

Love Thy Enemy

“Love thy enemy – it’ll drive ‘em crazy trying to figure out what your up to.”

– Anonymous

“We must move!” said Hayden rather pointedly.

“Tell us something we don’t know, Weapons Master,” Jaime snapped back sarcastically.

“*This is not... helping...*” started Mitch, squeaking slightly and quickly losing his nerve.

“ENOUGH!” said a deep voice from the darkness of the hall. The grumbles all quickly stopped as their captain, Iain Daniel Bryce, stepped through the hatch into the conference room. His always slightly mussed up hair made him look angrier than he was, “We know what we *must* do, let us figure out *how*.”

Phoenix was currently anchored, rather precariously, to a chunk of FSD – floating space debris. This chunk of what was likely once a planet or moon may yet prove her deathbed. The crew was unhappy about this condition since it was the beginning of the second week of it. They were attempting to hit a convoy of three supply ships when a blast from a CRF starling managed to pierce an opening in the starboard shield and punch a hole in her primary fuel tank. Digger’s micro vascular membrane system works quite well for smaller fractures and dings from FSD’s, but not large gaping holes. In the time it took the MVS to seal the breached area they’d leaked most of their raw plasma stores; which is how they wound up where they currently were, with barely the fuel to keep the environmentals running.

“Now, what is our highest priority?” asked Captain Bryce as he sat down at the head of the table and took a drink from the cup of coffee waiting for him.

“We need water,” said Yard, as if this should be obvious.

“We don’t have fuel to go anywhere to get any, the first burst will finish us,” grumbled Digger. He’d spent most of the last week repairing the hull and wasn’t in the best of moods.

“We can survive several more weeks on what we have of fuel but we need to replenish our water supply or we could have a medical crisis on our hands,” said Yard more adamantly, looking to Dr. Carter for agreement.

“He’s right, Captain. The water reintegration filters are spent, they aren’t purifying the recaptured water anymore; we aren’t getting out all the contaminants. That can cause bacteria levels to rise and kill us,” said the doctor, ignoring the evil looks from Digger and Hayden.

Digger started again, “But, we *cannot* filter the water unless we have the fuel to...”

“This we already know, Digger, tell us something new,” interrupted the captain. He was getting tired of going over the same issues every day. He too was frustrated, and he too knew the dangers if they didn’t do something soon, but no one seemed to have a solution.

“We should take what can be spared of the fuel in a sandpiper and go after more,” said Jaime pointedly. He’d offered this same option three other times already but had been shot down each time. Now it did seem their only option.

“Is there enough?” the captain asked Digger.

“I think just, sir.”

“I volunteer,” said Jaime, standing up.

Before the captain had a chance to accept, Kyle’s voice came over the ship’s intercom.

“Go, Kyle,” said Captain Bryce.

“We have a ship on the radar, sir. It’s about three clicks off our aft.”

They all rose quickly and left the room, making their way to the bridge.

Captain Bryce, who was in the rear, pushed his way through them and stepped into the helm room, beside his male pilot. “What class, Kyle?”

“It’s a transport class, sir, its signature is a bluejay.”

Captain Bryce looked to his mechanic for a breakdown of this class of vessels.

“They’re a type of space bus. They’d have good fuel stores for the backtrip; we should be able to siphon the tanks; that’ll get us up and moving, at the very least. The food stores should be good as well, but there won’t likely be much cargo for resale.”

“But, what’s it doing out here in the middle of nothing and nowhere?” asked the captain, there were no resort planets for about ten lightyears.

“She’s submitting general distress to all channels,” Kyle offered as possible explanation.

“Damage?”

Digger stepped over to the scanning array, after studying it for a moment he said, “Her hyperdrive is offline, sir.”

“Weapons?”

“None usually,” said Digger, looking a little confused, “they usually have a CRF escort though.”

“There aren’t any other ships in the vicinity?” asked the quartermaster.

“None on the forefront. They could be hanging back but it would take them time to reach us,” answered Digger.

“Is it coming this way?” asked Jaime.

