



Pirates of the Crimson Sand

Pirates of the Crimson Dawn

by

Justin R. Macumber

Pirates of the Crimson Sand

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Pirates of the Crimson Sand was first published by the fine people at [eMuse-zine](#), and I can't thank them enough for giving it a home. It was then published in [Golden Visions Magazine](#). My proudest moment, though, came when Timothy Reynolds and Dragon Moon Pressed accepted it in their short story anthology entitled "[Podthology](#)." Thanks go to them for giving the story such a fine home.

If you would like to read more stories from Justin Macumber, or if you would like this story in another format, please go to www.justinmacumber.com.

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Praise for PIRATES OF THE CRIMSON SAND:

“I bloody hate pirate stories — but I loved PIRATES OF THE CRIMSON SAND. Justin Macumber deftly weaves a futuristic high adventure story within a slang-soaked world so convincing, you can practically feel the heat of the electricity cannons. Set sail for awesome!”

– J.C. Hutchins, author of “7th Son: Descent” and “Personal Effects: Dark Arts”

“With a nod to Alex Raymond’s Flash Gordon and Edgar Rice Burrough’s John Carter of Mars classics, Justin Macumber packs a dynamic mix of action, conflict, and imagery into his short story. PIRATES OF THE CRIMSON SAND is an exciting and enjoyable synthesis of advanced and ancient technologies, a tale that could easily expand to fill a larger canvas.”

– Lloyd Ritchey, author of “Stormdragon”

“With PIRATES OF THE CRIMSON SAND you better learn to hold onto the rigging, as Justin Macumber catapults you into action and adventure. You can practically taste the sand in your mouth and feel the adrenalin in your blood.

– Philippa Ballantine, author of “Digital Magic” and “Geist”

“Fans of ‘Firefly’ will find a lot to love in this tale of a young pirate driven by love over gold.”

– Mathew Wayne Selznick, author of “Brave Men Run”

“Three! Two! One! Fire! Macumber strikes another blow for space pirates everywhere. An engaging, fun adventure with endearing characters and a world you’ll want to get to know better. Looking forward to more from this talented weaver of tales!”

– James Durham, author of the podcast novel “FETIDUS”

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Praise for the author's other work

Justin's debut novel HAYWIRE:

“A thrilling chase through a superbly realized future solar system. Enhanced warriors, space pirates, galactic threats and more make this a powerful debut from a strong new voice in speculative fiction.”

- Alan Baxter, author of REALMSHIFT and MAGESIGN

“With nods to comic book super heroes, mutant robots, and the sweeping menace of mechanization, Justin Macumber’s HAYWIRE is a thrill ride from first blood to closing sigh. HAYWIRE explores most of the tropes of hard-core space opera with nanite technology, space pirates, and a host of bad guys who are good guys, good guys who are bad guys, and all of them just hoping to survive the next catastrophe. Drawn with a broad brush, the comic book roots to this work add depth and style. Sure the good guys are bigger than life, and the bad guys are purely evil, but Macumber drags you through the story at a relentless pace. I found it difficult to put down.”

- Nathan Lowell, creator of the GOLDEN AGE OF THE SOLAR CLIPPER and the TANYTH FAIRPORT ADVENTURES.

Justin's short story series THE TIES THAT BIND: TALES OF THE BREAKING DAWN:

“Hard-hitting space opera in the golden age tradition, relentless and full of dark action.”

– David J Williams, author of *The Burning Skies*

“Whether regaling us with tales of anti-gravity pirate ships sailing an ocean of sand, or putting us aboard a cargo runner racing through coven gates and deep space perils, Justin Macumber delivers one hell of a fun story. What more can any reader ask?”

– J.F. Lewis, internationally published author of *ReVamped (Void City, Book Two)*

“THE TIES THAT BIND is some of the best sci-fi I’ve read all year and the crew of the Breaking Dawn will have you rooting for their success on every page. Exciting, smart and well written, this is a story that is seriously worth reading.”

– Jeremy Robinson, author of *Pulse* and *Antarktos Rising*

Dedication

*This story is dedicated to my wife, Krista.
You mean everything to me.*

*I'd also like to thank Joss Whedon.
Without your comicbook "Fray"
this story wouldn't exist.*

"Don't be so grit," Shana said as she planted her small brown hands on her hips and dug her feet into the rust-colored desert sand beneath her. "We go for the *Skulper*."

