

# *Buckman Rogers*

by

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“Marthaaaaaa!!!”

Fred Matheson held up his pack of Pall Mal cigarettes, which was only half there. The upper half of the pack had been burned off, and what was left inside the pack was nothing but charcoal. He was having a *‘stopped for three days really really needing a damned smoke bad’* craving. Now was not the time for his son to be messing with him.

“Martha... the kid burned up an entire pack of my cigarettes this time!”

Her voice floated in from the kitchen. “Just go and open another one Fred. Don’t be such a drama queen. Corey is only ten. You should be flattered that he loves his dad so much that he wants to help him quit smoking.”

Fred heard a dish smash on the floor and his wife cursed, which stopped their ‘through the rooms’ conversation. He was about to yell back at her that she wouldn’t think it was so funny if the brat had pissed in her scotch bottle but the stream of bad language coming from the kitchen made him reconsider.

“I suppose that means dinner is going to be late again?” he yelled instead.

More bad language found his ears, directed this time at him. He smiled at the touched nerve. Lifting the cigarette pack to his nose, he sniffed at it, wondering how his son had gotten such a close and neat burn on the pack while roasting every one of the cigs inside to blackness. It didn’t look right and it smelled funny like the electric blue of a close thunderbolt. He wrinkled his nose up in disgust. Crumpling the pack as he would normally before throwing it away, he coughed as a black cloud of dust enveloped his head. Tossing what was left of the pack to the ashtray, he decided to go up to his son’s room and maybe have a little chat with him. That was all though; Fred had never hit Corey in his life. In fact, his own father, Corey’s grandfather, told him on every occasion possible that this was what ailed his son. *‘Spare the rod, spoil the child’*, he would preach constantly. Fred glanced across the room to his father’s photo on the wall. Picking the crumpled paper back out of the ashtray he tossed it at the picture, hitting the image square on the nose. It left a black mark.

“Two points,” he muttered, and then smiled. His life might not be ideal, and his family might not be perfect; but he loved both his son and his wife with his whole being. His father’s thoughts on life no longer mattered to him.

Fred was about to knock on his son’s bedroom door when he heard him talking to someone. He stopped to listen to the conversation. It almost sounded like two different people. He had to admire the kid’s imagination, but it also worried him that his son at age ten still had an imaginary friend.

He knocked softly at the door. “Corey?”

The voices stopped and there was an electric spark of a sound. “Yeah Dad?”

Fred opened the door and peeked in. “I think you know why I’m here.”

“I didn’t do it!”

Fred walked fully into the room and closed the door behind himself. “You don’t even know what I’m sore about; so how can you say you didn’t do it?”

“Rogers told me that he fried them with something he keeps as a weapon; it’ll cut through anything. It’s for your own good. He says if you don’t quit you won’t live another ten years.”

“And he knows this how?”

Corey looked at the floor. “He just does.”

At times like this Fred hated having to be the disciplinarian... but it had to be done.

“Where is Buckman so I can talk with him?”

“He doesn’t like when you call him that Dad,” Corey bridled.

Fred used the name on purpose because he knew it would bother his son. It was a petty thing to do, but he was still sore about his cigarettes. Since the doll was a spaceman named Rogers, the father had dubbed it Buckman soon after its appearance. The name was in reference to the original space warrior: Buck Rogers.

“Corey... Buckman is a toy. He is a pretend playmate in the form of a doll.”

“He’s not a doll!”

“Oh yes,” Fred replied sitting on the bed. “I forgot; he’s an action figure. You know; I can’t even remember how you got him.”

“He flew here in his spaceship, which was wounded. He looks like an action figure because he’s hiding from the bad guys.”

“Rightttttttt.... And what are the bad guys called again?”

“Howlers. He says they look like Doberman Pinchers and you can never never trust one of them. They used to be Wolfs like Rogers, but they belong to the government. The government had them genitillicly changed while they were sleeping one night, but he was on a camping trip with his family so they missed him.”

“Wolves,” Fred corrected without thinking while smiling at his son’s youthful distortion of words.

Corey shook his head adamantly. “It’s Wolfs. That’s how Rogers says it. ‘Wolves’ is a term used by lower life forms. He always tells me that you upset him with the way you try to correct things you don’t understand.”

“Is that right?” He sat on the bed and studied his son.

Corey shook his head in the affirmative.

“Can I see him?”

“You could... but you won’t.”

Fred made a serious father face. “And what does that mean?”

“You’re a grown up. Rogers told me that grownups can’t see much of anything because they’re always too busy trying to make ends meet that are too far apart. He says it’s not your fault, it’s just the way of our society.”

Fred was actually impressed with this. His son was speaking words in an adult fashion... perhaps he should talk with him more often.

“You got that from the TV didn’t you?”

Corey shook his head no. “I don’t watch TV anymore.”

The father rubbed his chin and paused a moment looking at his son. “Are you sure you don’t watch cartoons? I can check with your mother you know. She’s here all day while I’m at work. I know they have entire cartoon networks for the after school bunch; and you get home plenty early.”

“Mom’s mind is not really here by the time I get home,” the boy replied looking back at the floor again.

Fred knew his wife drank too much, but he had no idea what went on in the house during the day. He left early and got home late every day except Sunday. He had immersed himself in his work and ignored the minor bad parts of his life. Everyone had bad parts in their marriage. If you didn't roll with the punches... he had a sudden mental picture of his father's upraised hand, and his own understanding that if he moved his head in the direction of the slap it wouldn't hurt as bad. He shook his head, trying to rid his memory of this demon.

"What say you and I try to maybe change all of that? I never knew..."

"Because you're always at work!" Corey interjected, looking at him in a hard way for a ten year old. "Rogers says you're hiding there. He says that happens, and I have to take care of myself as best I can, otherwise I'll become a Howler like all the rest of human kind." These last words were quieter than the rest, and tapered away to nothingness.

Fred was stymied. "Can I see Buckman please?"

Corey thought about it, and then slid completely under his bed. Fred remembered that when he was young, under the bed was the place where monsters stayed. He heard whispering and he could swear there were two different voices again. He was tempted to lean down and raise the skirt of the bed but he allowed his son the small bit of privacy the bed skirt afforded. Presently there was the wiggling sound of a small body on the wooden floor and Corey reappeared with the 'action figure' in his hand. The thought occurred to Fred that in all the toy stores he had ever been in, he had never seen another doll like this one. It just showed up one day, clutched in his son's hands; and Corey wouldn't give it up for anything. He wrinkled his forehead trying to remember when that was... maybe five years ago.

Standing back up, Corey handed over Rogers. "Just so you know Dad... Rogers doesn't like you."

"He doesn't?" Fred wondered what a shrink would make of this.

"No... he says you're a pussy."

Fred's immediate reaction was to slap his son's face for the use of a bad word, but he stopped himself even as his hand rose up. It had taken him years of discipline to keep away from the initial reactions that had gotten him into so much trouble in the past. "We don't use words like that son."

"Those were Roger's words Dad, not mine. I think it might mean something a little different in his language, but I know it's still not good. He also told me that Grandpa acts like a Howler."

Fred looked at the doll in his hand. "Buckman, you and I have to have a close and personal talk. Corey told me that you're the one who burned up my cigarettes, so it's you

who will have to be punished. I know my son is telling the truth because I know he knows he is absolutely not allowed to play with fire.” Fred looked at Corey. “Get ready for dinner; Buckman will spend the night in my bedroom. I can’t smoke... you can’t have Buckman, so we’re even.”

“NOOOOO!!!!” wailed Corey as his father stood. “You said you just wanted to talk to him!”

“Get used to the idea that there are repercussions in life son. Action and reaction... crime and punishment. You can have Rogers back in the morning.”

