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# **The Shaedon Resurgence**

Book 2

## **The Zar'aranos Deception**

*Jeffrey Debris*



# Foreword



# Chapter 1 – Incursion

*Deep within the Xarani Desert, an ancient temple had been hidden by the sands of time. It was uncovered when a drop ship deliberately crashed into it four years ago. The revelation of the temple had been one of the greatest finds in all of Xoron history, but despite its discovery, the Xoron people had not been able to fully appreciate their find. The core of the planet, Netherrea, had been destabilized by an ancient enemy: the Shaedon. Following the cataclysm, the entire planet had been evacuated. Presently, the Inter-galactic Alliance has pulled most of its resources in an attempt to stabilize the core. The Alliance's top scientists and elementalists have been working together for the past years, utilizing the restorative powers of the Scarowyn, a bipedal plant-like life form with a great bond to the element of Earth. Simultaneously, scientists have been monitoring the planet's seismic activity.*

*The relief effort was a monumental undertaking, but at long last, it seemed their hard work was bearing fruit.*

The early afternoon sun seared the Xarani Desert as it reached its zenith. "How are you holding up, Grummus?" Ráz Numera asked with his deep, dark voice. He was a Xoron Windmaster with dark, purple skin. His eyes were a golden white with no visible pupil and his hair was white as snow. He wore the attire of his order, which consisted of a large, single piece of cloth that, when folded correctly, formed a perfect robe.

"To be honest, I could use a bit of rest soon. Channelling all of this magicka has been quite taxing," Grummus replied. Dark circles under his eyes betrayed his exhaustion. He stood slightly over two metres tall, but had a slender body. His eyes were a bright green and his skin a leathery brown. He wore a simple straw hat, which covered the thick, blond hair that stuck out from underneath it. Furthermore, he wore dungarees and a simple linen shirt, both covered with dirt.

“Why don’t you take five, then?” Rüz said, knowing Grummus had been channelling magicka into the heavily polluted underground lake for hours. He patted Grummus on the back and switched positions with the young Scarowyn.

“Do you think we’ll ever stabilize the planet core? It’s been ages since we started this,” Grummus asked, his shoulders slumped and his lips pursed.

Rüz looked straight at him and shrugged. “I honestly have no idea, but doing nothing is not exactly an option, is it?”

Grummus nodded at Rüz, still unsure if that was the answer he had wanted to hear.

“If we wouldn’t at least try to get this lake decontaminated, we might as well give up. Besides, the rest of the teams seem to be doing a good job on keeping the planet stable.”

“I suppose. I just wish there wasn’t so much pressure on us. It’s only been a few years since my graduation – I never really expected I’d be doing something this monumental at this point in my career,” Grummus replied, still unsure why the Scarowyn Elders had chosen him for this specific task.

“You should be glad. Most people will never get a chance like this in their lifetime,” Rüz stated as he retrieved a green, glowing orb from within his robes. He let the orb rest in the palm of his right hand and folded his left over it. Within moments, a stream of green magicka poured into the lake from the orb.

“Thanks for taking my place, Rüz,” Grummus said as he turned away from Rüz towards the team’s encampment, not far from the shore of the lake.

“No problem, I’ll take care of this for the next few hours,” Rüz shouted after Grummus as he continued to focus on channelling magicka into the lake.

They had discovered this underground lake themselves shortly after the temple had been revealed. It was the location where they had fought and eventually overcome Langruff the Purger, a Shaedon monstrosity that had merged with Rüz’ former colleague Langruff. Once the fight was

over, it became clear that if the lake wouldn't be stabilized, the magicka in it could rip apart the entire cave system and the temple. The lake formed a conduit for a large number of elemental ley lines. The creators of the temple, the enigmatic Luminars, had built it on this location with the purpose of harnessing the power of these ley lines. As time had passed, however, the pipe systems guiding the elemental energy flows had eroded and as a result, the lake had become polluted with heavy quantities of pure magicka. Rüz, Grummus and several others had been working hard on stabilizing the lake, infusing it with magicka of different elements to even out the balance in the lake. At last, the lake had been largely neutralized, while dozens of engineers worked hard and with great success on repairing the elaborate systems created by the Luminars millennia ago.

As he walked towards the encampment, Grummus took a piece of cloth from the front pocket of his dungarees and wiped his brow with it. He was greeted by a couple of engineers who were going over some design plans sprawled across a portable holodesk. They were having a heated discussion on how to proceed with the repairs, Grummus overheard as he passed them, but he was too tired to listen to what exactly they were talking about. Instead, he kept walking on, further from the lake and the encampment until he reached a large green oak which, for some strange reason, flourished in the cave. He put his right hand on the trunk, gazed up and noticed that its leaves were rustling. A melancholy smile appeared on his face.

"It's good to see you're doing well ..." he said to the tree, then removed his hand. He sat down on the ground, resting his back against the tree. From his position, he looked straight at the encampment and the lake. Channelling magicka into the lake for the past few hours had drained him of all his energy; it was time to regenerate. Grummus removed his boots and looked at his feet, which resembled tangled roots. He leaned back a bit further and closed his eyes. His feet untangled; the roots dug into the ground as he fell into a deep, well-deserved sleep.

\* \* \*

“Duck!” a Xoron marine shouted at a nearby Scarowyn Earthmaster, but his warning came a second too late. As the word left his mouth and his eyes widened in shock, the Scarowyn’s chest burst into flames from the incoming laser salvo. By the time he had reached the smouldering body, he knew it was already too late to do anything. The Earthmaster lay flat on his back, his body contorted in agony.

A few minutes earlier, everything had been perfectly calm, until his comrades had spotted a group of five strangers approaching in the distance. By the time they were within combat range, they had started firing, catching most of the people on site by surprise. Gywen had little time to identify the strangers, but one thing he did notice was they all had exactly the same face. Only one of them stood out; his eyes were completely black. From what Gywen could tell, this was the squad leader, but he had only been able to catch a glimpse before taking cover from the incoming fire. The entire encampment had been reduced to nothing but rubble in a matter of seconds; after that, the firing had ceased. Gywen decided to take a peek around the corner, to check if the assailants were gone. He had not spotted any other survivors, but he found it hard to believe the enemy strike team would leave him alive after such a precision attack. He carefully pushed himself against the heavy crates he had used as cover and cocked his head around the corner. The enemy was moving away from the site. Gywen reached for his binoculars and studied them for as long as they remained within visual range. They did not seem to speak and their facial expressions hadn’t changed at all, he noticed. They kept marching into the distance, in the direction of the ancient Luminar tower. Gywen reached for his communicator and attempted to contact the troops near the tower, to warn them for the incoming enemies. He opened a hailing frequency.

“This is Private Andros reporting to all nearby outposts. We’ve just been attacked by a strike team of five unidentified enemies. They are headed north from my position, two five zero by three five one! I repeat, possible incoming, heading north from coordinates two five zero by three five one! Andros out.”

Gywen's jaw dropped as he watched the communicator display. Immediately after his broadcast, it lit up with dozens of other broadcasts, most of which were close by, but some came from remote locations. Whatever was going on, there was definitely more than just one strike team at work and most of the distress calls stopped after a few minutes. He made another round of the outpost, but couldn't spot any survivors other than himself. He had only been stationed here for about two weeks. Years of rigorous training hadn't prepared him for anything like this. Even his more experienced peers hadn't seen the attack coming; he wondered if it had been sheer luck he had survived. The enemy sure hadn't bothered to check if they had killed everyone, but he was fairly sure they'd succeeded in whatever their goal was.

The communicator display blinked with a red light. It was a call to all military personnel to evacuate to emergency coordinates nearby. Gywen grabbed his gear and headed out, into the black, volcanic wilderness beyond the encampment. He stopped to look back at what was left from it. He passed several other outposts nearby; black smoke billowed from most of them.

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"Status report!" Admiral Xer'xis shouted at one of his nearby bridge officers. He was wearing the new military uniform, which was crimson with white shoulder pads and the Xoron Fleet emblem displayed on the left side of the chest. His only decorations were those of his rank of Admiral. Although he had received many more over the past few years for exemplary service, he never found it necessary to wear them on duty. His hair was black and trimmed, his skin was remarkably dark for a Xoron – close to anthracite. His eyes were entirely red, with no visible iris or pupil, yet the look in them was determined.

"We've got reports pouring in from several outposts, Admiral. It seems most of them started broadcasting distress signals, only to go silent a few minutes later," one of his most trusted officers, Charl, replied. Charl had served with him since well before the evacuation of Netherea. Ever since the fall of the planet, he had been promoted to

Commander and was now serving as Xer'xis' right hand, making sure the Admiral was always well informed.

"Damn it! How come we never saw this coming? I want to know how they got past our blockade!" Xer'xis demanded, balling his hands into fists.

"I've already got a few engineers working on that, sir. They're trying to pinpoint the enemy ship's location. It's bound to be somewhere in orbit," Charl replied, hoping that the fact that they were working on finding them would improve the Admiral's mood slightly.

"Well, I guess Sha'hasra has kept true to her word," Xer'xis muttered to himself as he read the reports on the display on the Admiral's seat. This had to be the retaliation the Shaedon ambassador Sha'hasra had promised four years ago if they would not leave Netherea. He rested his face in the palm of his right hand, pondering what his next move would be. They had already ordered all troops at remote outposts back to the rendezvous points. He had sent in extra protection to ensure their safe return to the fleet. The larger bases would have to hold out for the moment, but he feared even the most well-armed military base wouldn't be safe in case of an attack. Reports had been vague, but it seemed most outposts were hit by only a small group of enemies. They possessed immense fire power, though, and all of them were focused close to the old Luminar tower and the Xarani Desert. It didn't take Xer'xis long to put two and two together. The Shaedon had shown their interest in these locations before and it didn't surprise him that they would try and gain control of them.

"Charl! Get me in contact with Commander Raggard, I have a mission for him," Xer'xis commanded. Charl turned his head around and nodded at Xer'xis.

"Of course, sir, right on it!" he shouted as he ran towards a nearby comm station. Xer'xis got up from his chair and headed to the back of the bridge, where the entrance to his personal office was.

"If anyone needs me, I'll be in my office. Don't disturb me, unless it's a code red emergency," Xer'xis stated, his jaw clenched. Most of the bridge crew simply saluted him as he strode out of the bridge, making sure not to get in his way.

Xer'xis moved towards his desk and sat down. For a few moments, he just stared out of the window of his office. The *Harbinger's Resolve* had been in orbit around Netherea for well over three years now and whenever Xer'xis had looked down to the planet from his window, he'd wondered if they'd ever be able to live on their home world again. Now that these strike teams had managed to slip past their blockade so easily, he wondered how long it would be before they would have to evacuate again. He couldn't shake the feeling that the Shaedon had managed to get their hands on technology far more advanced than their own. He almost felt as if they were a tribe of savages, using spears to defend themselves against a foe that could snuff out their lives with the pull of a trigger. He shook his head; this was not how it was going to go down – not on his watch. He activated his desk computer and within seconds, several holo displays gave him an overview of the current situation. The fleet was covering all sides of Netherea and several patrols had been sent out to sweep the area for cloaked ships, but they had not detected any so far. He continued to watch the fleet's movement for a while, until he was disturbed by an incoming call. With a simple flick of his finger, he took it. The white mask of High Councillor Máraxi Wihara of the Ninth Circle appeared on the holo display. Her burning red eyes pierced his.

"High Councillor," Xer'xis said, giving her a nod.

"Admiral," she replied with contempt in her voice.

"How are things? Enjoying your new ship?" Xer'xis asked, knowing well that Máraxi was not one for pleasantries. Shortly after she was released from custody, Máraxi had been given a full pardon by the Alliance. Xer'xis had tried to mend their broken relationship by giving her a ship of her own. Although she had appreciated the gesture, his accusation of treason had not improved her opinion of him, and although they ultimately wanted Netherea restored, they were further apart from one another than ever.

"The ship is adequate. How you are handling the current situation on the surface is not," Máraxi stated coldly.

“So, I suppose you knew about those enemy strike teams before they started decimating outposts?” Xer’xis said, his voice raised slightly. He found he had a hard time remaining cool around the Councillor.

“No, I’ll admit that I was as shocked as you were. I was merely wondering if you had more intel. If so, I need it.”

“I’m sending you what I have right now,” Xer’xis said, establishing a connection between the *Harbinger’s Resolve’s* central computer core and that of Máraxi’s ship, the *Storm Crow*.

