

Untitled

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Ash had never been to Earth and if she had, she definitely didn't remember doing so. She'd grown up on a ship; been everywhere from the Maelstrom Galaxy at the farthest reaches of the known universe, to the shining Arcturus Nebula on the opposite side, and everything in between. Ash knew ships like the back of her hand having been raised in the sky contrary to most kids of Star Generation-T, the first generation of humans to be born and raised anywhere but the dying planet of Earth.

Most of Star Generation-T were raised on various planets as their parents adjusted to living on different planets, galaxies away from what they had once known. Ash's parents never had that issue.

Delilah and Elliott Wallace met and fell in love while members of the International Earth Movement to Space program. Thus, they decided to raise their family among the stars.

It was a short-lived dream.

A fleet of Addon pirates had taken over their ship and Ash's parents were killed along with most of their crew. The Second Mate, Marcel of Zemoria, had taken nine-year-old Ash and fled in one of the escape pods. Marcel cared for Ash as if she was his. Previously, he had always taken on the role of uncle; but now he also took upon himself to fill the roles of mother, father, friend, mentor, and captain.

Marcel had landed on a nearby planet and found a job, saving money to get a ship. Ash had been sent to school, sitting in the classroom as the sky above called to every atom of her being.

Finding the Corvius Class ship was the best thing that happened to Ash after her parents were killed. She wasn't the greatest ship; but she was Nercalian and that meant she was well-made and would hold up well.

Of course, the ship wasn't in the greatest shape, but Marcel and Ash would be able to fix her up easily enough. As soon as school let out for the day, Ash would rush back to their rented house with a new part or two that she had picked up on her way back. During that time, Ash learned her way around their ship until it was a part of her. She learned how to listen and know what was wrong; she learned the ship.

"I got it, I got it!" Twelve-year-old Ash skidded into the hanger that held their ship. She held up the last piece triumphantly. Marcel smiled and gestured for her to come over.

"Great job, birdy, put it in." Marcel opened up the ship and Ash darted inside, barely stopping to throw off her backpack. She ran to the engine room joyously, barely able to contain her excitement of getting to live in the sky again. She opened the access hatch and dropped herself down. Getting to the right place, Ash carefully lowered the Reniolite reactor into the main engine before tightening the bolts with a wrench from the toolbox by her feet.

Ash then hit the grate above her with the wrench and yelled up to Marcel, "She's ready!" The engine slowly started to turn before speeding up. The whole ship hummed and Ash almost screamed in excitement. She quickly pulled herself up and ran to the main deck, almost tripping over herself as she looked at the ship in all her glory. Skidding onto the main deck, she launched herself into Marcel's arms. He held her close, both of them laughing in pure ecstasy as the ship hummed around them.

Marcel smiled at his adopted daughter. "I think we need to find ourselves a crew."

Six years later, Ash was the mechanic on the crew of The Phoenix. The Corvius class ship had been flying strong since she had been completed.

Marcel and Ash found a small crew that had become their family over the years. Everything had made sense, up until a week ago.

Hunter was strange, Ash wasn't even sure that Hunter was her real name, and had paid a decent amount of money to travel on their ship. When asked where she was heading, she said until she didn't want to travel anymore. Marcel had been uneasy about it, but Ash begged him to let Hunter join on for the sole purpose of Hunter being slightly older than Ash.

That reason ended up being a moot point as Hunter isolated herself from everyone and rejected every move from Ash to become friends. This left Ash feeling annoyed most days and now understanding Marcel's hesitance; something was off about Hunter.

Ash poked her head out of the vent with a comm receiver. Resting her elbows on the floor, she was only able to barely touch her toes on the ground of the crawlspace as she inspected the receiver in the brighter light of the ship. Seeing that a screw had come loose, making the circuit board move around more than it should, Ash pulled out a screwdriver and got to work fixing the device.

"The comms aren't working."

Ash looked up to see Hunter standing above her. Gesturing with the receiver in her hand, she tried not to roll her eyes. "I know, that's why I'm fixing it and anyway, Cap'n announced it over the speakers."

Hunter's cheeks coloured slightly. "Oh, um- sorry, then."

This was when Ash actually sighed. "Whatever, it's not like you try to be a part of this crew anyway." Having fixed the receiver, she dropped herself back into the crawlspace to reattach the device.

It wasn't Hunter's fault, Ash was just at the end of her rope. There was engine trouble in the morning and they needed to get a new part, but they had to finish a job first that would hopefully pay enough to buy the new part. After that, she had to replace a capacitor and then fix the suspension on one of the catwalks which then led to her seeing a loose panel. After fixing that, Marcel told her that their off-ship comms were not working.

