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HOPE'S HAVEN

By

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"Charge the ion cannon," Captain Rackman ordered. The frigate's hull loomed ahead, filling the viewscreen like some dark storm on the horizon. "Any mercs about?"

His first officer squealed so shrilly that the new navigator sitting beside him winced. After flying together all these years and surviving hell, Rackman knew the Quag's language well enough to recognize "no" before the computer's translation. Although Kermit didn't have to respond quite so enthusiastically.

Briggs kept his gaze locked on the controls before him. "There's four scatter guns down the sides and a monster cannon aft that'll shred our shields. Are you sure this--"

"Bring us in hard and fast beneath," Rackman broke in. He still wasn't sure how to read the new man. Briggs could definitely fly, but he wasn't meshing with the ship's crew, especially Kermit. The man couldn't even look at the Quag

without flinching. "The *Obsession* can outmaneuver this hunk of junk. That's what I hired you for, Briggs."

"But Captain--"

"You heard me, Briggs."

Briggs muttered but his hands flew over the panel entering the flight information. "This boat'd better be loaded down with a cache of guns and meds."

One small item in the frigate's cargo was priceless, at least to Rackman. His pulse raced and the old burn scars across his cheek tightened. So close.

A quick flurry of fluted whistles from Kermit was interpreted by the tinned computer voice. "They spotted us, Rack."

Briggs sent the *Obsession* under the frigate so close a hard sneeze would collide their small ship into the monster's belly. The smaller guns peppered their shields, hissing and flaring.

More whistles translated to, "Shields holding."

Briggs wheeled the ship up and around the frigate, zigzagging to miss as much fire as possible. "Where are the engines, Captain?"

Ah, now came the dicey part of this mission. Rackman let a small smile curve his lips. "Aft. Right beneath the big gun."

"Are you crazy?"

Kermit made a sound like a large, juicy burp. Thankfully, Rackman had removed that particular word from the computer's database.

"Get us as close as possible and with one shot we'll bring down the whole ship."

Muttering, Briggs tightened the ship's course even more, barely skimming the frigate's hull. Dead ahead, a glowing nimbus surrounded a three-foot-wide barrel. Red blazed to gold, searing Rack's eyes and tightening the muscles in his scarred cheek until his mouth twisted into a grimace.

Kermit held his three-fingered right hand over the ion cannon's detonator. An eye rolled back, watching Rackman expectantly.

Briggs swiped sweat out of his eyes. "Captain!"

"Sometimes you have to take a hit to win the fight," Rackman whispered.

"The shields--"

"They'll hold." *I hope.* Rackman smiled even though it felt like his face would split open. Hope was something he lost a long time ago. "Brace for impact."

The nimbus turned blue, burned toward violet, and the intense wave enveloped the *Obsession*. The ship shuddered. Alarms shrilled. Briggs cursed and when he wiped sweat out of his eyes, his hand trembled.

Kermit's hands flew over the panel and he chirped reports too fast for Rackman to translate without the computer's assistance. "Shields to twenty percent. Structural damage in the engine room. Speed dropping. Secondary engine is firing up, and crew is responding now."

"Keep our heading dead ahead. On my mark, drop our shields entirely."

Briggs whirled around, eyes wide and face clammy. "We can't survive another shot!"

"We won't have to." Mentally, Rackman counted the seconds, watching the cannon recharge, recalculating the window of opportunity with their decreased speed.

Briggs was a mistake, though. No fine flying could make up for his lack of courage. Under pressure, the man turned into bracken swamp water fit for the Quag.

Rackman snapped, "Man your station!"

Briggs jerked around, his shoulders hunched.

The glow intensified toward blue again, blazing in Rackman's eyes. They had to be close enough to fully disable the engines and the guns. Another second... "Drop shields! Fire!"

Kermit depressed the igniter, and the hull hummed beneath Rackman's feet. Raging blue-violet shone brighter, swelling, only to sputter. The glow about the big gun dissipated and lights failed on the frigate's hull.