“I have not been able to contact Ráz and that Earthmaster he has been working with in the old temple. Have you had any contact with that base?” Máraxi asked, her voice wavering just enough for Xer’xis to notice.

“I was just about to send a team their way. So far we haven’t been able to contact them.”

“I assume I don’t need to tell you how important it is that we keep control of the temple?” Máraxi asked.

“I know, but when Sha’hasra promised they would come back for us, I hadn’t expected it to be like this. I feel like we’re already ten steps behind, just like we were before ...”

“Then they have already won,” Máraxi stated. Her sarcasm did little to improve his confidence. He shook his head at her in response.

“As it appears, they do not seem to rely on numbers, but rather on technological superiority. This could work to our advantage – if we learn how to disable them, that is,” Xer’xis said, revealing some of what he’d deduced so far from all of the incoming reports.

“According to one report, a private close to the old Luminar tower saw only a squad of five enemies. They decimated the entire outpost within a few minutes and left immediately. He was the only survivor. I’ve seen several other reports of people surviving these onslaughts – they all share one vital detail.”

“Which is?” Máraxi asked impatiently.

“They never left any Scarowyn survivors. I’ve gone over all of the casualty lists that have been pouring in so far. It seems like they are purposely targeting them.”

"If what you are saying is true, then our plan to stabilize the core is at risk!"

"Yes, and they know we are relying on the Scarowyn to help us. We can't do it without their expertise," Xer'xis said, averting his gaze to look through the window.

"So, what is our next step?" Máraxi asked, unsure how to proceed.

"Regroup and make sure we get the Scarowyn to safety somehow," Xer'xis replied. He knew this was exactly what the Shaedon would want them to do, but he couldn't think of a better plan.

"We would be playing right into their hands," Máraxi said.

"I don't see any other option, do you?" Xer'xis shrugged at the image of Máraxi.

"No, not until we know exactly what we're up against in terms of numbers and firepower, I suppose," Máraxi replied.

"Wait, have you been in contact with Jessi lately?" Xer'xis asked. He knew it couldn't take long before *they* would. Sha'hasra had chosen her as her vessel and now, the girl served as their only means of communication with the Shaedon.

"No, I have not seen that woman since I was released from custody. Why do you ask?"

"Something tells me we will be hearing from Sha'hasra soon."

Máraxi was silent for a moment before she replied.

"You may be right."

"Listen, we'll stay in touch. For now, I'll be focusing on getting the troops on the surface to safety. It's the best course of action, we will never win this if we stay as divided across the surface as we are now."

"Agreed. Wihara out," Máraxi stated, closing off the comm channel. Her image dissipated and after a few seconds, Xer'xis was looking at the holographic image of the fleet and Netherea again.

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"Grummus, wake up!" Ráz shouted at the sleeping Earthmaster. It had taken him a good minute to snap Grummus out of his deep sleep, but

finally, he was slowly opening his eyes. His roots retracted from the earth and shaped themselves back into something that resembled feet.

“What’s going on?” Grummus asked. He grabbed his hat from the ground and put it on. It wasn’t until then that he noticed the rest of the guards standing around him.

“We’ve just received intel about enemies headed down here.”

“What? But there’s an entire company in the base up top – how did they manage to get past them?”

“I honestly have no idea, but we need to dig in. I’m sure it won’t be long before they’re on top of us.”

“Wait. If they’ve taken out the entire base up top, how exactly is digging in going to help?” Grummus asked with worry in his voice.

“What else would you suggest we do?” Rüz asked. He saw no other options but to wait and prepare to defend themselves.

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t sound like the best idea,” Grummus replied. As if struck by a sudden stroke of inspiration, he snapped his fingers.

“Wait! They’ll probably be aiming for our encampment, right?” Grummus asked.

Rüz looked at him with a frown on his face. “Yes, of course they will.”

“Then what if we create some sort of ambush?”

“What did you have in mind?” Rüz asked, wondering just how the young Scarowyn wanted to go about that.

“Well, what if we would just meld with the surrounding rocks?” he said, winking at Rüz.

A smile appeared on the Windmaster’s face. He had been working with Grummus for a few years now and he had often found the young Scarowyn to be full of little surprises. Although he was a bit naive, he would often come up with clever – even brilliant – solutions in tough situations.

“And I suppose you would be able to assist us with this blending?”

Grummus stood there, nodding with a grin on his face.

“Let’s not waste any time, then. Time to find ourselves a good spot for an ambush,” Rüz suggested, turning back towards the encampment

from the oak tree. The rest of the guards trailed after him, as did Grummus.

“How long will this spell last?” one of the guards asked Grummus, whose lower body had disappeared into a boulder.

“Well, it should last about an hour. I suggest you try moving your fingers once in a while to check how much effort it takes. When the rock starts to hamper your movement, well, that would be a good time to step out into the open, I’d say.”

“You’ve done this before?” Rüz asked while looking for a good position for himself.

“Sure, this is something pretty basic we learn during our training,” Grummus replied, but Rüz detected the lie almost immediately. He wanted to reply, but Grummus shook his head as a warning not to. Rüz simply nodded at him; it was better not to unsettle the guards and the rest of the personnel. They were already under enough stress with the threat of an assault.

“All right – everyone, look for a good place to hide, but make sure you can still see. We need to catch the enemy by surprise!” Rüz shouted before fading into a nearby rock wall. There had only been five guards stationed down in the cave, along with a team of three engineers, Rüz and Grummus. Everyone had taken up weapons and the engineers had set a few makeshift traps at each of the three entrances to the encampment.

It had been silent for at least fifteen minutes in the cave. After what seemed an eternity, Grummus finally saw searchlights coming from the far side, near the entrance. He was surprised when only a group of five individuals stepped into the area. The first thing he noticed was that they all looked alike, almost as if they were clones. The one in the middle stood out, being the only one with eyes as black as night. The others had bright, blue eyes. He immediately understood the one in the middle must be possessed by a Shaedon, but the others didn’t seem to be bothered by that fact at all. The possessed one ordered the rest to start searching the encampment, after which they all moved forward, cover-

ing each other as they did, pointing their rifles in different directions in search of targets. Grummus exhaled, trying not to make a sound. He looked to the other side, where Rüz had taken up his position. Rüz shook his head at him with a frown on his face. He cocked his head towards the leader of the enemy squad while keeping his gaze fixed on the young Earthmaster. Grummus answered with a nod, hoping Rüz was gesturing him to target the leader first when they would spring their trap. As the squad got closer to him, Grummus got a better view of them. He finally noticed the squad was made up entirely of artificial life forms. Their skin was pale and dull and their eyes lifeless. The four that were not possessed had finished sweeping the encampment and were headed back towards the leader.

“There’s no one here, Mistress,” one of them said to the leader. An angry, frustrated look twisted the possessed android’s face.

“Impossible! That Windmaster is supposed to be down here with an entire team!” the leader said, her voice strangely distorted. It sounded almost like two separate voices speaking at the same time, one female and one male.

“Perhaps they were warned of our approach? How do you wish to proceed?”

“Search these damned caves and that lake too, but be careful, it’s heavily polluted. Our skin may be resistant, but this magicka could alter anything. Spread out and report anything you find immediately!” the leader commanded.

“As you wish, Mistress,” the android replied, signalling his comrades to spread out and search.

Rüz had signalled everyone to remain in position and wait. He wanted to hear the conversation so he could confirm his suspicions. They were looking for him and these androids were capable of massive amounts of destruction, given the fact that they had successfully made their way through the base on the surface. The time to spring their trap was nearing and he wanted to attack the leader android first, knowing it was possessed by a Shaedon. The others had spread out by now; there was enough distance between them to give Rüz and his team at least twenty

seconds to deal with the possessed android. He waited for it to move further into the encampment, then signalled for his team to cover the exits. Grummus quietly moved out of the rock wall and drew magicka from a green orb he was holding in his left hand. He let the stream of magical energy flow towards the ground where the android leader was standing. Roots shot up from the ground, entangling its feet and quickly covering most of its legs and lower torso. At the same time, Rüz slid out of his hiding place and cast a spell to silence the android by creating an air void around its head. He moved closer carefully, keeping his right hand aimed at the android, in case it would resist. More roots had sprung up from the ground and grabbed the android's arms, immobilizing it entirely. Rüz saw the android shouting for help in vain. The void bubble did its work splendidly.

"If I dissolve the bubble, will you shout for help?" Rüz asked, knowing the android probably would. It looked at Rüz with its blackened eyes and shook its head.

"Make sure you don't or I'll let the bubble implode instead. Do we have an agreement?"

The android nodded. Rüz lowered his hand and snapped his fingers, removing the void bubble from around the android's head.

"You are a fool if you believe you can get out of this alive," it hissed, struggling against the roots that held it in place.

"Who are you?" Rüz asked, keeping an eye on the exits of the encampment.

"My name is Shi'fisso and you will soon be dead," it threatened through clenched teeth.

"Is that so? You are at a disadvantage at the moment. The rest of your team is spread out, searching for my people. We should probably destroy you and your team. Maybe we could salvage the bodies to download your data."

"You'd have to destroy us first," Shi'fisso said, unimpressed by the threat. An energy weapon fitted into the palm of the android's right hand had been charging and released a tremendous amount of energy, burning the roots that restrained the arm. Rüz immediately recast the void bubble and increased its size. As soon as it enveloped the android's

body, he brought his hands together and the void imploded, crushing the android entirely, leaving nothing but a pile of debris clattering to the ground.

Grummus ran up to Rüz. “Was that really necessary?” he asked, looking at Rüz questioningly with his bright green eyes. Rüz just shrugged at him.

“It’s not a person we’re dealing with here – that was just a machine. From the looks of it, they possess quite a bit of built-in weaponry. We should spot the others and take them out ASAP. I don’t think we can handle four of these at the same time.”

Grummus nodded, realizing Rüz had a point. He had hoped this could have been resolved some other way, but he had a feeling negotiating with the androids had been off the table from the start.

From the corner of his eye, Grummus saw an android charging at him. He could barely dodge the rushing android and fell to the ground, extending his hands to soften the blow. Rüz had not seen the attack coming and stood frozen in shock for a moment, processing what had just happened.

Just as the android started to charge up one of his weapons, Rüz shouted at the rest of the team to open fire on it. The guards and engineers stepped out of their hiding spots and fired salvos of lasers at the android; some of them hit, but most were deflected by its energy shield. It didn’t matter – the diversion had bought Rüz and Grummus some time to ready their spells. Rüz looked the android in the eyes and noticed the same black coloration as before. It didn’t take him long to realize Shi’fisso had switched bodies. The guards and engineers had disabled its left arm, but Shi’fisso didn’t seem to be bothered at all. Instead, she charged towards Rüz, but when she was supposed to crash into him, he had already disappeared. He had launched himself several metres into the air, landing softly a few metres away.

“No matter how many of these polydrones you destroy, I will just keep coming back for you,” Shi’fisso said while dodging the next salvo of incoming fire. One of the engineers noticed she had made the fatal mistake of stepping on one of the traps; he quickly activated it, frying the polydrone with an electrical current and causing it to overload.

Räz looked back at the engineer who had sprung the trap. "Nice job!" he shouted.

"Thank you, sir," the engineer replied.

"That leaves us just three of these bastards to deal with," Räz said, scanning his surroundings warily. He and Grummus both whirled around when they heard several explosions on the east side of the encampment. Two guards and an engineer flew through the air as they were hit by the force of the explosion.

"Fall back!" Räz ordered the other guards and engineers. The polydrones had regrouped and the three of them were marching through the debris caused by the explosion, their weapons pointed in several directions. They all charged their arm cannons and fired in different directions, reducing most of the encampment to rubble. Räz, Grummus and the rest of the team were running towards the exit of the cave.

"What do we do?" one of the engineers asked, panting heavily.

"We don't stand a chance against three of them. We have to get away, quick," Räz said, drawing energy from his wind orb.

"We have to block their path somehow," Grummus shouted at Räz, looking back to check where exactly their assailants were. They were hot on their tail and gaining distance fast. It wouldn't be long before they came within firing distance and as they were currently in the open, Grummus didn't find their chances of survival very appealing.

"I know. We'll have to get out of this open area first, into the narrow corridor," Räz replied as he stopped running for a moment. He had gathered enough magicka from the orb and used it to create a gust of wind in their backs to help them outrun their pursuers for just a little while. It was barely enough; the polydrones fired at the fleeing group. Now they were at the corridor. Grummus ran to the back of the group, towards Räz.

