

THE ARKSHIP ULYSSES

DELETED SCENE #2: BACK FROM EXILE

Abi crouched in an alcove at the end of Geller's Row waiting for the bunkees to return from work.

Day shift was at an end, and all around her the corridors of Geller's Row lay deserted and eerily silent after the bustle of the day. Only Abi lingered now, long after the last of the stalls had closed its shutters for the night and its owner had scuttled away with a nervous backward glance. She hid as she had for hours, in a space she had made for herself sandwiched between two market stalls. She waited for the bunkees to return.

Her head was freshly shaved for the occasion, her skin dirtied and her old duds reclaimed from Father Estavan and restained with soil. She appeared now as any bunkee might, tattoo exposed, belt knife absent, her expression one of grim determination. The only things she carried with her were the three credit chips that was standard pay for volunteer work and the evidence she had stolen from Hathaway's office, which she had carefully hidden in a secret pocket sown inside her dress. That and the clothes on her back were all she could take with her on this return trip to hell. She hoped it would be enough.

BOOM-boom BOOM-boom BOOM-boom

They were coming. The marching drum beat that accompanied the bunkees back from work came to Abi as it always did, a

primal two-beat thud of a sound, more felt than heard, that reverberated through the deck plate, tingled up her spine and had her breaking out in cold sweat.

This was it now. No turning back. She prayed to God that Father Estavan was right.

BOOM-boom BOOM-boom BOOM-boom

The bunkees were retuning.

The diaphragm at the end of the row slid open and suddenly they were in the corridor with her, marching past in their neatly arranged rows in time to that awful beat. Uniforms marched alongside them, urging the bunkees on with flashes of their nightsticks and the occasional hurled insult.

There were hundreds of them. They marched past Abi, concealed in her space between the market stalls, and as they passed she watched for her moment.

It wasn't long in coming. Abi had spent the better part of an hour that day loosening one of the corners of a deck plate near where she was hiding. It was a subtly done trick - invisible to look at and yet if one stepped on that corner in just the right place..

A young girl near the end of the line gave a sudden yelp of pain as her toes slammed into the edge of the deck plate. She stumbled into the bunkee next to her who in turn fell over as the bunkees behind them marched right into them. There was a moment of confused shuffling as the fragile line collapsed and the uniforms jumped in, nightsticks flashing as they ordered them back into line.

Abi slipped out of her hiding place and joined the rest of the bunkees as they continued to march on, oblivious to the commotion behind them. She didn't stop to look back. Though she heard the girl cry out in confusion as she saw her place in the line get taken from her and she heard the guard shouting at her to get up and be quiet, still she didn't dare look back to check. To be seen now was to lose.

She marched into the bunks alongside the other bunkees, her step locked with theirs and her expression fixed ahead of her. She prayed that no one would notice her.

Half a minute of marching, a quick head-count and the formal salute to the Captain and Abi found herself back inside the bunks once more, feeling giddy with relief as the gate to the ghetto fence was drawn shut behind her.

Hours of preparation, less than a minute of work, and Abi found herself back inside the very place she had spent the last seven years trying to escape. It was all so easy she felt like laughing.

Instead, she threw up.

The bunks, she was back.

Now what? she thought as she looked around her.

The bunks were no different from the last time she had been down here. These were the same streets she had known for years, the same crooked alleyways winding through the rows of beds. Here were the same dull expressions and listless routine. And yet, it seemed to her that she had never been here before in her life.

It was the smell that hit her the most. After seven years of living in the bunks, she'd almost forgotten what it was like to feel that stink for the first time. She had stopped noticing it in time, merging in with it until it had become just another part of her and she could no more separate it from herself than a planet could shed its own atmosphere.

No more.

Now that Abi was once again used to the scent of soap and sweet things, the smell that hit her as she walked down the main thoroughfare was almost to make her sick to her stomach.

She watched as the neat line of workers that had entered the bunks dissolved into an ambling crush of confused bodies. Some shuffled off towards their respective block to hand over their ration chips to their Capo. Others simply slumped down by the ghetto fence, their exhaustion so absolute they couldn't even afford the energy needed to lift their heads. Some fell asleep right there, their fists white as they clutched their miserly payment within. They would use that later to eat, Abi knew. If they were lucky they might hold onto it long enough to get some benefit from it. Then on the morrow, they would begin again.

