

## THE ARKSHIP ULYSSES

## DELETED SCENE #4: UNDERTAKINGS

The fields of the summer deck burned.

For almost half an hour, the rows of corn had crackled with flame. Food for half the ship burned there, hundreds of acres of prime-grown crops standing blackened and wilted, ends bearded with fire as flames leapt from stalk to stalk and belched thick coils of smoke in their wake. The corn pods crackled as they burst open. The air shimmered with heat.

It was beautiful.

Fire spread quickly in the semi-dry conditions of summer and with the sprinklers disabled and the uniforms incapacitated, there was nothing to stop those hungry flames as they descended upon the summer fields with all the biblical justice of a plague of locusts.

Abi stood at the edge of the field, handkerchief pressed over her mouth to block out the worst of the smoke as she stared transfixed at the destruction they had wrought. Hard to believe that all of this had been caused by just eight bunkees in less than an hour.

Hard to believe how easy it had been. Together, they had volunteered with the rest of the bunkees. They had marched down to the fields along with several hundred others and lined up ready to be taken out into the fields. A signal from Abi - a diversion from Vanyan - and they'd taken out the guards in

less than a minute and turned their guns on the crew. The other bunkees they had let free.

Phosphorus and finebrew had seen to the rest.

"Burn it down!" Abi had cried as her girls drenched the ground with finebrew. "Burn it all to the ground!" They ran down the rows, drizzling finebrew in their wake. The corn was planted in straight rows with less than half a metre between them. Abi waited in the changing area as Sparks knelt before the corn, uncorked her precious phosphorus and left it exposed to the air.

It caught with a whoosh and a cry of, "No!" from one of the captured workers. Abi remembered laughing as the flames caught.

It had almost been too easy.

"They won't forgive us for this," said Brent as he joined Abi at the fire's edge. He had pulled on a uniform from one of the dead guards and was struggling to button up the sash. The uniform had been made for a man much larger than Brent and a good few centimetres shorter, but he didn't seem to notice how badly it fit as he stared out at the fire before him. "This here is starvation for half the crew."

"Fuck 'em," Abi replied. "They can just go hungry like the rest of us."

Nearby, she could just make out the workers they had captured during their raid. Uniforms. At Abi's command they had been stripped naked, bound up in rope and held at gun point. Some had resisted, but a few warning shots had put a

stop to any silliness. They sat now in a sullen huddle against the far wall, staring miserably out at the fire. One of them was crying, she saw, praying to God in a loud moaning voice to, "Save me, please save me, I didn't do nothing Lord, please save me..."

It was pitiful. Abi wanted nothing more than to take out every last one of them and be done with the whole thing, but she knew that if they were to have any hope of getting out of here alive, those hostages were their only chance.

Brent followed her gaze. "They won't help us none," he declared. "We should just kill 'em."

"We need them alive."

"What for?" Brent shook his head. "We both know we're not going to survive this one."

"Too late to back out now if you're getting second thoughts."

"Who said nought about backing out?" He was stung by the comment. "I knew what I were getting into when I signed up fer this. This here is justice, I know that. But justice comes with a price and I reckon you gotta be prepared to pay it."

That much, at least was true. Abi felt for her brother's hand in the darkness beside her and gave it a light squeeze. "I'm glad you're here," she told him.

He laughed, embarrassed. "Mayhaps Dawn was the smart one. She at least might live long enough to see another day. Though not too long, I'm thinking. They're going to come down hard on us for this."

"We got out, Brent. On our own terms. That has to count for something."

"Aye, I guess it does at that."

They lapsed into silence.

Nearby, Abi could see Sparks standing as close to the fire as it was possible to get without getting burned. She was coughing badly but still hadn't moved from the moment she started the blaze. For the first time since Abi had known her, the young pyromaniac wasn't giggling or trembling with pent up energy. Her face was poised on the brink of what looked like a religious epiphany as she watched the fire burn. It made her look older, somehow. Ethereal.

Vanyan paced the rows beside her, his gun held high as he watched the doors for signs of pursuit. They had locked down the mainframe and Abi had used the information she commandeered from Commander Hathaway's office to scramble the codes, but even so, uniforms were a tricky bunch and he wasn't taking any chances when it came to his new lover.

"All's clear," he called out as he reached the end of the row. He looked surprised to be admitting it. "No sign of uniforms at all, though I know they're massing outside the doors."

