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*April 28, 2501 – 1400 hours; Redeemer's Respite Halfway House, Clay Hills suburb, Saga.*

Nikko, dressed in pitted and dirty black Hawdon Militia Special Forces combat armor, ducks beneath the blasted remains of the sign above the door as he enters. The top portion of the sign blown away during the firefight, but the bottom says something about a halfway house. In the lower right corner of the sign is the pointed cross of the house's sponsor, the Salvation Way Fellowship.

A couple of the members of his team are picking through the remains of the common room. Blasted monitors and computer equipment are strewn about. In one corner, a medic treats a wounded Saga Naval Militia marine sergeant. The remaining members of the marine strike force are scattered about the area making sure no other pirates remain in the area. Their urban gray camouflaged combat armor a stark contrast to that of the SpecFor team.

Nikko walks up to a SpecFor lieutenant and says while looking around the area, "Lieutenant Carson, I see our brothers and sisters in the marine unit were quite thorough in their sanitation of the target. Have you found anything useful?"

The red haired woman stands up with the broken remains of a datapad and says, "The marines used fragmentation and concussion grenades when they came in here. As far as I can tell, no one told them to try and take prisoners. However, this device probably our best bet. I'm having anything remotely readable packed up to sent off for examination."

The wristcomp on Nikko's arm bleeps for attention, he glances down at it before responding, "I see we have another target to take out and examine. You mentioned earlier that there was a prisoner captured here?"

"Yes sir," she replies, "the marines tell me the prisoner is secured in the back at the moment."

"Procure transport and remove the prisoner to the temporary command post, they can interrogate the prisoner there. Then catch up with us at the next site," he replies.

"Yes sir," the lieutenant replies and walks over to one of the marines with the name Soralass on his uniform. The marine private is easily a foot taller than she and masses 50 kilograms heavier. "Private Soralass, I need you to put the prisoner into a transport and take us to the command post."

The marine looks the lieutenant over and with a look of annoyance, he says, "I don't take orders fro..."

"But you do from me Private Soralass," the wounded sergeant calls out, "Since the militia owns your ... 'sorry ass' and cursed me with watching over it, that means I own your ... 'sorry ass'. If I ever hear or hear tell of you starting to talk to an officer like that again, I'll make you wish you could be busted lower than private. 'cause I can do things like that with the sorry asses I own. Do I make myself abundantly clear?"

"Yes Sergeant!" the marine calls out.

"Good, 'cause if she tells you to strip naked, dance on one leg in the middle of the street, and sing Yankee-Doodle; you do it and do it to the best of your ability. Am I getting through that thick head of yours?"

"Yes Sergeant!" the marine calls out again.

The red faced sergeant tries to stand up, but the wound in his leg prevents it. Instead he leans against a table and continues to shout, "Good. 'cause I'd hate to have to explain to the poor unfortunate woman that gave birth to you that you died when I stuck my size twelve armored boot up your ... 'sorry ass'. Now get back there, secure the prisoner in the transport, and get your ... 'sorry ass' back to the CP. NOW GET YOUR 'SORRY ASS' IN GEAR PRIVATE!"

Private Soralass snaps up his weapon and jogs to the back of the building.

Once the private has left the room, the sergeant turns to the Lieutenant and says, "Lieutenant, I offer my most profound apologies for his conduct. I assure you that I will deal with his lack of respect most severely."

The lieutenant nods, puts on her helmet, picks up her weapon, and makes her way after the marine private.

The sergeant goes back to berating the medic as Nikko watches the scene with concerned interest.

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As Lieutenant Carson enters the kitchen area, she sees Private Soralass remove a padlock from one of the walk in refrigerator units. She follows him inside and finds a blindfolded young, attractive, blond woman. The woman is dressed in form fitting jeans, cotton blouse; knee high leather boots, and a knee length leather jacket and sitting on top of a side of beef. Her arms are handcuffed over her head to the cooling tubes. The jacket, blouse, and jeans are slashed from debris from explosions. She shivers in the cold.

The Lieutenant looks at the thermometer mounted to the wall and says, "Good Lord Private, its 42 degrees in here. Are you trying to kill her? How long has she been in here?"

As he responds, he roughly secures the prisoner's hands behind her back and hauls her outside, "Little Miss Pirate Priss here has been cooling her heels for about 30 minutes now. We didn't have enough people to post a guard on her and so this was the only lockable place I could find." He leans in close to the prisoner's ear before saying, "The way I figure it, we'd just shot her and been done with it; but the Sarge said no."

The lieutenant stops the group just short of the back door and removes the blindfold. There are frozen tears in the woman's eyes. The woman's blue eyes blink a few times and she locks gazes with the lieutenant. "You got a name?"

"Bev...ev...ev...er..ly," she stammers out.