Checking to see that the receiver was in place, Ash started to move her tools out of the crawlspace before pulling herself up. She stood up and came face-to-face with Hunter. Hunter seemed shocked, but Ash really didn't have time to talk. Placing the grate back over the crawlspace entrance, Ash started to gather all of her tools.

"You guys wanted me to be a part of your crew?"

Ash fought a loud groan, she hadn't eaten lunch yet and she was hungry because she hadn't eaten enough for breakfast due to the engine troubles. It had already been a long day and she still had some basic maintenance to complete. "Yes, we did. When you're on this ship, it's appreciated when you try to help out somehow or interact with the crew. Nobody knows you or has a reason to care about you other than you're alive. So if you're in some sort of trouble, you're not guaranteed any help from us." With all that said, Ash made her way to the canteen to grab something to eat.

Later, after dinner, Ash sequestered herself on one of the catwalks with her most current read. The noise of someone climbing onto the catwalk pulled her out of her story. Looking at the ladder, Ash saw Hunter at the end of the catwalk.

“May I join you?”

Ash shrugged. “Sure.” Hunter hesitantly crawled to sit about a foot away from Ash, pulling out a book. “Hey,” Hunter looked at Ash. “I’m sorry, for snapping earlier, I was just frustrated with the amount of things that needed to be fixed today. It just felt like everything was falling apart.”

Hunter shook her head lightly. “It’s fine, I think I needed the push to join with everyone.”

Ash cracked a smile. “Yeah, I saw you at dinner. Glad to know that you finally decided to join us in the land of the living.”

Hunter also smiled, and the two reveled in companionship before reading their books. A soft silence fell across the two, words not needed.

Hunter slowly started to join in crew activities, even asking if there was anything that she could do to help. Ash and Hunter started to get closer, hanging out and sitting together at meal times. Ash was the happiest that she ever remembered being, but being happy isn’t the same as staying happy.

Planet PX-34J2 had the parts they needed for the engine and had a big marketplace which would allow the crew of The Phoenix to gather supplies and spend some time outside.

Ash and Hunter split up a while ago as Ash wanted to stock up on some different parts, but Ash wasn’t sure where Hunter was headed.

Humming to herself, Ash browsed shops as she looked for some more reading material. When she passed an alleyway, that’s when she saw it; Hunter dressed in Quantum Terrorist robes talking with someone in similar garb. Ash felt her heart leap into her throat.

Hunter was part of the Quantum Terrorist group? The terrorist group that hired pirates, like the Addon Pirates who killed Ash’s parents, to help wreak havoc across the universe?

Ash’s stomach churned and she was frozen until she felt something inside her snap. Ash spun around, intent on letting Marcel know when suddenly she tripped over her own feet and crashed to the ground. Cursing to herself, Ash scrambled up and started to run. She didn’t look behind her, not wanting to waste what precious headstart time she had. She swerved through the crowd of people and tried to get back to the ship as quickly as she could. The crowd was thick and Ash struggled to get through.

Panting, she skidded into The Phoenix and froze. Hunter was standing in the middle of the crew, in the middle of a story.

“-and then, by pure luck, I was able to grab a metal pole and hit the Quantum Terrorist in the head. He was thrown into the wall next to us and I was able to escape.”

Marcel turned to Ash, a smile on his face. “Ash! There you are, you missed Hunter’s amazing story of fighting off a Quantum Terrorist!”

“I thought-” Ash cut herself off when Hunter sent a barely discernible glare to Ash. Ash swallowed harshly and forced a painful smile onto her face. “That’s awesome, but I think I’m

going to head to my quarters. I'm beat." Marcel smiled and squeezed her shoulder, seemingly too distracted to notice the tension in Ash's shoulders.

Ash moved to her quarters as quickly as she could without arousing suspicion from the crew who were enraptured in the new story Hunter was telling.

Ash pulled the trapdoor to her room down and quickly used the string with a hook to keep it somewhat locked. She nearly fell down the ladder as she scrambled to get to her work table, connected against one wall across from a cot bed attached to the wall. It was cramped, but hers.

She quickly pulled out the attached seat to her table and sat down. Ash started to make a lock for her trapdoor as she tried to calm down her racing mind.

Was Hunter bad? Here to hurt the crew? Or someone else? Were my parents a target? Why? What did this all mean?

Out of all these questions, the biggest question kept running through her mind.

What to do now?

The next couple of weeks were uneventful and it drove Ash crazy. Hunter acted as though nothing was wrong, as if Ash hadn't caught her dressed as and consorting with a Quantum Terrorist. Ash avoided the crew as much as possible, not wanting to be labeled as jealous of Hunter's newfound popularity with the crew.

Ash kept herself busy with various problems and the upkeep of the ship. She ate her meals in her room under the guise of books or projects. Marcel was worried, but once Ash showed off a more efficient way to utilize their energy source, he let her do what she wanted. Throughout this time, Ash schemed to find a way to expose Hunter for the fraud she was.

