

Prisoners

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URGENT

Combat alerts and operations are still in effect. Enemy forces have broken contact but are not eliminated and may re-engage at any time.

Continue efforts to secure captured vessels. Be advised, information from captured NorthStar forces and gear as well as open media concerning actions elsewhere within Archangel is unconfirmed and potentially false. Officers and NCOs must keep personnel focused on current ops. Command will release information as it is verified.

Stay focused.

--Task Force Beowulf Internal Communications

December, 2276

Knowing what to expect didn't really prepare Tanner for his arrival at the battleship's sick bay. He reasonably figured the wounded would spill into the passageways outside. He didn't know they would stretch all the way to the nearest junctions and around each corner. Marines and navy crewmen lined the bulkheads in vac suits marred by blood, bandages, slings, and splints. The only people on their feet were those tasked with watching over the line of wounded prisoners stretching out along one bulkhead. Aside from the color and style of their vac suits, NorthStar's people looked no different than the rest.

These were the people who could afford to wait outside.

Prisoner watch took up all the attention available for crowd control. If the marine at the door even looked for more than Tanner's grey Archangel vac suit, his scrutiny probably ended with Tanner's Master-at-Arms insignia. The sick bay's waiting room held more patients, including two being tended by hospital corpsmen and nurses right there in their chairs. Beyond the front desk loomed exam and operating rooms tasked far beyond capacity.

Tanner wasn't sure where to look, and knew better than to ask. He turned down the calmest passageway to start his search and stumbled upon a lucky break. A tall black officer came out of a room with his helmet off, exposing a weary face. "Lieutenant Booker!" he called.

“Yeah? Oh, hey.” Booker clapped Tanner on the shoulder as soon as the younger man picked his way through the hall. “Glad you’re okay. You looking for me?”

“Same, and no. Here on an errand.” The latter was a lie of omission, but he’d committed far graver sins in the last few hours. “I ran into Sanjay and Ordoñez. They told me about the hit you took on the bridge.” He didn’t use names. “Is everyone else okay?”

Booker’s somber glance back to the open doorway answered the question Tanner knew he shouldn’t ask openly. Only then did he catch the “recovery” designation on the walls. “Yeah, the rest of us are fine. They operated on the skipper fast. She’ll be okay.”

“Good,” Tanner sighed with relief. “The others have been released. They should be on their way back to *Joan of Arc* now.”

“I ought to do the same. No time to catch up. Take care.” He gave Tanner another clap on the shoulder and headed out. Tanner let him go, grateful to see the corvette’s XO alive and unhurt and also glad he had no questions.

Four patients occupied beds in a recovery room built to hold two. Tanner knew just enough to identify sedatives and indicators on the monitors to back up the obvious signs of sleep on three out of the four beds. Booker’s exit gave him reason to doubt the closed eyes of the woman in the far corner.

A gel pack covered Lieutenant Lynette Kelly’s right forearm. The monitor noted injuries on her right hip and thigh. He noted blood loss, internal bruising... and fluttering emerald eyes under short, matted red hair. The cursors on her monitor bumped upward as she let out a breath and a cracked voice. “Tanner?”

“Hey.”

Her eyes widened, then shut tightly. “Damn, this better not be a dream. Or the drugs.”

He couldn’t hold back a grin at that. “I’m here. So are you. It’s not drugs or a dream.”

“Good.” Kelly sniffed, looking up at him again. “You’re not all fucked up this time.”

“Nah. Got knocked around, but it was worse on my clothes than on me. I got off easy.”

“I’m glad.”

He gestured to the monitor. “Looks like you’ll be okay.”

“Guess they want to keep me for a bit, though. Blood loss and exposure. Feels like they should move me out for someone else.”

“They’ll make space in other rooms. It’s our ship now.”

Kelly nodded. There was at least that. “Good job.”

“You, too. This was a team effort.”

“Uh-huh.” Her voice still came out cracked and weary. “What did *you* do tonight?”

“Stuff.”

“Right,” Kelly snorted. “Think I know you better than that.”

“We both had a rough night. Seems like yours was rougher.”

The answer satisfied, but other questions caught up. She lifted her head to glance around the recovery room and the busy passageway outside. “Should you be somewhere?”

“They haven’t called me for anything. Figured this was more important.”

