

Captain Michael Hane stepped off the transport shuttle onto Platform Five's dock. He squinted in the afternoon sun and flicked the pair of aviator shades resting on his head down onto the bridge of his nose.

"Nothing like being planetside, eh Captain?" his first officer Samantha Aarons asked from inside the shuttle. She hopped onto the platform behind Hane and slid off her helmet. Her curly red hair fell just over her shoulders and she smiled.

Hane slid a hand over his buzzed head then reached back into the shuttle for his and Samantha's duffel bags.

"I'd say so," Hane said, taking a big whiff of fresh, cool air. "Sure beats that metallic, body odor ripeness."

Hane handed Samantha her bag and threw on his jacket.

"What do you have in there, spare ship parts? Your bag weighs a ton," Hane said, picking up his own bag.

"Books," she said with a grin. "Well, mostly books."

Hane twisted around and stared through the large window at the New York City skyline stretching high into the sky and the milky clouds. Thousands of flying shuttle

cars littered the areas between hulking skyscrapers, but seemed to be barely moving.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Samantha asked.

“Yeah, we’ve come a long way from roads and highways, but we still can’t get rid of traffic jams.”

Samantha chuckled and threw her bag around her shoulder.

“So, Ms. Aarons, three months of shore leave,” Hane said heading down a hallway, Samantha not far behind, “better use it wisely.”

“Oh, I plan to, Captain,” Samantha said, struggling to keep Hane’s while pace carrying the weight of her bag. “I’m going to catch up on my reading, specifically Turg and Auran political...”

Hane waved his hand in protest.

“I get it, Ms. Aarons,” Hane said, stopping at an elevator, “not my thing.” He pressed the button for ground level and turned to face Samantha. “Just promise me you’ll get out and do something fun, something enjoyable. Lighten that soul of yours just a bit.”

“But that *is* fun for me, sir,” Samantha said with a smirk.

Hane sighed and shook his head.

“What about you, sir? What will Earth Alliance Captain Hane do with three months of leave?” Samantha asked.

“To be honest, this shore leave couldn’t have come at a better time. My wife is due in a couple of weeks with our first and I imagine that’ll keep me pretty busy once she pops,” Hane said, his tone full of the eventual stress to come.

“Girl or a boy, sir?”

Hane smirked.

“Sarah wants it to be a surprise. I may be an Alliance Captain, but in the Hane household, Sarah’s the boss.”

“Ah, then you have my congrats, Captain,” Samantha said.

Hane gave a smile of thanks and adjusted his jacket.

“How do I look?” he asked, straightening his posture.

Samantha set down her bag and straightened his jacket's collar then pressed the breasts of it against Hane's chest to flatten out any wrinkles. Her hands lingered for a bit and Hane cleared his throat to get her attention.

"Sam?" he asked. "Are you okay?"

Sam smiled, emptily, and pulled her hands away.

"I...You look good, Captain," she said. She picked up her bag and took a few steps back. "Enjoy lunch with your wife, sir."

The elevator doors dinged with a chime then opened. A group of Alliance crewmen filed out, weaving around and in between Hane and Samantha.

"I don't believe I mentioned I was going to lunch with my wife, Aarons," Hane said, cocking his head and backing into the elevator.

"You didn't have to," she said as the doors closed between them.

Hane wondered what Sam meant by that while the elevator descended to the ground floor. It'd been six months since he'd seen his wife, Sarah. Did it show on him that easily, the nerves, the anxiousness, the excitement...the worry? *There's nothing wrong with wanting to look good for your wife*, he thought to himself.

The doors dinged and opened and Hane walked into the bustling lobby of the New York City Earth Alliance Spaceport. The walls echoed with thousands of conversations. Hane guessed at any moment of the day, hundreds of people were coming and going through this lobby, all Earth Alliance Military of course.

Hane bumped shoulders and nudged his way through the crowds of fleet crewman and officers, making his way for the exit doors.

"Captain Hane!" a newly enlisted youth yelled near the exit door, recognizing the captain from his assignment card.

Hane broke free from the crowd and approached the young man.

“Ensign Leiman, sir.” Leiman said with a salute.

“At ease, Ensign. What can I do for you?”

Leiman looked at his assignment card nervously, then back at Hane.

“I’ve been assigned as your escort during the duration of your shore leave. I have a car waiting outside. You just tell me where you’d like me to take you, and we’ll be off.”