"Status, Kermit?"

"The frigate is dead in the water, Rack."

"And the *Obsession*?"

"Hyperdrive is inoperable. Crew expects an hour or two of work to bring systems online." Kermit paused his whistles while the computer translated. "No casualties. Boarding party standing by."

At last. Rackman smiled. The final puzzle piece was within his grasp. "Excellent. Tell them I'm on my way. Kermit, you have the helm."

#

"You have your target." Rackman waited for each of the four crewmen to nod. He only hoped the dockmaster was telling the truth about the presence of a certain crate from Tentar. "Grab your target and exit as quickly as possible. Remember our code. Shoot only as a last resort, and anyone who kills other than to protect our crew or ship will lose their share of the bounty."

With his nod, Frank lit the laztorch and in seconds cut a hole in the frigate's hull. "Let's go."

Leading the way, Rackman scanned for armed guards. Two. He stunned the one running toward the intercom and Frank nailed the other. Their docking position was perfect, with the main hold before them.

His crewmen split off in different directions, using their comms to locate their quarry. Rack didn't need specifics; they were emblazoned in his head. He

trotted through the maze of barrels and crates to grid H2. The white plaz pod caught his gaze immediately, glowing like a beacon on a stack of boxes marked mining samples.

A quick touch of each heel to the inside of the other boot sent razorblades shooting out the tips. Kicking and stabbing his way up the boxes using the blades for footholds, he climbed up enough to reach the pod and stuck it beneath his arm, cradling it against his body.

Jumping down, he barely heard Frank's check-in. His heart pounded too loudly.

"Captain, all targets acquired."

His hands trembled. It took all his control to leave the pod unopened beneath his arm. Besides, he would likely need his research materials in his quarters. He must be absolutely sure. Hundred-year-old mysteries were not magically solved. "Copy. Return home."

Running back onto his ship, he forced himself to observe the successful and speedy detachment of the *Obsession* and the opening of the other crates. The boarding party did well enough, but by the grim lines of their faces, they weren't pleased.

"This is it?" Briggs frowned. Rackman could hear the creaky wheels turning in his head as he added up the market value. "A few crates of antibiotics and foodstores. That's it?"

"The best pick of the frigate's hold." Rackman made his voice deliberately pleasant. Casually, he extended a foot and studied the blade protruding from his boot. "I'm not claiming a portion of this haul, so that increases the crew's portion. Antibiotics don't sell as well as painkillers, but it's still a worthy amount."

Even Frank, who flew on the *Obsession* over a year, clutched his hands into fists at his sides and glared at him. "You risked our lives for this?"

Clutching the precious pod tighter beneath his arm, Rackman tapped the tops of his boots and sent the blades sliding soundlessly back into their hiding place.

"There was no more risk than usual."

"And exactly why is the hyperdrive inoperable, then?" Briggs raised his voice. "When I signed on, you promised high returns, significant hauls. This... This is nothing! At this rate, it'll take me twenty years to buy my own ship!"

Frank gave a hard stare at the pod. "What is your share, Captain?"

Smoothing his face, Rackman shrugged. "Just a pod containing some old books. You know I love to add to my collection every chance I get."

"If you risked our lives for a moldy old book--"

Rackman stepped into the other man's space. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't make threats. All he did was let the years of hardship, torture, and suffering darken his eyes. The many deaths bloodying his hands.

Frank turned away and jerked his head to the rest of the party. "Get the booty stored. Let's get out of here before the cavalry arrives."

Blandly, Rackman nodded. He wasn't proud of his past, but it sometimes worked to his advantage, even when his men didn't know the full story. "Use the secondary engines until the hyperdrive is up."

"Course?" Briggs asked shakily.

"Anywhere for now." Rackman's pulse raced at the thought of the pod, and the location that would hopefully be revealed. "I'll change our course as needed in a few hours."