"We have to collapse this corridor! It's the only way!"

Räz nodded at him, looking at the ceiling of the cave corridor.

"Quick, everyone, focus fire on the ceiling," he ordered the guards and engineers. They all fired their lasers at the same spot on the ceiling, which became superheated. Meanwhile, Grummus had woven a wall of roots that blocked the path for the polydrones who were giving chase. It

wouldn't withstand their fire for long, but it would at least slow them down. Ráz lifted his hands towards the ceiling and created another void bubble. After making it as big as possible, he unleashed another crushing implosion, causing the ceiling to collapse at the weakened point, blocking off the entire corridor with piles of boulders and rock.

"Phew, that was close ..." Grummus said, audibly exhausted from keeping the barrier up. Ráz took a few moments to catch his breath too as they made their way out of the caves with the rest of the group.

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The purple-skinned face of a young Xoron woman, possessed by the enigmatic Sha'hasra, appeared on all intergalactic broadcasting channels. Her eyes seemed to be bottomless pits of darkness, her hair was an almost angelic silver, which made her blackened eyes only that much more unsettling.

"Citizens of the Intergalactic Alliance, four years ago we told you to leave Netherea alone. Despite our warning, you banded together in an attempt to save the planet. Today, it is with great pleasure that I can announce our return to Netherea. We have retaken the planet and advise any remaining Alliance citizens to leave. You will be given twenty-four hours to do so. We have already dispatched most of your military presence on the surface. From now on, Netherea is off limits to anyone from the Alliance. The planet is now officially property of the Shaedon Armada."

She paused for a moment, then continued speaking with that same eerie, double voice.

"During our short absence, we have not been sitting idly by. Truly, the loss of Langruff the Purger was a minor setback, but also a calculated risk. We spent our time strengthening our bonds with the Zar'aranos Empire and creating of an army of polydrones, androids far superior to any life form we could possess. We demonstrated their firepower during our insurgence of Netherea. As you can see, we have come prepared. Leave Netherea alone, or the death toll on the Alliance will be inconceivable. You have been warned. Sha'hasra out,"

After her last words were spoken, the screen went black and showed the emblem of the Shaedon Armada; a trinity of black discs interconnected by a series of curved lines, which got thinner the closer they got to the centre.

“No surprises there,” Xer’xis said, his gaze scanning the other people in the room. With him were Rüz, Grummus, Private Andros and a handful of guards and engineers who had all just boarded the ship after evacuating from the planet’s surface.

“The biggest mystery still remains: how did they manage to reach the surface?” Rüz asked. He knew they were still searching for cloaked ships around Netherea.

“It doesn’t matter how they did it. What matters is how we can even attempt to fight back,” Xer’xis growled, slamming his fists into his desk. Rüz frowned at the captain; he had never seen him lose his temper, but he had to admit the situation was extremely infuriating. During the past four years, they had only barely managed to stabilize the planet’s core and now, within just one day, the Shaedon had reclaimed the planet.

“How many were lost, Captain?” Grummus asked carefully, hoping not to further agitate him.

“Way too many, mostly Scarowyn ... I’m so sorry, Grummus. There were nearly a hundred thousand stationed all over the planet. I haven’t had the chance to add up all of the reports, but we’re lucky if a quarter of the people stationed down there survived,” Xer’xis replied, putting a hand on the young Earthmaster’s right shoulder. Everyone in the captain’s office stood in silence for a moment, waiting for someone to speak again.

“So, what do we do now?” Rüz asked, looking through the window at Netherea.

“I was hoping you’d have an idea, Rüz,” Xer’xis admitted. He was usually a man of ideas, but he was not too stubborn to admit that even he was clueless about what they could do against the combined threat of a Zar’aranos attack and the Shaedon getting back to their plan to destroy Netherea.

“I’m afraid not, but I know someone who might.”

## Chapter 2 – Prison Break

“Lerion Pryn, you have been found guilty of the following crimes: theft, fraud, smuggling, extortion, dealing in illegal substances and, most noteworthy, kidnapping the Pearl of the Silver Plains. The total amount of cases is estimated at over fifteen hundred. The evidence of your guilt is irrefutable. You have been sentenced to treatment in the Sleeper Cell facility, where you will experience a simulated punishment lasting forty years, although in reality, only two weeks will have passed. The procedure will reprogram your criminal behaviour, allowing you to continue your life as a reborn citizen of the Alliance. You will be given a suitable job and basic housing on one of the many planets within the Alliance. We understand the simulation will disorient you because it will seem to you like many years have passed. As such, you will be given proper counselling to help you adjust to this temporal disorientation. Do you understand?” the Arlin judge asked. He was sitting at his bench in the simulated courtroom, which was empty, save for him and the defendant. The judge put the tips of his fingers together, resting his elbows on his desk as he looked at Lerion over the tip of his beak. He was dressed in the customary regal judge’s robe. His coat of feathers was as white as snow and his neck long and slender. A pair of large wings lay folded on his back.

“Yes, I understand what you just said. What I don’t understand is how I managed to get caught!” Lerion replied, glaring at the judge with his yellow hawk-like eyes. A large scar ran from his left eye all the way down to his cheek, almost touching his goatee. His skin was a greenish brown, his hair thick and black. The jacket he was wearing was made of high quality Nuverian leather and the shirt underneath it was made from a fine type of silk. A large, black brimmed hat lay on the desk in front of him.

"I believe you will find that eventually, all crimes will catch up with you at some point or another, Mr. Prynne," came the clipped reply of the judge.

"Yeah, but still – this can't be the end of my career!" Lerion replied, clearly having trouble to fully understand the situation.

"Mr. Prynne, you are already experiencing the simulated punishment as we speak. I am only here to explain to you how the simulation works and what will happen after you have served your time. Knowledge about how you were caught is not part of my programming, but suffice it to say there was substantial proof against you, to justify this treatment."

"Treatment? You make it sound like I'm sick!" Lerion exclaimed in disbelief. The judge simply shook his head slowly.

"It is a mental illness, Mr. Prynne. Compulsive theft and worse. We are here to help you get better. Struggling will only increase the program's intensity."

"How come I never got to defend myself? I demand to see my lawyer!"

"That is no longer possible, Mr. Prynne. As I said before, the evidence of your guilt is irrefutable. Now, we can either do this the easy way, or the hard way. Whichever you prefer," the judge said with a slight hint of chagrin.

"All right, what's the fastest way out of this joint?"

"Fast would be an overstatement, Mr. Prynne. You have a forty-year sentence to serve."

"You said it would only last two weeks!"

"Yes, in reality. It will still feel like forty years to you. But to answer your question: the fastest way out of here would be to follow the program without misbehaving. If you respond well to the treatment, you might be able to shorten the sentence on account of good behaviour."

"I see."

"First, let me give you an introduction to what it is you will be experiencing during your sentence. You will not experience a prison in the common sense of the word. Instead, you will be exposed to different social settings, at which point the program will monitor your behaviour

and correct you when necessary. Good behaviour will be rewarded; bad behaviour will be punished.”

“Punished, how?”

“This can vary from a simple warning to excruciating pain. Although this is a simulated environment, the pain will seem very real. However, you will find that any attempt to inflict pain on yourself is futile. The same goes for attempting suicide: it is simply not possible.”

“Well, that’s a comforting thought,” Lerion said sarcastically. The judge did not indulge him.

“The first thing we will do after this is show you to your quarters. Just like in reality, you will require rest in this environment. After that, we will give you some time to recollect your thoughts and rest up for your first day. If you would kindly follow me,” the judge got up and walked out of the room from the door behind the bench.

For a moment, Lerion sat there, furrowing his brow in disbelief. A large wooden door opened in the left corner of the same wall. The judge stood in the doorway, beckoning Lerion to follow him. The Gald smuggler picked up his hat, put it on and nodded at the judge as he stood up.

\* \* \*

“Prynn, wake up,” the loud voice of Vester Sylkwhisker boomed through Lerion’s new quarters. The large Kevlar warrior was wearing his full body armour, save for the helmet. It was painted black with red details and decals. Kevlar males were usually enormous compared to most other bipedal races and Vester was no exception: he stood about two metres and thirty centimetres tall. He had a thick black fur coat and his eyes were a bright yellow. Lerion’s eyes widened when he saw his feline nemesis staring back at him. He crawled back into the corner, hoping Vester would not hurt him, but instead, the large Kevlar spoke to him calmly.

“Good to see you’re awake. How are you feeling?”

“Wait, what?” Lerion asked shakily, but then he realized the Vester before him could be part of the simulated environment. He crept forward a little.

"I asked how you were feeling. Also, I'm here to brief you on your next mission."

"Mission? What mission?"

"Nothing you can't handle, I'm sure. You're aboard the *Claw of Ra'asha*, by the way. We've been flying towards our destination for quite some time already, but I wanted to know how you were doing, so I came to check up on you."

"I'm fine, I guess. This is just a bit, how do I put it ... weird," Lerion said, failing to find the right words to express his feelings.

"What is?" Vester asked, raising an eyebrow at Lerion.

"Well, how this program puts me in a situation where my worst enemy is asking me how I am doing."

"What program? What are you talking about? Are you sure you're okay?" Vester asked, giving him a concerned look.

"Never mind. Yes, I'm all right. So, you were talking about a mission?" Lerion asked, reaching for his hat. He put it on and wiggled it until it fit comfortably. His large ears flowed out from underneath.

"Eager as ever, I see. Follow me down to the bridge and I'll give you all the details," Vester said, offering a massive paw to help Lerion up. He accepted it hesitantly.

Lerion had never been on the bridge of the *Claw of Ra'asha*, but he had seen the blueprints and design schematics of the Manta Class ship before. It was an impressive vessel and a class commonly seen in the Kevlar fleet, mostly as scout ships and often during combat. The ships were versatile and had plenty of room for upgrades and modifications. Typically, they would house a crew of about fifty, depending on their role in the fleet. The *Claw* served as the base of operations for his band of mercenaries known as the Sons of Ra'asha. Ever since he had been exiled from the Kevlar home world, he had strived to retain his Kevlar identity through any means possible. As a result, the ship contained a lot of reminders of its owner's heritage. Vester had always tried to regain the favour of his people, but as common as it was for Kevlar to be outcast for not succeeding in their pilgrimage, or as a result of dishonourable behaviour, so uncommon was it to be let back into their community. There

had only been a few cases in Kevlar history where an outcast had been welcomed back.

Vester walked up to the captain's chair, sat down and motioned for Lerion to sit down next to him. There were only half a dozen other crew members on the bridge, four of them were Kevlar females. The other two were a Gald male, who looked like an engineer, and a human female.

"Please, take a seat," Vester said, fidgeting with the controls on his armrest. The viewscreen of the ship turned from the view directly ahead of the ship to a star chart with their plotted flight plan. Vester got back up, walked forward and pointed a clawed finger at the chart to single out a specific spot.

"This is where we are headed. Do you recognize it?" he asked, knowing Lerion had an excellent knowledge of interstellar cartography. Lerion squinted his eyes a bit, then leaned forward.

"Hmm, why would you want to go there?" he asked, looking up at the large feline.

"Because that's where a lot of frigates headed into Zar'aranos space pass through. It's the perfect spot for an ambush," Vester said, looking back at Lerion with a malicious grin on his face.

"I guess you haven't heard the news yet, huh?"

"Heard what?"

"I quit this business a little while ago," Lerion said, hoping this would somehow trigger the simulation to respond positively. Vester just stared at him incredulously. The expression on his face changed and Vester laughed, louder and louder, clapping Lerion on the back so hard he nearly toppled over.

"I have to admit, Prynn, you've got quite a sense of humour!"

"Yeah, I guess," Lerion replied, laughing uncomfortably and nursing his shoulder.

Vester cleared his throat. "All right, so my crew and I have spent quite some time monitoring the incoming and outgoing ships in this particular part of space. Not many of the frigates passing through are guarded. In fact, we've studied most freight companies' schedules and they're almost always the same ships, containing the same product. In

other words, we know exactly what to hit and when. We're planning on raiding one of the bigger ones, of course."

"Sounds like you've got it all figured out. I guess you can do it without me, then," Lerion replied, staring coldly at Vester, who shook his head at Lerion.

"Oh, you're not going anywhere. When I said I had a mission for you, I never said it was optional, did I?"

"No, but—" Lerion tried, but Vester interrupted him the moment he spoke.

"This is not optional, Prynn," he growled, coming closer to Lerion, looking down threateningly. Lerion stepped back a little, feeling his heart race.