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That night, as Fred lay in bed, he could see the silhouette of Buckman standing on his dresser. The room was dimly lit by the yard light he’d installed on the garage. He always figured maybe he and Corey would play basketball by that light someday. He sighed... one step at a time. First he had to get his life back in order.

Though his wife was sound asleep, he was just the opposite, not being able to get comfortable no matter what. The window was open and a cool breeze blew the curtains making them billow. Heat lightning lit the sky without thunder. It was like having a distant camera flash go off. Slowly his eyes readjusted to the darkness. His mind was everywhere except for sleep. He envied his wife’s soft snoring, though he did not exactly like the way she worked into her sleep cycle lately.

What was happening to them? Why was everything the way that it was? Where was the storybook ‘happily ever after’ that was supposed to happen post honeymoon? Where was...

A noise from downstairs caught Fred’s attention. Heat lightning lit the room again as he sat up. In the flickering light, he thought he noticed that Buckman was missing from the dresser.

“Corey,” he muttered as he kicked off his sheets. He could actually understand, but things were the way they were. His son had to learn one way or another that there were always consequences to the things you did in life. If that meant he had to play the heavy and come down on him like a ton of bricks, then so be it.

Fred made his way out into the hallway and peered into the gloom. Surprise would be the best way, so he refrained from putting a light on. A quiet noise drifted upstairs... Corey and Buckman were obviously down raiding the refrigerator. As he recalled, his son had

mentioned that the space Wolf had a liking for orange juice. Perhaps that was what they were doing; a quick quenching of the old thirst and then back upstairs to sleep under the bed. Standing on the stairway while peering down into the darkness, Fred rubbed his chin in thought. A plan of action passed back and forth through his mind a few times before he finally decided on exactly what to do; best not to cause any trauma. He would creep quietly to the kitchen, and then when Corey saw him he would ask if he could join the pair; maybe they could talk things out.

Finding his way in the near darkness was not as easy as he had anticipated. The father in him might have smiled except for the pain he now felt as he limped his way to the swinging kitchen door. The light showing from under it was almost enough to light the way, but not quite enough that he didn't stub his toe coming through the living room. He had been hard put not to not make any noise as he danced around in pain. Pushing through the kitchen door, he found the refrigerator open and heard someone rummaging around. There was the clink of bottles, and a sudden 'pssshhhhhh' sound of a soda being opened. This was very odd, Corey didn't like soda.

"Son?" he said softly.

The refrigerator slammed closed and he was being stared at by something he could only describe as a huge Doberman Pincher in a metal looking space suit. It was standing on two legs, and in one hand it held a diet Coke. The kitchen light clicked off and he was hit from behind. The body blow knocked him to the floor. A heavy weight pinned him, and a dog's voice growled in his right ear. On the heels of the growl came an electronic vibrator sounding voice just like the one his Uncle Johnny had to use after they removed his cancerous larynx.

***"Wherrre isss Rrrogerssss?"***

"Who the hell are you?" he managed and the weight on his back shifted. He felt pain as a knee dug into his backbone. The dog's voice growled again, the light switched back on, and out of the corner of his eye he could see a big Doberman's snout with bared teeth.

***"Annsswerrr only wht isss askedddd. Wherrre issss Rrogerssss?"***

"What Rogers?" he managed. "I don't know any Rogers!"

'Growllllll.' - ***"Weee haveee the boyyyyy."*** - 'Grrrrgrrrowllllll.' - ***"Heee would not talk eatherrr."***

'Grrrr... sneezeeee.' Came from over by the refrigerator, and the same electronic voice translated that as well. ***"Thiss stuff is crapp. I don't knowww howww they eat itttt."***

'Bark!' - ***"Shut up!"***

“Look,” said Fred, now feeling crushed under the weight. “If I knew what it was you were looking for, I would help you out, but I really don’t know...” His words got cut off.

‘Snarlllll...GRROWwlllllllll!’ – **“We will kill the child if you do nnot complyyy!”**

“What did you do with him??!” Fred screamed, suddenly feeling panic. He jerked his head up, trying his best to rise against the weight applied to his back. His head was slammed back to the linoleum floor, and he saw stars.

‘Grrrrrrrrrr’, - **“Wee took him toooo the shiiipp.”**

Things happened so quickly that Fred hardly had time to catch his breath.

WHUMP... the light went out. Glass tinkled around him and water began to spray in the air.

WHUMP... the weight was lifted off his back and a large body crashed into the wall next to him. It fell back down as it ricocheted off the wall and flopped across him causing all the air to be knocked out of his body.

WHUMP... and the Doberman next to the refrigerator crashed backwards, the sound of it saying it was physically thrown through the window behind the sink.

The body lying across him was picked up and dumped off to the right. A large hand grabbed him by the neck and yanked him to his feet. “Let’s go!” was yelled loud enough to deafen him, and then his arm was grabbed, and he was half pulled half dragged out the back door.

“Who...” Fred began to demand of the person pulling him across the back yard.

“I’m Rogers you dopey bastard!” said the person without turning around. The rough voice had a slight Scottish sound to it. “And don’t you dare call me Buckman!”

They were halfway across the yard when the figure yelled out, “FRED! GUARD UP... DO IT NOW AND COVER THE HOUSE!”

In the darkness of the moonless sky, something large rose from the nearby landscape and eclipsed the stars. A small bluish light came on looking very much like a Cyclops’ eye, and then a hum filled the air all around them. The area was lit up and covered with the same blueness of the Cyclops’ eye. It became bright to the point that Fred had no problem seeing. Turning back towards the house, he noticed a large chunk of the back wall was missing where the kitchen window had been located. A metallic looking form lay inert on the ground surrounded by broken glass.

Bolts of lightning flashed over top of them without even a hint of thunder. At least ten of them were deflected by the bluish light and Fred – thought/heard – a series of ‘ouches’, and ‘ooffs’.

“QUIT COMPLAINING YOU BIG SISSY, AND SHOW’EM THE CANON!” yelled the person still clutching his arm.

“I have nothing to load with,” a bland sounding voice replied. To Fred, the strange voice emanated right in the middle of his head.

“FAKE IT! THEY DUN’T KNOW YA CAN’T SHOOT BACK... POWER UP THEN SEND OUT THE GHOST TO CHASE ‘EM... PUT DOWN OVER HERE SO WE KEN BOARD!”

“Us?”

“JEST DO IT!”

The person turned and looked at Fred. He had a Wolf’s face just like his son’s doll. Letting go of his arm, the creature stuck out its right hand. “The nem’s Rogers, and yes, I am that same action figure YOU took away from your son. Dam stupidest thing ya could’a ever done. We’ll get’im back. They’ll run, but we can catch’em... just have to find some fuel first.”

“Fuel?” Fred asked, not moving to shake hands.

The Wolf thing grabbed the man’s left hand and raised it up, looking at his wedding ring closely. He smiled. “This will do nicely. That much gold will get us to the Dog Star and back. You humans have no idea how fuel rich this planet is. You can trust me when I tell you wars will be fought over what you have here.”

Fred jerked his hand away. “That’s my wedding band!”

“Aye... well... the kid’s m’friend. With or without ya I’m gonna get him back. The choice is yours, come along and help or woose out like a pussy.”

Fred’s left hook was so quick that it staggered the Wolf. It didn’t matter that the ‘thing’ in front of him wasn’t even human, or that it had just killed a couple of other ‘things’ in the process of blowing holes in his house... he was pissed.

“Bad language is not acceptable Buckman!” he yelled at the Wolf.

A glowing blue sparkly thing reached out and encircled the father’s form. It raised him bodily from the ground, electrifying him with what looked like ball lightning. His teeth began to chatter and all of the hair on his body stood completely on end. It cut off as quickly as it began, dumping him back to the ground.

