

AGE OF RUIN

FROM THE ASHES

A COLLECTION OF SHORT SCIENCE
FICTION STORIES SET AGAINST THE BACKDROP
OF EPIC, GALAXY-SPANNING CONFLICT

Edited by Myles Poland

**A million years have come and gone
since Man first fled the place of his birth.**

**Countless fiefdoms, nations, and empires,
occupied by unfathomable varieties of life
have crept across the vastness of space.**

**Each of them conquering, rising, waning and collapsing,
as if this cycle of ruination were the heartbeat of the great void.**

Man finds himself once again in the shattered ruins among the stars.

The ashes miserable, yet somehow familiar to him.

To live is to struggle. To fight is to truly live.

**Even against the horrors beyond the comprehension
of Man, where he can fight, he can hope.**

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FOREWORD

“Don't give money to people who hate you.” That bit of sage advice comes from Dragon Award-winning science fiction author and blogger Brian Niemeier, and he's published a book titled with the same recommendation. It's advice that's blatantly, even insultingly obvious but that takes cyclopean effort to actually execute. How often have you heard of a business (it doesn't really matter what type) publicly embrace actions and values which you detest? If you're someone who takes even the idea of morality seriously, then there's no shortage of massive conglomerates against which to direct your ire. But when Disney gave its full-throated support to Florida teachers instructing their students in sodomy, did you cancel your Disney+ subscription? How about when Netflix put “Cuties,” a film glorifying pedophilia on its platform? Did you cancel your account? At time of writing, Amazon has erupted with scandals of worker abuse, interfering with their employees' right to organize, and offering to pay their workers to cross state lines to have their children assassinated in the womb. Do you still order from Amazon? I'd be lying to you if I said I don't.

A total break from the increasingly converged economy is extremely difficult, if not outright impossible. After all, even payment processors and banks happily affirm that men in wigs are really women. But we can start small. We can, at the very least, kick these cretins out of the entertainment we choose to consume.

Within the ever-shrinking sphere of sanity, Warhammer 40,000 (and its fantasy counterpart to a lesser extent) is broadly considered acceptable as an entertainment franchise, featuring miniature wargames, video games, novels, audio dramas, and short films set in a longstanding, thematically rich universe oozing with the type of epic battles and galactic machinations that set the imagination ablaze and affirm the values of duty, sacrifice, and loyalty to a cause greater than oneself. Upon closer inspection, however, we find that the creators and curators of this universe enthusiastically affirm the values we detest. Take a peek at any Black Library author's Twitter bio and see how many of them prominently list their preferred pronouns (it's all of them). See which causes they vocally support.

I know what you're thinking. “That's just a few authors! A few bad opinions isn't enough to deter my enjoyment of these stories!” But you'd be wrong. Take a look at the turgid public statements made by Games Workshop. Repeated diatribes insisting you get on board with their insane progressive politics, or remove yourself from the hobby, topped off with a fond farewell: “You will not be missed.” Warhammer 40,000 is, at its core, a parody of traditional values. If they've ever managed to create anything affirming those values, it was by total accident, or by fans who take the premise at face value.

It was at that point that I left the Warhammer 40,000 fandom for good. I wasn't welcome and I didn't want to be part of this awful scene anymore. I didn't want to be in a hobby lorded over by a company with a long history of shallow writing, ridiculous plot lines, abusive executives, wildly over-priced models, and a business strategy that treated customers like cattle to be milked then discarded. If you're reading this, chances are you're a lot like I was. You don't want to support a company that hates you and everyone like you, but you still have a strong desire for the kinds of stories that enthralled you, that you could seemingly only find published by Games Workshop.

Well, friend, if that sounds like you, you're in luck. In what I hope is the first of many entries into the AGE OF RUIN universe, we boldly affirm the values of justice, decisive action, and love of your own people. We explore the themes of what a star-spanning civilization looks like when they become decrepit and begin to rot from the inside out. We tell tales of mighty heroes, both victorious and tragic. Of ordinary individuals navigating the birth and collapse of empires. Of alien and irreconcilable civilizations clashing in epic battles set against a backdrop of distant stars.

I thank you sincerely, dear reader, for picking up this book, and I pray you enjoy these stories as much as I did. And I look forward to you joining us for all of the stories yet to come.

The Editor,
Myles Poland

THE STAR PROPHET

Laima Sedula

“Congratulations, Sy. You have reached the destination.” Sy blinked away the valediction. He could scarce contain his excitement as the hatch of the capsule began to hiss open. Microdoses of mood stabilizers brought him to a more settled state just in time to see the blindingly-blue sky and the lush green of a forest clearing. The harness holding him to the capsule’s cradle disengaged. He felt the release of muscle stiffeners and relaxants in just the right ratios to allow him to stand and step out onto the soil of BZY-39234-3.

“Lexi, give me the weather forecast for the exact coordinates,” Sy said. The chirping of birds answered him. He sighed. *I’m right by the capsule and no connection already...* Insects buzzed around. He felt bare without Lexi’s presence. *I knew this would happen. I’ve got my training. I’m prepared.* At least his internal apotheker was intact, for which he was ever-so-grateful. His breathing slowed as the cortisol-depressor did its work. The internal chronometer told Sy it was just past noon, local time. He sneezed. Yellow pollen was settling on his grey overalls. The rest of the day he dedicated to setting up — he had sensors to engage, analyzers to calibrate, equipment to sort, immunizations to self-administer. He hoped the insects would not get too annoying.

“Good morning, Sy! Are you heading off on your mission today?”

“Yes, Lexi. I’m going to follow the beacon left by the last outreachers.”

“Right on! On the behalf of the Conglomerate, good luck.”

Sy climbed out of the capsule where he had slept. He had intended to enjoy the cool spring night and camp, but the insects were too much. Screw those bugs! I’m in nature in the flesh, I should be savoring it all! Mood stabilizers did their work and he relaxed. All this anxiety was terrible for his synapses. *I’ll need a new apotheker installed when I get back.* So preoccupied was Sy with his thoughts that he failed to notice the perimeter alert for at least five seconds. Panic staked him to the spot at the mouth of the capsule. Insects buzzed. A deer bounded past, knocking over a carefully-placed mass spectrometer. He swore.

The perimeter alert beeped again. This time, a group of men stepped out into the clearing. They were tall, with the sort of physiques only the best pheno-therapy could buy. Sy had expected the local savages — for that was what they were — to be in leathers and furs, but they wore loose-fitting coats and trousers in earthy tones. They also wore what looked like primitive ceramic chest plates and carried ancient-looking laser rifles with solar battery packs. Sy realized he was staring open-mouthed and shut it with a click of teeth.

The man in front lowered his rifle and stepped forward. He had long blond hair and a braided red beard. The eyes beneath his heavy brow were blue. A few seconds passed before Sy realized the man was speaking. The translator module kicked in.

“I am North, chief of the Koshek tribe,” the man said. “This is my warband. You are the new Star Prophet?” Whatever words Sy had expected from the hulking fellow, these were not it.

“I... I am an outreachers,” he squealed, the translator module shaping his thoughts into strange words. He looked up at the beard. “From the Six-Star Conglomerate. This planet is now at Restriction Level 4.” *Idiot, those words mean nothing to him!* To his surprise, the leader of the savages simply nodded.

“You are welcome at our fires, Star Prophet. We will hear your tale.”

The journey to the fires of the Koshek tribe took a little more than a day on horseback. Sy felt compelled to ride rather than float along inside his capsule that was following the band on remote pilot. The saddle sores made him regret the compulsion. As he rode, he wondered at the nonchalance the savages showed towards this entire situation. They were laughing amongst themselves as a dark-haired man was telling a story. The translator module struggled to understand, but it had something to do with a horse and two dogs.

I expected... Well, I'm not sure what I expected. More awe, maybe? More fear? Sy thought back on his outreach training. *No, it's good they're not scared.* The forest receded, giving way to a rolling plain. Sy noticed they were following an old, paved road. He also noticed a structure in the middle distance that looked like a long-abandoned comms tower, of all things. *Well, this is a regressed world,* he thought, recalling his supervisor's words. "The mission of the outreach programme is uplifting savage branches of humxn-kind. The role of the outreach is to establish and maintain contact with reliable indigenes in a regressed world and prime them to accept the bounty of the Conglomerate. Generations may pass before they are ready to internalize our values, but the outreach has the profound task of planting the first seeds."

Sy knew he was not the first outreach to be sent to this particular world. BZY-39234-3 had been on the to-civilize list for hundreds of years. He was glad to see his predecessors had done some work, like making the savages comfortable around technology.

"Another half-day's ride, Star Prophet," spoke North. Startled out of his musings, Sy nodded. He stared out at the grassland around him, broken up by patches of woodland here and there. The sky was enormous — overwhelmingly so. The apotheke's chemicals overcame a growing sense of panic and Sy settled into his saddle.

He saw North looking at him with a wry expression on the savage's weathered face. "You flew the endless black, and yet this is too big for you! Ironic, isn't it?" *Ironic? Who taught these people about irony?*

Sy shook off his irritation. "Your ancestors must have flown the endless black once, too. What are the tales you tell of your arrival?"

"Arrival?" North raised an eyebrow. The gesture seemed strangely refined for such a brute. "We have always been here, Star Prophet."

I very much doubt it. Sy smirked to himself, glad his initial perception of the regression of the locals was correct. *Even the most severe regressions recall their first landing. These don't even do that!*

The camp of the Koshek tribe was a spiral of yurts on a rise above a river. Sy judged the number of inhabitants to be about three hundred. At least half were children. He stared — he had never seen an immature humxn in the flesh. They were running about, yelling and screaming, throwing balls or hitting each other with sticks. The noise! The smell! Sy sighed in relief as sense-dampeners did their work.

People gathered about as the band wove its way to the centre of the camp, many staring and pointing at the floating capsule. Once more, Sy found himself surprised — no ragged furs or tattered leather here, just colorful, well-made, carefully embroidered garb. At the center of the camp was an ancient stone amphitheater. It was not very large, fitting perhaps a thousand, but even so, Sy wondered who had built the structure. *Not these people, surely. They're just squatting on it.*

The band dismounted, Sy followed suit. “You may set your... egg... there,” North said, pointing at the main space of the amphitheatre. The crowd was gathering tight. Children poked their heads out from between the adults, their soft, round faces full of curiosity. Whatever they were chattering, the translator module could not pick up — Sy had not thought to calibrate it for immature vocal frequencies.

The crowd parted to let a woman and an old man through. The woman was tall, stately even, her auburn hair half-hidden by a bright green shawl. Beads and baubles covered her neck and wrists; small golden rods were sewn into the hem of her blue dress. The belt around her waist held many pouches and a long dagger in a silver-worked sheath. The old man had a waist-long beard and wispy white hair. Now he fits the stereotype of a savage. The bone fetishes around his neck, the painted markings on his forehead and cheeks, and the gnarled staff in his hands marked him as some sort of sorcerer or shaman.

“This is Finch, my wife, and this is Wolf, our Wise One,” North said. He raised his voice then, speaking to the crowd. “A Star Prophet has come. We will send for our kindred, and then we will hear his tale.”

The gathering of the kindred turned out to be a long and tedious affair. North sent messengers to friendly tribes; slowly, over a fortnight, people began to trickle in. All this Sy learned from Finch, in whose yurt he spent most of his time. She ran her household — North, six sons, four daughters, and over a dozen slaves with an iron fist.

Hers was a dry sense of humour and she obliged to let Sy help out in tasks like spinning wool, sewing, baking bread, gathering herbs and berries, and taking part in hours and hours of gossip. Other women of the tribe came to her with problems and disputes, or simply seeking advice. To Sy’s mind, Finch would have made an excellent middle manager.

Once the camp swelled to thrice its previous size, the preparations for the Star Prophet’s Telling began. Sy felt quite pleased that he was finally going to get his moment to do his job as outreach — so far, no one had wanted to hear even a whisper of anything about the “endless black.”

“There is a time for everything, and the time for your tale is at the Telling,” Finch had said with a tone that brooked no argument. Well, the time is imminent, Sy thought, watching men rolling barrels and women carrying bowls and jugs towards the amphitheater. The festivities had already begun, with horse racing, archery, wrestling, and other competitions.

He had been tempted to listen in on the storytelling contest, but chose to rehearse his own speech instead. “Out of the endless black comes the good will of the Six-Star Conglomerate.” *Is that too dramatic?* Dramatic was good, according to his supervisor — after all, every outreach knew that savages had unrefined tastes and tended towards the extremes.

With the setting sun, Wolf, the shaman, approached Sy. He was carrying a large deer skull and wore a grey pelt around his stooped shoulders. “The time for your Telling is here. Come with me, Star Prophet.”

Sy could hear something in the shaman’s tone that unsettled him. He could not quite put his finger on it, and quickly dismissed it as nerves. His apothecary had run out three days before, and ever since then he struggled to maintain a steady mood. He could feel his heart pounding and wished he could do something about all the adrenaline and cortisol in his blood.

“Deep breath now,” the shaman said, clearly reading Sy’s stress cues. He began walking. “You won’t be any worse than the last one.”

“Last one?” Sy said, rushing to catch up. “You met the previous outreach? That was what... 50 standard years ago? Did you speak to him?” Wolf did not answer.

He led Sy to the amphitheater in solemn silence. There, any quibbles Sy had about his last predecessor vanished as the view before him slammed into his uncontrolled emotions. Fires in bronze braziers ringed the base and rose up the steps. On each level, people sat, still and somber as if this were a lecture hall and not an architectural oddity on a regressed world. The capsule gleamed in the center of the space, very much like the egg to which North had likened it.

Sy stopped where he thought most appropriate. He would still need to turn this way and that as he spoke to take everyone in, but the movement would help calm his nerves. Wolf, the deer skull now masking his face, raised his staff and began to chant. It was not in the same language as the vernacular of the savages, and Sy frowned as the translator module struggled.

“Endless black... spirits come... wicked not... tale of... must act... the Ancients spoke...” Wolf was saying and Sy felt another wave of trepidation fray his already gossamer-thin grasp on his emotions. He tried to read the faces all around him, but they were, as one, schooled into a strange sort of stillness.

The shaman fell silent, turned to Sy, and proffered the deer skull. Inside, Sy saw dark, viscous liquid. With so many eyes on him, he could not refuse. It tasted sweet, almost cloying, and very alcoholic.

“Now, tell us your tale.”

“Out of the endless black I come bearing the good will of the Six-Star Conglomerate. You call me Star Prophet, so I will give you the news of the cosmos. The stars twinkling up there — they are not gods or demons or uncaring, cold lights. Just like your campfires, they are the hearths of countless people — families, tribes, nations. And all these hearths — these worlds — lie in the caring hands of the Six-Star Conglomerate.

“The Conglomerate is not some creature of myth — it is the united effort of many people to make sure that everyone in all these worlds is free to pursue happiness. The Conglomerate is above the bounds of blood, above the bounds of tribe, above even the bounds of world. The Conglomerate seeks wealth and health for everyone. Everyone is equal in the eyes of the Conglomerate, and everyone is free.” Sy paused, scanning the shadowy faces of his audience. *I cannot read them. I cannot tell what they’re thinking.*

Swallowing his anxiety, he continued. He could do nothing else. “No one starves. No one suffers. No one dies at the hands of another or from disease. The Conglomerate is plenty, a plenty shared by all. Every man and woman is free to be who they are, free to pursue their dreams and desires. The Conglomerate celebrates the differences of each individual and that is what makes us the greatest power in all the stars.” Sy paused again, expecting something — anything, at this point, murmurs, whispers, even heckling. All he saw were the same impassive expressions. Occasionally, someone would sip from his or her jug or horn. *What did the last outreachers say?* Sy faltered, unsure of himself.

“What would this Conglomerate have of us?” came a voice.

“Friendship!” Sy exclaimed, glad for the question. *I should’ve planted a few of these prompts! Well, live and learn.* “Friendship, trade, an exchange of wisdom and values. The Conglomerate would have you join the brotherhood of the cosmos. Slowly, of course, and only to the extent you wish. For a long, long time, this world was at Restriction Level 5 — deemed too dangerous, too deadly. But I see that you are good, kind, wise folk, open to guests and ideas. You welcomed me, and so I hope you will allow us to welcome you.”

The after-Telling celebrations sounded into the star-blanketed night. The moon was full and huge. Sy weaved in and out of the fray, a horn of honey liquor in one hand. The detox module was malfunctioning — he was getting more drunk than he should have been. A feeling of unease insisted on haunting him. Cheers and jugs raised towards him did little to ease his mind.

The eyes around him seemed too bright, faces too open; his surroundings swam in and out. Sy could almost imagine he was walking a dream — or a nightmare. He wanted to find Wolf, to ask what the shaman had said. A grinning crone pushed a sweetmeat into his hand and patted him on the shoulder. For a moment, the grin seemed more like a leer.

“There you are.” Sy jumped when he heard North speak. The chief wore a dark grey tunic intricately embroidered with suns and horses; a thin gold circlet sat atop his head. A small, finely-wrought laser pistol was holstered at his side.

“Did you like my tale?” Sy said. He sounded pathetic to his own ears, a subordinate hoping for praise from his superior.

“It was... enlightening. You spoke well,” North said, the expression on his face oddly neutral. Not for the first time, Sy wondered how a savage could look so... diplomatic. “I want to show you a place — a sacred place — as a way of thanks.”

Sy hesitated. He had no reason to mistrust North — the man had been nothing but friendly in a gruff way from their first meeting. Then he saw Finch approach and his mood settled. She wore a flowing dress in shimmering silver that would not have been out of place at any executive soiree. A colorful shawl held by a brooch in the shape of a bird in flight covered her hair; gold glittered around her neck and wrists.

“You spoke well,” she said, echoing her husband’s sentiment.

Sy felt his heart lift. A part of him wondered if this was how a child beamed at his mother’s pride. “Go,” she added. “See the sacred place. It will... enlighten you.”

Sy followed North away from the celebrations and out of the camp. They walked by the river for perhaps fifteen minutes, making small conversation. Sy wondered if the time was opportune to ask about establishing a Conglomerate trading post.

“The gods gave our ancestors this world,” North said, his tone more somber all of a sudden. Ahead, Sy could see a row of small hump-like hills. “The Ancients erected buildings that scraped the sky; they flew above the clouds; they made weapons to kill nations. They mastered the earth itself. And each time, the gods punished them.”

Sy opened his mouth, closed it again. Something in North’s voice rekindled his dread. “You told me my ancestors would have flown the endless black. I know you did not believe when I said we have always been here. But that is the truth.” North pointed ahead, at the mounds that Sy could now see were man-made. “These barrows are older than your Conglomerate. They are older than the once-men like you who feared the wrath of the gods and flew away into the endless black. We are men, for we stayed and redeemed ourselves.”

“I don’t—” Sy began, his mouth dry.

“Come, look.” The barrows loomed close. Their stone bases were illuminated with round lanterns and Sy could see the stories carved in relief. North led him past tales of worship and war, of plenty and nothing, of civilization and regression. One carving showed men who looked like the savages forcing men who looked more like Sy into the hold of an old-fashioned interstellar transport ship. They stopped at the edge of a cliff.

In the moonlight, something glinted below and Sy frowned when he looked over and down to see capsules, much like his, at the bottom of the cliffs. He also saw bleached bones. Terror shot up his spine. “What—” Cold steel pressed against his temple.

“This world is back to Restriction Level 5,” North said, and pulled the trigger.

SPACE RANGER

Jim Flanders

1 Dead or Alive

Glondarf Station was one of the older models. Artificial gravity generated through centripetal force, artificial sky, artificial weather. It was a thing in its day. A short-lived thing, but it was a thing. He'd seen a few of them, and they held up pretty well. Glondarf, though, looked every one of its years, and felt like it too. The air always smelled off, either over or under-scrubbed, the weather was never quite on schedule, the sunlight was always just missing the Goldilocks zone to the point where it was more tolerable to live at night. Which suited the residents of Glondarf okay. Rent was cheap and whatever squares showed up were easy to pick out and pick off. Just look for the guy up past his bedtime.

Deck Hanson stepped out of his "first-rate" hotel and onto the streets of Glondarf, lighting a cheroot to help stave off the smell of the streets. The rain was about two days behind and whatever was in the gutters smelled like it might soon spontaneously generate intelligent life. It didn't piss him off or depress him. He was a Space Ranger. He'd been through worse than a lumpy bed and a shitty continental breakfast. Besides, this was a "zumzum" job. Like the Voorteks said, "Hello, goodbye". He'd be off-station before the next cycle. It was already night on the street, unmistakable despite the ocean of neon he was swimming in. All you had to do was look up and see the fake black sky. He took a minute to do so, puffing out a cloud of tobacco smoke and wondering if they even bothered to simulate stars ... and if the star field would still work if they tried it.

Last known sighting of his target was in a bar a couple of blocks away. He had one rickshaw driver ask him if he wanted a ride, but otherwise Deck Hanson was left to himself. At least on Glondarf, people still respected a Ranger. No, that wasn't quite it. He'd been around in the old days. He'd seen respect. These days it was just fear. No skin off his back.

He got to the bar. Very understated for this neighborhood — it was just a hole in the wall. Literally. Not even a door, just a curtain and a small, almost tasteful neon sign above that merely read "Drink" in sixteen different languages that flashed in sequence. He practically had to bend double to get his two meter frame through the door. The bouncer inside waved him through.

Once inside, his eyes instantly adjusted to the dim light as a recent photo of his target appeared in the lower-left corner of his vision. Hanson scanned the room with his eyes, letting the AI subroutine do the work of spotting a face in the crowd for him. As usual, he saw the target before the AI did. He kept the software installed mostly because it was a bitch to change his 'wares with his old hardware and because it had a pretty good low-light filter that he'd gotten used to over the years. It was that more than the shitty AI that had made him some busts and gotten him out of some tough spots.

Over by a Klecch hookah station, hiding half-behind a huge, lurching alien with metal arms; that was Deck's target. Connor Kletz. Gambler, fraudster, smuggler. Strictly small-time as he had a habit of screwing up contracts and hitting the road with a bag full of hard currency. Hanson walked over to the hookah station, feeling the bar empty out behind him.

"Kletz," said Hanson. "Time's up."

Kletz, smoking the hookah and staring at his portavid, looked up casually. Hansen's file said the human was 117, but he looked more like thirty-five. He was at least smart with his own personal funds. Kletz's blue eyes glittered in the blue light from the hookah.

"Oh my. All my plans brought to rack and ruin by the Space Rangers. Curse this evil day." Hansen had known this guy would be a hard case. Thing about hard cases, you hit them in the right spot and they'd shatter.

"Dead or alive, you're coming with me," said Hansen. "Same price. So come on and let's get out of this shithole. Might just be the change of luck you need."

Kletz slowly, very slowly, put the stem of his hookah pipe down. "I prefer to make my own luck."

"Like you did at Midnight Vista? I heard they had to re-grow your dumb ass in a vat of goo."

"Everyone has bad days, Ranger Hansen," said Kletz.

"Damn right you know my name," said Hansen. His back-camera showed his six was clear, no one trying to sneak up him. What was with this guy? "You trying to make a hot date with me? Plenty of time for that on the ride back to Labakk. Sixteen hours in hyperspace."

"I'd never dream of attempting to seduce the last Space Ranger in the known Universe," said Kletz, eyes wrinkling as he grinned. There was a tightness between Hansen's eyes.

"You seem to be misinformed," he said carefully. "I can call a few more fellas down here to change your mind."

"Oh, I know. But how many favors would you have to call in to get a crew down here? How many bribes out of your own pocket? I know you're not the last human out there wearing the uniform of a Space Ranger. I just meant you're the last REAL one." The gun was out of Hansen's jacket before he knew it, his wired hand training the old slugthrowing pistol straight at Kletz's head.

"Dead or alive, Kletz," he said, controlling his voice the way he'd been trained. "You can ride off this free-falling trash can, or you can be carried off. Your choice." That was when Kletz's bodyguard decided to move. Hansen snapped his 7.62x39mm pistol over to the big alien.

"Are you a smart pile of shit, or a dead one?" he asked quietly. It had the intended effect. The rifle slug ripped the top off the massive creature's head as his chrome arms flailed in the air, only partway through his lunge, and whatever was left of the bar exploded in movement.

Hansen, keeping his eyes on target, ducked and slid left, dividing his consciousness between the eyes in front and the eyes in the back of his head, mostly trying to keep track of Kletz. The floor plan in the corner of his vision showed only one obvious exit other than getting past the big Ranger, so Hansen started angling himself to have cover over both routes out of the building. Most everyone still in the place was now desperately fleeing out of both exits.

Kletz, meanwhile, was still just sitting there. Kletz carefully picked up the hookah pipe and took a drag. When he spoke, it had the effect of amplifying his voice so that Hansen could have heard him over the din even without enhanced hearing.

"Bit touchy, Hansen. But I don't blame you. I really don't. That was a low blow, even for me." Hansen stood up to full height, gun leveled on Kletz. "I should just kill you."

Kletz shook his head. "But you won't. Because that's not what you do."

"It *is* what I do to little fags like you that play mind games," said Hansen. "Give me a reason not to have your freeze-dried head sitting in a vaccu-sealed box on the bridge of my ship as I rocket out of this shithole an hour from now."

"Tetra," said Kletz.

"Fuck you," said Hansen.

"You want them? I can get them for you," said Kletz.

"Bullshit."

"But I need your help. The help of the last man of honor in this empty universe. I'm putting a bounty on the people that sold you out, sold out everything you stand for, just to make their quarterly earnings and keep moving even as they devour everything that makes life worth living for the several trillion sentient forms of life in this spinning void we call the cosmos. You want to collect it?"

The gun was back out. "That's enough, Kletz," said Hansen.

"Just let me show you something," said Kletz. He gingerly reached into his shirt pocket. "Please?"

Hansen clicked his thumb upwards. "Later," he said, and fired a concussive round that dropped Kletz to the floor.

2

The Thing

When Kletz woke up, Hansen was sitting there watching him, smoking, on the other side of the glass. Kletz, clearly in pain, cricked his neck, hitched himself up a bit, and said "Happy birthday," in a gravelly voice.

"What's that about?" asked Hansen.

"Whenever I wake up after being pretty sure I was going to die, I wish myself a happy birthday. Kind of a personal thing, you know? Been doing it for a while. Like I've been reborn, you know? First day of the rest of your life kind of thing."

"Uh-huh," said Hansen, tapping the ash off his cheroot directly onto the deck. It wasn't carpeted.

"Can I get some medical assistance or something? I've got a bad headache."

"Medbot's sleeping. I'm considering waking him up." Hansen took a drag. "Fully and carefully considering."

"What did you hit me with? Concussive round? I thought those things were illegal."

"Illegal where? Who says? Besides, I'm a Ranger. In the void of space, I AM the law."

"Why didn't you just plug me with that right away? Would've saved you some time."

"Yeah, conks have a couple of problems," said Hansen. "First is, 'bout a five-percent chance your target doesn't wake up. Second is, target almost always shits himself."

Kletz looked down at himself involuntarily. He felt and smelled clean. He was wearing plastic pajamas, sitting in a plastic chair formed out of the plastic floor of a plastic cell.

"I cleaned you up," said Hansen. "You don't warrant riding through hyperspace soaked in your own shit."

"Mighty human of you."

"You're damn right."

They sat like that for a minute, Hansen sitting half in shadow, smoking, looking at Kletz through his heavy-lidded eyes, Kletz looking back at the big man because moving his head or neck made every nerve in his body light up with electric pain.

Finally Kletz said, "I assume you went through my belongings."

"Just what you had on you," said Hansen. "I didn't see a need to toss your room. I figured you're a bit behind on your rent anyway and your landlord would appreciate the gesture."

Kletz shook his head slightly without thinking and winced in pain. "You are really something, man."

"That's what my mama always told me," said Hansen. "So did you watch that video I had on me?"

"I got through the first ten minutes before you showed signs of waking up."

"And?"

"And I'm sitting here."

"Well?"

"I'm thinking."

"Don't hurt yourself."

"Don't plan on it. I do have one question."

“You should maybe wait until you watch the whole thing. It’s only another ten minutes.”

Hansen tapped his ash again. He leaned forward into the light a little more, Kletz could see he was still wearing his uniform pants but only a tee-shirt and a shoulder holster with his pistol in it.

“No,” said Hansen. “I need to ask this one now.”

“Could we maybe do the medbot first?” asked Kletz.

“Not yet,” said Hansen. “Question is — why?”

“Why what? Why do they do it? Money, man. Power. Because they’re assholes.”

“Not them. You. Why?”

“That’s ... that’s fair,” said Kletz. “I mean, didn’t you ever see something going wrong and want to change it to something right? If you thought you even had a chance to do it?”

“That’s my job,” said Hansen.

“Well it’s not mine,” said Kletz.

“So you suddenly grew a conscience? Like getting a skin cancer, it just showed up one day? What’s your angle?”

“I dunno, man,” said Kletz, feeling suddenly tired. “I figure, the average galaxy can handle a few guys like me just fine. Kinda part of the ecosystem, you know? But that’s when everything’s working right. You have, well, guys like you that keep guys like me in check. Make sure we’re not ripping off little old ladies or stealing medicine from children, shit like that. And these days, I don’t know about you, but it seems like things are starting to go off the rails, like no one is really in charge anymore, anywhere, no one gives a shit and everyone is just planning to make a pile and retire somewhere else where they don’t have to give a fuck about their old life a million parsecs away. A guy like me, that’s a world I don’t want to be a part of. I wouldn’t survive.”

Hansen crossed his arms, leaned back into the shadows so that Kletz could only see the cherry of his cheroot. “I think I get it,” he said, his voice sounding like he was talking to the ceiling.

“But you really need to watch the rest of the video,” said Kletz.

“I will,” said Hansen. “One more thing. What’s your *other* angle?”

“Oh, obviously, once shit kicks off with my plan there’s gonna be cash dropping left and right. I figure I could pick up enough to buy a planet, be set for life and then I can pursue my true passions and only work kinda pro bono, you know.”

Hansen leaned forward again. He was smiling with half his face, the cheroot hanging out of the other half. “There it is,” he said. He cocked his head to the side. “Shippy!” There was a quiet chime, dimmed somewhat by the window that separated them.

“Aye-aye, captain,” said the computer.

“Have the medbot see to the prisoner,” said Hansen, getting up from his chair.

“Does this mean you’re in?” asked Kletz.

“I still have to watch the rest of the video,” said Hansen. And after that I’ve got ...” he checked his chronometer — “about twelve hours to decide.” He left through a door Kletz couldn’t see. Kletz started to shout something, but the medbot was descending out of the ceiling making soothing noises.

3
A Light in the Void

"I want you to understand something," said Hansen. "Back in my day, the Rangers still stood for something. Something good in a dirty world. We helped people who needed helping, killed people who needed killing. We made crooked paths straight. You see? And just because it was the right thing to do. Yeah, it was a job, but it was also a calling. Sure, we had our story, how we got started, but that wasn't what mattered. What mattered was what we did out there, every day in a black empty void. You put on this uniform, you put on this star, people respected that and they had good reason to. I could walk into the middle of a bar fight and stop it, just by standing there where people could see me. Because I was a Ranger. 'One riot, one Ranger,' that's what we used to say. And it was true." He tapped his ash, staring into Kletz's eyes, and Kletz could see the hurt somewhere way back in them. "It was fucking true."

"It was," said Kletz. "Take it from one of those bad guys you were always after. It was all true."

They were sitting on the flight deck of Hansen's ship, staring out through the windows into hyperspace. Kletz was calm and collected for a man who had fallen asleep in a plastic prison and woken up dressed and brushed and with a cigarette in his hand and a drink at his elbow.

And then Hansen had started talking. "So now I have to decide — is that me? Is that who I am? Is that what this badge means now?" Hansen flipped the star over and over in his hands, looking at it, not looking up. Even knowing the way things were now, seeing it still made Kletz a little nervous. He remembered the old days, too.

"I have a feeling you've already decided," said Kletz. "Seeing as I'm sitting here instead of back in the koochow."

"Yeah," said Hansen.

"Well?"

"I have one more question. Tetra. Were you bullshitting me?"

Kletz took a sip of his highball. Tasted like real alcohol. He kept his face even. "No," he said. "I got a line in with them. Not much of a line, I'll admit, but you know, half a loaf and all that."

"Okay," said Hansen. He looked a little more relaxed. "I believe you."

Kletz grasped the implications of that statement immediately. You only get to bullshit a Space Ranger one time. "Look, let me just say — that star, that still means something. Even if the men who wear it now aren't much better than men like me. And maybe it can mean that again if someone stands up and does something. That's the point of symbols, right? They stand for something outside of ourselves."

"Yeah."

"I just want to say, part of why I'm on this bullshit is because I want to go back to the old days. When it was like ... did you ever play that game? I'm sure you did."

"Raiders and Settlers? Yeah."

"You played Settler, right?"

"Hell no. Raider all the way. Lots more fun." Hansen laughed. Kletz winced.

"Yeah," Kletz said. "I always liked being a Settler."

Hansen laughed harder. Kletz started laughing too. They remembered the highballs they had sitting in front of them, calmed down, and Kletz continued: "My point is, it was a more honest game in those days. More real. If I can just bribe a Ranger, or his boss, what's the point anymore? It's not a game. It's just business. I hate business. I specifically do what I do because it's not business, it's a game. Business works off a balance sheet and you can never really win. Games are where the magic happens."

"I'd agree with that," said Hansen. "You see some wild shit, being a Ranger. Magic, like you said."

"So I have a plan," said Kletz. "We should discuss it before we arrive at — wherever we're going," he added casually.

"So do I," said Hansen. "And since we're just sitting here jerking each other off I suppose we can jaw it around a little bit."

"Of course you do. I've thought about this a lot, you know. Hours and hours. Once I got the idea I couldn't let it go. You've known about it for less than a day unless you want to get fancy with the space-time mechanics."

"Every plan you came up with came to shit," remarked Hansen.

Kletz chose this time to light his cigarette. Hell, it was even his blend. He made sure not to react. He merely said, "Of course. I wanted to be caught. Remember? The game?"

"How 'bout now?"

"Different game," said Kletz. "Different rules. Rule one is it's not a fucking game."

"Sure it ain't," said Hansen. "You're the one with all the fucked-up psychological bullshit going on with your behavior. I don't play any damn games. I do my job. That's why we're going with my plan and you're going along as my special advisor. That's your role here. You know something I don't, you tell me. But we do this my way."

Kletz controlled his face, he was sure of it. Hansen still seemed to pick something up there.

"You think you know so much?" asked Hansen. "You're on the bridge. Look around. Where are we?" Astrogation was something Kletz hired people to do.

He shrugged. "You got me," he said.

"We're about an hour outside of Labakk," said Hansen. "So now's your chance to tell me your side of the story. I'm turning you in for the bounty."

4

Thank You For Your Service

Deck Hansen lit a cheroot on his way out of customs, the HoverCart burbling behind him a few paces. There wasn't much you could say for Labakk, but at least it was on a planet with real air and dirt. The planet was also called Labakk. The inhabitants weren't too creative. Hansen figured there had to be some nice parts of this world. It was inevitable. Every world had its beauty spots. He wasn't in one of them, but he knew it had to exist. Money was here, after all. If your planet's a shithole, the money doesn't stay. And at least the streets were wide and mostly clean. It was still full of the same filth that occupied the rough areas of any city on any planet, but the bots were running at least.

He didn't like his plan. It had too many moving parts. Too many things he didn't know, too many contingencies. Too many moving parts. Like when some primitive race starts cargo-culting the Space Races and builds some giant stupid toy that falls apart at the slightest breeze. But it was the plan he had, the only one he could come up with, and he stuck to it. He'd asked Kletz for his input up to a point, but he still didn't completely trust the man. That would have to change. But for now, Hansen liked Kletz where he was: locked up in a box on the HoverCart behind him.

Hansen had decided to wear his Class B uniform for this. Not full-dress, but it was the uniform you wore when you wanted to show the flag, as they used to say. When you served notice on someone to get out of town by sundown, that kind of thing. As he walked down the street, if anyone did notice his clothes and his badge, their reactions were only to hide or to make faces. To most of the people on the street he was just another carbon-based lifeform taking up space.

A screw inside him turned another thread. He got to the address for the dropoff. The sign was in the standard five languages. The English line read “Hi-Hi Import/Export Co.” He knocked on the door. He was five minutes early.

“Wait,” said a voice on a tinny speaker nailed to the wall above the door. The door buzzed.

“Enter,” the voice said. Hansen couldn’t be sure but it didn’t sound like an AI. He went inside.

Two human men were waiting for him on the other side. They were standing inside of a decent sized warehouse floor that was mostly empty. There were a few crates off to one side. Looked like Hi-Hi wasn’t exactly a going concern. The men were armed with short-barreled rifles of a popular make. One of them — squat, big build with a big neck, patchy beard — Hansen recognized as a former Ranger. His name was ... Tycho? Tyson? Something like that. Hansen remembered what’d he done well enough, though. Very well. It was good to see him. The other guy, Hansen didn’t know, but assumed he was part of whatever organization wanted Kletz. He was taller than Ty-Something, sandy hair, looked like he he spent a lot of time on his appearance and it wasn’t wasted.

“Howdy, fellas,” said Hansen as he dragged the HoverCart through the door and stopped about a hundred yards from them. Ty-Something clearly recognized Hansen, but he didn’t say anything. Just made a face. Call it the appetizer. The other guy spoke.

“Thanks for your help, Ranger,” he said. “You say you brought him in alive?”

“That’s right. You can check for yourself.”

“Thank you, I will.” Sandy snapped his fingers and a Ploof slithered out from between the crates near the door, almost taking Hansen by surprise. They could move fast enough on their pseudopods when they wanted to, and if you let them get close it was almost impossible to stop them putting a knife in you. Hansen angled himself away from the Ploof a bit, trying not to be too obvious about it, as the tentacled alien quietly checked Kletz’s vitals on the crate’s readout screen, then plugged in his own ‘nostic tool to confirm for himself. When it was done, it made a noise like a drain backing up and slid away into a dark corner.

“Very good,” said Sandy, pulling out a datapad and tapping on it. “Bounty was for dead or alive, but I think bringing him in alive warrants a bonus, considering. And — ahem — what account and I despositing to?”

“Rangers,” said Hansen. This was about sixty percent of the way Rangers earned their keep. The rest was from philanthropists and local government contracts. At least that was the way it was supposed to work.

“Of course,” said Sandy. “Done.” He put his datapad away. “And with that our business is concluded. There’s a Ranger Hostel about two blocks from here, if you didn’t already know. Thank you for your service, Ranger Hansen.”

Kletz’s plastic coffin was quickly dragged through a metal roll-up door into a waiting hovercraft as Hansen exited the building. He watched it slowly rise and head back toward the spaceport. Hansen made big strides as he did the same. Technically he didn’t need to hurry but he felt bad about the whole scheme. There were too many ways it could go wrong, and of course Kletz had gone whole-hog for it. It made him the star of his own show for a while, you see. So if Kletz did see how easy it would be for them to just coolly murder him without him being able to do anything about it ... well, if he did see that Hansen wasn’t sure what to make of the guy. Maybe he really had just grown a fatal case of the cancer called Conscience.

At least telemetry on the crate was working. Kletz was still alive and on the planet. Unless he was being spoofed. Unless EMF interference from the twin suns was creating a false signal. Hansen ground his teeth as he walked into the private pilot’s entrance to the spaceport for a quick trip through customs. No one was there. Except the fellow from before, leaning against a wall.

“Hansen,” he said. As soon as he heard his voice, Hansen remembered his name.

“Tyro,” he said casually as he mentally tripped his cybernetics and looked around the big, open room for any other trouble. “See you managed to land on your feet. You’re a lucky boy.”

“Lucky?”

“Lucky it wasn’t me brought you in.”

“What’s your angle with this case?” Tyro stepped closer; easy, but still closer. His hands were at his sides. Hansen’s cyber told him Tyro wasn’t carrying a firearm. He believed it.

“Doing a contract, bringing in bad guys. Ranger business. That’s my angle.” Hansen turned a bit, side-stepped like he was just stretching his legs, getting his back away from the door he’d walked through.

“Don’t give me that Young Paladin shit,” said Tyro. “Putting the bounty in the Ranger account. Bullshit. You’re up to something and I want to know what it is.”

“You sound like the Running Man to me,” said Hansen. The reference to Ranger training was deliberate — even when they had no reason to think they’d been caught, when a Ranger showed up, they ran away. And that was who you went after.

“Fuck you,” said Tyro.

“Acknowledged,” said Hansen, moving towards the exit that led to the landing pads. Tyro still liked to run his mouth.

“I’m gonna fight you,” said Tyro. “Let’s go.”

“You think so?” said Hansen, still moving. Tyro moved to block his path, holding open his jacket. “No gun, Hansen. Come on. Pussy.”

Hansen sidestepped and kept moving. “I fight Rangers,” he said. “I shoot scumbags.”

That was when Tyro lost his composure, grabbed Hansen by his jacket and threw him across the room. Which was the plan. Except Tyro had had some work done since they last tangled and Hansen hit the far wall harder than he’d anticipated, destroying an abandoned coffee station and souvenir shop. Just as well. Who would buy a souvenir of this shithole anyway?

Hansen got to his feet. Vitals looked good. He still felt like shit. The gun hung heavy under his armpit as Tyro came for him like a monorail going through open country. He thought about Kletz, trapped in a coffin, not even sure if he was alive or dead. This was bullshit. Best thing to do was get out of here and onto his ship quick like Flick.