"Just shut up and listen. Your role in this will be to act as a decoy. We've got a small vessel to put you and Cronjo in. You are to act like you're down on your luck and in need of repairs, at which point we will move in and attack the frigate. It's so simple, it can't fail."

"Who's Cronjo?" Lerion asked, his arms folded as he listened to Vester's plan, which admittedly seemed simple enough.

Vester turned around, found the Gald male at the engineer station and snapped his fingers. "Cronjo, get your arse over here so you two can shake hands, or whatever it is you Gald do!" Vester shouted. Cronjo took his time to get up after finishing whatever he was doing at the station, then walked up to Lerion and extended his right hand. Lerion shook his hand briefly and firmly, then nodded at the other Gald. The bright light emanating from the viewscreen reflected off of his bald, green-skinned head. A pair of bright blue eyes met Lerion's. The rest of his face was covered by a thick, black beard. His clothing was simple and clearly not meant for show: it was functional, multi-pocketed and grease-stained. Most probably from his work as an engineer, Lerion thought.

"Nice to meet you," Lerion said, nodding at Cronjo as he did.

"Where did you get that scar?" Cronjo asked, inspecting Lerion's facial scar intently. People had done it before, but this was quickly becoming uncomfortable.

“Your boss gave it to me a long time ago,” Lerion replied, shooting an angry glance at Vester. Cronjo turned his head to Vester, who stood there with his arms folded.

“You did this to him, boss? Aw man, look at you - you’re fucking deformed!”

Lerion frowned at Cronjo. “I wouldn’t exactly call this deformed, pal. Besides, the ladies really dig scars,” he retorted.

The engineer just shook his head disapprovingly. “No way any chick would find that attractive. A full beard on the other hand, eh?”

“Hey, could you two runts knock it off and listen?” Vester’s voice boomed across the bridge. Both Lerion and Cronjo shut their mouths as they turned to face him.

“As I said, you two will be acting as a decoy using this old shuttle we have down in the cargo hold. I’m sure you know how to fake an engine malfunction, Prynn?” Vester asked, shifting his gaze to the infamous smuggler, who pursed his lips and nodded in agreement.

“So, what kind of cargo are we after, exactly? And how will we get back on the *Claw of Ra’asha*?” Lerion asked.

“The cargo is none of your concern, Prynn, so don’t get any funny ideas. As for your safety, we’ll try not to hit you.”

“How comforting,” Lerion replied sarcastically.

“Before we go about this raid, we’re going to restock and refuel. I suggest you two familiarize yourselves with that shuttle in the meantime. It’s seen better days.”

“Sure, boss, no problem!” Cronjo replied, poking Lerion to follow him down to the cargo hold. Lerion glanced sideways at Vester sourly. The Kevar didn’t bother to satisfy him with a response. *This whole simulation seems quite real*, Lerion thought, wondering if there would be a time when he forgot he was even in a simulated environment.

\* \* \*

“All right, just let me get this straight. Three Kevar and a Gald showed up, shoved a release order in your faces and none of you thought it was even the least bit suspicious?” Vyrex Apollo asked, sounding equal parts

astounded and frustrated. He was a Gald with dark green skin and bright yellow eyes, which were currently flashing frantically over the team of security guards he was interrogating. He wore a leather vest with thick shoulder pads, and a hooded cowl which was currently down. His pants were made of a thick black fabric, which nicely complemented his brown leather boots. Part of his face was covered with a tattoo that ran down to what was visible of his neck.

“Their forms seemed legit, sir,” one of the four security guards replied hesitantly. Two of his colleagues were also human, a man and a woman. The other was a Kraut, clad in their typical armoured suits, which not only protected the Kraut themselves by containing their enormous body heat, but also served to protect those around them.

“Seemed legit? You ran it past security scans, right?”

“Of course we did! But it came up positive, so either their order was legitimate, or someone extremely skilled sliced into our systems.”

“It’s pretty clear that I’m dealing with a bunch of grade A idiots here. Where did they even find you?”

Vyrex sighed in frustration. If it were up to him, he’d fire the entire security team, but on the other hand, he had been waiting for a new challenge and this promised to be a good one.

“So, what happened exactly? Tell me again from the top,” he said, looking at the woman across the room, who had not spoken a single word since he had begun the interrogation.

“Like I said before, sir, they showed up unannounced and—”

Vyrex shot an angry glare at the other security guard, who shut his mouth immediately.

“I’ve heard enough from you, I want to hear it from her,” Vyrex said, his voice lowered.

“Me?” the female security guard asked, glancing sideways at her colleagues nervously.

“Yes, you! I don’t see any other females in this room, unless that Kraut is hiding something under that suit of his,” Vyrex replied, giggling at his own joke for a short moment. The others were all dead silent.

“Well, I was stationed at the entrance, doing some paperwork. Then we got a call from Logistics saying a couple of Alliance officials were

heading our way with a release form for a Lerion Pryn. I called everyone to greet them, but they weren't exactly what I was expecting."

"Ah. In what regard?" Vyrex asked, stroking his chin.

"I wasn't expecting the officials to be Kevar. They aren't known to keep themselves occupied with this sort of business. They looked more ... militant, I guess I would call it."

"So, you did find this suspicious, yet you didn't bother to inform your colleagues?"

"I would have, but when I received the order and double-checked its authenticity, it didn't really seem that odd anymore," the security guard said, looking for support from her colleagues. They all nodded in agreement.

"Stop. I've heard enough about how this happened. There are a few other details I'd like to know. For instance, you said Lerion's treatment had already started, but it was aborted only a few minutes after initiating. How will that affect him, both mentally and physically?"

"He had only been in his stasis chamber for a few minutes. As far as we can tell, that would equal about one day in the simulation. Right now, he might experience temporal disorientation as a result of thinking a day, maybe two days have passed, when only a few minutes really have. Physically, he shouldn't really feel any different. That would only occur after full treatment, since he would have been inactive for two weeks."

"Okay, so basically, he would only be disoriented or confused?" Vyrex asked.

"Yes, there's no evidence suggesting he could suffer from anything else."

"Where was the ship that picked him up heading?"

The Kraut security guard offered Vyrex a datapad. "Everything is on pad. Taken from database," it rumbled with a voice that sounded like rolling boulders. Vyrex studied the pad for a while, then slipped it into one of his vest pockets and patted the pocket twice.

"Looks like we're done here. It's a good thing you've got guys like me around to correct the errors you morons make. I'll make sure to put in a good word for you all at the Alliance cleaning companies, because you might have to look for a different career soon," Vyrex joked. None of the

security guards laughed, thinking whatever they'd say would only worsen what had already been a quite unpleasant interrogation. Vyxex put his hood back on and headed towards the exit. Just before he left the room, he turned around.

"Make sure you guys check the news regularly, because it shouldn't be long before I catch Prynn and bring him back here, where he belongs."

\* \* \*

"So, you're the kidnapper of the Pearl of the Silver Plains, right?" Cronjo asked while rummaging through his tool kit. He and Lerion had been brought down to the cargo hold of the *Claw*. Lerion's first reaction to the shuttle they were supposed to take for a spin had been shock. It was a model that had been made obsolete by technological advancement about fifty years ago and its state was even worse than he had feared. Vester thought it would be the perfect bait, but Lerion had tried pointing out the flaw in the logic in flying a fifty-year old vessel and asking for help. Despite his protest, Vester had been adamant. Now they were here, trying to repair the shuttle and hope they could get it to fly, only to fake an engine malfunction later on.

"Yep, I suppose that's one of the many things I'm known for. Someone should write a book about it sometime, it makes for one hell of a story!" Lerion replied, hoping Cronjo wouldn't ask too many questions. In the short time he had known his new companion, he had already decided Cronjo wasn't worth spending more time on than what was absolutely necessary.

"To be honest, I think that's about the only thing you're really known for. I hadn't heard your name until I heard about the kidnapping in the news. How did that end for you, anyway?" Cronjo asked as he pulled a spanner from his toolkit and used it to close a valve connected to the engine core.

"Let's just say I had to be quite resourceful to escape the law back then," Lerion answered while checking the pilot controls of the shuttle.

He really missed his own ship, the *Sly Maiden*. He wondered if he'd ever see her again. She had probably been impounded by the Alliance.

"Well, it seems like your resourcefulness ran dry back then. But at least you're with us now, right?"

Lerion raised an eyebrow at Cronjo, who was too busy to look up.

"What are you trying to say, exactly? That I'm supposed to be happy with the way things turned out?"

"Well, at least you're still getting a piece of the action and who knows, maybe Vester will be so pleased with your performance that he'll keep you on board as a retainer. Care to hand me that micro welder for a moment?"

Lerion stepped away from the pilot console and searched through Cronjo's toolbox, which was extremely well organized. It took him only a few seconds to find the tool.

"Look, Cronjo, I'm not really sure what kind of understanding you and Vester have, but this job we're doing right now, I'm pretty sure it's not a paid job. Not for me, at least. In fact - I don't know if you noticed this on the bridge - but he and I don't really see eye to eye ..." he said as he handed Cronjo the micro welder.

Cronjo turned his head around for a moment to face Lerion. He nodded and sighed.

"Yeah, I guess mutilating someone isn't a sign of friendship," he said, his words dripping with sarcasm. A few sparks flew off one of the exhausts Cronjo was applying the micro welder to, effectively closing a gap that had been there. He turned around, handed the welder back to Lerion and wiped his hands on his pants.

"Let's fire up this old-timer!" he said with a large grin on his face.

Lerion put the welder back in the toolbox. He strapped himself into the pilot's seat and activated the controls, which sprang to life nearly instantly. Lerion took a few moments to study the controls, which were just like he had expected: old-fashioned, almost alien. He pressed the ignition button for the engine and could feel it bursting to life. The familiar sounding drone filled the shuttle's cabin, but as quickly as it had come, it died away. The engine shut down and menacing red lights flashed on the pilot's control screen.

“Well, I guess that was to be expected!” Cronjo pounded an angry fist into the wall and injured one of his knuckles, which only added to his frustration. He let out a stream of curses as he nursed his hand.

“Looks like we’ll need to replace a bunch of power couplings and re-lays,” Lerion stated after studying the readout on the screen.

“I’m not sure if you noticed, but this shuttle is an antique. Where in hell do you think we’ll be able to get our hands on actual working power couplings that’ll work with this pile of crap?”

“Never heard of retrofitting?” Lerion taunted.

“Hey, you don’t have to be a condescending prick about it, Mr. Famous Kidnapper,” Cronjo replied stingily.

“Calm down, I was just saying ...” Lerion replied.

Cronjo scoffed at him. “All right, we should have a bunch of spare parts lying around the bay. I could use a bite to eat in the meantime,” he said, signalling Lerion to follow him.

\* \* \*

Vyrex had just finished landing his vessel, a heavily modified Alliance scout ship. The model was usually capable of supporting up to three people comfortably. Vyrex had opted to sacrifice some of the space in the ship to add extra power to the engines and its weapon systems. After the modifications, the ship was barely large enough to carry him and one other person, usually a criminal. Instead of two additional quarters, the ship now only had one quarter left and it was designed to be a brig, to confine those he needed to bring in.

Vyrex exited the ship into the docking bay of Deep Space Station V, which was one of the stations closest to the border with the Zar’aranos Empire. It was the direction his target was headed and most probably, they had stopped by here as well. He was hoping to speak to some of the officials there and inquire if they’d seen anything out of the ordinary. As he moved towards the exit of the docking bay, he was greeted by a young human woman, who was clad in an Alliance uniform made of dark blue fabric with black accents and polished boots.

“Welcome to Deep Space Station V, sir,” she stated, saluting Vyrex. She had clearly noticed the emblem of the Gald Board of Elemental Conduct and his rank of Assassin.

“I need to speak to the higher ups around here, where can I find them?” he asked without so much as looking at her. He moved through the exit, into the corridor. The young woman hurried after him. She was hesitant at first, but then she spoke.

“Let me take you to them, sir,” she said. It seemed like Vyrex was quite capable of finding his own way on the station. He walked up to the turbolift and pressed the button to call it to the current floor, then threw a quick glance at her.

“The station commander should be in his office, sir,” she said, smiling uncomfortably at Vyrex.

“I’ll find my way there myself,” was all he replied. After a short while, she just saluted Vyrex again before heading off.

