

AFRO PUFFS ARE THE ANTENNAE OF THE UNIVERSE

Chapter 1: Space...

One day you'll be interviewed, her subconscious riffed, about what it's like being Desiree Quicho, and you'll try to be this massively erudite Guatemalan Queen of philosophy and measured evaluation, except that won't feel right. Por ejemplo, you've successfully infiltrated a moon base under disguise, stolen top-secret machinery, went back to retrieve an errant crew member who provided the needed distraction for you to load said equipment on board your shuttle, and now find yourself wholly unable to wax philosophical about one person's role in assuring a decent, just world for all, because, in reality, saving the world involves a shitload of footwork.

As in running.

Desiree Quicho shouted, "Move your ass!" once and only once. Anyone unclear on the concept got the receding view of her backside. She whipped hell to get to the shuttle's quickly descending ramp. Two others followed her inside: Yvonne, who'd said there was no way she was letting Desiree go back out there alone, and Neon, who'd improvised a daring distraction requiring Desiree to come back for her.

Desiree hit the comm on her shoulder despite being certain their engineer had watched for them: "Keita, we're in."

The soft rumble of engines would kick, they'd ascend and spin, and the Aerie, commanded by Captain Desiree Quicho, would be off this bedamned moon base for good.

Didn't matter that there were ten enraged merc troopers training weapons on the ship whom, if lucky, might get maybe three or four ineffectual shots off before the ship's pulse engine flashed and ten enraged merc troopers were all left, hopefully, with mercticular cancer.

Unless—and granted—the ship sat long enough for enraged mercs to wheel out a weapon large enough to do damage.

Which both the ship and the mercs did.

"Keita? We're in."

"I know-," came back. Bit of attitude. Shade frantic. "In engineering."

Sons of— Captain Quicho turned to Yvonne DeCarlo Paul, Jill of all trades, former military, and second elder statesperson of the team. "Might need you to—"

"On it." Yvonne grabbed a large rifle-ish gun and palmed a port open. Neon ran to the pilot room. Two shots took out a gunner and his weapon, then Yvonne picked equipment targets she hoped would explode in the huge bay. Felt apropos to the moment.

Desiree hoofed it to engineering.

"Keita, what—Ooh."

Body on the floor, relatively new recruit. "Another one?" said Desiree. "Jesus! Thoom?"

"Thoom," said Keita "Flowerpot" LaFleur, not really knowing but comfortable in her bet that the miscreant organization that was an annoying thorn in so many's hides was behind yet another sleeper agent in their midst. Her frazzled hair, pulled into two puffs, matched her bad mood. Even the prematurely-yet-entirely-natural grey streak that crinolined from right temple to crown stood exasperatedly from her head in wispy locks. She tossed a very heavy hex wrench to Desiree. "He misaligned a coupling just enough for a misfire. Finish tightening that cover plate." Pieces of a vibrant, colorful headscarf peeked very much out of place from beneath the massive hex bolt needing

tightening. The captain had learned not to ask regarding such things. She tightened while Keita managed controls, her long, brown, engineer fingers seeming to have minds of their own.

“Who’s in the pilot room?” Keita asked Quicho.

“Neon.”

Neon liked quick takeoffs. Keita hit the comm. “Power gradually till we clear these tunnels.” The shuttle jerked upward. Into the comm: “Bit more gradually, gorgeous.” The clank of the wrench signaled Desiree’s departure.

Neon liked Keita. In the thousands of unimaginative catcalls she’d gotten in her life, not one had ever tried “Gorgeous” with the inflection Keita shined on it. She throttled back as advised and guided the hovering shuttle expertly through the egress tunnel. Ahead, the exit door remained closed. Behind, a huge pressure door dropped stealthily from the ceiling to the floor.

Desiree sprinted onto the bridge.

“They want us to blast it,” Neon said as the two exchanged positions. Neon was a good pilot but very few people had the piloting skills of the springy haired, frowning woman whose fingers flashed over controls.

“Hey, their money. Hit it four corners then dead center.”

“Got it.”

Four impact points quickly mangled the exit door’s integrity. The shot dead center blew it outward; the shitty gravity of the moon did the rest, yoinking the battered metal past the ship lurking for them on the other side just as the Aerie shot out of the egress tube and over the dry skin of Earth’s lonely satellite.

Quicho put the shuttle into a screaming parabola around the enemy vessel. “Fire everything!”

The Aerie unleashed focused energy and metal projectile hell at the little ship, coming around fully to face, upon completion, a ship that had not one scratch on it. Captain Quicho broadcast to it: “Next volley might not be so precisely aimed.”

Thrusters fired on the smaller ship, forcing it surfaceward.

“Lovely,” said the captain.

The Aerie zipped Earthward. The artificial gravity gave out moments later. “Keita,” comme’d the captain.

“Shit, fuck and damn-,” came back from the harried woman. There were times to wonder how Keita LaFleur, former NASA aerospace engineer and unapologetically amazing woman with sweet afro puffs, found herself on a hijacking mission to a secret moon base full of Japanese mercenaries, then there were times to fix a ship whose alien technology didn’t always play nice with its human cousins. This was the latter. She found she preferred the latter.