Hansen rolled over on his back, feigning a serious injury and swearing a blue streak as Tyro ran over to kick him under the armpit. When the angle was just right, Hansen drove both his heels into the man’s chin and used the momentum to get to his feet. Tyro took the shot hard, staggering back, and Hansen didn’t stop, driving his fists into the man’s head and body, pushing him back and keeping him off balance, starting to get angry now, thinking more and more about what the man did. A Ranger.

Then Tyro pulled his knife. Hansen didn’t even realize it himself. Cyber told him. Structural integrity compromised, intercostal area. Major organs threatened. *Son of a bitch*. Vitals okay, coagulants on the way. Pain meds on hold due to the user’s custom settings. Override? Override? This was not the time. Hansen feigned a vital hit, fell back, fading like he was just realizing he’d been stabbed — seen it a hundred times — and as Tyro came after him in a blind rage, he pulled his gun, switched to full-auto and shot a burst into Tyro’s left knee. An extended burst.

He’d had work done. The rifle rounds destroyed the flesh surrounding the metal, exposing it like a terrible secret. Like a closed file. Like he should just forget about it. So ugly, it was easy to look away. The metal knee dented a bit. That was all it took. Tyro, hopped up on pain meds, was getting clumsy. He tried to stand on his bad knee and collapsed. Hansen put his boot on his neck. Gun pointed down.

“Children are one thing,” he said. “Slaves are another thing. Child slaves? Every racket in the book, and you picked that one.”

“D-Deck,” said Tyro.

“You don’t say my name,” said Hansen. Five rounds left in the mag. “Kids, Tyro. You sold them. To xenos.”

“And what the fuck did we ever manage to do about it? A trillion square miles of space, we catch one or two, a million get away. Pissing in the wind. None of it matters. It’s all a joke. Might as well get paid and be the one laughing about it.”

“I’m not laughing,” said Hansen. “You laughing?” Tyro started laughing. The smart thing to do was to kill him. Hansen just walked away. He had a flight to catch.

5

The Third Man

Deck Hansen was watching the medbot work on him, a bit loopy off of pain meds. He’d had to do it. His cyber hadn’t been exaggerating and his own attitude was the adrenaline talking. Once he’d sat down in his comfy pilot’s chair he’d almost passed out and bled to death. It wasn’t the first time he’d almost died, wasn’t the first time he’d watched a robot stitching him up. This time, though, was different. This time he wasn’t just ignoring it, he was watching it, cutting and welding and stitching, the metal and wires mixed in with the flesh, and it was peaceful in a way, like it was happening to someone else. But it was also his body, it was mortal, and no matter how much tech he had in him, he could and he would die someday. Probably violently and painfully.

Just don’t let it be because I failed, he thought to himself. *I’ll take whatever you got for me going out, just don’t let me be a failure doing it.*

It was a relief when his comms chimed. Secure channel. Hansen picked up. “What’s your status?” he asked.

“Sittin’ pretty in Bah Dah Nang City,” said Kletz. “How about you?”

“I’m en route,” said Hansen as he checked his progress. He’d guessed the location accurately. The buyer would stop by to pick up the package and then leave the system, out of the reach of anyone without intersolar capability. Which was most people. “I’ll be in orbit in twenty minutes.”

“Fantastic,” said Kletz. “The pickup is a little complicated. I had to go over and over it with the courier, but I’ve got it. With your ETA we’ll just make the window for today.”

“You have a hard time?” “Nah, I just explained the situation calmly and rationally and we worked it out.”

“Really.”

“Well, after I had to phaze the other guy. But he made me do it. Self defense, I swear, I don’t like violence. So yeah, after I blasted that idiot the co-pilot was very willing to listen to reason.”

“With that little flashlight of yours?”

“If it’s so harmless, can I shoot you with it?”

“You can try. See you in orbit.” Hansen killed the transmission.

Thirty minutes later, they were en route to the handoff point, on a small planet with only a navigational designation that was close to this system’s sun. On the dark side. Very inhospitable and very private.

“You’re not worried they’ll recognize you?” asked Kletz.

“No,” said Hansen. “If they do, it’s just a different play. And I wouldn’t mind it so much. I want them to know I’m coming for ‘em.”

“Well, you’re the expert,” said Kletz. “But I’ve generally found myself having more success when they DON’T know I’m coming.”

“That’s because you’re a sneak.”

“Damn right. I’m a living, breathing, razzling and dazzling sneak. Not everyone gets to be a big tough guy, you know.”

“I want you to carry this,” said Hansen, handing Kletz a pistol.

“One of your firearms? There’s no atmosphere.”

“It’s not a firearm. It’s a needler. Mass driver. Armor-piercing, full auto. Tear right through an exosuit with just about zero recoil.”

“I think I’m good with my phazer. You worried about me?”

“That toy flashlight of yours only works up close. Range on the needler is thirty meters. The point is I don’t want to have to worry about you.”

“Fine.” Kletz took it and stuck it in his exosuit.

“There’s one more thing,” said Hansen. “If things go topsy, and I give you the high sign, you can feel free to save your own ass. Don’t worry about me. I’ve already told Shippy you’re an authorized pilot.”

“I’d like to say that there’s no way I’d leave you behind, but I did just meet you, and, well, who would look after my elderly mother when I’m gone? Thanks.”

“Such a good boy. Get in the fucking box.” Kletz did so. “Be ready to come out shooting,” said Hansen, closing the lid.

Hansen had put the ship down in a little canyon not far from the meetup point. Perfect place - closed in on three sides by a sheer wall of volcanic rock. From the looks of things this area probably was littered with little hidey-holes. You could do all kinds of nasty business here. It cried out for its own Chamber of Commerce. Whoever decided to open a bar and grill on this blasted rock could do a steady business if he kept his nose relatively clean. Maybe have a few rooms to rent. Call it Smuggler’s Hideaway.

He gradually got his legs as he walked out of the canyon. His exosuit reported that it was about 0.2G, only a fifth of standard gravity. Took a little getting used to. At least it made moving the coffin case easier.

Making sure his needler was handy, Hansen exited the canyon. There was a clear flat area a hundred meters or so away, three men standing in it, waiting. Two of them had long guns. Hansen walked up to them, pushing the coffin in front of him on its hoverskid. He was relying on the anonymity of the exosuit to let him get close. As he got up close to them, he swung the coffin case around so that the feet were facing one of the gunmen. The man in the middle of them hailed Hansen on a PA system that came across as tinny and far away.

“Did you have trouble? I can’t raise you on the secure channel.” Hansen responded by kicking the side of the coffin case, turning to the gunman on his left, and letting fly with the needler, sending gouts of boiling blood everywhere. The coffin case popped open and Kletz sat up and fired his needler, taking out the other rifleman in a similarly messy fashion. This all took only a few seconds.

Hansen turned to the man in the middle, switched to his PA. “Let’s you and me have a talk,” he said, covering the man with his needler as he took the golden star badge out of an outside pocket on the exosuit and raised it up. Kletz had gotten out of the coffin and was also covering the man from a discreet distance off to Hansen’s right.

The man collapsed into the dust. No one had fired a shot. Hansen stomped over, stood over the man. Through the glass he could see the man’s face all twisted and purple. Some kind of poison.

“You dumb bastard,” said Hansen. “You’d really kill yourself over this? Who the hell are you working for?” The man vomited in his helmet. Hansen was already dragging him back to the ship even though he knew it was pointless.

"I could go search their ship," said Kletz. Off in the distance, from behind the ridgeline, there was a brief flash of light and then a shower of metal. "Or ... not."

Back in the Ranger's ship, there wasn't much the medbot could do for the third man. Resuscitation was impossible due to massive cellular damage. The infamous toxin known colloquially as "Blue Death" was found in the man's blood. He carried no identification and his face was too distorted for facial recognition to work. He had the medbot run a dna test but Hansen was pretty sure it would come back with nothing. The chain was broken.

6 The Game

They were sitting having drinks on the bridge, smoking. Hansen's eyes looked far away. Kletz kept moving his hands around awkwardly and then putting them on the arms of his chair.

"There's a part of me wants to just point this ship out into The Black and just — see what's out there," said Hansen.

"No humans out there. I can see the appeal," said Kletz. "I've heard of people doing that, if they have the ship for it. Of course, that means they win."

"Hell, they already won," said Hansen. "The chain I was following is broken. Even going and looking over the two mooks outside and picking through what's left of their ship probably won't give us anything. I'm back where I started."

"Tetra, man," said Kletz. "I told you."

"Tetra's a ..." started Hansen. He was about to say "a myth", just like the official Ranger communiques had told him, but who the fuck in this man's universe was so terrified of the people he worked for, or believed so much in their cause, that he'd kill himself to avoid capture? That was something from the damn movies. "Maybe you've got a point," said Hansen.

"I have a philosophy," said Kletz. "You haven't lost any money until you walk away from the table. As long you're still playing, those chips are just pieces of plastic. It's only when the game is over that you have to settle up."

"That's your winning strategy, eh?"

"I didn't say it was a *winning* strategy, I said it was my philosophy."

"If it wasn't beneath me I'd slap you."

"I'm in awe of your nobility, sir." Kletz smiled. "My point is, we have an intersolar class ship, which is pretty damn rare these days. We have your badge. And we have our skills. And I don't think we're alone. We could find other people to help. These people aren't invincible. They have to eat and sleep and they can make mistakes. They have names and addresses. So you could fuck off into the outer darkness, and maybe I'd even go with you just to see what's out there. But I'd rather stick around where we could maybe do something about the problems in this galaxy instead of just running away from them."

"I've always thought about The Black. But, you're right. I think," said Hansen.

"Besides," said Kletz. "All the fun stuff is in known space. All the tasty food. Think of the food, Hansen."

"I hate food," said Hansen.

"Fair enough," said Kletz, lighting another cigarette. "So what now?"

Hansen stood up. "What now is I go back out there and see what I can find on those two dead mooks I ventilated to hard vacuum, and you're coming with me in case you know something I don't. Then we check what's left of their ship. Whatever we find, I'm coming back here, getting drunk, sleeping it off, and starting over after my sleep cycle. You know what I like? I like burning bastards down and setting things right. You in?"

“Do I get a badge?” asked Kletz.

“I wouldn’t pin one on you if they gave me my own planet, you piece of shit,” said Hansen. They both laughed and put on their exosuits.

THE WHISTLEBLOWER

H. Teloz

1

The Interrogation

The Company was frantically turning over every rock to find out who the whistleblower was. We'd had meetings, presentations, and offers of rewards which before long had transformed seamlessly into warnings and admonishments and then, finally, into outright threats. Whoever was guilty would not only be fired, they would never work in the field again. They were also almost guaranteed to face criminal prosecution: certainly fines and almost certainly imprisonment. For how long, it was hard to say. It was uncharted territory. And while this wasn't mentioned, the all-encompassing nature of the TogetherLink ensured that the whistleblower's name would be thrown out there forever, like chisel-marks in virtual stone, even after (or if) he was released. The system's well-maintained and omnipresent system of online social shaming would all at once evaporate all of their future prospects, from dating to renting. In short, they'd be in a permanent state of screwed.

So, it was safe to say that it was a tense, unnerving situation that I found myself in. Not only due to the impending doom of being caught but also due to the contradictions in the whole situation. The whistleblower can only blow his whistle if there is some real outrage to reveal to the world. And they can only reveal it if there's a receptive public who will be outraged when they discover that dirty, hidden secret. This is the 'efficient cause' of the whistleblower, acting in the role of public servant at a great personal cost. And yet... If I did share what I knew with a public who wanted to find out, who would be outraged, if I did destroy my career for their sake... then for the rest of my life I would be exiled from the protection of their society. What a sad paradox it was. Though perhaps many people would be shocked, the last few uncensored corners of the TogetherLink would surely celebrate me (it was true that they still had a network in the hundreds of thousands who would share the material instantly, despite the censorship), this couldn't transmute into money or security for me. Well then. To say I didn't have any regrets at that moment when the Company immediately stopped all regular work to interrogate every last one of us - well, that would be wrong.

Before long, my turn arrived. My colleague Fin made a face at me and rolled his eyes as he walked out of the makeshift interrogation room and I sighed and rolled my eyes back as we passed each other. Then we chuckled quietly and nodded at one another with shared resignation. We were still allowed to express annoyance at work meetings, surely that couldn't give me away, could it? *No, I'd actually look guiltier if I didn't seem annoyed at this disruption of my day. No, not guilty! I hadn't done anything wrong!* I thought to myself. *They're the ones who are guilty, they just happen to have all the power!*

But those couldn't be the thoughts I entered there with, as I couldn't afford to look agitated. I had to stay calm for their damned interrogation. There was so much to play for, so many consequences for just one wrong step. Knocking twice loudly, I opened the door and entered after they abruptly called me in.

"Mr. Boca! Thank you for sharing your time with us today," said an unpleasant man in an pleasant voice as he stood up to welcome me, "We're very sorry for having to drag you out of your work. We all know that you're such hard workers here. Very productive, famously even."

"Oh, y'know," I shrugged while pulling out a chair, "we all do our best, right?" I sat down, scratched an eyebrow, quietly sighed and smiled, "So, please, ask me whatever".

Sitting across the table from me, bathed under the sterile glare of fluorescent lights, was the official-looking man in a suit who welcomed me, alongside my boss: a woman in her late thirties, today dressed in a billowy purple dress. Next to them, the only person standing up, was the oldest of the three, a plump and short-haired woman in glasses with dyed violet hair, a standard-issue holographic tablet in hand, who stared at me in a way that was somehow intense yet empty. All of them together formed a fleshy wall of impenetrable suspicion that I needed to somehow traverse and survive if I wanted to leave the building a free man. I had no idea if this was a routine questioning, necessary for every one of the 252 employees who worked here, or if I was naive prey destined to be swallowed up in the jaws of bureaucratic discipline. I'd heard that the expressionless man opposite me was a highly esteemed private investigator that the company managed to snag on permanent retainer. Most major corporations no longer relied on the state police, and had PIs just as they had lawyers on the payroll. The larger companies had dozens, policing everything from violations of speech policies to attempts at unionisation. This one was well-known as a committed ideologue.

The unknown older woman, eyes now wide and receptive but still empty, asked me with faux politeness: "Can you please confirm for us your name, age, and date of birth?" I recited the information as asked.

"I suppose its quite obvious at this point why you're here?" she continued.

"Yep," I sighed, playing the bored employee resigned to going through the motions, "We've all heard. This is all about that whistleblower who leaked what the C Department were working on, yes?"

"Yes, that's correct" she replied coldly.

"Are you in C Department?" the detective asked abruptly.

Before I could speak, my boss told him that I wasn't. He looked sidelong at her, irritated that she answered for me. "Right. I'm in the D Department."

"But you might have access to C Department files, is that correct? In other words, it would be possible for you to have obtained the leaked data," the detective inquired further.

"In theory, yes. It's possible," I replied. "D Department can obtain access to the B and C Departments' work."

The detective tapped his fingers on the table while my boss wrung her hands together anxiously. Then they looked at each other and stopped. "Can I just ask on which dates did you have access to C Department data" my boss asked, mirroring the detective's tone of voice.

"Well, as you know, every day there is a bidirectional active access between my work account and all of C Departments' data, in case one of them require emergency assistance. This is protocol."

A long silence followed. They knew they wouldn't get anywhere with this line of questioning. There was no bait on the line, and they were fishing in areas far too close to the surface. But the detective seemed to be working something over in his head.

"I'd like to put something you, Mr. Boca, hypothetically. As you know, we do not disclose the majority of our research and development here to the public sphere. Why is that?"

"For the security of our democracy," I answered immediately. He leaned back in his chair when suddenly his entire body assumed an air of thoughtful uncertainty.

"But of course, our critics can easily say that democracy thrives on transparency, can they not? They can say that we only have democracy to the extent to our institutions reflect the opinion of the electorate, that the work of our institutions must flow downstream from the wishes of the populace. And for this to be truly democratic, our work must be visible. That's a good point isn't it?"

"I don't really think so."

"Why not?"

“That’s only an uninformed view of democracy. Several experts and scholars have provided a far more foundational and nuanced definition than this,” I shrugged. “The power of the state, if abused, can easily be used to counteract the democratic values. Anti-democratic elements can take hold of the democratic apparatus. So, the people vote in their politicians to work for them, like... hiring a private detective. You wouldn’t want your private detective to reveal all of their inner workings, it doesn’t help the one who has hired the detective. Therefore, its enough that we get the end result of democracy and this justifies and necessitates strong security measures on behalf of our sacred institutions--” I quickly realized I had to shut up as to not overdo the performance.

“Interesting comments. So you know most companies have private detectives on retainer, I see. Are you a well-informed person?”

“I don’t know,” I looked to my boss who returned my look with an icy stare “that’s not really for me to say, I guess.”

“Well then, a political person, would you say?”

“I guess. Not really. More or less.”

The detective continued staring at me intently; he looked as if he was tossing a ball from side to side inside his mind, a ball that represented my undecided guilt. Did he notice that I gave too long an answer, that I anticipated this question?

“Thank you Mr. Boca,” he smiled politely and made a note with his finger in an open holopad on the table. “A more practical question for you now, if you don’t mind. What do you know about the recent experimental research conducted on the Quantifiable Free Human Project? That was the purview of D department?”

“Of the C Department, actually,” I rebutted.

“Ah, of course! Well spotted. Slipped my mind for a second. Yes, the C Department. But what do you know about it?”

“It’s an attempt to, to... bolster freedom and equity among citizens... to further cast off the shackles of an unequal world built to favor the expansionist aims of humans. A novel interface that bridges the emerging virtual universe and the old physical world which can be made from the ground-up to reflect modern, egalitarian values instead of remaining tied to the old, world of flesh, matter and prejudice,” I recited.

“Well said Mr. Boca. Almost textbook”. I nodded. “Here’s one for you. When you got this job, I bet they asked you what a flaw of yours was, right?”

“Right.”

“And what did you say?”

“I said I guess that I have difficulty with hiding my true thoughts”

“Oh hoh,” the detective chuckled, “Really?”

“Yeah,”

“Good. My next question is on very similar grounds. If Our Democracy were to be criticized in some way – let’s say your life depended on it – what would you say?” Another silence, longer this time.

“I’d say that even in our great democracy, the greatest political system to have ever existed, the populace have little control over the direction of our Progress. They remain ignorant to the internal mechanisms, uninformed of the final destination, and patronized by the channels of information used to explain it to them. Even if our democracy serves the people, it nonetheless cannot be said to reflect their ideas. They are provided with their opinions *a priori*, and then our system reflects these opinions in a closed loop. If my life depended on it, that is what I’d say.” While my boss and the older woman were nonplussed, the detective suddenly looked bright-eyed and satisfied.

“Very good. I think we’ll take a short break now. Please return in half an hour and we will continue.”

I thanked my board of interrogators, got up, and headed for the door. But as my hand reached for the doorknob, I was called. “Oh, Mr. Boca! Before you leave...”

“Yes, investigator?” I asked.

“In answer to your question. It has not been uncommon in history for the populace to be slow to rid themselves of the worse parts of their nature. The way that we remove undemocratic tendencies in the populace may not be popular, it may not even be a consequence of democracy. But it is certainly the precondition for our democracy. The creation of the democratic human unit has be be primary. The solution is in the order of things,” the detective said.

“Yes, investigator.”

2

Inside TogetherLink, Three Months Earlier

Indistinguishable from its brick-and-mortar ancestor, a virtual bar sat in a narrow, virtual alley in one of the seediest districts of the TogetherVerse’s now ubiquitous virtual reality universe. Waiting inside, a plug-in meant that I was constantly aware of passing time, second by second. Of course, this did nothing but increase my anxiety. Anyway, there was no guarantee my contact would turn up at all.

What brought me to such a place? I had obtained military-grade equipment that was handed to us almost a year ago so we could prepare it for release to the civilian market. In an atmosphere of plummeting social decay but sweetened with boundless technological innovation, this invention was truly ground-breaking, even by contemporary standards. It gave the user the ability to bring real, three-dimensional objects over into virtual space seamlessly. The physics behind such a miracle were very complex indeed, and I won’t pretend to understand it comprehensively. But so long as the object fit specific size and weight parameters (nothing longer than a meter or heavier than 10 kilograms) EuclidPlus--*Not a bad name*, I thought--could make it cross from the real world to the virtual universe.

A far more sinister invention came across my desk a short while after. It would become known as the Quantifiable Free Human Project, or QFHP. One of the many problems with the QFHP was that it would hold all human activity up to the microscope, constantly monitored by artificial intelligence. It wouldn’t be long until human beings were totally isolated from physical reality, unable to return like those fish that left the water to evolve on land.

Ironically, a brief lag in the surveillance system allowed me to leak this project in a way they couldn’t have accounted for. To whoever is reading this, by the time you see it, this loophole will likely have been patched. But for me, it struck as an opportunity that couldn’t be ignored. While algorithms can automatically detect the sharing of particular kinds of data by way of code-matching, the same data could instead be transferred to a simple data storage device without triggering an alert. That would be my golden ticket: my way of showing the world what they were planning, no matter the outcome.

In only a few minutes, all of the files pertaining to the QFHP were transferred to an old-fashioned data stick. With EuclidPlus, this meant that I could take the data stick into the virtual space of TogetherLink, meet my contact and hand over the files to him. My contact, who I hope shall remain nameless, can then transfer the data over to his terminal and, even without the Euclid technology, finalize the data transfer from me to him, all without having made any direct online transmission of the data.

It seemed a flawless plan.

When I arrived at the meeting spot I was reminded as to why I hadn’t frequented such places in so many years. As I’d entered the virtual cafe, garishly explicit advertisements for extreme pornography blindsided me from every direction. Several TogetherVerse virtual chat portals were open, their strange fetish or micro-subculture written in neon letters, floating above the portal that gave your body access to them. There are horrifying rumors about what happened in the unnamed ones. If you were to enter, there could be horrible things that you’d see, or, so the rumors say, horrible things that would happen to you.

Other smaller, red and purple portals were situated internal to walls of the bar. These were places that you could buy things. Adam Jack, a prominent conspiracy theorist who got wrong as much as he exposed, sold brain implants alleged to increase your Status Points without having to earn them in the normal way, which was through spending more time in virtual space or by paying large sums to TogetherLink. My own Status, (everyone's Status is permanently visible to everyone else's in virtual space) was low enough from all the years I abstained from these places that I wouldn't look out of place at this run down place.

At the bar I ordered a cocktail, made with a simulation of one of the Old World's finest scotch whiskeys. Obviously, it cost a fraction of the price, yet would stimulate my taste receptors exactly as the real stuff would've. Soon after, it would trick my brain into releasing chemicals that would make me feel drunk. But unlike real alcohol, the drunken effect dissolves away after just a few minutes, provoking you to buy more. So, of course, it doesn't work out any cheaper or healthier in the end; but most people have forgotten what the original taste off alcohol was like anyway.

But I digress. The man I was set to meet turned up around fifteen minutes after I sat down. As soon as we met eyes, I had to fight back of pangs of nausea, wishing I hadn't come this far, that I was safely home. Yet I couldn't turn back. *What if he was a corporate spy or a police officer?* I thought. In a few seconds I was about to irreversibly incriminate myself. Without any doubt, the consequences would be disastrous. During the past three years, a long list of punishments had been rapidly introduced as the populace became increasingly suspicious and distressed at the Company's enmeshment with the government and began to take counteraction. Losing my job would be the least of it. I had to take a good look in the face of the man opposite me, into his eyes, his pores, into his soul, and decide if he was going to sell me out or if he'd see the job through and I could leave satisfied.

When he arrived, we shook hands and assessed each other. He had thin, light brown hair swept past, pale, misty blue eyes. His face was pale and creased, seemingly beyond his years. There was a sense of suffering about him. Ultimately I decided--more like hoped--that this meant he was to be trusted, and I put my life in his hands with the quiet hope they wouldn't end up throttling my neck.

"There's an interesting quality about this place," he eventually said. That was the code.

"I've heard it's up-and-coming," I said, digging around in my pocket. The data stick was hidden in a cigarette packet. This seemed like a good way to transfer a secret and terrible item; nobody around us would've been watching (it certainly wouldn't be the strangest thing to happen there that day) but by law all virtual establishments were required to have continuous video surveillance. But a seedy place like this wouldn't have upgraded to audio surveillance, which most establishments had, but wasn't yet mandated by law. So for any future investigation, hiding the data stick in the cigarette packet would suffice.

Like everything for our generation, this ancient espionage trick was absorbed passively from the shows we watched growing up. My parents told me that when they were young, their shows were allotted to certain times of the day. As teenagers they were amazed by something as quaint as on-demand entertainment, if you can believe that. Though we always ridiculed them for the simplicity of this affair, I sometimes quietly wonder if having a certain time and place for a certain thing, even a certain piece of entertainment, actually did them some good. Instead of a boundless mess of intersecting threads without beginning or end, what they consumed would be demarcated from everything else. Some kind of core self would be better preserved.

But I digress again. My attention span is pretty shot to pieces. Another commonality for our generation.

"Thanks for the cig," the man wheezed in a gravely voice. At least he sounded the part.

“You’re welcome. And let me ask if you know how long it’ll take from this moment until its uploaded? Obviously, I guess you’ll all have your measures for saving and reuploading it when they try to scrub it?” I asked.

In all honesty I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. I had to wonder if he saw through my act. Because this wasn’t like those old shows. We had no complex network of dissidents, organized and funded, waiting to claim justice again. All we had was each other, and a few unknown allies, reaching around in the darkness cast by a big shadow.

With a faint show of confidence, he responded: “Yeah, we have fairly decent measures in place for that inevitability. It will get out, you don’t need to worry about that, at least. As for the rest... well, we’ll see.”

As agreed, we waited for another fifteen minutes to pass and then we bid each other goodbye and departed. The transfer had been successful. In a few minutes, every detail of the QFHP would be spread around the dissident networks of the TogetherVerse. As I left a someone seemed to be watching me from a stool at the bar. But by now, it was too late. Going back was impossible.

3

Back to the Interrogation

“We see that you accessed two news articles relating to the case on Wednesday from your work computer,” asked the detective, a faint grin on his lips, as we reunited after the short break to continue their interrogation. The two women didn’t conceal their suspicion and both folded their arms as I waited patiently, letting them all marinate in the air of tension.

“Sure,” I responded as the tension reached its peak, “but I can swear to you that I knew really nothing of that whole thing until it came out yesterday,”

“When do you think the data breach occurred?” my boss asked with her eyebrow raised. I’m sure you think that almost got me. “I couldn’t know. Something like that could’ve happened a week, a month ago. I don’t know how long it takes to go from the release to the news media catching wind of it”. I was high enough in the company chain to know that employees’ internet usage was always monitored, and if certain words were searched for, that employee was auto-flagged. I assumed they’d updated it immediately after the leak became known about. For this reason, I searched for details of the story only after I saw another employee reading about it in the office. That way, I wouldn’t be the first.

The man continued: “The illegal data breach was made Sunday evening. The media got hold of the story Monday evening, and most people would’ve heard about at least by Tuesday morning. It was a big story. And one affecting your directly at that. Maybe you weren’t interested?”

“Well, like most people these days I try to take a break from the depressing news cycle. Now you’re asking me to remember one specific news story...”

“Didn’t you say that you follow the news... ‘more or less’ were the words you used, no?”

“I don’t know what to say. I guess ‘less’ is the operative word this time,” I exhaled deeply while rubbing my eyes and continued, “Look, I’m starting to get tired of this interrogation thing. You’re making me feel like a criminal. If I’m not being charged, I think I’m going to head out. We’ve been doing this for almost three hours.”

“You’re not being charged yet, Mr. Boca,” the older woman said as I headed for the door, “but from what we’ve seen today there will be further inquires.”

4 That Evening

As I sat on the electric tram that took me deep inside the zone of my living complex, I realized I could've played things a lot better. Especially at the end, where I grew stressed and terminated the interrogation. That wasn't good. But at least I was heading home, looking out the decaying, multi-story apartment complexes that towered high above the clouds as my tram passed them.

The local estate agents had some kind of deal with the Company, legal or otherwise. It meant that all the employees were able to be crammed together, in one of the three relatively secure parts of our city. Of the 3,000 people who lived in my apartment complex, 201 of them worked with me. From the thirty-second floor on which I lived, the view of the surrounding area could even be taken as nice; you were far enough away from the squalor, the trash, the sketchy people of unknown origin eyeballing you from doorways down below. From up high, the city looked like the clean, organized living space it was once intended to be.

But even considering relative safety of my area, as for the time you spent at the front door, well, it was better that you make it as short as possible. People have been stabbed or shot fumbling for their keys at the door, even with all of the private security that you paid for in a neighborhood like this. And so when I continued to swipe my key card at the entrance's card reader again and again, my panic rapidly overflowed as the little red light refused to turn blue. 'TEEP TEEP' the stupid thing kept emitting. I thought maybe if I kept trying to door would unlock: I'd get inside, I'd swipe it again at the elevator, get in the elevator and head high, high up to my thirty-second floor apartment at leave this godforsaken place for a few hours until it dragged me back again tomorrow morning.

But no. Even this little respite was asking too much. This wouldn't be where my problems ended. A shadow cast over the front door showed two human figures approaching me from behind. How I wanted them just to be local crackheads. Even the more aggressive kind, I didn't care. Slowly I turned around, knowing my hopes would be dashed. Two large men in police uniform stood firmly a couple of feet from me. Behind them stood a small, fat hunched over man and a thin young woman. Presumably, they were the sergeants, looking over the grunts who've been ordered to take me in.

"Are you Adam Boca"? One of the grunts asked.

For a while I stood in silence. Did I have to say yes? Could I somehow prevent the chain of events that will fall into place when I affirmed it?... No. "Yeah. That's me."

And of course, the inevitable: "We'd like you to come with us,". As I sat handcuffed and in the back of the police car, I saw my colossal apartment building slowly disappear off into the horizon as it picked up speed. It seemed like I would probably never see it again. And it didn't feel as bad as I thought.

5 The Final Interview

Surprisingly, they took me back to Company headquarters, not to a police station. We're still led to think that the business and governmental worlds are entirely separate, but as I suspected, this was just Old-world nostalgia. In reality, I was to be arrested by the state yet interrogated on private premises; all above board, all legal. Should've seen it coming. Still. With all of the building tension of the last few years, it was at least liberating to be resigned to some kind of definite fate. The evermore sophisticated neuroimaging techniques and psychometric tests my job mandated would've got me eventually, anyway. And so, as the police car pulled into that soulless parking lot that had greeted me on so many miserable weekday mornings, these were the kinds of thoughts that comforted me.

The two officers led me through the front door, up in the elevator to the fifteenth floor, past my cubicle (now my old cubicle) and down into the same makeshift interrogation room as before. Really, my past 24 hours had been a single, protracted interrogation, just with one brief interlude.

Inside the room sat the same stern, private detective as before, seemingly emboldened with the legal powers as a police detective. If he was tired from the long day, he didn't show it. My ex-boss wasn't present, but the other, older woman was still there, sitting down this time. I later discovered that her apparent role was to safeguard my rights, yet she didn't intervene at any point.

"It's late. They pay you overtime, detective?" I asked.

"This isn't a crime thriller, Adam," the detective said flatly.

"I would hope not." The detective ignored me and continued: "As a bright man like you has no doubt gathered, we were not entirely satisfied with your previous interview. No, that would be an understatement. Your interview revealed several areas of suspicion we would like to clear up. Enough suspicion, in fact, that we were able to issue a warrant for your arrest."

"Under which authority, I was wondering?"

"Under the Company's and, by extension, the government's. As you know, your alleged actions broke both the law and, worse still, your employment contract. As a legally-appointed independent enforcement contractor, I am authorized to keep you in custody on your employer's property. But let's not waste any more time with silly questions. Three months ago, you were virtually active in the TogetherLink, specifically, in the so-called Sexual Sphere. Of course, we believe that during this time you illegally handed over private, confidential data to an unknown third party."

"You're half right only, detective. Yes, I admit I was online there, as I'm sure you know. And of course, I met some people, as part of my own private life. But nothing I did was illegal."

"And why in such a place so known for its lax security? What were you hiding?"

"I only frequent those parts of TogetherLink due to extreme sexual fetishes that I don't want to disclose here" I said bluntly.

"Extreme fetishes, huh? Right, right. I wish I could believe it was so innocent. We know full well that insurrectionists have weaponized regulations used to protect the rights of marginalized communities for their own hate-filled agendas. You people are well aware that those who attend the Sexual Sphere are not registered upon entry, lest that information fall into the hands of hateful extremists. We believe that you have used these privacy laws for your own malicious ends. How do you respond to this claim?"

"I deny it, of course. I don't have any 'agenda', and I have as much right to use those areas as anyone else."

"Do you? Are you claiming to be a member of historically marginalized community now, Mr. Boca?"

"No. I'm only saying there are no laws forbidding my presence there. And from what I can see from here, despite all of your self-righteousness, neither are you a member!"

He sat back in his chair and showed the first expression of displeasure I'd seen, subtle as it was. "I trust that as I progress in years I will improve myself and purge my older self," his discomfort quickly changed into his normal stern self-confidence. "And besides, once the QFHP is implemented into TogetherLink, I will be permanently free of the burden of my prior terrestrial identity. I will be neither male nor human, I will be disembodied, non-gendered and a-cultural." Shocked to hear such a blatant admission – welcoming, even - of the awful implications of the technology that had recently taken over my life, I was unable to respond.

"Something on your mind, Mr. Boca?"

“There is,” I finally managed to say, “Where exactly does all this so-called progress that supposedly permeates the air come from anyway? This shiny promised land we all apparently have no choice but to shuffle towards? This directive to strip everything meaningful off from yourself? From the world? Does it emanate from a divine presence? From a quiet Universal consciousness that only shows itself slowly, piece by piece, but coincidentally only through those holding power? No. It comes from think-tanks and government initiatives, from well funded corporate directives. From an academic world only permitted to eternally repeat its own core principles narrative in an endless cycle. From a constant stream of advertising permitted to only sell products in a particular way, of movies permitted to only elicit particular kinds of emotions. And yet you sing its praises as if it was some ethereal being hanging above us. Our world today could’ve been any other world. Your trajectory is arbitrary and empty. Your idea of being some harbinger of a transcendental ideal of progress-in-itself is... pathetic delusion.”

“A nice speech and all, but I don’t concern myself with the arbitrary, Mr. Boca. Only with reality. And the reality is that you’ve broken our laws,” the detective quipped.

“Funny, I was taught at school and university that everything is arbitrary. Reality as such doesn’t exist. Neither do borders, nations or genders. And laws are the mere expression of power, acquired contingently. It is why we were told to live in a world without judgment, without fixed norms, without Insider and Other, without good and bad. Its funny how that viewpoint dissolved over the years, isn’t it?”

“Before our world was welcomed into the Six Star Conglomerate, it was a time when humanity will still finding the correct path, it was a time of transition. As of now, we have eliminated all possible scenarios that will lead us away from democracy. We have constructed for ourselves the perfect virtual system in which absolute democracy will truly flourish. This has now been proven scientifically, and implemented technologically,” the detective said, nearly boasting.

“What a tragic comedy it all is. You people have the narrowest of understandings of human nature and yet all of the power to implement your bastardized re-imagining of it! A tragedy on a massive time-scale... You’re like children who inherited a kingdom, or a stone age tribe that got nuclear bombs. You have no idea of what you’re doing or even why. That is why you could never do what you do in the clear light of day!” I shouted accusingly.

The detective appeared suddenly elated. “Excellent! Thank you for your input Mr. Boca. I must inform you that we have now acquired a reasonable motive.”

My eyes narrowed, “Detective, I haven’t admitted to anything. I am expressing my legally protected right to voice my opinion.”

“Not so, Mr. Boca. We already had CCTV footage and a witness of what you did that day, and we now have good reason to believe there was hate in your heart while doing it. An open and shut case.”

“What? That’s insanity! This isn’t good enough for a clear attribution of psychological motivation!”

“It’s good enough for a conviction,” the detective smiled. “Plus, we already confirmed your identity in the video footage. You were sitting with a known hate criminal. Oh, and your actions at work were recorded also. You didn’t know that but you should check your contract. You signed away permission to be constantly recorded for all of your time spent here. You were observed in the act of obtaining the data, leaking it and stirring and spreading hate.”

“Any alleged leakage would have been an act of political activism, not ‘hate’. What is ‘hate’ even supposed to mean here? You talk like some tribal shaman.”

"Does that really matter to you at this point, Mr. Boca?" He pushed a button on his tablet and it emitted several holographic screens. In parallel, I watched myself download the data onto the data stick, enter the sexual sphere and meet with the contact.

"But don't worry," he continued after the videos ended, "After you are convicted, there will be psychiatric counseling made available to help you with this. It will be a mandatory component of your sentence, and over the years you will become successfully rehabilitated. I've seen it happen repeatedly, the results are astounding. Of course, if you admit to your crime now, your sentence will be far lighter and we will instead focus more on your rehabilitation."

He was right. They had me on video retrieving the data and making the drop, they likely had me followed, and now they'd confirmed at least some kind of dissident disposition within me. As far as I knew, there wasn't one other person in this company who could've been the culprit. We'd have been friends, if there were. There was no doubt. All the arrows pointed towards me.

"Fine, then. I guess I'll confess. Rip the band-aid off. At this point, I have nothing to lose. The whistleblower was me. I did it with a clear conscience. And I would happily do it again. Now, at least the people can have some chance of resisting what you... no, what we have been doing to them. The Quantifiable Free Human Project must never succeed. It won't succeed. This much I know. You've all become so lost in your abstract models, your unassailable theories, insulated for so long from every counter-argument, every second thought. And now this long, winding line of madness is going to terminate in virtual imprisonment for all of humanity. It cannot go on any further!"

The detective folded his arms and began to speak in a quiet, confident voice, "You know, I actually took the job as private investigator for the Company specifically because of the QFH project. Its potential is really boundless. I know you must have some romantic idea of yourself as an intrepid fighter for freedom or some such nonsense. Just like the rest. But there are types like you in the emissions of the exhaust pipes of progress' engines each and every time humanity reaches a new threshold. And, yes, you might fight and resist and bite, but ultimately you will be left behind in the dust, alone, and we will progress. The QFHP represents humanity's greatest chance to leave behind its inhumanity, its animality, its cruelty..." he trailed off.

"At what expense? A complete severance of our nature? Of the physical world itself? Justified by what creed? Decided by who? By you!?"

"The physical world has to be let go! There is really no point in pining for it. It is no longer fit for the modern world. Its limited resources have always made the human being vicious. A zero sum world, where individuals ally with one another for tactical advantage to form groups, where people are driven to irrationality by myths and stories, where men become aggressive and driven for the sake of reproduction, like blind animals enslaved by an old fertility God. Disgusting! And we humans were worst of all! We formed not just groups but nations! We colonized countless worlds! Not just reproduction but rituals such as 'marriage', perpetuating the idea of gender for millennia! Now, we have been instrumental in wiping clean that debt to the galaxy which we incurred, in carving out a new path for all. In the new version of TogetherLink, we will leave behind the brutal fight for survival and reproduction, we won't have the ragged rough edges of a terrestrial animal, but the clean, rounded being of a number."

"Yes. The quantification of every human being who enters the TogetherVerse. I know what you're planning. An act of benevolence so great you must hide it from everyone! Perfect computability and perfect compatibility for all... Sacrificed at the altar of free will? Of identity?"

"Identity? Identity makes us feel that I am 'me' and 'we' are 'we' or that I am 'he' and not 'she'. Social constructions. Illusions. A computer bug corrupting our mainframe. What is identity? Is it your name? A name contains ties to a place. It has traces of the mountains, rivers, plains, your clan, your ancestor's occupation. There lies difference. Even worse, it became understood that names elicited connotations, human-sounding names would elicit different connotations to Abosian or Zalfas names. Much better for these differences to be replaced by the Number."

“And how much of the human is still linked to gender?” the detective continued. “Men continue to increase their muscle mass for reproductive advantages. Women continue to wear their hair long even today, echoes of a time in which they were not productive, in which they aimed to look beautiful to attract a man. Evilness! Or families who favored their own offspring, ruining any chance of permanent equality. These differences must be reduced into One. We are no longer a man or woman, but a person: two becomes One. The peoples of humanity and the Conglomerate have become one homogeneous people: many become One. But its still not enough. We still have not rid ourselves of the past. Its traces linger even today. But not for much longer,” the detective said finishing his speech.

I quickly stood up and my chair crashed to the floor, “This frantic need to sever yourselves from the past speaks to your own pathology. So what if parents care for their children? So what if women still have their hair long? So what if beauty has not been replaced by efficiency in every little nook and cranny on this planet? What harm did the need to create and preserve the beautiful, the different, the perennial, the long-lasting, the incalculable really do? Have you really gone so far that you can’t even look back and understand why both the animal in man at the bottom, and our search for find God at the top... must both be sliced apart in one mechanical swipe?”

The detective collected himself and explained calmly: “They introduced chance into an otherwise perfect, calculable system. It carved off something specific from the true core of humanity. Our true destiny. And in this core, we will remain the same front and back, east and west, at every angle. Each occupying a point on geometric grid. In the past, the things of the world were gathered and power was sought. Religions were built too, which said that same things were better than others. Values were constructed and excluded those who were outside of those values. Chaos! But the Number has no such value. Its only ‘value’ is the numerical value, placeable inside any vast system, unable to say if anything is ‘Good’ or ‘Bad’. And when we are permanently virtual in the TogetherLink in accordance with the Quantifiable Free Human Project, all of this will seem like a fading nightmare. We will forget all ties to the mud of this world.”