“They’ll come within a quarter click.”

“Do we have the fuel to intercept her and get back if we meet trouble?” asked Captain Bryce. He wanted this hit as much as any of them, but he had to look at the bigger picture.

“No,” answered Digger dejectedly; the collective sigh completed the simple answer well.

“Then we modify the quartermaster’s plan. Put the CRF insignias on a starling, Jaime, go to them as if you’re responding to their distress call and lead them this way. How close does she need to be for us to grapple her?”

“Within a tenth of a click, sir.”

“Alright, Kyle, keep an eye on the radar for siege crashers. When she’s within a quarter click engage the shroud then hook her and bring her in. Go to it, Jaime.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Jaime and Kyle said in unison and Jaime ran to the hanger deck.

The first stages of siege getting all their adrenaline flowing, the captain told Hayden to ready the grunts with weapons, the doctor to fill a bag with medical supplies, in case of injuries, Yard to raid their kitchens for anything worth taking, Digger to retrieve any fuel he could and

strip the vessel of any usable parts and Mitch to be ready to record the haul and went to dress himself more appropriately for the bluejay's first viewing of the BrimTier pirate, Iain Bryce.



Iain felt the first viewing of Phoenix Enclave was an important ceremony, in homage of sorts to their pirate forefathers. His simple dress of tan linen trousers and white button up shirt was fine for regular ship wears but he felt he had an image to uphold so he changed the trousers for a silk pair with wide red and black stripes and the plain shirt for a black silk tunic with puffy sleeves. A purple bandana went over his head, leaving the sides and bottom of his hair loose and curling wildly, the simple silver stud earring in his left earlobe was swapped with a fake finger bone, dangling from a golden chain, and his regular brown leather boots were replaced with a pair of black leather boots that came up to his knees and folded over, completing the look. He glanced at himself in his full-length mirror and smiled at how outlandish he looked; it was an important impression to make, so it was endured.

As he turned to leave, Kyle's voice announced the bluejay was within a quarter click and the shroud was being engaged. He smiled wickedly as he grabbed the black leather belt that held the holsters for his laser side arms and ran towards the hanger bay.

Captain Iain Bryce, seven of his officers and fifteen grunts walked through the docking tunnel and stepped through the opening that had been cut in the other ship's hull. The first thing they saw was a large billboard that made them all laugh heartily and set the mood appropriately. The sign told the passengers of the bluejay what they should do in case of a hijacking and hinted that any who cooperated would be all but considered accomplices to the crime.

Once they all got over the initial joke, the captain said enthusiastically, "Alright, let us begin, the siege is on!"

Yard and his men went immediately to the galley and began to inventory the food stores, Digger began to move the fuel tanks to Phoenix, Hayden and five grunts went through the ship, herding the occupants and crew into the dining hall, and Captain Bryce, Jaime, Eve, Dr. Carter, Mitch and the balance of the grunts went there to wait. It wasn't long before the passengers and crew began to flood into the room; all stopping dead at the sight of their captors standing on a catwalk that went around the room, like a terrace above the assemblage.

The lights from below, streaming up through the open grid work grating, made them all look quite impressive but they made Iain Bryce look superhuman. The way they flickered made his mussed up hair look like it was being blown by some unfelt wind and the smile, that normally looked quite warm and friendly, look very sinister. It made more than a few passengers forget how to breathe for a moment.

Captain Bryce looked down on the passengers of the bluejay before him and smiled, they all seemed appropriately frightened. The first thing he needed to do was weed out any that might think to cause unneeded hassle.

Before him was an unusual mix for a resort transport, not many looked to be vacationers, but he didn't linger on the thought. Most of them, including the ship's crew, was ignored at once, not worth worrying about, seven CRF officers, the highest rank a lieutenant commander, three men dressed in business suites, a young couple hanging on to each other for dear life, and a very portly lady, being comforted by what was possibly the most beautiful woman Iain had ever seen, and took all his effort to look away from, held his interest.

Iain nodded to the quartermaster that he was ready.