Ash attached the last screw on a new energy gun that shouldn't run out of charge when the whole ship moved. She was thrown into a wall and landed hard on her bed, knocking the breath out of her. She gasped, trying to catch her breath, when she was then thrown off her bed and hit the floor. Scrambling upright, Ash stumbled as the ship jerked around again, letting out a cry as a throb of pain went through her thigh as she hit the side of the desk chair. She reached for the rungs of the ladder leading out of her room and started to climb up. She gripped the rungs tightly as the ship tried to toss her off before reaching the trapdoor. Unlocking it, Ash pushed it open just enough to have a small slit to peer through. She saw the soles of two pairs of nice, new leather boots.

None of the crew owned a pair like this except Hunter, so who was Hunter talking to?

"I told you, Artemys, The Phoenix isn't a threat so there's no need to comander it." Hunter's voice was cold. "There's no tactical reason to do this."

A slap rang out. "Curb your thoughts now, Ruby. You call yourself 'Hunter' to pretend that you have a bigger part than being a pawn in this, but you need to learn your place now. We are doing this because you are too attached!" The other voice sounded older than Hunter-Ruby- and gave Ash chills.

"I'm not too attached! I was just gathering information on the traitors' daughter, Ash! She may have what we need or know where it is. I was getting close enough to ask, but you had to pull this stunt!"

Another slap, this time accompanied by a thud and groan of pain. “You are going to be put on probation after this. You don’t make the orders, you just take them. Now, go get the girl and bring her to the bridge. A lesson needs to be taught; to you and everyone else. Go!”

Ash heard the person walk away before realizing that she should hide. Before Ash could even move, the trapdoor was yanked open and Hunter grabbed Ash’s arm. In a blur of motion, Ash was thrown against the opposite wall of the corridor. She tried to get up, but Hunter pushed her down again.

Arms yanked harshly behind her back and a tight rope around her wrists, Ash was led to the bridge by Hunter. She was thrown to the ground in front of a stern-looking woman with graying hair and Quantum Terrorist robes.

“Ah, the daughter of the infamous Delilah and Elliott Wallace.” The lady gestured with a hand and a group of reptilian aliens moved to guard the entrances to the bridge. Ash tried to sit up and look around, but a boot was shoved into her back and her forehead slammed into the ground. The lady above Ash tsked, the voice sounded harsh in Ash’s now pounding head. “Sweetheart, don’t try anything or things will get so bad that you will long for what’s happening now.” The boot dug deeper into Ash’s back before disappearing. Ash hesitantly lifted her head to look at the woman who smiled, predatory. “I’m Artemys and you’re going to answer all of my questions truthfully or this little crew of yours will shrink. So, where are the files?”

“What files?”

A foot swung up and hit Ash’s chin, throwing her head and body back. Ash’s head throbbed even more as she laid on the ground, her shoulders burning after landing on her restrained arms. Artemys walked into Ash’s eyesight.

“The files your parents stole.”

“She doesn’t know anything about them!” Marcel’s voice rang out and Artemys walked out of Ash’s view as Ash struggled to get up. Someone with claws grabbed Ash’s restrained arms and yanked her up, eliciting a pained yelp.

Now that she was upright, Ash could see the whole room now. The crew was held hostage on one end of the bridge and there were various species scattered around the room dressed in Quantum Terrorist Robes, armed with weapons. Hunter was standing a couple of feet to the left from Ash and Marcel was being dragged out by some reptilian guards.

“Marcel! What are you-!” A scaly, clawed hand clamped over Ash’s mouth and she screamed muffled obscenities.

Everything after that was a blur, panic racing through Ash’s body as Marcel was questioned. Every hit became more and more muffled as Ash’s body seemed to be shutting down. Eventually, Marcel stopped responding to anything, red pooling around him. Artemys smiled.

Ash was suddenly being dragged off of the bridge and her hearing slowly came back as the Quantum Terrorists started to file out.

“Burn the ship.” Artemys’s voice cut like a knife through Ash’s panicked fog.

This ignited another struggle in Ash and she started to kick, thrashing around in hopes to break free. A knock to her head dazed her and she was practically carried to the docking site.

The rest of the journey was a blur until she was thrown into her cell, her head hitting the wall. She sat up and felt tears burn in her eyes. She had a feeling that The Phoenix and her crew wouldn’t be surviving the night. She wiped at her eyes vigorously as footsteps echoed down the cell block. Hunter came into view, a scowl on her face.

“You played us.” Ash couldn’t bring any emotion into her voice as she spoke.

“Did you really believe that I cared?” Hunter’s face hardened. “You’re nothing, never was and never will be.”

Ash was left in darkness, all alone with a broken heart.