It's me that's changed, Abi realised as she watched them with an odd sense of melancholy. Father Estavan had warned her about this, but it still didn't make it any easier to see.

Abi set off down the main thoroughfare. The steel frames of the bunks loomed around her - six levels high and countless rows deep. The light was dim, the noise loud. Eyes watched her

from the darkness. She could almost feel the questions that hovered unspoken in the fetid air.

"Who is that girl? She ain't no bunkee. Is she new? Why was there no signal for newbies?" And maybe - from one or two of the more sharp-eyed, "Is that the outcast?"

Abi too found herself full of questions. Looking at this place, this rotting slum on the edge of the ship, did the uniforms truly see it as the Priesthood said, as temporary accommodation for those who couldn't fit into the other parts of the overcrowded ship? Or did they see them as Abi had always feared they did: as a guilty secret which no one ever talked about except in scorn because they were all too embarrassed about it to do anything else. The very existence of this place was humanity's greatest shame. It made hypocrites of the uniforms and sinners of them all.

I don't belong here. Yet here she was all the same. And she had work to do.

Her feet carried her to her old bunk almost of their own volition. It was a route she had followed a thousand times before and Abi could have walked it in her sleep. At one point a young urchin tried to make a grab for Abi's wages but Abi had been waiting for just such an attempt and the girl left howling in pain and with nothing more for her troubles than a sprained wrist. Abi claimed the girl's knife as her own. They left her alone after that, though Abi could feel the eyes following her from the shadows and hear the questions that flittered through their minds.

Her old bunk was occupied, as Abi had known it would be. Ester, her old neighbour, lay on her bunk engraving a piece of scrap metal with a random interlocking design.

She leapt up, startled as Abi approached. "What you want?" she shrieked as she fumbled for her knife and held it trembling in Abi's direction. "This is my bunk - you hear? Get out! Out! I'll call the Capo, I will!"

"Ester, it's me! Calm down." Abi stood well back from the bunk, hands raised and expression earnest but still the old woman didn't relax.

"I paid for these lodgings good and proper - you just go ask the Twins if I 'ent."

Had Abi's old neighbour always looked so wretched? Ester couldn't have been older than 50 and yet her face was a horror show of blistered scabs and sallow skin. Long white hairs sprouted from her chin and her left eye was a cloudy blur of cataract that narrowed at her, squinting her hostility.

"So you just get now, you hear? There 'ent nothing for you 'ere."

Abi stepped forwards and wrestled the knife out of the old lady's grip as easily as if she were plucking a hair. Ester cried out in fear and pulled away. Abi followed her inside. "It's me, Ester!" she pressed as the old lady quailed away from her. "Abi! The exile!"

Ester looked at her as though at a complete stranger.

"The exile's dead," she announced through narrowed eyes.

"I'm not dead, Ester. See?" She flashed the woman her tattoo. There was no faking a mark like that. Sure, so maybe there were those on the ship who were crazy enough to get their own bunkee number tattooed as a kind of anti-fashion statement, but Abi was sure she would have spotted such as a fake the moment she saw it. A real bunkee number was a badly done thing, hacked into a bunkee's arm with all the grace of a man who didn't care what the end result looked like. Abi's own number was a faded, puckered thing, more brand than ink, that almost wasn't a number at all and yet marked her out as a bunkee more thoroughly than even the most efficient of tagging systems.

Ester's eyes went wide with awe. "It is you," she said, almost reverent. "You got fat."

"I'm looking for Dawn," Abi told her.

"Look at you all fed and pink-cheeked! Tits and ass just like them uniforms like 'em." She pinched the skin around Abi's waist and shook her head in disgust. "It's like you was never here."

"I was here." She fingered her scar.

"And now you're back, aye. I know how that goes."

"Where's Dawn?" she pressed.

"Not here. Obviously. And I don't right know why I should tell you anyway seeing as how you're just..."

"An exile?" A flick of Abi's wrist and Ester's knife was hovering over the old lady's throat, just millimetres from the skin. "Is that what you were going to say?"

"You wouldn't," Ester said, staring at the blade.

Abi had no time for this. The woman was frail and lighter than the blanket she lay upon. It was next to nothing to tumble her out of her bunk - even less to grab her by the arm and twist it up behind her. She thrust her over the edge of the catrun. "Wouldn't I?"