A man twice her height and three times her age glared down at her with his one fierce eye, and hard sunlight winked off the studs in his nose and upper lip as he frowned. "Ain't grit, Cap'n," he said. "It's wit, sharp as ever. The *Skulper* is a tag fools run, and we all knows it. We should go for the *Behemoth*. Loads of sparkle in that."

"True nuff," another man said. He wasn't much taller than Shana, but he could have held several of her in his hairy stomach as it poked out from beneath the shirt that was stretched taut over his chest and gut. "I'm just a bosun, Shana. You the Cap'n, so we follow you as ever, but Braka's true. We should go for the *Behemoth*."

Thrusting her lower lip out, Shana clomped over and shoved a finger in the fat man's belly. "You grit then too, Chim. What, you think the *Behemoth* got just one cannon on it? We gonna sail up and gut her pretty as we please? And how many swabs we lose last time we try that? Half? You talk tag fool run? Goin' after that *Behemoth* with what few we got now, *that* be a tag fool."

Braka sighed roughly and ran a calloused hand through the sun-bleached hair that sprang from his head like a desert fire. After a moment of grumpy silence he said, "True and wit, Cap'n. True and wit."

Shana saw Chim glance at Braka out of the corner of his eye, and she could tell that neither of them was entirely convinced, not that she could blame them. She wasn't being

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entirely honest with them, and they'd sniffed it out. She knew the only thing that held them back from calling her on it was their respect for her family and her rank.

At that moment she missed her dad in a way that was deep and painful. The crew had never given *him* backtalk. Then again, he would've been upfront with them and told them that the mission wasn't really for gems and engine juice, but for medicine to save a sick little boy. He would've told them his decision was based on emotion and nothing more, and they would have accepted it. But her dad was dead, and her hold over the crew wasn't strong enough yet to show them any weakness, even if they would've understood it.

"Fore we make a run at the big sparkles," she said, looking at each of them in turn, "we gotta get our names back, our reps. That last hit nearly did us in, and every scag around here knows it. If we make a solid hit or two, it'll all be blue skies again."

"I hope you're true," Chim said.

Shana glanced over at the bosun. "Ain't I ever?"

Chim's eyes twinkled like he wanted to laugh, but his lips clamped together and caught the sound before it could escape. "Enough so, yeah," he replied.

Since her dad's death Shana had stepped up and become as good a Cap'n as she was able, a right solid splinter off the old man. But, in doing so she'd lost some of the humor that had once been as much a part of her as her long black hair and grey eyes. Above all else she demanded respect, so she didn't deal well with laughter at her expense. Not even from Chim. More than one bar rat had come away with a blackened eye and broken nose after making a joke loud enough for her to hear.

Seeing that she'd won the day, the taut skin of her dark face softened and she smiled.

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When she did, she felt like an actual fifteen year-old again, and not like the gruff old skipper she'd had to become. "Good nuff," she told them. "Da always said, 'Be right more than wrong.'"

"He was wit," Braka said.

Chim nodded in agreement.

"Mark you true," the little captain said. "Now that we has our course, get my ship made worthy and the crew chinned up. Aye?"

Chim and Braka snapped their heels together and saluted. "Aye aye, Cap'n!" they replied in unison before hustling off to the creaking hangar that stood at their backsides like a fossil from a bygone era.

Shana watched them go for a moment, and then walked toward a small shed that sat in the sand a short distance away. Scarred from decades of howling winds that blew sporadically through the desert without rhyme or reason, the hut's metal walls leaned dangerously inward, but they remained standing, and she knew that somehow they always would.

As she entered the hut she heard humming, and beneath that the sound of sand and wood rubbing together. A grin rose to her face, but then the overwhelming heat nearly burned it away. The hut was as hot as a wheatwork's oven, and instantly beads of sweat broke out across the coffee colored skin of her cheeks and arms.

"That you, Sissy?" a tiny voice asked.

Her grin widening, Shana stepped through the curtains that fell from the ceiling just inside the door. Once past it she had a clear view of the hut's interior, and it looked the same as it ever had. Layers of blankets were spread across half the room's sandy floor, and on them were piled pillows beyond number. The rest of the floor was uncovered, and that was where

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her little brother sat, wooden boats in each tiny hand. She could only imagine what epic battles he'd been playing out in the sand.

"Of course it's me, Sweets," she replied.

The young boy frowned. "I hates that name, and you knows it."

"I do," Shana replied as she settled onto the floor next to him. "But Sweets is much choicer than Swain."