“That’s enough Fred,” said the Wolf, wiping blood from his mouth with the back of a paw. “No need to protect me, I could’a handled the likes of him easily enough. Just glad to see he’s all fired up. Per’aps he’s got some guts after all. Speaking of which...” Rogers turned his attention to the hovering space craft. “How in the hell did they get past your sensors?”

“I was asleep.”

“You were what?”

“Asleep.”

“You’re a machine... you don’t sleep.”

“You told me to power down and conserve what fuel I had left.”

Rogers opened his mouth to scream an obscenity at the large black spot in the sky... caught himself... and then sighed. “If you don’t have enough in you to beam us up, get down here and help me. You fried him, you fix’im. Get the ring off his hand while you’re at it and then we blast. It’s that or we kiss the kid goodbye.”

The blue light sheltering them and the house cut off. “You were right about the cannon; they fled.”

“Tails b’tween their legs I presume?”

“Yes.”

Rogers laughed. “Some things nerr change. The ghost is on their heels?”

“Yes. I am tracking them even as they are taking evasive maneuvers. They will be out of range, however, in ten minutes forty seven seconds.”

The Wolf cursed under his breath. Leaning down, he pulled Fred to his feet, and then pulled him up on his shoulders. “Get your carcass down here; we need to hurry.”

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Fred woke to the sensation of floating. At least his arms were floating, since the rest of him was strapped into a chair of some sort.

“Ten point seven centurns and closing,” said a voice. “We will overtake in approximately two hours.”

“They had that much of a lead on us?” asked a gravely voice he recognized as belonging to the Wolf creature. He didn’t open his eyes but continued to listen.

“They have upgraded their engines. The ship is .4277 ferons faster than it used to be with full containment of the fields.”

“Damummmm... how long’ve we been in hiding?”

“Five rotations around the star of the planet you chose.”

There were some unfamiliar sounds, but one that he readily identified as a body moving in a seat. “You’re really beginning to get on my nerves Fred. You full know the reason we landed there.”

“So you could hide; like a pussy.”

The gravely voice sighed. “Do we have to have this conversation now?”

Fred felt a rough slap on his shoulder. “Op’n your eyes Twinkie, I know you’re awake. Fred’s been monitoring your body functions; there’s no hiding from him. He’s an all knowing prick.”

Fred’s first view as he opened his eyes was the expanse of space stretching out in front of him. He’d never realized how many stars there were.

“Impressive isn’t it?” the Wolf asked. “I neer get tired of seeing it. Amazing that with all this nothingness, we have to seek each other out in order to snuff life away... and you gotta just ask... why?”

“Where am I?” the man managed, his eyes growing large as he stared straight ahead.

“Yooohoo... over here Freddy old boy.”

He turned to the voice and saw the Wolf sitting in what appeared to be the commander’s seat just to his left. Rogers was looking at him but he was not smiling. He was wearing the same tin foil looking space outfit and when Fred glanced at his own floating arms, he saw he was wearing one just like it.

“I’m not used ta work’n with creatures that are inferior; so you’re somethin of an oddity for me,” the Wolf told him.

“That’s not truthful. He’s simply not used to working with anyone but me,” said the bland voice emanating in Fred’s mind.

“Can it gizmo, or I’ll pull your circuit boards and fly ya m’self.”

Fred cleared his throat. He was about to say something and promptly covered his mouth, looking rather frantic.

“Puke bag is right on the floor next to you, just make sure you keep it held to your face until you’re completely done. We’re flying with zero gravity and if you’re not careful your spue’ll be floating around the cockpit like grease in a gravy bowl.”

The man looked, grabbed, and puked; doing as he’d been instructed. When he was done, he held it with the flap folded tightly over. A hand appeared next to his face, taking the bag from him. Fred looked up and into the smiling face of his wife. He gave a start but managed not to make any comments. As he watched, the image turned into that of a pretty Wolf girl, who then easily walked to the back and down a ladder, disappearing from sight. Rogers chuckled.

“He gotcha.”

Fred wiped his mouth with the back of a hand. “Who got me?” he asked, sounding miserable.

“Fred did. Funny that you and he would have the same name.”

“Who’s Fred?”

The Wolf leaned back in his chair, made an adjustment on a small lever, and then toggled a switch. The chair rotated to face the man. “You are,” he laughed. “Oh... and the ship. You’ll get used to him after a while. He’s a bit stubborn sometimes but he has a hell of a sense of humor... like showing himself to look like your wife. I almost pulled his guts out when he did that to me once. You should have seen your expression... like you were expecting to be beaten.” The Wolf stopped talking, as if what he’d been saying finally caught up to his brain. His mouth opened for a moment, and then closed again. His eyes looked sad, and then he continued, but it was in a more subdued manner.

“Look, I’m sorry about your boy.”

“His name is Corey.”

“Yes... believe it or not, that was my son’s name too... so we do have that in common. They got to Corey before I could do anything. As you might recall, I was be’n punished by yours truly for frosting a stupid pack of cigarettes. Can you imagine... the lit’le guy didn’t give me up. Well... no matter... we’ll get him back or die trying. What do you say to that?”

“I think I’m having one hell of a nightmare.”

The Wolf looked hard at him. “Trust me,” he said in a very soft voice. “This is no nightmare... it’s much worse than a nightmare. Best case scenario for your son if we do

not rescue him, will be the government zoo on the capitol planet. We'll catch up to that scout ship in about two hours, so before that time gets here I would suggest that you pay close attention to the things I'm gonna tell'n show. You will then need to ready yourself for whatever might happen. You may want to make peace with whatever God you worship while you're at it."

The Wolf rotated the chair back to face his control console and touched a small square spot. Gray metal blast doors moved across the huge windscreen until they met in the middle and with a hissing sound; closed solidly. Fred noticed there were burned looking areas on the inside.

"I left them open so when you woke up you might see that you were not dreaming and that we are indeed in deep space."

"With no weapons," intoned the ship's voice gravely.

"With no weapons," agreed Rogers quietly. "That's going to make things just a bit ticklish."

"Right," said Fred. "And what exactly did you shoot the two back at my house with? It sure as hell wasn't one of Corey's toys."

The Wolf looked at him, smiled, and pulled a strange looking pistol out of the holster on his hip. "My whumper," he replied, holding up a device that did indeed look just like one of his son's toys.

"Of course," the man replied, "A whumper. I should have guessed. It makes a very loud whumping noise, so it's called a 'whumper'. Are you going to apply some sort of gravitational force here or will I have to float around for my entire dream?"

"For the last time... this is not a dream and this is called a whumper. Actually, your son named it for me. What it's called in Wolf is hardly what you could pra' nounce in any case. He's a very smart child, by the way. He took the acronym for the translated words and there you go. 'Wheffer Hymen Ultra Monotone Projection Energy Resonator'." He smiled, holding it up. "Whumper, and no I'll not be applying gravitational forces for two reasons. One: they are detectable, and two: it would slow us down. Right now we need all the speed we can get, especially in the light of 'no weapons'. Why do you think I was running in the first place?"

"Because you're a pussy," intoned the ships voice.

Rogers stood and shouted as loud as he could, "I AM NOT A PUSSY!"

"Bucka buck buck buck," cackled back the ship.

“Wait,” Fred said, placing a hand to his forehead, “Bucka bucka bucka reflects the word ‘pussy’?”

Rogers looked at him. “Aye... small feathered bird thing that’s quite a pleasure to eat. ‘Pussy’.”

“That’s a chicken.”

The Wolf holstered his whumper, and shrugged his shoulders. “Chicken to you, pussy to me... eats the same no matter how it’s cooked.”

Crossing to Fred, he punched the center of the straps holding him into the seat. The man floated freely up. The spacewolf righted him and then brought him back to where his feet touched the floor. He touched another place on the tinfoil like suit covering Fred’s body and his shoes clicked fastly to the deck.

