

A Taste of Home

Captain Raymond Montoya sat on the bridge of what remained of the EMS Libertas, his first and last command. The brutal war against the Draca had been ongoing for decades. Humans had learned early on that the lizard-like Draca were cunning and fierce warriors who would totally obliterate an enemy in their victory. Unfortunately, it took considerable time to realize this was because they ate the vanquished.

Fortunately for Montoya, the bridge of his ship had been designed as an escape pod. Unfortunately for Montoya, the escape pod now drifted towards the shattered remains of a once-proud fleet of ships, most of which were overrun by Draca boarding parties. He looked at the empty stations around him; bodies of their former occupants cycled through the airlock. Most had perished in combat, while others couldn't face the horrors of capture and ended their lives. Station five, formerly crewed by 2nd Lieutenant Samuels, held his attention. Lt. Samuels had naively believed his despondent crewmate wouldn't cycle the outer airlock door if he were in it with them. He was wrong.

It was just as well he was alone, being the only member of the crew who knew the escape pod doubled as a booby trap. Any attempt to force the outer air lock door open would cause the pod to explode with enough force to damage even a battleship outside her shields and destroy it if inside their cargo bay. Another hard learned lesson about Draca. They were apparently more than happy to hunt down escape pods and crack them open like eggs at breakfast.

Putting aside such maudlin thoughts, Montoya walked the bridge to check systems. At the end of the circuit, he looked at the duffle strapped to the back of his chair. He was assigned this command at the last minute when the previous captain suffered a debilitating injury during final inspection. Montoya hadn't even had a chance to see his new quarters, let alone unpack and settle in. Lucky for him, otherwise his personal effects would now be lost. Not that they would make any difference, but what better in the face of oblivion than memories and a taste of home?

Opening the duffle, he dug towards the bottom and quickly found the precious cargo wrapped in

sweats. Reverently removing the protective clothing, he gently caressed the bottle of Orujo and took his seat. Cradling the bottle of home-brew in his hands, he thought of his wife when she handed it to him right before he left.

"To celebrate your victory, my love." Her last words to him.

He sat, just staring at the bottle and picturing his wife, until his eyes blurred with tears that wouldn't fall in zero gravity. Wiping his eyes clear, he secured the bottle in the netting on the side of his chair and pulled the workstation down, locking it in place. He still had work to complete.

Inserting a small flash drive into the side of the computer, he began downloading all available sensor data from the fight, then made posthumous award recommendations. Messages for loved ones came next. Lastly, he recorded his final message, saying goodbye to his wife and family.

Removing the small drive, he placed it in his pocket and returned the workstation to standby. He retrieved the bottle and a drinking bladder, taking a few minutes to transfer the potent alcohol to the bladder. Pouring in zero gravity just wasn't possible. He stared at the empty bottle for a while before removing the drive from his pocket. Continuing to stare, he took several pulls from the bladder, savoring the familiar burn of the alcohol down his throat. Eventually, he placed the drive in the bottle and replaced the cork.

"Just like the shipwrecked sailors of old!" he said, chuckling at his joke. Opening a compartment on the wall, he placed the bottle inside. "I wonder where this will wash ashore?" Entering his command code into the panel next to the compartment, he watched it close. It made some noise as it sealed the contents in a small, protective drone, then launched. Its homing beacon set to activate in seven days.

He returned to the command chair and began toasting every crew member, using any names he could recall. On screen, an enemy ship altered course towards his position. With any luck, the alcohol would be gone before they arrived.