To Hope's Haven.

#

Rackman slammed his fist on the table. Thrusting his chair backward so hard it bounced into the wall, he paced the small cabin, his mind stuffed with inconsequential details.

Kermit whistled softly. "No Hope?"

"If the location of New Haven is there, I don't understand it." Dropping back into his chair, Rackman raked a hand through his hair. "I've read every single one of her journals, finally this last one. I've read every single theory and collected hint relating to the legend. With my own eyes, I've seen the port of origin their colonization ship left from. I've read every passenger's background. Every piece of the puzzle is right here in front of me, and I still don't know where Hope's Haven is."

"What if Hope's Haven is only a legend, as you say? A galaxy hoax?"

"No." Rackman ground his teeth at the thought of such a vile betrayal. "It's not a hoax. I've proven too many details. Hope Brennan did exist. She was ship's doctor for the *Orion* out of Tentar ninety seven years ago. She was real. The ship was real. It truly was lost in space. Her journals are real--even fifty years ago someone verified her handwriting using her patient notes. Hope was real, is real, and I'm going to find her!"

"Odd, a woman writing by hand in that day and age." Kermit made a low tinkling sound that Rackman knew was supposed to soothe him. It did, despite his determination not to be swayed. "Few used such archaic writing implements so long ago, let alone today."

"Hope was... *is* special," Rackman retorted. "She lost a patient database on Tentar, all her notes, all her research. Ultimately, she blamed the epidemic and her failure to contain it on the lack of hardcopy notes. Afterward, she always wrote by hand and then scanned all her personal correspondence."

"You sound as if... you... know her."

"I do, in a way." Sighing, he bowed his head. "She's so strong, so fierce in her determination to *live*."

Determination he himself lacked for so long. If he didn't have the galaxy legend of Hope's final resting place to tantalize him, he would have given up on life long ago. It was the least he could do, considering how many lives he'd wrongfully taken.

Betrayed by his government, lied to, brainwashed, he killed thousands of Quags to avenge his brother, only to learn the truth. The most precious thing on the Quag swampy homeworld? Coal. Fuel. Enough for extermination of an entire planet, initiated by his own brother.

When Rackman tried to stop the atrocity, his own government imprisoned him for war crimes, deliberately in the same prison as the few surviving Quags. It should have been a fitting end for the Butcher, slaughtered in Im-Muir by the very race he helped murder.

Kermit whistled again. "Not your fault, Rack. Even I have forgiven you. Why do you not forgive yourself?"

"There is no forgiveness." Pain clutched Rackman's lungs in a vise. He closed his eyes, breathing hard. "Not when so many are dead and the Butcher of Fen-Ddai still lives."

A sharp note from Kermit made him wince. "Fen-Ddai. Yes. But you paid the price in full in the years you spent in Im-Muir. The rest should be paid by your government, not you. Prison enough."

Rackman stroked the thick, raw scar on his cheek. "Not enough. I'm still alive."

"Barely." Kermit patted him on the back, an extremely rare sign of respect and friendship. Quags very rarely touched anybody, let alone a human. "Find your Hope, my friend. If anyone can, you will. Fraud or not, she keeps you alive."

"If Hope Brennan is a fraud, then I'll get busy dying."

#

Eyes aching and his back a mass of knots, Rackman lowered the lights and stood up to stretch. His back and shoulders popped, and the mark on his face burned as fiercely as when the wolf first spit acid on him. At least the damned beast missed his eye.

Something rustled outside his door. A thud. He glanced at the clock. Too early for the shift to change. Silently, he edged over to the wall and drew his stunner. With his back pressed tight, he waited. Surviving--and escaping--the worst prison in the galaxy taught him never to ignore his instincts. Right now, his instincts screamed at him to dial the stunner up to kill.

No, enough killing. I've done enough killing for a dozen lifetimes.