“There, now you won’t feel so ill. As long as you have the shoes on you can walk around quite normally. If you come off of your feet, let’s say you jump up, you will float until you can get your feet back to the deck so be careful; no sudden movements.

For the first time Fred was able to stand totally frontal to Rogers. He found that they were exactly the same height.

“When I slugged you, what happened to me?” he asked.

“That was Fred. He gets a tad protective when things like that happen. No damage done, you were just stunned. It’s not like you didn’t d’serve it for being an ass.”

The right hook took the Wolf totally by surprise and he was staggered. He stayed in a slightly crouched position, waiting for the next blow. He did not try to hit back, nor did he position to block the punch.

“Is that all you know how to do?” he asked softly, looking up at his human counterpart.

In the middle of his head, Fred heard his father’s voice. ‘That’s it... you let a bully push you around at school; so now get a whipping at home too.’

He straightened himself, hearing the space suit crinkle like new plastic. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ve been under a lot of stress... no... that’s an excuse. “I’m just sorry. Thank you for helping me.”

“Apology accepted,” replied the Wolf, wiping his mouth with a paw and then looking at the blood on it. “I’m going to give you a quick tour of Fred and then we’re going ta sit and calmly discuss our plans. Does that sound reasonable to you?”

The man nodded.

“Good.”

Fred cleared his throat, still tasting the bile from throwing up. He then held out his right hand. The Wolf looked at it, and then accepted it; slowly standing straight again.

“Just one question,” the man asked him, holding on to the handshake.

“Aye?”

“Why do you call your ship Fred?”

“It’s another acronym your son came up with; stands for Feifer Research – Experimental Division. I was working there when the government began their grand design. Fred is my baby; so to speak. My family and I were on a camping trip when the changes took place so we were missed... passed over by the troop ships sent to find us. I stole Fred, trying to get them away. They were caught while waiting for me to come and get them. I fought the bastards as long as I could. Apparently I hurt them worse than I figured. They seem rather desperate to get me back.”

“Don’t be so egotistical,” said the voice in their heads. “They want me.”

The Wolf looked upwards in an expression of exasperation. “All they had to do was ask... I would gladly have giv’n ya to’em. You’re sech a pain in the bum; giv’n you up would’ve been the absolute best way to punish them.”

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The tour of the ship took less than ten minutes. Though it was the size of a small hill, something it had been pretending to be just on the other side of Fred’s back yard, it was pretty much all business.

“He was never intended as a transport,” Rogers explained, “In reality, he was to be a new form of fighting ship capable of completely independent action. We gave him the capability of carrying passengers and a crew but it was all an afterthought. We actually did it more to conceal the truth behind the madness.”

“Artificial Intelligence,” Fred said softly in understanding.

“You’re quick for a human.”

“I have found that humans are, in fact, smarter than Wolfs,” said the voice in their heads. “They seem to accept things more naturally. The fact that they are not as scientifically

advanced should not be held against them. Just so you know, Rogers, I have taken a great deal of offense to the idea that I was madness.”

“I was kidding!” the Wolf said loudly. “Besides, where would I be without you?”

Fred and Rogers were just coming through the door from the engine room and the Wolf girl was there to meet them. She continued the conversation externally to their minds, the transition moving smoothly. “Actually I think humans are rather cute. I wouldn’t mind having one of them as a pet.” She smiled at Rogers. “May I keep him Dear? ... or maybe I should just give you up to their government and go work for them? I did some research and they have a space shuttle that’s kind of cute in an old fashioned sort of way.”

“No, you can’t keep him... and stop screwing around; you know how I feel about you. Did you make us something to eat?”

“Please follow me,” she replied, winking at Fred.

The generated image led them to a small round table. For every intent and purpose, the Wolfess was quite solid looking, with no indication she was nothing more than a programmed image. On the table were two plates; both held zero gravity packs of squeeze goo. She pointed at it. “Will this suffice?”

“Drinks,” the Wolf said with a sigh.

“Will water be sufficient?” she asked with a smile, as if this were some sort of inside joke.

He nodded, and winked at Fred the human. “It’s all we have in any case,” he said as she stepped to a small galley area, coming back with two squeeze bottles of water.

Fred regarded her closely. For a Wolf creature she was very pretty. “You’re really Fred?” he asked, making to touch her. His finger went right through her image with no feeling of any kind. “That’s amazing... no substance and yet you can serve us food and water.”

She smiled at him, all poise and grace. “Yes, I am the ship. Moving matter inside myself is no mean feat.”

“The image he’s using is of my wife,” Rogers said softly. “It’s as a reminder.”

“Reminder of what?”

“Of why I fight; she died rather than be converted. I should have been there to die with her.”

“Tell me about your family.”

“We had a son and a daughter. They took my son. I found my daughter in the arms of her mother. Both of them were... were... they died fighting.”

The Wolf girl placed Rogers’ water bottle on the table next to him with a magnetic click, not seeming to notice the sadness that Fred saw. She then placed the second bottle in front of the man.

“Thank you Fred,” Rogers told her. “I need you to sit with us now so we can come up with some sort of strategy to get Corey back. Let’s begin by looking at a diagram of their ship. I assume you had a good look at it with your sensors?”

“Inside and out.”

“Good.”

-----

Rogers and Fred knelt quietly in the cockpit of the spacecraft. Both of them were going over a pile of equipment that sat between them on the deck. There was nothing to see out the windows because the blast doors were closed, and even if that had not been the case, Fred the ship had pulled chunks of asteroids to himself until he looked just like any of the other floating space debris in the area. The plan was simple; they’d sped past the other ship to a place they knew it had to travel through... an asteroid belt. It was a simple case of ‘heading the bad guys off at the pass’ by going the long way around at a super-fast speed. The Howlers would have to slow their ship down to traverse the area since their smallish space craft did not possess very strong shields. As they passed, Fred and Rogers would beam over. There would be only three of the Dobermans on board since it was only a small scout ship, and the other two crewmembers had been disposed of back at the house.

“OK,” said Fred the human, going over his equipment again. “Whumper, flash grenades, laser thingie...”

“It’s not called a laser thingie,” corrected the Wolf. “It’s called a Plit; short for Plasma Laser Isobar Tool.”

“And my son named this one too?”

“Yes... you find that odd?”

Fred sighed. “I find this whole thing odd, but that doesn’t seem to matter all that much.”

Rogers nodded, not bothering to refute this any longer. "Its original intent, just so you know, was for use in sealing up a breach in the hull. It is also very useful for sealing up a door you don't want anyone going through. It's actually a tool we developed while building Fred and it was part of his repair package." He smiled a strange smile and rather vicious smile, "During the course of things, I found it was also very useful up close and personal."

"It's a fancy assed welder, is what you're telling me," Fred countered frowning as he looked at it. He flicked it on and then off, watching the six inch glowing beam intently. "And it certainly is useful for burning up packs of cigarettes as I recall."

Rogers ignored the comment and continued. "As I understand your term 'welder'; yes, that was its function. It will also cut through just about anything the beam touches. Remember... about this far away," he motioned with his hands, "And whatever you are joining will stay joined until they blast the bastard apart. Do not touch the beam to the surface you are bonding or you'll have a whopping big hole. Also; keep it away from any type of window or you'll find yourself floating through space in short order. The depressurization alone will kill you..."

"OK... OK, I get the point." He flipped the inert tool around in the air and caught it again in his hand. "It has the feel of a Commando Graybar."

"What's that?"

"A knife; which is a really really simple tool. It's sharp, made of steel, and you use it to cut throats and such."

Rogers nodded his head. "This is better, since your 'knife' would not penetrate one of these suits. The Plit will. Just, whatever else you do, remember it can cut you as easily as it will cut your enemy. Since I needed weapons, I modified it, and took away all of the safeguards."