“And when our names are replaced with codes, when our identities replaced by avatars, when we are fully separated from our physical bodies, members of one virtual, homogeneous culture... how can you be certain this will last forever? A thousand tyrannical Utopians like you people have tried and failed,” I rebutted.

“Quality is the enemy of quantity. But equality is the friend of quantity. There have been clumsy attempts at equality before, we don’t deny it. But freedom only failed before because humanity lacked the technology to implement it. The Old World wasn’t fully demolished before people tried to build something better on top of it. With TogetherLink, we will all be the same distance from one another as everyone else. Those who resist progress will not be tolerated. This is our paradox of tolerance.”

“There we go. In reality, we’re still trapped within the same inescapable prism.”

“Stop waxing poetic. Explain yourself,” the detective demanded.

“We’re still enthralled to the fantasies of an elite of opinion-makers. The rest of us have no say over whether we want to join the TogetherLink. We don’t want to become mere numbers. There was no vote, no joint decision. And how can you say this new world is ‘better’ if you want to abolish all judgement, all means of making values? This is why for all your love of science you still talk like dark age mystics and cultists. Naive and mediocre fools like you were strung along into an ideological dead-end, curated by your own information channels. And that led you to here. And now you’re so far removed from the worlds of normal people you can’t even see them any more. So your reach now encompasses the entire globe now. So what? Flukes of history and advances in technology that you had no part in have simply carried you to this point. In fact, I was wrong to say we’re enthralled to your fantasies. We’re still enthralled to the fantasies of you middlemen who are themselves led along by the pragmatism of the powerful. Hasn’t it occurred to you how the quantification of all of mankind--”

“Of humankind,” he interjected.

“...How the quantification of *humankind* hands over unspeakable amounts of power to those in control of this virtual world? That we will be mere numbers, placeable anywhere, usable for anything, subtracted and added across a system at will. It is the final stage of a long journey of standardization as a means of neutralization. And you gullible managerial types are all so happy to skip along to this pied-piper’s tune, squeezing the purpose, the vitality, the livability out of life until its a grey rag, a neutral zero-point, condemning us to an irreversibly inhuman humanity. And I’m sure you think you’ll be congratulated by future historians as ushering in some perfect new era. But I tell you now, you’re very wrong.”

“Thank You, Mr. Boca” replied the detective evenly, “We’ve got all we need for now. For the record,” he leaned into the center of the table. “The interview will now be terminated and the recording has ended.”

6 Epilogue

I cannot say how long ago the events I described occurred. It could have been weeks, months or decades. If you’re reading this, there may still be time to act. From this cold, sealed-off, anonymous vantage point, I can have no access to the rest of you. I am unable to perceive anything of your time or space. All I can do is collect my story, and hope that one day I find a way to spread it. After the interview concluded, I discovered that my fate was far worse than I could’ve ever feared. Without even a trial, I was whisked into a containment cell virtually located in the beta version of the updated TogetherLink that I’d been fighting against. This must have been the most sadistic thing they could think of: I am a number, but I am here only as One. Singular. Alone. Trapped here in one large, boundless, grey void. I feel neither hunger nor thirst, somehow located both nowhere and everywhere.

But I have managed to hang onto something of my humanity, my will. For how much longer my mind will last is impossible to say. I have to hope that someone will gain access and free me. But be careful. Be smarter than I was.

All I have now is time. So I must wait for someone to find me. In the mean-time, savor every moment that you have, while you still have it.

Godspeed,

-Adam Boca, date unknown.

THE DEEP ROOTS OF KNOSSOS STATION

Michael de Valera

The red glow of 66 Knossos shone through the cockpit of The *Gallowglass* as it steadily approached the dying star's asteroid belt. Being now within ten minutes of its programmed destination, the starship's rudimentary AI beeped to life, waking up its owner from his troubled sleep.

"Good day computer. Status report," he croaked.

"Good day Captain," the ship AI's sterile baritone voice replied, "You are within ten minutes from your destination. Life support, artificial gravity, offensive and defensive systems are at 100 percent capacity. Engines are at 56% capacity. FTL drive operating at 3% capacity."

The captain gripped the torn padding on the pilot chair's armrest.

"Looks like we're stranded without this Knossos job."

"Affirmative. The nearest starport is 12 light years outside range."

"How much fuel do we need to return home?" the captain asked, already knowing the answer.

"Fifty liters of refined helium-3." He grimaced. The captain got up to stretch his arms and legs in the narrow space between the pilot's chair and the hatch leading to the rest of the ship. He left the cockpit and slid his way past the narrow corridor to the lavatory. Water spluttered out of the faucet into his great-grandfather's steel mess cup. Teuton checked the lavatory's display; only half a liter was left in the water tank.

The proximity alarm blared from the cockpit. The captain gulped down the precious cold liquid and bolted to his battle position.

"Unidentified gunship: do not attempt to land. Power down your engine and shields and wait for a patrol craft to board you for further instruction. Failure to comply will result in forfeiture of persons and possessions for the Knossos Mining Corporation's use," a voice barked over the communication channel. The captain threw himself back onto the pilot's chair and joined the channel.

"This is Captain Teuton Lefauvre of The *Gallowglass*; I'm here on the invitation of Manager-General Baltus Commenox. I will power down my shields and weapons when I'm safely landed in a docking bay."

"Standby."

Teuton sat back in his chair and glared at the station. Its appearance was unremarkable, unlike its history. Knossos station was built over the only known source of rebitium, a compound the galaxy's best scientists have been unable to completely identify or use other than as a supercharger for faster-than-light engines. The Knossos Mining Corporation's monopoly of the resource made it the wealthiest entity in the sector until unscrupulous business practices and advances in FTL technology brought the station into a state of decline.

"Landing permission granted. Land in Bay 7."

Teuton carefully guided his ship into the interior of the asteroid. The inside of the station showed its age more than its exterior: more than half of the wall and ceiling paneling was replaced with exposed rock, and what paneling was left was either rusted or cracked. The uniforms of the mechanics and security personnel scurrying about the spaceport were weathered and worn down by years of poor maintenance and neglect. Even the personnel themselves looked worn down and tired. Just being in the station was making Teuton feel tired.

Teuton set down The *Gallowglass* snugly into Bay 7 and powered down its shield and weapon systems. The lights illuminating the spaceport flickered on and off for a few seconds. Teuton looked out the cockpit window and saw four security personnel adorned in weathered black flak armor and armed with slender white projectile rifles standing by the exit.

Running a diagnostic on his power armor and debating over carrying a high powered beam or anti-personnel pistol before holstering them both, Teuton took his time to prepare for his mission. He tuned and assembled his laser rifle into a carbine more suitable for close quarters combat while watching a spindly bald man outside on the hull viewfeed. He was profusely sweating over his silver jumpsuit, preparing for and then hesitating to knock on the gunship's aft blast door. After having a good laugh and stocking his utility belt with munitions, Teuton slung the rifle behind his back, donned his helmet and opened the aft blast door of his ship.

"On behalf of the Knossos Mining Corporation, welcome!" the bureaucrat exclaimed, "You couldn't have arrived at a better time, the situation has grown critical." The bureaucrat's cyan blue augmented eye implants contrasted sharply with his gray, clammy skin, and he stank of sweat and disinfectant chemicals exuding from under his jumpsuit.

"Where is Commenox?" Teuton said through his helmet's speaker.

"Manager-General Commenox. Yes he is waiting for you right outside the miner's district. I've been assigned to help you with your mission. My name is Taris, by the way, I'm the Secretary to the Manager-General..." the bureaucrat trailed off. Teuton nodded. Taris smiled and placed his hand on a piece of bright white wall paneling. After a few seconds the panel beeped and slowly, inch by inch it slid down into the floor, revealing a dark passage through the wall behind it.

"This way please," Taris said, gesturing to Teuton and the four security personnel. When all four of them were in, Taris tapped on the ceiling panel. The wall panel slowly rose before short circuiting and stopping a meter short of its proper place.

"Someone will fix that. Follow me please," Taris said. The bureaucrat and his security escort briskly walked down the service corridor while Teuton followed, slouching to fit his two meter frame, behind them.

"My apologies," Taris said, "Normally I would be proud to give you a tour of the station but the recent worker unrest makes that problematic. It all began as a strike but negotiations broke down and they started killing security and maintenance personnel alike. Yesterday bombs went off in the administrative and water treatment modules. The damage was so severe that the Manager-General was forced to put the station on lockdown until the violence stops and the damage can be repaired."

They came up against a blast door which gave the five men momentary peace from Taris' incessant yammering as he unlocked it.

"We'll now be going through the residential module. Please make as little noise as possible through here. Residents have been required to stay in their domiciles for 32 hours now and we don't want to agitate them. They can't see us, but might hear us," Taris said, opening the hatch.

The service corridor of the residential module was dimly lit by the occasional light that came in through the one way mirror installed in each domicile. Many of the residents were laying in their beds either asleep or dead. Most of the active ones were sitting on their beds, surrounded by empty food, drink, and narcotic packages and consuming their preferred comfort media. The rest were either barricading their doors or trying to break them down.

Other residents weren't so lucky. Taris would quietly gasp as he passed by dozens of scenes of wrists slashed open by their own hand, throats cut open with shards of glass, and whole families soaked in their own coagulated blood. He quickened his pace and his escort followed suit, their heavy boots echoing through the corridor. Teuton drew his anti-personnel pistol and chambered a round. His gut felt something very off.

Fewer and fewer lights were on as the group went deeper through the service corridor. The residents who were still alive had bloodshot eyes, almost all of them were in a confused haze and covered in blood and bile. Others had torn out their own eyes and sat contently on their beds, as if waiting for something.

The guard to Taris' left turned his head briefly to look at a tree with large roots drawn in blood on one of the mirrors. The guard behind him jabbed the barrel of his rifle into his back.

"Eyes forward!" he barked.

At that moment a hand smashed a small hole through the glass, gripping the guard's throat. The hand was covered in sores and missing patches of flesh, and its fingertips were replaced by bloody sharpened bone. An emaciated man sprung into view of the mirror, his decomposing flesh and pus-filled empty eye sockets so horrifying that for a moment the four other men stood helplessly while the ghoulish man's grip tightened around his victim's throat.

"Don't fight. She only wants to show us peace," the man said, his voice sounding guttural as roaring water.

Teuton snapped back to his senses, instinctively raised his pistol and fired two sabot slugs into the ghoulish man's chest and one into his head. He fell to the floor with a splat; two large, smoking holes where his lungs and brain had once been. His victim slumped back onto the wall before collapsing, his neck having been snapped. The third gunshot echoed throughout the corridor. A moment of palpable silence passed before the stale air was filled with muffled shrieking and violent banging.

"I told you to stay quiet!" Taris hissed, his forehead seeping sweat.

The three guards raised their cumbrously long rifles down the corridor, which was filled with the shadows of mutating residents smashing their mirrors.

"There's no time, run for it!" Teuton shouted. Taris and his escort bolted down the corridor as fast as his skinny legs could propel him and they disappeared around a corner. Teuton turned on his helmet light and made his way after them, finger firmly on the trigger. Every domicile in this stretch of corridor had no lights on and lay in total darkness. Teuton's flashlight had an effective range of ten meters and it showed no obvious exit in sight. A symphony of howling and frenzied footsteps was approaching fast. He lit a flare and hurled it at the corner behind him and readied his pistol. He had time to take one balancing breath before the first resident appeared around the corner.

Everything went silent.

"Stay back!" Teuton shouted.

"The water was poison. Poison! Manager-Genital forced us to drink it. Said we were crazy. Well...who's crazy now?!" In the weak outer reaches of his helmet light, Teuton saw the woman as a silhouette spreading her arms out to hold back the others. "I knew what was going on in the mine. I didn't say anything because ..." She stumbled forward into his light. Her bare head was covered in bleeding lesions and she was missing her right eye.

"I drank her essence. When I die I'm going to be a part of her. And you," she said, letting out a pained, toothless grin. She stuck her fingers into her remaining eye. Teuton's knuckles turned white around the pistol grip.

"You're gonna be bloody pulp!" she screamed, holding her newly torn out left eye. Teuton silenced her with a round square in the forehead. A dozen residents in various stages of some sort of mutation bum rushed him. Teuton fired as quickly as he could without a single round missing its target. He took out the fastest four residents with the rest of his twenty round magazine before switching to his beam pistol. Squeezing the trigger, Teuton burned and dismembered the rest of them with a continuous red beam of energy until the pistol overheated. He holstered it and drew his energized blade from its sheath on the center of his torso armor plate, but no more ghouls remained standing.

A door opened 20 meters behind him, flooding the corridor with light. Taris popped out from behind it.

"You're still alive?! This way! Quickly!" he shouted.

Teuton regained his composure and returned the knife to its sheath. He walked to the opened panel and was met with two laser rifles shoved in his face and a blinding light.

“Clear. He’s healthy, let him in.”

When his vision returned Teuton saw two Special Weapons and Tactics security personnel lowering their laser rifles and returning to guarding the secret passage.

“Welcome to the commercial district!” Taris exclaimed.

The commercial district made the station’s spaceport look pleasant. All main entrances and exits were welded shut from the inside and all others were guarded heavily. Recreation and dining facilities were repurposed into shelter for the survivors of whatever disaster that was plaguing the station. High ranking KMC personnel and their families huddled together under silver blankets and shared rationed protein bars and cans of imported water. The medical clinic was overflowing with wounded mechanic and guard personnel, waiting to be tended by two nurse technicians and a single medical android.

“The Manager-General is waiting for you in his office,” Taris said, pointing to the wide double door guarded by the rest of the station’s SWAT team, “Baltus’ Bar, my favorite place on the station.”

Teuton made his way to the bar and the guards moved aside to let him pass and then fell right back into place. The inside of the bar stank of the plastic-like stench of narcotic vapor. So much of it was floating about like a cloud that Teuton’s helmet began to fog as he passed through a glowing quartz curtain and entered the main bar area.

“At my darkest hour he arrives; clad in ancient armor and carrying weapons from a bygone golden age of warfare. Teuton Lefauvre, the best mercenary in this part of the galaxy and the only man who can save my station,” a digital voice box buzzed.

It was difficult to determine where exactly the man of Baltus Commenox began and where the machine ended. The only visibly human parts of him were his head and right arm, with the rest of him encapsulated inside a golden egg shaped chair that floated a meter above the floor. His organic arm reached for the injector fixed to his chair and placed it in his neck, and he inhaled and subsequently exhaled a massive cloud of the plastic smelling vapor.

The Manager-General grabbed a can of imported sweetened water from a refrigerated compartment on his hover chair and brought it to his lips, savoring each drop. He threw a can to Teuton, who opened it and filled his armor’s drinking pouch.

“Even before the recent unfortunate events, Knossos station was decaying. I always knew it was a finite resource but the rebitium started drying up sooner than even the computers expected. I needed to keep running the station at a profit, so when he offered me a blank check I was unable to refuse.

“Presenting himself as an archeologist, Dr. Erber Meyer wanted to study the source of rebitium and offered us a lot of money to conduct his experiments. The results of which you have already had the pleasure of encountering. Whatever that mad doctor is doing down there is threatening my business and this station’s very existence!” Commenox slammed his fat arm against the hoverlift’s armrest.

“What do you need me to do?” Teuton asked.

“I need you to go down to the bottom level of the mine and bring the doctor to me. It is imperative you bring him back alive... so that he can find a cure for whatever madness he’s infecting this station’s people with. My men will provide support and take care of pacifying any resistance between you and the elevator leading to the bottom level. I sent for you because I knew no one else had the skill to complete this mission in a timely manner and with the utmost discretion that your services are renowned for,” the Manager-General said.

Commenox’s voice box went silent and he focused his two hundred year old organic eyes through Teuton’s helmet right into his. A compartment opened in front of the chair and he pulled out a silver cylinder and placed it on the bar counter.

“Five liters of highly refined helium-3 infused with rebitium. This and nine other canisters just like it will be yours when Dr. Meyer is delivered... safely to me.”

Teuton nodded.

“Very good. Please make haste, the station’s hull has taken heavy damage. Another bombing and we risk mass decompression. My secretary will escort you to the mining district and introduce you to Captain Varrus who will assist you in any way he can.”

Teuton turned to leave.

“One more thing. Rebitium is so durable that even mining lasers can’t harm or ignite it. No need to worry about collateral damage. That goes for the miners, too. Understood?”

“Understood.”

The Manager-General placed the injector back into his neck and filled his lungs with vapor, covering Teuton’s exit with a cloud of mist. Leaving the bar, Teuton saw that the Manager-General’s SWAT team had left their posts in front of the bar. He scanned the district; Taris was nowhere to be found, either.

Orange lights flashed overhead and an alarm blared. Teuton turned to the large blast door separating the commercial district from the mine. The hydraulic motors groaned and the massive door opened, letting in a cloud of dust and the sound of small arms fire and mining lasers being exchanged. Two security personnel guided a hovering lift covered in smoldering, desiccated corpses.

In the corner of his eye, Teuton saw the station’s SWAT team stacking up outside the secret corridor entrance. Behind them was Taris, covered in a flak vest that was twice his size and awkwardly carrying a boot pistol. He locked eyes with Teuton and smirked, saluting him before disappearing into the corridor. The orange lights stopped flashing and the large door began to close. Teuton reloaded his anti-personnel pistol and holstered it as he made his way to the doors. He slid between them right before they slammed shut and drew his carbine.

The paneling and flooring of the commercial district was replaced by the bare rock of the mining district. The distinct sounds of caseless ammunition popping and overheating mining lasers whirring emanated down from a diagonal hallway leading to the mine. The mining district itself was entirely carved into the asteroid, with the only fixtures being artificial lights and a crane used to transport rebitium rich rock into the processing machine.

Teuton peeked around a corner to assess the situation. The cave that led to the mine elevator was blocked by barricades made from rubble and broken mining equipment that let the miners shoot from cover and concealment. The insurgent miners also managed to mount a mining laser to the cockpit on top of the crane to rain death from above on the hapless KMC Security. The only cover Teuton could find was behind a heavy transport truck certified for the vacuum of space. Hiding behind it were a dozen security guards huddled together, too pinned down to effectively return fire.

Thermal vision revealed 21 combatants in the cave and three in the crane cockpit; less than half were armed with lasers. Teuton aimed his carbine at the crane and increased the energy output to penetrate through its hull. He squeezed the trigger for five seconds, long enough to melt through the cockpit’s titanium plating and cook its occupants alive. The large beam of green energy attracted the miners’ fire. A man with a red cybernetic eye wearing a black beret and wielding a laser pistol shouted orders and the battered security personnel peeked out from cover and focused their fire on the source of the red laser bolts in the mine.

As the miners returned their attention to the guards, Teuton dashed behind the heavy truck.

“Captain Varrus?” he asked the guard in the beret.

“You the mercenary? About time you arrived; they have a utility walker reinforced with armor and a mining laser. We don’t have the firepower to take it down,” the beleaguered Captain said.

Teuton checked the charge on his rifle: 73 percent. He withdrew a fragmentation grenade from his belt.

“After this goes off, I’m going to need your squad to give me covering fire,” he said. The Captain nodded and signaled his team to reload and prepare as Teuton hurled the grenade behind the rubble barricades. Five seconds of panicked shouting came from the miners before a small explosion shattered their makeshift stockades.

“Now!” Captain Varrus shouted.

The remaining security personnel fired a volley at the mine entrance. Teuton crawled under the heavy truck until the mine entrance was in sight. A heavier beam of red energy shot out from the cave and burned a hole through the truck’s side. Teuton in a panic pulled the trigger, illuminating the mine entrance bright green until he saw smoke pouring out. He rolled out from under the truck, carbine pointed forward.

One by one, the disheveled, emaciated miners poured out from the mine entrance, followed by their equally destitute families. The miners kept their hands raised and offered no resistance when the guards hit them with the butts of their rifles and corralled their families in an electrified cage.

“Captain, the children’s tongues have all been cut out,” a guard reported.

“What horror,” Varrus said.

“The only horror is what your damned company has done to us. Slavery, experiments, turning our children into monsters!” a frail voice cried out. Leaning against the smoldering wreck of the utility walker was an old man with blood staining his long gray beard. His bloodshot blue eyes followed Teuton as he approached him.

“Is Dr. Erber Meyer down in that mine?” he asked.

“Who cares?” the old man spat, “You’re all going to end up on level two and get what you deserve.”

Captain Varrus marched past Teuton and stood over the old man.

“Answer his question!” he barked, pressing his pistol to the old man’s forehead. “Yes, the quack is still on the bottom level.”

“Did you misappropriate and illegally modify this piece of company equipment?” Varrus asked, pointing at the walker. “I was assigned that thing when I got my first job on this station. When I was actually paid for my work. I figured with the backpay KMC owes me I might as well make the walker mine--” Varrus pulled the trigger and scrambled the old man’s brain with a purple plasma bolt.

He turned to Teuton, who walked past him to call the elevator up.

“Amazing performance, chap. Worth every liter. I’ll clear the second level, the bottom level is all yours,” he said. Varrus gathered half of the remaining security guards, cramming them into the elevator with Teuton before making their way down.

Level two was dug 50 meters into the crust of the asteroid. It had been stripped clean of retibium for decades and had been repurposed into a living quarters for the miners and their families. All of the lights on the second level had been smashed, leaving the entire level pitch black. Varrus was the first to get out of the elevator, shining a red beam of light out from his cybernetic eye.

“Lights on,” he whispered.

A series of clicks echoed through the elevator shaft as the guards turned on the lights attached to their rifles and filed out of the elevator.

“Good luck, merc,” Varrus said.

Teuton nodded, and then watched the Captain and his squad disappear into the palpable darkness of level two. The bottom level of the mine lay near the center of the asteroid. As the elevator made its way to the bottom, Teuton’s eyes were met with violet light coming from the excavation site. In the center of the excavation site was what appeared to be a fossilized tree whose trunk was over one hundred meters tall and reached the second level. It looked like a fusion of a redwood tree and rotting concrete planted over a fuzzy white moss covered in blue mold spores. Around it was a trench that unearthed the tree’s sharp, spiny roots underneath. Hanging down from above were dehydrated, shriveled vines casting long shadows against the violet light.

Teuton approached the site, not taking his eyes off of it. Silence ensued. He circled around, careful to keep his distance from the exposed roots. He found a large tent covered in ultraviolet lights. A man’s silhouette moved about inside. Teuton held his breath and slowly snapped an underslung attachment to the bottom of his pistol.

“Dr. Erber Meyer?” Teuton asked. The figure stopped.

“Yes?”

Teuton inserted a non-lethal round and put his finger over the launcher’s trigger.

“Manager-General Commenox has paid me a great deal to escort you back to him safely,” Teuton said.

“Has he now? Has he actually paid you yet?” Dr. Meyer asked.

“That’s none of your concern. You need to come with me now.”

“Very well. Give me a moment to prepare my things,” Dr. Meyer said.

Teuton looked at the fossilized tree, and then at the violet light shining down on the empty elevator. Through the tent he saw Dr. Meyer bringing a cup to his lips.

“We need to leave,” he said.

“I’m dead either way so I’d much rather take my time preparing for it,” the doctor said, activating a datasphere. “I knew Commenox could be swayed with money but I didn’t have any, you see? So I told him that if I could study the source of rebitium I could make him live forever! He agreed, like I knew he would, but he couldn’t leave well enough alone...”

“Enough. Get out from there,” Teuton barked, “Now!”

Dr. Meyer groaned, grabbed his cane and hobbled his way out of the tent. The doctor was a bookish man, with small eyes made to look large under thick framed glasses, and shriveled, twitching hands plagued by decades of arthritis. He clutched a recording datasphere.

“When I began my work here I hypothesized this asteroid was originally a starship from a long, long dead race, and that rebitium was its decaying fuel. I was wrong, however. Rebitium isn’t fuel; it’s blood. Sap to be more accurate. Sap from the remains of its pilot.” He looked at the fossilized tree.

Teuton suppressed a laugh. “The tree? The tree was the pilot?” he asked.

Dr. Meyer smiled and nodded. “I couldn’t find any control mechanism but I did find petroglyphs carved into what once was the original stone vessel before millions of years of dust and ice expanded it to its current size. Their technology is beyond our comprehension.”

“Very interesting, you can tell me the rest on the way back,” Teuton said, gesturing with his pistol.

The doctor huffed and limped towards the exit. Teuton noticed the bulb in the UV lamp above the elevator door start to flicker as the doors shut. The digital display over the controls flashed; the elevator was being called up to the second level.

“The sap being useful starship fuel is entirely incidental; in fact, its exploitation as such has led to this disaster. After a century, rebitium was rendered impractical for use as fuel, so to save money the Commenox family enslaved the miners and their families and prevented them from leaving the district. A generation of children were born and raised in the damp darkness of this mine,” Dr. Meyer said.

Teuton looked at the fossilized tree and then up at the cave ceiling, biting his lip under his helmet. He checked the elevator display. Now it was being called back up to the entrance. Dr. Meyer was still making his way from the tent to the elevator.

“It’s amazing how something so beautiful can be the result of such a terrible act of greed. The children were able to make contact with this very being,” Dr. Meyer said, placing his hand on the trunk of what Teuton thought was a fossilized tree.

Teuton’s helmet detected screams coming from the top level. He removed the attachment from his pistol and holstered it, swapping it for his carbine. The power cell had only 43 percent charge left.

“By keeping the children in a constant state of REM sleep, I was able to learn their language and decipher the petroglyphs,” he said, pointing to a strip of stone etchings next to the tree, “they tell of their species’ golden age millions of years ago. So secure they were in their technological supremacy that the species turned inward, isolating themselves in stone vessels such as this where their every desire was met. Their bodies and minds, apparently located in their roots, decayed over time,” Dr. Meyer explained to an increasingly anxious Teuton.

Teuton punched the call button.

“What does that have to do with what’s going on in this station?” Teuton asked.

“Why do you ask? What is happening?” Dr. Meyer asked, leaning against the elevator guard rail. Teuton stared blankly at him. “Oh, that. I suppose some of the rebitium mixed in with the ice that’s harvested for the station’s drinking water. Diluted sap seems to only cause confused madness. With concentrated sap, however, I’m hoping to make a more direct connection with the entity,” Dr. Meyer explained.

The elevator was now slowly making its way down again. Dr. Meyer hunched over and vomited out a thick clear liquid. “Please pardon me. This is all quite distressing, I couldn’t keep my lunch,” he said with a chuckle.

“Relax. The elevator’s almost here,” Teuton said, reassuring himself more than Dr. Meyer.

“I understand what’s happening in the station,” the doctor said, “they want to help. Help heal this creature. Help her roots grow...”

The elevator stopped at the second level again. Dr. Meyer tossed his cane aside and walked over to the tree, his datasphere silently following over his shoulder. He grabbed one of the shriveled vines and ran his hand against its tiny sharp thorns. He squeezed his hand and blood oozing through his tightened fingers.

“That’s it. I feel much better now. This feels amazing,” he said, sighing in ecstasy. Teuton was entirely focused on the elevator display.

“Do you hear that?” Dr. Meyer asked.

“No, I can’t hear anything over your droning,” Teuton said.

“Whispers. She finally speaks to me!” Dr. Meyer screamed, gripping the vine with both bleeding hands.

Teuton turned around and prepared to stun the old man but stopped cold. The stoic mercenary stared at the mad archeologist as the now rejuvenated vine wrapped itself around his neck and inserted its pointed barb into his jugular. Teuton snapped out of his shock and raised his carbine, prompting the vines to tighten and suspend Dr. Meyer in the air.

“It’s quite alright my friend, she just wants to help us,” he said, in between groans.

The elevator was now making its descent back to the bottom level. Teuton fired a green beam of energy at the vine’s base at the top of the tree to zero effect. The vine lowered Dr. Meyer over the exposed roots and pulled itself out from his neck, leaving a swollen bump to keep the wound closed. Teuton repeatedly fired green beams from his carbine at the vine as close as safely possible to Meyer, only managing to hit his floating datasphere.

“What? Yes...I understand. It’s for the best, I understand,” Dr. Meyer whispered. The vine loosened and he began removing his clothing.

“What are you doing, you lunatic?! Now’s your chance to escape!” Teuton shouted. His rifle had overheated too close to zero charge and couldn’t expend the last 12 percent of energy left. He shouldered it and drew his anti-personnel pistol, replacing the underslung nonlethal round with an incendiary one.

“Why would I want to? I’ve never felt more fulfilled. Bring the Manager-General down here; tell him I’ve found a way to make him immortal.” The vine slithered over his stomach and sliced it open from naval to his Adam’s apple, covering the exposed dried roots with Dr. Meyer’s blood and intestines. Once moistened with blood, the roots began to writhe like millions of tiny brown worms. The vine dropped his body onto the wriggling roots which began to grind up and chew his flesh before absorbing it.

Teuton's blood boiled and he fired an incendiary round at the exposed roots. An ear piercing crackling erupted from the tree and the whole asteroid shook. The previously shriveled vines were now twitching and making their way towards him. Teuton tossed an incendiary grenade, the last incendiary weapon on him, between him and the Tree. While the fire kept the vines back, Teuton stumbled towards the elevator, which had finally reached the bottom floor. He locked himself in and hit the button to return to the top level.

Through the fire, Teuton saw the vines use Dr. Meyer's discarded clothing to cover the burning roots and snuff out their flames as the elevator ascended. He loaded an explosive round into the underslung launcher and took a deep breath. As the elevator passed the entrance to the second level Teuton stopped it and shined his helmet light into the endless dark in front of him. He saw dozens of bloody footprints heading into the level, but couldn't find any heading back towards the elevator.

"Captain Varrus!" he shouted.

Silence.

"Captain Varrus!" Teuton shouted again, as loud as his courage would let him.

His helmet picked up a shuffling noise just outside the range of his light. It stopped. Teuton stepped out of the elevator and focused his light slightly farther. Just a meter outside range of his light his helmet picked up a wet *plop* sound. Teuton jumped back into the elevator and continued his ride up.

When he got to the top level, Teuton found the mining district completely devoid of life. No security personnel, no miners, no wounded, not even splashes of blood to suggest what had happened to them. Teuton began walking away just as the elevator began to descend to the second floor once again.

Teuton gripped his pistol as he passed under the curtain leading into Baltus' Bar. No clouds of vapor greeted him, only the golden husk that was the Manager-General's hovering chair and life support device laying cracked open on the floor. Above it on the bar counter was the canister. Teuton checked and found that the fuel was indeed inside. He attached the canister to his back armor and left his latest employer's bar.

Teuton exited the commercial district through the service corridor, which was just as empty as the rest of the station. He was halfway to the spaceport when the station's white fluorescent lights shut down. A few moments later the red emergency lights turned on. All the doors of the residential district that hadn't been bashed down were now open, but the district remained still. Even the corpses had disappeared, leaving only a trail of blood leading out into the hallway. Teuton quickened his pace.

When he reached the corridor leading back to the spaceport the silence that plagued Teuton's gut was broken by the sound of distant yammering. The panel leading to the passage was still open and evidently had not been fixed. Teuton looked through, finding Taris berating two SWAT personnel outside The Galloglass' aft blast door. Taris, whose silver jumpsuit had been torn to shreds, pushed aside his two guards and aimed a pistol at the exterior door control.

Before he could try to blast it open Teuton fired half his pistol's magazine at the trio, cracking their armor and filling the two guards with fist-sized holes.

Teuton tried to climb over the malfunctioning panel but the blood accumulated on his armor made gaining purchase difficult. After making it over, Teuton stood up and received three kinetic rounds to his chest armor, knocking the wind out of him. Taris, using his fallen guards as cover, continued to pull the trigger, not noticing the slide of his pistol was now locked back; empty. Teuton instinctively returned fire and the impact of the slug blew Taris' hand off at the wrist, still gripping the empty pistol. He fell to his knees and screamed at the sight of his own blood.

Teuton walked past him and opened the blast door to his ship.

"The power's out, you can't get out of here without getting the backup power online. I know the code. Maybe we can help each other out," Taris said, tying his Employee of the Year necklace around his bleeding wrist.

The aft door to The *Gallowglass* closed, and soon its thrusters carried the ship away.

“Sucker! You’ll be dead before me! They’ll send help and then they’ll make me Manager-General of this station!” Taris shouted, smirking. He laid his head down on the cold spaceport floor.

“I actually made it,” he whispered.

Taris took a deep breath, closed his eyes and took in the silence while he figured out his next move. Then, coming from the service corridor, he heard the sound of shuffling, followed by a wet *plop*.

In The *Gallowglass*, Teuton manually flew through the spaceport until he ran up against the airlock, which without power wouldn’t open. The ship hovered in the cramped tunnel while Teuton placed the fuel canister into its fusion reactor and then made his way to the cockpit. Crashing into the comfort of the pilot’s chair, Teuton primed the ship’s laser and blasted open the airlock. The red emergency lights began flashing all over the station, signaling a decompression lockdown. The *Gallowglass* howled through the opening before the emergency blast doors shut, turning Knossos Mining Station into a sealed tomb.

Teuton waited until he had completely left the orbit of the asteroid before turning the ship’s autopilot back on.

“Good day, computer,” he said.

“Good day, Captain,” the ship’s AI replied.

“This job’s payout was less than desired. We’re taking a detour before we go home. Bring us to the nearest spaceport, the one twelve light years away,” he ordered.

“Setting course now, captain. Estimated time of arrival: 36 hours.” Teuton sighed and removed his helmet. The sweet water the governor had given him made his mouth dry. He went to the lavatory to fill his canteen with water and noticed that the ship’s tank had been filled.

FAR FLUNG

Type_Other

The pair of steel rings around the lithe man's left collarbone glinted in the firelight. His were uniquely adorned with thin metal trinkets hanging from short chains, which jingled together as chimes while he bounced on the balls of his feet with the gleeful, springing confidence of a child--this crazy, twice-tagged killer.

The neck of his shirt had been stretched loose to hang over his left shoulder and show them off, as most inmates took to doing after the overthrow, keeping their tokens of defiance on proud display. He held his short, sharpened shower pole like a fencing sword, and his other arm up in a shrugging stance that said 'Try me! I dare you!'

"I don't have anything!" Dal shouted, cowering next to Arlo.

The armed man's playful bouncing stopped and his smile faded. He eyed the burning corpse in the corner, his clan's calling card, then turned back at the two of them with his head tilted. "You gonna lie to me too?"

"W-We're not trying to cause any trouble!" Dal stuttered out. "We just got here!"

His shirt neck was kept straight, having nothing underneath to show. Only a fresh arrival during the overthrow, Dal not only had no tags, but never got the experience needed to know: weakness doesn't work on people like this.

"Put it down," Arlo ordered. He was speaking out of line, himself having been tagged only once. "We're allied, you and me." He pulled down the loosened neck of his drab prison uniform a bit farther than usual, displaying the motif of the Spectres, Galla's gang, branded into his left shoulder. "See?"

The way this man's tags were decorated with clattering junkyard jewelry hanging off them indicated he was a member of Hoss's gang, the Boars, with whom Galla had agreed to a truce some weeks ago.

"Put it down or you'll have us spilling each other's blood over nothing. You think Hoss would like that?" Weakness wouldn't work, Arlo knew. Hit him hard with a direct command to show you're willing to assert yourself. Follow it up with a little reason. End on a credible threat. The right combination of ingredients.

The man leveled his weapon at Dal and peered down it like a rifle. "And you, barebone?"

"My property," Arlo replied instead, lying. "We're scavenging this area. If you're interested, I might sell him to you later." Distract. Lighten the tension. Change the subject.

"You were scavenging?" The man came in closer as he spoke. "Then it's my turn now, isn't it?" His face was soon only an inch from Arlo's. "So stay out of my way."

After a moment of silent stares, Hoss's man pivoted all at once like a coiled spring, lashing out at Dal with his fist still clenching the iron pole. The heavy sucker punch sent Dal crumpling to the floor, covering his bloodied mouth and crying out. His glasses, sent flying, clattered to the ground a moment later. The man again tilted his head and smiled at Arlo. "Got it?"

He nodded, and let him get the last word. People like this need to feel powerful. The man sauntered down one of the dim maze's halls, lined lengthwise with pipes and grates, the jingling adornments to his tags eventually escaping earshot.

At one's first sign of disobedience, of carelessness, of violence, or of anything that happened to upset the wrong warden, they were pulled away. The offender was marked permanently with their first subclavicle piercing, a steel ring affixed around the left collarbone. This first tag was so easy to get because its only purpose was to make a statement: stay in line. With the second came a beating within an inch of one's life. With the third came torture that went on for weeks. There was no fourth; such inmates were considered irredeemable and thrown outside.

Excess tags were the sign of a troublemaker. 'Stay away from this person.' 'He'll get you extra attention.' 'He'll get you killed.' They were an outcast class when Facility-M still functioned as intended.

After the final riot not even a year ago, that order flipped. The revolution turned those piercings into status symbols. 'Look what I've been through,' they showed. 'Look at the part I played in taking over this whole prison.' When the wardens were gutted, weak as they were, so too was the old strict structure, replaced by countless chaotic factions, the *de facto* hierarchy of tags, and whatever six thousand felons trapped in a tin can on a ball of ice could impose on one another.

It was only after the two-tagged Boar's noises had faded fully that Arlo spoke.

"Explain." He held out a hand. "Why did you need me to come here?"

Dal grabbed hold and was lifted to his feet. "I heard you were a doctor."

"Who told you that?" He averted his eyes, rubbing and wiping blood from his aching nose.

"I don't know; it's just one of those things that goes around. You're the Spectres' medic or something, right?" Arlo stared, silent, waiting long enough for him to look back from the Boar's charred handiwork and meet his gaze.

"Again: why do you need me?"

"We..." Dal hesitated. "I mean... I can just say there's something I need a doctor's opinion on."

Arlo puzzled the situation together as Dal led them through one of Facility-M's mostly abandoned wings. A dim maze of corridors that had long-since been scoured for anything useful, it had only graffiti from gangs that had already fallen apart, and exposed electrical wiring allowing only an occasional emergency light to guide the way. What he suspected was something he desperately wanted to be both true and false.

"This is what I think it's about, isn't it?" asked Arlo.

"What's that?" Dal asked in return.

"The noise."

"Oh, uhm... I haven't heard of that."

Rumors had circulated the prior week about something that shouldn't have been possible in such a place. A noise some claimed to have heard. One that shouldn't exist. In an unused hall, identical in appearance to countless others crossed, Dal opened a narrow iron door into a storage closet. "Come in. Close it behind you."

Arlo followed and did so. He saw only janitorial items about the cluttered place, but soon noticed in the corner a faint light slipping out around the edges of a long, hip-high cabinet. As Dal slid it open and filled the room with the glow of the small lantern within, the rumored sound of what shouldn't be possible was heard--a noise that couldn't exist on an all-male prison planet a million miles from nowhere--a crying baby.

Dal turned back with the infant in his arms, wrapped in repurposed bath towels. Arlo turned for the door.

"Wait!" Dal pleaded. "He's sick."

Arlo shook his head, leaving his hand on the latch. Not only was it true, but he had been pulled into the middle of it. This was dangerous information to have. A child implied a woman, which could only have been some never-before-seen female employee. She must have somehow survived the overthrow and been in hiding ever since.

"Nothing good will come from this. You know that, right?"

"He needs help. I'm begging you. He's my only child."

Arlo breathed deeply. He turned back to face him, and found glints of tears on the father's cheeks. Dal sniffled, and fought to regain some small bit of composure. "I'm sure you have a lot of questions."

"Not the least of which: who's the mother?"

Dal turned back toward the cabinet. "Rebecca, it's safe." From where the cabinet continued to the side, a slender hand reached out and moved the lantern. Then, a woman--by God, a real woman--carefully climbed out. She had long, brunette hair, a pale complexion, and wore the same standard prison garb they did. She raised her arms to stretch, and bent her back left and right. Arlo couldn't help but stare.

"We're not called Facility-M because there's a dozen others on the planet or something," Dal brightened, reliving the realization. "It's because there's a Facility-F." A wave of understanding washed over Arlo.

"There's a women's prison?" It was half question, half statement.

She held out her hand to shake. "Rebecca."

He took it on instinct. "Dr. Nichols."

Holding the lantern high, Arlo examined the yellow eyes of the little infant in its mother's arms. "I'd usually say this is the fault of an underdeveloped liver. But you said the pregnancy was nine months?"

"We think so--as best anybody can tell time without days and nights," Dal nodded. "She made it here a while after the overthrow, so that's more than enough time."

"Then you've done a hell of a job keeping her hidden for so long." Arlo continued the examination.

"I take it that an infant isn't as easy to keep quiet." Rebecca chuckled, and soothed the boy with cradling.

"He's definitely a moody one." Dal's hope welled watching him work and check and run through possibilities, inspecting everything from the insides of the boy's ears to the flexibility of his joints. "You really are a scientist or something, huh? How'd you wind up in a place like this?"

"And you look like an accountant. How'd you?"

"I..." He began, but hesitated. "I made some bad decisions."

"Yeah. Funny thing."

"There's been vomiting too, recently," Rebecca cut in. Dal looked at her in shock.

"What've you been feeding him?" Arlo continued.

"I've been giving Rebecca most of my rations, and the baby's been nursing, though not well." That could only mean she'd been eating just their powdered, preserved, practically plastic prison meals, and incomplete servings at that. Even augmented with what vegetable cakes the automatic cafeterias spat out, anyone could guess her baby would be malnourished.