His door swooshed open. Had he forgotten to lock it? He might have in the rush to read Hope's last journal. Someone crept inside, a gun in hand. Rackman waited, barely breathing, as the intruder scanned the room.

Filling his lungs as quietly as possible, he let loose a shrill, piercing call that would have made Kermit fall into a dead faint. The sound still haunted Rackman's nightmares, too.

The intruder flinched, covered his ears, and Rackman struck, hard, the butt of his gun to the back of the man's neck. He went down in a heap.

Not taking any chances, Rackman crouched back against the wall. The door was still open. His knees ached, and his lungs screamed for loud, deep breathing, but he kept his body tight and silent, just in case the intruder had assistance.

"Frank." The low whisper barely reached Rackman's ears, but he knew the voice.

Son of a bitch. Briggs slipped into the doorway. He didn't have the courage to play chicken with a massive, slow frigate, but he thought he could pull off a mutiny?

Rage tightened Rackman's face, splitting the scar in a blaze of fire. Pushing away from the wall with the stunner aimed carefully at the bastard's chest, he spoke. "Come get your murderous friend."

"Captain." Hesitating a moment, Briggs strode inside and bent down to check Frank's pulse. "We didn't violate your primary rule. His weapon was set to stun."

"As was mine." Rackman grimaced, his face twisted by that hateful scar. "Repeat to me our code on the *Obsession*, Briggs, the code I gave you when I hired you. Let me hear it from your traitorous lips."

Swallowing nervously, Briggs replied, "The crew is family. The ship is our home. We kill only to protect the life of our family or our home."

"Ah. And yet you come in the dead of night to eliminate your Captain, the father of this happy little family?"

"Not eliminate, Sir." Briggs raised his chin, his eyes glinting in the low light. "We were merely going to incapacitate you."

"Oh, well, that's all. Mutiny."

Briggs flinched. "You're unfit to Captain this ship. You take outrageous risks, putting us up against a massive gun, taking considerable damage, for a few casks! A few thousand marks at most! The ship alone is worth ten times that, Captain."

"You have no right to question me or my orders. None." Rackman bit off the words, fury tightening his face even more. "I am owner and Captain of the *Obsession*. Since you object so strenuously to my leadership, you will disembark at the next port."

"You listen to that Quag, that Bullfrog, making him first officer when he can't even communicate with us. What did he get out of this insane strike? What hold does he have on you, Captain?"

Rackman slowly stroked a hand down the horrible scars on his face, forcing the other man to take a good, long look. "He saved the life of the Butcher of Fenddai, even when I single-handedly killed thousands of his people. If I'd known what a racist you are, I would have kicked you out of my ship without an interview, let alone a position."

"He's a Frog. We defeated the Quags."

"Did we?" Rackman shook his head. "You don't understand your history very well, then."

"Wait a minute." Briggs searched his gaze, shock sagging his face. "If you're the Butcher, then you-- you--"

Rackman stepped closer, deliberately leering that warped smile. "I escaped from Im-Muir. With Kermit."

"You're worth--"

"Nothing." Shame burned as fiercely as the scar on his cheek. He turned away, his gaze falling on the fragile journals, tattered with age and so priceless. Hope. She was all he had left. "Last I heard, my bounty is well over a million marks, but my life is worth nothing."

Briggs launched at him, one arm going hard around his throat, the other grabbing his hand with the gun. Surprised, Rackman wheezed, trying to bring the gun up against the other man's body.

"Suns, Captain, you're a fool. I'll gig the Frog and hand you over to the Republic. Then I'll own a dozen shitty ships like this one. A whole fleet."

Now he knew where Briggs found courage--in greed. Spots danced before Rackman's eyes. His will to live was strong, thanks to Hope. He must find her.

He heeled the small depression on the inside leather on his right boot, once, twice, to fully arm his weapons. A small movement against the bottom and sides

of his foot confirmed the razors and spikes in the sole deployed. He stomped straight down on Briggs' foot, piercing through his boot with an inch-long barb.