Hane looked Leiman from head to toe, sizing him up.

“There’s gonna’ be a slight change of plans,” Hane said with a chuckle.

“Sir?”

“I’ve been on a tiny, tiny ship for the past six months, Ensign. I think I’d like to walk,” Hane said, patting Leiman on the shoulder and walking passed him for the door.

Leiman turned, unsure of what to do.

“But, Captain. I...I...What do I do then?”

Hane stopped and turned, reaching into his pants pocket. He pulled a ten dollar bill out and jammed it into Leiman’s hand.

“Get a drink! I’ve got a date with my wife!” Hane said, sidestepping through a group of fleet crewman rushing through the doors.

The outside air rushed over Hane like a cool shower, bringing with it the musk of oil and sharp exhaust. Hane set his bag down on the grimy sidewalk and unzipped it. Behind, he heard the choking of an engine running on fossil fuels.

*It’s nice they kept the paved roads open, for those who can’t afford the upgrade. Flying is great, but you gotta admire the way things used to be. Simple.*

The government had outlawed the purchase of automobiles, a strict attempt to force everyone into the skies, otherwise Hane would have a car. He liked simple. But the Earth Alliance had their reasons. It was cleaner, safer, but it was expensive.

Hane sifted through his bag, overturning dirty uniforms and ziplock bags with toothpaste and brushes.

His hand stopped at the bottom and he pulled out his smartphone. He zipped it back up and threw the bag back around his shoulder.

Overhead, a shuttle car zipped passed, heading higher and higher into the clouds.

Hane thumbed through his visual voicemails and texts then stopped on two unread messages from his wife Sarah.

*-Call when you're planetside, babe. Love you!*

Hane smiled to himself while his head swam with images of her soft blond hair, her narrow cheeks, and full-bodied lips. It'd only been six months since he'd last seen her, but to Hane it felt like years had passed. His joints were giddy, anxious. He didn't feel thirty-five.

He saved the text, like he did all of Sarah's messages, and moved on to the next one.

*-I have a surprise for you! BIG BIG Surprise! Call me, NOW! Love you!*

Hane exited his texts and dialed up Sarah while he headed down the sidewalk.

Another automobile puffed and putted passed Hane, stinging his nostrils with harsh exhaust.

*If only they weren't so damn dirty. So much pollution.*

The phone rang once then went straight to Sarah's voicemail.

"Hello, you've reached Sarah Hane. I can't answer my phone right now because I'm out to lunch with my wonderful, strappingly handsome husband!"

Hane laughed out loud as he brushed past a man walking with his young son. She didn't answer the phone on purpose and ignored his call, sending it right to her message.

"And if this is a certain Alliance Captain, then you'll find me at the Heavenly Quarter Café. One hundred twenty first floor of the Paradiso Towers."

Hane looked up at the Paradiso Towers, clustered with a dozen other skyscrapers that stretched up and through the clouds. The ground floor of which was only a twenty minute walk from where he was, thirty minutes tops.

“And Michael?” the voicemail asked.

Hane perked up and concentrated on the phone.

“It’s a girl. We’re going to have a beautiful baby girl!”

Hane’s eyes widened, jaw dropped. His mind went calm, like the quiet before a storm. Then a thousand thoughts hit him at once and he nearly dropped the phone.

*Names, dresses, boyfriends, husband, sweet sixteen...*

His mind raced at a million miles an hour then was interrupted by the voicemail.

“And if this isn’t Michael, leave a message!” the voicemail said before a sharp beep.

*A girl. I’m going to have a daughter.*

He wasn’t sure why, he’d known about the pregnancy for some time now, but he was finally starting to feel like a father. He couldn’t help but smile while he dialed up Sarah again. She’d answer this time.

The phone clicked and Sarah answered on the first ring.

“Michael!” Sarah screamed with joy and excitement. He could sense it in her voice too. If he had to guess, he’d say it was a mother’s voice.

The phone clicked and Hane didn’t notice that the line disconnected.

“A girl, Sarah! We’re having a girl!” Hane shouted. “I’m going to be a dad! A dad! Oh, there’s so many things I want to...”

Hane stopped and looked at the phone when he realized there was no noise coming from the other end.

A volley of shuttle cars fluttered overhead, bolting from Paradiso Towers. Their speed whipped the air, flapping Hane’s jacket and tossing dirt clouds and paper trash from the sidewalk into the air.

