***Abandon***

Commissioned by Wootnik

P

eople don't dream in space, they say. Apparently, we're too far from the planet that gave us life to remember how. That terraforming doesn't do the same thing to a planet. Doesn’t give it the soul our home has, that gave us the ability to dream.

It's interesting; some of the evangelists out here call us 'Children of the Dark', because none of us can dream anymore. They always lie when they say they can, when they say their faith is what lets them have dreams.

I don't see what worth dreams are when you're asleep, anyways. Dreams are for when you're awake, when you can grab hold of them.

Not much to take hold of out here in the sticks, though.

There is plenty of time to sleep, though. Which is about as useful as being awake here; there's just nothing to do sleep or wake.

Speaking of, I *was* enjoying myself a good nap until my comm crackled to life.

"How's the quadrant, Pierce?"

"The quadrant was enjoying a nice nap until you had to open your trap, kid." A soft giggle through an electric filter greets me in response.

I groan. It’s all I can do. These ships’ seats are hard as a vein of coal.

"So, nothing wrong with your Jitter, either?"

Aside from being a piece of shit, no. Out here, all we have are Jitters. They're actually called A0-42s, product name Jitterbug. Sensitive little craft that can seat two at max and flies like an over-caffeinated hummingbird. Has some pea-shooters on the wingspan. Can fly damn near forever, though.

I do a quick systems check while rubbing an eye.

"No, everything's clear. Pit pressure, core supply. Munitions we never use. Radar…"

I blink a few times. What?

"Your radar, Pierce?"

"Angeline, what does your radar say?"

This time, no sweet little giggles from my wing-woman. "So you're seeing the same thing I am, right?"

"I shouldn't be seeing *anything*. I'm reading there's a few hundred ships. Some are frigate-class huge."

"Okay, so I'm not imagining things and neither is my system. Pierce, what the hell do you think we're looking at and hasn't seen us yet?"

I'll admit I'm getting a little nervous. Glancing into the deep dark, I can't see a thing but the glint of stars aimed at me.

"Angel, I have no idea that doesn't sound downright insane."

"And if you were insane?"

"I'd say we're sitting in front of a cloaked fleet and they haven't seen us yet because idle Jitters don't throw off enough heat to warm breakfast with."

Complete silence over comms.

"Do you think they can hear us?"

"I sure as hell hope not."

As if in answer, a streak of white cuts through space, causing ripples of light in its wake, explosions trailing throughout them.

"Fuck, fuck fuck! They've got antimatter weapons, get out of here!" I start shouting into the comms as the cloaked fleet appears in front of us, all firing aimlessly into space. They know we're here, they just have no idea where.

"Don't move unless you *will be hit* do you understand, Angel?"

She sounds panicked, but she responds. "R-Roger, got it!"

It may not have resulted in much, but I attended the United American Pilot's academy. I know what these things are and how dangerous they can be.

Anti-matter weapons. How do they have so many?!

Whatever matter anti-matter collides with causes a violent explosion and destruction of both particles. We used to use them as a trigger mechanism for nukes, back when those were practical. Over the span of planets, they've sort of lost their efficiency.

Naturally, anti-matter is basically useless. It's supposed to take hundreds of years to create enough contained anti-matter to weaponize. How these guys are firing it wildly is beyond me. What kind of tech are they running?

I start putting myself on the frequency of HQ.

"Colonel, Colonel! We've got red 'n yellows on the perimeter, a whole fuckin' fleet of them! Copy, HQ? HQ!"

I get no response for a few moments while volleys of tear through space, causing rumbling explosions that I can hear through my Jitter's canopy.

"We copy, Breeze One. Can you confirm they're Chinese Republic?"

"Fuck yeah, I can confirm! I'm right in front of them, looking at their bullshit stars. Can we get some support out here? They're firing on us with anti-matter!"

Static from HQ.

"Anti-matter? Are you sure you're not drunk, Breeze One?"

I snarl into the comm's speaker as I start to lean forward. "I'm not drunk, asshole. Are you sending support?" The Jitterbug's seat and cockpit changes to accommodate me from reclining to combat mode so that I can dodge at a moment's notice.

The thing about Jitters are that they sense your entire body and move in accordance with you. This makes them incredibly sensitive, but incredibly maneuverable in the hands of a decent pilot.

It just so happens that I am one.

"No, we don't have that kind of firepower. Retreat to base or phase to UAHQ and tell them. They're trying to make a foothold with our planet. We have a lot of valuable resources you bumpkins have no idea about."

I practically punch my console. "And you have us flying around in Jitters to protect it? You fucks!"

I don't have much time to continue bellowing at command; a bolt of anti-matter comes flying at me. I have to roll out of the way. If I could, I'd fire in return but that'd compromise my position more than moving just did.

"Angel, get back to base."

"But—"

"No, **NOW!**"

I can see her engines flare up from the darkness, beginning to bob and weave around the arcing blasts of anti-matter.

Horrifying, yet beautiful. A display of this much firepower isn't something I've ever seen before. Plasma, nukes, particle weapons, I've seen a lot in my travels – but this is something entirely different.

The white-hot streaks that seem to cut and erase through the fabric of space seem to resonate colors for a brief second, just before they detonate in an explosion of pure energy.