Briggs howled but didn't let go until Rackman used the heel blade to slice open his kneecap. He jerked the gun up hard into the man's abdomen. "Why do you hate him so much?"

No answer, just a growled, frantic gasp of pain and anger.

Drawing a deep breath, Rackman searched the man's face for some redeeming quality. No Quag hated as violently as this man who'd never even seen the atrocities of Fen-Ddai and the bloody work of the Butcher. Rackman carried the weight of countless deaths on his soul that dragged him closer to hell every day. Eliminating such hatred would lighten his load somewhat.

Rackman pulled the trigger.

The blast shoved Briggs back, stumbling, until he fell flat on the floor. A stun at such close range was a painful way to die. Gasping, twitching, it took him several minutes to finally stop breathing. While Rackman watched, silently, feeling every convulsion himself.

How could he face Hope with so much blood on his hands?

Despair weighed on him. Perhaps Kermit was right. No one knew more about Hope's Haven. Nobody. Yet Rackman couldn't find her. He didn't even have one solid lead where her resting place might be. Even if he found her now, cryo would've failed after nearly one hundred years. Hope was dead.

Suns, Captain, you are a fool.

His head jerked up. Of course, the suns!

Rackman dug through the stack and opened the first journal entry she wrote after landing on the barren wasteland they dubbed New Haven. He had most of Hope's letters memorized, so it only took him a moment to pinpoint the full eclipse of the two suns hanging above New Haven, and then the next.

Twenty three days between eclipses. Exactly like--

Terrified yet giddy, he entered the search parameters into the computer. Which planets with two suns had a cycle of exactly twenty three days of full daylight and three of night?

Only one known planet. The planet he still dreamed of and woke screaming. The planet to which his return meant a sentence worse than death.

Im-Muir.

#

Kermit's large bulbous eyes blinked and rolled independently, a sure sign of Quag agitation. "Are you sure, Rack? Must you go back?"

"I'm sure. The suns and eclipses were the clues." He laughed raggedly, running a hand through his hair. "The clues were there all along. I didn't even need the last journal, although it helped clarify exactly how many full night hours she saw. It was the third night that she put herself into cryo, right after the Captain died from his injuries. In the eclipse, it must have been Fades that got them. All along, she was right there..."

"New Haven and Im-Muir, the same?"

"Remember the ruins we saw in the tunnels?" Just thinking about the escape made Rack's hands tremble. His stomach churned with bile and the scar burned viciously. The poisonous wolf was only the first obstacle they faced in their escape. "I think that's where she is. To protect the colonists from beasts on the surface, they set up command in a cave. A cave, just like those under Im-Muir! They didn't know about the Fades beneath ground until it was too late."

"But-- but--" Kermit shrilled. "The only way-- You--"

"The only way I can possibly find my way back to those ruins is through the prison."

"If you go back--" Kermit twittered so fast, so broken, that Rack couldn't understand him. "Death -- Worse -- Suffer -- Wolves -- Fades!"

Rackman patted him on the back, humming beneath his breath. His human vocal chords couldn't manage the exact soothing sound, but it seemed to help. "I know, my friend, I know."

"They will lock you up again!"

Grimly, he nodded. "That's exactly what I need them to do." He pulled out the comm he prepared earlier and smiled with genuine affection as he pressed it into the Quag's hand. "The *Obsession* is yours, Kreee-meeet." Deliberately, he tried to mimic the whistles of the Quag, to pronounce his name correctly. One last sign of respect. "My only request is that you name her something else."

Kermit calmed, blinking at him slowly with his head cocked. "I shall name your ship the *Redemption*."

Wordlessly, Rackman nodded, his throat tight. If his life was the price for finding Hope's Haven, he'd go with a smile on his face. Hope would redeem him.