One red eyebrow rose. “This?”

“When they pulled me off that liner and after *St. Jude*, what I needed more than anything else in the world was a friend. Turns out I had one right there. It helped.” Tanner nodded to her bed and the monitor that could only display her physical injuries. “You’ve been through hell. I didn’t want you to be here alone.”

Lynette’s eyes narrowed suspiciously, but without anger. He’d know if she was angry. “You remember I’m a lieutenant, right? You’re enlisted with two years and I’m a CO?”

“Yeah.” Tanner chose his words carefully and kept his voice low. “If that’s what you need, I respect it. But between you and me, after everything I’ve dealt with tonight, I haven’t got a single fuck to give for military bearing and etiquette. I don’t want to play space navy. I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

Her suspicious look didn’t change... except for how it did. “Tanner, are you hitting on me?”

“Y’know, that’s not a question I expected.”

“The question stands,” said Lynette.

“No. No way,” Tanner vowed. “Never in the next three years unless one of us gets discharged early. Or if you ever tell me not to.”

Lynette slumped back in bed. “God, you’re trouble.”

Outside, people moved up and down the hallway. Some limped. Others were pushed on beds.

Tanner waited. It didn’t take long.

Lynette’s mouth tightened, then shook, heralding a sob from her chest. Teardrops streamed from the corners of her eyes. “They froze to the deck. I couldn’t do anything.”

“Yeah.” He never noticed whose hand found the other’s first. “It’s like that.”

“Stan was twenty when he came on. Romita’s wife makes everyone birthday cookies.” She took in a shuddering breath. “I keep thinking if I pulled up harder or turned faster...”

“You couldn’t. It would’ve been someone else.”

Her tears didn’t last. It wasn’t long before her breath steadied. The rest would come and go in its own time, as this had. “What about you?” asked Lynette.

“I lost friends. People from basic. Nobody tight, but... friends.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me, too.”

“What else?” she asked. “I’m...I heard Michael...?”

Tanner nodded. “They took Michael. I don’t know how bad it is yet.”

“We’re gonna fix this,” she said.

“I know.”

“Because you’re right. You can’t stay in that fucking uniform.”

The buzz of his holocom interrupted his grin. Lieutenant Commander Jacobson’s name at the top of the message came as a relief. His department head was one more part of Tanner’s life to survive all this. The message read, “All Masters-at-Arms, report to the galley on Deck Three ASAP. If currently under other orders, notify your next-in-line immediately.”

“Turns out I’m still in this fucking uniform for now, anyway,” said Tanner. “Job’s not over yet. I have to go.”

“Yeah, you do. Take care. Thanks for coming.”

“Wanted to.” He scooped up his helmet.

“Hey.” Her suspicion returned. “You’re gonna come back when you can. Aren’t you?”

“Unless you tell me not to,” said Tanner.

She nodded. “I’m gonna act like I don’t need it.”

“Yeah. I know.”

* * *

“Normally, intelligence handles the questioning while your shop handles the rest of prisoner intake,” Lieutenant Commander Reyes explained to the small assembly. Jacobson’s presence right beside him lent authority and agreement to the intelligence officer’s instructions. A sling

restrained his wounded arm, assuring that Reyes did his part in capturing the ship. “This is a big job, and for a lot of reasons, it can’t wait. It’ll go much faster with your help.”

Little more than a dozen Masters-at-Arms formed a half-circle around the two officers. Many were from Jacobson’s command on *Los Angeles*, while others were attached from other vessels for the operation. Tanner had been the last to arrive.

“Some of you haven’t done much in the way of interviews after rating school,” said Jacobson. “Don’t worry too much about that. This is only initial intake, not a full interrogation. Stick to the script—but keep your wits and listen. Record everything. If they keep quiet, that’s fine. Anything beyond that, anything you notice, anything you suspect: make a note and let the intel shop sort it out. If it seems urgent, ping Commander Reyes and I on the network with a note. We imagine we’ll get a lot of that. Too much info is better than nothing.”

“It’s not a lot of questions,” Reyes continued. “It’s direct and it’s simple. That’s fine. You don’t need to be fancy. Remember, no approach has a better success record than direct questioning, and this is a game of numbers. A lot of these guys don’t have anything big to share, but with a crowd like this, something’s bound to fall out. That’s why we do it now.

