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WORK SAMPLE
Genre: Science Fiction

Chapter 1: A 30 Degree Tilt

The skies had been quiet these last few fortnights as *The Argentum* sailed its way through a sparsely populated belt of asteroids and micro-planets. Uneventful and predictable, this stretch of the journey was, in the opinion of the captain, the perfect time to finish up various projects that needed to be done around the ship. Alton was a Scorpien, a race born of the long and constant contact between computers and living beings. Tall and straight-backed, with pale, silvery-white metal flesh and keen black eyes, he was headed this afternoon to the engine room to check on the progress of his two mechanics.

As soon as he pushed open the door, a metal rod slid down from its position behind it with a loud clanging sound. Of course. Astrid and Callum could be untidy, but not to this degree - Alton was quite sure the rod had been placed there precisely for the purpose of alerting them to an opened door. Sure enough, he found the two Geminia feigning intense work on the transmission, having obviously darted into position mere moments before his arrival.

Either oblivious to the clarity of their scheme or pretending to be, they both looked up at their captain with welcoming grins. As Geminia, they were tiny enough to be sitting on the machinery itself.

“How’s things, Cap’n?” Astrid asked, waving her tiny fingers, a wrench balanced precariously between them. Astrid kept her pale blonde hair long and wild, as many Geminia did, wiry curls twisting outwards from her head. She had a coil of copper wire tucked into it, though whether this was for convenient safekeeping or personal decoration, Alton could not tell. Callum, her twin, kept his equally light hair pulled back in a tight braid. They both had dark smears of grease on their brown skin, a near-constant with the two mechanics.

“Quiet. Things are quiet,” Alton said, eyeing the transmission, which looked to be in nearly the same shape he had left it after his last check-in with the two. “How are things progressing down here?”

“Spiffy as ever,” Astrid chirped, tapping her seat with the wrench.

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“Sure she’s as lovely as you left ‘er,” Callum added, winking at his sister after making the rhyme.

Alton looked over at the wall, where he had used a magnet to secure his checklist of requests for the two. “How far have you progressed on the task I set for you?” Alton had asked them to take inventory of all bolts and screws larger than 7C, replace any of them older than 6 months, and record it all so that another round of replacements could be done in another 6 months.

“Yes, yes, coming along fine,” Astrid said.

“No need to fuss on it, sure we’ll have it done in time,” Callum continued.

Alton took a step toward the edge of the engine room, scanning over his printed sheet. Very little had been checked off. At this rate, the inventory and replacement would never be done before they embarked at their destination.

“Please ensure that this is a priority,” he said. “No other projects should be started until this is completed.” He looked pointedly toward a wrinkled tarp that had been thrown over something near one of the thruster coils.

“Of course, of course,” Callum said, his grin never leaving his face.

“Nothing more ‘til we’re done,” Astrid promised.

Alton was unconvinced that the Geminia would jump to their work after his check-in. They were generally talkative to the point of aggravation, chattering on with him no matter the context, and their quick, dismissive answers led Alton to believe that they wanted him gone sooner than later so they could return to whatever they were tinkering with before. But there was, realistically, no more to be done that could sway their focus, so with a small whirring sigh, Alton left the two to their business, hoping they would not need too much more prodding. As he left the engine room, he was sure he heard the metallic clink of the rod at the door being replaced.

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The coordinates were set, the course was well charted, and all Zallie had to do was relax and keep half an eye out for asteroids that had shifted out of place since the last mapping. As much as she liked the technical challenges of piloting a ship like *The Argentum*, she also found enjoyment in these quiet stretches. There was time for reflecting, for tuning into the ship's subtleties.

Alone in the cockpit, Zallie had set the airlock and turned off the life support system, as she was capable of surviving without it. Such a move was unnecessary - the ship had plenty of resources to make it to their destination, and all of the systems were functioning perfectly - but Zallie saw no need to waste what wasn't needed.

Plus, it tended to keep interruptions at a minimum, her being the only Piscean on board. Anyone else would need to buzz through the airlock and wait a few moments before barging in, which was often enough to deter intruders who had no clear reason to bother her.