"Thank you Vanyan," she said, soberly. She didn't even know why he was bothering. Brent was right: none of them were getting out of this alive, but if it made Vanyan happy to act as her personal bodyguard, she wasn't about to stop him.

"Appen we should get to moving out, though, quick like. I hope you have a get-out plan."

"In a minute, Vanyan," she promised. "Come on," she told Brent as she turned away from the fire. "Let's go see these hostages of ours."

There were five hostages in total and they were all of them naked. Agricultural workers, these had been the first to throw their tools down the moment the bunkees rebelled. They had watched the guards being taken out with nothing more than a stricken expression and a few gabbled words that they not suffer the same fate.

It was pitiful.

Despite their lack of uniform, Abi didn't need any insignia to tell which one was in charge. Their leader was a craggy man with a head of salt and pepper hair and a pair of the most piercing blue eyes she had ever seen. If he was self-conscious about being held naked at gun point, he hid it remarkably well. He looked up at Abi as she approached and spat on the ground beside him.

"You're her, ain't you?" he said in a remarkably low tongue for one so high born. "You did this."

"I did."

He snorted. "Figured. I told Menzies you bunkees weren't like to get organised on your ownsome but he wouldn't believe me."

"A-actually," stammered a pinch-faced man next to him that Abi assumed must be Menzies. "I-I just pointed out that

C-commander Hathaway had been saying we shouldn't use bunkees in the fields and h-how ironic it w-was that..."

The other man spoke over him. "You any idea how much you've fucked us over here little girl?"

"I do."

"I don't s'pose it'd help none if I pointed out that we're all like t'suffer for this?"

"Suffering is the point," Abi informed him.

"Aye," he said miserably. "I figured that an'all."

"What do you want doing with 'em?" Tess asked Abi as she scowled at the two men and waved her gun at them.

Abi didn't answer straight away. "Crew manifest lists the leader down here being a Commander Gull-Fosset," she told the craggy-faced man. "You him?"

"I am," he admitted. He looked more than a little surprised to hear that a bunkee could read but Abi appreciated his honesty.

"And these other men?"

Gull-Fosset shrugged. "They're nobodies. Non-coms. You killed all t'other officers."

"Liar," said Abi.

The uniform cried out as Vanyan struck him with the butt of his gun. He slumped over sideways into Menzies's lap, a tear of blood weeping from his forehead. Tess laughed as Menzies's stared down at his commanding officer, horrified and then blinked up at Abi. "What do you want with us?" he gasped.

"Want?" She laughed at the very idea of it. "What do we want, guys?"

"Dead uniforms," said Vanyan.

"Justice," said Tess.

"Anarchy," said Brent.

Abi nodded at the words. "All of that," she told the snivelling Menzies. "Simple really." No high-flung morals for her, or hypocrisy shielded by a 3,000 year old book. Right now, Abi's ambitions were simple: to cause as much devastation as possible before the uniforms put an end to it. They were trapped here in this burning prison they had made for themselves with no way out and only a handful of hostages to use as a shield.

But Abi's life wasn't what was important. It was the message that mattered. The message that, though a single bunkee was a wretched thing good for nothing but naval gazing and suffering, if you organised him and united him behind an idea, he was a force of nature, as uncontainable as a forest fire and just as dangerous.

Push a bunkee and he pushes right back. They would be pushed around no longer.

"We want an end to you and all the rest of you fucking uniforms," she told him and the others muttered their agreement. "We want a cleansing through fire. A rebirth from the ashes of the old."

Sparks giggled at the imagery.

The hostages just stared up at Abi as though she were mad. Perhaps she was. Even the praying man had fallen silent now.

To a man, they knew they were beaten.

"Him," Abi said, pointing at the craggy officer passed out in Menzies's lap. "And the one who looks like his face has been crushed in a vice. They're the highest ranking. The others won't be needed."

"Got it," said Brent stepping forwards.

Abi turned away as the bullets sounded out behind her. She watched the smoke-laden horizon, the legacy of her night's work. Even with the extractor fans turned on full, it was getting hard to breath in here now and Abi coughed in the ash-filled air. From horizon to horizon the world had been transformed in the last few minutes. It had been cast into stark relief. Red and yellow, flame and smoke, brown soil and black destruction and everywhere a dearth of green.

So beautiful, Abi thought as she watched the fields burn. And for the first time in as long as she could remember, Abigail Leighton smiled.