



**Home
for
the
Holidays**

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Home for the Holidays

It was a nightmare, worse than any combat situation he'd ever found himself involved in.

His very own version of hell on Earth.

And he wasn't even on Earth.

Sweat trickled down his back inside the shirt and jacket, and his hand twitched toward the laser pistol strapped to this hip, and twitched away again. Much as he wanted to, he couldn't justify blasting his way through this crowd.

It was the biggest shopping day of the year, and the Sky Mall was filled to bursting. All fourteen levels, stuffed full of women and children. Squealing children, crying children, whining children; their shrill screams and maniacal laughter assaulting his eardrums like tiny sonic grenades, sending chills down his spine.

And then there were the women: chattering, laughing, and giggling like hyenas. Their comm links chirped incessantly, and their gel soles squished when they walked.

Noise everywhere, people everywhere, and he couldn't shoot any of 'em.

Christ, he never woulda guessed he'd ever wish himself back into that box where he'd spent all his time recently, but it had been quiet in solitary confinement. Blessedly quiet.

Gritting his teeth, he plunged into the maelstrom of bodies and fought his way toward the lift tube, doing his best not to step on any children or get tangled in the strings of the tiny flying reindeer some of them towed.

He'd walked maybe twenty feet when one of the latter collided with his head. He swatted at it, and heard it yip in pain.

Christ Almighty, that thing's alive.

A foot and a half tall, with antlers and fur, and a red nose that blinked on and off, soaring through the air at the end of a string.

Alive. A Christmas novelty. What the hell would happen to it—to all of 'em; there must be a hundred tiny reindeer flying all over the mall—once the holidays were over?

The kid attached to it took one look at Isaac's face and reeled the tiny animal in. "Sorry, mister."

He melted into the crowd with a nervous look over his shoulder, as if afraid Isaac might hurt either him or his creature. But at least he cradled it to his chest. At least he seemed to realize he was responsible for a living thing.

Isaac uncurled his fists and forced himself to take a deep breath, just as two Kedarii women passed by, their long capes flapping behind them. Kohl-rimmed eyes lingered on his gun for a moment.

The one on his hip.

For a second, his blood ran cold. His hand flexed toward the weapon, even though he knew he couldn't draw it. He'd be on the floor before it could clear the holster.

The women were warrior-caste, with the appropriate facial markings. Swirls across their foreheads and the tops of the high Kedarii cheekbones. They each carried a legal stunner he could see, and God knew how many other weapons he couldn't, tucked away on their bodies. And there were so many bronze bracelets jangling around their wrists he couldn't even count them.

One for each kill. Between them, they must have dispatched several dozen men.

They didn't seem to be after him, though, because they kept walking. He forced himself to do the same, in the opposite direction, even as his heart pounded. With every step he expected to hear the crackle of a stunner, and then blackness—but it never came. When he turned at the lift tube to look over his shoulder, one of the women was looking back at him, above the heads of the crowd. She had masses of braids coiled on top of her head, and legs that just wouldn't quit, and when the rust red cape swirled aside for a moment, he saw the handle and a couple of blades of a shongo nestled at her back.

He ducked into the lift tube before she could pull it and throw. Although she probably wasn't going to, because he could see a flash of white teeth as the lift tube sucked him away.

Good teeth. Nice lips, too.

He fought his way off at level 11, into another crowd of women, children, and miniature reindeer. None of'em hit him this time. In fact,

everyone seemed to give him a wide berth, as if the tension rolling off him in waves created a sort of force field, keeping everyone at a distance.

The crowds thinned as he got closer to the doors of Thrusters, the Sky Mall bar, and then he was through, and back in his own environment again. Not a woman, child, or flying reindeer in sight.

The place was just as tightly packed as the mall itself. This was where the husbands and fathers congregated, waiting for their domestic partners and children to finish holiday shopping.

Not the kind of bar he was used to. Too clean. Too many nicely dressed people. It made his neck prickle. Give him the Down and Dirty on Sumatra or the Last Chance on Canton Station any day.

He scanned the dark room, squinting, and found what he was looking for in the back corner.

There were three of 'em: all white as the snow on Krai. A man about Isaac's age, with dark hair flopping over his forehead. A man a few years older, small and spare with fair hair and ruddy cheeks. And a kid, early twenties maybe, with soft, brown hair and a face that was just a shade away from too pretty.

All three looked up when he stopped beside the table. "One of you named Conlan?"

There was a pause while they looked at one another. He'd spoken Standard, assuming they'd understand it, but maybe they didn't.

Surprisingly, it was the pretty-boy who spoke up. "Who wants to know?"

Isaac looked at him. At them all.

There was no telling which of them was the captain and which were the crew. They were all dressed in freighter grays, and neither looked anymore like the boss than the others. Other than the kid, who had to be too young.

“My name’s Isaac Miller. I was told I could find Captain Conlan here.”

There was another exchange of glances, then the kid spoke again. “Who told you that?”

“Dockmaster at the shipyards. Said the Good Fortune’s breaking dock later today.”

“We might be,” the kid said, confirming that at least he’d found the right crew. “Why?”

“I’m looking for passage home.”

“We run cargo,” the man with the dark hair said. “And not the human kind.”

Isaac turned to him. “I ain’t looking to stow away. There’s a price on my head, but not here. I’m a free man, and I can leave when I choose.”

The man nodded. If the bounty bothered him, it didn’t show. “Why don’t you just book a berth on one of the passenger liners? It’s the holiday season. There are shoppers coming and going every day this time of year.”

Isaac hesitated. No sense in lying to someone you’re asking help from. “No money.”

There was a pause.

“Where’s home for you?” the kid broke the silence, and Isaac turned to him.

“Old Earth. North American continent. But you can drop me anywhere on the planet. I’ll find my way from there.”

“You got family waiting for you?”

Isaac shook his head. “It’s still home, though.” Or the closest thing he had to one.

There was another pause.

“We ain’t going that way,” the dark-haired man said, leaning back on his chair. “We’re on our way in the other direction. el-Kedar. After we stop off on Avaris for a bit.”

“It can be rough out that way.” Not on the pleasure-planet Avaris, or at least not in any way that mattered, but el-Kedar was no vacation spot. All those warrior-women.

“Tell me about it.” A shadow crossed the man’s face.

“I’m pretty good with a gun,” Isaac offered.

A pair of gray eyes assessed him. “You offering to come along?”

Might as well. Didn’t look like he was getting home for the holidays. Then again, with no home to get home to, did it matter? “Guess I am.”

“We’ll get back to Old Earth sometime in the next year,” the kid offered. “You can decide whether you want to stay or go then.”

Isaac nodded.

“Grab a chair.” The dark-haired man—Captain Conlan?—nodded to the silent one, who pulled a stool over from the next table. He stuck out a hand. “Welcome to my crew, Mr. Miller.”

“Glad to be here,” Isaac said and sat down.

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Home for the Holidays
A Soldiers of Fortune short story

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