Without the gravity generator running, Zallie's wispy black hair floated softly around her face. She tucked a loose strand behind her ear, her hair a dark contrast to her lilac skin. Absentmindedly, she left her hand up at her face, resting it against the long tusk-like appendage that started at her temple and ran down past her jaw. Outside, space was as black and vast as it ever was, but the humming of the ship beneath her was her pride and reassurance. No matter how big and black the sky might be, a pilot always had ways of making it theirs.

But her time spent communing with her ship was interrupted by the buzzing sound of someone activating the life support and opening the airlock. She turned around in her pilot's seat to see Marcus, the ship's only resident Ramman, and Ellerby, a Tauran. Together, the two were responsible for the physical logistics of the ship - packing, hauling, and organizing the food, cargo, and equipment that kept the *The Argentum* functional. Some referred to them as "the muscle."

Zallie had respect for the work that they did, but found them challenging as crewmates. They were not helping their case right now, nearly piling into the cockpit on top of each other. Marcus was tall and fond of wearing a brown canvas jacket, sewn with so much structure that it nearly looked like armor. But today he was just in an undershirt, and Zallie was reminded of why Ramman were often considered the ablest of the races. The ruddy-skinned Tauran, Ellerby, was half of Marcus's size, measured generously. Still, the two seemed to do equal work.

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“Hey, Zallie, how’s it going?” Marcus draped himself over the back of Zallie’s seat, leaning heavily on her shoulders with his arms. “Pretty easy gig hereabouts, huh?”

“It’s been smooth, yes,” Zallie said, twisting around in her seat, partly to face them, partly to get out from under Marcus. “Do you two need something?”

“We had an idea,” Ellerby said mischievously, standing on his tiptoes to look over the control panel while keeping his hands behind his back so Zallie couldn’t find reason chide or caution him.

“Now get this,” Marcus said, sounding very pleased with himself. “We got a ton of cargo down in the hold, right, that we’re meant to unload soon as we get land-side. But it’s been packed all away in the back, and it’d take me and Ellerby the better part of all day to haul it all from one side to the other, right? And we’re thinking, there’s got to be a better use of our time, no?”

Zallie nodded. Marcus had a habit of talking in half-questions, which annoyed her, since she was never sure when an answer was called for, and when he was just making a show of assuming her agreement.

“So we figure, this isn’t land-side, there’s no reason things all gotta stay flat, you know?”

Ellerby had stepped back away from the console to free his hands for gesturing. “We thought, why not ask Zallie to tilt the ship a little bit! Just to make things slide a little easier down to where they’re supposed to be!”

Zallie would have sighed, but after so long without the oxygen on, she didn’t have much air in her lungs, so she settled for turning back toward the window. “That’s not what this ship was meant to do,” she said, fiddling with a few levers.

“Aw, come on, Zallie,” Marcus said. “A brilliant pilot like you, you gotta know a little trick for that, yeah? We don’t need nothing fancy, just a little downward angle, is all.”

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Zallie sighed. “What you’re suggesting isn’t really possible. You can’t just shift things around in a spaceship by putting it at a tilt.”

“How come?”

“The gravity that keeps everything in place is generated by the ship itself. It’s a lot more complicated than you think to start maneuvering such that cargo in the hold is actually shifted around at a specific angle.”

Marcus looked confused. “So, can you do it or not?”

“I can,” Zallie conceded. “But it’s harder than you think. And a little dangerous. What if you mis-estimate and some case of cargo damages the door? Or crushes Ellerby?”

“Hey now,” the Tauran said, clearly annoyed at the implication that he was at special risk of being crushed. “I’d like to think I can handle my own against a bunch of boxes.”

“See?” Marcus asked. “Now you’ve gotta give him a chance to prove it, or else it seems like you think Ellerby’s bad at his job.”

“Of course I don’t think that,” Zallie said. Marcus and Ellerby wouldn’t stop grinning expectantly at her, though, and she knew they’d never let her rest until she agreed. Besides, it would be an interesting little challenge during this otherwise uneventful stretch of time. “Fine, okay. I’ll do my best. Give me ten minutes to get everything in order and let the rest of the crew know.”

“Great, thanks so much!” Marcus left with a hard smack on Zallie’s shoulder, obviously pleased with himself. “You’re the best, Zal!”