“Also, remember these are prisoners of war, not suspects in a criminal arrest,” he added. “They have all the same rights to humane treatment, but not the same legal protections. You’ve got a reminder note in your instructions. Remember it.”

Tanner pressed his lips together tightly and looked to the overhead. When he looked back, he noted Jacobson’s eyes on him. The boss made a gesture to pull Tanner aside as Reyes set the rest to work. Both officers turned to talk to him. “You got here just in time,” said Jacobson. “Where have you been?”

“Sick bay,” answered Tanner.

“You don’t look hurt.”

Tanner looked down at his blackened, pock-marked vac suit and frowned. “My kit ran out of band-aids, sir.”

Jacobson snorted. Reyes even let out a laugh. “Fair enough,” said the boss. “Baldwin gave me the headline version of your night when she got here. I don’t have a clever way to ask this, but I have to ask: what have you heard?”

“You mean about Michael, sir? I saw the comms feed on the flag bridge. I know.”

“Then you might know more than either of us,” said Reyes. “How bad is it?”

“I only saw a little. The governor gave a surrender order. Sounded like Bethlehem Station got hit pretty bad. A couple cities might’ve been hit by missiles.”

“Damn. We need you to keep quiet on that for now,” said Reyes. “Listen, I’m from Michael, too. This fucking sucks and I want to go charge in there, but it’s not our call. We’ve gotta get *this* job done. The others from Michael don’t know yet. It doesn’t help to tell them. We don’t know enough yet anyway, okay?”

“I understand,” said Tanner.

“Are you gonna be okay dealing with prisoners right now?” Jacobson asked seriously.

“I already took the guy who probably planned all this into custody and I didn’t lose it then. I’m good. Might’ve charged him with piracy along the way, though.”

Jacobson patted him on the shoulder and pointed down the passageway. “That’s your room. We’ll have them coming in a couple minutes.”

The office had to belong to someone on galley staff. Regulations and posters about nutrition decorated the walls. All that really mattered was the desk, two chairs, and the marine waiting inside. “I’m Tanner. How are you doing?”

“Garcia,” she answered, and then his casual manner caught up to her. She let her shoulders down a bit. “Ana. This is fuckin’ crazy. I had a shoot-out on this ship’s basketball court a couple hours ago an’ now I’m here.”

Tanner came around the desk, brought up holo screens with the script and his rules, and got his recorder ready. “Where are you from?”

“Playa de Cristal. You’re from Michael, too, right?”

“Geronimo, yeah.” Michael had been his first guess from the moment she spoke. Already, he had to keep the news from someone. It felt as bad as he expected. *That didn’t take long*, Tanner grumbled inwardly.

A knock against the door broke him off that train of thought. “We’re ready when you are,” said a marine sergeant Tanner didn’t know. “You both clear on everything?”

“They told me to stand here behind the prisoner and let the MA do the talking,” said Ana. “I’m only here as back-up if they get stupid.”

“The boss says most of these guys are gonna be scrubs and grunts like us,” said Tanner. “Shouldn’t take more than a couple minutes for each of them. This will probably get boring fast. Think we’re good, sergeant.”

The sergeant stepped out, soon replaced by another marine guiding a NorthStar crewman with his hands bound behind his back. The prisoner had a pale, wide-eyed expression and the name “Campbell” emblazoned on his vac suit. As soon as the prisoner was seated across from Tanner, the other marine walked out and closed the door.

“Crewman Campbell, state your full name and rank, please,” said Tanner.

Campbell burst into tears. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I just needed the money for college!”

“Y’know, so did I,” Tanner sighed.

“Same, bro,” said Ana.

* * *

“Please state your full name and rank.”

“Peter David Norman, Administrator, Grade One.” He was bigger than Tanner, filling out his vac suit with a husky build and a sullen frown. “Same as on my ID.”

“I still need to ask. What’s your home of record?”

“Why do you need to know?”

Tanner didn’t match Norman’s defiant energy. He didn’t need to. “So we can tell your family and the Red Cross you’re okay.”

That deflated Norman a little. “Earth. City of Denver.”

“What’s your unit?”

“Personnel Division here on the ship.”

“What are your duties?”

“Clerical. I track sick leave and promotion schedules. That sort of stuff.”