Her brother thrust out his lower lip, his hands shook as he held onto his boats, and a small tear rolled past his nose. "Only Da calls me Sweets."

For a brief moment she wanted to reach out and clout the boy, both for his stubbornness and for his tears, but the thought left her as quickly as it had come, and instead she reached out and rubbed his bony little shoulder.

"You're true," she said. "Only Da can call you that. I'll know better nexty."

Like the sun rising out from a reaving cloud, Swain smiled. "You bring me any sparkles?"

"Not much glitter to be got," she replied as she leaned over to one side, "but, I did brings you this."

From a pocket in her billowy pants she pulled a toy. It was similar in size and shape to the wooden boats her brother held, but the new one was made of metal, and the paint on its hull was still shiny and fresh.

"Ow!" Swain said, bouncing up and down in the sand as his eyes caught sight of it. He tilted forward to grab it, but a coughing fit suddenly ripped through him, and he fell onto his side.

Shana scuttled over as quickly as she could and took hold of his shoulders. Powerful

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coughs shook his chest, and in them she could hear what sounded like wet paper tearing. Flecks of blood coated his lips.

"My breath," he said between coughs. "Get. . . me. . . my breath."

Even before the first word was out Shana was reaching into the pockets of his tattered linen pants. She felt metal against her fingers, and from his left pocket she pulled a small, brass object. Swain weakly grabbed for it and put it in his mouth. Small white wisps of vapor rose from the object, and after a few moments his coughing jag ended.

"Thanks, Sissy," he said, too drained to rise from the blankets. "I know. . . I know we don't have many breaths left. Sorry for having to use one now."

Shana shifted around and tucked pillows beneath his head. "No need for that. I'll get more, no worries. You my li'l bra, Swain. I may not be Da, but I'll do my true best to care for ya."

"Forever and all?" Swain asked, his tiny face slowly clearing up.

"Forever and all."

He smiled, but when he looked down at his empty hands his eyes went wide and he started struggling like an up-turned turtle. "My new boat, Sissy! I lost it!"

Shana shushed at him and picked the toy up from the ground. "It's right here."

Contentment spread across his face as his tiny fingers closed around the metal ship. As he brought it close to his chest, he closed his eyes and sighed.

"Now," Shana said as she got to her knees, "I has to sail. You be good?"

"Good and true, Sissy." Swain smiled, but the small blood droplets that freckled his face undid the expression's sweetness.

Shana pulled her shirt tail out, shifted forward, and used the material to wipe his face

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clean. Once that was done she held his head and watched him for a moment. His skin was cold against her own, and she knew that no matter how warm the hut got, it couldn't be warm enough.

Swain opened his eyes and looked up at her. She marveled at their light blue clarity, like an untroubled summer sky.

"I love you, Sissy," he said.

A sob nearly tore from her throat, but she held it in check and nodded. "And more love back to you, bra."

As he closed his eyes again, he said, "S'okay. I trig you call me Sweets. You're not Da, but you care for me like he did."

"I do as I can. If you needs for anything while I sail, ring the bell, and Momma May will come a'runnin'."

"All righty," Swain replied as he rolled over and curled up in a nest of blankets and pillows. He said something else, but his voice was little more than a whisper as he put his thumb in his mouth and began snoring.

Shana smiled, rose to her feet, and then turned toward the curtains and the door beyond. Minutes later she was inside the hangar and on her boat. When she looked down at the deck of her ship, the *Cloudstrike*, she flashed a wicked grin. The grin was echoed back at her by a dozen grizzled faces, faces she loved and had known since birth.

"Alright, ya flea-ridden sundogs," she said, propping a foot up on the railing that ran across the front of the bridge deck, "when last we sailed, twice our number crewed this boat, but that's the past. Today marks our future, so chin up and keep a salty eye for what's to come,

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aye? Yon distant *Skulper* might seem a light tussle, but she's got sparkles in her belly and it needs be ours, aye?!"

A chorus of "Ayes!" rang up at her.

"Then step witty, ya mongrels! Bosun, lash the hindmost. I want us swimming in spoils come supper!"

Chim grinned, and several golden teeth glinted in the sunlight. "Aye aye, Cap'n.!" He then turned to face the crew that stood behind him. "Taverd and Russa, stoke the plasma drive! Doog, you and Neven trig the wing stabilizers! Keiff, up to the crow with ya. As soon as the *Skulper* comes on screen, I better hear you bellow. The rest of ya, get to your stations and stand ready!"