Kato was in his office when the announcement came over the ship’s intercom: Zallie alerting everyone that she was taking the ship through a listing maneuver in ten minutes. He stood up from his desk and gathered the papers that were strewn over the surface, clipping them into three tidy stacks. Most things on *The Argentum* were made to withstand the jostling of life

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aboard a spaceship, but Kato's office tended to look more like part of a land-side building than a room on a ship.

He sat back down at his desk and flipped the handful of brass switches that latched everything down in his office. The office echoed with a bunch of metallic clicks and snaps as the mechanisms locked his desk drawers, secured his cabinets, and kept everything where it was meant to be. Most of the furniture was wood and brass - a sturdy wooden desk, wood shelves and cabinets to holding his books and belongings, and a wooden chair with leather upholstery that he sat back in now, waiting for Zallie to finish her maneuver before he went back to his work.

Olivella, the ship's first mate, poked her head into Kato's office. "You hear that?"

"Yep," Kato said, unconcerned.

"You need help getting anything secured?"

"Nah."

Olivella stepped into the room and looked down at the stacks of papers on Kato's desk. "I still don't know why you insist on living like this - pretending you're land-side. Just makes more work anytime we have to batten down the hatches, so to speak." Olivella was a Libran, lithe and graceful with an even-keeled disposition. Kato liked her. She was patient and smart, something he felt was an uncommon combination.

"No one here's pretending," he said, more conversational than defensive. "I just know what I like."

"If you say so," Olivella said, taking a step toward one of his display cabinets with various figurines and trophies Kato had collected during his travels and looking inside. Olivella had grown up in space, traveling with her diplomat parents, and Kato knew she didn't understand his appreciation for feeling settled, surrounded by one's own possessions, of keeping things around just because you like them. "And you're sure these are all secured down?"

"Would I lie to you, Ollie? Especially if it meant risking my treasures?"

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Olivella turned back toward him and smiled. “I suppose not. I should have known you’d keep your stuff safe before you even checked on life support.”

“Hey now,” Kato said, raising his hands. “Life support is not my department. You don’t know how much trouble we’d all be in if it was.”

Olivella laughed. “I’m glad we have more use for your accounting skills here than your engineering, then.”

Zallie’s voice came over the intercom again, letting the crew know she was starting the list. Kato stayed in his chair, snug and secure even as the ship began to tilt. Olivella widened her stance to keep her balance, but Kato knew if he got out of his chair, he’d be as useless as a legless bear cub. Olivella was a Libran - known for being generally skilled, well balanced in more ways than one - but Kato was a Leonine, short and round, strong but unathletic, swarthy where Olivella was fair. He kept his thick, reddish-brown hair and beard well-groomed, oiled every morning and adorned with beads and braids.

“Since you mention it,” Kato leaned forward, with some effort, to hand Olivella one of the stacks of paper he had secured in a shallow metal case on his desk. “Here are the projected numbers for next month. Looking to be a good one, especially with the drop-off we have coming up here on Melechen.”

Olivella took the stack and flipped through the top few sheets. “Looks great, Kato, thanks. Let’s keep a close eye on your connections in Abbideen. It seems like there’s some risk there and it’s not a deal I’d like to lose.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

“Thanks, Kato.” The ship was still listing, but Olivella turned to leave after setting Kato’s report back in its case. Kato remained in his chair, content to wait out the ten minutes in uselessness than to risk trying to make his way around an off-kilter ship. But Olivella wasn’t even through the doorway of his office when a heavy jerk in the ship’s movement threw her off-balance and she went tumbling into one of Kato’s shelves. The Leonine himself held himself in place by gripping the arms of his chair tightly, thankful for the startle response that had kept him from falling.

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Zallie's voice immediately came out of the intercom. *"What was that, Marcus and Ellerby respond, I repeat, what was that, is everything okay below deck?"*

Kato and Olivella both looked to the intercom box on the wall of his office, the tension in Zallie's voice leaving them anxious.

Ellerby's voice came across soon after, speaking quickly, though not sounding panicked. *"All fine down here, Marcus and Ellerby reporting, no problems, no need to worry."* Then, a moment later: *"All crew please stay above the cargo deck for now, please."*