Jaime's strong, steady voice carried easily across the room, calling for silence. "Eyes forward, mouths shut, ears open." It took only the one attempt to fulfill the request, even the fat lady quieted. He waited a second then nodded to the captain.

Iain took up his most imposing stance and said, in his deep, commanding voice, "You are under siege of Phoenix Enclave, as long as no one attempts anything foolhardy none of you will

come to harm. I am Captain Iain Bryce and this..."

"You're the Robin Hood pirate," interrupted one of the bluejay's crew with a little bit of a snigger, which sent grumbles of disappointment and mockery through the crowd.

"Aye, and these are my *merry men!*" snapped the captain as ten pirates stepped out from behind him, aimed laser rifles at them and, in unison, charged the guns up with a loud and overt tweak of energy.

Everyone in the mess quieted immediately and the fat lady swooned.

The pirate captain stood over the group silently while he waited for his men to report on the condition of the ship. He was trying to build the prisoners anxiety, nervous people tended to do as they were told better than strong willed ones did, and though he would harm any of them that fought him, he didn't want to. The problem was that he was getting anxious as well, Digger wasn't responding to his comlink.

He was about to send someone to find out the man's status when his voice finally came over the com.

"Captain Bryce."

"Go, Digger," answered the captain.

"The hyperdrive is terribly unstable, if we bleed it dry it could explode. I've siphoned all I dare, sir."

"How much did you get?" asked Iain, trying to hide his anxiety.

"Enough, sir," answered Digger.

"Any idea what they're doing out here by themselves?"

"It looks like the drive failed while they were in jump and it dumped them here, sir; their escort is most likely lightyears from here," answered Digger.

"Can you repair it?" asked the captain, he could guess the answer by the man's tone.

"The couplers are fried, it will cost more than she's worth to even try." The frustration in Digger's voice was very thick, he hated when he had to admit he couldn't fix an engine; it really bothered his pride.

"Your suggestion?" asked Captain Bryce.

“We scuttle her, Captain.”

“Alright, finish looking for anything worth scavenging and get back to Phoenix.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” finished the mechanic.

There was static but nothing more.

That wasn't good news; these vessels rarely had much of worth beyond their resale value. Hopefully at least one of the passengers would prove worth ransoming.

With the preliminaries out of the way now, Iain looked back at Jaime and said they were ready to start processing the prisoners.

~~In a voice that carried around the room with ease, Jaime said, “Eyes forward, mouths shut, ears open.”~~

“As I was saying before, no harm will come to you, long as you all cooperate,” said the captain as he once more addressed the prisoners. He paused to see if he got any dissension before continuing. “First, is there any here that require medical attention? Any with weak tickers or the like?” There was some chatter then a unified no. “Good, you can return to our ship, Doctor.”

Dr. Carter nodded and started to leave the gangway then stopped when a voice called out.

“You're the one that will need a doctor.”

Eve quickly brought her rifle up, which prompted the grunts to do the same, looking for who had spoken. It had come from one of the suits.

Undeterred by the number of laser rifles now aimed at him, or just plain stupid, the man continued, “Release us immediately or you will receive no mercy.”

“Excuse me, did I give you leave to speak?” growled Captain Bryce as he pulled his own laser and charged it.

“I'll see you hanged for this,” said the suit loudly.

“My neck's just long enough, thank you, but *you* will need my doctor to sew your tongue back on if you don't hold it.”

The man looked ready to continue but one of the CRF officers put a hand on his shoulder and slowly shook his head, the heckler did hold off, but his body language said he'd speak again if given half a chance.

Iain waited a moment longer to be sure that was truly the end of it before he looked down at Mitch, who had come from the purser's office during the exchange with about a ream of paper in his hands. "How many we got aboard, Master Gordon?"

"Twenty passengers and eleven crew, thirty one total, sir," Mitch answered as he quickly counted the heads before him, "Captain, I see only thirty."

The captain looked over the heads before him and came up with the same number. He was about to tell Eve to search the ship again when the mousy man, part of the clingy couple in the back, raised his hand and called out for their attention.

