Second Run: Kitsa & Jack by Leigh Green

The ship was quiet save for the bass of the music that echoed through the cockpit. Metal creaked from time to time, but for the most part all that was audible was the quiet thrum of the sub-light engines. The hold was full of crates strapped down with webbing. The multi-purpose room that served as galley, lounge, and sickbay for the small freighter was dark.

It was a sleepy, soporific 'evening' (per Time report) on the Archon's Fury as Kitsa plotted the next jump. She bobbed her head along to the music as she consulted the latest navigational charts. The charts were a few months out of date, but their destination was Cancer Four: a small, distant colony that had just been settled a few years prior on completion of terraforming.

Kitsa was singing along to the music when they hit. Even small meteors can do intense damage. The ship was sent sidelong into a spin before the dampeners kicked in.

Alarms in the cockpit were screaming above the volume of the music as she scrambled to regain control.

"KIT!" The radio crackled to life with the sound of Jack's voice. There was a croak to the anger; he'd just woken up.

"On it," she called, breathless, as she got the ship back under control and began going over the reports.

"What hit us?" Jack's voice was one of a man in motion.

Kitsa waited until he'd arrived to respond. Hull breach in the cargo section. She sealed off the door and moved to the next alarm. They were losing fuel. She felt a chill as she frantically tried to cut the flow off somewhere along the line.

It was no good. A tank had been punctured.

Jack burst into the cockpit, dressed only in sweatpants. The tattoos across his chest took on a sickly green cant under the low lights. He took one look at her and rushed over.

"Shit," Jack said.

"Shit," Kitsa agreed. She scrubbed a hand over her face, trying to calm the painful thudding of her heart.

"I'll get out there. You get comms back."

She hadn't even noticed that they were out. Before she could even agree, Jack was off at a run.

Hands shaking, Kitsa pulled up the reports on their communications array. It'd cut out with numerous errors and a truncated damage report. She was trying to bring it back online when Jack came in over radio.

"I'm getting a patch on the breach in the hold," he said, voice thick in the EVA suit. "Hole's small, thankfully."

But Kitsa – like any spacer – knew it didn't matter how small a hole it was. Any hole could mean death as the atmosphere was sucked out.

She shut off her music as she worked and waited to hear back from Jack. The alert that the airlock was opening soon went off and she reached over to toggle the video from his suit.

Nothing.

"Video's down," Kitsa reported.

"Fuck." Jack's voice soured further in the single word.

"Comms array isn't responding," she said after a few aborted attempts to get the system back up and running.

"That's 'cause it's gone," Jack answered, voice low and rough.

Kitsa knew this meant he was very upset. Beyond anger. She'd only known him to get that way a couple times before. Usually when someone tried to stiff them.

She didn't know what to say and sat back in her chair. After a few long minutes of staring out the narrow portholes at the front of the cockpit, she toggled the radio again, almost afraid to ask...

"What about our fuel?"

In the time it took Jack to respond, she knew it wasn't good.

"Gone," he said. "Or at least all but. It's patched, but..."

The silence lingered before Kitsa answered. "Not enough to do us any good."

"Right."

She sank into the despair brewing in her stomach, staring at the reports that spilled across the screen. Error after error flashed at her.

Jack's hand on her shoulder broke her from her reverie.

"Sorry," he said in a dark voice that wasn't very apologetic at all. Kitsa found herself immediately defensive, pulling to stare at him.

"What?" Her voice flattened, making it less question and more accusation.

Jack still wore the EVA suit, but had removed the helmet. He set it on one of the other chairs in the cockpit before turning to her. There was fury in his eyes.

"What the fuck were you doing?"

"Me?!" Kitsa felt her cheeks flush. "I was flying the route you plotted. We were due to stop here before the next jump."

Jack looked ready to argue, but just growled under his breath and drew a hand over his features. He tugged at his beard before taking a few steps. Kitsa had always found him intimidating. Jack was big for a spacer. Most of them had grown thinner and frailer in their non-planetary lives, from generations of people who rarely set foot on planets. Jack, however, had not. He was tall and broad shouldered. It only enhanced the brooding nature of his dark eyes.

"Our maps must be out of date."

"I've been telling you they are," Kitsa said, feeling petulant.

"And how would you propose we update them? I don't have the money to land us on a core world."

"You could have asked the other ships! Surely someone had better maps than we do."

"And risk them being a GA agent? Fuck that."

Kitsa was about to respond when the ship shuddered and the cockpit went dark.

The faint glow of distant stars barely permeated the cramped space. She could only see

Jack for the reflective stripes on his EVA suit.

She found herself suddenly claustrophobic.

"Kit?" Jack's voice seemed to come from a distance and only belatedly did she realize he'd whispered.

"We lost power." It was stating the obvious, but it gave her the grounding she needed. Turning to the consoles, she began pushing switches on muscle memory as she felt her body weight dissipate as the spin drive stalled. They clicked in the darkness, but that was all.