"But malnourishment is only compounding the problem," Arlo thought aloud. "There's a bigger problem he can't fix just by eating more here; he's lacking vitamin D."

"And that's dangerous?"

"Normally not, but this is an exceptional case. It doesn't secrete much in breast milk either, and-- meaning no offense--Rebecca looks like she's already deficient herself." She shook her head, and could only reiterate the sentiment.

"What does that mean for him, though? How bad is it?"

"At this development stage, if left untreated, he'll suffer brain damage and deformed bones at best." Arlo lowered the lantern. "That's assuming he beats the odds and survives at all."

"Wh--I, uh..." Dal stammered. "Where can we get vitamin D?" He looked at Rebecca.

"The pharmacy?" She looked back.

"He'd get more outside," Arlo quipped. "Clan Rimat ransacked the pharmacy months ago. Since they got wiped out, there's no telling where anything is anymore." He folded his arms and considered it. "Even if you managed to find a spare pill here or there, they wouldn't last long; without body fat to store it long-term, most of it would just pass through his system."

"Well 'outside' can't happen," Dal pleaded, certainty rising. "Have you seen what it's like out there? I'm an icebreaker--"

"Oh, I'm well aware what it's like," Arlo cut him off. He'd had the job too, while still keeping his medical proficiency hidden--the menial, low-rank task of bringing in chunks of ice to keep their water supplied and their geothermal stations running. "Which makes her journey all the more miraculous." He glanced toward Rebecca.

Outside, exposed, the cold was unreal. Without goggles, a man's eyes would freeze over immediately, and he would flay his corneas trying to close them. At his first exposed breath, his sinuses would solidify. At the second, a reflexive gasp, his trachea would follow. More careless souls were soon statues, frozen fully through. Even with the insulation they layered on for short trips out, Arlo doubted anyone could survive that ceaseless, bitter night more than two minutes at a time.

"I had help," she said, sitting. "They have us break ice at Facility-F too, but it's with these suits. They look like the ones astronauts wear."

"Temperature-controlled?" Arlo perked up. "You used one to get here?"

"She did, but..." Dal shook his head. "It won't do any good. It's basically unusable now."

"There's not enough energy or air for a trip back," Rebecca explained. "We're built into a different mountain; I only ended up here by accident. I slipped off a steeper side, and was trying to find a way back when I ran into this place. By then, there wasn't even an hour left in it."

"Regardless," said Dal, "What did you mean by finding it outside? Is D the one you can get from sunlight?"

"Usually," answered Arlo.

"So that would work? I'm sure there are windows somewhere."

"There are, but glass blocks the type your body can use. It would have to be direct exposure." Arlo sighed, and fell to a sit. "So he'd have to last until we're much closer to the sun. Make it to the next warm period."

He avoided the misnomer of 'Spring' most used, as seasons didn't have much meaning on such a stretched elliptical orbit as theirs. It referred to a time--a two-year span in their decade-long transit around the sun--when they were close enough to have Earth-like warmth. To have liquid water. To have dormant plant life emerge. Seeing out the facility's scant windows during that time was the only reason they even knew it existed. Beyond then, the planet's surface might as well have been deep space, or the bottom of an ocean, for how habitable it was to human life.

"How long is it till then?"

"We're over the middle of the night, so..." Arlo stood and thought. Before the riot, they had just passed their slowest and farthest orbital point, when new supplies and inmates were dropped off and most wardens switched out. "From now, about three more years."

Silence fell over the two of them, and they were soon in each other's mournful embrace. Arlo placed the lantern down, and walked away while they wept.

"I'm sorry if I got your hopes up by coming here, but..." he took a moment at the door to gather the words. "Your boy's a lost cause. I suggest you come to grips with that, and focus on your own survival."

Arlo spoke to no one for some number of hours following. He only gathered his thoughts in a dim, warm, humming generator room. Dal couldn't have realized what kind of dilemma he was imposing with the knowledge of Rebecca's existence. If Arlo explained the situation to Galla, he'd have the rest of the Spectres storm the area and steal her. The only woman in the prison, practically the world, would be an invaluable bargaining chip with which to manipulate any other gang to do as they pleased--for at least the next three years. What horrors they would do to her, he didn't want to imagine.

But if he didn't tell them, and they were to find out he was withholding such advantageous information, he would be torn limb from limb for the egregious betrayal of trust. He wished the truth was cleaner, or at least that he didn't have to know it--that a child would die only because there was no one good with power. No one who could solve the situation who wouldn't also be corrupted by it. The inmates were most all maniacs who deserved to be locked away, but he felt the wardens were truly to blame. Chaos could only take over like this because order had become so careless.

"I'm not trying to bother you or anything." Dal's timid voice echoed so faintly by the generator that Arlo could have sworn he'd imagined it. He stepped inside, the man who'd started it all, eyes now baggy and bloodshot. "They said I'd find you here."

"I can't help you," Arlo said, raising his head but unable to face Dal.

"I was just wondering something. I've been thinking about what you said; how do we get it if we don't have sunlight here? Vitamin D, I mean."

"For you and me, it's those big lights some of the larger communal rooms have. They emit a type of filtered UV. It's not quite sunlight, but it does the job."

"So what's stopping us from--"

"Taking one? From who?" Arlo was met with only meek silence and averted eyes. "I'm sorry, but do you think I haven't thought of that? That I haven't already ruled it out?"

"The Spectres must have a few. They do, don't they?"

"I'm not stealing from my own faction," Arlo said flatly. It wasn't that he had any particular allegiance to them, but they wouldn't be forgiving of treachery. He wasn't going to die failing, a traitor at that. "Besides, we're already short since Montblanc sent his goons. When the Summit Kings attacked last month, they smashed one and stole another."

"They went after your UV lights?"

"A running scheme of theirs, after somebody figured out they were important." Arlo had a begrudging appreciation for it as a long-term attack strategy--starving out other gangs more subtly than simply cutting them off from food.

"If they go after them, that must mean they have extras..." Dal nodded to himself, resolving on something, and started away.

"Stop. I know what you're thinking." He paused at the exit. "You can't just take these things. Someone like you can't very well barter for one either; anything a barebone has that they want, they'll just take. There's no nice way to say this, but to them you're a nobody. And we don't have anything valuable enough, besides." Seeing no change, Arlo tried another angle to squeeze an ounce of reason out of him. "Think about Rebecca. What happens to her if you're gone?"

"Well, I have to do something!" Dal spun back and spread his arms. "I can't just sit there and watch him die!"

"You will if you don't have anything better! All you'll accomplish going up to some gang's front door is getting all three of you killed!" bellowed Arlo.

Dal had no retort. He could only huff in frustration and slam his balled fists into the metallic inner wall. The hollow thud echoed off, and he stayed staring at the wall a moment longer. He seemed to look through it as realization dawned.

"Actually, I... I think I do."

“Hmm?”

“I do have something better than the front door.” He turned to Arlo. “The back.”

While it didn't have much power left, Rebecca's old suit did provide them an advantage no one else had; they could leave the facility. They could, if they chose, freely exit any door, and enter any other. Instead of approaching from within and alerting countless guards along the way, they could open straight into the heart of any sector from the outside with only the lifting of a single latch. With it, Dal could take a light straight from under Montblanc's nose, and then escape back out where no one would be able to follow.

He checked the equipment up and down while his partner and child stayed in hiding--sleeping, he hoped. Having only the faint emergency hall lamps of their sequestered wing guiding his tired eyes, he didn't see Arlo coming.

“I knew I'd find you here,” Arlo said as Dal jumped. “Didn't need anyone to tell me, either.”

“Oh, it's you.” He turned his gaze back to the suit. “I've got everything I need now. I know you're probably going to tell me not to do it, but we have to get one of those lights.” He pulled it off the rack, walked toward Arlo at the entrance, and placed a hand on his bare shoulder. “Thank you. As slim as it is, we wouldn't have had any chance without your insight.”

“You're right,” Arlo shook his head. “You're not going to do this.” He grabbed Dal's arm and stepped forward, backing him into the room.

“What?” stammered Dal.

“Give me the suit,” demanded Arlo.

“What are you talking about?”

“You wouldn't know where to go or what to look for.” Arlo grabbed at it. “I'm the only one who can do it.”

“You can't.” Dal pulled away. “I've done enough dragging you into this.”

“Please.” Arlo looked Dal in the eye. “Let me.”

“You don't even know what I did to get here. How many lives I ruined back home.” Dal swallowed, and memories flooded behind his eyes. “If I die trying... Just believe me, it's well deserved.”

“And you think I'm so innocent? They wouldn't send us here if we were. We've all been found guilty. Rebecca too. By my count, there's only one innocent person on this planet.”

“I can't ask you to do this. You don't know me.”

“I know you feel guilt. And that's enough.” Guilt would be Arlo's litmus test. Most of them out there showed no hint of it. Felt no need to atone. No compulsion to seek forgiveness for anything they'd done.

“When I asked why you were here, you didn't blame anyone else. You just took it,” said Arlo. The very fact that Dal hated the wrong he'd committed was evidence enough that he was worth helping. “That's all I need.”

Arlo had never put his life on the line for anyone else. He thought back, as he found footing up the icy mountainside into which Facility-M was fixed, to the fatal failing that found him imprisoned in the first place: a disobeyed order, leading, too directly to deny, to over a dozen deaths. That insubordination and its consequences had sentenced him rightly to that icebox of a planet, that sat near the bottom of any terraforming priority list--that deepest, frozen circle of Hell--for the rest of his dark days.

I made some bad decisions, Dal had said. Yes. They all had.

It felt strange being outside again, not just because of the thermal suit, but for being the first time in the eleven years since his sentencing he was outside safely--to be neither locked in with a roof overhead, nor breathing air so cold it burned.

He'd made good time. With twenty minutes of power left, and the trip down sure to be easier than the one up, he could make it back if he could make it out. He had only the hardest part ahead of him: an outer door that led, he expected, into a less traveled leg in the Summit Kings' territory.

He lifted the latch and slipped inside. Arlo removed his helmet. The halls were bright, and the air felt warmer than he was used to. From their generators below, the heat must have regularly risen and settled there, higher in the facility. It smelled different as well, reminding him of something familiar he couldn't quite place.

He ducked around a corner and, behind a large crate, doffed the rest of the suit. If spotted, he wanted to assure at least his rank and affiliation were known. He couldn't steal from the Spectres because a traitor was worth less living than dead; being caught by an enemy would, paradoxically, be safer. If captured, they'd most likely keep him alive to sell back as a hostage. Arlo briefly wondered how much Galla would care to pay for his return, if it came to that.

He heard forceful footsteps echo, and peered over the crate back into empty iron halls. It sounded like someone running full tilt, and they were getting closer. The scent was more specific, he realized. A cauterized wound? The running man poured in from a connecting path some fifty feet away, slamming into the wall of a sharp turn and shoving himself along it, now darting frantically for Arlo's location.

He ducked down, not sure if he'd been seen. It looked like a Summit King one-tag, by the glimpse he got. The man didn't slow. He kept coming in closer, and soon sprinted past, voice of fear faint on his panting breaths.

More footsteps followed, this time many men coming in from multiple halls. Something big was happening. Arlo rose to run before it could reach him, following the same route the prior man fled toward. Voices arose this time, shouting and screaming, scaring him to a halt. There was clamor around corners both in front and behind him, trapping him in the pincer of some unknown threat, when he finally recognized enough of the disgusting smell to place it. Burning flesh.

He lunged to try the nearest door, fell through it into the connecting room flat on his face, then, with his foot, slammed it shut behind. An empty room. Thank God. He caught his breath. Burning bodies implied the Boars. With their wing having stores of kerosene to spare, they had a habit of setting fires to make a point, often with corpses as kindling. They must have been waging a surprise attack on the Summit Kings, and he was caught in the middle.

The noises grew louder outside as the warring factions clashed just beyond the door. Arlo searched for something in the room to bar it closed, but could only find flat-bottom boxes-- nothing that he could wedge to seal himself safely inside. He bolted back for the door, planning to use his own weight to hold it closed, but before he could reach, it flung open again.

A bloodied body spilled in limp to the floor, and a knife-wielding, one-tagged Boar jumped over it into the room, escaping the melee of the hall. A two-tagged King member stepped in after him, avoiding the corpse. He carried a thick metal pipe with bolts along it, repurposed into a studded bat.

The Boar assumed a fighting stance and lunged at him, but the quick King's swing caught him at the elbow, cracking bones, bending the arm around the bat. He could only begin a grunt of pain before the next swing came, this time to the head. His knees buckled beneath him, and a sickening clang of metal to skull was soon followed by another and another and another. His work finished on the floor, bat dripping with blood, the Summit King turned to Arlo.

He approached, as calmly as he had before. Backing up with his arms raised, Arlo heard the squeak of an opening door behind him, and felt an unknown hand grab him by the bicep. He was yanked aside, thrown into a pile of boxes as another Boar rushed in from behind--this one a two-tag armed with a sharpened shower pole.

This Boar dashed in close, and laughed as he bent back under a wild swing. Before the King could even see he missed, the pole's end was inches into him. It was when Arlo saw blood gushing from the hilt that he realized how devious its design was. A stab with a blade plugged its own wound. If removed, nearby muscles tightened to restrict blood loss. That hollow beveled shape was like a syringe; it held open the wound it made and let blood empty out freely. He smiled as he drained the man, and when his tilted head turned to Arlo, saw recognition.

"Didn't I tell you to stay out of my way?"

Pulse pounding, Arlo gasped, then sighed. He'd been saved by the very man who'd nearly killed him the day prior. When the King member collapsed, the grinning Boar took his makeshift studded bat and lobbed it across the room, back toward the open door he had entered. A burly, shirtless man, stepping in, caught it. Scraggly hair wreathed his face down to a thick beard over bulging muscle. He was well-fed. Someone important.

"Sector three clear yet?" the big man asked.

The two-tag nodded. As the big man turned to consider Arlo, he revealed heavy chains hanging down the left side of his chest from his collarbone's three rings. It was Hoss. He recognized the brand on Arlo's shoulder, and handed the bloody bat to him.

"Make yourself useful."

Arlo descended the stairs after an exhausting hour of fighting, bulky box in his arms. He now had a small charm hanging from his tag like the Boars; after the combat had cleared, they decorated his ring as a token of honor for fighting at their side. He had, without meaning to, fostered a greater pact of peace between them and the Spectres in helping dethrone the Summit Kings.

The thermal suit had disappeared, but it made no difference with the Kings sent fleeing. Arlo could simply walk away, and back down, step after heavy step, each colder than the last. The light was heavier than he expected, but he knew he could bring it where it was needed, in spite of his injuries. He counted along the corridors to the one he knew was correct, where there wasn't the faintest bit of light even if one knew where to look, and--outside an unmarked thin door of a nondescript hall of an abandoned wing--placed the box on the floor.

With his delivery complete, he walked on.

There was a short burst of wind when pushing open a door to the outside. Then, after the initial pressure change, the heat would blow out bit by bit. Arlo let it guide his steps. The door closed itself behind him, and, exposed in the frozen dark, he walked on. The fresh wound in his gut didn't ache anymore. Where he'd been slashed open by one of the Summit Kings in the fighting, where he'd seen his tattered entrails spewing out of him, had been hastily taped shut. Even if they'd had the proper tools and a skilled surgeon, he wouldn't survive longer than a few agonizing days more.

He let the wind numb him, and looked up while he walked. There was a sea of stars shimmering overhead, one notably brighter and redder than the rest. They were getting closer. This cycle had let the monsters loose, but he kept faith that order was returning. That he'd helped to foster some of it. That in just a few years more, things would get warmer. That the next age of abundance wasn't far. Free to leave, the men would surely find the women, and, he hoped, the child he'd saved would be the first of many in the new generations that would emerge.

No amount of good would undo his wrongs, he knew. He was only, finally, getting what he deserved. Yet he found some comfort in knowing he gave back better. The image of the distant star blurred and split as his corneas froze over. He took a breath, and his sinuses solidified. The cold forced another, a gasp, and his trachea soon followed. He walked on, slowing as his skin hardened. As he froze more fully, inside and out, he finally stopped, joining the other statues in the dark.

APOCALYPSE

Corydoras

“Good morning sir - we regret to inform you that you are going to die.” Arpeerian blinked at the message filling the screen which dominated his rest quarters. It wasn’t unusual for the Leadership Authority to transmit important notices to the citizenry in this manner. *But this*, he thought, *must be an error*. Retinal tracking tech beneath the screen assured he’d read the words several times before another message appeared.

“A catastrophic failure in life support systems has occurred. Please be assured that the Leadership Authority made every effort to acquire the necessary replacement parts before departing the planet. Thelema colony will remain habitable for between 5.7 to 7.2 days, at which point air quality will degrade beyond human tolerances. We apologize for the inconvenience.”

After reading the message for the third or fourth time, Arpeerian’s emotions finally arranged themselves into indignation. *After all these years paying into the biomaintenance fund? No, it’s a mistake. Or, at least it’s a mistake that I’m not being offered a place as an evacuee. In fact...* Arpeerian pressed his hand against the screen, clearing the apocalyptic notice. With a few swipes of his slender, uncalled fingers, he attempted to initiate a voice call with the District Undersecretary of Regional Transit Repairs, who he slept with once or twice. The call went unanswered. Frowning, Arpeerian selected another contact - a modestly well-connected block governor who he canvassed for once or twice. Again, no reply. It took Arpeerian the better part of an hour to get through his list of socially and politically connected friends, and only toward the end of his labor did he realize that the Leadership Authority might be limiting calls to certain important figures. *Well naturally in a situation like this, they’d need to be in touch with one another...*

There’s only one thing to do about it, he decided. Ordinarily, he wouldn’t rouse from his quarters before midmeal, but the threat of the end of the world, even if it were a false alarm, warranted some action. He dressed languidly, putting on loose, silken pants that looked like a skirt unless he was practically spread-eagle. He also donned a richly embroidered crop-top to showcase his finely muscled stomach - a mark of his privileged status, since only the colony’s leisure class had the time to exercise. After a moment of consideration, he dabbed on some bright orange body paint and wrapped an assortment of bright silver chains around his neck and arms. Though he still wasn’t convinced the colony was facing terminal failure, he wanted to look his best on the off chance he needed to exchange some favors to get off-world. With a finishing dusting of body glitter, Arpeerian finally felt dressed enough to attempt to video-call his patron.

The enormous screen before him emitted a single ring before a corpulent, reddened face appeared. Even a glance was enough for Arpeerian to realize that the man before him was drunk and terrified.

“Oh, Kairian, I’m ever so glad you picked up. You haven’t seen that awful false alarm, have you?” Arpeerian said gently, assuming a more coquettish pose.

“You damn fool whore. It’s true,” the behemoth on screen seemed to swell slightly with indignation. “We’re all dead in a week, or near enough. You get that black outfit I bought you, you put it on and you come to my quarters. I’ve got Pallibur and Roheral here too - we’ll drink and fuck until the world ends.”

“You’re serious?” In shock, Arpeerian dropped his effeminate persona entirely.

"Of bloody course I am. These idiots - two months ago, three months ago my friends in District Administration were trying to tell people in Sector Administration that a failure was on the way. But by the time Sector Administration got word to Colony Authority that was it. The nearest vendor with the repair components is...2 weeks away? A technician who could even install that kind of thing...who knows."

"But surely...I mean you can afford to get yourself and your entourage off-colony, no?" Arpeerian pleaded.

Kairian let out a half-crazed laugh, spittle flecking off his teeth and onto the camera lens. "I've been trying to get off-colony since I first heard things were going bad. But richer people, better connected people, they must have gotten wind of all this mess even before more. Most spacecapable ships have already left, or hadn't you noticed?"

Arpeerian's stomach dropped. He had noticed a dwindling number of craft at port, but he'd assumed that those wealthy enough to travel the stars were headed to some neighboring planet for some festivity or another. His paramours never brought it up in their brief, pre-coital tete-a-tetes, so he'd buried his awareness of that strange detail.

"You've got a window there, don't you? Why don't you look outside," Kairian ordered, still sounding as though he were wavering on the edge of sanity.

With a trembling hand, Arpeerian drew back his curtain and observed the cityscape with increasing nausea. Hundreds of thousands of unmarked ships hovered below the clouds like a swarm of gnats. Every so often, one descended to street level briefly, then shot back to the sky, trailing writhing black dots as it ascended. *People*, Arpeerian realized, *People clinging to the ships...*

"Pirates, traders, carpetbaggers...A few of them will take you aboard. For a price. More than I can pay, of course. Some of them might even save you. Most times though, the ships go down, pick up their little refugees, and once they reach a certain height, they'll open a bay door and *all* those refugees are pushed out and..." Kairian slapped his huge, blubbery hands together for effect, causing Arpeerian to jump. "Then those same ships go back down and collect another group. What a business!" Kairian cackled.

"Oh sir, come away from the call with all that gloomy talk," said a familiar voice from off-screen. Arpeerian stifled a shiver as Roheral appeared. Though the two men - if Roheral could be considered a man - had serviced Kairian side-by-side for at least a year, Arpeerian never could squash the visceral disgust he felt when looking at his fellow whore. Roheral invested heavily in cosmetic surgeries which appealed to a particular clientele. He'd had female breasts grafted to his chest, with penis-heads for nipples that leaked milk and semen, and his male genitalia were engorged many times their natural size. He'd even had a small pair of breasts installed on his shoulder blades, so his clients had something to grab when taking him from behind.

Arpeerian considered Roheral to be a creature fit for fucking and nothing else. And Roheral was only the most surgically adapted prostitute who Arpeerian knew personally; the truly twisted creatures commanded a much higher price, and existed only in the mansions of the colony's most wealthy. Even in the midst of disaster, the thought of them chilled Arpeerian's blood. Worse, though, was the knowledge that he knew he had a price, and that for a sum, astronomical though it may be, he'd consider being melded into some rich man's horrific fantasy.

"He's right, you know," Kairian said with a grin. "Why waste our time on gloomy talk? Here, Arpeerian, I'm transferring you your allowance for the rest of the month. No, the rest of the year - why not? It'll cost a pretty penny to get here. They've increased transport costs overnight, of course. Everyone's trying to get somewhere to enjoy the end of the world. So come to me, darling boy," Kairian said.

"Yes, *please* do!" Roheral warbled in his awful falsetto.

Without further pleasantries, the call ended, leaving Arpeerian in his silent bedroom. He heard his own heartbeat in his ears, thudding faster and faster until he felt sure he was about to die. Breathing in short, ragged gasps, a realization brought him to his knees: he was going to die. Not in some hazy, distant future, but in 5.7 to 7.2 days, drunk and high and in the company of degenerates and prostitutes. Nobody would claim his body, or mourn his passing, and he'd lay there rotting, disturbed only by insects and thieves. *I'm going to die. I'm going to die. I'm going to DIE.* The certainty of it all filled him to bursting, and he heard himself screaming in mortal terror. He screamed himself hoarse, until hour-long minutes later, a drowsy dullness overwhelmed him. Throughout that grey expanse of exhausted emotions, a single thought emanated: No. Perhaps he would die during the colony's collapse. In fact, he certainly would. But he wouldn't die a prostitute, prone in another man's bed. Now, at the end of the world, his life was his own, and he would not surrender it lightly.

With trembling hands, Arpeerian assembled what he imagined might constitute a survival kit - a few of his perfumes and bangles to use as bribes or currency, a little bottle of water and a nutrient stick, and, after some consideration, one of his lighter free weights to use as a club. His first order of business was finding a way to survive the decline in air quality. Thanks to a former client in the local Emergency Continuity Administrations, he had an idea how.

During the long elevator ride to street level, Arpeerian tried to prepare himself to wade through the chaos he saw from his window. However, when he stepped outside, the immediate atmosphere seemed confused and oppressive. Listless throngs of people accumulated at street corners, and for no discernible reason, even arguments were hushed. Arpeerian realized that the frantic scramble for ships was limited to wealthy districts - in his neighborhood, there was nothing but shellshocked grief in the cramped streets.

Uneasily, Arpeerian descended to a subterranean transit terminal and immediately encountered a different, much angrier crowd. As Kairian predicted, a seething mass of people was crammed onto the platform, shouting and jostling one another while queuing up for transit pods. Checking the prices on his comms tablet, Arpeerian immediately saw the reason for their consternation - a one way trip to almost anywhere in the city cost more than he typically made in a month. *Then again, what are we trying to save money for, anyway?* He thought dryly. Even so, it still stung when he pressed 'accept charges' and booked his pod.

The trip to a small district maintenance building took twice as long as Arpeerian anticipated, giving him plenty of time to anxiously review his plan *ad nauseam*. Arpeerian's disaffected client frequently complained about his job, including the need to manually inventory the gear available to first responders at certain utility access points. Crucially, this included rebreathers. Arpeerian assumed that most maintenance buildings were raided as soon as the doomsday announcement was made, but his client always complained about one building on his circuit which stood amid an expanse of fulfillment warehouses. Apparently it was so remote and nondescript that nobody even bothered to rob it. *Until me, I guess*, Arpeerian thought.

To Arpeerian's surprise, he didn't encounter another soul as he picked through the enormous stand of monolithic buildings, even though the hike took the better part of 3 hours. *Maybe the guards just stayed home today. Or maybe these warehouses are just empty anyway. Wouldn't be surprised, with all the issues we've had...* The quiet isolation picked at his mind, clearing space for all his despairing thoughts to congeal. He'd spent his life flitting from diversion to diversion, and it left him with no defense against encroaching terror other than a singular focus on the maintenance building and the rebreathers. Like the death of the colony, like his own death, his goal seemed simultaneously imminent and remote; an utter impossibility until he rounded a corner and saw the squat, grey building. That, and the woman standing before it, examining the door.

She was swaddled in a heavy, poncho-like garment, and her shocked expression was marred by intricate facial tattoos which identified her as a petty thief. Almost as soon as she saw Arpeerian, a knife appeared in her hand.

“Get,” she hissed.

“No,” Arpeerian said, wrapping his fist around his weight.

He approached her slowly. As he got closer, he saw the woman was young, about his age, but brutally thin and quite short. He looked around.

“It’s just you here?” he asked. The woman said nothing, though contempt seemed to ooze from her bright blue eyes. “And nobody’s gotten into this building yet? Then there’s no issue. There’s a dozen rebreathers in there.”

“How you know that?” the woman asked warily.

“The same way I knew how to find this building. Someone told me. Do you have a way to get in there?” Arpeerian asked.

“Working on it,” she said grudgingly. “Hey, I said get!”

Arpeerian ignored her, approaching the door while still carefully staying out of reach.

“You know, when I first started working, I got robbed by a few clients. At knifepoint, even. It was terrifying. I never tried to fight back, though. It didn’t matter what they took, as long as it wasn’t my life. But you know, I think I’m ready to fight now,” Arpeerian glared at the woman, and to his surprise, she actually shrunk back. “I’d rather not, though. If you have a way into that building, I’d rather just follow you in, take one or two rebreathers, and leave.”

“One or two rebreathers?” The woman’s defensive pose slackened somewhat.

“Well, in case the first one breaks, or gets stolen...” Arpeerian explained.

Shaking her head, the woman stowed the knife beneath her poncho. “Stay back there then. Out of arm’s reach. I’ll get this door open - you shout if you see anything, yeah?” Turning back to the door, the woman retrieved a door card attached to a comms tablet.

“Are you a hacker or something?” Arpeerian asked, watching her fiddle with the comms tablet out of the corner of his eye.

She snorted derisively. “No. But someone - a real hacker - did get a hold of low-level security protocols for local administrators. They were nice enough to distribute the database. There.” The woman stepped away from the door as it swung open with a permissive ‘beep.’ Then, quick as a shadow, she went inside, and Arpeerian hastily followed.

“Close that thing behind you.” She called, rummaging through the supplies and throwing them into a huge satchel, apparently also extracted from the folds of the poncho. “What else is in here, huh? Rebreathers and what else? You have an inventory list?”

“It wasn’t a recent conversation. But there are medical supplies, some illumination rods, some repellent suits...things people might need to go down and correct a grid failure in a hurry,” Arpeerian said, hastily stowing 2 of the precious rebreathers in his own bag.

“Well, that’s good news then. You might take that, too. Just a thought,” the woman said, gesturing toward an immense multi-tool propped up in one corner. It was longer than a man’s arm, and could be configured as a shovel, a pick, or a large hammer. Turning the massive instrument over in his hands, Arpeerian could only assume that she meant for him to use it as a weapon.

“What’s your name, anyway?” Arpeerian asked, watching what the woman hastily gather up seemingly irrelevant supplies. Then, abruptly, the door to the maintenance building swung open with another permissive ‘beep.’

Standing in the frame were two men, also wearing long ponchos and carrying improvised clubs. The woman jumped back like a cat, and her knife was in her hand again almost faster than Arpeerian could register.

One of the men sized up Arpeerian and immediately started laughing. “Yanire, did you hire a whore to help you? That’s...that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen,” he cackled.

“He was already here. Somehow,” the woman hissed. “We’re almost done here.”

“Oh that’s true, that’s true,” the man said, lunging forward.

Without a moment's thought, Arpeerian stuck out his multi-tool, interrupting the downward arch of the man's swing. A painful jolt shot up Arpeerian's elbow and shoulder from the resonant collision, and he was pulled off-balance by the blow. However, he did manage to divert the man's attack and prevent his blow from falling true on the woman's head.

"Behind you!" The woman shouted.

Instinctually, Arpeerian hunched down and was hit painfully across his back, bringing him to one knee. Apparently the second man had entered the fray. Before the pair could begin raining blows on his prone head, Arpeerian stood up quickly and, in the process, slammed the multi-tool into the first man's crotch. In a clean, brisk, motion, he closed the distance between himself and the second man, stifling an overhead swing meant for the top of his head. Smoothly, naturally, he slammed the butt of his multi-tool into the second man's chest, pushing him away, and then followed the motion with a snappy downward blow to the man's head. The man fell to the floor instantly. Arpeerian pivoted and saw the first man swinging his club wildly at the woman, managing to land a solid blow on her upper thigh. She cried out, but took the opportunity to practically claw her way up the man's arm and stab him in the neck with her short blade. She wiped her hand and knife on the man's poncho, then looked from Arpeerian to his fallen combatant.

"Looks like you killed that one. Time to go, huh?" The woman attempted to grab her bag of stolen wares, but collapsed when she put weight on her injured leg. A series of near-hysterical curses escaped her lips.

"I'll help you, I'll help you. Let's go to my apartment, you can rest there," Arpeerian said, and without thinking, he scooped up the woman, her bag of loot and his own in one motion. His muscles unleashed a punishing volley of pain, still aching from the fight. The woman seemed to reflexively flinch away from Arpeerian's supportive hold, but after a moment her posture softened and she leaned into him.

"You better not steal my shit," she warned as they hobbled off together.

Despite the additional burden of his looted goods and the injured woman, the journey back to his apartment seemed quicker than his path to the maintenance building. The pair said very little to one another as they limped along, even on the transit pod which was, at least theoretically, private. It was only when Arpeerian gently lowered the woman onto his bed that she looked up at him and said, "You saved me, you know. Thank you." Her gaze was so flat and honest Arpeerian felt compelled to turn away from it.

"Your name's Yanire, right? One of those thugs called you that, anyway," Arpeerian said as he fumbled around for a water bottle.

"Yes. They know me. Knew me. We all lived near the warehouse area, got into the same trouble. No friends of mine though, clearly." She absently traced a finger along the couch cushions and remarked, "You've got a nice place. Maybe I should have been a whore too, huh?"

Arpeerian laughed dryly. "Maybe. Are you a natural blonde? You'd have done great."

"Hah. The license is too expensive for women, anyway," Yanire said, taking the water bottle Arpeerian handed her with a nod.

"You're kidding. I've got to pay 25% percent of my fees back to the colony to compensate for my future medical expenses, or something. Women just have to pay for filing and get a hysterectomy."

"Too expensive," Yanire reiterated in a dark tone.

Standing back and considering the strange woman, Arpeerian finally asked, "Are you going to rob me?"

Yanire gave a short, barking laugh, "How naive are you, prostitute? Look at my face - you know I'm a robber, and worse."

"I prefer 'Arpeerian' to 'prostitute,' thanks," he said archingly.

"But seriously, I won't. But you'll have to tell me how you ended up this way. A criminal like you, so trusting," Yanire said, shaking her head.

"I'm not a criminal - I've got my license. And it wasn't like I grew up on the streets and just fell into this line of work. I was actually raised in one of the nicer pleasure orphanages. My theory is that my mother was an unlicensed prostitute and my father was a local governor. Lots of clients tell me I look like Puneerio, when he was younger," Arpeerian said stiffly.

"I can't believe your father let you live. Maybe his last encounter with your mother was disappointing, and he didn't keep tabs on her."

"Maybe they cared for one another," Arpeerian offered.

"Either way, you were born lucky. Obviously lucky," Yanire said approvingly, gesturing at their haul of rebreathers.

"You think so? Maybe that's true." He paused, considering their loot, "But I still don't know what to do after the support systems fail. I'll be able to breathe, that's not for nothing. But I'll have to get off the planet somehow."

Yanire cocked her head with curiosity. "Why do you say that? Everything will be back on again, in 2 weeks time I'm sure."

"What makes you say that?" he asked suspiciously.

"Huh? Well all the big-wigs left, right? Most of them well before the formal alarm. They aren't just going to leave all their fancy things here. Someone in the government will pay to get the support systems fixed, and they'll all come back again. In fact, I bet they killed the city on purpose. I just don't know what they're planning on replacing us with. A park, maybe?" Yanire gently angled her head so she could look out the window, "So I wouldn't worry too much about breathing, long term. Though it might be hard to reintegrate. They aren't expecting us to survive."

Following her gaze, Arpeerian stared wistfully at the cloud of looter's ships, now silhouetted before an evening sky awash in purple and red. *One day gone. 4.7 to 6.2 days remaining*, he thought.

"Maybe we can be gardeners, afterward," Yanire mused.

That does sound nice, Arpeerian thought as he watched the twilight slowly wash over the city and tucked all its terrors away.

In an attempt at chivalry, Arpeerian offered his bed to Yanire, but she insisted the couch was more than comfortable enough for her. Privately, he wondered if she thought she was above sleeping in a prostitute's bed, even if the prostitute himself was resting elsewhere. Arpeerian dreamed of his fight with the thugs in the maintenance building, experiencing it over and over in endless variations. In every dream, he saw the wide-eyed expression of the man he killed and Yanire, cornered and vulnerable. He was in the midst of such a dream when suddenly, a percussive explosion jarred him awake. Momentarily, he thought he was still dreaming until he realized he could hear Yanire beating on his locked door, imploring him to wake up.

Another explosion sounded outside, and adrenaline rocketed Arpeerian into wakefulness.

"What's happening?!" he shouted, throwing on his silken exercise outfit.

"Government ships - they're destroying the raider ships," Yanire yelled back, pounding on the door more forcibly, "We have to get down somewhere, somewhere."

"Get the rebreathers, get your stuff," Arpeerian ordered, bursting out of his bedroom carrying his own bag full of loot.

"What are you doing? We need to go!" Yanire howled, practically clawing at his front door.

"I just grabbed some more water and nutrient sticks - can you walk?" he asked, ushering her through the threshold into the hallway.

"Mostly. Just badly bruised, I think. Where are we going?" she asked as he pulled her toward the elevator, pushing roughly past his recently emerged neighbors as they too flooded the hallway in a state of confusion.

"The transit pods...the same client who told me about the maintenance building - he said an orbital miner could crash directly on the colony and those things would be fine," Arpeerian said, practically throwing Yanire into an elevator and slamming the down button.

"But what if the power grid goes down...being stuck in there..." Yanire protested.

"Then we'll take a pod to the governance district. If you're right, they won't be shooting anything down over those buildings," Arpeerian snapped.

The outside streets were bedlam. People were pouring from their high rises, trying to escape a potential building collapse, only to find certain alleyways already filled to bursting with other fleeing inhabitants. Above them, the night seemed alive with violence and flame.

Yanire started swearing, her voice rising in pitch to match the shriek of rockets overhead. Desperately, Arpeerian tried to burrow through the crowd toward the transit pod station, but it was clear the whole block had his same idea. Spotting a low roof on a bar, Arpeerian changed course and dragged Yanire toward it.

Moving awkwardly against the flow of traffic, the pair managed to climb up a small side staircase and, for a moment, stood alone just above street level while the frantic mob pulsed below. Whipping out his comms tablet, Arpeerian requested an automated air shuttle. It cost him almost his entire savings, but he didn't know what else to do.

A moment later, a sleek, low-slung ship appeared at the end of the street, flying above the heads of the district's screaming population. Arpeerian realized some people had spotted the ship, and were pointing wildly at it, trying to follow it to its eventual landing site. Just as a pit of worry began to form in his belly, he felt Yanire's thin hand grab his with a reassuring squeeze.

The air shuttle breezed to a stop on the bar rooftop, seemingly opening its doors with deliberate laziness. Arpeerian and Yanire immediately flung themselves into the plush interior, looking on as a small detachment of the massive mob spilled out onto the rooftop and groped toward the departing craft. One wide-eyed man even made it right to the doors, but even as they slid closed over his fingers, Yanire made a few quick cuts on his wrist with her clever little knife and he fell away bleeding. The air shuttle's hull muted the sounds of battle above and below, muting the explosions to muffled bass beats as they flew. Arpeerian felt queasy, seeing chaos above and below but only hearing the neutral music native to the ship's interior.

"Won't they shoot us down?" Yanire asked, pointing fearfully at a government ship as it passed overhead.

"I don't think so. They look like they're focusing down higher-altitude ships. Shuttles stay relatively low," Arpeerian explained, only half-believing his own reasoning. "I'm out of tricks, though. I spent the last of my money on this ride."

"It's worth it, I'm sure," Yanire said, closing her eyes.

"You're not going back to sleep?," Arpeerian said, shocked.

"I'm trying not to throw up. I've never been on an air shuttle before. And I'm glad you're out of money so I won't have to go on one again," she replied, sounding very sick indeed.

"That makes one of us. It shouldn't be a very long ride." Arpeerian glanced out the window and watched in horror as a raider banked to avoid incoming fire from a colony police vessel, overcorrected, and slammed into a towering residential building. The building seemed to collapse in slow motion, not toppling but crumpling into its own footprint, releasing a huge plume of debris as it disappeared behind the rest of the skyline.

"What was that?" Yanire asked nervously.

"It's fine. Something far away," Arpeerian said uneasily, putting his hand on her shoulder.

As they flew, it seemed to Arpeerian that the colony was melting around them. Citizens of all stripes poured into streets too small to accommodate them all. Criminal and colony craft plowed through buildings and crowds alike, leaving troughs of gore and devastation in their wakes.

So like a vid, Arpeerian marvelled. *Though, people seem to drop more quickly when they die. No stumbling around, no pretty last words.* He looked down and his hands and realized his nail polish was chipped, and the intricate orange whorls he'd applied along his arms that yesterday - had it really been yesterday? - were smeared and unrecognizable. He realized, with a strange sting of pride, that his appearance was the least of the changes he'd undergone.

Closer to their destination, Arpeerian noticed a change taking place on the ground. The roiling crowds seemed more focused - all pushing away from the city center and toward an enormous barrier encircling the colony's wealthiest district. Private security stood along the top, firing into the desperate masses seemingly at random. *Looks like it's holding...for now...* Arpeerian observed.

"Surprised they let us pass," Yanire said, peeking at the madness below from between her fingers.

"I guess I did have another trick after all. I had a client once who lived in this area. He didn't patronize me for very long - he could certainly afford better. He never revoked my permissions to enter the district, though. Automated security should leave the pod alone, and it looks like the manual team is staying busy," Arpeerian explained as the pod coasted toward the ground beyond the barrier.

The wealthy district of the colony resembled an almost pre-industrial agricultural landscape, with enormous estates surrounded by oceans of verdant gardens. Tiny, mock-towns were situated between the villas, where the rich residents could shop and dine without entering the city proper. *Efficiency for thee but not for me*, Arpeerian thought dryly. Though he could hardly blame the elite residents for retreating into their pastoral dreamscape.

Finally, the pod stopped before a massive gate which separated a gentle, winding drive from what could be loosely called a main road. As Arpeerian hustled Yanire onto the wide lawn opposite the estate driveway, the first inklings of morning light brushed across the sky and revealed the watchful forms of colony enforcement vessels. The sounds of battle had largely tapered off. *They must have made short work of the raiders*, Arpeerian thought, guiding Yanire toward a copse of trees. Looking back at her, he saw that she was marveling at the landscape as the rising morning light slowly revealed all its intimate richness. When they passed beneath the boughs, she traced her fingers along the knobby bark with wonder.

"We can rest here, I guess," Arpeerian said, dropping his bag of rebreathers and supplies at the base of an enormous tree. Yanire collapsed to her knees, and Arpeerian realized her eyes were pricked with tears as she stared up at the leafy branches above her. Unsure of what to say, Arpeerian quietly unrolled a light blanket he grabbed during his escape from his apartment, curled up between some roots, and went to sleep.