"Sir... excuse me, Pirate, sir? My son is number thirty one."

Captain Bryce motioned the couple forward. The woman was holding a bundle of cloth in front of her; both jumped a foot when the captain twisted his hand in the air, motioning for them to drop the cloth. The woman hesitated then complied, revealing the head of a baby. Iain kneeled before them, bringing him eye level to the man and asked, just loud enough for the three to hear, "Boy or girl?"

"B... boy, s... sir," said the man shaking so bad it sounded like he was stuttering.

"How old?"

"Si... six... m... months, sir," said the man respectfully, then he added, "You... you *are* ... the pirate... who... who gives to the poor... aren't you?"

"I am," said Captain Bryce proudly.

"We will do... noth... nothing to cause you any... any trouble, sir, I pro... promise."

"That's good to hear," said Iain, smiling down at the baby. He waved them to step back and stood back up just as Yard stepped from the hatch below, carrying ten bags, his grunts each had ten bags in their arms also. They set them down and Yard looked up at the captain, nodding that all was ready. Iain acknowledged his galley master then turned to face the bluejay captain, "How many life pods is this vessel equipped with?"

"Ten, sir."

"And, they each hold how many?" asked Captain Bryce.

"Six each, sir."

“Plenty,” said Iain as he looked back to the young couple. “Might you have an ident card on you?”

“Yes, sir,” the man said as he stepped forward, passed his tattered billfold up to the pirate captain and quickly stepped back.

Iain opened it and pulled out an ident card that had seen better days but the holograph was definitely the man standing before him. It listed him as a resident of Bangor, a planet in the First Tier, but his occupation listed him as a miner so he would have no monetary connections. Captain Bryce found thirty credits inside the billfold, which he passed to Jaime, then he handed the wallet back to the man.

“Thank you,” the captain said kindly then looked down at his steward, “Yard, take two bags, add some extra milk and water, just in case, and escort them to a pod, if you please.”

“Sir?” asked the coalminer in a rather squeaky voice, frightened and confused.

“The bags hold a week worth of provisions. The beacon in the pods is more focused and effective than the distress signal of this ship, you should be found by a CRF cruiser within three days, we will be back through in four, if you’re still here we will collect you and take you to the closest colony,” answered the pirate captain.

“Thank you, sir,” said the man through tears, helping his wife re-cover their baby boy.

“Bless you and your men,” said the woman as two grunts escorted them from the room.

Captain Bryce waited for the two to be gone before he stood and turned his attention back to the rest of the assembled travelers. “Now, let’s see if any of you is worth keeping?” Grumbles erupted but quickly stopped when he held up his laser again, “Form a neat line before me and kindly have your ident cards ready, if you please.”

The first man, a small and round man, one of the three in the suits, with no hair and thick glasses that seemed permanently attached to the bridge of his nose, stepped forward and asked boldly, “Are you going to kill us?”

The pirate captain looked the man up and down, pretending to be sizing up his potential threat, raised an eyebrow and said, through a crooked half smile, “That’ll depend entirely on how helpful you are, won’t it!” He laughed wildly at the man’s reaction to the simple statement.

The man's ident named him only a lowly banker; nobody would pay for his safe return. He only had fifty credits and nothing else of worth so Captain Bryce told him to step to the back of the room and curled his finger several times to prompt the next one forward.

The next five passengers proved to be of little value either, except they had three hundred fifty credits between them; they too were told to go back and wait. The bluejay crew might fetch a little from their company but not enough to be worth the effort, and they only had twenty-five. He took all that had value from the CRF officers, whom they would be holding for ransom. One of the two other men in suits was the head of a conglomerate of farms on Jones Province within the Inner Tier; he was taken immediately to Phoenix's brig for ransoming.

The third suited man, the one that had heckled them, stepped up then and Iain drew in a breath. He hadn't recognized him from the catwalk but did up close. The man before him had dark brown hair, greased back, a mustache and goatee that made his face look much rounder than it really was, perpetually squinted eyes, as if he was always mad, and his lips were pinched to all but non-existence.