Jack swore again and she felt him storm by her, pulling at handholds in the walls.

"We didn't lose that much fuel," he was saying as he went.

Kitsa found the silence in Jack's absence to be even more suffocating. She stared out at the stars as she waited.

Long moments passed with the ship creaking around her. She found herself imagining more meteors hitting them. Imagined Jack getting sucked into space. Imagined herself suffocating in the dark and cold.

When the ship finally did shudder back to life, she gasped. The hull shuddered as the spin drive picked back up and her weight returned with a sickening twist to her stomach.

"Kit?"

Kitsa fumbled for the radio. "Yeah?"

"I'm not sure how long this is going to hold."

Jack didn't sound angry anymore. He sounded scared. He sounded like a child over the crackle of the shortwave. It sent a chill down Kitsa's spine. She swallowed.

"I'll... kill unnecessary systems," she said. As she began shutting down the power running to their sensors, non-functional comms, and the thrusters, a thought came over her. "Jack? Should I shoot off a beacon?"

"No one's out here," he said, appearing in the hatchway. "Except maybe GA patrols. Do we really want them to find us?"

Kitsa looked up at him, seeing her fear reflected in his eyes. "What other choice do we have?"

"I don't know," Jack admitted, shoulders slumping. "But we'll figure it out.

Just... give me time to think."

Turning from him, Kitsa went back to her work. More reports. More secondary systems shut down.

Then another alarm began going off and she felt herself go cold.

"Jack?"

He must have heard the fear in her voice because he hesitated before moving towards her. "What?"

"Life support is gone."

His jaw worked like he wanted to say something, but couldn't find the words.

Kitsa slumped back in her seat, feeling the webbing of the straps cut into her shoulders.

She ignored them, staring off past Jack's shoulder. She was about to say something when he just stormed past.

Looking over to the console once he was gone, she leaned out and set off the beacon. A few seconds later, through the port, she could see the single, blinking red light of the small pod.

The Galactic Agency would be better than death at least.

Leaving the cockpit behind as a lost cause, Kitsa ventured into the rest of the ship to look for Jack. With most of the freighter's bulk given over to a cargo hold, there weren't many places he could be. She found him down in the engine room, an analyzer plugged directly into the computer system. She hovered in the hatch in silence, watching him angrily jab at the screen.

"Six hours," he said finally.

"Six hours?" Kitsa knew the answer already, but couldn't stop herself from asking.

"That's how much life support I estimate we have left." He hit a few buttons and the spin drive shuddered out again. Kitsa grabbed, sharply, at a handhold above the door as gravity disappeared once again. The meal she'd had hours before roiled uncomfortably in her abdomen.

"Eight, now," he said, tone flat.

"Is there anything we can do?" Kitsa wracked her brain for solutions.

Emergencies happened all the time, but they were either by-the-book and manageable, or hopeless. She knew they were in the latter category, but survival insisted they try.

"Sure," Jack said, voice still without much emotion. "If there's only one of us, that almost doubles the remaining oxygen."

Kitsa found herself unable to talk, unable to even breathe. She stared at him. By the time she found her voice, she could only utter two words: "Jack, no."

"Eight hours isn't enough time to fix the ship, but in sixteen... maybe."

"But we're a team."

Jack's eyes hardened as he left the analyzer to float beside him, turning to her. "No. I'm your boss." Then, seeing the look in her eyes, he amended: "I'm not going to kill you, Kitsa. I'm volunteering."

She'd never admit it out loud, but Kitsa felt a sudden wave of relief. Even so, she shook her head, her hair floating in a halo around her. "No. We do this together."

From the waist of the EVA suit, Jack pulled out his sidearm. "You don't get a say in this, Kit."

Before she could protest, the gun went off and Jack's head became a mess of flesh, bone, and blood that hovered in place next to where he'd pressed the muzzle against his skull. Kitsa did lose her lunch, then, nearly choking on the bile as she fought the lack of gravity to get it up and out.

She dragged herself as quickly as the zero-g and her arms would allow away from the engine room. She fled until she was back in the cockpit, closing the hatch behind her as if it could shut out the horror left below. Unable to think or function, she burrowed as best she could into the chair at the controls and cried.

After what seemed like hours (and may have only been minutes), she was brought out of her misery by a flash of bright light through the narrow viewports. Blinking away the salty tears that lingered at her cheeks, she dragged herself closer and pressed to the thick shielding.

Its bulk far surpassing the freighter had appeared a Galactic Agency patrol ship.

Practically a small city unto itself, it made even their cargo hauler seem miniscule by comparison. They'd lined up by the airlock and already had a port extending to connect.

Too scared to move, Kitsa just waited for them to find her.

Even imprisonment for hauling illegal goods was better than the cold death that awaited her otherwise.