The pair waited for the death of the colony embraced by their little grove of trees. Between their water bottles and nutrient sticks, they were well supplied for their impromptu excursion, and judging by the ebb and flow of gunfire at the district wall, they assumed manual forces wouldn't come for them any time soon. A few times, colony enforcement ships passed low over their refuge and they shrunk to the ground like rabbits, as though that would protect them. However, the ships passed without so much as slowing down, presumably off to deal with the more pressing situation at the wall. For a while, Arpeerian spent his waking time trying to formulate a plan to escape the elite district after the rest of the colony died off, a way to survive whatever strange future the colony's leadership had for the destroyed city. Again and again, he turned the situation over and over in his mind, feeling about for any crack that they might squeeze through to avoid their doom. Every so often, he'd summon Yanire for a consult, trying to plumb her vast criminal knowledge. However, she was never impressed by his schemes: no, they couldn't sneak through the wall back into the city district - it's too heavily guarded and too exposed on the other side. No, they couldn't break into a mansion and assume the identities of the inhabitants. No, she didn't know what would become of the city even if they did make it out alive.

Eventually, she simply shook her head and patted his shoulder. “You’re working very hard, even now. I think, in this place, it’s fine to rest,” she said simply. After that, he spent more time admiring the riffles of a little brook, or watching Yanire as she admired low woodland flowers as if they were rare orchids.

On the fifth night since the colony-wide announcement, Arpeerian and Yanire found a little clearing where they dared to lay and admire the fading light. They’d noticed that the air seemed thinner, and decided to lock eyes with the stars before putting on their rebreathers. In the distance, the combat along the district wall escalated to a fever pitch. The end of the world was catching up to them.

“Yanire, I was wondering if I could ask you a favor,” Arpeerian asked, too embarrassed to look at her directly. Instead, his gaze remained fixed on the slowly emerging stars. “Well, that is, I was hoping I could kiss you.”

“Oh?” he heard her say. She sounded generally surprised. “I assumed, with your work, that sort of thing didn’t interest you. With a woman.”

“No! No that’s...it was the only work I knew. But it was never what I wanted,” he stammered. Yanire’s tattooed face appeared in his field of vision, her blonde hair falling about her face like a shawl. Her expression was oddly intense.

“Hmm. Even when everything is coming undone, I’m particular. Do you want any kiss? Or do you want a kiss from me?” she asked in a near-whisper.

“You,” he said as he gently guided her mouth to his. A triumphant warmth spread through his body as she reciprocated, closing her eyes with contemplative pleasure.

Then, softly, sweetly, she pulled away and placed Arpeerian’s head on her lap. With drowsy slowness, she ran her fingers through his hair, and somehow even those innocent caresses felt electric to him. Arpeerian had lain with so many men, endured their coddling and cooing, though it unmanned him at his core. For years, his every intimate act was performative. To lay bare with his feelings now nearly brought him to tears.

“You’ve done well, you know,” Yanire said gently.

“I don’t think I can save us,” Arpeerian said, staring out at the wide sky. Night was truly upon them now.

“Perhaps not. But you’ve managed to save yourself from your life for a long time. A less sturdy man, in your position. I’ve seen them in the gutters. Discarded monsters. It’s so easy to rot from the outside in, you know. But not you. Somehow, not you,” she said dreamily. Then, quick as a bird, she stole another kiss and handed Arpeerian his rebreather. “That will have to do for now, I think.”

Arpeerian clamped the mask over his face, and heard a rustle as Yanire did the same. With almost childlike hesitancy, he rested his head on her lap again, and she resumed her pleasant ministrations. He fell asleep like that, comforted, giving comfort, and sincere.

Overnight, the air quality deteriorated, and the colony died.

Arpeerian woke to a grimly quiet world. There was no sound from the direction of the district wall, no violent clash of ships in the sky, no cries of despair from a distant, tormented crowd. Yanire lay at his side, still asleep and curled up against him, her face obscured by the rebreather. He could have sat there forever, admiring the winnowing tree leaves and the dappled shadows they cast on Yanire’s prone form, but a ship passed over the pair and came to a stop near their grove.

“They’ve found us,” Arpeerian said, waking Yanire with a gentle shake. She nodded silently and stood, holding her knife at her side.

However, the man who emerged from the tree line wasn’t dressed like a colony enforcer. Even Arpeerian, with his vast begrudging expertise with fashion, didn’t recognize the style. The stranger was dressed head-to-toe in a rich red uniform, bearing a strange insignia on his right shoulder. He too wore a rebreather, but approached with his gloved hands raised.

“Fiercely met,” the man said, maybe a little mockingly, as he eyed Yanire’s knife.

“Private security?” Arpeerian asked cautiously.

"No, I'm from offworld. I'm Voidmaster Tai'leon - congratulations on, well, being alive I suppose," the man laughed.

"The colony let you land here?" Arpeerian demanded.

"Oh yes. In fact they think I'm doing them a bit of a favor. I'm here to collect you two. And other survivors as well, of course. I've done some preliminary heat scans of the city - there's more of you left than you'd think," Tai'leon said in a matter-of-fact way.

Yanire's mouth fell open in disbelief. "That's a lie, surely," she snapped. "They've every reason to kill us."

"Luckily for you, colony elites have a lot of work ahead of them. Disposing of millions of bodies, repairing the mechanisms that caused this whole mess, keeping pirates out of the city, planning for phase 2...hunting down and killing survivors diverts resources, causes delays. Really, they just want you gone. My organization volunteered to remove you." Tai'leon stopped about 20 feet away from the couple, his hands still raised.

"Out of the goodness of your hearts?" Yanire spat.

"Well, in a way," the man paused. "There are disasters everywhere. Towns, colonies, continents - across the galaxy, they're dying every day. But, in almost every case, there are survivors. Our mission is to collect these survivors and, you could say, cultivate them. To create a society filled with men and women with the grit and will to live."

"You've survived an apocalypse?" Arpeerian asked warily.

"Oh yes. I was a crewman on a Helicean colony barge. It crashed on Sal'rila. I scrounged around the planet with a small detachment of survivors for over a year before the organization found us. So, consider yourselves lucky."

Arpeerian thought he vaguely remembered something called the Sal'rila Tragedy, but he couldn't be sure. Even if such a thing occurred, he had no way of knowing if this man was actually part of it.

"We'll fill you in on the details, of course, but we should get going," Tai'leon said, turning on his heel and motioning for Arpeerian and Yanire to follow him.

Glancing to his right, Arpeerian saw that Yanire was looking to him for direction. She clearly didn't trust Tai'leon, but with a burst of pride, Arpeerian realized that she trusted him. Taking her hand, he smiled at her, and she tentatively smiled back. "Let's go. I'm starting to think that I really am lucky," he said, leading her into uncertainty.

THE PRINCESS OF AGARTHA

Lars Umlaut

“In Elder days, Man was as one on Agarth, the world of his birth. Together Man built a Great Tower to the Stars and stepped into the cosmos. Many wonders did Man make and many worlds did Man reshape in Agarth's fair image and they praised the LORD for His blessings. But Man grew proud and sought to make Machine in his image and to become as one with the Machine. But through the Machine the Powers and Principalities found vessels for their desires and they brought great evil into the cosmos and Man came to worship them. The LORD struck down the Great Tower and the Deluge came, scattering Man for his sins and Man was forbidden from returning to Agarth. A great war was fought in the heavens against the Powers and Principalities and their Machines, and the works of Man fell to ruin.

Thus passed the Deluge with Man adrift among the stars.”

- The Lunar Chronicle, written by St. Ethalsten of Von Braun

Hooves thundered and the wind whipped both mane and hair as they raced towards the endless blue horizon. Green fields and forests blurred together as they chased after the sunrise and rode into the sunset. Cities burned behind them as they burst out from the steppe and steel rang as it smote against steel. The faces of the enemy was always changing, they were bearded, swarthy and fair. Light eyed, dark eyed, fierce and craven. But they were always the same. Immobile, inactive and still. Cowering behind shields or boldly holding swords they were the same. Frozen in time. Unable to stand against horse and rider and their endless charges. From the saddle, kingdoms and empires were forged and from the saddle kingdoms and empires were slain. They rode out, they conquered, crushing civilizations under hoof and foot as they raced towards the endless blue sky. Hooves thundered again as horse and rider chased the sunrise, the light of a new dawn blinding his eyes but his heart knew where to point lance and sword to slay the scaled beast that dwells in darkness. Fire roared, horse screamed and lance struck the great wyrm as heat washed over him, blistering his skin and boiling his insides.

The wan light of the sun gave little warmth this far out, beyond blue Nephris's orbit and near the cursed void of the Belt of Hades. But its yearning touch upon his face was still felt this far away from mankind's cradle. Siegfried returned from the dreaming world still drifting silently just outside the hatch of his Katafrakt, attached to the 45ft humanoid war machine by the control umbilical that gave him air to breathe and the ability to control it as an extension of himself.

“Wake up, lad.” The coarse voice of Adalwolf roused him fully from sleep, the helmets HUD interjecting a small vid-feed of the aged and bearded warrior in the starfield Siegfried saw facing the Sun. “Your turn to take watch.”

Siegfrid grunted in response to his comrade, with a simple tug on the cable the umbilical began retracting and pulled him into the Katafrakts piloting chamber. The chamber was a cramped affair, just large enough for him to fully extend himself in every direction, the chamber was dominated by an exo-skeleton in its centre used to control the Katafrakt, several computer consoles and vid-screens surrounded the exo-skeleton in the chamber allowing an overview of the Katafrakts systems and controls. As he always did when he entered, Siegfried touched the Crucifix mounted on the center console, praying to Christ for His mercy and protection.

“How are the Thelians doing, still fraying their nerves?”

“You know how these civilized men are, *kamerad*. Pissing themselves over every gas pocket thinking they’ve awoken an antediluvian demon.” The elder warrior grumbled.

Siegfrid reconnected the exo-skeleton to his hard-suit allowing him to control the Katafrakt. As the outer hatch closed and the pilots chamber repressurized Siegfried performed the war-dance that recalibrated his movements with the Katafrakt. In wide circular movements that ended in sudden cuts or strikes, similar to the drills for training with extension weapons, Siegfried ‘put on’ the Katafrakt like an enormous suit of powered armour with the smoothness only a lifetime of habit can build.

“If only they would!” A second much younger voice and face interjected on the com-line, next to Adalwolf. “Three days we have been out here and the only excitement is a sensor-ghost that the Beliskner is off chasing while we babysit a gaggle of grav-bred dirt-eaters!”

The brash interjection did not interrupt Siegfried’s focus on his task, known as he was among his comrades to have ice water in his veins, as little rattled his nerves. Following the traditions of his tribe, the full donning of the Katafrakt ended with the sign of the Cross from both Man and war machine as the neuro-crown connected to his crested ‘stech-helm’ style helmet, optics-visor attached to his hard-suits visor-slit allowing him to ‘see’ with the mono-eye optic mounted in his Katafrakts Y-shaped vision slit in its face plate. Fully synchronized, a Katafrakt wearer wore the giant humanoid war-machine like a man wore a suit of power armour, enhancing his existing skills at warcraft and allowing the warrior to fight freely in deep space, on the surface of a moon or inside a cylinder colony.

It was a machine of war designed for Man, rather than the Antediluvian machine-horrors that were designed to replace him in elder days. Armed with a mag-cannon on his right arm, a shield projector on his left arm that created a round shield of pure energy large enough to protect the Katafrakts torso and a pair of missile pods mounted on the shoulders and a sword as a side-arm. The high mobility of the Katafrakt, its ability to be intuitively controlled and flexible armaments made it the premier war machine in the system and it allowed a single man to be as dangerous as a multitude of lesser men.

“Relax Viglaf, there’ll be plenty of war ahead. The Ashtar are flexing their muscles in the Inner System after our Skythic cousins gave them a bloody nose last lunar cycle.” Siegfried spoke to mollify the hot blood of his younger comrade, turning to face the comet that he was orbiting.

“For now, be happy that we’ve run into neither pirate nor Hades born horror from the belt and we’re earning an easy tribute to bring home to the tribe.”

“But where is the glory in this, *kamerad*? I joined with chief Marsfreund for blood & glory, not stand watch like a statue.”

“There will be enough blood & glory for us all to become legends many times over if the Ashtar push towards our territory, Viglaf.”

“God willing.”

Even as he tried to steer it away from stupid risks, Viglaf’s sheer eagerness to fight anything and anyone was infectious and his nephew’s enthusiasm for battle cracked Siegfried’s lips in a grin. “And God may will it another day, Viglaf. For now, keep your eyes peeled for pirates.”

The Katafrakts sensors marked out the Thelian miners working like ants on the comets surface, blue indicators showing their positions and where their ship formed a base camp on its surface. Highlighted on his HUD with green indicators was also his fellow warriors. Adalwolf in his Katafrakt standing watch on the surface, Viglaf orbiting impatiently above and the dozen *hirdmen*, power-armoured warriors of their tribe who fought in tandem with those who wore a Katafrakt, glittering in their grey steel armour plate with red, black and white accents that was their tribal livery. Katafrakt and *hirdmen* all wore the same colours and their mutual warband allegiance was shown by the 'Goethic adler' their warchief, Hermanaric Marsfreund, earned as his mark after gaining his fame and reputation fighting as an auxiliary under the eagle of the Augustan legions.

Spread out over the surface around the mining operation, they were based in a MUL, Mechanized Utility Lighter. A medium sized dropship designed to support Katafrakt wearers and their power-armoured companions. A simple thought-impulse fired the main thrusters on his Katafrakts back and he entered into a controlled descent to the comets surface. A com-line opened from Gunthar, the brute of a man that was chief of the dozen *hirdmen* scattered on the surface. The other three Katafrakts and dozen MUL borne *hirdmen* which formed their warband, were still with the Beliskner, their Trireme-class starship.

"Hail Siegfried, 'bout time you ended your stargazing and joined us drudges down here in the dirt!" Gunthar spoke with a toothy grin on the vid-feed, corresponding to a power armoured figure giving a salute with his extended right arm on the surface in Siegfrieds direction.

"Why's that Gunthar? You MUL-jockeys about to host a feast?" Siegfried responded in kind.

"Bah, if only kamerad, but these tight-arsed Thelians are to spooked to drink! They heard to many ghost stories when they passed through Ouran I tell you." Siegfried waved with his shield arm to Adalwolf to signal he now had his watch. The older warrior responded with a salute from his weapon arm and withdrew towards the MUL.

"A damn shame, Gunthar, hired by a Thelian aristocrat to guard his miners and antediluvian artifact salvagers and we don't even get to liberate them of their drink."

"Aye it is, speak of the devil there's their foreman coming." Gunthar turned to point towards a space suit wearing figure bouncing toward them in the comet's low gravity and another com-line opened, this one audio only.

"*Chaire*, Goethar." The foreman greeted them in European, the most widely spoken tongue in Jovias orbit, referring to them both by their tribe's name.

"*Chaire*, Alexandrios." Replied Siegfried, the most fluent of the two Goethar warriors in the European tongue, learned in his youth as a mercenary in the Koryntic war. "How fares your work?"

"The work fares well... Siegfried, is it? I cannot tell all of your Katafrakti apart."

"Mine bears the rearing white horse and sword on a black field and a black and white horn-crest on the helm, Adalwolf bears a Kraken trapped in a wolfs jaws and white wings on his helm and Viglaf has yet to earn his mark." Siegfried interjected.

"Ah, of course. No matter, we have found a structure beneath the ice where we're digging and going by its size and shape, we think it might be a ship!" Alexandrios continued unperturbed by the Goethars lesson in heraldry.

"A wreck?" A hint of eagerness entered Siegfrieds voice.

Antediluvian relics was what they were looking for. But a full wreck? There were enough tall- tales and ghost stories of haunted antediluvian wrecks whose promise of treasure only was a lure for the fiends that dwelled within their hulls. As much as he tried to steer his nephew away from dumb risks Siegfried too felt the sting of boredom from inactivity. Finding some kind of beast to slay in the comets bowels would be a welcome distraction and a chance to increase his own fame to being more than the Blonde Beast of Knydus. Fame for a single battle defeating three Lykurgan champions without pause between each bout was not enough to satisfy Siegfried.

“Exactly, a wreck! Imagine the wealth of elder days we can find in something preserved in a comets ice! Neural arrays, ambrosia synthesizers, undamaged databanks, Kyther mechanisms and who knows what else! We will all walk away from this as rich men my *barbaroi* friend, very rich!”

Siegfrid simply grunted in reply, unwilling to fully reveal his thoughts to an outsider.

“Do not be so sour!” The Thelian continued unperturbed. “Even if we dig up the Hydra of Antares it will be nothing for mighty men such as you!” Alexandrios continued and supplied the two Goethar warriors with an updated map of the digsite with a few taps on a wrist mounted control panel on his space suit.

“We will be digging around this area here with blasting charges to crack the ice. Tell your men to keep a sharper eye out, those blasts can be spotted far away with a set of good sensors.”

“We will do that.” Siegfried replied as the foreman turned back to the rest of the Thelian miners with a wave to the pair of Goethar.

“I don’t like him much.” Gunthar commented as the Thelian walked away.

“I’ve met much worse. You, for instance Gunthar.” Siegfried spoke, the vid-feed showing his wry grin.

Boisterous laughter was the only response from the power armoured brute as he began walking towards the nearest group of *hirdmen* to inform them of the Thelian’s plans.

A rumble picked up by the Katafrakts sensors was the only warning before the ice and rock of the comet cracked and crumbled. The comet trembled and its icy surface, punctured and weakened by the Thelians digging, exploded in a torrent of steam and flame. With a roar that pierced the airless void and struck fear deep into their hearts, something crawled out from beneath the comet’s surface. An ageless terror that has haunted Man since he was bound to but a single world and huddling in caves. A head crowned with horns, four legs tipped with monstrous talons, wings that could blot out the stars and a hundred-foot-long serpentine body covered in crimson scales ending in a spiked tail. Tongues of flame flickered from behind its sabre-like fangs and evil gleamed in its baleful yellow eyes. Upon wings of doom, it took flight and the Dragon set upon the men of Thelos and sons of Goethar with ageless hate.

“God have mercy!” Adalwolf spat out.

The Thelians where fleeing in terror from the scaled fiend as the Goethar hirdmen tried to steel their hearts and guide their wards to safety. Flames that burned with no natural heat engulfed them and men died as the Dragon spat its fury.

“Adalwolf, I’ll draw its attention and lead it away from those on foot! If we can get it to open space, we can fight it on our terms!” Siegfried barked as he hauled his Katafrakt from his idle position, thrusters burning, shield-projector flaring to life and his blood rising in his veins as he put himself on a war footing with the dawning realization that he had a chance to claim the glory from killing a dragon.

“The beast is mine!” Viglaf bellowed over the com-line, his thrusters burning bright as a star as he charged headlong towards the Dragon, sword in hand and shield held in front.

A wordless protest was all Siegfried managed to say before the disaster was upon them. Viglaf drew the dragon’s attention by emptying his missile pods as he charged, the explosive yields of the missiles did little against the ancient wyrms scaly hide, but it turned its attentions away from tormenting the lesser men and it hurled itself against Viglaf, its wings carrying it forward upon some unknown aether that filled the airless void. There was a clash of steel against claw and bright flashes of flame, as Dragon and Katafrakt wrestled for position. But the ancient wyrms greater bulk and long years of terrorizing man quickly won out. Its great jaws tore the weapon arm off Viglaf’s Katafrakt and its claws raked the armour and pierced the war machines vitals. Only a shot from Siegfrieds mag-cannon drew it away from finishing its slaughter of the young Goethar warrior.

“Here I am you old snake! Fight me!” He hissed out on an open com-line, as he ascended from the comets surface, challenging the dragon by beating his mag-cannons barrel against his shield.

The fiend, vexed by being kept from feasting on man-flesh turned to face Siegfried with a single beat of its great wings against whatever aether that gave it flight.

“Foul child of Adam!” The dragon spoke and its dread voice carried through the com-line of his Katafrakt, the speakers shrieked with feedback as the old wyrm imposed its will on mere machine. “You dare stand against Ushumgallu!? He who rages like the lion, Eater of lambs, Terror of Nod and Doom of Agartha!” The burning glare of the dragon hit Siegfried like a punch in the chest, its raw hatred forcing itself upon him like a physical thing.

“A lot of boasting for an oversized worm!” Siegfried taunted through gritted teeth, steeling his heart against the immense malice radiating from the dragon.

Raising his shield, Siegfried advanced on the wyrm with a thruster burst, his blood thundered in his veins in anticipation for the fight to come, but he kept his cool. This was a dragon, a monster of legend. He would have no hope of killing it if he rushed in with nothing but bravado. An indicator on his HUD told him that Adalwolf was setting up a shot from the comets surface with his far larger shoulder fired mag-cannon and Siegfried closed the distance between him and Ushumgallu, leaving enough room for his comrade to have a clear line of fire.

“Impudent spawn of the dirt, I am Ushumgallu! You think I do not see through your witless ploy?! You will not take my prize; she is mine and beyond the reach of the Lamb's slaves!” the dragons gaze turned from Siegfried to Adalwolf and with a mighty roar it barreled into Siegfried. He had barely enough time to angle his shield to take the brunt of the impact as the dragon tossed him aside and left him dazed and drifting in the comets orbit.

“Come then you big lizard, let Adalwolf the Kraken Eater break your teeth!” The old warrior roared, the magnetic coils of his mag-cannon propelling a three-foot metal spike to hypersonic velocities with a soundless blast in the comet’s airless atmosphere.

Ushumgallu’s roar of pain brought every still living man on the comet to his knees with the screeching feedback it sent into their com-systems. Adalwolfs shot had struck true, but it had merely wounded the dread wyrm and it did nothing to halt Ushumgallus charge. Undaunted, the hoary old Goethar tossed the mag-cannon, drew his Katafrakts war-knife and received the beasts charge with a howling cry. Blade once again met claw, fire flashed against steel and though the old warrior was a slayer of krakens, in the dragon he had met a foe that was his match.

Siegfried recovered from the dragons blow that dazed him just to see the dragon in the midst of slaughtering another of his brothers in arms. With cold fury, Siegfried directed all available power to his Katafrakts thrusters and launched himself into a headlong charge. With a thunderous crash that cracked scales and buckled armour plating Siegfried collided into Ushumgallus side, pushing him off Adalwolfs savaged Katafrakt.

“Adalwolf!”

“Don’t worry about me lad, kill the dragon!” The elder warrior responded over a crackling commline.

Needing no further assurance, Siegfried ejected the mag-cannon from his right arm and drew the sword that hung at his Katafrakts side and faced Ushumgallu, the Eater of Heroes.

“Mongrel! Usurper! I will devour the Agarthans bones before your eyes and rend your flesh so even the Son of Man dare not look upon your despoiled carcass!” The wyrm hissed, the venom in its voice causing a seething static in the Katafrakts com-systems as it spoke.

Curiosity lingered in Siegfrieds mind, exactly who was the beast referring to in his taunts? A question that would be answered after the dragon was dead, a lifetime of honing his martial skills kept him focused on Ushumgallu. Rather than the headlong assaults in their previous clashes the combatants were judging one another, Siegfried’s other two comrades had been dispatched swiftly by the dragon and if he fell, the miners and *hirdmen* would be at Ushumgallus mercy. A doom that Siegfried would not allow to overcome them. With prudence born of caution, Siegfried stared down the dragon with a cool head and likewise, the beast’s wounds gave it pause to act with caution.

Lesser men scampered around their feet to get out of the way of the impending clash and many stared in awe at this battle out of legend. Siegfried's blood thundered in his veins as he stared down Ushumgallu, feeling as if he had been in this position a hundred times before. Sensations swam through his mind, called from deep in his blood. Hooves beating hard earth, the roar of flame and beast as lance pierced through scaly hide, the fearful cry of a woman and the heat of flame as it washed over his steel-clad skin. Lesser men would shirk in terror from this contest of wills, as even through optical interface Siegfried's steely blue eyes and Ushumgallu's hateful yellow eyes were locked together. Siegfried's blood cried out, it called for the dragon's death but his will cooled it. Impatient action would not grant him victory or fame.

For what seemed like half an age, man and monster fought this battle in their minds. Then suddenly both exploded into motion, Ushumgallu spitting blasphemies as the pair collided like brawling tigers. Siegfried ducked and weaved and deflected the wyrms claws with his shield but the beast's size and unholy strength soon put him on the back foot and a fell blow from the fiend's tail sent him sprawling on the comet's surface. Spitting blood into his helmet and cursing as he ignored half a dozen alarm signals flashing on his HUD, with an effort of will he forced himself and the Katafrakt back on his feet. Buckled armour plating ground against each other and sent sparks flying as artificial muscle flexed, but both man and war machine rose.

"Siegfried, fire!" Gunthar's voice called, barely audible over the static interference, but it was enough to see the wyrm risen up on its hind legs, throat glowing with heat.

With a curse Siegfried raised his shield and crouched behind it a mere moment before being awash with searing flame. More alarm signals rang as solar flare heat was quickly overloading the capacity of his shield and turning the ice and rock Siegfried was standing on to vapour. Siegfried's teeth were gritted together from the effort, but his voice was calm and even as he prayed: "Blessed be the LORD my rock, who trained my hands for war and taught my fingers to fight. He is my loving God, my fortress and my deliverer in whom I take refuge and who grants me victory. Amen."

With a mighty war cry Siegfried hurled himself forward, burning all available propellant for his thruster-charge through Ushumgallu's hellish fire. His shield overloaded before he had fully passed through the flames and his Katafrakt was burned black as he impacted shield arm first with the wyrm. Caught off guard by the suicidal charge, Ushumgallu reacted with pure bestial instinct, enveloping the Goethar warrior in a monstrous grapple trying to snap and bite off Siegfried's shield arm, thinking it was what carried the killing blade. That mistake was the doom of Ushumgallu, He who rages like the Lion, Eater of Lambs, Terror of Nod and Doom of Agartha. As Ushumgallu's mouth descended on the Katafrakt's shoulder to tear it off and reach the man's flesh inside it, Siegfried jammed his shield arm into the wyrms throat and the fell monster sunk its teeth into the machine's limb triumphantly, swallowing the ploy and thinking victory was within its teeth.

As the dragon's fangs cracked armour plate and rent apart myomer muscle, Siegfried's sword pierced Ushumgallu's ribs, spilling the fiend's black blood. Panic set in Ushumgallu, as inhuman fear gripped its black heart and the fiend struggled with all the fervor of a cornered animal. With what remained of his shield arm Siegfried held firm inside the dragon's mouth to prevent it from escaping as the dragon's claws and wings beat ferociously to break free from the Goethar warrior's deadly grasp. But Siegfried did not relent, through sheer will he poured into the Katafrakt's limbs he held the wyrm firm and his sword struck with killing stroke upon killing stroke into its black heart with the calm certainty of a butcher at work. With its chest a bloody ruin and its noxious black blood draining into the airless void, Ushumgallu was sent screaming to join its kin in Hell.

Wrenching his mangled shield arm free from the dragon's gutted carcass, Siegfried cut off the dragon's head with his sword and crushed the remains of the wyrm under his Katafrakt's heel as he held the dragon's head aloft in silent triumph.

"Siegfried the Blonde Beast of Knydus! Siegfried the Dragon slayer!" Gunthar cheered over the com-line and his voice was joined by every man on the comet.

“You killed the damn thing, you’ve already got first claim on whatever is in its hoard, there’s no reason to be digging around in the dirt when you could be enjoying a hero’s feast instead!” Gunthar grumbled as he followed Siegfried down the crater from which Ushumgallu had emerged. Siegfried’s white cloak billowed from every movement in the comet’s low gravity, having left his damaged Katafrakt to go on foot in just his hard-suit.

“Always thinking with your stomach, Gunthar.” Siegfried remarked wryly as he approached what looked like the torn open side of a starship, ripped open with large claws and partially melted, signs of Ushumgallus passing.

“You sound just like the Father Brennus.”

Siegfried ignored the comment and descended into the bowels of the starship, his own sword drawn, a smaller version of the sword he wielded when wearing his Katafrakt.

“Well I’ll be, guess I owe the Thelians some money. They weren’t wrong about there being an antediluvian ship buried here. These bulkheads don’t look like anything I’ve ever seen before.” Gunthar commented.

The pair walked the ship’s hallways, adjusting smoothly from the comet’s low gravity to the ship’s artificial gravity, their helmet mounted lights illuminating the smooth interiors of the ship. They passed through rounded corridors made out of a pale golden metal that seemed to be wrought by an artist’s hand rather than the utilitarian interiors common across the solar system, scratched with deep grooves from Ushumgallus claws where he’d bent metal to crawl through.

The pair of Goethar warriors both stopped to look in awe, their faintly illuminated forms standing before a gateway covered by the unmistakable, opaque haze of an active shield, but of no kind that either of them had seen before.

“There’s atmosphere in there.” Remarked Siegfried, glancing towards the reading his hard-suits sensors was giving.

“I’ll get the rest of the lads and we’ll- Damn it Siegfried!” Without a word of warning Siegfried had stepped forward and passed through the shield.

The other side of the shield was not the vault of wonder and riches that he expected, rather it gave Siegfried the impression of a dusty tomb. No light was cast inside it but the pale glow from the shield, the stabbing beam from his helmet light and softly glowing lights on what looked like a gold sarcophagus. A dozen of them were sunk into niches on the wall but only one seemed active. The others Siegfried quickly discovered contained only corpses – the dried-out husks of what looked like royalty to his eyes. Wearing a mixture of very finely wrought hard-suits and robes in gold and lapis blue shades. Siegfried was no expert in machinery, but these sarcophagi appeared to be cryo-sleep pods and where they Agarthan, as the dragon had boasted? With Ushumgallu’s words ringing in his mind Siegfried strode over to the active cryo-pod and with wide eyes beheld the still living occupant.

She had white-blond hair that fell to her shoulders, her skin, tanned golden, was only exposed on her face, which had strong, fine boned features on the kind of face Siegfried associated with the marble statues the Jovians carved. What was visible of her body through the view-screen was hidden behind a hard-suit that was far less bulky than what Siegfried and his comrades wore. The first layer seemed to be nothing more than a thick bodysuit that covered her up to her jaw, covered with plating of glittering golden metal and blue lapis, decorated with engravings of sunwheels, stylized falcons and winged beings. Over it she wore what looked like a cloak or long shawl made from some thin silken material that was mildly translucent in a cold white colour with embroidery in gold and lapis that formed sun and star patterns. She was one of the most beautiful women Siegfried had ever beheld, and judging by her finery and the finery of the dead occupants of the other cryo-pods, a princess.

A princess of Agartha. The realization struck Siegfried like a blow and he began to examine the cryo-pod with some vigor, stretching the technical lessons his grandfather had taught him about how Katafrakts functioned to the limit of their application. He had slain a dragon and if he could further his legend by not only saving a princess but a living, breathing Agarthan princess, the skalds would sing of his fame across the Solar system for centuries to come.

After some fiddling with the control panel and the incomprehensible language it used, Siegfried found what he thought was the button to open the cryo-pod and after a brief pause to be sure it was the correct button, he crossed himself and pressed it. With a hiss of depressurization, mechanical clunking and whirring the cryo-pod slid open and after a few tenuous moments the princess of Agartha fell forward to be caught and cradled in Siegfried's arms. Her first breaths came with hacking coughs as she filled her lungs for the first time in centuries and she looked around her with bewildered eyes, eyes who were several shades of vivid blues. She spoke with a frantic voice to Siegfried, asking, pleading even in a language he did not understand, but still carried some familiarity in its cadence, until she noticed the broken cryo-pods and the colour drained from her face. Impressively, she maintained her composure and though her eyes watered she did not break down in tears or give up as much as a sob.

Once her shock had drained away, the Princess started and turned, regarding Siegfried fearfully as if she expected him to be some kind of transhuman monster rather than her rescuer. Coolly, Siegfried unclasped his helmet and lifted it off his head with a soft hiss as it disconnected from his hard-suits life-support system. His wavy golden blond hair, the reason for his moniker, was swept back over his scalp and the hard Teutonic lines of his face had seen better days, though it still carried some glow from his youth. Several days' worth of accumulated stubble covered his cheeks, blood spatter from his battle with Ushumgallu dirtied his fair skin with red stains and his warpaint, red, white and black lines had become smudged with sweat. In many ways, Siegfried was the classic image of the Teutones techno-barbarian, stern faced and with his tall, muscular form carried proudly. Despite his stern expression, the fact that he was a natural born human gave the Princess an obvious sense of relief and she began speaking to him earnestly in the Agarthan tongue, expressing what sounded like gratitude to Siegfried's ears.

"Woman." Siegfried addressed her and tapped his helmet demonstratively before putting it back on his head. "We are leaving."

The Princess looked at him puzzled for a moment until she understood his meaning, she put two of her fingers against her hard-suit collar and Siegfried was treated to a wonder of Antediluvian technology. Golden, metallic plates slid out from what had looked like a brace on the backside of her neck and formed a helm over her head, as richly decorated as the rest of her hard-suit with a smooth, featureless, metal faceplate. With a cocked head she asked Siegfried something he did not understand and he answered her by grabbing her and tossing her up on his broad shoulder despite her indignant protests. With the Princess of Agartha laying over his shoulder, Siegfried passed through the shield and returned to his comrades, receiving a hero's welcome in camp as he emerged from the wreck as a barbarian hero of old, monster slain and crushed underfoot and with a fair maiden carried over his shoulder.

In the stars above, a dot of light drew nearer to the celebrations of the Goethar and men of Thelos on the comets surface. Coming out of the wan light of the Sun, it was carried forward with immense speed as its fully extended star sails caught the solar winds. Like a blade hid inside a cloak the trireme approached, shadowed by its low emissions among the background radiation of the void. Atop its prow a solitary Katafrakt stood tall like a demi-god, holding on to the bow sprit and watching the horizon like a sailor of old. Over its shoulders it wore a short mantle of exotic spotted fur and its armour was bedecked in red livery with bronzed details adorning its horned helm and four wing shaped thrusters. On its bronzed chest, formed in the style of a muscular male torso, it bore the Morning Star encircled by a winged serpent devouring its tail. The mark of Ashtar, greatest and most decadent of his people's kingdoms.

PATHFINDER

Turncoat

“You hear anything, pathfinder?” I asked as I walked past Pullo. He shook his head, the slight protrusion of plugs on his temples visible momentarily through leathery skin. Pullo smiled at me, as if I was in the midst of telling a joke he’d heard before, one where our lives were the punchline. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again.

“Have a good shift.” He eventually said as we parted ways in the hall. I looked at the tall archway to the executive suite and sighed. It had seemed like a gateway to a better life only a few years ago. It didn’t seem that way any more, just another banal series of doors that kept Calliope running.

I nodded to Raymond as I entered the control center. It consisted of a roundabout, centered on a massive glassy sphere. Six workers kept track of the vast habitats, sectors, and protrusions whose function maintained nearly a hundred million human lives. A little red light or an alarm meant that there was a problem too serious for the automated systems. Generally everything took care of itself, a few hundred techs were enough to keep everything running as long as there were no cascade failures. Raymond was the Superintendent of General Operations, he made the final call if anything went badly. The old mans tubby frame was at rest in a high-backed chair staring blankly across several boringly green readouts.

I sat in one of three available positions facing the glassy sphere in the center of the room. “Evening Raymond. Hear any news?”

The old man glanced up and spoke, “I haven’t heard anything Lawrance, did you see the letter signed by section 12-04?”

I shook my head.

“They’re trying to blame me for shortages of some plastics and heavy elements. As if I have anything to do with what we’re shipped, or when. I’m drafting a response letter now, can you think of anything to add?”

“I don’t know,” I said as I sat down. “We’ve hardly heard any chatter over the last six weeks or so, cluster’s mostly complaining about the same trade tariffs and merchant shortages, but not much more. This keeps up and I’ll start getting worried about my job.”

Raymond scoffed “These people I swear.”

One of the other techs looked up and smiled, “I wouldn’t worry about your job, regulations require no fewer than three pathfinders at any given time in a class II. I don’t think they’ll change that any time soon.”

“I don’t think we’ll hear anything any time soon.” I said grumpily

“Regs are regs.” Responded the tech.

“Regulations say that Pullo isn’t supposed to jack out until I’m jacked in.”

“Yeah, well, don’t be late.” Responded Raymond, “besides, his old lady is sick. I’m not gonna be the one who keeps him.”

“You ready?” Asked the tech.

I paused for a breath, a pang of irritation tainted my thoughts. Next week I would have been showing my son around my workplace, but that wasn’t really in the cards right now. He’d always been a rambunctious kid, and I felt guilty as hell not being there for him right now. He was just starting to get old enough that he really needed his father in his life and... I really wanted to be there.

“You good?” Repeated the tech. I tried to shake myself out of the moment of self-pity and frustration. I nodded and pulled a pair of cords from a console beneath the glassy sphere. Lifting the two chords to my temples, they magnetically slotted into place, transmitting a high-bandwidth lowpower signal to the contact implants in my neocortex. It took a moment for me to connect through the carefully contained condensed matter at suspended in the core of the device before me. The experience was like jumping into an ice cold bath of water, a momentary breathtaking plunge into a frame-shifted state of mind.

Superluminal travel and communications require traveling into the future, not just in the metaphorical sense, but the literal one. Sure navigational computers can adhere to well trodden paths, zapping starships from one system to another. Navigating a new path or communicating across vast physical and temporal spaces requires the concentrated low-entropy of a mind. That was my job, as a pathfinder, I could see ships arriving from distant stars and provide navigational updates and alerts before they physically arrived in-system at my home, Calliope.

I shivered as I felt like I was surrounded by fog, my mind superimposing a spiderweb of connections like delicate threads leading from the past to the future. My present ceased to exist and while I was still in the physical presence of my colleagues in the CIC, my mind had vanished into countless threads of alternative futures and pasts.

One thread tugged at my mind more strongly than the others. I was with my son, he was here in the CIC, blond haired and bright eyed as he tried to climb into a ventilation duct. “Doran, stop that.” Some one shouted, was that me? I tried to refocus, not to be distracted by these visions, but it was difficult. I should have taken an extra few minutes to clear my head before connecting. I tried to follow the voices back to the CIC, but the fog swirled around me again, future and past colliding in a frothing soup of emotive action.

Being a pathfinder was difficult and took training. My father described it as being the lantern that guides ships in the dark, where you’re constantly flickering as wind and water try to quench you. It was an apt metaphor, but a difficult experience to capture in words. He’d become a pathfinder to care for his family, and I had intended to do the same. Care for my--

There he was again, toddling through my thoughts. “Doran, hold still and get dressed.” I carried him from a small bedroom. Another alternate future? Maybe a vision of the past, I wasn’t sure. I tugged on the hazy strands of possibility around me and found the center again. I was in the fog, I could feel the tug of the white dwarf star hanging far below Calliope, brilliant, hot, slowly cooling into the endless future. Calliope itself, a silver circlet surrounding the sphere, spinning slowly along its own axis.

I tried to tie the threads of possibility together, feeling out the most likely futures that bounded ahead of me, to see if anything was out there that had a voice calling forward. I heard nothing, no rumble of engines, and no soft voices of other pathfinders in the null-space of superluminal flight. I’d never traveled from Calliope, had lived my whole life here, first with my parents, then through school, then pushing papers until I’d become a pathfinder like my dad had been. I missed him. This station had been a home to our family for at least a dozen generations. It was built up like a living organism where each layer represented new growth like an aged tree. Silver rings and discs, and traffic sprawling both within and without. Calliope was over over one and a half million miles in diameter, narrow, wrapped all the way around its host star, and lay host to several cultures all governed by a counsel here in the CIC. It was beautiful, like a circlet of diamond bright in the light white light, and those of us who had grown up here rarely imagined any other home. My father was like that; he’d said he would be happy to die here one day. Eventually he did.

I kept getting dragged out of the moment, out of the fog into the null-space of possibility. I reached to my temples and withdrew the cords and took a deep breath. The tech had changed, it was now a woman with dark hair, not the rugged man from earlier.

“How long has it been?” I asked.

She glanced up, startled by my sudden movement. “Uh, hang on, it’s been about two and a half hours since you put in. Have you heard anything?”

I shook my head and tried to remember the woman's name, “No, I haven’t heard a damn thing Carsie. Where’s Reymond?”

“He left about twenty minutes ago.” Carsie said.

I nodded, “Yeah that makes sense.”

Carsie looked back at the screen, “are you going to take your half-hour break now?”

“Yeah. I need to cool off. It’s rough seas out there right now.” I said, fully aware of the fact that she likely had only the vaguest of notions what it was I really meant. I stood up and walked out of the CIC. According to official regulations I wasn’t supposed to be off duty for more than thirty minutes at a time. Of course practice and paper are starkly different out here on the edges of imperial space. We hadn’t suffered an actual inspection since... Actually I wasn’t sure if I’d ever seen one. I think there were a few back when my father had been a pathfinder. Calliope wasn’t some major trade hub, it was a relatively isolated topopolis habitat at the edge of the Argentine cluster. Imperial officials almost never stopped here not since before I started working. Well, once, when a condensed matter shipment was late out of Calliope.

The rest of my shift was exhausting, but it wasn’t as bad once I’d calmed my mind. The eternal fog of null-space has a way of getting inside your head if you aren’t ready for it, and I hadn’t been ready. When my shift finally ended, simply changed and left. No debrief, there’d been no messages. It took me another ten minutes just to get through the CIC complex and back into the habitat proper. Waiting for the tram in the early morning. I stood on the inner surface of an enormous cylinder, the horizon ahead wrapped upward to join the ground ten or so kilometers above. Great celestial lights were just barely beginning to hum, prepping for the early morning commuters.