"Right bloody brilliant! Pardon me ladies and gentlemen we are in the presence of none other than the most dishonorable, oh, pardon me, sir, that should be honorable, shouldn't it? The second in command of our *fine* government, Vice President Gerard Nikolas," said Iain in fake reverence. He put his hand over his heart like he couldn't contain the excitement then quickly spit on the deck at the man's feet. "Tell me, Mr. Nikolas, what is the likes of you doing aboard such a public vessel?"

"That's none of your business, you despicable rogue," snarled Vice President Nikolas maliciously as he spit at the pirate.

Captain Bryce acted momentarily affronted then wiped the foamy spittle from his cheek and smiled, "It matters not, you'll fetch a right pretty pent, I expect."

"The president will pay you nothing," said the man defiantly.

"You'd better hope he does, 'cause I've got no other use for ya otherwise and I wouldn't consider submitting any of these fine folk to the torture of being stuck with you in a pod for even a day!" said Iain curtly, turning away from him as if he were any other man.

It was an insult the man took personally. “You arrogant bastard, I’ll kill you myself!” shouted Mr. Nikolas, as he grabbed Iain’s silk shirt, drawing the captain’s attention back to him.

Iain slowly looked down at the hand on his body, then back up at the man holding it and raised an eyebrow as he said, through clenched teeth, “Remove your hand, now!”

The man did release the cloth and took a step back, his face turning white for a moment.

Iain almost wished the vice president did try to hit him and was disappointed when he didn’t. He motioned two of the grunts over and said, disdainfully, “Take this piece of shit from my sight at once.”

That left only the two women.

The fat lady had cried herself dry but was still whimpering hysterically, she looked to be about fifty but had no gray hair, her hair was almost jet black and was pulled back severely into a bun on the top of her head. Her face was round and her cheeks were bright red though she had no makeup on any other part of her face. She had dullish gray eyes and very thin, almost colorless, lips that didn’t look like they had smiled in many years. She was dressed in a plain brown dress with no waist to it, which only made her look fatter.

The other woman standing before him had an impudent look on her face, though she was trembling a little. He’d thought she was quite beautiful from the catwalk but she was even more breathtaking up close. Blond hair fell in loose curls to just past her shoulders, deep brown eyes, with a defiant sparkle to them that was very attractive to Iain, a well shaped nose that had just a bit of an upturn to the end and just enough makeup to look natural. She was wearing a nicely fitted ankle length silk dress in the softest pink, almost white, that showed just enough skin to look appropriate for her apparent class. She had an air about her that was very refined and was trying, very hard, not to show how afraid she was.

Iain almost felt sorry for them, they likely had an idea what a pirate would do to them, he couldn’t tell them that they didn’t have to worry about that from his crew because their anxiety was essential. Neither of them had ident cards on them, which was odd, when he asked why the girl only put a hand up to quiet the fat woman and shook her head.

“Won’t you at least tell me where you were heading?” asked the captain, putting a kind tone to his voice and an innocent smile on his face.

The girl said nothing.

“I cannot get you home unless you help me, Lady,” said the captain patiently.

Still, the girl said nothing.

“No matter, I dare say a few days in my brig will right loosen up your tongues,” said Iain. He was about to wave them away when the fat woman burst.

“You cannot do that, she cannot be harmed, she is...”

“Moirra!” the girl shouted then stamped her foot, upset that she had been made to speak.

“You do have a voice to go with that beautiful face,” said Iain, hoping to charm her into speaking more. She blushed a little but had already regained her self-control. He turned back to the heavy-set lady, obviously the weaker link, and asked, “Why can’t I harm her?”

The woman was back to whimpering and wouldn’t say anything.

He shrugged, turned away from them, climbed the stairs back up to the gangway and took up position in the center of his men.