“What were your expected duties if this operation had been successful?” Tanner asked. He noted Norman’s quizzical look. “If NorthStar won here, what would you be doing?”

Norman shrugged. “The same stuff.”

“How do you feel?”

“What?”

“I’m asking how you feel,” Tanner repeated.

Confused, suspicious, and scowling, Norman answered, “Fine.”

“Okay.” Tanner hit a marker on his holo screen. “We’re done here.”

The door opened with the return of the marine escort.

“Wait, that’s it?” Norman blinked.

“Yeah,” Tanner shrugged. “Do you want to stay and talk?”

Norman stared in disbelief. Responses hovered at his mouth, but he kept them inside. With a glance over his shoulder, he followed the tug of the marine’s hand on his arm.

Tanner opened up a new file and waited for the next prisoner.

* * *

“Fuck you. I’m not telling you shit. I’m not talking to you, I’m not talking to her, I’m not talking to any of those assholes out there. Fuck every one of you.”

Tanner nodded. “Okay.”

“I said *fuck*—wait, what?” the prisoner blinked.

“I’ve got your ID. You’re wearing basic crewman stripes. I’ll go with that.” Tanner hit a few keys on his holocom screen. “We’re done.”

“Fucking serious? You give up that easy?”

“We’ve got a couple thousand others out there. You’re not special.”

“The fuck I’m not! I’ve had enough of that shit! Workin’ my ass off for nothing, no pay, get my leave canceled, now I’m stuck here. Specialist Travis sayin’ I ain’t shit, Bo’sun Hsu sayin’ I ain’t shit, Lieutenant White sayin’ I ain’t shit. That fucker’s hiding pills in his gear and he wants to talk down to me? And now you? Fuck you, man!”

Tanner tilted his head to distract from the touch of his thumb on his holocom, flagging this part of the recording. It hardly mattered to him, but it might matter to someone. “Who’s Lieutenant White?”

* * *

“I’m not talking to anyone but my lawyer.”

“You’re not under arrest for a crime,” Tanner explained. “You’re a prisoner of war.”

“What war? Nobody declared a war,” she scoffed.

“You caught the part where your battleship invaded a sovereign system, right?”

Her cold stare almost concealed the way her mind tripped over his question. “Then how long are you going to hold us?”

“I don’t know. How long does the war go on?”

“Uh...do they still pay us while we’re prisoners?”

“Girl, you don’t even know?” Ana blurted from behind the prisoner. She glanced at Tanner. “Sorry.”

Slowly, almost against his will, Tanner asked, “Did you not read the basic manual when you enlisted with NorthStar?”

“No. Who reads all that stuff?”

Tanner stopped himself from saying he had. He also stopped himself from flagging her file. He didn’t need to waste anyone else’s time.

* * *

“What were your expected duties if this operation had been successful?”

“I dunno. More admin shit,” said Ewing. A lot of this crowd turned out to be administrative. It made sense, given the deck and the sorting of prisoners. “No reason to expect otherwise.”

“How do you feel?”

Ewing tilted his head, unsure if he’d heard right. “Pretty fuckin’ pissed off at getting in all this stupid shit because the bosses are morons.”

“Okay,” Tanner replied.

“What kind of question is that? Some sort of probe?”

“It’s a question we ask.”

“Bullshit. I’m supposed to believe you care how I feel?”

“What you believe isn’t up to me.”

“Then what do you get out of it?”

“I guess that depends on how you answer.”

Ewing huffed, but said no more. Tanner nodded. “That’s all. We’re done.”

“That’s all?” Ewing asked.

Tanner shrugged. “Is there anything you want me to know?”

“I mean...” Ewing glanced over his shoulder at the closed door and the silent marine behind his chair. “I kind of expected... I dunno. Something.” He waited. So did Tanner. Finally, Ewing ventured, “You didn’t ask what I know. Not really.”

“What should I ask?” Tanner replied.

“What do I get if I tell you?”

Tanner had no guidance on this, let alone any authority for bargaining. He did, however, have his own wits. “This is all crowd control right now. We don’t want to draw any attention to you. But whatever you have to say will go up the chain along with your name.”

He waited.