I wasn’t sure if the night-shift was for me, but it did leave me time during the day. It was nice that I didn’t have to try and schedule appointments around work, just around sleep. I was tired. Tired of a job I’d probably hold for the rest of my life, tired of not seeing my son on the weekends, tired of all of it. Maybe I’d feel better after some rest.

My dreams were shattered by an insistent buzzing alarm. I pawed at it. My subconscious and I sparred for some time over whether awakening and facing reality was actually necessary, or just a waste of time. Eventually I roused myself, dressed, and checked my tablet to see the time. It was early afternoon, far earlier than I should be waking up. No wonder I was so tired. I tried to remember why it was that I’d awaken so early but it didn’t come to me immediately, so I washed my face and showered hoping that I’d remember.

It was about two minutes into the wash cycle that I finally did recall the reason for my early alarm. I had to attend a custodial adjudication date. Stupid bullshit, scheduled it right for when I was supposed to be sleeping too. Dark stars, they really wanted to make my life difficult.

After struggling through the transit lines to arrive on time, I was relegated to a waiting room while several legal experts argued over the correct method for a custodial hearing. I wanted improved visitation rights, I wanted my son back. I wanted to teach him about what I did for a living. It was hardly the intention of the friendly social-worker Lucia to let that happen. After nearly an hour and a half, I was finally permitted into the courtroom proper.

After two hours of briefings and statements I was angrily gripping the bench in front of me, knuckles white. A portly old woman sat atop the proceedings and was dully reading out statements and precedents.

The adjudicator spoke, clearly irritated that I was here at all. “In accordance with Volume 21, chapter 9, section 8, subsection 49-B, part A-1 the genetic donor-”

I couldn't hardly hold my tongue any longer, "Father." I said angrily.

She looked at me, and then at my counsel who sat next to me. The man glared at me from beneath a highly formalized pair of traditional spectacles and mouthed "Lawrence, shut up," beneath the adjudicators angry glare.

"You will keep your client silent, or his privilege in the proceedings will be ended. Father is not a recognized legal term, you are the genetic donor, nothing more." I glared at her.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Lucia's smug face. Dark stars I wanted to hit it. The damn social worker had taken Doran mere days after his mother died and was looking to steal my son to the far side of Calliope: a ward of the station. There was nothing I could really do except seek adjudication. I wasn't even allowed to speak or really partake in the proceedings, but I had to be present for legal reasons. My counsel was the one who was there to speak on my behalf. I kind of hated him too.

I dreamed of a family and of teaching Doran how to surf the crests of starlight in nulls-space, making him breakfast, learning about his favorite sims. Those dreams were crushed by some volume of some legal book that had been written lightyears away and centuries ago. Even at this distance, imperial weight seemed crushing: legal codes so ancient and byzantine that not even skilled scholars could navigate them. I'd heard from a few friends with family members who worked in the legal system that sometimes the laws were so cumbersome that they'd just make things up on the fly from time to time. I wondered if that's what the old crone was doing now. She'd better not be stealing away my family on a whim. What gave her the right anyway? She wasn't in my home, didn't see how my family had functioned. *Had* functioned. I wiped my eyes.

By the time the proceedings had ended, I was exhausted, both psychologically and emotionally. Lucia's smug smirk of indifference had me in a rage. I hadn't embarrassed myself too badly, according to my counsel anyway. I tried to get home and take a nap before work, sleep didn't really come. I just kept seeing that smug face. I couldn't do anything either. Refusing the rule of an adjudicator was the same as refusing the rule of empire entirely, and you could spend years on reactor-duty. And if you ran, the templar ghosts would come for you, and that ended a lot worse.

I got to work late again, that would probably result in a memo being sent some bureaucrat somewhere, but it didn't really matter as long as Raymond wasn't pissed off. Pathfinders were mostly here to fulfill regulations than actually accomplish anything outside of the occasional heads up for a sudden arrival.

That night, for the first time in months, communications were alight between star systems. Calliope was right at the edge of the star cluster that represented the Argentine Imperium, so little of of the chatter was readily accessible to me. Still, I could hear distant voices and chatter from star to star. From what I heard, some kind of catastrophic dispute had occurred toward the core of the cluster. There was a disagreement between systems around movement of supplies I think some of the admiralty had gotten involved. None of it was really relevant to Calliope, but it interested me none the less. I probed nearby systems for more news, and slowly started piecing together what had occurred deep within the core of our pocket of space.

When I was in primary schooling, I'd been taught about the structural wings of the Argentine Imperium. Within the globular cluster, imperial space, there were nine hundred and eighty seven stars and stellar remnants within a span of only sixteen light years from one side to the other. The density made the region extremely difficult to navigate.

Pathfinders were a resource used heavily, and surveys of null-space routes were constantly conducted by the throne. There are only a few hundred globular clusters like Argentine in the Galaxy, and most were similarly independent empires. The high density and difficult navigability made them almost impossible to invade, while the evolved centralized governance structures made it precarious for such principalities to project power into open galactic space.

Within the Imperium there were a total of five distinct government branches: The Admiralty, the Admin, the Merchant Marine, the Adjudicarus, and the Templarum. Each of these served its own purpose in maintaining stability. The Admiralty provided naval defenses, warships that were used in border-skirmishes with our neighbors in open space. The battleships were gigantic kilometers long warships that housed tens of thousands of semi-autonomous drones. I'd seen battle replays occasionally, ten thousand dots, each representing a mountain sized drone swarming across an entire solar system like a hive of raging hornets. I'd once aspired to join the naval forces, but my father had forbade it. A quiet life wasn't all bad in the long run.

The Adjudicarus were responsible for maintaining imperial legal rule. The Imperium had an enormous legal structure that had been developed over countless years of galactic stability. Due to the way that power was centralized within the star cluster, an impossibly complex set of legal codes and precedents had developed over many cycles. Most adjudicators were some type of savant who could memorize endless pages. Even then, digital subsystems were constantly required to support the Adjudicarus as legal precedent was an ever shifting sea of serpentine connections. I knew relatively little about the legal code, save that the interactions between governance, corporate, and individual assets was something you'd desperately need a lawyer for. And that was prior to any attempts at figuring out inter-habitat or inter-stellar law.

The Admin was straight forward, it maintained the function of individual colonial assets and habitats. That's where I worked. Due to the convoluted regulations, the admin tended to grow more and more lax as one drifted away from Argentine Primaris at the cluster core. By the time one was on the rim, as I was, the regulations were sometimes more of a manifest suggestion than hard law. Even in the event that a deviation was noticed, the summary audit would often take so long to snake it's way through the bureaucracy that the original offender may well have died of old age. I heard that a lot of the other smaller habitats had straight up begun functioning semi-autonomously in the last few decades as their requests for resources were so rarely received that they had to rely on themselves. It was an effect that had been growing.

While the Admin was a generalized non-central system that kept things running, the Templarum was nearly the opposite. It held ancient traditions that had been passed down from the early era of human expansion into the galaxy. The Templarum were in many ways the opposite of the Admin: they were tight-lipped, highly disciplined, and every one was absolutely terrified of them. Raymond worked with a templarum representative, but they weren't directly beholden to habitat administration or the Adjudicarus. The Templarum was the real means of imperial control, any who stood directly against an imperial decree, particularly those who dared go against an order of the adjudicarus would simply disappear.

The Templarum were remnants of ancient ground forces from the era when habitats were not the primary method of habitation. Equipped with stealth armor, high powered arms, drones, and all manner of logistical support, they were ghosts. They'd appear by your bedside in the middle of the night, and you'd come-to in a Templarum holding cell ready for immediate adjudicated justice. The Templarum were terrifying, and their reach was omnipresent. Not so much a security force as the inquisitorial right hand of the imperial throne. They were the spirits of the imperial order. As long as one didn't cause a public threat or flaunt the declarations of an adjudicator, however, the Templars were generally quite hands-off with the general populace; operating within their own arcane code. If one did accrue their attention, nothing short of prophetic insight or divine intervention would keep them from your doorstep.

The fifth branch of imperial governance was the Merchant Marine. After much investigation, I determined it was seven ships of the merchant marine that had ruffled imperial feathers. The merchant mariners were the blood that kept the empire whole, transporting goods through labyrinthine trade lines across the Argentine Imperium. There had been a dispute over condensed matter taxation and supply annexation. After some back and forth with pathfinders further in, I worked out that the imperials had demanded a number of rare elements and several merchant mariners had instead attempted to smuggle high value materials. The merchant mariners could hardly be blamed, they already operated with razor thin profit margins after taxes. Why they thought they could get away with smuggling the stuff, I had no idea. But when they were caught the ships were seized by the Templarum. Then some kind of a four way skirmish had broken out between the Merchant Marines, the Templarum borders, an unknown third party, and the Admiralty. Reports varied, but several marine ships were damaged or destroyed. What were, by all reports, a number of pirate ships had escaped with large quantities of the material. Pirates shouldn't be able to operate that far inside the empire, the Templarum would simply seize their ships at the nearest port. Still, if I was to believe reports: pirates either captured a few merchant vessels, or their cargo. This was significant political news. The thrones capacity to defend trade lanes was in question. No wonder there was so much chatter. I was sure dozens of lawsuits would already in processes across the Imperium. Court politicians were already making angry statements about stability, and demands for responsibility and justice. Much of this was conveyed directly through the machines attached to my mind. I could hear every word, but they passed through me so fast it was like a dream. The mind is a high bandwidth system, but null-space is higher.

The whole thing gave me a headache trying to parse things as fast as they came to me. I wasn't sure, but it was indicated that the Commodore of the naval detachment had been declared an enemy of the empire. Admiralty vessels, like habitats, would have a compliment of templars that would seize the ship in a situation like this. It was strange communicating with so many other pathfinders across the stars. Usually we all sat in silence, with nothing but the cosmic wind to keep us company, listening to distant whispers. For a brief few hours we were in a ruckus meeting hall with voices I'd never heard before making themselves known. A few thousands of us spreading rumors far faster than the sluggish speed of light. Once we got talking information flowed freely.

I learned that there had been rare element shortages in the core for going on years now, no wonder their fuse had grown short with the Merchant Marines. They were pulling in goods from all corners. Things had evidently been a little more unstable than I'd realized. You can only get by for so long when short of phosphorus and lithium and zinc. I guess it wasn't only we in Calliope who had seen more significant demands from the core. They'd been double-dipping from the admiralty for the last five years according to one of some of the other pathfinders. While the imperial ivory emblems of might had been unassailable in my mind, something was weak in the imperial palatial palisade. The hundreds of habitats within Argentine Prime were growing desperate. Galactic trade slowdowns had effected our little pocket more than I had realized.

Momentarily I thought about how much Doran would like to hear this story. He always liked hearing about work when something exciting happened. He liked that his father was the first to find out about some newsworthy event. I'd tell him once I'd finished debriefing. Those thoughts were immediately replaced by concern and regret. I would have told him once I'd finished debriefing. If the State was not in the midst of seizing my son and sending him to gods know where, vanished into the million kilometer length of Calliope. My focus slipped, and I was plunged into the dark of nullspace. For a brief moment I could still feel the CIC that surrounding me, then it all dissolved.

There were stories of pathfinders who got lost in the drift. Those of us who lost focus for too long, or fell asleep while in the grip of null-space. Stories of pathfinders who didn't come back. For the second time in as many days I'd gotten lost. I hadn't just strayed like last time, I'd fully lost touch with physical reality. Waves of possibility rushed over me as I struggled to the surface of that abyssal ocean to try and breathe. Past and future collided in a cacophonous simultaneous "now."

I struggled to refocus my mind as the kaleidoscopic span stretched in front of me. I finally found purchase on a memory of the habitat. Was it Calliope? It had to be. This was the old workshop, my father had rented it on the far several kilometers around the great cylinder from the CIC complex. He would tinker there, I'd thought about renting it again for a while, but hadn't gotten around to it. It was empty, but familiar. All my father's old tools and tech having been emptied long ago. How did I come to this place of all places? Was this the future or the past? It must be the future. I could hear something.

Through the door of the old workshop I could hear a croaking. What was it? I moved as in a dream, not so much walking as simply coming to exist outside the workshop in a strange landscape. The horizon stretched upwards meeting itself high above, but it was wrong. I could see buildings where there were parks, and cloud banks arcing above me in strange patterns and shapes. The celestial lights normally a pale yellow white were crisscrossed with blue discharges. Currents induced by the distant white dwarf, had our orbit shifted? In the sky, on the far side of the great cylinder where the CIC had been rested a bizarre spiral cloud. Things had changed over the years, but the CIC remained... most of it. What was that whisking haze of white?

I looked down and saw *him*. Older, much older. Twenties maybe? Thirties? I couldn't tell, but I recognized my son. He was near unconsciousness, his chest heaving in and out gasping for air. It was then that I recognized with horror that strange cluster of clouds on the far side of the habitat. It was a funnel, a powerful vortex where Calliope's thick skin had been punctured. The entire habitat was slowly draining of air. I knelt next to Doran and grabbed his hand. Speaking I couldn't speak, perhaps it was the dreamlike trance or maybe there was no air in my lungs either. His croaking breath coming more and weakly. A whisper... "it's coming, it's coming, it's coming."

I didn't understand... what was this?

Doran looked at me and his eyes burned like a neutron star. "The future is coming."

"Emergency epinephrine dose ripped you out." that's what the medic told me when my tremors had subsided. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I got hit by a warship." I stammered, still on the floor of the CIC. "I think, everything got muddled up."

"Got lost in the drift?" Asked Pullo. What was Pullo doing here with his wrinkled old face? "How long was I out?" I asked.

"Still twitching and plugged in when I got here." He said, "that's why I called the doc." I swore under my breath. "It was intense. I... I saw things. I saw Calliope sucked dry... something's coming."

"So they tell me." Responded Pullo. We'll give you a full debriefing, but based on the notes I've seen it looks like you've had a busy night. Something happened in the core worlds?"

I struggled to remember, "something about a trade dispute. I'll... I'll have to reread what squirted through the contact lines. I also saw something else, when I got lost."

Pullo shook his head, "don't put too much stock in that, everything gets all jumbled up when you're in the drift."

“Calliope, punctured and decayed, twenty or thirty years from now.” I tried to sit up, my hands were pale and trembling and my heart was pounding.

The medic pressed me gently back down, “it’ll be a bit before you’re back to functional. Take it easy.”

I took a few deep breaths. “Something happened, I don’t know, some how we... we ran down, or the repairs weren’t done. I don’t know...”

Pullo placed a hand on my shoulder. “Just another potential future, we’ve all been there once or twice.”

I shook my head and gasped, hands still trembling from the drugs I’d been injected with. “No, it’s too, too vivid. Not like the others.”

“You were lost in the drift, don’t worry about it.”

After a brief recovery on the CIC floor, I was taken to debrief. When messages are transmitted the dreamlike state of a frame-shifted mind makes it easy to forget important things. We can be spoken to and used directly as a communications device to cast messages across vast galactic distances. Simultaneously, anything we hear from across the void we can generally enunciate to our coworkers. Neural measurements are also taken and spit back out. The further away the next pathfinder, the harder it was to hear them clearly. After a thousand lightyears it neared impossibility for all but the most skilled, one reason it was so easy for the imperial throne to exert dominance among the tightly packed stellar cluster: easy communications. The whole thing was a process you got used to.

During the debrief, we went over most of the material, and I reiterated the whispers I’d heard from within the imperial core. That we on Calliope weren’t the only ones struggling with supply shortages as distant trade routes ground to a halt. There was also a seemingly new market for condensed matter, the type we mined from the white dwarf below. If we could find the right people, that stellar engine might prove a boon for our economy. I spoke to the chief advisory committee about what I’d heard and they debated increasing production. It was a controlled material, but new imperial mandates hadn’t been issued that would prevent us from selling it to a broad audience. The process took hours.

“... and what about this statement regarding a naval detachment? Should we be expecting company?”

I looked at the transcript. Evidently I’d said something but didn’t remember it clearly. “Uh, I don’t remember that bit. There was a naval engagement near the imperial core, but I don’t think that’ll effect us.”

The bureaucrat, he was gangly with dark hair and a withered look about him, drew me back to the transcript and spoke in a bored voice. “According to the transcript there was a ping from a ship, but no direct communications.”

I tried to think. Had there been a ping from a ship? That would just be a navigational computer, no pathfinder. The transcript didn’t lie, but I’d been distracted conversing with distant voices more than I’d been relaying navigational beacon locations. I shook my head “I don’t remember it, does the digital recording show the same ping?”

The man waived his withered hand and a small digital map of nearby systems appeared in holoform immediately above the table. “Each red dot is a navigational ping, and you can see the vector arrows on them.”

The star-map only extended out around a lightyear, but, given the high density of the imperial star cluster, meant the lightyear contained quite a few stars. One red dot had an arrow vectored at Calliope. From this vantage, Calliope looked more like a random star sucked into the orbit of the much more dense cluster. I suppose it probably was, many of the stars in the cluster were young. Calliope’s white dwarf wasn’t.

“Well, if that’s what it shows, then I’ll go with the digital readings, there was a lot of chatter out there today. Normally it’s quiet.”

The bureaucrat nodded and moved on. At the end of the debrief, I was placed on suspension. Some regulation in an enormous legal tome stated as much. When a pathfinder had to be ripped from the drift they were placed on leave and into counseling for seven to twelve days. It was paid, but it definitely wouldn't help what little case I had regarding Doran. I tried to protest, but the order had already been given. It was official, I was on leave.

It wasn't until the next evening, when I staggered out of bed to ready myself for work, that I could clearly parse what had transpired. I was on administrative leave, and had two hours mandatory counseling starting tomorrow morning, right before I normally slept. It was the first time in a long time that I had a wake-period that wasn't already scheduled for something. The guys at CIC wouldn't be happy about having to work double-shift as pathfinders. Right now, there were only three of us as the Chief of Staff hadn't seen fit to hire a forth backup. "Too expensive" she'd complained when I'd mentioned it a year ago. Well, that was her problem now.

I walked empty roads as night fell and the great skylights went from a yellow white to red to a dim purple. It'd been months since I'd been actually outside without rushing to or from some meaningless meeting or work at the CIC. Across to the far side of the vast spinning habitat I could see homes lit and spread among a pastoral residential arrangement. It almost looked like stars from down here except for the motion of vehicular lights in a steely grid. North and South were generally taken to be around the circumference of the cylinder while east and west extended over a million miles along its length. The CIC was just to the north east, a series of vast structures that made up the control center, surrounded by blocks of government housing like mine. Several clicks to the west was a more conventional metropolitan archipelago of structures.

I'd lived for so long in this area, but never bothered to actually explore it. Tonight would be my first chance in a long time. I hopped a tramline and headed west to the sparkling lights of Bow Shock City, a hive of activity in the vast night of our home. Bow Shock was like many of the condensed living structures. Tall buildings that, from beneath, seemed to reach to the centerline of the cylinder itself. The nature of spin-gravity meant you could build much taller as the forces dropped off the higher you were, of course the Coriolis forces required complex architectural design as the buildings were constantly under lateral stress. The higher you built, the more Coriolis correction had to be engineered in. Still the structures were enormous and seemingly spindly compared to their planetary counterparts. They rose up from the ground, stalagmites sparkling with lit windows as I the tram approached.

Within there were signs and businesses, high density homes belonging to those who preferred a more metropolitan lifestyle. Bars, and patrons wandering back and forth. The main economic driver of Calliope was, of course, the condensed matter mine. A massive complex dangerously close to the white dwarf, that pulled degenerate matter off of the surface and contained with unbelievably powerful forces and complex engineering. The rest of our habitat had grown up around the mine, the wealth flowing through had driven nearly a hundred million people into proximity.

When I got off the tram it was raining, clouds having formed above the city which now dropped their prodigious supply of moisture. I drew a hood over my head and walked while scrolling through my tablet to find a place to drink that wouldn't be too loud. Bow Shock City was where most interstellar traders stopped, what few there were. The largest births were near the CIC, and thus most of the news and goods flowed first into Bow Shock ahead of the rest of the habitat. I found a tradersbar. It was big enough to host many patrons; designed to be a place where foreigners from across the imperium could plant themselves before exploring our habitat as they passed through and their ships were loaded with expensive cargo. It was quiet, three or four people probably regulars dressed in older style grey suits with bronze highlights.

When I arrived, the youngest man in the bar sidled up to me and asked who I was.

"Lawrence. I work at the CIC."

He rolled his eyes. "You and every one else these days, I'm Ordae. It's been quiet as hell for the last month or so. Usually I hang here to hear what's going on in the stars. That's Jim, he's the owner."

I nodded at Jim.

Ordae continued with a half-smile. "Jim's an asshole. What do you do over at the CIC?"

I considered lying to the kid, but figured I probably wouldn't be back here again any time soon. "I'm a pathfinder."

"No shit?" Said Ordae.

I nodded, "you can look me up, my picture is posted in the Calliope info hub."

The kid lifted his tablet and tapped it a few times. "Look at that. There you are. What's it like being a pathfinder? What're you doing at a dive like this."

"I'm on leave." I said shortly. "Saw some things I'm not sure how I feel about, besides, I've got my own disagreements with the Calliope Adjudicarus at the moment."

The kid persisted, and we ended up discussing more than I probably should have. A few drinks will loosen the tongue. I told him that we will probably have a ship arriving in the next few days, so he'd have company soon enough.

"Did you talk to their pathfinder?" He asked.

"They didn't have one, nav computer using the catalogued travel lines I think. A lot of smaller vessels do that type of thing. Can't afford a pathfinder."

The kid nodded and continued probing me with questions. He seemed interested in what being a pathfinder was like. I tried to explain it to him, but the experience was difficult to articulate. Any one can use the equipment, but only a few people, one in a million, has the aptitude to see more than a few light days or weeks away. "Being a pathfinder isn't just looking across vast distances, it's looking ahead in time. Space and time are the same thing, you want to navigate to a distance of a lightyear, you have to see what's going on there right now and that's the same thing as looking ahead a year in time. Totally change show you see things."

"So you can see the future?" He asked.

I grew quiet, "Sometimes."

Maybe it was the drink talking, maybe I simply didn't care about keeping the secrets of a government that seemed to be doing its damndest to take from me the only thing I really cared about. I didn't tell Ordae about the goings on with my son, but I did let slip that vision I'd seen earlier when lost in the drift. "It's just a *potential* future" I cautioned, "but it seemed so damn vivid. I've never felt anything like that before. Twenty years, thirty, I don't know. Maybe the trade shortages will get worse? Who knows."

Ordae listened, and we exchanged drinks, I bought him one or two and he did the same. I was pretty well buzzed by the time the celestial lights quieted to the black of midnight and I exited the establishment and into the drizzle outside. My feet hadn't seemed to know where I was going.

I eventually found myself outside of the Child Services building in Bow Shock City. On the second floor of that building is where they were keeping Doran. I missed him, dark stars how I missed him. They'd held him for over two months and his birthday, by Imperial Time, would be coming up soon. I wanted to be there, I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I wasn't there for it. It meant more to me than anything else. I thought about the future I'd seen, where he'd been gasping for air. As I stood across from the building, drunk and angry, I resolved that I had to do something, anything, to get him back. Even if meant crossing Calliope or the Tempalrum. I had to secure a future for him that wouldn't end in the belly of a dying civilization. I owed my son that much, I owed it to my father just as much.

“Due to your behavior, it has been deemed necessary to revoke your clearance in the government complex of Bow Shock City.” I’d received the message a few days after traveling to the bar in the rain. It came from the same adjudicator who had called me the genetic donor. Evidently the Adjudicarus had tracked my movements and decided that I shouldn’t be permitted within a half kilometer of my son. Great. I was so furious about the message that I’d nearly thrown my tablet through the nearest window. My sleep cycle had been readjusting since I’d been put on leave. I was now waking at noon. I was barely out of bed, and already I urgently wanted to choke some one. Maybe that’s what Lucia wanted, she’d get me to commit to something I couldn’t undo. Get rid of me. I don’t know why bureaucrats behaved this way: they all want to be kings of their own little worlds because they’ve nothing better to do with their time. I truly hated her in that moment. I resolved to call my legal counsel and see if anything could be done, probably not, but it was worth it to at least try. I took a deep breath and began what would become a long day. I had a scheduled meeting with a therapist, and I was *not* looking forward to it.

Four hours later after an incessant series of increasingly irritating questions, I decided I was right not to be looking forward to my time with the therapist. She wanted to know every detail of my life, as if it wasn’t a matter of public record. “But in your own words” she’d said. I tried to reiterate things as clearly as possible. The one time I’d strayed from the script is when I mentioned that future flash when lost in the drift. She had patiently tried to direct me back to the communications transcript. When I told her that I felt the vision was important, she dismissed it. She said that such things were too unreliable to give any credence. I was expected to see up to a few hundred light years into the future as a part of my job, why was it so difficult to accept that I’d seen twenty or thirty regular years into the future? That was the only part of the session where she’d gotten noticeably irritated. I didn’t want to risk her deeming me unfit for duty, so aside from a few brief statements, I kept on task.

In the next session, I decided, I’d keep to the unwritten script I was clearly supposed to follow. She’d ask about getting lost, I’d tell her about the chatter I’d heard, I’d tell her it was all fine and I was fit for duty. I’d avoid mentioning Doran, or the future flashes, or anything else that might make her uncomfortable. You either lived by the template, or they’d make sure you couldn’t live at all. I didn’t want to end up on a red flag list any more than I already was. The Adjudicarus already didn’t like me, no need to extend that to the imperial admin as well.

It was shortly after my session ended that I received a message from Pullo. It was poignant but brief as was his way: “Check the feeds in two hours, you got one thing right for sure.” I wondered what he was talking about. This had nothing to do with the future-flash, maybe they were talking about the stolen freight? That was a long way from here though... I realized what he meant around the same time I got home: He was talking about the incoming nav signal. Some one was about to show up to Calliope. If Pullo was telling me to check feeds, that must mean it was something big.

I doubt any one on Calliope was prepared for what emerged from null-space. I was just as surprised as every one else when news feeds lit up with the new visitor. It hadn’t been a small trade ship as I’d imagined. It was a battleship flanked by two destroyers. Each vessel was huge and blocky. Satellite images displayed colossal shadows next to the delicate stretched ribbon of Calliope. I wondered what the hell it was doing out here? Warships were required to hold pathfinders on board. They’d be docked in less than a day at gigantic births near the CIC. I wondered what could possibly be was going on. As soon as Pullo was off-shift, I called him.

“Say they’re here by imperial decree,” said Pullo.

“What are they doing so far out?”

“Don’t know, maybe black-ops stuff, regardless they’ve sent a request to admin for refuel and resupply. Imperial mandate in accordance with Volume 9, chapters... eh, I don’t know, yada yada. You know how they are. They’ve got most of their paper work in order far as I know.”

“Do you know what they requested?” I asked.

“I mean...” Pullo said. “I’m not supposed to know that.”

I knew full well that Pullo had been in the room when the orders were relayed to Raymond. The old man only barely followed protocol given how far out we were from the imperial core and how lax things had become in the preceding decades. “You wanna grab a drink?” I asked.

Pullo and I met in the corner of a small coffee shop just outside of the CIC complex and exchanged pleasantries. He explained to me how the ship had come out of nowhere, he’d only noticed when it was close to popping back into real-space because of its incredible size distorting the drift. He didn’t know why they didn’t have any pathfinders on board. “Shouldn’t they, though? Shouldn’t they have one or two on board by regulation?”

Pullo shrugged, “The Commodore of the fleet detachment is negotiating with Raymond this evening. Evidently their full list of requests includes some more delicate things than food, air, and weapons.”

I nodded, “Maybe they’re planning to requisition one of us.”

“I don’t think they can,” said Pullo. “By imperial decree, pathfinders belong solely to the habitat they’re stationed on. They can only be moved by direct Admin orders, and we haven’t heard anything there.”

I thought about it for a minute. “Maybe... or maybe things have gotten out of hand in the core.”

“Well, there’s one other thing, I think the real reason they stopped here was because they’re requisitioning over a cubic meter of condensed matter.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What on earth for? That’s nearly...” I had to think for a minute. “That’s a significant percentage of what we produce in a year. Millions of kilos.”

Pullo nodded.

“That would... the amount of isolation and compression it would take to keep all of that from destabilizing would be.”

“...A substantial portion of their free cargo space...” completed Pullo. “Enough to support a lot of pathfinders.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Fuel I understand, but degenerate matter is hard to manufacture, transport, should the merchants handle that?” I asked.

“That’s what I thought, but I’m not going to argue with the Admiralty,” said Pullo. “I doubt that Raymond will either.”

It was late that evening when I received another call from the social services Admin. “Hello, this is Lawrence.” I said.

“Ah, excellent,” responded a maddeningly mellifluous voice on the far end. “We are in the process of scheduling your next custodial hearing, a followup session.” She gave me the date of the hearing. It was weeks away, they were dragging this out intentionally. According to my legal counsel, Lucia wanted to be able to claim that I’d abandoned my child. If I didn’t see him for too long, the Adjudicator, by some inane regulation, would simply declare Doran to be abandoned. If the social system dragged it out long enough, there was nothing I could do about it. I threw my tablet and the screen cracked against my wall...

Over the next couple of days the crew of the three Admiralty disembarked. There were a total of around three thousand hands who inculcated Bow Shock City, making permissive use of the services there. I didn't want to think about the debauchery that many cooped up soldiers would be capable of.

I continued partaking in the therapy sessions and watching news reels of contents being loaded, enormous crate by enormous crate, into the behemoth warships parked just outside. I knew that numerous fiscal negotiations were taking place. It seemed like the crews of the ships were buying up half the station, but that was just here, where they were all present. I saw prices begin to move at several shops for various goods. I found the whole thing disconcerting.

Evidently I wasn't the only one. Several days after the arrival of the warships, I received a call on my cracked tablet. It from Raymonds chief of staff. Evidently the big man wanted a meeting with me and he'd had my access to the CIC complex reinstated. Everything seemed to be changing so quickly around the station that I jumped at the chance to get a handle on what was going on. It was just a small detachment that had arrived here, but I felt that the winds of change blew with them.

I walked through the grey halls of the CIC until I found Raymonds private briefing room. I'd only been there once before when I'd interviewed for the pathfinder position after completing academy training. It seemed smaller now, the ornate brass door tarnished rather than the shine I'd seen in it all those years ago. Staffers rushed through the halls carrying paperwork and equipment as I waited outside for nearly a half hour before the door opened. Raymond stood there, in full formal dress, a white sash stretched across his portly chest.

Within the room stood Raymond, an Admin representative and an enormous man I'd never met before. I knew that soldiers were subjected to genetic enhancement, but he seemed, well, big. His shoulders were broad and when we shook hands, his fingers felt like concrete. Sinewy muscles stretched across his neck to a jaw that could crush a skull.

"This is Commodore Vexil." Said Raymond, "we've been negotiating."

The Commodore, for all that his form was imposing, moved with a kind of elegant ease. He was clearly aware of his physiology and went out of his way not to use it as an instrument of intimidation. I nodded the man.

"What do you want me for?" I asked, somewhat concerned that I already knew.

"I'll cut to the point. We'd like to hire you." He said in a deep voice that reminded me of a heavy industrial engine.

"Can you?" I asked looking between the big man and Raymond. "That would take our staffing from sub-par to a downright infringement."

Raymond shook his head, "No, I'm sure we'll have another high level pathfinder ready to go soon enough." He looked nervous, Raymond never looked nervous.

"Why not take Pullo, or the other one, Davis?" I asked.

"You're the best candidate." Said Raymond. Leaving unstated that *best candidate* likely translated to *most expendable*.

"Even then, they can't force you to let go of one of your pathfinders." I said.

Raymond glanced at Vexil who looked back with a slightly cocked eyebrow. I felt like I was missing something important.

I spoke again, "I've got some rather pressing issues that I have to work out with Adjudicarus at the moment. You should know that."

Vexil looked at Raymond and then spoke surprisingly softly for a man of his size. "Why don't you wait for us outside."

Raymond stood up in protest, "I think anything that needs to be said can be said here."

"Outside." Said Vexil again, the threatening thrum of his voice reverberating in the room

Raymond opened his mouth as his fatty body gyrated for a moment. He was angry, but a type of angry I'd never seen from the man before. Then Raymond walked outside.

I watched Raymond leave, kicked out of his own briefing room and turned back to Vexil, “The hell is going on?”

“We want your services, pathfinder. Lawrence, right?” Said the enormous man.

I narrowed my eyes, “Yeah, Lawrence.” I wasn’t bout to let the man intimidate me, he had to follow all the same stupid rules as the rest of us. Big or not, he wasn’t in a position to be throwing around demands.

“I understand that you’re under suspension right now. That you saw some things in the drift, and that you are currently subjected to legal trouble.”

“It isn’t like there’s anything any one can do about it.” I said, “regs are regs.”

“I don’t really care about your legal troubles.” Said Vexil, “things within the Imperium are slightly... fluid right now.”

“What’s that mean?” I asked.

“It means that we don’t particularly care about those legal entanglements, we require the services of a pathfinder. You’re one of the best on Calliope, or so I’ve heard.”

“You got here with a nav computer along plotted trade lanes, why can’t you just cruise back to the capital and ask for an imperial pathfinder there?”

Vaxil narrowed his eyes slightly, “that is not currently an option.”

I shook my head, “I’m not ready to...” I thought about the future flash when lost in the drift again, a slowly dying Calliope, my son embedded within. Maybe this could be my chance to change the future, or at least part of it. Maybe if I could find out what was really going on out there.

“Let me think about it.” I said.

The meeting had ended inconclusively. There was no way I could leave until I’d gotten Doran back, *if* I could get Doran back. It wasn’t like I could march in there and take him, not because of the security, there wasn’t any... it was because if I did, there was no where I could go where the Templarum wouldn’t find me. Still, I felt like something was happening that I didn’t understand. I was a pawn in larger game being played, and I didn’t even know what the rules were. It was with that in mind that I found myself back in the bar in Bow Shock city. This time it was crowded. Most of the patrons wore admiralty uniforms of one type or another. Some seemed oddly personalized, causing you to perceive each as an individual rather than components of a whole. I lacked the training to recognize ranks or insignias, but they seemed less regimented than I’d imagined. Their accents were thick, clearly foreign. Amongst the chatter, I made out snippets of conversation here and there in the dusty old dive.

“Maybe I’ll just find a pretty girl here and call it a day.” Said one young man. His compatriots responding swiftly: “Implying you could find a pretty girl anywhere. Gonna settle down at the edge of the empire?”

Another conversation was taking place between men in the back of the room.

“Capt says that won’t be an issue soon, we’ll have more than enough hydrogen for the next decade.”

“You think they’ll strip it bare?”

“Hardly, we couldn’t carry it all.”

A few of the men were smoking something that smelled faintly of foreign spices in one room and speaking languidly about the worlds and habitats they’d originally come from. Evidently they’d grown up in a core system where dozens or hundreds of habitats all circled a single massive star.

A woman next to me, who had clearly had one or two drinks too many slurred, “you know, we wouldn’t even be here if the throne wasn’t run by a bunch of inbred fuckups.”

A glanced at her carefully, “I wouldn’t say that about the throne.”

“Fuck the throne.” She said definitively. “Thought they could scare us all into submission, fuck them, fuck their templars.”

“I really wouldn’t--” I glanced around, but no one was really listening.

“Or what?” She shouted. “Are they gonna ghost me in the middle of the night? Tried that already. They used to be able to. Kept every one in line, see how that’s working out for Olidar.”

I had no idea who Olidar was. I’d come here for information, though, so I pressed the question.

“It isn’t working out for Olidar?”

She shook her head, “the old bastard thought that he didn’t need us no more. Thought he’d send his goons to wipe us out. With their cloaks and their armor and their big guns. Didn’t see shit is what happened.”

I was about to ask her what happened when the young man from before sat down next to me. “Lawrence, I haven’t seen you in a while.” He had to raise his voice substantially to be heard above the din of voices.

“It’s been a bit.” I said shortly.

“Gotten pretty loud, you said a ship was coming, didn’t say it was gonna be like this. Didn’t realize a pathfinder would’ve missed a warship.”

I was about to respond that all I’d seen was a nav beacon, not a fully fledged warship when the girl next to me cut me off.

“Oh shit, you’re the pathfinder?” She said. “Been looking for one of you the commodore has.”

“I’m on leave right now.” I said, but she didn’t hear me.

The woman turned around and shouted at some one in the crowd “Hey, Antonov, C’mere.”

The man who approached us was wearing a similar uniform. He smiled at the drunk woman in a fatherly fashion, “what?”

Antonov’s uniform was tight and he didn’t appear to have been drinking. In fact his poise seemed much more to be that of a man on duty than a man on leave. He had a few implants, mostly along his collar bones that I suspected were for interfacing with some kind of an exo-suit. Most strikingly there was some type of cybernetic attachment in the middle of his head, a small star-shaped piece of plastic and metal.

“I think I found your guy.” She said with a drunken smile, and raised a glass to him.

I looked over at young man who regarded me carefully. “Your the pathfinder?” He asked.

I nodded.

“Let me buy you a drink.”

Antonov told me about the three ships, Tonga, Eridanus, and Sheridan. Evidently it was a small detachment from a larger imperial force that had been engaged with pirates for the last six months. The pirates were some bizarre star-peoples that had originated outside of imperial space and had been anticipating imperial movements to knock out resources from numerous freighters of the Merchant Marine. Evidently one of the boarded pirate ships had contained something that none of their techs had ever seen before.

After arousing my curiosity he pulled the thing on his head off and handed it to me. Blinking for a few seconds. “Why don’t you tell me what you think? You’ve got a better understanding of all this than I probably ever will.”

I looked at the device quizzically, it was mostly plastic with something metallic and shiny in the center. It was heavier than it should have been for its small size.

“You press it to your head, right in the center, it’s all pretty intuitive.”

I did as instructed, and suddenly understood everything. The chess game that was really being played out there, the personalized uniforms, the supply shortages, the star-people pirates, the inevitable future of Calliope that I had glimpsed. Everything.

I accepted Vexils offer of employment on one condition: that I be allowed to bring an additional passenger onboard, and that we'd both be under his protection directly. He needed me not only as a pathfinder, also as an instructor. As I'd left the bar, I was absolutely terrified of the implications of what I'd just experienced. I spoke to the young man outside before returning home. "You need to get off of Calliope," I said. "This place isn't going to survive what's coming."

"What do you mean?" He asked

"As the pathfinder of this habitat," I said, "I'm telling you you've got maybe five years before things get really, really bad." Then I left. I told Vexil that I'd meet his men at the docks around midday tomorrow. There was something I had to do first.

The small device that I'd been holding in the bar was something that pathfinders had theorized as a possibility for going on a century. Now some one had built it. The theoretical papers had been scrutinized in passing, but it'd been considered a technical impossibility only sufficient for theoretical examination in my academy days. Some one had evidently built one, some one had evidently built a lot of them. We'd referred to the theoretical items as oracles.

A pathfinder required a great deal of technical logistics to reach out into null-space and see flashes of the future. An untrained man might be able to see a few light hours into the future, and even those trained would max out at light days or weeks if they didn't have an aptitude. Still, the mechanisms surrounding a pathfinder were exceedingly complex, massive, and expensive, requiring an entire structure to house and arcane machinery. An oracle was a theorized device that would behave like a pathfinders cathedral, but miniaturized and refined to the size that one could simply wear it. It would be useless in terms of communications, or navigating vessels through null-space. Rather than delving deep into flowing realities of the drift, an oracle would merely provide a primitive glimpse of reality, but one that would be intuitive in use. It could show any one a clear and accurate view of the near future, a few light hours away, is a few hours ahead in time.

A user, any user, could peer into the future with extremely high precision. High enough precision that the device would, theoretically, be an incredibly powerful tool in gambling, games, communications, and most importantly combat. That is what had been happening I realized, the pirates weren't vagabonds of imperial space. They were a people who had located or designed an oracle and were using it to prey upon an outdated system that functioned through a glacial bureaucracy and the sharp blade of the templarum. All admiralty vessels had been equipped with templars, elite specialists concealed among the regular crew who might seize the ship if a captain ever went rogue. But what use were cloaked armor and hidden assassins when ones quarry can see through time to the confrontations outcome?

Oracles devices would change everything. The entire vehicle of implied violence that kept human societies functional would fall apart. No longer would a small team of elite soldiers control an entire habitat of populace. The hierarchies were just beginning their mightiest convulsion since ancient peoples developed easy-to-use projectile weapons. A small group of elite soldiers would get destroyed by a team of regular men equipped with oracles. Those with oracles wouldn't need to outfight, or even see their opponents, they'd know where there opponents would be ahead of time during every moment of the fight. Vexil didn't need a pathfinder just to pilot his ship, he needed a pathfinder to train his men to use those oracles they'd found. The commodore was smart, he knew what was coming, and his goal was to protect his men from the complete disillusion of imperial space. Already supply shortages were wracking galactic trade, all it would take was one tiny new technology to begin a cascade failure in the centralized imperial system. An era of warlords and tiny republics was about to begin. Vexil clearly intended to be one of those errant lords, one way or another. It was his oracle that had allowed Antinov to locate me in the bar.

Vexil had probably even ordered the man to find me, knowing what I'd deduce the moment I put the thing to my head: that the impossible had been rendered possible.

It took until I got back to my room on the tram that my heart had stopped pounding. No wonder that flash of the future had appeared so dire, all of the Argentine Imperium was about to change in very unpredictable and chaotic ways.