Swarthy bodies moved across the deck of the *Cloudstrike*, and soon Shana could feel a surge of power thrum through the ship's hull. It was a sensation that was as familiar to her as her own breathing. The *Cloudstrike* was the only home she'd ever truly known.

Behind her Braka popped the wheelhouse hatch and said, "You tendin' the helm on this hit, Cap'n?"

She nodded firmly. "So long as I've two hands to me, Braka, they'll be on that wheel."

The older man nodded and cleared the hatchway. As Shana entered the wheelhouse, the chilled air sent a shiver through her. Moments later every panel and screen was activated, and a constellation of lights blinked across the helm control station.

"The drives are trim, Cap'n," Braka said as he read a display. "So say the stabilizers. Keiff's called a clear sky. We're answerin' all bells. *Cloudstrike* is fit and ready."

Nodding, she put her left hand on the large metal wheel that dominated the center of

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the room and reached forward with her right hand to press a red button. The ship's gravity lifts kicked into life with a powerful burst of sand and sound. When the horizontal stabilizers showed a clean lift, she grabbed the throttle and pushed it upward. Bells rang through the air, and the *Cloudstrike* sailed forward in a smooth rush.

Once the hangar was cleared, she had an unfettered view of the Saara Basin, but that wasn't saying much. All she could see were shifting dunes. Scarlet sand stretched out beneath blue-white skies, and there was little to break up the monotony of it. Even so, Shana felt a kinship with the desert that let her see it as few others could. Its sand pumped through her veins and surely as her father's blood.

Braka turned a knob next to the forward radar display. "Zepple had better been trim with us."

"He's been trim so far, yeah?"

"Aye, but there's ever a first time not, and I'd rather we not be it."

"For the shiny we flipped him, he'd better have steered us wit."

The older man sighed. "Mayhap so. . . Mayhap so."

The *Cloudstrike* sailed through the Basin for nearly an hour, its keel well above the dune line, before Shana's right hand pulled on the wheel and turned the ship to starboard. The sand began to thin as they left the Basin and entered Azazel Ridge, until eventually it was replaced by flat and seemingly endless hardscrabble dirt. Rocks and cacti littered the ground like a demon's garden.

"Cap'n, Keiff spies an active radar pinging to the north-northwest."

"Is it the *Skulper*?"

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Braka shook his head. "Not sure less we ping 'em back, but won't much else be grit enough to sail these wastes."

"Alright then. Let's go."

Pushing up on the helm, the *Cloudstrike* shifted its course slightly to port. Shana then grabbed a lever and pulled it down several inches. In response the ship dropped altitude until it was only a meter above the rushing ground.

"Cap'n, we're getting a friend-foe signal now. It's definitely the *Skulper*."

She grinned. "Get the crew set for boarding. I'll zoom her so fast she can't bring cannon to bear. Once we're locked to her I want everyone over the side and looking for sparkle. Her crew should be few, so no needs to rampage. Kill if we must, but otherwise truss 'em and lock 'em way."

"Aye aye, Cap'n." As he turned, alarm bells suddenly began to ring out. The older pirate glanced down with his one good eye, and a moment later he said, "Ah, no, this ain't well. Zepple either ain't trim, or someone else weren't trim with him, 'cause the *Skulper* got two gun skiffs flankin' her."

Cold water filled Shana's middle. "Have they spied us?"

Braka looked at Keiff's report and said, "Don't seem to. Not yet anyways. We gonna break off, Cap'n?"

Part of her wanted to nod and turn the ship around, but there was too much at stake to let a small thing like gunships quake her innards. "We still hit her, Braka. Too much juice been spent getting' here, and we needs the sparkles too much. 'Sides, ain't never seen a skiff that could tend with *Cloudstrike*. Not even two. So, go man a cannon. I want those gunnies downed

'fore they even know we're hittin'."

Braka saluted and was out of the wheelhouse in record time.

Gritting her teeth, Shana dropped her ship's altitude even lower. Cactus tips whapped at her keel so quickly that it almost sounded like rain, and she could feel it in the soles of her bare feet. Behind her was a wash of flying cactus milk and needles. Flying so low went against her instinct as a captain, but in the broken expanse of Azazel's Ridge it was the only way to avoid radar detection.

To her left was a screen that showed the *Skulper* and her escorts. They were several kilometers out, but the distance was narrowing quickly. Her left hand held a white-knuckled grip on the helm as she steered the ship down into their wake.