Vyrex sighed. He was sick and tired of all those suck ups everywhere. The turbolift door slid open; he entered and commanded it to head up to the commander’s office, overriding the security by identifying himself with a voice code. When the door slid open, he saw the commander sitting behind his desk, working on something. Whatever it was, Vyrex didn’t care at all.

“I’m Agent Apollo, with the Gald Board of Elemental Conduct. I believe a ship has passed by that I’m currently chasing.”

The commander was a human man in his mid-forties with dark skin and an ocular implant, which replaced his left eye. His hair was short and gray at the edges. He looked up, clearly not interested in having his work interrupted by an Alliance official.

“Mr. Apollo, dozens of ships pass by here on a daily basis and most of them don’t even bother to stop at our station,” he said disinterestedly.

“Just give me access to your database and I’ll have a look myself. Every minute I waste on bureaucratic bullshit is one too many,” Vyrex said, staring coldly at the commander.

“All right, just use that station over there. I’ll grant you access,” the commander replied, seemingly not bothered by Vyrex’ lack of manners.

He pressed a few buttons on his computer and then pointed at the terminal.

After about fifteen minutes, Vyrex had finished going through the logs. There had been only one Manta Class ship in the log and it had passed by nearly a week ago. According to its flight plan, it was headed into Zar'aranos space, perhaps to deliver cargo, or perhaps to seek refuge for a wanted criminal. Either way, he would have to head after them and find out.

"Upload all the info you've got on this Manta Class ship to my own vessel and I'll be off your back," Vyrex ordered the commander, who looked up from a datapad he was reading. He took a sip of his coffee and nodded at Vyrex.

"Consider it done, agent. If you need anything else, let my personnel know."

"I doubt it. See you later," Vyrex said, walking back into the turbolift. He checked his wrist pad and noticed the data had already been uploaded to his ship. His quarry had been there to pick up only a few supplies and some spare parts. What Vyrex didn't understand was why they'd picked up parts for a Gald ship. He had a feeling he'd find out soon enough.

## Chapter 3 – The Drawing Board

“Welcome to Intergalactic Business Today! I’m your host, Robert Swanson. We are here today with Miss Gomez, CEO of NanoTech Corporation. Welcome, Miss Gomez, it’s nice to have you on our show this morning!” said a young, bronze-skinned man in his early thirties with a pearly white smile and a sharp gray suit on. His black hair brushed his shoulders, and he was neatly groomed. The woman sitting across from him was Serra Gomez, CEO of one of humanity’s biggest corporations, known for their expertise in the fields of nanotechnology, implants, cybernetics and medical care. She was on the show for an in-depth interview about the company’s struggle after the sudden death of her former employer and CEO, Chando Rombilius. He had died in the tragic explosion of their former headquarters, Taniguchi Station, which had orbited Earth. Serra was a slender woman whose features resembled the host’s. Her skin was bronze and her hair, which she wore loose, black. Her right eye was equipped with an ocular implant, betrayed by a blue dot in the iris. She was sharply dressed, wearing a formal white suit and a black shirt that contrasted the white perfectly.

“Thank you for having me, Robert.”

“It has been quite the year for you, Miss Gomez. The newly built Taniguchi Station II is nearly finished and we’ve just been informed about your new line of implants, the brand new Accipiter Oculus implant, the Fortitudo range of bionics and the new healthcare plans from NanoCare. Could you please elaborate on the last one?” Robert asked as he picked up the glass of water that was standing in front of him on the table.

“Certainly, Robert. NanoCare has been developing quite well over the past years. As the implant and bionics industry keeps growing, we thought we would really do well investing in healthcare as a company. We’ve spent the past years developing this branch of our company and since we do not only care about humans, we offer different kinds of healthcare plans to suit every client within Alliance space. Our plans

range from basic, or bronze, to complete, or platinum packages,” Serra explained, waving her arms around as she spoke.

Robert nodded at her. “That sounds great. Where do I sign up?”

“These packages will be available right after this interview. Just head on to the extranet and search for NanoCare – you’ll be able to order your healthcare plan today!”

Robert straightened his face as he prepared to ask the next question.

“Now, Serra, NanoTech has been in quite a rough patch these past years, after the sudden and unfortunate death of your former boss and CEO, Chando Rombilius. Many believed the company would die alongside him and sceptics stated they did not have any faith in your capabilities to lead the company after the loss of such a brilliant man. Yet, you managed to get the company back on track and as strong as ever, even after many investors pulled their investments from the company. How has the death of Mr. Rombilius affected you personally?”

“I knew Chando well and the news of his passing was a terrible tragedy. His absence has affected me greatly. He was not just my boss, he was my mentor and we often spoke about personal subjects. I know a lot of people thought of him as the figurehead of the company and he was and will be irreplaceable. All I can try is to keep the company running, to continue his legacy,” Serra said, bowing her head a little as she spoke.

“That was beautifully put, Serra. We all still miss him,” Robert paused a moment, then continued. “On to another question, if you don’t mind. Why did you choose to build the new headquarters in orbit around Caledon?”

“There are several reasons for this. First of all, it was Chando’s wish that the new station would be built there. He had originally chosen to have the headquarters in orbit around Earth because the company was based there before. The reason for building the new station close to Caledon is more pragmatic. There are still a lot of resources on Caledon, so it makes more sense to have the station near, to reduce transportation costs. Not only that, but Mr. Rombilius had a special love for the planet as well. He always called it his second home because it reminded him so much of the old Scotland, his birthplace.”

“So it serves two purposes, then. It’s nice to see that you were able to fulfil his dying wish. There is another question I’ve been wanting to ask.”

“Go ahead,” Serra replied, already sensing the question Robert was about to ask.

“There have been allegations about Nanotech’s involvement in illegal AI development. What is your stance on this?”

“I had a feeling you would ask me about this. Sadly, Mr. Rombilius was involved in a project for the development of a sentient AI in the same year Taniguchi Station was destroyed. It’s not known if there’s a correlation between these two facts, but I can assure you NanoTech takes full responsibility for the consequences of this research. We are aware that the data from the research on this AI has been stolen by the original employer and we are still searching for him actively.”

“So, you are no longer working on this project? Sorry, I just have to ask,” Robert asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

Serra shook her head at him. “You don’t have to apologize, Robert. No, we are not currently working on anything like this. In fact, we’ve been cooperating with Alliance Security. They are keeping a close eye on our work and we share our newest developments with them. We equip their personnel with the latest in implant technology as well as bionics and medical care. It is our way of showing we care about honest business and we’re not willing to let anything like this happen anymore,” Serra stated diplomatically.

“An honest answer and a relief to our viewers, I’m sure! We’re nearly out of time for this interview. Is there anything else you would like to say to our viewers?”

Serra considered Robert’s question for a moment before she answered.

“Yes, there is. I want to thank everyone for their continued faith in NanoTech Incorporated and we hope you will continue to enjoy our products and services in the future. We are here for the people and we wouldn’t be where we are today if it weren’t for you. Thank you.”

“And thank you as well, Serra. It’s been a pleasure to have you on our show. To our viewers out there, don’t forget to get on the extranet and have a look at the new NanoCare healthcare plans. After the commercial

break, we'll be back with more business news, as usual. Stay tuned and have a nice day!"

\* \* \*

The *Seraph's Wings* touched down on the ground. The sleek, heavily modified freighter-class ship had been Serra's since she started working for Chando. She had it refitted and given a new paintjob shortly after she became CEO of NanoTech Incorporated. The ship had an angelic white colour, with silver and gold lines and a few decals. She had parked the ship next to a large mansion on Caledon and was currently ascending the steps leading to its front door. The building was located on a cliff overlooking a large region of New Scotland. Mountains sprung up as far as the eye could see and the land was pocked with lakes, or lochs as the people called them in true Scottish fashion. Some of the locals had even chosen a career as whisky craftsmen, competing in intergalactic whisky and spirits competitions and although the Scots didn't want to admit it, Caledonian whisky was among the best the galaxy had to offer. Serra reached for the doorbell, but before she could press the button, she was greeted by her butler, Giles.

"Ma'am, you're just in time for lunch," he said, giving her a warm smile.

He was what one would expect from a butler: a middle-aged man with grayish white hair and black livery. Butlers and servants were an uncommon sight, since most of them had been replaced by a virtual assistant of some sort. Serra had insisted on having some human company when she was in her mansion and so she ended up hiring Giles, after speaking to him in a pub in the nearby village. He had been working for her for the past three years now and she was always glad to have him around.

"Please come in, lunch is waiting for you in the dining room," Giles said, holding out his hands to accept Serra's coat. He helped her take it off and put it on a nearby coat rack, while Serra preceded him to the dining room.

"Thank you, Giles," she said as she passed through the hallway.

Serra pushed open the heavy door leading to the dining room and was not surprised to see she was not by herself. Standing in the far corner of the room was a man in a dark gray suit. He was pouring himself a drink from the cabinet in the corner, but he turned around when he noticed her entering the room. A contented smile appeared on his face. Chando Rombilius was a tall, dark man and although he didn't look a year past his mid-forties, he was in fact well over a hundred years old. He lifted the glass of whisky to her and took a sip.

"Serra, welcome back. How was the interview this morning?" he asked with a thick British accent. He sat down at the table. Serra walked up towards the spot where her lunch was presented and sat down as well.

"Just as we had rehearsed, Chando," she replied, carefully picking up the spoon in front of her and pulling the bowl of soup closer.

"Good, I hate the situation I'm currently in. Especially being stuck here in this *prison*," Chando said with audible frustration.

Serra ate a few spoonfuls of soup. "So, any progress on your end?"

"Actually, there might be, yes. It would seem our friends have been quite busy. I've had some reports coming in and I believe I'm close to pinpointing their exact location. I'm waiting for more intel from two of our agents who are investigating the nebula in Veraan space. That's where I sent Baynam before he was merged with that Shaedon," Chando said, lowering his gaze, into the glass of whisky.

"Isn't that area off limits these days?" Serra asked, worrying for the safety of the agents. Chando looked at her and shrugged.

"It is, but that has never stopped us from accomplishing that which we must, has it?" he asked. Serra nodded in agreement as she continued eating her soup.

"How is the progress on the station going? I've read the reports, but I'd rather hear it from you."

"Everything is going as planned. We expect the station to be fully operational in about two weeks, which gives us time to deal with some other issues," Serra said as she shoved the empty soup bowl away and

took a sandwich from the platter across from her. Cream cheese with chive and ham, one of her favourites.

“We seem to have so many these days. Which issues are you referring to now?” Chando asked. He gently rocked his glass, then took a sip of his whisky.

“Finding the Master Tinkerer and that Kraut Forgemaster, for instance.”

“Ah, yes. Actually, I’ve received a few leads we could investigate regarding those two. We’ll need a few specialists to find and reach them, I believe.” Chando sighed deeply.

Serra looked at him, raising an eyebrow. “What kind of specialists do you mean?”

“The kind that can withstand extremely high temperatures, I’m afraid. Non-human.”

“So, Kraut?” Serra asked, knowing Kraut to be highly resilient to extreme temperatures.

“Preferably, although I’ve not had the best of luck finding a proper candidate. They aren’t known for their subtlety and communication with them is always so – how should I put it ... *slow*.”

“I agree, but which options do we have, besides hiring another Saridion? They developed the environmental suits for the Kraut, after all. We could procure some of those and do this job ourselves.”

Chando shook his head at Serra. “I’ve already thought it through. Our best chance would be this candidate, I believe.”

He shoved a datapad across the table. Serra picked it up and looked at it, but all she saw was an image of a bird. The bird’s feathers resembled flames: the tips were white, then they faded to yellow, orange, red and finally to black. The bird’s eyes were a fiery red and its head reminded Serra of a bald eagle.

“Tyndra Emberwing?” Serra asked, looking at Chando over the rim of the datapad. He just sat there with a grin on his face.

“What species is this ... *Tyndra*?”

“Our feathered friend there is an Arlin Infernis. They used to mentor the Gald in the use of fire magicka, but when the Saridions discovered the Kraut, they expanded their mentoring to both the Gald and the

Kraut. I believe most of them even prefer to teach the Kraut – they are much more primal and less greedy than the Gald. This particular lady has been in the mentoring business for at least a century. Her methods are somewhat unorthodox, but she has always delivered graduates with exceeding skill. It also helps that she speaks quite well.”

“So how did you find her and, more importantly, how can I recruit her to our cause?”

“Finding her wasn’t so hard. She’s currently on the Bastion as part of a cultural exchange program. She should still be there for a couple of weeks. The real challenge will be the actual recruiting. There’s no reason for her to help us, as far as I can see, and I haven’t had much luck finding out what could incentivise her to join us.”