Fred cleared his throat and looked at the floor. "I was busting Corey's chops, when I was calling you Buckman. He said you didn't like it and that made me want to call you the name all the more." He looked back up at the Wolf. "It might sound kind of stupid but I was actually jealous of my son's 'action figure'."

The Wolf looked at him; the look was friendly. "Tell me about this Buck Rogers."

Fred shrugged. "Actually he was way before my time. Old Buck was the original movie space hero. His spaceship looked really funny and you could see the wires holding it up. It made this funny buzzing sound and the smoke from its engines went straight up into the air even though they were supposed to be in space. Buck Rogers was invented by people who had little or no concept of what space really was; but they had great imaginations."

“Like you?”

The man turned back to his equipment and picking up the whumper looked at it with keen interest. “I used to have a good imagination, but then I grew up.”

“And now you’re here.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Yeah... now I’m here.” Fred pointed at a latch on the side of the whumper. “This is the safety right?”

“Yes; push that button forward if you want to use the weapon. It should be all right to use inside the craft but I will warn you that it’s going to be very loud. It might temporarily deafen you. I would suggest ya only use it and the flash grenades if you have to.”

“Gotcha.”

Rogers handed him the holster that the whumper came out of. “And so, what happened to your imagination then?” He asked.

Fred accepted the holster and strapped it around his waist. “Let’s just say there was this little boy who was small for his age and frail. His father was very disappointed with this. When the boy came home after being beaten by a bully, he was beaten even more. The father believed he could make his son stronger if he dealt out more punishment than the boy got from those of his own age at school. The theory was; the boy would begin to stand up for himself in order to avoid the punishment for losing a fight.”

“Did it work?”

Fred holstered the whumper. Standing straight, he adjusted it to his waste and then took the time to tie the hold down strap to his leg. He drew and pointed the weapon. His movements were very fluid. “Yes and no.”

“Yes and no?” Rogers asked quietly.

“The child became more than a handful. He got into any number of fights and by high school it got so bad that he actually stabbed another student. He was expelled, threatened with jail time, and finally ended up in the military where he joined the elite and learned to kill.”

“And what about his imagination?” asked the Wolf softly.

Fred knelt back on the deck and looked at him in a hard way. “He became a realist. Neverland wasn’t only dead; it never existed. The whole world became two dimensional; black and white, yes or no, kill or live... nothing in between. After the military there was only work. It was the same just a different battle ground.”

“But his father was proud of him, yes?”

“Yeah; sure. He came home with a chest full of medals and he didn’t take shit from anyone. The father was proud of the son but there was no longer a relationship there... that was dead along with Neverland.”

“I am truly sorry for ya,” Rogers told him, buckling into his own holster. “But you’re here now... that means there is still hope for you.”

“Why? Because my son got kidnapped by space creatures, and his ‘action figure’ doll is helping me out? I might be insane, and this is nothing more than a delusion; but I’m going to get my son back or die trying.”

Rogers cleared his throat. “It’s not exactly like that and you know it. I can assure you; you are quite sane.”

“The ship is approaching,” said a voice they both heard inside their heads, “In range for transport in three minutes twenty seven seconds.”

“Dinna show yerself until we give the signal Fred.”

The ship did not reply.

Fred the man had gotten used to hearing Fred the ship in his head. He actually had an entire conversation with him while Rogers was away getting their equipment. The voice had begun as that of his wife but this had made him uneasy. Fred the ship then changed the way he spoke back to the bland monotone voice more suitable to a grade b sci-fi movie. He’d given Fred the man a quick history on both himself and his creator. Rogers had been the lead scientist on the artificial intelligence project. He had also been secretly working on an antidote for the Howler transformation serum which was being developed in a genetics research department close by. He’d learned about it through an underground resistance faction begun within the government they had at the time. The Howlers, begun as a political party, offered the change free to any Wolf wanting to ‘better’ themselves. They were able to do this on a small scale and it actually became an accepted practice... but the serum being researched was for a massive scale transformation. Word leaked out to the Howlers about Rogers’ side research project and this made him their biggest enemy. He’d narrowly escaped several assassination attempts.

The scientist was only a warrior because he had to be; simple self-preservation.

It had been that way for Fred the human too. In his life; it was beat or be beaten. His father made sure to always preach the sermon of; ‘do unto others before they could do unto you’, belt in hand. Eventually, Fred swung to his way of thinking.

The man became a warrior but only because he had to... simple self-preservation.

Fred the ship pointed this similarity out to Fred the man. He was logic based, and logic stated that both of these creatures needed the other for more than the obvious reason of getting Corey back. Fred the ship was, in truth, worried about both of them, and not just for what they were about to attempt.

Rogers stood and adjusted the translator earpiece on his human counterpart, making sure it would not accidentally fall out. "Can you hear ok?" he asked in the Howler language.

It was a strange feeling for Fred to hear one thing in one ear and straightforward English in the other. "Yes, I hear you just fine; though I will tell you this will take some getting used to."

"We haven't time for get'n used ta things. I'd say 'don't worry about it' but all the same it's probably best you wear it just in case. You can speak with me in your language and I will understand you."

"All things in their proper perspective Rogers, I just want my son back. If I have to break heads to do it then so be it. Last I checked you didn't need language to do that."

"Lis'n," the Wolf told Fred, placing his hand on the man's shoulder. "I'm sorry I fried your cigarettes."

"Not a problem," he replied without smiling. He now had his game face on. "When we get back, I intend to quit."

"Me too," said Rogers; but he spoke the words only to himself.

"Transport now," Fred the ship told them... and everything faded to black.

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The engine room of the scout ship was hot and the light was dim. It reminded Fred of an engine room he had seen in a movie about a German U-boat. There was one 'engineman' dressed in a stained T-shirt and shorts tending to the power plant. Unlike Roger's engine room, which was clean and quiet, this one was noisy to the point they couldn't hear each other speak. Getting the drop on the engine tech was easy because of this. While he was busy examining a piece of equipment Fred came up on one side and touched him on the shoulder. When he looked up, Rogers, coming up on the other side, hit him over the head with a large wrench he'd found lying on the deck. His arms were then tied behind his back with plastic tie wraps they found in the engine room control booth.

Rogers pointed in a direction and held out the big wrench. Fred took it, nodded, and moved to the hatchway leading out of the area. When he was ready, the Wolf located a

control panel, touched two places on it, and the deafening noise of the engine room wound down to a low hum. They immediately felt a loss of weight as the ship's gravitational processes reduced with the engine's output.

The bell of a communications device began sporadically ringing and barking sounds came over a loudspeaker. Within moments, the door to the engine room opened and a big Doberman, wearing one of the metal suits, walked through. There was a thud as Fred's wrench found its mark. A moment later the second crewmember was tied up and laid out next to the first.

Rogers was out the door first, whumper in hand. "There will be one left" he whispered. "We'll take him, but be sure to keep him conscious. We'll need to convince him to tell us where your son is."

The passage to the bridge was not long and it was semi direct; going through only two other areas. Rogers seem to know the way so Fred followed him, his own whumper out and pointing into the shadows of each area they moved through. When they arrived at the last door the Wolf stopped a distance from it and whispered, "If the blast doors are open, under no circumstances use the whumper. The cockpit layout will be similar to Fred's so there will be no place for him to hide."

Fred nodded his understanding.

The Space Wolf moved forward again, but when the door didn't open automatically he opened a small access panel on the bulkhead. Taking out his Plit, he turned it on, looked for an exact place and quickly touched a spot with the blue light. There was a spark, the door opened. They were through, but their rush was quickly stopped with each of them taking up a position of readiness on either side of the entrance.

Standing in front of an unshielded cockpit window was a large Doberman in one of the shiny suits. Held in front of him was Corey and there was a whumper pointed at his head.

"I have been waiting for you Father," said the Doberman in his snarling language. "Welcome to my trap. You will lay your arms on the deck and kick them over this way."