Hane dialed up Sarah again and wiped the grit that collected in the corners of his eyes, the tiny bit that had

gotten passed his sunglasses from the rustling breath of wind.

The phone whined and droned an error message followed by a buzzing and dial tone squeals.

A feeling washed over Hane when he hung up and tried again, only to get the same error message. He couldn't tell what it was at first, but when he looked back up at Paradiso Towers and saw the swarm of shuttle cars now fleeing, he was able to put his finger on it.

*Something's not right.*

The air went silent despite the gridlock above. His hands went warm and he could hear his own heartbeat pounding in his chest.

The overcast hanging over Paradiso Towers began to pulsate and swirl.

Hane crossed the street, not peeling his gaze from the towers even once. The clouds above the towers dipped and then it seemed the air pressure of the entire world shifted, like a giant vacuum above the towers had just been turned on. Hane even felt the air pulled toward the tower. He took a step forward with the suction then it stopped.

He heard a group of people across the street talking about their cell phones malfunctioning and wondered if it was a solar flare.

*This isn't a solar flare. Solar flares don't fuck with the wind, and they don't make people run!*

Then it was like a choir of trumpets blared, blasting loud enough for the entire city to hear.

The noise slammed into Hane like a wall of hot air, ruffling his clothes and knocking his sunglasses off his face. His bones vibrated and his eyes watered.

*What the fuck was that!?*

Hane looked at the group of people across the street and saw the noise blast had knocked them all down. One, an elderly woman, held her nose while blood dripped down her chin and neck. She sat on her knees while a younger man pulled out a handkerchief and helped clean the blood.

He felt the urge to run, to tear his way to the bottom of Paradiso Towers, to be with his wife and unborn child, his daughter.

The elderly woman pushed the younger man away and screamed then pointed into the sky.

Hane followed her finger with his eyes and his stomach dropped and legs went weak and stringy.

The clouds above the towers parted like curtains and a red beam of light seared through them, warping and burning the clouds themselves.

The air around Hane went humid while the beam sheered through the towers, melted the innards, and slammed into the ground below on the other side before dissipating.

A tear of numbness and of perspective slid down his cheek and dripped from the butt of his chin. It could have been the shock, or of a fear that is beyond humanity, but he could only think about the perspective of things, and how small he felt.

He felt like an ant.

The clouds continued parting and a craft, super-massive in size, bigger than any Alliance ship he'd ever seen, fired another beam into Paradiso Towers.

Bright, molten chunks of the tower bled from the wounds of the beam, but this second attack struck something deep inside the building. After a moment of stiff silence, the core of the building detonated, shattering the windows and cracking the hulking monster in half. A plume of thick smoke and flame engulfed most of the building while hunks of metal and concrete broke free and crashed into the ground. A piece from the roof cracked and fell, smashing into a fleeing shuttle. The shuttle car tried to correct itself but nose-dived into another car, igniting the both of them in a fiery explosion of metal shards.

The ground shook, knocking Hane to his knees and rattling street lights onto their sides with hollow metal



clangs. Popping light bulbs lined the street in front of and behind Hane while glass rained down for blocks from the towers.

Hane watched as the building shifted and began to lean, shaking loose debris and something else he couldn't see clearly enough. When he heard those somethings screaming, his heart skipped a beat.

*People are leaping from it...*

He turned his head to the side. He couldn't watch.

A support strut on the ground snapped and crumbled into a cloud of cinders. The building moaned and Hane began to run up the street in the opposite direction of the tower.

He heard the screams of people leaping, the screams of the people with him on the streets, running with him, running behind him. Their cries were everywhere.

The building buckled and with most of its innards in flames or melted by the beam, it finally collapsed inward, showering the streets for blocks with concrete lumps the size of cars and homes.

A wall of dust and debris chased behind Hane as the building fell into itself. The wave overtook the people running behind him with a quick swallow. He heard a man running beside him smashed by a piece of concrete, but didn't dare turn his head or slow his pace.

His lungs burned, throat hoarse and dried. He pushed himself harder, faster. His knees were on fire and his calves were getting stiff. He wasn't used to running in dress shoes.

He felt a piece of the building hit the heel of his foot and he lost his legs rhythm and speed. Hane only had a fraction of a second to scream when the cloud of debris rammed into him with the unstoppable force of a tidal wave.