The next morning I woke with what felt like real energy for the first time. My morning routine went quickly and I packed some things. Not much, I didn't think I'd have to worry about rent again anytime soon. My next stop was the tramline that would take me deep into Bow Shock City. This time, as the city spires stretched upwards ahead of me, they no longer seemed to be imposing eternal stalagmites. They seemed fragile, delicate, here but for the shifting of the tide or the gust of a strong wind.

It took me the better part of twenty minutes to mentally prepare myself to enter the building. I'd already been formally banned from the social services section of the city, but I didn't care any more. So reliant were they on the implied threat of the cloaked templars that security personnel had been long ignored. I received a red-code on my tablet the moment I crossed the threshold, as if that would stop me. The secretary, some pear-shaped woman with bland face greeted me when I walked in. I'd never met her before, and realizing she didn't recognize me I decided to do something that I hadn't done before.

She looked up, "Can I help you?" The implicit surveillance of the station would no doubt be triggering alerts among the adjudicarus, but they'd be content in the fact that I was sure to be captured by templars after the fact for the rendering of their justice.

I glanced at the woman and quickly lied, trying to sound as if I were in a rush and late to some inane meeting regarding social services. "I have an appointment upstairs, I'm on the schedule." The staircase was readily accessible and I immediately took to it as the secretary began scrolling through her schedules certain she'd missed something important.

There were two others in the stairwell. I attempted to climb them in as nonchalant a fashion as possible. I needn't have worried. I'd seen it all in through the Oracle last night. Not a momentary roiling wave of future possibility, but a few hours ahead. I'd seen everything I was now doing, that's how I knew I was going. Did I have a choice? I think I did, the philosophy of future-sight and free will had long been debated. A debate that would grow only more intense as oracles became wide spread. I knew that I could change the future, navigate the possibilities around a curve of finite reality. I had already navigated the series of events, last night when I'd placed that oracle to my temple, that's how I knew where I was going.

At the top of the stairs I glanced at posted room numbers. Doran was kept in room 295 by the Calliope social team. Most of the doors were unlocked with a central play-room being at the far end of the wall. Like the rest of Calliope, surveillance was universal, so the children were generally left to their own devices.

I'll never forget the look on my boys face when I opened that door. His eye lit up like it was a holiday and he ran to me with the enthusiasm of a starving man at a buffet. "Dad?"

"Hey there, I haven't seen you in a while." It was all I could do to prevent my eyes from tearing up. Though I had seen it in the oracle last night, I could scarcely believe I was with him again.

Doran grinned as I picked him up, "You came back! They said you wouldn't come back." He was clearly having just as much trouble containing himself as I was.

"Yeah, I came back. I'm here to pick you up. We're going."

He smiled and rubbed at his eyes and nose with small hands. "Ralph too?" He asked, referring to a plush anthropomorphic creature his mother had given him. The last thing his mother had given him.

"Yeah." I said, "Ralph too, go find him."

I watched as he ran back into his room and began searching through sheets, scattering his room into further disarray.

"I should have known you'd try something Lawrence." I recognized the voice, of course I wouldn't have needed to. I knew what came next.

I turned around to confront the friendly social worker who had been so intent on rending apart my already damaged family. I didn't say anything, merely looked at her. It was strange, I'd known this moment was coming, creeping up on me from when I'd first decided on my course of action.

"You broke the ban on this district, and you broke the adjudicators orders by coming here to see your son." She said angrily, "I'll see you at the bottom of the gravity well, the lowest level of the mine for this. You have any idea how many rules you broke?"

I glanced back in the room where Doran was half way under his bed, and then looked back at the small petulant bureaucrat in front of me. "How many?" I asked.

"At least a dozen," she said haughtily. "Volume 21 chapter 9, volume 21 Chapter 10, and at least three subsections from volume 19."

I looked at her and cocked her head. There is a moment of realization that happens for some people. For other people it never occurs at all. It's the moment that a soft life secured by legality and fine print comes crashing down and you see the world for what it is. When it becomes self-evident that for all these legal codes and a galaxy of moralizing, humanity is at it's heart still an animal. That it isn't laws or judges or kings or money that keeps human societies functional, rather it is the implicit or explicit threat of violence should you dare to stray outside the bounds of what is deemed "acceptable." That without that implicit threat of violence to keep every one in line, anything was possible.

It was with the crunch of her jawbone that Lucia experienced such a moment of revelation. All the laws and social studies and de-escalation training in the world wouldn't stop some one who no longer adhered to the rules of her society. It felt good, incredibly good to give a little back to the bureaucrats who had been governing so many minutia of my life since birth. The look of complete bewildered shock on her face when my balled fist slammed into it was worth a broken knuckle or two.

Just after she stiffened and hit the ground, Doran came out, holding his little plushie treasure. I placed myself between him and the crumpled form and picked him up. Gritting my teeth against making use of my newly damaged hand. I smiled at him, "come on, let's go." As I expected, the secretary was still trying to go through her logs as I walked out, messages about the assault would only now be getting delivered to a response team in some nearby precinct. They'd be after me in around a half hour or less, but I'd be onboard the battleship Eridanus.

Doran and I floated through microgravity to where the massive behemoths were docked. It was along a narrow extended passage that stretched out from the ever rotating cylinder of Calliope. The light was bright and white outside, not the yellow we were accustomed to.

"Where are we going?" Asked Doran.

"Somewhere exciting, we're going to get to see the galaxy." I said to him.

I nodded to a pair of enormous security crewmen, both equipped with Oracles, though clearly inexperienced in their use. I spoke as I approached them. "Pathfinder Lawrence, reporting for duty." One of the men nodded and let us through.

"Vaxil is expecting you." One of them said in that heavy admiralty accent.

As I turned around, I saw a few men from Calliope had gathered at the far side of the docking tube. One of them shouted down the hall, "Get back here Lawrence, there's no where you can hide!"

It would have been true. After having committed an assault like that, it would be almost impossible for me to find safety almost anywhere in the Imperium. Even participation in martial arts of any type required acres of paperwork. So much so that only those engaged in military ever trained in such things. Still, my dad had taught me to throw a proper punch when I was a child, just incase. Thanks dad. I made a rude dismissive gesture as I entered Eridanus through the main airlock.

An hour later I was sitting in the massive ships CIC. Spin gravity was generated by a gigantic pair of counter-rotating spheres that contained most of the crew compartment. Vaxil was next to me, allowing me to tour the ship when I asked him the only question that had been nagging at me the night before. "I see the use of the oracles..."

"The what?" Asked Vaxil as Doran scurried under one of the seats in the CIC.

"The devices that you attach to your heads. That let you see the future." I clarified.

"We call them third-eyes," he said. "What about them?"

"Tell me if I'm wrong in any of this. You found these... third-eyes on the wreckage of some pirate ship and your pathfinder figured out what they were." Vaxil nodded so I continued. "At some point between then and now your detachment went rogue. Likely because you could see how this would destabilize the entire imperial system from the inside out. There's no sense in sticking around and waiting for the collapse when you can leave with a full compliment of warships. At some point the templarum onboard your ship made their presence known, maybe just killed the pathfinders onboard to prevent you from using the third eyes. Then you found that they were relatively easy to use and through them managed to eliminate the templarum soldiers onboard."

Vaxil shrugged, "not too far off so far."

"But you wanted to be trained properly," I said, "so you stopped here to acquire fuel, provisions and a pathfinder who could both guide your ships away from imperial space and instruct you to make better use of the third-eye devices. You can't have many though, it's not like it can be standard equipment it would take..."

"More than a cubic meter of condensed degenerate matter?" Vaxil finished Lawrence's question.

"You've learned how to fabricate them?" I said, shocked.

"Our engineers are working on it, right now we have a number of working third eyes, scavenged from the remains of star-people ships."

I took a deep breath, "what's going to happen?"

"To the Imperium? I have no idea."

A blinking alert flashed on Vaxil's tablet and he tapped at it. "This is Eridanus." The enormous man's voice was sharp, but relaxed, as if he'd already had this conversation a thousand times. Which, I realized, he may very well have, depending on his skill with the oracles.

"This is Calliope Habitat, you are housing an imperial fugitive. A man and a kidnapped boy, we demand you return him at once."

Vaxil looked over at me, while Doran precociously attempted to catch the stars that floated through a nearby holo-display. "Get into some trouble?"

"Protection for me and my son was part of the deal." I said.

The big man smiled and said back into the microphone. "Or what? He's my pathfinder now."

"You can't do this, we are sending a detachment of personnel to collect the fugitive."

Vaxil chuckled and shook his head. "You try to force your way onto my ship and I'll punch a hole in Calliope and kill you all."

There was a stunned silence on the other end of the line for a moment. "I'll be filing a complaint to the admiralty."

"You do that." Said Vaxil.

I took a deep breath, "thank you." I said.

“They’ve fucked me over a few times too.” Said Vaxil.

Doran looked up at me from where he was looking at a small camera feed of the ships exterior.

“Are we going to go see the stars?” He asked.

“Yeah. We’re going to see the stars.”

LET IT BE THY SHIP

Beltway Bandit

Father Wellan MacKinnon gripped the guardrail with a sweat-soaked hand. His other hand, also damp with sweat, pulled a heavy cart of fuel canisters across the catwalk towards the waiting cargo hold. He looked down, gritting his teeth. Always look down, he thought, it is always better to look at a fear face-to-face than to pretend it isn't there. About ten miles below him, the dull factory lights and emotionless metal bulks of Greytree Energy Corporation Salma Refinery 171 taunted Father MacKinnon. The only thing between him and a certain death-drop was a steel catwalk, constructed with efficiency of materials in mind, not safety. Father MacKinnon had walked this catwalk hundreds of times, maybe over a thousand at this point. But no matter how many times, the vertigo still got to him, testing his resolve.

Father MacKinnon drew a sharp breath in through the oxygen mask he was wearing and pushed forward. If today is the day, let it come, he thought, but I'll not be a coward in the company of my brothers. The cart held five cylindrical canisters, filled to the brim with refined burner fuel. The fuel was heavy, but was a vital substance throughout the Aurina system. Spacecraft could be powered by other, more archaic fuels, but if you wanted to get from Abosi or any of her moons to Iocuin in less than a couple months, you needed to put burner fuel in your ship.

"Welly!" a voice called from inside the cargo bay ahead, "Come on brother, let's stack 'em!"

Father MacKinnon had reached the threshold. He crossed over from the catwalk and into the vast space of the cargo hold. The man who called out approached with a smile underneath his oxygen mask. Like Father MacKinnon, he had short dark hair, bright blue eyes, and skin almost as white as the surface of Salma. The only difference was that the man had a dark beard, tinged with spots of deep red.

"Last haul for me it looks like Danny," Father MacKinnon said to his comrade as they each hefted a canister and went deeper into the cargo hold.

The hold was large, excessively large based on the quantity of burner fuel that had been loaded already. The hold was one of three attached to the OSTG-485 Freighter Ship. The ship, called the Dexter Mule by everyone that did not write official Old Star Trading Guild documents, was one of the finest freighters in the Guild's fleet. In its glory days, the Dexter Mule boasted a crew of nearly two-hundred. Now, however, only twenty-eight worked the ship. Three pilots, two navigators, five security officers, and eighteen workmen, of which Father MacKinnon and Danny were two.

"I'm gonna go make sure the Seekers get the book," Father MacKinnon told Danny in a hushed voice as they unloaded the last canister from his cart together, "Did Jack get the painting?"

"Yeah," Danny replied in a whisper, "they gave him a few poems too, says their Loremaster was inspired by the Yeats we gave 'em a few months ago."

Father MacKinnon smiled as he made his way back across the catwalk. He kept his eyes downward, inviting the vertigo in, but continuing to walk, daring his fear to challenge him. In a minute, he was on the platform of Refinery 171's docking tower. The tower was an incredible feat of engineering. Built miles above the refinery itself, with several sturdy supports to ensure it did not fall prey to winds. Twenty large, silver balloons were attached to the top of the tower, lessening the effect of Salma's gravity. It might seem unconventional to those untrained in space travel, but the height was necessary. If a ship powered up to breaching speeds any closer to the ground, they risked damaging the refinery. Father MacKinnon had always found an irony in that there were very few safety measures to protect the workers of the refinery, but plenty to protect the refinery itself.

Having made his way past the rest of his comrades who were bringing the last of the burner fuel to the Dexter Mule, Father MacKinnon found the man he was looking for. Man was an odd term as the person he sought was no more than fourteen Gregorian years old. But he was tall, well-built, and had a face of one who had matured quicker than most, and matured out of necessity. He had a shaved head, and wore nothing but a pair of sunspecs, an oxygen mask, and a light gray jumpsuit with the upper portion tied around his waist, revealing his bare chest. His skin was a chalky white, literally. Father MacKinnon had learned long ago that the Seekers coated themselves in some kind of chalk to protect their fair skin from the brightness of the sun on harsh Salma. Across his body and face as well, were light red markings. They were intricate and beautiful, but the Seekers had never revealed their meaning to anyone, so most stopped asking.

“Hail, Bonnisman,” the young man said, upon seeing Father MacKinnon approach him.

“Hail to you Seeker,” Father MacKinnon replied before giving him a firm embrace.

“We are sorry we cannot provide more liquid for you.”

“Worry not Seeker, we will be paid all the same. Besides, it is not your people’s fault Salma is drying up.”

“Some say the salt is eating away at the Undercrust, some say soon, there will be no more liquid. Some say Salma is dying.”

“I pray that it does not die, only if you and the rest of the Seekers can continue to live.”

“Fear not Bonnisman, the Loremaster says the journey to Akapara will be soon at hand. All the signs point to it. Perhaps even Duxavi himself will be upon us in my lifetime.”

Father MacKinnon often wondered about the religious beliefs of the strange refinery workers of Salma. They definitely were religious, as all of the Christian writings Father MacKinnon had managed to smuggle to them had been praised. But they had a different spirituality, possibly one connected to their relationship with the salt planet upon which they lived. None of the Bonnismen had been able to determine how long the Seekers had been on Salma, or where they originated from. Father MacKinnon did know that his father had had dealings with Seekers when he ran on the freighters, so did his grandfather and great grandfather.

“How did your Loremaster like the W.B. Yeats we gave you?” Father MacKinnon asked, always hoping to learn more about the slaves of the Greytrees Energy Corporation.

“He enjoyed them very much, and has begun training a group of Rhyme-Artists. Our lives grow more beautiful with every visit from your people, Bonnisman.”

Father MacKinnon never ceased to be amazed at the complexity of the Seekers. They had been enslaved for who knows how many generations, and yet they thanked the Bonnismen for delivering poetry to them and spoke of beauty with understanding.

“I hope someday our interactions will not have to be so short-lived, Seeker.”

The young man nodded solemnly. The ‘*Seekers*’, Father MacKinnon thought, *definitely religious*. They were called all sorts of names by the various peoples of the Aurina system, but Seeker was the name they gave themselves. *What are they seeking?*

“Perhaps when we are both freed, we will find each other in Akapara.”

“Perhaps, Seeker. God-willing.”

Akapara was understood as the Seeker conception of paradise, heaven. But they often spoke of it as if it was a physical place, specifically a physical place on Salma. It was unlikely that any sort of paradise existed on Salma. The planet had been scanned numerous times. All that was found of importance on the dried-up ocean planet was massive subterranean petroleum reserves and small pockets of geothermal activity, not large enough to be harnessed into any kind of useful energy. And since Salma was effectively owned by the Greytrees Energy Corporation, and the GEC was run by Abosian Industrialists, and Abosi was already a paradise world of oceans and lakes and forests and jungles, no one would be looking for a paradise on Salma.

“Get on it, Welly!” a Bonnisman named Liam called as he brought back what looked to be the last empty cart, “Somethin’s wrong in the freight-lines, we’re leavin’ early!”

“Here,” Father MacKinnon said, suddenly filled with dread and worry, “This is one of our most prized possessions.”

He produced an enclosed steel box, with a latch.

“We only have a few copies of it, but it is one of the most important works of our faith. It was made long long ago, back when we knew only one world.”

“Like the Book!” the Seeker gasped, “Please, we are not worthy of such an heirloom!”

“We want you to have it, it is a series of commentaries on the Book. It is complicated, but I believe your Loremaster, based on what you have told me of him, can comprehend what the author is saying in it.”

The Seeker opened the box to reveal a leather bound book.

The Seeker pronounced the title with some difficulty and said, “It looks ancient.”

“It is,” Father MacKinnon replied, “Take good care of it. And may all your people learn from it, as we have.”

“We shall, Bonnisman. The Seeker always finds.”

“I pray that you all will find Akapara, and that this book will help you.”

“Thank you again, Bonnisman, we continue to be indebted to you. Our time unfortunately seems to have departed.”

He pointed towards the *Dexter Mule*. The loud twin engines on the top and bottom of the hull powered up with a loud whir. Quickly, the heat from the burners distorted the air as they prepared to ignite.

“May God always be with you and your people, Seeker!” Father MacKinnon yelled over the noise.

The Seeker placed his hand over his right breast and then extended it towards Father MacKinnon, palm up, a sign of peace and safety. Father MacKinnon returned the gesture and hastily made his way to the freighter. He ignored his vertigo as best he could, crossing the catwalk one last time until he reached the *Dexter Mule*.

“Pile in Welly, find a spot to squeeze if ya can!” Danny shouted with a laugh, gesturing to the half empty cargo hold before activating his comlink, “Take ‘er up bridge, all workmen accounted for.”

“Copy Mule One,” the disembodied voice returned, this time over the speaker system throughout the ship, “GEC Tower one-seven-one, this is Ostig four-eight-five, disengaging docking locks, preparing breaching speed.”

The door to the cargo hold closed, sealing the interior of the ship. A hiss of oxygen was dispensed from the vents above and the Bonnismen doffed their oxygen masks and made for a row of seats fixed to the wall. Father MacKinnon was able to catch one last glimpse of the Seeker through the door’s view-window before he followed his comrades and placed his mask on the hooks with the others.

“Strap up lads!”

The Bonnismen began strapping down their torsos, legs, and waists.

“Pre-breach,” came the voice once again, “Burners on.”

“We’ll see the stars tonight boys!”

Whoops and cheers came from the Bonnismen as they completed the checks on their clips and straps. They then grasped handles built on the sides of the chairs with white knuckles, anticipating the violence of a burn-breach.

“How’s about a song lads!”

“Ya-hey, Welly give us a good one!”

“Burn on, departure initiated, see you next time Tower.”

Father MacKinnon felt the pull of the g-force as the ship shook and rumbled, beginning its rocket-burn in order to breach the gravitational pull of Salma. Despite the discomfort and threat to him staying conscious, he yelled the song as loud as he could.

*Oh, far, far away from the Isles of Bonnis
Far, far away ye see
From our home an' hearth we've been away
Oh, far, far away ye see!
Far, far away but not for long now!
Far, far away ye see
For the 'auling is done and rocket is burnin'
Oh, far, far away ye see!*

Out of the view-window of the cargo hold, the Bonnismen could see the tower disappearing onto the plain white, salt terrain of Salma. The rest of the workmen took up the chorus and continued in unison, with a few stamping a beat on the floor or smacking their seats with their hands.

*Oh we are far, far away, far, far, far away
Far, far away ye see
We've been slavin' away for night an' day
Far, far away ye see!
Oh, far, far away from the Church, God bless Her!
Far, far away ye see Good dear Lord, please bring us home
Far, far away ye see!*

Salma still occupied the entirety of the window as the last verse was finished. Unexpectedly, the freighter drastically decreased its burners. Massive g-force hit the workmen all at once as the *Dexter Mule* slowed to a near halt.

"That's not right," Father MacKinnon said immediately, "We should be at max burn until we hit the lane, we're nowhere near the lane!"

"All crew be advised," the bridge sounded over the com system, "SRI frigates spotted, Alliance forces closing in as well. Secure all cargo, move to evasive positions, don ISPAV."

Danny looked to Father MacKinnon with fear in his eyes. The priest glanced around and saw that all the workmen were looking to him, silently. Finally, Danny said, after turning off his comlink, "What do we do Father?"

"Lord God, the Christ, have mercy on us, all sinners." Father MacKinnon prayed aloud before replying, "Move to the Central cargo hold, put your ISPAVs on, then we pray and pray like we won't see tomorrow."

"Is everyone accounted for?" Father MacKinnon asked Danny as the latter hurried through the open door of the cargo hold.

"Aye father," Danny replied, opening the face latch on his ISPAV, "What are we to do?"

"Danny," Father MacKinnon replied, placing a hand on the man's shoulder, "The guilders think that you are the leader among us. That perception must remain. Are we all in agreement?"

Nods and murmurs of approval rose throughout the group of men now gathered in the empty cargo hold. They all knew that while Father MacKinnon was their leader, both in spiritual matters and physical ones, his office must not be discovered by the guild traders.

"Everyone keep your ISPAV on," Father MacKinnon said to the whole group, "And stay off of coms, talk without the face latch, but be ready to close it should we suffer an attack."

Everyone complied, opening a small latch in the plastic of the ISPAV's helmet. The suits were designed for workmen, not soldiers. They had no armor, no weapon systems, and no personal shields. The ISPAV would provide oxygen and the grav-lock boots would allow them to space walk. But in a space battle, they were fairly vulnerable.

"Danny," Father MacKinnon started, "Get on coms with the bridge, just so they know we are still here. We need to know what their plans for us are."

Danny nodded, his face partially shrouded by the visor of his ISPAV helmet. Still, through the shadows, his blue eyes held a grim look.

"Bridge, this is Danny, Mule One, what's our status?"

A quiet static followed for a few seconds before Danny hailed them again.

"Bridge, Mule One, are yeh all there?"

Danny was trying hard to speak without his Bonnis accent, but it came through all the same. Father MacKinnon cringed slightly, hearing an accent that told jokes and sang songs having to be so serious was unnatural to him. Finally after almost a minute of silence, the bridge responded.

"We're here Mule One," the voice came in through all of their coms, "we've hailed the Alliance flagship and are going to make a hard burn towards the fleet once they give the signal. What is your status?"

"All workmen are 'ere," Danny responded, as he and Father MacKinnon moved towards the front view window to catch a glimpse of the amassed forces, "We've got the fuel packed down extra snug. We've moved to the central hold, ISPAV on."

"Stay put and strap in Mule One."

"Aye bridge."

Father MacKinnon peered out the window as Danny clicked off his comlink. The black abyss of space yawned back at him, a thousand stars like a thousand unsympathetic eyes, waiting to watch if they would make it through or be blown apart. Looking upward, the amassed fleets could be seen. The Alliance fleet was larger, but the Republic fleet seemed to be in a defensive position, closer to Salma than the Alliance force. There were about twenty frigates in total. From this distance they all looked the same, but even miles away, the Alliance flagship could still be seen. Larger than the rest, like a whale among trout.

"Look there father," Danny said, pointing to a space in between the two fleets, "That's ne'er a good sight."

Floating between the two forces, a swarm of smaller ships jostled amongst themselves. This far away, they looked like little flies, buzzing about, but the reputation carried by these ships was terrible.

"Vultures," Father said with a scowl, "Let us pray that they do not locate us. All those warships, but we are the juiciest morsel for them by far."

"Bridge, Mule One 'ere," Danny said, activating his comlink, "Just to let ye know, we've spotted a pack of vultures 'overing."

"Good eyes Mule One," the bridge responded after a short silence, "we've been informed by the Alliance flagship that they have guaranteed safe passage for us from the Vultures, as long as we get past Republic ships, we are in the clear."

"That didn't sound too reassuring," Father MacKinnon said as Danny turned off his comlink, "All that told me is that the Vultures know there is a fuel freighter nearby."

"Lord save us!" Danny replied, "Those bastards'll make right for us!"

The pair were about to return to their comrades, but suddenly a bright blue light flashed through the window.

"No!" Father MacKinnon shouted helplessly.

For an instant, a line of pure, white light was visible. It protruded from one of the Republic ships and went directly through the Alliance flagship. There was a great stillness for a moment. Very slowly, bits started to come off the massive ship.

"The fools! They've-" was all Father MacKinnon could get out before ten more flashes lit up the blackness of space.

Macroweapons, fired from both sides, all found their marks. Soon the frigates that were hit began to break apart. Each shot was like a lightning bolt, lasting only for a split-second, leaving destruction in its wake.

"Strap in!" Danny yelled, scrambling back towards the row of seats. Father MacKinnon remained looking out the window, breathless. On account of the energy crisis, no shipborne weapons of that scale had been fired in over two years. Was Salma really that important? A few more flashes were seen, then each side moved in to engage with close range kinetic weapons. Fourteen shots in total, Father MacKinnon counted. Everyone in the system knew that no macroweapons had been fired in over two years on account of the cost. Two years of saving those terrible and awesome weapons for about fifteen seconds of carnage. The battle could not be lost by either side now. It would take generations of refining on Salma to justify the energy cost of so many shots alone.

As Father MacKinnon turned to go strap in and lead the Bonnismen in prayer, the guild pilots took the slaughter as the sign to make a dash for it. The *Dexter Mule* suddenly went to maximum burn, throwing Father MacKinnon and eight Bonnismen who were not strapped in across the cargo hold. The pain was fierce. Blessedly, he had landed on his back and only had the wind knocked out of him. Father MacKinnon could see the Bonnisman nearest him, young Liam, had his leg pinned under him at an awkward angle. Underneath the shroud of the ISPAV visor, Father MacKinnon could see Liam's face contorted in anguish, his screams drowned out by the roar of the engines.

There was little to be done however. The g-force of the *Dexter Mule* flying at full speed towards the Alliance forces made it impossible to move anything beyond a finger. Pinned against the rear window and unable to move, Father MacKinnon pressed his chin against the comlink inside his helmet.

"Afix thy soul to the Lord my brothers!" Father MacKinnon yelled out, "That He may greet us lovingly and with a Father's hand. For the Lord saith to them that love Him, when their time is expired: 'well done my good and faithful servant!'"

The Bonnismen cried and wailed over the com, some pleading that they not die. Like a strong ship through a torrential sea, Father MacKinnon shouted through the confusion.

"The Lord's prayer brothers! Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name!"

Those that were able to speak joined in, yelling at the top of their lungs.

"Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done! On our world as it is in Heaven!"

Father MacKinnon was able to turn his head enough to see through the window that he was pressed against. A squadron of Alliance interceptors were now behind them, providing escort.

"Give us this day our daily bread! And forgive us our trespasses!"

The *Dexter Mule* now slowed to a more moderate pace. The g-force was still enough to prevent the men from standing up, but some were able to reach out to each other, and claw their way towards the seats.

"As we forgive those who trespass against us! And lead us not into temptation!"

Father MacKinnon saw out the window that their Alliance escort had been destroyed and was now replaced with a dozen Vultures. Their non-uniform ships were covered in strange markings and numbers. Many of them began to fire upon each other. It seemed as though while the Alliance and Republic tore themselves apart over Salma and the GEC refineries, the Vultures would tear each other apart over the *Dexter Mule*. When one Vulture was blasted to bits, two more took its place. All along the cargo hold trembled and shook. Muffled blasts could be heard where the freighter's shield reflected rockets and torpedoes. Loud clangs could be heard where smaller kinetic rounds punched through the shield, threatening to pierce the hull once it became weakened.

“But deliver us from evil!”

The last line of the ancient prayer was said by every Bonnisman in the hold, even those in pain. Two of the workmen, Danny being one of them, had managed to be pulled up to the row of seats. After strapping themselves in halfway, they reached down to help the rest of the men. Suddenly, the *Dexter Mule* slowed almost to a halt and jolted to the side. Father MacKinnon and those not strapped down were thrown to the port side of the hold, then fell upon the hold’s floor as the artificial gravity snapped back. The experience was very disorientating and the men groaned as they attempted to stand up. As sudden as the first move, a second turn was executed, this time sending the men sliding towards the seats. Quickly, those already strapped in pulled the others into the harnesses.

The prayers continued and the *Dexter Mule* continued to lurch about sporadically. The next five minutes were marked by clunking, crashing, thudding, and scenes of the space battle taking place outside the window. Father MacKinnon gripped the side handles as tight as he could. He felt pain throughout his whole body, unsure of its source. The prayers became a muscle reflex, each line a defiant reaction to a sudden turn or a muffled crash of torpedoes hitting the shield. A few small kinetic rounds had found their way through the armor of the hull, creating a depressurization suck. Father MacKinnon knew any moment, they could be vaporized.

The chaos continued until the g-force and inertia of the *Dexter Mule* reduced drastically. Father MacKinnon quickly realized that a sound among the chaos was missing. The engines! The artificial gravity drive shut down soon after, and a feeling of weightlessness filled the hold. All at once, the chaos picked back up to a fever pitch. Father MacKinnon could see out the window debris being blown past. Interceptors, boarding transports, even the ruins of a frigate swirled around and past the window. It was like looking into an aquarium of floating metal. More loud clangs occurred and the *Dexter Mule* was jostled around.

Suddenly, the opposite wall of the hold was ripped off. The Bonnismen were now shoved into the battle, able to purvey the entire scene. Some missile or torpedo had destroyed most of the port side cargo hold and much of the central hold’s port wall. The fuel canisters could still be seen, strapped down to what remained of the only wall in that hold. Some trailed outwards, holding onto the other canisters with damaged straps. A few floated away into the wreckage. The battle appeared to be over. There was an eerie silence as bits of wreckage floated past aimlessly, clunking into each other occasionally. Among the debris, bodies, some wearing armor, some just an ISPAV, others wearing nothing but an unprotected uniform, drifted. Looking up, they could see just a curve of Salma hanging away and above. It would seem that the *Dexter Mule* had been turned upside down during the flight.

The Bonnismen stopped their prayers.

“Danny, the bridge!” Father MacKinnon said, forgetting that the bridge could hear their coms.

“Bridge, this is Mule One,” Danny said in between winces of pain, “Status?”

There was only static in response. Father MacKinnon clicked his grav-boots to see if they still worked. They did and he attached himself to the floor of the hold. With steady hands he undid the straps of the seat.

“Father,” the nearest man, an older Bonnisman named Pat, said, “What are yeh doing? We can’t ‘ave yeh die.”

“We’re exposed,” Father MacKinnon replied, “we’ve got to move somewhere that’s secure.”

He walked to the edge of the destruction, his feet a couple inches away from the drop off into space. Leaning out, he was able to see both the upper and lower engines. Beyond them, he could see the edge of the bridge and the body of the *Dexter Mule* that held the guildsmen’s living quarters, the kitchen, and the armory.

“Looks like they’re damaged and disabled,” Father MacKinnon said to the Bonnismen over the coms, “but the main hull is intact.”

He moved back to the seats, taking care to ensure he did not misstep in the grav-boots.

“Quickly now!” he said, helping Pat, who had injured his arm, out of his straps, “We can get to the guild quarters. There may be a way out of this.”

“Climb up the seats,” Danny said, up ahead, “Don’t trust your boots, not until we get in.”

The process was very slow. All of the Bonnismen except for Father MacKinnon and a few others. Danny’s right arm hung at his side and he walked with a slight limp. Still, gradually, they managed to work their way up to the circular door that led to the main body of the ship. Without gravity, the climb was welcomingly easy. With no cargo in it, the hold was about a hundred and fifty feet long and the Bonnismen arrived at the door in a couple of minutes.

After muttering a quick prayer, Father MacKinnon tried the button. Blessedly, it responded, and the door parted silently. Although the engines had been knocked out, it seemed that there was enough reserve power to keep the basic electrics and interior gravity drive on. Within a few moments, the work crew were in the kitchen and dining area. The place was a mess, with pots, ration packs, silverware, and water bladders strewn about. It was, however, unlike the cargo hold, airtight. The armor around the crew quarters was not as strong as it was around the holds, but it was a much smaller target.

Many of the men took off their helmets and collapsed on the floor once the door was sealed. There were broken bones, bruises, concussions, and a host of other injuries, but against all odds, all eighteen of the workmen from Bonnis were alive.

“Bridge,” Danny said over coms, “All workmen ‘ave survived, wounds sustained. Anyone alive up there?”

There was no response.

“I think we shall have to move on under the assumption that we are the only ones alive on the Mule,” Father MacKinnon said, “May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.”

The men that could hold off their pain long enough to speak repeated the prayer. There was no love lost between the Bonnismen and the guildsmen, especially the two slug-faced Abosian guild officers. Nevertheless, they all knew their teaching instructed prayers for the deceased, especially those that did not live in the faith.

“Let’s get the worst of the wounded to the living quarters,” Father MacKinnon said, then addressing one of the Bonnismen who had not been injured, “Jack, do you remember any of your medicine from your soldiering days?”

“Aye Father,” the grim-faced man responded, “sure do. If there’s some of ‘em packs about, I can fix our boys’ bleedin’ and broken bones.”

“Let’s get to it then.”

Those that could walk and had the use of at least one of their arms carried the wounded men to the set of bunks attached to the kitchen. Dull fluorescent lights shone from the short ceiling, giving the area the effect of a run-down hospital. Jack located the medkits and quickly went to work on Liam’s broken leg.

“Ye’ve got a bit of the internal bleedin’ there mate,” Jack said, after having the young man take his ISPAV off, “we’ll get you fixed up right quick.”

Father MacKinnon had everyone except for Danny to help Jack with the distribution of medical aid.

“We’ve got to see if there’s a way to start those engines Father,” Danny said, after Father MacKinnon explained what he had seen.

“I agree, but first, we must acknowledge that we will likely perish here.”

Danny nodded solemnly. With the dreary and shrouded ISPAV helmet off, most of the Bonnismen looked youthful and optimistic, with their blue or green eyes and cheery cheeks. *Hope springs eternal*, Father MacKinnon thought, but he knew their situation was dire.

“I will administer last rites to all of us, as the faith dictates.”

After making a stole out of one of the towels from the kitchen by making a cross on either end and blessing it, Father MacKinnon administered the sacrament of last rites to all the Bonnismen, including himself. Using a packet of crackers from the kitchen as well, he gave each man their communion. Father MacKinnon did the best he could from memory, but he knew he missed a few things.

“Be lenient with your servant O Lord,” he implored, silently after the sacraments had been administered, “for he only wishes to see Your Will done and your people saved.”

“Now Danny,” Father MacKinnon said, as the man adjusted the sling that held his broken arm, “We need to see about those engines and what the state of the bridge is.”

“Aye father,” Danny replied, “You ‘ead upstairs, I’ll do the spacewalk.”

“Danny, you’re not doing any spacewalk with your arm like that.”

“Well I’m not letting our good priest risk floatin’ away off into nothin’. We need ya father, I’m just a man.”

“So am I Danny, I’m not anything special. Besides, you’re a father yourself. Three little ones back in Bonnis right? You an’ most ‘o the men. If I’m to die so yeh can see yer kids, then let the Lord take me but spare yeh.”

Anytime Father MacKinnon spoke quickly and passionately, his low Bonnis accent overcame his scholarly accent, which had come after a long education. Danny could see that the priest was not going to give an inch on the issue.

“Very well father, but at least take one ‘o the boys with yeh.”

Father MacKinnon was about to respond, but there was a sudden and loud ca-clunk that rocked the whole ship. The pair were thrown to the floor and there were shouts of pain and protest from the impromptu medical bay.

“What the ‘ell was that!” Danny shouted.

“Shhhhhh!” Father MacKinnon quickly hushed him, then followed with a whisper, “armory, now!”

Father MacKinnon, Danny, and five others who were well enough to walk and hold things walked the short distance to the armory, attached to the far side of the kitchen. Rifles, pistols, billy-clubs, jet-packs, and armor were jostled about, but still behind a locked cage. None of the men knew the passcode and they hopelessly shook the titanium bars. All fell silent again as they heard a sound above their heads.

Clunk, clunk, clunk. These were much softer, and after a few moments it sounded like someone walking right above them. Father MacKinnon ran back to the kitchen and donned his ISPAV as quickly as he could and made for the double air-sealed hatch that led to the bridge. As he did so, the clunking footsteps followed the same path past the kitchen and towards the bridge. Father MacKinnon tried the hatch, but the pilots must have activated the emergency lock at some point during the fight, a feature that ironically, was intended to keep potential Bonnismen mutineers out.

Father MacKinnon was helpless as he heard the footsteps go past him above. Whoever or whatever it was was clearly going to the bridge. Father MacKinnon prayed under his breath. What he prayed for, he was not quite sure, but he prayed nonetheless. It felt like hours of silence, waiting to see what would happen. Then, the coms crackled to life and a gruff voice called out: “Any poor bastards on this godforsaken thing alive?”

“Danny,” Father MacKinnon whispered after muting coms, “answer him, and be smart.”

Danny nodded and responded to the gruff, new voice, “Aye, a group of us survived.”

“Who are you?”

“I’d ask yeh the same, seein’ as we were on this ship first.”

"Is that right? What makes you say that you were here first?"

"This here is our ship, we heard yeh clankin' along just now."

"This is your ship eh? Then how come there's no one on the bridge?"

"On account 'o the battle I'd wager."

"Oh right the battle..." the voice trailed off before screaming over coms, "Well excuse me for wondering, seeing as how the whole bridge has been blown to hell! Do you even know you're floating through a damn graveyard!"

Danny looked to Father MacKinnon who immediately motioned to Danny to ease off.

"Listen 'ere," Danny replied, "Maybe we can 'elp each other, seeing as we're both in this mess together."

"Sorry, can't."

"Why's that then?"

"Don't trust you."

"Well fair enough, but yer in the bridge, so yer steerin' the Mule. You ain't have to trust us, it's us trustin' yeh."

"Steering the what?"

"The Mule, the Dexter Mule, that's 'er name. The ship I mean."

"Dumb name for a ship."

"Hey!" Danny replied, genuinely insulted, "She may not be much, 'specially now, what with 'er all torn up, an' she wa'nt too kind to us while she was in workin' order, but she's still a decent 'auler!"

Danny's accent got more incomprehensible the more flustered he became. Father MacKinnon again motioned for him to calm down.

"Heh," the voice chuckled over the coms, "I'm not going to pretend to understand half of what you just said, hick. I said I didn't like the name, the name is stupid. As a ship, it's fine, flies better than mine anyway."

"Why's that?"

"Because mine's in a thousand pieces somewhere on the Blue's line, near...oh what was it called? The *Spear of Excelsus*, big Republic gunship, now there's a name."

"Well I don't know what an 'excelsus' is, but I'm sorry to 'ear about your ship, mate."

"That's alright, flying with me, it wasn't long for this world. And don't call me mate, I ain't your mate."

That first part distrubed Father MacKinnon, it implied that a maniac pilot was now in charge of the Dexter Mule. He was about to motion for Danny to keep talking while he thought of a plan when Danny took matters into his own hands.

"Fine, we ain't mates, sure, but are we just gonna chitter-chatter until some Vulture pack comes and gets us, or are we gonna work together to get out 'o this mess?"

"You ain't gotta worry about a Vulture coming to get you."

"How's that then?"

"Cause you're talking to the only one in the system still breathing."

That caused all the men to be shaken to their core. The Bonnismen had stories of rovers and pirates, but those were fun-loving vigilanties. Rovers took from the rich and gave to the poor, after a hearty drink of course. Pirates were meant to scare children before bedtime. Vultures on the other hand had a reputation of ruthlessly killing unarmed innocents over a bit of rusted copper wire. As far as the Bonnismen were concerned, they were a bunch of amoral scavengers.

"Now 'ang on a minute there," Danny said, trying to keep both his accent and his shaky voice under control, "You ain't gotta do any killing here."

"I won't unless I have to." came the cold response.

Father MacKinnon said a short and quiet prayer. They had survived the battle only to be commandeered by a killer.

"How's about a deal, Vulture?"

"I'm listening."

"Most 'o the burner fuel we 'auled off ole' Salma is still hangin' on to the port-side hold. We're workmen, we'll give you the fuel if you fly us somewhere safe."

"Burner fuel you say?"

"That's right."

"How do I know you won't cut the fuel loose as soon as I take you where you wanna go?"

"How do we know you won't kill us when we get there, or anytime between now 'an then?"

There was a couple minutes of silence. A few of the workmen were still trying to access the armory behind the steel bars. Jack was still tending to the wounded. Some were organizing rations and supplies. But everyone could hear the silence and it hung in the pressurized air like a great weight ready to crush all eighteen of them. Some of the Bonnismen just stared at the door to the bridge, as if at any second the Vulture would burst through, guns blazing.

"Fine, we work together," Came the gruff response finally. There was a collective sigh of relief before the Vulture continued, "We've three problems however. One, the engines are cooked, we need at least one to get anywhere. Two, if the fuel is hanging on in open space, it has to be moved somewhere safe, or else it'll float away and I won't be paid. Third, I've got the controls working well enough, but this is an Abosi freighter, so for some stupid reason the controls require a co-pilot."

"We can 'elp with most of those, Vulture. We 'ave some mechanics, might be able to get an engine going. As for the fuel, we 'andle that every day, no problem. But I know none of us are pilots."

"Don't need a pilot, just a pair of working hands. I can fly anything, but I don't have three hands."

Father MacKinnon nodded to Danny, telling him to accept the agreement.

"Alright Vulture, we'll get on it."

"Send one of your men through to the bridge, we can move on the pressure thrusters until you fix an engine."

Danny looked to Father MacKinnon.

"I'm going Danny," the priest said, as calm as a summer day.

"I won't let yeh father, you're too important," Danny responded, deactivating coms.

"He said it himself, he needs a co-pilot. He wouldn't ask for one if he didn't need it. Besides, if he wants to take a hostage, he can have me. My duty is to get you and the men back to your families and back to Bonnis."