"I were only joking is all. I'm just a stupid old woman, I din't mean nought, I swear!"

Abi pushed her further over the edge. "Tell me where Dawn is or I'll call the uniforms. You remember what the New Girl did when Charity's lot were attacking her? She wasn't the only one with connections."

"U-uniforms?" Her eyes went wide and she quailed in Abi's grip. "But I ent done nothing.."

"Tell me!"

She was almost sobbing by the time Abi dragged her back inside her bunk and dumped her down on her filthy blanket. She curled herself up foetus-like, her injured arm clutched to her chest like a trophy as she glared up at Abi from the bed.

The commotion had aroused the interest of her neighbours but Abi knew they wouldn't interfere. Dawn had been the only one to ever unite these people together; without her galvanising influence most people wouldn't piss on the other even if they were on fire. They were only here to watch; fights like this were the closest thing to entertainment the bunks offered.

"Dawn..." Ester coughed wetly into her blanket. Abi was shocked when it came away red with blood. "Dawn went Capo on us, din't she?" she said weakly. "Took most of Charity's lot with her and then set up shop over in bunk seven."

"Dawn went Capo?" Abi blinked at what she'd just been told. She wasn't sure if it was that which shocked her the most or the fact that she'd moved to bunk seven to do it. Sure, so Dawn was a natural people-person, quick witted and ideally suited for the task of a Capo, but Abi's friend had always hated them with a passion. They were worse than uniforms to her, since they were fellow bunkees who sucked up to the uniforms just for a few extra perks and shit all over their common man to do it. And bunk seven - that was where only the most dangerous bunkees went. It was suicide even going near that place.

Ester cackled at Abi's amazement. "Nice to see even uniforms can be shocked."

"I'm no uniform."

"Exile then - even worse."

"What happened?" she asked.

"It were the Twins," Ester explained. "Once Charity were killed, they decided to make a play for her bunk - get her girls on their side and claim that block as theirs. Only problem were that Mouse - you remember her right?"

"Capo from the far-side block," Abi remembered. "Tiny thing."

"Aye that's the one. She decides she wants the same thing."

"So there was a turf war," Abi interpreted. It wasn't surprising. The Capos were always fighting with one another. The uniforms left them to it for the most part; as long as the bunkees were fighting each other and not them, most uniforms did nothing more than laugh at them and place wagers on the winner.

"Aye, a turf war," Ester agreed. Another cough and she pulled herself upright, making space for Abi on the bunk beside her. Whether it was because she liked telling stories or because she was just lonely, Abi couldn't tell, but she seemed to be warming to her slightly. "Then Dawn appears. She comes in here one day, all full o'anger like I never seen her, right. Well, we all assume it's 'cause o'what the Twins is doing, you know. So when she says she's gonna deal with this, we all throw in our support like. So she goes over and she rounds up most o'Charity's old lot - fights down Mona and takes the leadership for herself. No idea what she says to 'em but she gets them all wrapped up round those nimble fingers o'hers like she's weaving a cat's cradle." Ester grinned at her metaphor, flashing a row of grey, mossy teeth. "I don't know if those girls would die for her, but they'd certainly kill and that's all that really matters. Fine, we all think. Everyone likes Dawn.

"But then she comes over t'this block - takes out the Mouse and steals some of their best guys. And then she

leaves." She stared up at Abi from the bed, her breaths shallow and wet as she coughed another burst of blood. She waited to see what Abi would make of it.

Abi wasn't sure herself. "She left? Without any protection?"

"That's what I said, weren't it? Said she had no intention o'being no Capo and off she goes, taking all the best girls with her so that all that's left down here are folks like me. She's been fucking with the system ever since. No idea why - it works plenty fine - but now she's attacking the Capos, drawing 'em out and stealing their shit. Half the Capos are busy taking territory off each other, the others are hunkering down to protect themselves. Either way it's fucking war is what it is and with a bunch o'fucking vigilantes in the middle o'it. There's three Capos currently claiming us as being theirs and they all wants their payment, like."