Captain Bryce held out his hand to his quartermaster, who handed him a decorated scroll case. He slowly and dramatically unrolled the scroll, looked to be sure he had all their attention then cleared his throat loudly and began, “Per the articles of Phoenix Enclave, you are hereby offered the chance to renounce your former alliances and join me and my crew as free BrimTier pirates. First, I read you my requirements, then you choose to agree to them or refuse my offer.”

“What if they refuse?” asked the girl, finally finding her tongue.

“The CRF officers, the farm boss, the vice president and you two will be ransomed and released, the rest of you will be set up in escape pods with enough provisions to survive, as I did the couple with child.”

The girl seemed unconvinced and a little bit amused but only nodded for the captain to continue.

Captain Bryce thought about asking her why she was so concerned for everyone’s safety but didn’t want to lose his momentum so he turned his attention back to the others and began to

read the articles of Phoenix Enclave. He paused halfway through and looked over the crowd to be sure all were still paying attention, they were, the girl looking a little green. He glanced up at the girl again as he said the line about meddling with another results in death, this was said with absolute sincerity, and the line about mutineers getting spaced was said almost in anger.

Once he had finished, the captain rolled the scroll back up and handed it back to Jaime to put back into its case then leaned forward on the railing with a bit of amusement on his face. He looked down on the passengers and bluejay crew before him as they spoke amongst themselves. He wasn't surprised none took the option; he rarely got any that did but he felt it was only right to give them the choice.

Shrugging to them, he ordered the two ladies and CRF officers be taken to the brig and the rest to be loaded, three to a pod, those pods released, the rest of the ship stripped of anything of value then Digger's suggestion be carried out, to scuttle the ship.



Back aboard Phoenix, Iain went immediately to his office and set his computer to pull all available information on the vice president. While it was processing he stepped through the door that opened into his cabin to get back into his normal ship wear, tossing the discarded pieces into a pile in the corner. He stopped before the mirror across from his bed and ran his fingers through his hair to muss up the matted portion that had been covered by the bandana. When he stepped back into his office he poured himself a fresh cup of coffee and stepped behind his desk, smiling as he found fifty-six documents relating to Mr. Nikolas waiting for him.

It took him nearly an hour to sort through all the articles; most were of appearances made throughout the first two Tiers and were quickly discarded. A brief piece on his current business holdings gave him potential sources if the president did refuse to pay but one article caught his eye and made him smile.

It actually wasn't the article so much as the photo with it that stopped him. It showed the first and second families before the capital building on Earth, on the left was the vice president with his wife and son and on the right was the president with his wife and son on each side of him and his daughter in front of him. The photo looked to be from about five years ago but the resemblance was unmistakable. Iain left his office, feeling better than he had in months, to meet with his officers and find out how lucrative the haul had been.



Yard set a mug of steaming coffee before the captain, [Jaime](#) and [EveOakley](#) and took his seat at the long conference room table, still in a bit of a snit.

“Yard, it’s only until we have received some of the ransoms,” said the captain, the initial amusement having waned now.

“But, no meat, sir?”

“We don’t have enough fuel to run the coolers, Yard,” said Digger, more than irritated already, having gone over the same subject three times before.

“The first ransom credits we receive are yours, Galley Master, you may purchase and slaughter as many beasts as you like, in fact, throw a right freakin’ huge barbeque if you like,” said the captain.

Yard harrumphed but remained silent.

Captain Bryce turned his attention to the procurement master and asked him the question the rest had been waiting for.

“We knew it would be slight at best, but here it is,” said Mitch quietly. He brought out a digital tablet and punched the numbers on the calculator face before looking up at the expectant faces, “Six hundred fifty credits between all the crew, passengers and cabins, the ship wielded trinkets that should fetch near two thousand and miscellaneous parts and equipment another five

hundred or so. Some crates of fresh vegetables and fruits, two-dozen live hens and two barrels of fuel.” He pausing to take a breath and added, “I don’t believe there is enough in this haul to be worth giving to a colony so I put forth we use this to replenish our own supplies?” He looked at the others for consensus.