Fred did not take his eyes off of the huge creature holding his son captive. Neither did his weapon stray from its mark. He had called Rogers 'Father'. He risked a sideways glance at the Wolf and found him simply standing with his weapon pointed at the floor.

"Corey," he said softly to his son, "Be brave. We're going to get you out of this."

The Doberman looked at the man sharply. "How did you know my name?" he asked plainly, his English bearing the same strange accent as Roger's.

"He didn't," the Wolf replied softly. "The child you hold is his, and his name is the same as your own. You never asked him anything at all did you?"

“He is your comrade; which is all I needed to know. You would come for him... unlike you did for us.”

“I came for you. I found your mother and sister dead,” he replied acidly, “They fought, but you embraced their executioners.”

“Wait a minute,” said Fred loudly. He lowered his weapon and stood from his crouched position. Turning, he looked directly at Rogers. “Am I understanding this right Buckman? This dog thing holding my son is your kid?!”

“They’re called Howlers, not dog things, and I think you state the obvious stupidly,” he replied flatly. “He is not my son! He ran away and left his mother and sister to die. My son would not’a dun that.”

“He’s not my father!” the Doberman yelled in response. “Howlers have only one father, and that is Ton Balsamore the Mighty. I’m not the one who ran; the Wolf called Rogers was! He took his precious ship and left us to rot!”

Fred mentally measured the distance between himself and the Doberman and then continued what was happening, easily allowing the pent up anger to show in his voice.

“I’ll tell you what I think... I think this is all a load of crap and you’re both cowards! I think you both want to blame the other for what happened because it’s easier than facing the truth. Now it’s down to who can catch who! Well how about leaving us the hell out of it?”

He paused to think very hard, “*Are you getting all of this Fred?*”

The voice in his head sounded faint, but it was there. “*Yes.*”

“*I need the whumper off my kids head for just a second.*”

Very faintly, the image of Rogers’ wife appeared to the left of the Doberman. Its arms were outstretched and ghostly looking.

“Corey...” it said.

The big Doberman turned to it for just a fraction of a second, but it was enough. Fred threw his whumper and struck him square on the side of the head. He went down in slow motion like a tree cut down in the forest. Corey the human dropped to the deck and rolled. Rogers and Fred jumped Corey the Howler at the same moment and it was over... almost.

When they had his arms pinioned and the weapon he held dropped kicked away, they saw a disturbing sight through the smallish windows of the scout ship’s cockpit. Floating right

in front of them at no more than two thousand meters distance was a very large warship. Canon fire ripped the darkness and a nearby asteroid was vaporized.

Fred the human was the first to speak. "He did say it was a trap."

"So he did," replied Rogers.

"You're the expert in these things," the man continued. "What do we do now?"

The Wolf watched the warship as it blasted another small asteroid. "I haven't the slightest idea."

-----

Captain Pultzer of the Howler Warcraft Kitten watched the scout ship drifting in front of them. Another small asteroid moved through the space between the ships and was vaporized by the craft's secondary armament.

"Hail the ship," he said in the cryptic growls of the Howler language. This was now the official language of everyone under the Howler dominion. He did not look at anyone in particular as he said this and yet it was done immediately. Life as a Howler was harsh and disciplined. It was everything being a Howler stood for. There was no room for the weak... that was the theory behind the grand design. There would be no weaklings; everyone was a soldier of the state. Those who would not conform... or could not conform would simply be done away with.

The communications officer on duty pressed a spot on his consol. "Scout ship One Niner Five, this is Warcraft Kitten, respond and be recognized."

Fred looked at Rogers. "Warship Kitten? You've got to be kidding me."

"Not at all, Kitten is the pet name of Ton Balsamore the Mighty's mistress."

"They all have to have a title don't they," mumbled Fred, "The pay is never enough... there's just got to be a title."

Rogers moved to the commander's chair on the left side of the cockpit. He glanced briefly at the panel, and then punched a lighted spot. "Scout ship One Niner Five reporting. We have lost two crew members. Lieutenant Rogers was killed. His father did not follow... I repeat; Rogers did not follow."

On the bridge of the Kitten, the Captain looked doubtful, but it was a report he could deal with. To a crewmember on messenger watch, he said, "Give Ton Balsamore my regards, and tell him the scout ship has come back empty handed."

A flash of cannon fire rippled across the blackness at a nearby asteroid. Instead of the usual resulting explosion, there was only a dull blue flash. The asteroid stayed intact.

The Captain's eyes narrowed. "Wait. Tell him his presence is requested on the bridge immediately, as I will need his guidance. Tell him also that Rogers is here."

Fred the human and Fred the ship cursed at the same moment. Fred the human thought very hard... "*Fred... do you love Rogers?*"

"Yes."

*"Standby to bring everyone aboard except me; this will include the other two crew members we captured."*

"Buckman," Fred said calmly. "We've been made. I need you to do something, and I don't need an argument."

Rogers looked at him. His expression told Fred that he had come to the same conclusion with the blue flash. "Speak," he told him. "I'm listening."

"Is there a way to reverse the changes in your son?"

"Yes. I was able to cum up with a way, but all of what I need is back on the ship."

Fred nodded his understanding, and continued. "Can you set this pigboat up to ram the warship?"

"They have shields, it wou'na do any good."

"That's not what I asked, can you do it?"

"Aye."

"Do it now. I need a button to push to set it in motion. Then you and the boys will go back to Fred... no questions."

"You're talking suicide."

Fred shook his head. "No... not exactly. Just before impact, Fred is going to transport me through the hole in the shield and onto the bridge of that warship. Fred, did you copy that?"

*"Suicide."*

“It’s the only chance we’ve got. I need you and Rogers to get my son home to his mother.” He gave Rogers a look and the Wolf understood it perfectly. He would have done the very same thing, and Fred was right, it was the only hope they had.

Looking down at the control console, he punched a series of lighted panels. When he was finished all but one of them extinguished. “Sit here and strap yourself in. It will take five seconds for the engines to come back to full power, and another three seconds for them to come up to the thrust levels you’ll need. I have the computer putting all the shield strength to the front of the craft, but it’s not much since she’s just a scout.”

Fred walked over to his whumper. Picking it up, he placed it in its holster. “You never told me how long I have after I activate a flash grenade until it goes off.”

“Three seconds.”

Until now, Corey the human had been quiet but he was watching what was going on. His father and Rogers were talking very softly so he’d heard nothing of what they’d been discussing.

“Dad?”

Fred turned to him as he climbed into the Captain’s seat. He winked. “Everything’s going to be fine son. You be sure to tell your mom I love her a lot ok?”

His son gave him a questioning look.

Fred the human thought real hard to Fred the ship and the three other creatures in the cockpit simply faded from his view.

*“They’re on board,”* flashed through his brain along with an emotion that he found strange to be feeling... it was a combination... sadness... gratitude... and something else.

“OK Fred, as soon as you do the final transport, you shag tail out of here. Throw a few of those ghost thingies out there for good measure... but you get the hell away from here as fast as you can. The best I’m hoping for is to simply slow them down a bit.”

As he buckled himself into the seat, the speaker in front of him sounded, and a small spot on the panel lit up. “Scout ship One Niner Five, prepare for docking sequence.”

Fred punched the lighted spot that Rogers told him would get the show on the road.

Second one...

Fred the human punched the button that had lighted with the communications. “Cowabunga dudddeeeeeee,” he yelled loudly as he pulled two grenades off of his belt. He held one in each hand.

“What is this noise?” growled the Captain of the Kitten. “Get a translation on that!”

Second two...

Almost as soon as he said it, the communications officer turned and repeated the expression as closely as he could in the Howler language. “That’s utter nonsense,” the Captain responded. “It makes no sense at all.”

Fred the ship blew his asteroid rock cover, and extended his own shields to cover the scout ship.