"Cap'n!" Braka said over the ship's intercom. "The cannon are ready!"

"Unseal the starboard gunports on my mark," she replied.

"Aye aye!"

Shana kept one eye on her passive sensors and the other on her flight screen. She didn't want to sneak up on the gunships only to end up hitting a boulder and flipping through the ridge like a flaming cartwheel. After several minutes of dodging debris and slipping through engine wash, the *Cloudstrike* was behind and below the gun skiff on the *Skulper's* port side, as close as she could get without triggering their proximity alarms.

"Fire in five!" she yelled as she grabbed the throttle and shoved it upward. The ship leapt beneath her in a savage flood of power. "Four!" She turned the helm to port and exited the skiff's wake. "Three!" She moved the altitude lever up, and the *Cloudstrike* rose higher into the air. "Two!" The skiff shifted its heading suddenly, but Shana's boat was already beside it,

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boxing it in. "One!" Four gunports opened along the *Cloudstrike's* starboard hull. "Fire!" The ship shuddered as four Gauss cannons shot heavy rounds across the short distance that separated the two ships. The skiff never had a chance. Seconds later it hit the ground in a shower of broken steel and fire.

The element of surprise now gone, Shana knew that getting the second skiff would require skill and a steady hand. She tried putting herself in the place of the skiff's captain, thinking what he might think, making her plans on what he'd think they would do. After a few seconds she had an idea.

With a grin she hit the afterburner button on the throttle, and like a rocket the *Cloudstrike* blasted forward until it was ahead of the *Skulper*. She then spun the helm to starboard with a hard yank, which brought them directly in front of the second skiff.

"All hands!" she said in the intercom that hung near her mouth. "Brace for impact!"

Skiffs were small ships, Shana knew, built mainly for speed and agility. Guns could be stowed along each side of them to add a bit of bite without limiting their movement, but one thing they couldn't add was armor. A heavy, ironclad skiff was a useless skiff. Even knowing that, she had a lump in her throat when she reached for the throttle.

"Da, if you're out there," she whispered, "let this work."

Without allowing herself more time to think about it, she pulled her throttle down as hard as she could and then hit the switch that triggered the ship's breaking flaps. Immediately she was shoved forward as the *Cloudstrike* radically reduced its speed. Behind them, the skiff turned hard to starboard as its captain saw what was happening, but by then it was too late. The skiff slammed against the rear of the *Cloudstrike* and was broken nearly in half by the

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impact. A shudder ran down her ship as they collided, and alarms rang out, but Shana saw that her hull integrity held firm. There'd be a dent or two to repair later, but they'd come out of the impact better than she'd thought they would.

Ahead of them, the *Skulper* was racing as fast as its engines would carry them, but she shook her head as she pushed the throttle upward again. The *Skulper* could have had a half day's head start and it still wouldn't have gotten away. Cargo transports were built for hauling freight, not for racing.

"Braka, get ready to board!" she said into the intercom.

"Aye, Cap'n"

She turned her radio on and then said, "*Skulper*, heave to!"

"Chaff you!" the *Skulper's* captain replied. "We've got guns aplenty on this boat!"

"We got you, *Skulper*! Both your escorts have been planted! Heave to and you *might* get to live."

A laugh rang across the comm channel. "Promises from a pirate! What a lark! The day I thinks you scags are trim is the day they put me under!"

"Mayhap you true, *Skulper*," Shana said. "Don't cry I didn't warn you."

She shut the radio off and refocused her eyes on her target. Her throbbing engines brought her to them in less than two minutes. The *Skulper* tried throwing them off by tacking back and forth, but the lumbering transport didn't have the agility to match the *Cloudstrike*. As soon as they were broadside to broadside, she hit a button that fired a series of magnetic grappling hooks. Once they established a lock, powerful winches reeled the carbon nanofiber ropes in. The two ships' hulls clanged together seconds later.

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"All hands, begin boarding!" she yelled before activating the powerful magnetic clamp that would keep both vessels secured to each other. Once the automated guidance systems were engaged, she was out of the wheelhouse and running down the ramp to the lower deck. Ahead of her she saw her crew as they scurried across the carbon ropes to the *Skulper*. Wind whipped past her furiously, but with a practiced jump she was on the ropes and running across them like a crazed acrobat. As her feet hit the foreign deck, she pulled the pistol that was holstered to her right hip.

She'd expected a bit of fighting to greet her crew, and she wasn't disappointed. Several well armed marines fended them off from a hatchway that led to the bridge. Her men tried to shake them loose, but their number just wasn't enough to pound them out.