Just to draw their fire away from Angeline, I start to strafe some of the larger ships, firing on them. The Jitter's cannons aren't strong or robust enough to pierce the hull, but I can definitely see that I'm causing them enough structural damage to focus on me.

Issue is, there weapons are too powerful to use when I'm this close to their other ships. They start switching to auxiliary weapons, plasma cannons and missiles.

Not a hard task to avoid stuff like this. All their funds have been funneled into whatever insane technology that is creating all that anti-matter, because their missiles and plasma are too inaccurate to even draw a bead on me.

Dodging and weaving isn't a hard thing to do while I dip and duck between the metallic juggernauts. There's no way I could take one of these down unless I fired a few handfuls of rockets into their exhaust or something.

"Angel, listen – I need you to phase to the United American headquarters. They need to be told that the PRC are taking planets strategic to an assault on Haven."

"Pierce, what about you?"

I can't respond because my radar's running hot with lock-ons. I need to focus on dodging these missiles and deploying flares to try and distract them from my actual ship. Being a trained USSF pilot helps, but not much when you've got a limited ship to pilot.

"I'll do what I can! You need to warn them, go!"

She hasn't phased out yet.

"C'mon, idiot! Phase out of here already!" I streak the flagship's deck with low-grade plasma fire. Not enough to break through the hull, but enough to cause them some panic.

"No!" Instead of listening, she charges headfirst into the fight with me, helping focus on the targets I'm painting while diverting some of the fire.

It's becoming a furball in here quick; what with all the beam weaponry and missiles crisscrossing space. Things are a little lighter with Angel on my side, but it doesn't help me feel any more comfortable. One of us needs to warn UAHQ or we're all fucked.

There's no way two Jitters can take down this kind of fleet.

To make concerns worse, they've started mobilizing fighters. *Real* fighters. X82s. Things that can outrun Jitters and outfire them, too. The only thing we have is maneuverability. We can move in all six directions at any given time, fast as hell.

But we can't take a hit, something they can. The minute these X82s get a bead on us or predict our movement patterns, we're screwed.

"Angel, go! For fuck's sake, do you want to die?!"

"What if I do, Pierce? Huh!? What if I'd rather die out here, doing something useful than dying some old grandma in some forgotten corner of space?"

I'm quiet.

"I'm not like you, I don't have talent. I don't even know why you got assigned here in the first place!"

Maybe I wanted to be.

Maybe I didn't want part of this war, maybe I just wanted a simple life. You're not going to let me, though, are you? "Angeline, please. Go back. Warn them."

"No! You do it! I'll hold them off!"

I'm grinding my teeth so hard they hurt. "I'm not going to argue with you over who gets to die here, Angel. I can live through this, you can't. **Leave!**"

She doesn't phase out though.

"Either I die, or we both die. We're both not making it out of here. One of them will lock onto our phase the minute we both jump. Someone has to keep their focus, Pierce. You know better."

I do, and it doesn't change that you're an idiot.

"C'mon, get out of here!"

"No!"

"Of all days to be a stubborn bitch – Can't you pick another day? Just listen to me!"

A streak of anti-matter from a pursuing X82 clips my wing. Most of it is gone, just from a glancing hit. Crap. I can't maneuver as easily now and the rest of the vultures are already positioning to see who can add their next star to their killcount.

"Phase out, Pierce!"

"Angel, you're not doing this to me. Phase with me, please!"

No response. I can see them closing in. I can't dodge what's coming next. "Angel! ANGELINE!"

Still nothing.

I'm given the choice of me, my love or my country.

I flip the panel on my console and input the emergency coordinates, slamming the button down before any fire hits me.

"You better not die, Angel!"

"Please, I've lived through worse."

"Angel."

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

I wish I hadn't waited until now. There'd been so many opportunities, so many chances – I had to wait until now, until when there was no more time left.

"I love you too, Pierce. You know that."

I sometimes wonder what was worse than dying.

What was it, Angeline?

They found your ship torn to shit days later, floating through space. Your body was in it, clutching your personal comm with my contact still in it.

What were you trying to tell me before you died? What message did you want to share while I was phasing through the dark matter that sews our universe together?

Whatever it was, I doubt I'll ever know.

The PRC took over our old home though, strip-mined it of anything valuable and then cored the planet for fuel. There's nothing left but rubble now. All those people who we spent our days with? Dead. Maybe enslaved or conscripted. Who knows? I don't.

All I do know is that I plan to make good on the name everyone's given me.

"Abandon". The coward. Bad luck, the one who'll leave you to die. They don't know what happened. They don't care to and I don't care to tell them that it was you who saved me. I still don't know why you did. I had no choice and we both knew that. I just wish I could've done something differently.

I know there wasn't anything I could've.

So all I can do is make the difference in the future.

"Captain, orders?"

The viewport shows me the planet we're planning to assault, as per accordance of the newly declared Second Sino-American war.

Captain.

Sounds strange, doesn't it? I barely passed basic Academy and never bothered becoming a commissioned officer. Now, here I am – sitting at the helm of a flagship, deciding the fate of a planet ruled by those who took everything from me. As a Captain.

They say we can't dream, because we're so far from Earth.

"Melt the planet."

Oh, but I've dreamed of this day since you died.