Danny saw that there would be no arguing with Father MacKinnon.

"At least take some kind of weapon with you father, please."

"Not a chance," Father MacKinnon replied, heading for the door, "I won't give him any chance to fear us. If he fears us, he'll try to double-cross us. No, I'm just going to talk to him and help him fly the *Mule*."

"Right Vulture," Danny said over coms, his heart beating fast as Father MacKinnon made for the door, "Our man is outside, let 'im in."

"He had better be alone and unarmed."

"'e is."

"He better have an ISPAV or something on, and grav-boots."

"'e does."

The first of the double doors slid open silently. Father MacKinnon stepped over the threshold gently. They immediately closed again behind him. For a brief moment, he was alone in the antechamber. He used that moment to quiet his mind and silently say "Lord Jesus, have mercy upon me." The other doors slid open and Father MacKinnon was met with a chaotic yet calm and silent sight.

The roof of the bridge had indeed blown off and wreckage from the battle was floating aimlessly above him. Inside the bridge, which Father MacKinnon now saw was really more of a cockpit, there was chaos as well. Two bodies, both lifeless, sat in chairs. One was a human with no helmet and a steel rod protruding from his chest. His red blood floated out of the wound and the color had already gone from his face. The second was one of the Abosian guildsmen. His blue, tentacled face had green blood flowing from it out of his eyes and thick, slug-like nose. His mouth tentacles waved about as if they were underwater. There was a large crack in his ISPAV helmet, its cause unknown.

“Don’t move.” came a gruff voice from in front of Father MacKinnon. He looked straight ahead and was met with the barrel of a kinetic pistol aimed directly at his helmet.

“I can tell yeh I’m unarmed,” Father MacKinnon said, purposefully making his accent more noticeable.

The man rose and stepped slowly towards the priest. He wore an ISPAV that had armor attached to it in key places. His helmet was rounded and though he had a shrouded visor, Father MacKinnon could see a fair but rough chin and mouth, covered in dark stubble. Father MacKinnon put his hands above his head and allowed the Vulture to pat him down.

“How is the *Mule* still workin’?” Father MacKinnon asked.

“It’s not,” came the laconic response from the man.

“But yeh say yeh can fly ‘er.”

“Needs to be fixed first.”

The Vulture seemed satisfied that Father MacKinnon did not have any weapons, so he motioned for the priest to come forward. The dead Abosian guildsman sat in the co-pilot’s chair. Although Father MacKinnon and the rest of the Bonnismen lived in Bonnis, which was itself a region on Abosi, the creature still looked alien. Father MacKinnon thought it strange that although the Bonnismen lived on its planet, the Abosian was incredibly foreign.

“Give a hand,” the Vulture ordered as he undid the straps on the co-pilot’s chair. Father MacKinnon did as he was told, then by an unspoken agreement, the pair pushed the Abosian’s lifeless body up through the hole in the bridge and out into space. They did the same with the dead human who was sitting in the navigator’s seat. The Vulture then motioned for Father MacKinnon to take a seat. The priest was hesitant about sitting in a green blood-stained seat, but he volunteered for this duty, so he strapped himself in.

“I control the steering with these,” the Vulture said with his hands on two joysticks, “you control the amount of pressure from the thrusters and the power of the engine once your people get it running.”

““Ow much will I know t’ use?”” Father MacKinnon asked, worried that he was hamming his accent up too much.

“Can’t you people talk normal?” the Vulture responded, “there are numbers on the power and thruster dials, I’ll tell you the number and you just set it to that. Be on your toes, if we get in a hairy situation speeds will have to change fast.”

“I’ll try to talk more normal sir,” Father MacKinnon replied, changing his accent to do so, “If I control the power, why do the controls go forward an’ backwards?”

“Different levels of power. Think of it like you are setting a limit, a barrier for me and I know the range that I am working in.”

“Sounds complicated.”

“It is, Ostig freighters are a pain to fly. Stealing them was the only reason I took an apprentice.”

“I didn’t know Vultures had apprentices.”

“Some of us do.”

"Where's yours?"

"Out there somewhere," the Vulture gestured to the floating wreckage.

"Dead?"

"Yep."

Father MacKinnon was silent for a moment, but felt a responsibility to inquire further.

"What was his name?"

"Don't know," was the response.

"How do you not know his name?"

The Vulture turned to Father MacKinnon, expressionless.

"I'm sorry for prying."

"Don't be, you didn't kill him, damn clickers did."

"Who?"

"The Selukans, who the hell do you think did all this?"

Stunned at the revelation, Father MacKinnon was speechless. The coms crackled to life.

"Bridge," came the voice of a Bonnisman, "This is engine repair. We 'ave enough to get the top engine movin', but it'll take some time. Bottom engine is missin' 'alf of it."

"Bridge," came the voice of a Bonnisman, "This is engine repair. We 'ave enough to get the top engine movin', but it'll take some time. Bottom engine is missin' 'alf of it."

"Forget the bottom, focus on the top," the Vulture replied, "Get it done quick too, we're not safe."

"Alright yeh," came the response.

"Fuel movers," the Vulture barked, "What's your status?"

"Goin' well," a different Bonnisman responded, "about 'alfway done."

"Move fast."

"Aye." The Vulture leaned back, keeping a lazy hand on one of the controls, gently steering past floating debris.

"Selukans were here?" Father MacKinnon asked, still shocked.

"Yep, shot everything to hell."

Father MacKinnon had heard about the mysterious beings and their volcanic planet on the outer reaches of the system. He had never, however, encountered a Selukan himself.

"What happened during the battle exactly?" Father MacKinnon asked.

"Pretty simple," the Vulture started, "the fleet of the 'Sovereign Republic of Iocuin', what we call Blues, makes a play for Salma. Alliance needs Salma, pretty desperately it turns out. You're looking at what remains of the Abosian Alliance's First Fleet, the most powerful force in the system, it's what let the Alliance push the Blues around. Blues decide they're not gonna take it anymore and break out the big guns. First time a plasma macrocannon has been fired in two years. And boy did they fire 'em."

"We saw," Father MacKinnon interjected, "from the hold."

"Twenty-seven in total, from both sides. Massive energy dump."

Father MacKinnon had only seen fourteen, so they must have continued as the battle went on. He continued to play dumb to see if he could get more information.

"They need a lot 'o energy?"

"Put it this way, a single shot from a standard Mark Nine Plasma Obliterator is the same as flying this freighter from Desilex to Seluka at full burn back and forth for a month straight."

Father MacKinnon thought of the days when the Mule would have all three of its holds full of burner fuel, its haul would power other freighters for months. He was trying to comprehend the magnitude of the battle when the Vulture continued.

"And that's just the regular ones, the ones on the big frigates need about four times as much energy."

“Why’d they do it?” Father MacKinnon asked, “All the Death and destruction, for what?”

“Salma. It’s all about Salma. They need what you’re hauling and it’s drying up.”

“How are the ships goin’ to fly?”

“Ha!” the Vulture laughed, it was an insidious laugh and it was a true laugh, a laugh that enjoyed chaos, or at least did not mind it, “I suppose they’ll stop flying!”

The Vulture continued to laugh, seemingly entertained by the prospect of space travel, something that was as common in the Aurnia system as eating or sleeping, becoming a rarity, a thing of the past. Father MacKinnon suddenly became anxious that he was not only sitting next to a killer scavenger, but an insane one.

“So ‘ow did the Selukans come in?” Father MacKinnon asked, remaining calm and composed as best he could.

“Plasma cannons going off left and right,” the Vulture replied, getting his laughter under control, “a pack of us are just watching the fireworks, waiting for it to end so we can go in and do our thing. Then BOOM! Half of the guys to my right get hit, smashed to bits. A whole bunch of ‘em show up out of nowhere, about thirty clickers. Both the Blues and the Alliance have shot each other to hell, then clickers use our move. They waste every damn ship in the sector. No survivors, ‘cept me and you guys.”

“How’d they do it?” Father MacKinnon asked, he knew most weapons could not get through a ship’s shields, especially a frigate or interceptor, that was the reason plasma cannons were popular.

“Clickers don’t use plasma cannons, they don’t use energy weapons. They use these rods. Made from tungsten or steel or something. Whatever it is, they launch a whole bunch of ‘em, and they punch right through any shield. Tears metal, shatters hulls. If one is headed for you, it’s over, can’t do a thing. I’m guessing that’s what happened to the port side of this freighter and to the bottom engine.”

Death and destruction, thought Father MacKinnon, they were floating through a graveyard and they had probably just witnessed the last space battle for several generations.

“How are we going to get back?” he asked out loud after a while of silence.

“Get back where?” the Vulture asked.

Father MacKinnon looked at him, wondering if he should just stop speaking and focus on the task at hand. Protecting his brothers, getting home, that was his goal. He could not allow for this unknown factor, this scavenger, to prevent them.

“You know what,” the Vulture said, as if reading Father MacKinnon’s mind, “I don’t care, I need you, you need me, let’s just get to a Nest and ride this thing out.”

“A Nest?” Father MacKinnon asked.

“Vulture Nest, neutral stations throughout the system. Think of it like a floating bar and brothel, only with a dock.”

“That’s where we are headed?”

“We’ll I’m not going to Abosi, Alliance kills Vultures.”

“Justice you mean.”

As soon as Father MacKinnon said that he mentally cursed himself. *Stupid, stupid, idiot*, he thought. The Vulture, without hesitating, pulled his pistol out and held it against the clear face of Father MacKinnon’s ISPAV helmet.

“Would this be justice?”

“Have I wronged you?” Father MacKinnon replied, desperate to calm the situation.

“You said it’s justice when those green-blood tentacle assholes kill people like me. Would it be justice if I killed you?”

“It would be mercy if you didn’t.”

“If we landed on Abosi and the Alliance found out I was a Vulture, would they show me mercy?”

“Probably not.”

"So why should I give it to you?"

"I'm not the Alliance."

"You haul fuel for 'em, you say it'd be justice if they killed me, sure as hell sounds like you're in with 'em."

"I don't like the Alliance."

"Then why are you saying that killing me is some sort of justice?"

Father MacKinnon paused, the barrel of the pistol occupying his vision.

"Answer," the Vulture said calmly.

Spurred by some internal survival instinct, Father MacKinnon felt all of his theological, philosophical, and rhetorical training swell within him. He dropped the peasant accent and turned his head, looking past the gun barrel and straight at the Vulture's visor.

"Justice," he began, "is a manifestation of the natural law carried out. It is God's law. Vultures have a reputation, you must know this. You are thieves, murderers, scum of the lowest kind. I don't like the Alliance, they treat my people poorly. We haul their fuel and they pay us with vouchers that are spent how they wish. We exist because we are more valuable as a living people that they can exploit rather than a dying people that they can ground into the dirt. But there are wicked people, wicked groups, who do wicked things. And when, by the merit of their actions, those people, those groups are punished, then justice has been done. It does not matter whose hand renders the verdict, or whose finger pulls the execution trigger. It is the hand of God that brings the law about. That is justice."

The Vulture slowly lifted the pistol away.

"You're not a dumb hauler are you?"

"No."

"What are you then, professor?"

"I'm a priest."

The Vulture burst out laughing.

"You can't be serious."

"I'm deadly serious."

"I doubt that."

"What, serious?"

"No, that you're deadly in any way."

"I might surprise you."

"I doubt it."

Nothing was said for quite some time after that. A few minutes ticked by. The Vulture gently adjusted the *Mule's* positioning every now and then. It was he who broke the silence first.

"Well I'm glad they sent the most intelligent person to help me fly."

"I'm glad you haven't killed us."

"I still might."

"Why?"

"Haven't decided. But it might still happen."

"You might still do it." Father MacKinnon said in a corrective tone.

"That's what I said."

"No, you said that it might happen. Don't remove culpability from yourself. You killing us is not a force of nature, something that just happens. You would do it, and every consequence that came from it would be yours to bear."

"I think I liked you better when you talked like a hick. I don't like not being the smartest person in a room."

"I don't like being in a room with someone that might kill me."

"Would it ease your mind if I said I won't kill you?"

"It would if I knew you wouldn't"

"No guarantees."

"That's reassuring."

"I need you to help me fly. I need your guys to fix the engine. I need your guys to move the fuel. Even if I wanted to, I can't kill any of you."

Father MacKinnon saw the logic in it, it was the same logic that Danny used to convince the Vulture to work together in the first place. He found himself intrigued by the Vulture. The man obviously would not hesitate to kill them if he felt he had to, but he was not a mindless brute.

"What if we decided to rush you?"

"What?"

"What if we decided to rush the bridge and take you out. This thing doesn't seem too hard to fly, we just need two people. You're an unknown factor."

"If any of your 'mates' did that, I would show you how good I am at what I do."

"You couldn't kill us all."

"I would kill you first."

"What if I don't mind that?"

"They would."

Another brief pause. *He's definitely not stupid*, Father MacKinnon decided. He found himself wanting to know more about the Vulture out of sheer morbid curiosity.

"Why do you sound like you're wanting to die?" the Vulture asked before Father MacKinnon could make his next inquiry.

"I don't."

"You said you wouldn't mind."

"That doesn't mean I want my death to be brought about."

"Fair enough. Then why are you egging me on? 'Cause it sure sounds like you got a death wish."

"We've only heard stories about Vultures, I'm just curious."

"Ha, you're an educated man, you should know what curiosity does to men."

"I'm well aware."

"Then why are you so curious, priest? Trying to save my soul?"

"Only you can do that, with God of course. I'm just a mediator, a facilitator."

"Well I don't believe in any God, so you can leave that alone."

"I figured as much. Most people don't believe in God, even if they say they do."

"Well I don't and I know I don't, so no sermons or I actually might kill you."

"Very well," Father MacKinnon said with his hands up in a joking surrender, "No sermons here."

"Good."

"May I ask a question however?"

"Sure you can. I'll let you know if I want to answer."

"What do you worship?"

"What?"

"What do you, whatever your name is, worship?"

"I told you, I don't believe in God, I don't worship anything."

"All men worship something, something they place above all others. What is your name by the way?"

"Well here's a man who doesn't worship anything. I place me at the front of my thoughts, all Vultures do I guess. If you don't look out for yourself, you're likely to get killed or worse. And no names, complicates things."

"So you worship yourself then."

"No, I just try to survive."

“Don’t you think it would be easier to survive if you had some friends with you?”

“Absolutely not. You said earlier I’m an unknown factor. That’s what other people are. You can’t control them, you don’t know what they’ll do. In my line of work, trusting people is not advisable.”

“I trust all the men here. I know each by name, their families too. We are stronger together. Take flying as an example, you need two to fly the *Mule*. If you got here and we were all dead, you would be stuck.”

“I might be stuck, I’m sure there is something else working in this mess. And that’s a bad example. This thing requires two people to fly it because it was designed by an idiot.”

“Then why don’t you leave us the second you see something that you can fly by yourself.”

“I need the fuel because I need money. And that fuel is going to be more precious than gold pretty soon, but the money is going to be as worthless as dust. That fuel is my survival and believe me, the fact that I’m not in complete control of it bothers me.”

“Money is the opiate of the godless.”

“That’s probably true, but I still need it.”

“Why?”

“Because I owe some people a lot of money!” the Vulture suddenly became very angry,

“I need the money so that asshole Jek Bevitinki doesn’t break my knees and pour mercury down my throat!”

“How did someone like you get into debt? I thought you didn’t want to rely on anybody.”

“Easy for you to say, you fly free ‘cause you’re hauling the fuel. Rest of us have to pay for it. Everyone’s in debt, fuel gets more expensive, credits of any kind, Republic, Ostig, or Alliance are worthless. This was the big payday, or it was supposed to be. It still can be if I get to a Nest with this piece of junk intact.”

“The battle was your payday?”

“Enough salvage for all of us. That was the idea. No one had to do any killing, just watch the Blues and the Alliance tear each other apart and we pick up the pieces, plenty of stuff for everyone. Then the clickers showed up. Now everyone is dead and me not getting killed depends on your ability to listen to my instructions and on your mechanics fixing that damn engine.”

“I’m sorry if you lost anyone.”

“I didn’t.”

“You were communicating with the other Vultures, you must have known some of them.”

“I knew faces, but no names. Faces fade.”

“That’s why you don’t do names?”

“Yep.”

“I understand.”

“Do you now?”

“It makes sense,” Father MacKinnon began, “I imagine a lot of Vultures die often.”

The Vulture nodded.

“So the fewer people you really know, the less connections you have, the less it hurts when they inevitably die.”

He nodded again.

“That’s a terrible way to live.”

“It’s a painless way to live, priest.”

“Life is pain, life is suffering, life is struggle.”

“For you.”

“Aye, for me, and for all of them back there,” he motioned to the rear where the rest of the Bonnisemen were. “We lose people all the time too. We feel pain, we suffer, we struggle.”

“Sounds miserable.”

"It is at times, yes. But that is the only way to know love, to know community."

"I've known enough women to know that love isn't real. At least not anymore."

"That's not the only kind of love, Vulture. Those men are my brothers, I love them, I'd die for them. If it came to it, I'd even kill for them."

"Again, I doubt you could kill anybody."

"Would it surprise you if I told you I already have?"

The Vulture gave him a sideways look.

"Yes it would, and even if you did I don't think I'd believe you."

"Do you think it would surprise me if you told me you've never killed anyone?"

"Yes I think it would, you already know me to be a killer. And you're right, I have killed. I killed today, three Alliance interceptors and one Abosi slug."

"Few years ago, we were cashing in vouchers at the docks on Tebari, the big moon," Father MacKinnon started, "The quartermaster takes the vouchers, then doesn't give us our rations. He thought it was funny, 'flesh is cheaper than food Bonnie' he said."

"What's a Bonnie?"

"It's a name they have for Bonnisman," Father MacKinnon responded, "That's who we are. All of us men from the Isles of Bonnis on Abosi."

"Go on," the Vulture said, looking straight ahead.

"One of our guys, Jack, a medic who served on an Alliance frigate for a while, gets in his face demanding our rations. The quartermaster pulls his gun, shoots him twice in the stomach. I'm the closest one to them, so I jump at the quartermaster and shoot him through the head with his gun." After this came the longest silence between the two. Father MacKinnon had never told that story to anyone but the men who were there and to the priest he confessed to later. His tongue was loose right now and he was not sure why. *Either it's the Lord or I really do have a death wish*, he thought.

"So how'd you get out of it?" the Vulture asked.

"You believe me?"

"Yeah, should I not?"

"No, it happened, it's just been awhile since I thought about it."

"So did you turn yourself in?"

"No."

"What'd you do?"

"Burned the body in a trash incinerator and cleaned up the blood."

"Was he human?"

"Abosian."

"Eh, that's barely murder."

"He was still a person."

"And he shot your friend and probably would have killed you too if you hadn't got to him."

"Aye."

"Don't be torn up about it."

"I'm not."

"Yeah?"

"That's probably the scariest part. It didn't feel wrong at the time and it doesn't now."

"You sure you're a priest?"

"I am."

"Well you killed the same way I've killed. For a reason."

"How many have you killed?"

"Enough to lose count."

"What makes you say we've killed in the same way?"

"I've never killed someone just to do it. I've done it out of anger, necessity, for profit. But I've never killed anyone who hadn't earned it, who didn't deserve it."

"Have you ever killed for a friend?"

"I don't have friends."

"Do you want some?"

"No."

"How about a family?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Families are complicated. Too much risk, too many moving parts."

"A ship has lots of moving parts, yet you had one of those."

"I would have thought a man of God would see something as noble as a family as more important than a ship."

"Oh, a family is definitely more noble than a freighter or a frigate, but it is still a kind of ship. Think about the crew of a ship, they all have to work together to make it run, to get to their destination. A family is a ship, a community is a fleet, they are stronger, less fragile together."

"Are they now," the Vulture responded, gesturing to the floating wreckage around them.

"How do the Selukans fight?"

"What do you mean?"

"How did the Selukans take out both the Republic and Alliance fleets, as well as most of the Vultures?"

"Shields don't stop them, and their interceptors are fast."

"Did one Selukan ship take out everything here?"

"No, I said there were about thirty."

"That's their fleet. Sure they have weapons that can punch through shields, but if it were only one, or even a handful of ships, could they have defeated both fleets on their own?"

"I see your point, probably not."

"I'd wager they've got a decent sense of community. Aren't they also known to suicide bomb?"

"Yep, a few did today after getting shot up."

"Is the kamikaze effective?"

"Very."

"My faith doesn't endorse that, but I cannot deny the brutal effectiveness of their love of their family."

"Kamikaze is not love priest, it's suicide."

"Aye, and I'd never do it or allow any of my brothers to do it, but to the Selukan, sacrificing themselves is love for their people."

"Or it's fanatic insanity."

"True, but the point still stands, a group is stronger than an individual."

"In pure numbers, but a group has more joints, more weaknesses."

"Yes, but the group can cover those weaknesses. If someone is weak in one area, but strong in another, he can be assigned to the area where he is strong, while another covers his weakness."

The Vulture leaned back his head like he was going to respond, but he did not.

"Furthermore," Father MacKinnon continued, "If everyone is working to their ability, the ship, the community runs better."

"So you're all just using each other?"

"Sorry, what?"

"You, priest, want to get back to your Isles of Bonnis, correct?"

"Of course."

"So you are using the other men back there to get to where you want to go."

"We have the same objective, I want to get them back too, and if them getting back meant me not getting back, I would take that option."

"Why?"

"Because I love them."

"Why do you love them?"

"Because they are my family, my people. I know their fathers and mothers, I know their children. They have given me everything and asked for nothing in return. I have given my life to them and the Church, expecting nothing from either and yet I have received more than you could know. I am richer than the President of Ostig, than the head of the GEC, than any leader of government in the Alliance or Republic. And yet I do not have a single credit to my name. I have the clothes on my back, my vestments, and a few books. And yet, I am the wealthiest person I know."

The Vulture was silent again for a long while. The *Mule* drifted, seemingly aimlessly through ripped steel plating, glass, tungsten, and all other sorts of wreckage. At one point, the battle lines between the two fleets had been clearly drawn, but now destroyed Alliance ships mixed with obliterated Republic ships. Now and then a Vulture's wreck could be seen. During the silence, they passed by a frigate that had been hit by the Selukans. The hull, bridge, engines, everything but the plasma cannon assembly and two of the gunner positions next to it had been reduced to scrap. The massive cannon still crackled with energy, as if it had been charging up when the rest of the ship was hit. Father MacKinnon felt the need to break the silence.

"Why did the cannon survive? I would think it would be the first thing to be destroyed."

"It's an unwieldy weapon, meant to take out other large ships, an interceptor or the smaller Selukan skiffs can avoid them on speed alone."

"If they are so expensive and can only be used against big targets, why use them at all?"

"There was a time when it wasn't so expensive. Those days when this freighter's holds were full every trip, when my ship could have been refueled for pennies. Back then, you'd have twenty blasts from a single frigate. Battles were damn light shows."

"All of that over Salma."

"You're damn right," the Vulture responded with a laugh, "that ball of salt is the most valuable thing in the system."

"Not anymore."

"What do you mean, priest, that's where all the fuel is. I know it's been slowing down, but they've got to have more fuel."

"There's no more," Father MacKinnon replied, "That was our last haul from 171, the Seekers were supposed to move to the next refinery tomorrow."

"Seekers?"

"It's the name the GEC slaves on Salma gave themselves."

"What are they seeking?"

"Knowledge," Father MacKinnon responded instantly, then after thinking for a moment adjusted his answer. "Truth actually, I think. They have lorekeepers, storytellers, they are like their own people, a very mystical people."

"I thought you were a churchman."

"I am."

"These guys sound like heathens."

"That might be true, but it's more complicated than that."

"How do you know all this?"

"We trade with them."

"Trade what? I thought you weren't paid."

"Neither are they, we trade poems, stories, books, jewelry. Sometimes if the departure was delayed, we would be able to converse with each other."

"Sounds weird."

"They are very odd, but their situation dictates it. They are the slaves of the GEC the same that we are the slaves of the Old Star Trading Guild."

"They looking for anything else down on that desert?"

"Paradise, what they call Akapara."

"Like heaven?"

"I believe so, but they speak of it as if it were a physical place, somewhere hidden on Salma. They have this legend that a man with one eye but has seen the stars will fall from the sky and lead them to Akapara. They call him Duxavi."

"Interesting," came the short response from the Vulture. This was then followed by more silence. The wreckage above seemed like a strange pattern, endless, yet somehow ever changing.

"You know I still might kill you," the Vulture said casually, "All your talk of love and family and justice and the slaves of Salma. If you or any of your people become a problem for me, I will kill who I need to."

"Oh I'm sure you will if it comes to it, my hope is that it will not come to it."

"Pray as hard as you can, priest, the hardest part is still ahead."

"What's that?"

"As soon as the engine is fixed and we fire it up, it will light up like a damn flare on any surveying system. If there is any ship still functional out there, they'll know about us."

"What do we do when that happens?"

"That is when you are going to have to do exactly what I say and I will have to fly better than I have in my entire life."

"I'll do exactly as you say."

"Good, you and everyone of your people will die if you don't. If you don't do what I say and we don't crash, I'll kill you and then we will crash."

"Why would you kill me if it would cause us to crash?"

"Because I don't like relying on people and that would piss me off. Remember, you are alive because I need you."

"Why do you need me?"

"To survive this mess."

"Why do you want to survive?"

There was a pause.

"What was that?"

"Why do you want to survive?"

Another pause. *Now we come to it*, thought Father MacKinnon, *I'm not sure why, but his soul hangs by a thread and this is the crucial moment.*

"Because the only other option would be to die."

"What do you risk if you die?"

"What are you talking about?" The Vulture turned towards Father MacKinnon, keeping one hand on the joysticks and moving one to his breast where his pistol was.

"Debts to a dangerous man, a low chance of getting out of this metal graveyard, and even if you do, you have no friends, no family. You don't know anyone's name and no one knows yours. Why do you have a desire to survive?"

"You know you're a pretty shitty priest," the Vulture replied, chuckling, "I would've thought a 'man of the cloth' wouldn't tell someone suicide is good option."

"I'm not telling you should kill yourself to get out of this mess that all of us are in, I'm asking you why you want to survive so bad that you'll kill eighteen men who harbor no ill will towards you just so that you will get the chance to survive."

The Vulture, quick as a jackrabbit pulled his pistol out and pushed it up against Father MacKinnon's helmet. His dark visor still obscured his eyes, but that unflinching mouth with its dark stubble was unmoving, as still as a lake on a windless night.

"I survive," he said, his lips barely moving as he spoke through gritted teeth, "I always have and I always will. The debts can be handled. I don't want a family, I don't want friends, I don't want pain. I want to live because that is what I do. There is nothing more to it."

"That's bullshit and you know it," Father MacKinnon replied instantly.

The Vulture's hand started to shake. He moved his other hand off the joystick to steady it. Underneath his helmet, his teeth were clenched, his mouth holding a shape of fury. His breath was short and huffy.

"You know what you want," Father MacKinnon said with a steady voice, "You've struggled your whole life, I can see it. But you've been struggling for nothing. Why not struggle for something. Something that is real and raw."

In a quick motion, the Vulture pulled the pistol away and put the barrel under his own chin. He then let out a yell, like a battle-cry. Father MacKinnon could see the glint of a single tear fall past the Vulture's mouth. *Stay his hand O Lord*, Father MacKinnon desperately prayed, *Save his soul*. Father MacKinnon repeated this prayer a few times as the cry of the Vulture continued out into the void. Father MacKinnon closed his eyes and fervently repeated the prayer, not able to think of anything else to do. He did not open them again until he heard a single shot sound and then be silenced by the dampness of space.

The Vulture's kinetic pistol was jammed into a portion of the roof of the bridge. His head was down. Father MacKinnon viewed the scene with baited breath, the Vulture did not move or speak. *Oh Father forgive me*, Father MacKinnon prayed, *if I am the reason this man is dead, take me and do with me what thou wilt. But I implore thee, O God, let him be alive, and spare my brothers from thy wrath*.

After a minute or two, with Father MacKinnon too paralyzed by shock to move, the Vulture's gradually lifted his head.

"There is a hell isn't there?" a gruff, yet soft voice asked.

"Aye, there is," Father MacKinnon replied to the Vulture.

"I'm headed there, aren't I?"

"Not necessarily, where you go is up to you."

The Vulture looked at Father MacKinnon and deactivated his visor. He had dark hair and blue eyes. If he was thinner and had a more cheerful face, he could have been a Bonnisman. His eyes were bloodshot with tears that now flowed freely down his cheeks.

"Can you help me?" the Vulture asked, and then added slowly, "Father."

"Aye, I can," Father MacKinnon replied, placing a hand on the Vulture's shoulder, "only if you let me."

"You said men were like the crew of a ship. You're the captain, steer me, steer us."

"I will."

Jarringly, the coms crackled and the voice of Danny came through.

"Welly! We 'eard a shot sound, everything a'right?"

"Everything is fine Danny," Father MacKinnon responded, "and it's Father Wellan MacKinnon. We know the score up here."

"Roger that Father," came the response, "just to let yeh up there know, fuel's all moved and strapped, and the boys are almost done with th' engine."

"Let us know when they are ready to go Danny, and strap yourselves in safe, we're not out of the briar thicket yet."

"Aye Father."

The coms clicked off and Father MacKinnon turned to the Vulture. His visor was still up and his whole face betrayed a kind of littleness, a humility that only a hard man can embody. The pistol still in his hand, he raised it up almost through the hole in the roof, then as if he was letting a caught fish back into a pond, he released it. The pistol floated upwards and then out of sight as the *Dexter Mule* slowly moved on. The Vulture flipped his visor back down, put his hands on the joysticks, and looked forward. The *Mule* floated on while Father MacKinnon silently prayed, *All praise and honor be yours! You have saved Your servant, now, I pray, bring us safely home.*

"That's a good name," the Vulture said suddenly.

"What's that?"

"Your name Father, Wellan MacKinnon, it's a good name."

"Thanks," Father MacKinnon replied, "What's you?"

He was cut off by the sound of the coms once more.

"Engine should be good now, give 'er a go!"

"Power dial one," the Vulture said to Father MacKinnon, "put the lever up first."

Doing as he was told, the priest from Bonnis pushed the lever next to the large red dial up all the way, then he gingerly set the dial to power one out of twenty.

The Vulture pressed the button on the top of the right joystick and eased it forward. There was a short lurch and then a gradual increase in speed.

"It's working," the Vulture said, sounding surprised, "I don't know how much it'll be able to take. We'll have to work our way up to a full burn slowly."

"Can you go at full power through this?" Father MacKinnon asked, gesturing to the wreckage.

"Not through this, but if we get out of it, we will need to in order to avoid any conflicts. Power three, thrusters six."

Father MacKinnon adjusted the dials. The Vulture then made a sharp downwards turn and for a moment, Father MacKinnon felt like they were upside down.

"Where are we going? Towards Salma?"

"The most efficient way to go is at a full burn, we are wasting fuel in this wreckage. This is the fastest way out, trust me."

"I do."

The pair shared a quick look before the Vulture had to engage in more maneuvers.

"Power four, thrusters nine."

They sped faster through the wreckage, the Vulture expertly piloting past demolished ships.

"Power five, thrusters max and leave 'em there."

A light on the controls began to beep rapidly.

"Someone's picked us up!" the Vulture shouted before the remains of a carrier's hangar bay was blown apart without an explosion.

"Clicker!" he yelled, "Power two, I'll dodge him on thrusters."

The *Mule* suddenly was kicked into a nosedive and then a side roll. It was all very disorienting for Father MacKinnon and he felt his vertigo kicking in. Nevertheless, he gritted his teeth and kept his hands near the dials.

"There's the bastard," the Vulture said as a small green ship with sharp angles passed in front of the bridge's window before over shooting them, "Shit! He's a small one, we can't out-burn him. Have to take him out!"

"How!?" Father MacKinnon yelled in response.

"Power seven!" the Vulture yelled as he pushed the joysticks all the way forward, "Need to find an interceptor!"

"But you're the pilot!"

"Now you are!" the Vulture responded before taking another evasive maneuver, "Power three!" Father MacKinnon adjusted the dial.

"Get one of your guys up here, someone competent," the Vulture said as he flipped the back end of the *Mule* up, scraping the backside of the intact cargo hold against some flotsam.

"Danny!" Father MacKinnon yelled through the coms, "Get to the bridge, now!"

The Vulture slipped the *Mule* through a mess of wreckage and then stopped the engine, letting the damaged freighter float. He opened the doors to let Danny, whose broken arm was now in a splint, in and soon Father MacKinnon had his hands on the joysticks.

"I have the coordinates for the Nest in the Nav Computer. Once you get out of the wreckage, just push this and it'll take you there at max efficiency. Slow it down once you get in coms distance and call ahead saying that you need landing assistance."

"What about you?" Father MacKinnon asked, feeling very uneasy about his first time piloting.

"I'm going to get that clicker off us, I can dodge him here, but out in open space he'll take us down no question. I'm going to spacewalk to that interceptor over there."

Father MacKinnon looked where he was pointing. An Alliance fighter interceptor, colored black with bright gold trim was stationary, the cockpit was open and the pilot, still attached to a tether, was floating in open space without a helmet.

God provides, Father MacKinnon thought.

"Remember, low power through the graveyard, once you get out, push the auto, it'll get you there, I promise."

"Aye," Father MacKinnon said, "when do you meet up with us?"

The Vulture put his visor down, and for the first time, gave Father MacKinnon a smile.

"I'll catch up."

"You'd better."

The Vulture pulled himself up through the hole in the roof and looked down on Danny and Father MacKinnon.

"Carter," he said with a bright face, "Damon Carter. I'll see you when I see you, Father Wellan MacKinnon."

With that he disappeared from the hole. Through the window, Father MacKinnon and Danny could see a figure pushing himself towards the disabled interceptor.

The Bonnisman pair watched as Damon Carter, the Vulture, unclipped the dead pilot from his tether and then pulled himself into the cockpit of the Alliance interceptor. In an instant, the single engine starfighter was powered up and moving towards them. For a brief instant, Father MacKinnon could see inside the cockpit as the interceptor passed them. Inside, Damon gave a thumbs up and then was gone, dodging through the wreckage, looking for the Selukan pursuer.

"Right Danny," Father MacKinnon said, pushing gently on the joysticks towards what looked like an open area of space, "put that red dial on two, I'm just going to go slow."

"Aye, Father."

Surprising himself, Father MacKinnon was able to navigate through the graveyard with only a few scrapes here and there. Slowly but surely, the field of open space got closer and closer. Gradually the white curve of Salma hove back into view. Father MacKinnon sighed, knowing that it would probably be the last time that he would see the planet and thus, he would never speak with a Seeker again.

"I'm feeling good Danny, put it up to three," Father MacKinnon said, "and make sure you watch what I'm doing, in case something happens."

"Nothin's goin' to happen Father, you'll get us home, I know it."

The priest exhaled sharply, knowing that as long as he was having to be a pilot, nothing was certain. On cue, there came a great crash from behind and the *Mule* went careening upwards, away from Salma and towards a demolished frigate.

"What was that!" Danny yelled.

"Cargo hold's been hit!" came the cry over coms, "the fuel's out!"

Father MacKinnon used the thrusters to right the *Mule* and turn it about. Sure enough, two dozen fuel canisters were now floating amidst the flotsam. But that wasn't the only problem.

"Down!" Father MacKinnon yelled, quickly pushing thrusters and forcing the *Mule* downwards. As he did so, another Selukan rod slammed into the frigate above them and the angular ship flew past their view.

"I feel like he's toyin' with us Father," Danny said, with a shudder, "Oh please Lord, deliver us!"

"He will Danny, He will!" Father MacKinnon yelled back, pushing the thrusters to avoid crashing into the shrapnel from the Selukan rod, "Look! He's sent our Guardian Angel!"

The Alliance interceptor zipped past the view and Father MacKinnon pushed the thrusters so that they could see what would happen. Sure enough, six torpedoes shot out of Damon's ship, two managing to strike the elusive Selukan fighter, the others veering off. Damon was clearly the better pilot, but the Selukan had another trick. The green ship, using thrusters of its own, flipped around and fired straight through Damon's engine. Then many things happened so quickly, neither Father MacKinnon nor Danny could react.

Damon's interceptor hurtled towards Salma, having been shot from behind. In a matter of seconds, it was out of sight. The Selukan burst towards the *Mule*, its engines evidently still working. But a second later, something on the green ship ignited and it suddenly exploded, vaporized into pieces. Gathering his senses, Father MacKinnon adjusted the thrusters, just in time to see Damon's interceptor disappear against the white landscape of Salma. It was then that the most disastrous thing happened.

Father MacKinnon had not gotten the *Mule* far enough away from the shrapnel of the frigate hit by the missed Selukan shot. A large metal chunk was hurtling towards them unseen.

Just at that moment, Father MacKinnon had undone his straps to see if he could glimpse Damon entering Salma's atmosphere. As he did so, the debris hit the port side of the *Mule* and shook the ship, sending it careening to the right, towards other debris. As it was clattering around, Father MacKinnon was shoved upwards, through the hole in the roof of the bridge. He was able to cling onto the jagged edge with one hand.

The jarring movement of the *Mule* prevented Danny from unstrapping to reach Father MacKinnon. Quickly, Danny engaged the thrusters to stabilize the *Mule*. As it stabilized, Father MacKinnon was thrown ahead, into the front edge of the roof. He was able to grab on, but not before the sleeve of his ISPAV ripped along the sharp broken edge. Father MacKinnon quickly started to feel light headed as his ISPAV depressurized. As his consciousness faded, he looked to Danny.

"Get home."

Then everything went black.

"It'll be enough to get you passage to Tebari, but not much else," the shipmaster said, "Ya might be a bit hungry when you get there."

"We can deal with 'unger," Danny said, handing the half empty fuel canister to the shipmaster, "We've dealt with much worse."

"If it was just yourself, you'd fly first class, but eighteen," he whistled, "that's tough."

“Just as long as we get there a’right,” Danny replied, motioning for the rest of the Bonnismen to follow him.

That fuel was the last of what they had. Two canisters had survived, strapped to the destroyed cargo hold. They had to use one and a half to get to the Nest. The Nest was, as Damon had described, a mix between a bar and a brothel with a dock attached. The Bonnismen had wasted no time when they had landed and immediately set about getting on the next transport that took them anywhere close to Abosi. Fortunately, a freighter that had been converted into a transport was taking all of the Nest’s crew planetside with the incoming fuel crisis looming.

Danny offered everything they had, including indentured work and the last of their fuel. Both had been accepted and the Bonnismen had two years of mining on Tebari to look forward to. But after that, in written contracts, they would have passage to Abosi and eventually the seabound Isles of Bonnis.

“What happened to your mate there?” the shipmaster asked as Jack and mostly healed Liam carried a stretcher onto the transport. On the stretcher lay the body of Father MacKinnon, his body covered with red splotches.

“His ISPAV ripped,” Danny replied solemnly, thinking back to that moment, “We got ‘im inside just barely.”

“Will he make it?” the shipmaster asked.

“Aye,” Jack responded with a smile, looking down on Father MacKinnon, “He will. He’s wrecked right now, but he’s the strongest out of any of us.”

“Alright,” the shipmaster responded, nonchalantly, “hurry and get on, we’ve got to move soon.”

“If I may sir,” Danny asked the shipmaster as the rest of the Bonnismen filed on board. “What’ll ‘appen to this here station?”

“Dunno, it’ll be here I suppose, until someone can use it again.”

“A’right, fair enough,” Danny said as he walked up the gangplank and onto the transport.

“The sleeper awakens,” a strange voice called.

There was pain, a few groans, but Damon Carter managed to sit up and view his surroundings. He was in what appeared to be a shack, with tarps draped about and cheap steel walls. He looked ahead at the origin of the voice. He found that his vision was incredibly blurry and no amount of blinking could fix it. He then suddenly realized that he was blinking only his left eye. Damon moved a trembling hand up to his right and found it stitched shut. He sunk back against the bundle of gray cloth that served as a pillow on what apparently was a cot.

“My apologies for the eye, but you were bleeding quite a lot.”

Damon lifted his head, trying to get his vision to focus on the figure in front of him. After a few moments, he could see that it was a boy that was nearing adulthood. His skin was a pasty, no, more like a chalky white, and there were decorative red tattoos on his face and neck that were then snaked underneath his gray jumpsuit.

“Where am I?” Damon asked, feeling like all of this was familiar somehow.

“Graytree Energy Corporation Refinery 171 on the planet you would call Salma.”

Suddenly, it all came back to Damon, the battle, the Selukans, the freighter, the workmen who helped him, the Selukan sending a rod through his engine. Father Wellan MacKinnon.

“Are you a Seeker?” Damon asked hesitantly.

“I am,” the boy responded, before standing and saluting Damon with his right hand over his left breast and then extending it outwards. He then went into a deep bow, “Lorekeeper Ricker, at your service.”

“Thank you,” Damon said, “for saving me.”

“You are incredibly lucky, star-man.” Lorekeeper Ricker said, “Of course, luck is another way of saying aligned.”

“Aligned?” Damon asked.

“With the Path,” the boy responded, moving back to his seat, which was a plastic box. “The Path to Akapara.”

“The Path to Akapara...” Damon whispered, his voice trailing off.

“Do you know the Path?” the Lorekeeper asked.

“I didn’t,” Damon replied, “I still don’t, but if you want me to help you, I will.”

“What is your name, star-man?”

“Damon Carter,” he replied without hesitating.