Serra wiped her mouth with a napkin and then lifted her glass of orange juice.

“Aren’t the Arlin the kind to offer assistance in times of need?”

“They are, but you’ll still have to find some way to convince her. I’ve always found Arlin hard to figure out. They aren’t motivated by greed, like most other species.”

“I’ll find a way, I’m sure,” Serra replied confidently.

“I’d be wrong if I said you were incapable of solving many of my problems. You’ll have some time to figure it out before you get to the Bastion.”

“Wait, I’m supposed to go there right now?” Serra asked, frowning at Chando and shaking her head. A smile appeared on Chando’s face as he stood up and walked over to her.

“This is a matter that cannot wait, my dear,” he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. Serra looked up and smiled at him for a moment.

“All right, I’ll have Giles contact the administrator on the station. He can handle the everyday business while I’m off for some official matters on the Bastion. I’m sure he’ll understand,” Serra said.

“You seem relieved?” he asked her, wondering if he was correct.

“Well, it’s been a lot of hard work to stand in for you as CEO. I’m glad I can finally do something more exciting than interviews, board meetings and approving reports.”

Chando laughed at Serra for a moment, then patted her on the back.

“You know, I’m very grateful for the effort you’ve put into running the company after my unfortunate death. There will be a day when I can return, but that time won’t be until after we’ve dealt with Baynam and his kin.”

“I know. I hope that day will be sooner rather than later. I’d better get going then, right?”

“You are right, my dear. Hopefully, I’ll be able to report some more good news later. I should be hearing from those agents soon.”

“I’ll be in contact with you later, okay?” Serra said as she got up, wiped her mouth one last time with the same napkin and threw it back on the table.

“Of course, my dear. As will I.”

“Bye, Chando,” Serra said, kissing him on the cheeks three times.

“Although I don’t really believe in it, I wish you good luck. Something tells me you’ll need it this time.”

“Thank you,” she said, smiling at Chando with a glint in her eye.

Serra had set course for the Bastion, the Intergalactic Alliance’s political heart. The Alliance Council chambers were located at the very centre of the immense space station, giving room to a hundred and fifty politicians, ranging from ministers to ambassadors and delegates. Each race that was part of the Alliance had three ministers appointed to the Council, representing their people’s interests and political views. Ten races were now part of the Alliance, the most recent addition being the Xoron, who joined the Alliance roughly eighty years earlier. Ever since then, the Alliance had been stable, until the Shaedon revealed themselves four years ago and assassinated the Prime Minister. As a result of the threat from the Zar’aranos Empire and the influence of the Shaedon, security on the Bastion had been increased to its maximum and official meetings were only performed in person, so security could be absolutely sure no Shaedon possessed anyone during the meeting. This could easily be detected by the person’s eyes turning as black as night.

Serra had made it about halfway through her journey when she received an incoming call through a secure channel. When she answered the call,

only a shadowy figure appeared on the viewscreen on the bridge of her ship. She knew it was Chando, who was taking precautions in case the line wasn't as secure as they believed it to be.

"Good afternoon, Miss Gomez," Chando said with a heavily distorted voice.

"Good afternoon, sir," Serra simply replied, waiting for Chando's message.

"My remaining two agents reported in a few hours ago. I had to confirm their reports before I contacted you. I believe I've found our friends and they have been quite busy," Chando said. The viewscreen faded to a star chart with a few locations marked on it, then zoomed in on those marked locations.

"It would seem our friends have built a new base on this remote planet - GF-128-T is its designation. Barely habitable, but sufficient for their purposes. Their base seems to include a lab and a factory."

"Factory? They're building more of those androids?" Serra asked, hoping it wasn't true. She had heard about the destruction the prototype had caused and she wasn't too keen to learn that there might be more like it on their way.

"Sadly, yes. In fact, they are already using them against us. I've just received word that Netherea was under attack and all Alliance forces were ordered to retreat. Preliminary reports suggest the attacks were carried out with these *polydrones*, as they are apparently called now."

Serra shook her head in disbelief as she registered Chando's words.

"How is that possible? There are literally thousands of troops stationed on Netherea."

"Were, my dear. Past tense," Chando replied, sounding irked.

"Apparently, they managed to slip past the blockades. I don't believe the Alliance fleet detected any cloaked ships, which leads me to believe they used teleportation technology, or something similar."

"So, what's our plan then?" Serra asked, wondering if recruiting the Arlin and Kraut would be a prudent move at this time, now that a much bigger threat had presented itself.

"Well, this clearly shortens the timetable for our little project, but continue as planned. In the meantime, I will try and find out as much as I

can about the attack on Netherea. There might be some way we can discover how they executed it so flawlessly.”

“Any better news?” Serra asked sarcastically.

“Actually, yes. I have written a letter for the Alliance Council – please convey this message to them. It contains the exact location of the poly-drone factory. Perhaps you can find some more support for our cause. I’m not sure if we should go in with guns blazing, but if you could at least try to get some support, we might be able to form a covert team and blow this thing to pieces, before the threat becomes too big to handle.”

Serra’s worried frown faded. “Thanks, I’ll make sure they get this. I hope they’ll listen.”

“I’m sure you’ll do just fine, Miss Gomez. Let’s focus on the task at hand, then.”

“Yes, I will. Thanks again. Gomez out,” Serra said as she cut off the transmission.

It had taken Serra another day to get to the Bastion and after a lengthy docking procedure, she had finally set foot on the station itself. There were at least twelve space traffic controllers active at all times on the station, and it would usually take well over an hour before a ship would be cleared for docking, unless they had priority arrangements. Unfortunately for her, she didn’t have priority clearance, even as the CEO of NanoTech. She was on her way now to meet with an Alliance council member from Earth, to see if she could get her message relayed to the entire Council.

The door to Lars Sivertsen’s office slid open as Serra stepped through. Lars was one of three council members representing Humanity in the Council. Prior to becoming a council member, he had always been politically active as a diplomat and ambassador to humankind. He was a tall, pale man somewhere in his mid-thirties, with short blond hair. He was seated at his desk, from which he could greet whomever entered the room without the need to get up. The desk was littered with datapads and presently, a large hologram of Taniguchi Station II was being pro-

jected on the left side of it. He looked up from the datapad he was holding and noticed Serra.

“Miss Gomez, it’s a pleasure to meet you! I was surprised you wanted to see me. Please, sit down,” Lars said, getting up from his office chair and extending a hand to Serra. She shook it briefly, but firmly, and seated herself in one of the two luxurious chairs. Lars himself moved back to his chair and turned off the holographic projector.

“You were studying the new station?” Serra asked curiously.

“Ah, yes. I was interested in what you’ve been up to and I have to say the new station looks like it will be top of the bill! Also, I saw your interview earlier and I’m seriously considering getting a healthcare package from your company,” Lars said, folding his fingers together and resting his elbows on his chair’s armrests.

“I’m glad to hear it, we are offering some very competitive prices,” Serra replied, giving him an awkward smile.

“But that’s not why you are here, I presume?” Lars asked.

“No, I’m here because I have some very important information to share with you and I was hoping you’d be willing to make sure the entire Council gets this message,” Serra said, handing Lars a datapad. He took it and carelessly put it down with the rest of the clutter on his desk.

“Before I read this, would you be willing to tell me what’s on the pad first?”

“The location of the Shaedon Armada’s polydrone factory,” Serra said.

A frown appeared on Lars’ face. He stroked his chin for a moment and nodded slowly at Serra. “Just how did you get this information? If I may be so bold to ask, of course.”

“I have my sources, but if it’s any comfort to you, this is a hundred percent legitimate.”

Lars shook his head and smiled warmly. “Miss Gomez, there’s no need to defend yourself. I believe you. I was just wondering how exactly you were hoping I could help you.”

“Well, if you could use your influence in the Council to present this message, perhaps we could stage an attack on that factory before they produce more of those polydrones,” Serra explained, hoping Lars would

see the urgency of the situation. She had the uncomfortable feeling that going through official channels would be a waste of time.

“Of course. I will make sure this message gets where it belongs. However, I’m afraid that at the moment, there are no resources at our disposal for an attack on these facilities. The Alliance fleet is spread thin already. On the one hand, we’ve got the situation on Netherea to deal with. On the other hand, there is the continued threat from the Zar’aranos Empire. Their activity along the border has increased and for all we know, we might be going to war soon,” Lars said, looking troubled.

Serra looked at him pleadingly. “There must be something you can do.”

Lars stood up from his chair and walked towards the right corner of his desk, picked up a large bottle of water and poured two glasses, then handed one of them over to Serra.

“Listen, Miss Gomez. There might not be much I can do, but I’m sure there will be other people willing to spare what they can to get rid of this threat. The Alliance has always been about defending itself and its interests. Having said that, I do understand the severity of the situation. I will make absolutely sure this message gets to the right people – you have my word. I’m afraid the Alliance just can’t spare the resources at the moment.”

“I sincerely hope you’ll stay true to your word. Any resources you could spare would help us tremendously. I’m investing in this myself, too, because it is in our interest as well,” Serra said, putting as much weight into the words as she could.

Lars took a sip of water and nodded at her. “Of course, Miss Gomez. I thank you for your effort, of course. We live in perilous times.”

Serra scoffed at Lars. “That’s a bit of an understatement. If we don’t act fast, we might lose everything we hold dear.”

“Perhaps my words came out wrong, but you understand what I mean,” Lars replied, picking up the datapad so he could quickly scan the document Serra had given him. He put the pad down again almost immediately.

“All right, Miss Gomez, I’ll read this and send it to whom I think will be able to help you. I’ll make sure to contact you later, hopefully with some good news.’ Lars sounded self-assured.

After taking a sip from her glass, Serra got up from her chair and extended her right hand to Lars, who shook it briefly.

“Please make sure you do, Mr. Sivertsen. I wish I had more time for small talk, but I have other business to attend to on the station, if you don’t mind,” Serra said. Lars walked to her side of the desk and escorted her to the door.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Gomez. I wish you good luck with the company. Don’t be a stranger,” he said, moving his hands to his back.

“Thanks, councilman. Perhaps we’ll meet again someday, under better circumstances,” Serra replied, with a bitter tone in her voice.

Besides housing the Alliance Council, the Bastion featured a large variety of other facilities as well. Shops, embassies, exchange halls, entertainment in multiple forms and residency for Alliance officials and personnel. Serra was in one of its many exchange halls, looking for the Arlin she was sent out to recruit. The place was bustling with people of all kinds. The hall was currently being used for a student exchange program; many young people from all Alliance races were trying to get an internship at one of the many companies that were present there. Serra only knew her target was supposed to attend the fair, but finding her in this crowd would be quite a task. She had downloaded a floor plan and a guide to her wrist pad at the entrance of the fair and was browsing the map, hoping to find anything related to the Arlin. She soon located a booth that sounded like she would find an Arlin there and started threading her way through the crowd.

A large Arlin of the Pure Caste greeted Serra as she approached their stand. Her white wings shone beautifully in the light and she had a regal look about her. A thin, but elegant golden necklace with several glittering diamonds hung around her long, slender neck.

“Hello, how may we be of service to you today?” she asked with a soft, kind voice.

“Uh, actually, I was hoping you could help me find Tyndra Emberwing – she’s also an Arlin,” Serra said hesitantly.

“Tyndra? She’s Arlin Infernis, unlike me. I’m of the Pure Caste,” the Arlin replied with what sounded like arrogance to Serra. She knew very little about Arlin society, but she was aware that they used a caste system, which had never quite worked for her own race.

“I’m sorry. I meant no disrespect, milady,” Serra tried, hoping to alleviate her insult.

The Arlin nodded curtly before she continued speaking.

“You are forgiven. Tyndra is somewhere around here, I believe. What is your business with her, if I may be so bold to ask?” the Arlin asked, putting the tips of her fingers together and tilting her head oddly several times at Serra.

“I need to speak to her regarding an issue of great importance,” Serra replied, hoping it would be enough to get the Arlin off her back and obtain directions to where she could find Tyndra.

The Arlin was silent for a moment. Serra felt uncomfortable, not really knowing where to look.

“I admire your discretion. You will find Tyndra at stand five B, just a few rows behind ours,” she finally said.

“Thank you, milady,” Serra replied and hurried off to the given location.