“I don’t see as we’ve much choice, I’ll forfeit my share of the first ransom we receive to purchase supplies for the colonists to make up for this small haul,” said Iain, the others chimed in quickly and said the burden should be shared equally, so it was decided they’d each give a third. Iain smiled and nodded proudly at his officers then they began to make plans for ransoming their prisoners and adjourned the meeting.



The ~~c~~Captain had asked the pilot before they started the meeting to get a comlink through to Earth, which meant relaying the signal through several stations and then all the levels of staff on the planet to speak directly to the president himself, knowing it would likely take many hours to finally get connected to him.

He was standing at the counter across the back of his office setting up the coffeemaker for a fresh pot when Kyle’s voice spoke from the combadge pinned on the right side of his shirt. He pushed the skull shaped button to open the channel and said, “Go, Kyle.”

“Captain, I have the president on com for you,” said Kyle, anxiously.

“That was quick, patch him through.”

Iain sat down at his desk and turned the monitor on to find the very irate face of Thomas Nason looking back at him. He flashed his trademark smile and said, “Good Day, Mr. President, or is it evening there? Well no matter, it seems we have some business to transact. I am Captain Iain Bryce of Phoenix Encl...”

“Let’s dispense with the pleasantries, I have no need for such with the likes of you.”

“Now, now, no point getting put off before we even begin, is there?” asked the captain, more than a little amused.

“I’ve received a report that you are holding the vice president and my daughter hostage, before I say anything more, what proof do you have to show me?”

“Let’s get right to the point then,” said the captain, smiling wickedly.

Iain reached behind him, removed two items from a glass case and held them up to the monitor. He watched the man’s eyes move from one to the other and the color drain from it as he recognized them. One was a golden locket with the scrolling letters CJN engraved in the center, dangling on a golden chain; the other a signet ring with the Confederational Regime seal set into a black onyx stone, still on the finger that would’ve worn it. Iain smiled, knowing the president had gotten the message, and waited for the official to speak.

“Wh... what do you want for them?”

“Let’s see, I think Vice President Nikolas ought to be worth... say, one hundred thousand creds. Your daughter should be worth more, I think. I’ll take another hundred thou for her, plus twenty head of cattle, six being virile males, twenty ton of grain and twenty barrels of drinkable water and I’ll throw in her retinue for nothing,” said Iain.

“That’s too much!” spat the president.

“For your second in command and your very own flesh and blood? No, I think not. Your answer will be required in seventy two hours.”

“What then?”

“If you accept my terms, we’ll make arrangements for the ransom delivery and prisoner drops, if you refuse, you’ll receive a piece of each every week until you have them all back.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” said the president, but his words were thick with uncertainty.

“I wouldn’t? Would you like this to be the first piece of Mr. Nikolas or would you prefer something a touch fresher?” asked the captain darkly, showing him the sliced off digit with the ring on it again, “Now, exactly why wouldn’t I do this?”

“If you harm my... *I will hunt you down and destroy you.*”

“I have enjoyed my life so far, *Mr. President*, if my ticket is up, so be it,” said the pirate smugly.

“You arrogant bastard, I’ll...”

“Mr. President, please don’t provoke him,” said a voice somewhere beyond the monitor.

“Listen to your advisor, *Tommy boy*. I’ll be waiting for your ans...” started Iain, but the screen went black before he got to finish.

Kyle’s face appeared moments later, “The connection was severed Earthside, sir.”

“Thank you, Kyle.”

Iain shut the monitor off and stared at the piece of finger with the ring on it for a moment, frowning at it, then turned back to the case. He pulled the ring off the severed digit and placed it into the case then tossed the finger into the rubbish incinerator across the room, smiling sickly as it ground in the tines. It wasn’t really the vice president’s finger; it wasn’t even a real finger. As yet the man was unharmed but the pirate had to present a front that he *was* willing to harm them or the man wouldn’t be willing to pay so much. He lifted the chain and locket from his desk then and started to put it in the case. He stopped and smiled as he held it up to the light, watching it sparkle as it twirled. He closed his hand over it, closed the lid on the case, and left the office.