Second three...

“Captain... we have a second ship bearing 360 relative. It was the suspected asteroid.”

“Big surprise there wouldn’t you say? Open fire with the secondaries. How long until the main cannon can be brought on line?” He asked this already knowing the answer.

“Ten seconds sir.”

“Sound General Quarters.”

Second four...

Fred felt the scout ship begin to shake. The vibrations began softly, but increased rapidly to the point that he began to think it would shake itself to pieces before it ever launched.

Cannon fire lashed out repeatedly, and he heard Fred sounding off in his head like a person who had picked up a hot coal and was bouncing it back and forth between their hands.

“oooo...ahhh....crap...ouch...dang...umppphhhh....dammit....ouch...”

“Main armament to bear as soon as it can,” instructed the Captain. “Shields to full. Primary damage assessment if he rams us?”

“Shield depletion by 95% sir, but it will hold.”

“You wished to consult with me Captain Pultz?” asked a voice behind him. The Captain turned to find Ton Balsamore standing right behind him. He had actually embarked on the Captain’s craft when the communications had come in from Roger’s son. Ton Balsamore was delighted, insisting that he be a part of the trap.

“Now is a very bad time sir,” the Captain told him. “Perhaps you would consider going back to your cabin. Should something go wrong, you have a jettison pod right there at your disposal.”

Second five...

Rogers strapped himself into the pilot’s seat, and punched up a visual, doubly certain to keep the blast doors closed.

“Scout ship engines at full power, thrust coming on line now.”

It was an actual voice and Rogers looked over at the co-pilots seat to see his wife strapped in there. With every cannon blast that hit the shields, she cringed slightly, her image going fuzzy and then filling in again.

“We’re not going to leave him there Fred,” he told her. “As soon as the thrusters on the scout ship pop, I want you to pull him out.”

“No.”

Rogers looked at the form in the other chair. “What do you mean no?”

“Go back to my cabin, and miss all of this?” said the big Doberman to the Captain loudly. Unlike the others of the crew, he wore a lavish outfit befitting his rank and power; which was ultimate.

“Captain, sensors are picking up a high energy output coming from the scout ship,” reported one of the crew.

“Main cannon?”

“Not on line yet sir.”

“This is so exciting!” exclaimed the Dictator.

Second six...

Fred’s body was now bouncing around so hard he felt he was on the inside of his wife’s drink mixer. He began a primal scream that was well known to all men who have rushed into battle expecting to die.

“Bring him aboard now!” yelled Rogers. “We can still escape; we’re faster than the Kitten!”

His wife’s image was barely discernable as Fred the ship felt the punishment his shields were taking. “Nooooo!”

“Close the Blast doors!” commanded the Kitten’s Captain, not taking his eyes off of the scout ship. The shield around it was glowing red from the cannon fire. “Sound collision! Evasive maneuver Alfa!”

“Leave the doors open!” countermanded the Dictator. “The assessment said the shields would hold. I want to see him self-destruct with my own eyes and then we will chase down the other ship.”

“But sir!”

“You forget that I captained the Labrador during the glorious Scion Wars,” Ton Balsamore chided the Captain. “Shift all fire to the other ship!” he further commanded the bridge crew loudly. Then in a lower voice, he told the Captain, “The one you’re aiming at is only going to splatter itself. There is no sense wasting what energy we have, especially since we will want to take the other one next.”

Being formed into the perfect society of the Howlers, the bridge crew did not hesitate to do exactly what their Dictator commanded.

Second seven...

Fred the human’s face was scarlet from the shaking his body was taking. He held the grenades up in front of his face, and looped the pins in opposite handed fingers. As soon as the engines kicked in, he would pull them.

Fred the ship shrieked in pain as all the canon fire from the warship was redirected directly to him.

“Martha!” cried out Rogers when he saw the image of his wife writhing in pain. It quickly blipped out and was gone, and Roger’s felt as if he had lost his wife a second time. If only he had a way to shoot back.

“Captain; the scout ship is at full power! He’s nose on to the Kitten!”

The Captain touched a communicator. “This is not a drill, this is not a drill: all hands brace for impact. Threat level Delta... repeat; threat level Delta.”

“BRING IT ON ROGERS YOU PUSSY!” yelled the Dictator, clutching the rail next to the Captain. “GO AHEAD AND SPLATTER YOURSELF!” He laughed loud and hard, but he was the only one on the bridge who did.

Second eight... lasted an eternity. Things happened so fast, that they came across the collective thoughts of everyone at the very same moment.

Fred the human pulled the pins on his grenades just as the scout ship leaped forward at blinding speed. His primal scream never stopped.

Fred the ship joined him in the scream in the form of Rogers' wife's image reappearing; displaying his anger flawlessly. He was taking heavy cannon fire and would have to shut his shields off to fully focus what energy he had left on the transport. He too was preparing for death.

The Captain of the Kitten had a very bad feeling as he saw the exhaust flash of the scout ship. He was an old timer... a pre-change actual Doberman; and he never did have total faith in a shield he could not see. Regardless of that fact, he was exceptionally brave; and he refused to show the fear he now felt. "CEASE FIRING..." He commanded. "ALL ENERGY ON THE SHIELDS!"

Ton Balsamore pointed at the flash of light and squealed like a puppy.

Corey the human looked at Corey the Howler who was still bound, through a lightly glowing space of the protective shield that separated them. The two were in the same secure room inside Fred the ship. An image of both their mothers sat next to each.

"It's all happening right now, isn't it?" Corey the human asked the image of his mother.

She nodded.

"Will Dad be all right?"

"I don't know," both images replied softly.

Roger's watched the display on his pilot's console, not realizing that he was holding his breath. Fred the ship had never disobeyed him before. Suddenly he was only a spectator; and he felt so helpless.

Second nine...

The scout ship careened forward, the onboard computer driving it straight towards the bridge of the Kitten.

Cannon fire ceased.

The image of Rogers' wife stopped screaming, and calmly said, "Preparing transport."

Rogers looked at her believing Fred the ship had finally come to his senses.

Captain Pultz turned away from the windows, shielding his eyes and bracing himself against the impact.

Ton Balsamore sucked his breath in and held it as a small child might when hearing the faint 'foomp' of the launch of a fireworks rocket.

Rogers, in a very un-logical way, crossed his fingers, and whispered, "God please preserve him in life, or let him pass painlessly into death."

Second ten...

The impact and transport were seamless. Fred found himself standing in the middle of a strange area full of Doberman Pincher looking crewmembers. He quickly tossed the flash grenades to opposite sides of the room and pulled out his whumper.

The image of the Wolf girl looked at Rogers. "He's in," she said simply. "Should I do as he instructed and leave the area?"

"You're asking me now?" Rogers yelled at her, not even able to read his own emotions in the excitement.

"Yes," Fred said softly both in Roger's mind and through the image.

"Give him five seconds, and then try to pull him back out. No matter what happens we leave."

Five...

Fred opened fire with the whumper; the noise from its blast was incredibly loud in the closed area.

Captain Pultz was reaching for the alarm that would have immediately transferred functional command to the 'battle bridge' deep within the ship, when the flash grenades went off stunning him.

Rigid self-discipline left the bridge crew. Half of them left their posts seeking escape. Half of the other half tried their best to hide, and those remaining bravely tried their best to rush this strange creature.

Ton Balsamore began barking in the crazed manner of a street fighter. He swept his cape back, and reached for the small whumper he always carried.

Four...

Fred the human began moving among the crewmembers, whumper in one hand, and Plit in the other. One of the work stations was shattered, and an arm that was reaching for him was instantly severed.

Ton Balsamore had his whumper out and jerked the trigger in a wild shot that took down a crew member about to jump on Fred's back.

Captain Pultzler shook his head trying to clear away the ringing in his ears. His ship was in danger and he had to do something... something... close the blast doors... yes... must close them; they were being attacked.