Abi felt weak. What Ester was describing sounded so unlike the Dawn she knew that she wasn't sure what to make of it. And yet, she knew that if anyone could unite the bunkees together in the way that Ester had described, it was Dawn. Only she had the charisma, the knowhow and strength of character needed to get people working for her. And if she really had turned vigilante Capo, it was only because of Abi. Her betrayal - her abandonment of her friend - had pushed her over the edge.

As horrible as it was to admit, this was all her fault.

Ester seemed to be thinking much the same thing. "What you planning to do when you find her? Send your uniforms after her?"

"No."

"Shame. Might be the only time they might do some good. You planning to join up with 'em then?"

"No."

"Good. You'd get killed even trying it." Ester laughed at that, but the laugh quickly turned into another blood-spattered cough and the rest of her insult was left unsaid. "She won't come to you, you know. You broke that girl's heart when you turned traitor on her and Lord knows she's letting us all know how she feels about it."

"That's why I'm going to her," Abi explained. "I have to put this right." Kneeling, Abi pressed her three ration credits into Ester's hand. It was a pittance but down here, in the midst of a turf war, it could mean the difference between eating and going hungry. "For your help."

Ester stared at the coins as though expecting some new trick. "I don't need no charity," she grumbled, but she tucked the coins away all the same.

"See you around Ester."

"Whatever."

Abi pulled the curtain shut behind her.

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The girls jumped her before she'd even reached the end of the next row. There were five of them in total - most from Charity's old gang - and none of them looked happy to see her.

"It is her an'all," hirsute Mona said by way of greeting. She was skinnier than Abi remembered and missing a few more teeth, but she was just as ugly as ever. Her brow was a thick line of coarse black hairs. She scowled at Abi and her whole face seemed to divide itself in two. "There's the bitch that killed Charity."

"Cool it Mona," a young girl said as she circled Abi from the side. Abi recognised her as Tess, the youngest, and best looking of Charity's old gang, though 'best looking' wasn't saying much. Abi had always remembered the girl as a cute slip of a thing with a button nose and dimples when she smiled, but now she looked just as bad as the others. "We 'ent here to damage her none."

The knives in their grips were clean and sharp and each was wielded by an expert.

"Dawn'll be mighty pleased to see you alive," Mona told her. "Maybe she'll even let me do the honours o'killing you."

"Don't count on it," Tess cautioned in her strangely husky voice. "But mayhaps she'll let you play with the body after."

Abi could have done without the way they shoved her to the ground and wrestled her knife away from her and she certainly would have preferred not going through the ordeal of being tied up and frogmarched down to the far corner of the

bunks, where a secret passageway, guarded at all times by a pair of grim looking girls, led to bunk seven, but she was glad for the escort all the same. She would have hated to have to ask for directions.

"Scout said you was back with dayshift's lot but I almost couldn't believe it," Mona chatted as she shoved Abi along. "We had t'tail you for half a block 'fore we was sure it were you. But then we knew it had t'be you 'cause only a fucking exile would be stupid enough to go back to where she used to live."

"I wasn't trying to hide from you," Abi told her.

"That so?"

"I was looking for Dawn."

That made them laugh. "Not valuing your life, is it?"

"I have something to say to her."

"Well unless it's a writ from the Holy Captain Hissself with a full pardon and eight fucking bajillion yarin you might as well forget it. That girl ain't in no talking mood these days."

Tess grinned out the corner of Abi's eyes. "She's gonna fuck you up," she promised.

Abi tried not to let her terror show. It was true that she hadn't expected her friend to be a Capo - that did complicate things - but surely her friend would still listen to her? They had lived together for years and Dawn was a clever girl. Surely she would see the value in what Abi was bringing her.

Still Abi felt the same cold sweat breaking out over her and felt the same drum beat marching her down the thoroughfare.

BOOM-boom BOOM-boom BOOM-boom.

Dear Lord, give me strength.

It was true that Dawn wasn't exactly happy to see her. Word of Abi's return must have travelled ahead, for Abi's old bunkmate and erstwhile lover stood waiting at the end of the next row, her expression unreadable beneath her actress mask.

"It's true then," she said as Abi was dragged before her and forced down to her knees. "You're back."

"Yes," Abi confirmed. Her friend's was one of the few faces down here that didn't seem to have changed much over the last few months. Abi wasn't sure if that was because she knew Dawn so well or if it was simply that the life of a Capo had been good to her, but there was no doubting that this was the same face that had greeted her every morning for the last seven years. The face she had kissed and told she loved.

