



A Touch of Revenge

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The enemy spaceship's display blinked red, indicating its weapons-ready status. Through the wall of windows on the main bridge, Eryk studied five other ships which armed at his command, their missile bays illuminating like rings of miniature stars in the eternal night sky. Eryk's fingers trembled as they hovered over Release Payload. He didn't know if he had the gall to turn Earth into ash.

"Humans believe in equality," he said to himself. *We punish criminals.*

Eryk had no home to return to. His wife, his parents, *his people* were dead. The planet was dead.

Three years ago, Kugrons had provided Earth with hover-engines—a "peace" offering. But the engines emitted radioactive fallout. Humans, animals, and plants died. Kugrons colonized in the wake of their destruction—like starving maggots.

The few humans who evaded the fallout had perished while sneaking Eryk onto an automated transport as it dropped off more hover-engines from the ships in space—a ship he now stood inside. The engines were never a gift, always a necessity, one Kugrons didn't want humans to discover until it was too late.

No one knew what Eryk would find when he docked. He was a soldier; he would improvise.

Empty ships.

Translation chips.

An apocalypse switch.

Eryk slumped in the captain's chair and stared out at Earth. Every Kugron was down there, thriving in the rot. The once-green continents were brown and red with death, the blue oceans now gray and steaming from decay.

Beside him, in the co-pilot's seat, a small creature burbled as it licked the bandages Eryk had scrapped together out his clothes. Judging by the glowing collar, it was a pet. He had discovered it while hiding in a ventilation duct. The critter had cowered in a corner until a half-eaten grain cookie given in the shadows had made them friends.

Anger and revenge had been Eryk's driving force. But after he'd armed the weapons, he'd hesitated.

What if someone else is hiding down there like I was?

He swiped through the diagrams of Earth on a display to his left. A rainbow of terra-forming progress. Wireframe schematics of topography. Landmass acquisitions. Thermal maps. Oceans.

The creature snorted and shook its head. It curled up like an old dog on a cold day. Tufts of its rust-brown fur were charred to the skin, others matted with blood. Eryk had to figure Kugrons had beaten it. A chunk was missing out of an ear, the eye on the same side scarred and milky green. Torch, as Eryk named him, had been the one to lead him to the bridge.

Flipping through the logged data displays of Earth, Eryk found one showing Earthlings in red and Kugrons in blue. He spun the globe, scanning.

Eryk *was* the last—his red dot alone on a ship in space, a green dot nestled beside him.

Torch.

He sighed and rested his chin in a palm, staring out at Earth. It was never a decision he thought he'd face—the fate of a planet too grand of a responsibility for a grunt like him.

One command from the Kugrons' main bridge, designed to take out a fleet of battleships, would eradicate his enemy.

One tap of his finger would turn his home planet into a churning mass of magma.

Inside, Eryk felt cold as a corpse on a slab. He sat frozen and torn between saving a symbol of humanity's existence and exterminating an infestation. No war could callus his hands or heart enough for such a burden.

He would be the sole human in the galaxy. There would be no history but what he could remember.

Still, he'd made his kind a promise.

Eryk focused on the flashing button beneath his fingers. *Even if the blast kills me*, "At least they won't be able to do this again."

He tapped the flashing button.

Streams of white rockets pelted out of every ship, silent swords in the night. They thrust into the planet's crust like thousands of righteous needles in sadistic nurses' hands.

No more bills or traffic jams or disease.

Eryk cocked his head and watched Earth's skin bubble and crack the way Cerise's had the week she died. He'd seen so much death in recent years that he'd found peace in its silence. It was the end of pain.

Crags of blood-orange light crawled around Earth's surface. Plumes of steam and ash and dirt from disintegrating tectonic plates darkened the skies.

There was no one left to hug or kiss or cry with.

Torch howled high and long at the ceiling, a sad tune that reminded Eryk of arctic foxes near his home in Alaska—two things he could never see again.

Red lights flashed on the main display. Through the windows, Eryk watched a veil of red fall over the ship. All six of the Kugron vessels donned a shield. Ahead of him, Earth sank inward. Fractures of white light shone through as the planet ballooned.

Rapid beeps rattled Eryk's ears. He grabbed his harness and closed his eyes.

Something warm and soft jumped into his lap with a whimper. Eryk released a hand to pull Torch close. "Hang on, buddy."

Carmine light flickered across his eyes as the ship launched backward. Metal groaned and screeched as the hull bore the pressure of the blast. Sirens whistled and warbled from displays at stations on the bridge behind him. Engines kicked on in a distant hum. But Eryk couldn't hear much over the rush of blood in his ears or think through the realization he was now no better than his enemy.

He had nothing: no family, no home, and no morals. Eryk prayed for the end to be quick.

But the flash of heat from the explosion dissipated. The ship steadied and momentum equalized. Alarms quieted. And the windows darkened.

Eryk opened his eyes to a blinking blue indicator on his display.

Mass Compensation?

With no logical reason not to, Eryk selected it.

Two orbs launched from each ship, one blue, one yellow—twelve in all. Only then, did Eryk see the distance they'd traveled from Earth's prior location, and noted the expansion. The moon arced off into the distant stars—a motherless asteroid.

The blue and yellow orbs converged into a writhing green knot. Eryk felt a tug on his body and the ship. Everything came to a standstill again. He stared out at the globe of light filling the hole Earth left behind—a hole Eryk had made.

Hours passed that he stared at that tiny flickering ball in the emptiness, too shocked to celebrate or cry. He wished it had killed him so he wouldn't have to live with the memories and guilt. The other five ships remained in position as if awaiting a command.

Eryk had no desire to move. The sky looked empty and wrong. But there was no going back.

Just as his bones chilled and joints began to ache from not moving, Torch stirred. A warm tongue licked his hand.

He looked down and noticed fluid leaking through one of the creature's bandaged legs. Tearing off another strip of his shirt, Eryk removed the old and tied on the new. The animal kicked and squirmed in protest, bumping a display.

A three-dimensional hologram lit up the windows. Galaxies and planets danced and swirled in greens and blues and reds, highlighting their bodies and the controls before them. Targeting brackets blinked over different locations zooming in and expanding nine locations. Along the bottom of the display, names and statuses appeared.

Eryk studied them. *Planet selected for colonization. Kugron Outpost Twenty-seven. Class M Planet for inspection—Space Travel Capable Colony. Kugron Supreme Council Headquarters.*

He hadn't committed genocide. He'd merely lopped off a finger. Hope sparked in his chest as he swiped through the options with interest. "Couldn't save humanity, but maybe we can save someone else. What do you think, Torch?"

The creature sat up in his lap and pawed at the hologram in the air. The Class M planet scrolled back to the center of the display. A square expanded with a close-up of the star system. A button flashed beside it.

Accept Coordinates?

Eryk couldn't still the energy building within him. He would never hold his wife again or sit on a sofa watching TV while enjoying pizza and beer with his friends. There would be no vacations. Every job would fall on him. Maintenance, defense, command—all responsibility would be his.

Drawing in a deep breath, he shrugged to set himself at ease. "Why the hell not? I just blew up my own damned planet. Three months should be enough travel time to learn how to work all this shit, right?"

Torch let out an excited yip.

The button pulsed red beneath Eryk's steady finger, swollen with the promise of blood.

Giving Torch's head a gentle rub, Eryk grinned. He tapped Accept.