Rogers watched the images on his display, the blast of the grenades popped up as red and extinguished. Now, every blast of the Fred's whumper registered white. He was jubilant... and then there was the yellow flash of a different whumper, and he cursed under his breath. "For God's sake don't run out of ammunition!" he yelled at the screen.

"I can't find him," said the image of Roger's wife. "Buckman... I need help... I can't find him!"

Three...

Ton Balsamore's next shot was more controlled. He stopped barking, and controlled his breathing; taking the time to aim. He double tapped the trigger. Fred was winged with the first shot, his whumper flying from his hand. The second shot threw him back against the cold glass of the bridge windows, where he slumped to the deck, stunned. He managed to hang on to the Plit though the beam had extinguished when his thumb moved against its button in the violence of the hit he'd taken.

The three crewmembers who were still standing moved to bury the man under their bodies, but Ton Balsamore's voice roared out. "LEAVE HIM! HE BELONGS TO ME!"

"Easy Fred," said Rogers. "What you're feeling is brand new to you. Take a deep breath, let it out, and focus. You have to get past the emotions and concentrate. Think... what's preventing the lock?"

"The shield. It's down to two percent, but it's disrupting my lock."

"Sync with the frequency and plane phase... then all you have to do is get through the hull."

Captain Pultzler reached out... but the control for the blast doors seemed a million miles away.

Both Marthas cuddled their Coreys and whispered, "Your father loves you very much."

Two...

Ton Balsamore crossed the warship's bridge in five huge strides. An incredible number of alarms and sirens were going off, creating a hellish din. He stood over Fred, his small whumper pointed directly at his head. His growling voice translated through Fred's

earpiece, which was, miraculously still in place and still working. “You fought like a Howler; it is a true pity that you are not one of us. Who are you?”

Fred’s head throbbed, and his vision was blurred. “Sergeant Fred Murphy, serial number 1056742, Special OPS; Task Force Wolf.”

I have him,” said Fred the ship, but there’s still too much between us. Going in we had the scout ship’s blast to propel him.

Rogers tapped the screen in front of him and said nothing. There was nothing to say.

One...

Captain Pultz reached the dangling Captain’s consol, and punched the control initiating the closure of the blast doors.

Two of the crewmembers, seeing the movement of the doors, looked to the Captain’s station, and immediately moved to help their fallen commander.

Ton Balsamore, startled by the sudden movement of the doors looked up, and then followed the movement of the two crewmembers.

Fred thumbed the Plit in his left hand, switching the beam back on. “And I’m a father,” he said quietly, hardly even aware that he’d said it.

Bringing the Plit rapidly up and over his head, he drove the beam into the window behind him.

Decompression was immediate.

Zero...

“I’ve got him!”

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Martha stood clutching her bathrobe, trying to keep it tight to her body. Looking from her son, and then to her husband, she stared next at the large hole in the kitchen wall where the window over the sink used to be. Her head was pulsating in reddish hangover sensations.

Fred and Corey sat at the kitchen table smiling at each other. When Martha first came into the kitchen, they were busy trying to clean the mess up. When she could speak, they told her the story... well... the short form anyhow.

“Tell me again why my house has a hole in it and the floor is all wet,” she said. “Only this time, speak slower... and softer.”

“You forgot about the flooded basement,” added Fred happily.

She gave him an evil look.

“Like I told you,” Corey told her patiently. “I was captured by Howlers last night. Buckman and Dad came and rescued me.”

“I thought he didn’t like being called Buckman?” She said clutching at her head. Her robe came open, showing her frilly night gown. “I need aspirin.”

Going to a cupboard, she pulled out a large bottle of aspirin, popped four in her mouth and went to the sink only to see it was broken. Making a sound in her throat, she went to the refrigerator, opened the door, and almost screamed at the mess she found. Grabbing a soda, she opened it, swallowed her aspirin, and then made a nasty looking face.

“I hate root beer!”

Pulling a chair out at the table, she plopped down next to them, holding the cold can to her head. “What else... because I know there has to be a ‘what else’... there always is.”

Fred cleared his throat. “I quit smoking,” he told her cheerfully.

She looked at him through bloodshot eyes. “Heard that one before... next.”

“I also quit my job.”

Martha gazed at him without speaking... and then she took a large gulp of the root beer. She didn’t even seem to notice it was root beer.

“You’re a sick man to torment me like this Fred,” she said when she could speak. “It’s Sunday, no one’s at the office.”

He reached over and held her hand. “I called the President at home. We’re starting fresh from today hun. Last night... well... we told you the story and it’s all true. Buckman is real.”

“Yeah,” chimed in Corey. “He got his own son back and cured him of being a Howler. Now they’re heading to their own planet. Dad killed the Dictator last night so now they have hope.”

Martha looked at her son and gave him a rye look. “And I am willing to bet that Buckman’s son was also named Corey?”

Her son's jaw dropped. "How'd you know that?????"

"A wild guess." She looked back at her husband and the look was not pleasant.

Fred squeezed her hand again. "Before you pass judgment on us, I'll make you a bet," he told her.

"What?"

Fred removed a whumper from the back of his pants where it had been tucked away and laid it on the table with a plastic sound.

She looked at it, and then back at her husband. "It's one of Corey's toys," she told him, "So you played a game with our son all night and you hung on to this. The fact that you both had a lot of fun is not going to fix my house and pay my bills."

"If that's what you think," he replied. "I'm willing to bet that we can put all of the booze and cigarettes we have in the house into a large box and I can destroy them with this. If I can; it will prove our story was true."

"Why the booze and cigarettes?" she asked.

"Because, if the story is true, we start all over again and that means no cigarettes and no booze. In two weeks, Buckman will be back to pick us up. We need to be ready. No more of either of them for us from now on."

"You're serious?"

"As a heart attack."

She looked at Corey and smiled through the pain of her headache. "And you're in on this? You and your father are actually talking and you hatched this whole scheme last night?"

"It's the truth Mom."

"I'll tell you both what," she said, pushing her chair back. "We do this... this... put everything in a box deal, and when nothing happens, I go back to bed and wake up tomorrow with all of this," she waved a hand at the kitchen, "fixed. You, Corey, will go back to being a normal little boy, and you, Fred, will go back to work bright and early Monday morning."

She smiled, thinking she had them.

"DEAL!" they both said at the same time.

Within minutes, the pair had all of the bottles that had been stashed in the closet, including the cooking wine, in a large cardboard box. Corey then retrieved no less than five cartons of cigarettes he'd hidden on his father over the past months. Martha, still feeling very ill, followed them out into the yard. They lived in a rural area, Fred having commuted longer than he liked to admit and never liking it. Just this once, though, where they lived had the benefit of privacy.

"I don't know why you're bothering to do this Fred," his wife told him as they walked across the yard. "It's nice that you and Corey had some sort of story time adventure last night, but you have to come back to the real world now. That toy is not going to do anything except shoot a stream of water and you know it."

He placed the box on the grass at the far reaches of the yard and then they turned and walked back towards the house.

"There's one other thing I neglected to mention," he told her. "It's a just so you know thing. Buckman needed gold to fuel Fred."

"Who's Fred?" she asked him.

"His ship; remember? Come on Martha... wake up and smell the coffee. Our lives are a wreck. It's time to take them back."

"By pretending we don't have issues?" she asked him. "By playing some silly assed game with your son all night?"

"No," he told her, stopping, and turning to face the box. He reached out a hand and moved Corey behind him, "By being who we are and not who everyone expects us to be."

His previous statement suddenly caught in her brain. "What about gold?"

He smiled at her. "I gave Buckman all of your jewelry. He was very appreciative."

Before she could say anything else, he raised the whumper, aimed it at the box, and pulled the trigger.

WHUMP