“There’s a guy in my group. Curly brown hair, kind of a babyface, basic crew vac suit. His nametag says Jones. He’s not a regular crewman. He’s from corporate. Some sort of auditor, had a job for occupying the system here. As soon as we got the order to stand down, he blanked out his holocom and stuffed it in a garbage chute with his corporate badge so he could hide with the regular crew. I don’t know much else about him.”

“Good to know.”

* * *

“You don’t understand,” said Steven Jones. “It’s not just about Archangel. Those losses are compounded. We can’t cover it all. The insurance isn’t enough! That’s why everyone came in.”

“What do you mean by everyone?” Tanner didn’t have to push hard. Jones had cracked after Tanner repeated the request for his full name and rank three times. That had been twenty minutes ago, and Jones had hardly taken a breath since.

“The Big Three! We’re all taking big losses here and it’s the kind of numbers only a peer can insure. Nobody else can underwrite that much. You get what I’m saying?”

Tanner tried to hold a poker face through every interview, but he couldn’t feel his brow knit together now. Not when his sense of self was overwhelmed by the sinking sensation in his stomach. “You’re all insured by each other?”

“Yes! We don’t have the money to cover these losses—not when we’re all pulling on each other and we’re all taking hits! My whole job was to squeeze every credit and everything else of

value I could find out of Raphael and Michael as soon as we occupied. All just to keep the machine going until we had a better fix.”

“Wait, Michael?” said Ana. She’d been silent through one interview after another, but she stayed watchful and alert. “What about Michael?”

“The other task force,” said Jones. “They have auditors like me, too.”

Ana looked past the back of the prisoner’s head to Tanner. He didn’t try to silence her with a word or a look, but she caught herself. Instead, she called up a blank screen from the holocom on her wrist and typed.

“What happens now?” Tanner asked.

“What, now that you’ve taken these ships? I don’t know. The company’s got more, but this is a disaster. It’s not going to stop the operation. They *can’t* stop now. The hole is too deep.”

Ana’s holo screen turned to flash at Tanner with the words, “Do they know about Michael?” She jerked her thumb toward the door.

“Mr. Jones,” Tanner pressed on, “who are the other auditors on—”

A knock at the door warned of it opening a second later. Reyes appeared with two marines. “Sorry to interrupt. We’re going to sit Mr. Jones with some other interviewers,” he explained. As he spoke, the marines tugged Jones up from his chair and escorted him out. Reyes lingered in the door. “This was a good catch. We meant to catch him when you flagged the other file, but we crossed some wires. Did he say much?”

“A lot, actually,” said Tanner. “I’ll send the recording. He knew about Michael. It only came up just before you got here.”

“Shit. Alright, thanks.” Reyes walked away without another word.

That left Tanner alone in the room with Ana looking back at him in alarm. “What’s going on? What’s happening on Michael?” she asked.

“They hit Michael the same time they hit here,” said Tanner. “I only saw a couple flashes on a screen earlier, but it looks bad. If we’re not already on our way there, it’s gotta be because we’re still not ready for another fight. I’m sorry,” he added. “They told me not to say anything. Nobody knew much, anyway.”

“Oh my god,” said Ana.

A bump at the door heralded the return of the marine sergeant. “You ready for the next one?”

* * *

Coming back to sick bay wasn't such a risk by the time he could get away. Things were under control by then, with the docs and corpsmen moving out of triage and the crowding issue settled. Though her room was less crowded than before, the other patients were conscious now. Their only privacy came from a curtain.

"They had to go back into my hip. First round was only a patch job so they could stabilize me while they took care of others." Though she still hadn't gotten a shower and couldn't get out of her bed, Lynette looked better for having rested. "I guess someone's math said they want me back on my ship sooner rather than later."

"I can understand that one, ma'am," said Tanner. Her skeptical frown at his first utterance of "ma'am" made the visit worthwhile. "Is there anything you need?"

"The company helps." She hesitated before saying more. He saw that wince again and knew the sort of thoughts behind it. He knew the grief behind her eyes, though her position put a significantly different twist on things. Tanner waited patiently until her eyes found his again and she beckoned him closer with a tilt of her head. She barely spoke above a whisper. "I keep trying not to think about the guys, and then if I pull that off I feel terrible for it."

"It'll probably take some weird turns," said Tanner. "You're gonna need someone with more training than me. But I'm here for now."

"About that... this once I'd let you get away with hugging me."