"Beverly?" the Lieutenant replies as she begins to rub the arms and shoulders of the woman to improve her circulation. "Hi, my name is Samantha," she says, "You are going to be ok. I'll get you a blanket when we get outside."

The woman nods a couple of times, looks back to the private, then tells Lieutenant Carson, "I... I'm... no pirate."

The marine just snorts, "She was caught workin' with them. The way I figure it that makes her a pirate."

"Ok," Samantha replies, "we'll get that all straightened out at the command post. In the meantime, I need to replace the blindfold and move you out. As long as you don't cause me problems, I will not cause you any. Do we understand each other?"

With a quick glance back at the marine behind her, she nods an affirmative to the lieutenant who replaces the blindfold and leads her outside towards one of the wheeled ground vehicles <looking a lot like a Hummer> with a short bed instead of a cab on the back of it.

As Samantha searches in the back of the cab for a blanket, the private grabs Beverly and nearly throws her into the bed of the truck. "Is that kind of behavior necessary Private?" the lieutenant asks.

"Absolutely ma'am," he replies as he roughly ties her hands and feet to opposite rails of the bed, "I cannot drive, keep an eye out for ambushes, and keep an eye on her all at the same time. The way I figure it, when dealing with live pirates, its best to let them know who is in charge. Otherwise, they take advantage of you and you end up working as a slave in one of their mines."

He gets into the cab and starts the engine as she hurriedly stuffs a blanket around the still cold woman. "I'm sorry," she whispers, "but it's not a long ride and it's warm today."

She climbs up into the cab and announces on her radio, "Base, Leopard Five Three is RTB; ETA, base minus fifteen." She motions for the private to drive on as the reply comes back, "Roger Leopard Five Three, see you when you arrive, Base out."

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After twenty minutes of total silence in the cab, the lieutenant asks, "You don't like pirates much do you Private?"

Without looking at her, the private replies, "No, ma'am... They're better off dead."

"Why?" she asks.

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The private says nothing for several minutes then when it looks like he will never answer, he says, "My baby brother ma'am. He had just turned seventeen and was trying to get his commercial shipworkers license on board a short jump freighter called the *Jody Lane*. Really smart he was; a lot smarter than me anyway.

One day, some security weenie came to the house and told Ma that her boy was missing. The pirates had attacked the ship and made off with the cargo and crew. I was already in the militia and could not get permission to return home long enough to search for him. Pa had died a few years earlier from a bad heart. For the next two years, Ma had to live day to day alone, worrying that the security weenies would return and tell her that her boy was dead."

He pauses as he reigns in his emotions then continues, "Then a couple of months ago, some people found and rescued a bunch of people from a pirate mine. My baby brother was among them. Ma was overjoyed that her son was coming home. But it was a bitter thing. He was ... different. He's scared of everything and everyone. The first night he was home, he hid in the closet all night crying. Now, he only sleeps in the back yard at night. He refuses to come indoors at night. I was at least able to convince him to use an open sided tent when it rained. Doc said he'll get over it in time with lots of therapy they say."

He pauses for a few more moments then continues, "One night while I was home on leave, I went outside and slept on the ground next to him. He told me about the things they did to him. How they bartered him from group to group 'cause he was a hard worker and good with tools. I promised him that I'd kill every last sonofabitch pirate I could lay my hands on for what they did to him. I prayed really hard that I'd get the chance to do just that. Then bam! Here they are and I've been getting' that chance ever since. Only prayer God ever answered for me. So the way I figure it, He gave me a mission to complete."

Without slowing down, he makes a hard right hand turn that tosses loose objects in the bed against the woman tied to the bed; the lieutenant can hear her call out in pain over the road noise and wind.

He looks over to the lieutenant and says, "So no. I don't like 'em. Don't trust them in the least. Give'em a chance and they'll stab you in the back. Sarge and the Militia says I can't kill 'em when they give up. So Little Miss Pirate Priss back there gets a reprieve. That's ok though, 'cause when the trial is over, she'll get what's coming to her anyway. That's what they do to pirates and the way I figure it, that's good enough for me."

The lieutenant watches the private for a minute or two then says, "You need to let go of your hate Private Soralass before it destroys your ability to love at all. What's done is done. Killing every pirate in known space will never avenge what was done to your brother. He needs your love and understanding now, not some gung ho maniac blazing his way across the city in search of revenge that will never come. If you truly believe in God, then trust that He will punish those responsible; In His own way and in His own time."

"You know," the private begins, "you're the second person to say something like that. Our lieutenant said the same thing to me yesterday afternoon."

"It sounds like your lieutenant is a fair minded person," she replies, "I don't recall meeting the lieutenant back there."

"You didn't," he says as he slows to make the final turn down the alley behind the temporary command post, "he had his brains splattered across the seat behind you by a pirate sniper about 30 seconds after saying it. So the way I figure it, God was telling him to keep his trap shut. And besides, who is to say that my way isn't His way and His time is now? We're here, Lieutenant."