I hope she's still alive.

#

Rackman landed the shuttle exactly where the Quag rescue ship first picked up him and Kermit nearly ten years ago. Last time he was an inmate at Im-Muir, they allowed him to keep the clothes he came in with but took away all his water, food, and marks. He stuffed a few more tokens in his pocket--not enough to make an obscene bribe, since he wanted them to believe his story, but respectable. Enough to earn him a few days' reprieve until the eclipse.

Although from the red lip along the bottom of the second sun, the eclipse wasn't far away.

His gut tightened and shivers raced down his spine. He wouldn't think about the Fades. Not yet. He needed to worry about the wolves first. To be safe,

though, he guzzled all the water he could hold. He'd need the extra fluid in the tunnels. If he made it that far.

Before venturing outside, he took out Hope's last journal entry.

The suns are gone.

The search party, butchered.

Captain Killian is alive but so badly injured I know he'll die before I can stabilize him enough for cryo. He's the last crewmember still alive, other than me.

So many dead.

I'm a doctor. I save lives. Yet I couldn't save my husband and seven-year-old son from a virus on Tentar. I couldn't save these poor colonists. I can't save myself now. All I can do is sleep, and hope. Hope that you will find these journals. Hope that you'll come looking for the idealistic fools who set out into the wilderness, were lost in space, and tried to find a new life here in New Haven.

I hope you find what you're looking for.

Don't forget me, trapped in my cold, dead sleep. I will live until you find me.

The suns are gone. The beasts come. Please hurry.

Find me!

Rackman ripped out that last page, carefully folded it into a neat square, and placed it in his inside pocket next to his heart. He took a deep breath, opened the shuttle door, and ran for his life.

#

Glancing back over his shoulder, Rackman pounded both fists on the plazdoor. The shaggy red-brown beast came nearly up to his waist. Its jaws were lined with jagged teeth, but that wasn't the wolf's primary weapon. His heavy-duty canvas jacket was already pock-marked with acid spots, and the wolf opened its jaws, shoulders bunching, preparing to unload again. "Open the door!"

Inside, the two guards guffawed, pointing and betting on how long he'd last. Rackman snarled at them, hit the door again, and then turned to better dodge the wolf's spray. Sucking in a deep breath until his chest bulged with air, he made the same high-pitched squeal that Kermit taught him years ago. The hunting call of a Fade was the only thing the wolves feared.

The beast skidded to a halt, ears flat to its head, tail clutched to its hind legs. It jerked around, scanning for danger, nose sniffing frantically for the trademark sickly sweet smell of Fades.

"Let me in!"

The burly guard frowned, his gaze suddenly considering. "Who the hell are you?"

"Rackman."

The two guards exchanged glances. "John Rackman? The Butcher of--"

"Fen-Ddai! You know my bounty!"

They cracked the plazdoor enough for him to slide through, scraping his unscarred cheek and leaving a scrap of his pants behind when it slammed shut behind him. Panting on the dingy floor, he waited for the questioning. And the beating. Or whatever they felt like.

"Well, Rack, what are you doing back here in Shangri-La?" The barrel-chested bastard managed to sound magnanimous. "Last I heard you were a pirate of sorts running in the Tentar quadrant."

"I was. My crew mutinied, found out my past, and decided to bring me home, so to speak."

The other guard was twitchy with tight eyes and mouth, several scars on his hands, forearms, and face. Ah, Rack remembered him. The scars were mutual.

Water suddenly flowed down the plaz walls, blurring the snarling, raving wolf outside. Rackman cleared his dry, raspy throat. "When's the eclipse?"

The barrel-chested guard kidney-punched him and casually kicked him in the head. "Tonight."

Blinking away the starbursts, Rackman proceeded with his plan. "Which one of you pussies is going to be brave enough to feed me to the Fades first?"

