

Rushing the Line

“Going silent.” His voice echoed through the small cargo ship as the engines cut out. He could hear her tapping away behind him. The cockpit felt crowded, claustrophobic, but he doubted it had much to do with space. “Open every station you can decrypt.”

“I know what I’m doing.” His daughter’s voice was acidic. She’d never been good with authority. She was worse with his. “Worry about flying.”

A dozen lines of communication began to fill the silence that followed. Through the windshield he could see the Intergalactic Safety Alliance’s outmost stations. Everything flickered as the ship’s stealth shields rose. If they could make it through the barricade and out of the buffer between Free Space and the Unknown, they’d be safe. They’d have friends.

“Have you contacted them?” His voice was rigid. Anxious.

“I’m trying. Back off.”

This was his mess. It had been almost 5 years since they had parted ways, and his daughter had not been keen on helping him track down the hacker that had betrayed him. She had been less willing once she had learned that the thieves he was pursuing would be in the Unknown.

“Blood is thicker than water, right?” he’d asked with just a tinge of guilt.

“Or whiskey,” she’d corrected coldly.

Things only got worse between them when they discovered they'd been led into a trap.

He shook himself and checked the gauges. He was afraid the shields wouldn't hold. It had taken them too long to reach the "shadow" beneath one of the stations; a single spot that their own radar couldn't detect. The fact that there was no patrol made him nervous, and he couldn't see if the viewing room at the base of the station was manned.

As they emerged from the shadow his hand twitched toward the cubby hole that often cradled an opaque bottle. A bottle she'd ejected into space, along with all of its brethren. His eyes darted behind him to look at the unforgiving lines of her back, morose.

The ship shuddered, an alarm squealed. *No. Not now.*

Now. The shields lost power just as they broke out of the safe zone. There was no time to form a contingency plan. He pulled up the rear view as panic threatened to set in. He could see fighters pouring out of the station they had passed under, a few more breaking away from another the right. The engines came to life with a roar, the ship lurched, and they were racing forward. The *Subtle Manifest* was fast, but not that fast. The fighters were hot on his heels, and he knew they would not try to disable him. No one, nothing, was allowed out of the Unknown. The ISA claimed there was too much out there that they didn't understand, too many contaminants.

Behind him a fist hit metal.

"Answer me!"

"Anything?" His attempt to mask his growing panic was undermined by a waver.

“No.” Their rescue crew wasn’t waiting on the other side. It probably didn’t matter.

“I’ll try to keep them off our backs, you just keep us afloat.”

“Just. Right.”

He cringed. She hated him, and they were going to die before he could fix it.

He didn’t have time to worry about that. His hands flew over the console hitting keys, flipping switches, pulling levers with a speed that only instinct could sustain. The fighters closed in and he had nowhere to go. The only way he could remove his pursuers from space was to turn around, which would lose him ground and give them more time to kill him off. He pushed the throttle forward, intent on outrunning them.

The first hit was minor, but it rattled the ship. His daughter cursed as she began to shut down the chatter, narrowing communications to one channel.

“Subtle Manifest calling Arbiter. Can you hear me?” An alarm drowned her out. “Come on. Come on.” Fear edged into her voice as she urged something on her monitor. “I thought you were getting them off our backs!!”

“I’m doing my best.” Returning her malice wouldn’t make the situation any better.

The next blow spun them. Disorientation grasped him until they fell dead in space- facing the enemy.

“I guess I can fire back now.” Desperation marred his humor.

“We’re losing power.” The edge had left her words as she began to panic. “Oh my god, we lost an engine.” Guilt gripped him.

“It’s okay. I have a plan.” The need to save her was stronger than his desire for self-preservation. It focused him. He couldn’t steer with an engine gone, but maybe he could still move. “Route all life support to the cockpit. Turn everything else off.”

He could do this; he had to do this. Some of the fighters broke off, headed for home. That just left the clean up crew. They would demolish what was left of his ship with him inside. Couldn’t be too safe.

“Hold on.” One of the fighter’s was coming straight for him. He held his breath as he counted. He’d only get one chance. “Now!”

A beam cut through space and ripped through the fighter. The shockwave from its destruction hit the crippled ship, threatening to tear it apart as they were sent careening backwards.

“Daddy!” her voice ripped through the cockpit, a reminder of just how young she really was.

“Just hold on!” He didn’t know what he’d do when they stopped, but they would be in Free Space.

Then they were dead again. Floating. A light flashed in warning. They were losing oxygen. They were out of time.

“I’m sorry.” He voiced his regret for the first time.

“I know.”

Silence followed and the air thinned. For once, he didn’t reach for the bottle hidden under his seat.