The face that was now red with rage.

"I'm sorry Dawn," she told her.

"Sorry," Dawn repeated. "Uniforms ran out o'uses for you, was it? Had to come crawling back?"

"I came here by choice."

"Sure you did. We all chose to be here, din't we lads?"

Everyone laughed. The group that had gathered to watch Abi's grilling was some 20 strong and growing by the second. It was a crowd that consisted of some of the very worst the

bunks had to offer. Big, fierce men with tempers like a blast furnace; hard, cold women with hearts like comet ice. All of them young, all of them killers with sanities that balanced on a knife edge. Dawn's territory certainly was vast, judging by this eclectic mixture of Capo leavings. Sparks with her cowed face giggled from the back of the crowd, her body trembling at the sight of Abi as though from some nervous energy bottled up inside her. The Gentleman, who had taught himself to read and the Mongrel, his half-insane rival who ran the drug trade stood nearby passing bets among themselves. Caster Wade who dealt with trafficking shared a joke with Lake McKenzie, a fierce thug of a man who despite having only one arm and being an outcast civilian had made himself one of the most feared men in the bunks thanks to his charming ability to tell people exactly what they wanted to hear. Hardened people all of them. Thugs, all of them. They pressed in around Abi, their expressions hungry.

Abi swallowed. "Quite a team you've assembled here."

"You're damn right it is."

"Never knew playing Capo was your thing."

"I 'ent no Capo."

"You certainly look like one."

Dawn backhanded Abi, her hand flicking out to knock her aside as casually as if she were brushing lint off her dress. "I 'ent no Capo! You hear me? Capos work for the uniforms. They round up volunteers and keep everyone well behaved." She stabbed her chest with a finger. "I fuck Capos up the arse!"

The crowd roared with agreement and Dawn turned to them, grinning her arms outstretched to receive their accolades, her smile a feral slice of teeth cut into her face.

"You hear this?" she mocked. "You hear what I've made here. They call me the Righteous Dawn."

Abi smirked. "Sure, 'cause that's not pretentious at all, is it?"

Dawn laughed - "Fuck you" - and suddenly she attacked.

Abi had no time to react. One moment she was standing upright, the next she was back-peddling as Dawn came flying at her, her fist a blur in the air. Abi tripped and fell, the air knocking out of her as she slammed into the ground. She rolled away with the hit and quickly found her feet. She wiped the blood from her lip.

The crowd encircled them, pressing into their backs as they ringed one another.

"You've no idea how much I've wanted to do this..." Dawn snarled as her knife flicked into her hand.

Abi squared off. "Then do it already."

They fought. Dawn came at Abi in a blur of swinging limbs and fierce screams. Twice they wrestled one another to the ground, trading blows while they untangled themselves and jumped back to their feet. Twice they came at one another again. Dawn swung, Abi dodged. Abi kicked, Dawn danced out of the way. There was no elegance to the fighting: this was primal and real, a show of brute force where only speed and strength counted.

Abi was easily the stronger of the two fighters, taller and surer of foot than her malnourished opponent but Dawn was crafty, her fighting style shaped by years of street fighting, getting by with the skin of her teeth and turning impossible situations in her favour.

It was all so inevitable from the first. The third time Abi lashed at her, Dawn ducked, spinning inside Abi's reach, her hands snapping out to grab Abi's wrist.

She pulled down sharply - something clicked in Abi's shoulder - and the next thing she knew she was down on her back, her arm numb and useless, blood streaming from her nose where Dawn had headbutted.

Dawn straddled Abi's chest, her knife pressed to her throat.

"I'm going to fucking enjoy this," she hissed.

Abi looked back at her friend and suddenly, all the fight left her. She saw her friend now as she had all those years ago in a situation much like this. Only back then it had been a uniform attacking her and Dawn who had found her and taken her to safety. She had been covered in the blood of her mother, crying so hard she thought she'd never be able to stop and yet her friend had shown her mercy where none other had. She had saved her.

Surely, that mercy was still in her.

Tilting her neck back to better expose her throat, Abi looked up at her friend of all those years and told her, "Go

on then. Do it." A drop of blood trickled down her neck.

"Please."