When Serra reached the stand, she spotted Tyndra immediately. She was larger than Serra had pictured her to be. She had only ever met one Arlin before: an Arlin Terraris named Tryu, who had been roughly the size of a crow. Tyndra was about twice his size. She was having a conversation with a Kraut. He was slightly smaller than most others of his kind, but he still dwarfed everyone in his vicinity. As Serra got closer, she managed to catch part of their conversation and decided to wait for the right moment to approach Tyndra.

“Not just anyone can be a student of mine, young one,” Tyndra said resolutely.

The lumbering Kraut nodded at her just once. "Understand, but am strong! Talented!" his voice rumbled, like the heavy grinding of rocks.

"Do you have anyone who could endorse you?" Tyndra asked, clearly not impressed by the Kraut looming over her.

"Endorse?" he asked, shrugging at her.

"Yes, endorse. Someone who will vouch for you and your talent."

"Know what means, not needed. Can show. All right?" he tried.

"No, not all right! You'll need someone who can vouch for you. I will not take you as a student unless you have an endorsement," Tyndra replied, exasperated. Serra had overheard the conversation between the two and she had put two and two together, so she decided to step in.

"Excuse me, are you Tyndra?" she asked. Both heads snapped up.

"Can't you see I'm talking to this buffoon?" she replied with an increasingly foul temper.

"Yes, in fact, I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. Clearly this Kraut wants to be your student and I haven't noticed anyone else at your stand for the past few minutes. And I—"

"And you nothing!" Tyndra interrupted. "What would you know about how many possible candidates have been here today, human?" she asked, radiating contempt.

Serra folded her arms defiantly at the large bird. "I guess I don't. I came here to offer you a job."

A frown appeared on Tyndra's head, but Serra could tell she had piqued her interest.

"You? Offer me a job? Preposterous!"

"Was speaking to mentor! Wait turn," the Kraut suddenly interrupted, positioning his large body between Serra and Tyndra. Serra couldn't help but back up a little.

"Hold on, young one. Let me speak to this human," Tyndra commanded the Kraut, who hesitated shortly before getting out of the way. All Serra heard was a grumbling noise coming from him as he obeyed.

"Actually, I could have use for the both of you," Serra said, hoping the Kraut would be pleased to hear something good. She felt kind of sorry for him, being treated like that by the large bird.

“So, you need individuals that can survive in extreme conditions?” Tyndra deduced.

Serra nodded at her. “Have I piqued your interest?” she asked, hoping recruiting Tyndra wouldn’t be as troublesome as it seemed.

“Perhaps, but would you mind telling me what exactly you want me and this young Kraut to do?”

“Look for two people who have gone missing.”

“Who?” Tyndra asked, clearly unsatisfied with the answer.

“Philbin, the Master Tinkerer, and Guilty Ember, a Kraut Forgemaster,” Serra stated.

The eyes of the Kraut burned more intensely as Serra dropped the latter name. “Guilty?” he exclaimed.

## Chapter 4 – Storm Front

Máraxi looked through the window of her office aboard her ship, the *Storm Crow*. It had been in orbit around Derenthia to pick up some new Circle recruits, including her personal Windblade. He was a young man named Emeron Vinran, gifted in the use of magicka, but not sufficiently to attain the rank of Master. Instead, he had been trained to become a Windblade: a person who combines his elemental capabilities with martial arts and, in Emeron's case, swordsmanship. His specialization was dual-bladed combat without kinetic shielding. Although this was an unpopular choice, Emeron had managed to turn the disadvantages of the style into an advantage through his use of magicka, resulting in a unique fighting style. Now he was about to continue his career as the right hand of the Ninth Circle's High Councillor, which was considered a most honourable position by many.

The *Storm Crow* had been given to Máraxi as an apology gift by Xer'xis after she was released from custody. Even if he knew he had wrongly accused her of treason, he had gotten what he had wanted back then. Although the two never saw eye to eye, even before she was detained, Máraxi was very pleased with the ship. It was named during an official naming and launching ceremony, attended by many officials of the Xoron Fleet and government as well as high ranking members of the Windmaster Order. The *Storm Crow* was a cruiser ship, with an elegant, sleek design, like most Xoron vessels. Its outward appearance was much like an ogival delta and very organic. With minimal effort, the ship had been refitted to serve as a mobile headquarters for the Ninth Circle. Although the ship was not the largest, its firepower and speed more than made up for it. It featured a total of fifteen decks and had a crew capacity of three hundred. All remaining space was currently used to store relics and one entire deck had been redesigned to house a library, filled to the brim with ancient tomes, books, scrolls and almanacs. It featured

thousands of pieces of writing, most of which were copies. The originals were either being kept in a safe house, or had unfortunately been left behind on Netherea.

Máraxi was slightly startled when the door to her office slid open, but she hid it well as she made her way to her desk. A young man had entered. He stood up straight and saluted her officially. She noticed his bare arms were covered with glyphic tattoos. Part of his long white hair hung loosely over his shoulders, the rest of it was tied up in a large top knot. Two entirely white eyes met Máraxi's. Her blood red eyes inspected the young man in front of her. Although he tried hard not to, a sly smile appeared on his handsome face.

"Ma'am, Emeron Vinran reporting in!" he stated with a warm, dark voice.

Máraxi simply nodded at him in acknowledgement. She stood up from her chair and walked around him a few times, inspecting all of his features. Emeron remained still, but his gaze followed her every move. A pair of long blades were strapped crosswise to his back, their hilts wrapped in fine leather. Máraxi could tell Emeron took great pride in his sense of fashion. His outfit was a perfect combination of functional and elegant, giving him a very distinctive look. He wore a tabard with the Ninth Circle's emblem on it, along with azure-coloured pants, which perfectly complemented the tabard's colour scheme of blues and whites. A simple scarf hung loosely over his right shoulder pad and covered most of his neck. His fine black leather boots finished his elegant look.

"I had not expected you to be this ..... *sophisticated*," Máraxi said, her voice muffled slightly by the mask she was wearing. Vinran bowed his head deeply at Máraxi, evidently taking her comment as a compliment.

"So, I'm Langruff's replacement, then?" he asked smugly.

Máraxi scoffed at him and said in a low tone of voice: "That remains to be seen, Vinran."

Emeron's smile faded immediately. He straightened his posture and remained still while Máraxi continued inspecting him. When she completed her circle around him, she strode back to her chair and sat down

silently. Her red eyes seemed to radiate with resentment toward him for a moment, the rest of her face was obscured by her mask.

“Langruff’s loss was not one I have taken lightly. Choosing a successor was not something I have done on a whim either. I’ve been keeping tabs on a lot of potential candidates. Why do you think I chose you over them?” Máraxi asked icily.

“I’m not sure what to answer, ma’am. I did not know this was a job interview and I have a feeling that nothing I say will suffice,” Emeron stammered.

Máraxi put the tips of her fingers together as she replied.

“You are correct, not one thing you say will matter. That is why I chose you. You are a true Windblade – you follow orders without question. It was the trait I chose Langruff for and it is a trait I look for in anyone who is to become my personal assistant. You are an instrument of precision and skill and I will be the hand guiding you as you cut your way through the cancer that is our enemy,” Máraxi said, her voice raised. Her words oozed with nothing but pure hatred. Emeron bowed his head, careful not to say a word. Máraxi paused briefly before she spoke again.

“One thing I noticed when I was reading your file. You were born on Derenthia?” she asked, picking up a nearby datapad.

“Yes. Is that a problem, ma’am?” Emeron asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

“No, but it is quite rare to find someone as gifted as you who is not from the home world.”

“You believe Derenthians are inferior to those born on Netherea?”

“Statistically, your people are less ‘gifted’, but I have to admit Derenthia makes for a great training ground,” Máraxi replied disdainfully.

“Perhaps, but then again, statistically, the number of gifted people has declined progressively over the past decades. I never settled for anything less than success.”

“Deeds speak louder than words, Vinran. I will give you some time to get settled on the ship, but I expect you to report to me first thing tomorrow morning, at zero eight hundred hours. Dismissed,” Máraxi stated, waving a disinterested hand at Emeron, who saluted her, turned on his heels and left her office.

Not one hour had passed before Máraxi received an incoming call from one of her most trusted Windmasters, Ráz Numera. The vidcom flashed to life, displaying his face.

“Ráz, I am glad to hear that you are well. How are the others?” Máraxi asked.

“I’m fine, but I’m afraid we’re back to square one as far as Netherea is concerned. We still have no evidence as to how the Shaedon managed to slip by the blockade so easily, but one of the possibilities is that they are using some sort of teleportation technology. There have been no traces of any cloaked ships in the vicinity. We’ve lost thousands as a result of these ambushes. Most of the casualties were Scarowyn. They knew exactly where to strike.” His reply sounded bitter and frustrated.

“We cannot allow the Shaedon to continue with their plan,” Máraxi said. Ráz nodded at her with a questioning frown.

“What is it?” Máraxi asked.

“Well, I was hoping you’d have any bright ideas, but we’d better not discuss them over the vidcom. Would you mind if we met up? We can be with you in a few hours.”

“Of course. I believe it would be wise if we met. There is another matter that requires our attention, but I will not discuss it now. We will do that in person as well. Wihara out,” Máraxi said as she disconnected the transmission.

\* \* \*

Several hours later, Admiral Xer’xis had taken the *Harbinger’s Resolve* and a few other available ships to Derenthia to rendezvous with the *Storm Crow*. Ráz, Grummus and Xer’xis had taken a shuttle and were now docking the vessel in the lower docking bay of the *Storm Crow*. They were greeted by one of Ráz’ fellow members of the Circle and brought up to Máraxi’s office for their meeting.

The door to her office slid open. Máraxi was already seated behind her desk, going over several reports from the fleet. The losses they had suffered on Netherea were grim and it remained a mystery just how the

Shaedon managed to inflict so much damage with such small numbers. Ráz walked in first, followed by Grummus and Xer'xis. He saluted the High Councillor as he stood in front of her.

"At ease, Ráz," she said, which was quite the opposite of what Ráz was expecting. He knew Máraxi was not one for pleasantries and such; she had always been quite strict about code.

"Well met, High Councillor," Grummus said, extending his right hand to her. With slight hesitation, she shook the large, but slender Scarowyn's hand.

"Admiral," Máraxi said as she noticed Xer'xis, giving him the slightest of nods. He bowed his head in return and muttered a formal greeting.

Máraxi turned back to her desk and pressed a button. A hologram materialized, showing nearby star clusters and systems. Several planets and areas were highlighted with various colours: red, green, blue and yellow.

'Who would have thought the Xoron race would sink so low?' Máraxi stated grimly, pointing at the green area on the chart.

"These are Xoron-controlled planets. I have already removed Netherea from this overview, because I do not believe we will be able to reclaim our home world any time soon. That is why I marked Netherea red, as well as the systems directly adjacent to it. A far more interesting thing about this chart are the yellow and blue areas. Our intel suggests we will be able to find traces of Luminar activity in these regions."

The areas she pointed out were fairly small and the amount of habitable planets even smaller in number. The yellow area was located on the far side of Kevar space, while the blue one was deep within Zar'aranos space.

"Why would we waste our time going after ancient technology when we should focus on stopping our enemy? Our most urgent task should be to disrupt their supply lines and find a way to deal with those polydrones," Xer'xis said sharply.

Máraxi shook her head and waved an angry finger at him. "Is that not exactly what they want us to do right now, Admiral?" she retorted, her voice filled with contempt.

Xer'xis looked back at her defiantly, folding his arms as he waited for her to continue sharing her plan. The others were smart enough not to interrupt the High Councillor either.

"History has taught us that the Luminars were able to defeat or imprison the Shaedon somehow. All we have at our disposal now is Ráz, and he cannot be in all of the conflict zones simultaneously. We need to find some way to allow Ráz to transfer his abilities. It is imperative that we find another machine like the Custodian, if one even exists. Moreover, Zurák's study of the silver-bound tome suggests there are more volumes like it and that it is actually part of a series. We have reason to believe that they can be found in those areas as well. We need to find them, since they are the key to uncovering the Prime Spell of Air. In other words, we are closer to finding it now than we have ever been before, but we are racing against the clock."

"So, we need to investigate those areas before the Shaedon find out?" Ráz asked while studying the star chart.

"If they don't already know about their existence," Máraxi said sullenly.

"Getting to the one in Kevar space should be relatively easy, but what about the Zar'aranos one?" Grummus asked.