Seeing no other choice, she took matters into her own petite hands and started running. The marines saw her coming, but her small size and youthful speed was too much for them, and moments later she let fly two sonic grenades through the hatch. She nearly went deaf when they detonated. The hull rang like church bells all around her. But, the marines also stopped firing, and her crew swarmed past her before she could rise to her feet.

Marines deeper in the ship tried to stand against them, but by then her crew had the momentum, and soon they'd secured the bridge. The *Skulper's* captain, when Shana finally saw him, wasn't nearly as defiant as he'd been earlier. Tight ropes around his hands, arms, and legs saw to that. He had no other crew on the bridge with him.

"You so grit," she said with a grin.

The captain looked at her with a scowl. "You talk big for one so wee."

Braka lashed out and smacked him hard across the face. "Mind your tone, scag."

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Shana approached the tied up captain and said, "Mayhap I'm wee, but I'm not the one trussed up like a winter goose. Now, be good and give us the keys to your hold. If I has to ask twice, Braka will hit you again, and not so gentle that time."

Looking up at the large man that towered over him, and then at the armed pirates that sneered through scarred faces, the captain shook his head and replied. "Sigma-Five-Epsilon."

"There now. Tweren't so hard, yeah? Braka, take the crew and secure all the sparkle we can carry. Dump the rest for the scavages."

"Aye aye, Cap'n" Braka said before gathering the men and exiting the bridge.

Once they were gone, she turned to the captain and said, "Now, my little goose, I know you also has a secret hidey hole up here, and all you need to open it is your voice. Open 'er up, and smartly, or I'll get really nasty."

"Don't be grit," he said. "That's meant for a hospital, it is! A children's hospital at that!"

Shana laughed and shook her head. "You think I'm grit? You got no med supplies writ on your manifest. I looked. The black market is where you've plotted these to go. You knows it, as do I, so don't cuff with me. You're no mercy saint. Now open it."

"You're a monster," the captain said.

In a rush Shana stood before him and had her pistol pressed again his right temple so hard that it dimpled his skin. His face was level with her own, and she could smell traces of soap on him, but beneath that was more than a little fear. "Mayhap so, scag, but I'm the one standin' here with the gun, so open the hold. Now."

The captain gritted his teeth hard, and his cheek muscles jumped, but when Shana pulled down the hammer on her pistol he said, "Red sky at night, sailor's delight."

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Behind her she could hear the sound of rushing air as a vacuum seal broke. When she turned she saw that a small panel had opened on the port wall, and in it was a box. The container was cold to the touch, but she was able to grab it and pull it into the light of the bridge without any trouble. Red medical symbols were painted on its sides, and they made Shana smile. When she opened it and saw what seemed like a hundred brass mouth pieces, each one identical to the one she'd pulled from her brother's pocket hours before, her smile widened.

"Ow, ain't you pretty," she said.

"I hope you get not one copper bolt for the lot of them," the captain said behind her.

Shana turned and fixed him with a cold stare. "These ain't for sale, scag. I have a love who needs these, so to me they're worth more than all the sparkle in the world."

The captain's expression softened for a moment as understanding dawned on him, but then he sneered and rolled his eyes. "If lies help your head rest at night, so be it."

A reply rose to her lips, but she knew her words would be wasted breath, so she kept her mouth closed as she walked over to him. He looked at her with eyes filled with venom, but as she raised her pistol he began to plead for his life. He fell silent when she struck the butt of her pistol against the side of his head. He was unconscious before his kneeling body hit the deck.

"Braka," she said into the comm wrapped around her left wrist. "Everything trig?"

"Blue skies all the way, Cap'n. Our hold is brimmin'. Want we should set charges as we leave?"

Shana thought about it, but she shook her head. "No. This old tug's no menace to us,

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and if they do drift to harbor any word they say about us will only get our reps up again. Leave her be."

"Aye aye, Cap'n. See you back on the *Cloudstrike* shortly."

Shana nodded as she lowered her wrist. After closing the medical supply box and tucking it under her left arm, she left the bridge of the *Skulper* and retraced her steps to her ship. With any luck, the winds back to their hangar would be fair, and she'd be home in time to read her brother a story before he fell asleep. Her dad had read to them both once upon a time, and she was only too happy to carry on doing it. Her brother meant more to her than anything else, and she knew that she would do anything for him, no apologies asked, and none given.

The End