Dawn's resolve seemed to flicker. For a moment, her mask slipped, and Abi glimpsed the pain lurking behind that demonic bile. Then she covered it up, a mocking coyness taking its place so quickly that Abi was almost sure she'd never seen it at all. "What's the matter, little Abi?" she mocked in a sing-song voice. "Life on the outside not as peachy as you thought it would be?"

Abi swallowed and felt the pressure on the knife increase. "I said I'd come back for you. I have."

"Aye. A right woman of your word, ain't you? Said you'd get me out too if I recalled."

"And I intend to."

"Oh, intend to is it? How very nice. Only problem is, there's a ghetto fence between us and the outside world and I don't see no uniform on your back."

"There are other ways. Other places for us. Not the bunks, not the uniforms. A new way. Let me show you." Abi gestured at the watching crowd. "You want it too, or else you wouldn't have built all this. A break from the old ways. A fresh start."

"Big words," Dawn said, bored. "Words don't get you fed."

"Fuck her up Dawn!" someone from the crowd called out.

"Yeah, make that fucking exile pay!"

"I'm doing it already!" Dawn called back to them, and yet, Abi wasn't so sure she was. It was always hard to tell

with Dawn - she was so good at concealing her true feelings - but Abi had spent a lot of time among the nobles lately, and if anyone knew how to hide their true feelings it was them. Though she still smiled and laughed and apparently switched emotions like a toddler with a TV remote but in all of them Abi thought she saw the same underlying bitterness - deep rooted and oh, so painful.

It was to that side of her that Abi said, "I'm sorry Dawn," and watched the last of her resolve fade away from her.

Dawn rolled off her and pocketed her knife with a sniff. She took in the girls gathered around her with an impassive sweep of her hands. "You may have noticed I've got a pretty sweet thing going on here. Your brother and I. Vanyan, Charity's gang. Some from the Twins even - stolen out under their noses. We've made names for ourselves and what's more we did it without you and your outcast help. We don't need the uniforms, we don't need the New Girl and we certainly don't need you. Looks like it weren't so special after all."

"So kill me," Abi told her. She was sure now that she had the right of things. "You've got the knife."

A final snarl. A wave of the hands. "Ah, you 'ent worth it."

"Let me do it then!" Mona said, stepping forward but Dawn stepped in front of her pushing her down.

"No! She's my prisoner, you got me? She's mine t'deal with!"

"But she killed Charity!"

"Shut up!"

Abi seemed to realise it at the same moment as the rest of them: Abi wasn't going to die today. There was a sudden deflating of tension from the crowd as the realisation rippled around them and they looked to one another muttering among themselves.

Dawn glared at them all until a grudging silence fell over them. Still the tension remained.

Doubt flickered in her friend's eyes as she saw the same thing Abi did. She was losing the respect of her men and yet to kill Abi... She turned back and Abi nodded at her, her words as earnest as she could make them. "I'm here now Dawn. I'm back and I have something important to say. Will you listen? It's for all of you."

Would she take the bait? She had no reason to, Abi knew and she knew it better than any. Abi saw her old friend fingering the knife around her waist. She saw the look of doubt flickering in her eyes, the crowd that craned to see what was going on. The growing muttering. Dawn had always been an actress by nature, but Abi had learned to see through her mood.

Right now, though, her face was as unreadable as Abi had ever seen it, a blank slate of dull nerves that stared at Abi, eyes narrowed, as though at a particularly messy patch of dirt one needs to clean up but really can't be bothered to.

Abi pressed. "I know you're angry with me..."

"Angry?" Dawn laughed bitterly. "Girl there ain't a fucking word for how I feel 'bout you. All you ever gave to me with your learning and your fucking exile wiles and what did it mean? Nothing. You got me so convinced about that New Girl and how special she was. Turned out she was just a fucking plaything for the Captain to cuddle with. Great for her. Nought to us. I gave up everything for that - scarified it all just for the chance it might get us freedom. And then what do you do?" She shook her head in disgust. "No, I 'ent angry with you, Abs. I fucking hate you. And I will be so pleased to see you finally dead."

She turned to the others and her voice cracked like a whip. "Tie her up," she commanded. "Her brother can deal with her when he gets back." Her smile was almost feral as she took Abi in and the crowd scrabbled to do her bidding. "I'd imagine they got a lot o' catching up t'do an'all."