The runt took his shots, hard and fast with a bitterness that surprised him. The guard fisted a hand in his hair and smashed his face into the floor a few times for good measure. "You remember Hank? He was put outside because of you."

Spitting out blood, Rack laughed. "How many wolves got him? Was he as pretty as me when they were finished spitting acid on him?"

Blows descended so fast he felt them from a distance. A great lassitude settled over him. He saw a woman, sitting at a table, writing by hand. Soft light shadowed her features, but he knew her. Hope shone all around.

#

The smell awakened him. Rotten cake, sweet, sugary but so foul. His stomach lurched and it was all he could do to keep his full bladder from releasing. Too early to piss himself; he would need the fluid to drive the Fade away.

Darkness. He felt his eyes to make sure they were open. Damn, they must have tried to make the rest of his face match the scar on his left cheek. His right eye was almost swollen shut, but it was functioning. There just wasn't shit to see. How far into the tunnel had they thrown him?

Crawling through cold, slick clay, he tried not to make a sound. Slipping, he stayed in the dampness, avoiding the drier areas. Every little bit of moisture helped. He couldn't hear the Fade, but the hair prickled on the back of his neck. It was there, stalking him.

Overwhelmingly sweet, the rank odor wafted to him, sending his heart thumping frantically against his ribs. If he remembered their escape route

correctly, this used to be an underground creek. The ruins were at least a mile away from the central prison compound.

A mile.

If this was the right creek. They'd only encountered one water source in their original escape, but in the infinite darkness...

What if the guards deliberately dumped him in an entirely different spot? Years ago, they used the easiest tunnel access for dumping prisoners--the easier to save their own skin.

Please, dear Hope, still be alive. Let the water last until I can reach you.

His right hand skidded out from beneath him and he fell face first in the slop. Thinking quickly, he rolled in the sludge, fully coating himself. If it kept him wet enough, he might have a chance. A small chance. That's all he needed.

#

Shrill metallic screeching reverberated in the tunnel. Huddled in the mud, Rackman squeezed his hands over his ears, trying to hold back his own scream. The Fade was calling in reinforcements. Even after so many years, their rudimentary calls were dreadfully familiar. After the pack showed up, they'd drive him, screaming and shrilling until he went mad with fear and ran ahead with no thought to the trap, exactly how they hunted wolves when the eclipse cast full night on the surface.

Maybe the pack would be occupied with fresh kills upside. He could handle one Fade.

The ground sloped downward. Despite the surge of adrenaline, he slowed his crawl. His arms trembled and his knees were scraped and bloody, but the ravine should be just ahead. The underground creek used to speed up here, and Kermit had nearly been swept over the cliff. Who knew how far the water fell,

where it led, how deep into the ground it traveled. Deeper caverns, darker, more Fades. The thought set Rackman's teeth chattering so hard his jaw ached.

He edged to the right. The tunnel he needed would be just ahead, invisible, except for the faint draft. Concentrating, so careful not to slip off the edge into the ravine, he froze. The rotten cake slapped him in the face. Gagging, he fought against his instincts and crawled forward. This was the way. No Fade would keep him from Hope.

The mud ended. Coating himself in a fresh layer of moistness, he crept forward, still on hands and knees. A cool draft caressed his face, bringing another overwhelming wave of stench. Slowly, he gained his feet. Trailing his right hand along the wall, he fought his fear step by step.

The Fade was more elemental than flesh and blood. It fed on emotions, on fear. It would use his instincts against him and feed on that turmoil rioting in the pit of his stomach. It wouldn't bleed, couldn't as far as he knew. No weapon would touch it, but it was terrified of water. Any water.

He'd spit on it, piss on it, throw mud on it, whatever was required. He would not give in to his fear and run. He would not give in to the quivering in his knees and fall into a wailing, sniveling ball of tears. Not when Hope was so close.

Rancid molasses clogged his nostrils. Goose bumps raised on his arms, shivering down his back, tightening his muscles for flight. With trembling hands, he ripped open his pants, hoping he could perform on call and piss all over the son of a bitch.

A wash of cold drenched him, seizing his lungs. The Fade touched him, held him in a grip of sweet, fetid breath and cold terror.

Suddenly, all he could think about was Kermit. How much he hated the Butcher at first. How much Rackman hated himself. Kermit overcame his hatred, though. Kermit gave him hope for the future. He gave Rackman a reason to live,

to try and redeem the blood on his hands. Then Hope's Haven lured him onward. But in the beginning, it was the ugly frog-like alien who should have hated him, but instead saved his life.

Humming that low, resonant sound meant to soothe, Rackman smiled. He deserved to die. Fitting that he would die remembering his best friend. A Quag.

The Fade recoiled. Cold peeled away, leaving him shivering. His knees gave out, and he fell, catching himself before planting his face in the rocks.

Lightheaded, he wet his lips and continued the gentle, soothing sound.

With one last metallic shriek, the Fade fled.

Afraid to wait, afraid it would regain its courage, Rackman fumbled his pants closed and crawled forward. Humming. Smiling.

A faint glow crawled up the walls, created by some florescent plant that he and Kermit had spent years trying to identify in the safety of the *Obsession*. It was rather pretty, a soft white fur that released a gentle light. Kermit had pronounced it edible and quite delicious, although his crap had glowed for weeks later, much to his mortification and Rack's amusement.

Chuckling beneath his breath at the memory, he stood and quickened his pace. The first glint of metal sent his stomach churning again. Running, he turned into the side cave. Crates were tossed about, abandoned metal covered with glowing white furred plants. And there, deeper in the cavern, a softly lit ship.

Heart in his throat, he raced forward. Smaller than he expected for a colonization ship, but then the original crew had been less than twenty. The ramp was down. Was that good or bad? The ship groaned, creaking frighteningly like the Fade's shrill cry. The medical bay--where would it be?

He tried to remember the layout of the *Orion*, but his mind blanked. So close. How could she possibly be alive?

Broken crates spewed farming tools, rotted clothing, tattered books, plaz utensils, heaps of moldering food. The hold, of course. The cryo area would be aft.

He shoved a crate aside and pried at the rusted door. It was stuck. Frantically, he ran back to the farming tools and hefted a shovel. Rusted, but solid enough, he decided. Racing back, he levered the protesting door open and stepped inside.

To Hope Brennan's resting place.

Ah, clever, brilliant woman! Since she was the last surviving crew member, she used the other cryo units' power cells to extend her cycle. The cells were all dead but one. One cell still glowed.

Hope was alive.

Hands trembling, tears sizzling painfully on the acid scar, Rackman keyed the awaken sequence. Thirty minutes. Cursing archaic technology, he paced back and forth. He tried to rake his hair out of his face, but it was hardened with clay.

Thirty minutes--long enough to wash some mud away. He went back to the hold and used some of the cloth to wipe his face and hands clean. He couldn't find any water.

Thinking of water, he winced. He desperately needed to empty his bladder. Just in case the Fades came again, he used a plaz container to gather his urine. Disgusting, but an effective deterrent, as he and Kermit had learned.

Kermit. Rack smiled again, his heart aching with new understanding. So fragile, so tender. He never hoped to feel so good again, to feel genuine warmth and friendship, especially for a Quag. He found himself humming again and checked his comm unit. Startled, he hurried back to the cryo unit and counted down the last five minutes.

The thick plaz lid finally cracked, steam pouring out. Terrified, he pushed it open. Would she still be alive, unharmed, aware? What did she look like? Would she truly be glad to find herself awake one hundred years later than she planned?

Breathe, damn it. Breathe!

Her eyes opened. Blue. Dark blue. She hauled in air and choked. Unable to tear his gaze away from hers, he waited silently until she spoke.

Hope smiled on Rackman. "I knew you'd come."

The End