"Neither of them will be easy to get to, I fear," she said, letting out a small sigh. "The one in Kevar space is on Urdak III, a planet used by their Spiritwalkers as a training ground and for vision quests. Access is prohibited to anyone who does not carry the mark of the Patriarch."

"Does that mean we'll just need to get that mark?" Grummus asked happily. Xer'xis and Ráz snickered softly at his naivety, making the Scarowyn blush.

"No. I believe we will have to make use of someone who has the right skill set for a job of this magnitude. You two are better suited to get to the location within the Empire," Máraxi said, pointing out the blue zone on the star chart. "You will have another purpose there - not just the search for the Luminar remnants and hopefully another volume in the series of tomes. We know the Shaedon are heavily involved with the Empire. Your secondary goal would be to find out just how deep they have managed to infiltrate the Empire and whether you can find any

means to expose them," Máraxi explained. It was most probably a suicide mission, but this was the time to take risks. The time to play safe had long gone.

"That's why you invited me, then?" Xer'xis asked. He looked her straight in the eyes, but she remained perfectly still and showed no intention to answer the question. Xer'xis cleared his throat before he spoke again.

"I've been having meetings with some of the other members of the Alliance and I've had an interesting chat with some Byndari twins who have been working on a prototype vessel. Perhaps they'd like to do some field testing with this new ship of theirs. I'd have to make an appointment with them first. Sending a ship into Empire space doesn't sound like the best diplomatic move right now. They are still negotiating with the Kevlar for a cloaking device. I might have to pull a few strings, but perhaps we can make this work somehow."

Ráz pursed his lips and rubbed his chin with his right hand. "I don't know, Xer'xis. It sounds a bit far-fetched. Can't we take what ships we have and just go there?"

"No, I agree with the Admiral here. This is something that needs to be done covertly. We can't show up at the Empire's doorstep with a small fleet. How much time do you need to convince those Byndari to use their prototype?" Máraxi asked Xer'xis.

"I suppose it depends on how well we can curry favour with them. I think I have a few things to incentivise them," Xer'xis replied with a smug face.

"Then do it," Máraxi demanded.

Xer'xis scoffed at her, but didn't respond to Máraxi's rude reply. "Before we end this meeting, we need to think about who we are going to send on this mission. Are you sure you want to send the only one with a fighting chance against the Shaedon into hostile territory?" he asked.

"Ráz is just about the only candidate suitable for this mission, Admiral. Should the mission crew run into any trouble with the Shaedon, he might be their only hope of survival. Wouldn't you agree?"

Xer'xis turned his head left and looked at Ráz, who shrugged at him. He seemed to agree with Máraxi's statement.

“Admiral, no matter where I’m sent, it will always be too little, too late. The High Councillor is right. I might just be what this team needs. We have no idea what state the Empire is in. For all we know, they’re all possessed by Shaedon. Besides that, many still believe that I’m the sole reason for all of this happening. I’ve heard people whisper wherever I approach. I wouldn’t mind taking a little trip away from it all,” Ráz said, winking at the Admiral before switching his gaze back to the High Councillor.

“I’m definitely going with Ráz,” Grummus said. He straightened his back, which made him look even taller than before.

“We’ll have to get the rest of your crew together, then. I’ll see what men I can spare and contact our allies. Perhaps there are more who like this approach,” Xer’xis said.

“Then it is settled. I will keep you all posted through encrypted messages. Take these decoders with you, so you can read them,” Máraxi said, handing out several small, pen-like devices to Ráz, Grummus and Xer’xis. After putting away the decoders, the trio headed for the exit. Just before Ráz stepped out, Máraxi shouted: “Oh, Ráz! Before you head back to the *Harbinger’s Resolve*, there is someone who wishes to speak to you down on the library deck. Make sure you visit there before heading off.”

Ráz nodded at Máraxi. “I will, High Councillor,” he replied as he marched out of the office.

“So, who’s this person who wants to speak to you?” Grummus asked excitedly as he and Ráz walked towards the turbolift. Ráz threw a glance at Grummus before activating the turbolift’s call button.

“Could be anyone, really,” Ráz replied, but he already had a clue who it might be.

“Library deck, please,” Ráz said. The turbolift whirred into motion. Not ten seconds had passed when the doors of the lift slid open to reveal a large open area. The ceiling was quite a bit higher than on the other decks, making Ráz believe that perhaps two decks were merged to create this large library. The walls were all lined with shelves and although a lot of the Xoron works had long been digitalized, there were still quite a few originals and tons of copies to be found. A bluish light emanated

from several spots across the entire deck, giving readers a comfortable amount of light to read. In the very centre of the deck was a large, round construction with at least twenty terminals from which one could access the digital archives. Each station featured a neatly designed compact holo terminal, with a comfortable office chair placed in front of it.

The deck was bustling with activity. Ráz noticed scribes hard at work, librarians and historians seeking tomes, scrolls or books they required for their research. One of them spotted Grummus and Ráz as they entered the deck. He greeted them with several heavy tomes in his arms.

“You are Master Numera, are you not?” he asked.

Ráz frowned at him momentarily, but wasn't really surprised the librarian knew him. “Yes, I am. I was sent down here by the High Councilor.”

A smile appeared on the librarian's face. He beckoned for both of them to follow him.

“I wish both of you a warm welcome to the heart of our Circle. This is where we store all of our findings – mostly digitalized, of course. The originals are kept in safe houses spread across several colonies and planets. There are a few original pieces here, too, since some of the artefacts still hold mysteries unsolved,” the librarian explained as he pointed out several artefacts held in stasis by force fields.

“It's a shame I don't have time to study these days,” Ráz said, intrigued by some of the artefacts they had passed. The revelation of the ancient Luminar temple had unearthed many artefacts and works of writing. Studying them was high on Ráz' wish list, although he probably knew everything there was to know about the Luminars. If only he were able to access that part of his brain ..... Sometimes, he'd experience dreams in which fragments of knowledge seemed to surface, but he was never quite able to make heads or tails of them.

“I suppose your position is not something I should be envious of, Master Numera,” the librarian said.

Ráz shook his head at him and sighed lightly. “You're right. Perhaps one day I'll be able to study peacefully. I'm looking forward to that moment.”

The librarian gave him a comforting smile.

"This is the end of the line for me," the librarian stated as he approached an older Xoron clad in robes similar to those Rüz was wearing. His gray hair was long and flowed over his shoulders.

"Master, he's here. He brought a Scarowyn Earthmaster as well, I hope you don't mind," the librarian said. The old man turned around, a large smile smeared across his face.

"Rüz! I'm so very glad to see you again!" Zurâk said, opening his arms to embrace his old student and friend. Zurâk Keronii was one of the eldest Windmasters of the Ninth Circle. He had a large beard, which truly gave him the look of a revered master. He looked at Rüz with a pair of warm, white eyes. The feature that stood out most were the intricate tribal designs on his tattooed arms. Rüz moved in to hug his former master, who was now slightly over four hundred years old. He could tell when they embraced, because he felt brittle and bony. Zurâk grasped Rüz by the arms, inspecting him.

"You look well," he said. Rüz couldn't help but smile, seeing his master back on his feet again after he had been in a coma for a long time.

"So do you, Master. I'm glad to see you've recovered," Rüz said, turning his head towards Grummus. He grabbed the Scarowyn by the arm and pulled him towards himself and Zurâk.

"Master, this is Grummus. He's an Earthmaster and a friend. Grummus, this is my former mentor, Zurâk."

After Rüz' short introduction, they shook hands briefly. Zurâk's handshake was surprisingly powerful.

"It is such a great honour to finally meet you, Master Zurâk!" Grummus spoke excitedly.

The old master frowned at his former student.

"I've told Grummus all about our adventures and discoveries," Rüz explained.

Zurâk nodded at Rüz first, then at Grummus. "He's been telling tall tales again? Most of what he has told you is largely exaggerated, I'm fairly sure ....." Zurâk's sentence ended abruptly with a hacking cough.

"Are you all right, Master?" Rüz asked worriedly.

Zurâk waved a hand in dismissal. "It's nothing, I'm just getting old. Anyways, that is not the topic I want to discuss right now. I've heard all about your wild adventures. The discovery of the ancient Luminar temple was a monumental find! I was sad to hear about what happened to Langruff, though. I remember teaching him when he was younger," Zurâk said, his voice trailing off. He looked at the floor a moment.

"Whatever was left of the true him was merciful enough to let me and a few others escape," Grummus said.

"You were present during the battle between Langruff and Râz?" Zurâk asked, stroking his beard. Grummus nodded at Zurâk with a slightly cocky smile.

"Actually, the fight would've ended very differently if Grummus hadn't been present. He's truly a gifted Earthmaster," Râz said.

"I will take your word for it, Râz. So, we've lost Netherea once again?" Zurâk asked.

"It only took the Shaedon's invasion force half a day to make us flee with our tails between our legs, like a bunch of Agrritan dogs," Râz replied.

"The loss of control over Netherea is not necessarily the worst thing that could happen. However, the time we've spent on the restoration efforts will be completely lost. Our current estimation is that we will have at most four years to stop the Shaedon from fulfilling their plans. The fact remains that we are on a tight schedule," Zurâk stated matter-of-factly.

"So, why exactly did you want to speak to me, besides catching up?" Râz asked.

"Well, you should know I'm not one to sit idly by. I've been studying the silver-bound tome you managed to retrieve, right before the fall," Zurâk said, shuffling towards a desk filled with scrolls, writing tools and the tome, which lay open on the desk. Râz and Grummus moved along with him, both of them standing on the side of the desk opposite of Zurâk.

"Was it worth all the effort?" Râz asked.

"Now that is a question loaded with regrets. I would be lying to you if I said it wasn't. The cost may have been too great, though. You see, I've

found out this tome is part of a series, which is why you are being sent out to retrieve one of its counterparts. The good news is that the tome has revealed to me quite some details about the Luminars, but also about the Shaedon!”

Räz and Grummus glanced at each other, their eyes widened at the mention of the incorporeal beings.

“The tome mentions the Shaedon?” Räz asked.

“Yes. I was as shocked as the both of you. Apparently the Luminars and Shaedon have a shared history. The tome was not specific about their relationship, but there was mention of them, which is why we need to look for the other volumes. I have reason to believe they will not only point us towards an answer on how to deal with the Shaedon, but also where we might find the Prime Spell of Air. If my translations are correct, the Luminars scattered the coordinates to the spell, which might just be what we need to deal with the Shaedon.”

“But what about my new abilities?” Räz asked, folding his arms.

“What about them? I’ve heard you can’t even use them at will. The Custodian crammed your head with so much knowledge that we will have to find a different way for you to unlock all of that hidden potential. It is my fond hope that the other two tomes I’ve managed to pinpoint are hidden in a location similar to the temple on Netherea. We will either need to find another machine like the Custodian, or we will have to try a different approach,” Zurâk said.

“What are the chances of us finding another Custodian? I find it hard to believe there is another one. So, what’s the other approach?” Räz asked.

“You know about the Kevar Spiritwalkers, yes?”

“Yes, but how would they be able to help? Talking to an ancestor would hardly help me unlock those memories.”

Zurâk shook his head at Räz, turning the tome towards him and Grummus. Räz looked at the image that filled the left page. They were looking at a depiction of what could only be a Kevar with a sceptre and a glowing orb in his hands at the far side of a tunnel. The rest of the tunnel was dimly lit and filled with slivery shadows. A seemingly desperate hand tried to reach out for the Kevar at the far end.

“The Kevar are much more involved in history than we give them credit for. Their gift to enter the spirit realm is unique and it would seem the Luminars were, at some point in history, acquainted with our feline friends.”

“That would explain why one of the tomes is supposedly located within their territory,” Grumus said, still studying the image, which was drawn with the most intricate details.

“Yes, it was not hard to figure that out,” Zurâk admitted, “but after seeing this image, I decided to dig a little deeper in Spiritwalker history. Although they are often used to accompany someone willing to take on a journey in the realm of the spirits, they are also known to help people remember that which they have forgotten. Which is why you should definitely consider visiting one, at some point, Râz,” Zurâk pleaded, although it sounded more like a command.

Râz nodded at his old mentor. “All right, but only if we don’t find another Custodian. Our relations with the Kevar aren’t at their best...”

“What happened to your ‘whatever it takes’ attitude?” Zurâk asked.

“Oh, it’s still there, don’t worry. There are simply more pressing matters at hand,” Râz replied confidently.

“Very well. I will stay here and study further. Máraxi said she had already found someone perfect for the job to retrieve the missing tome. She even managed to convince the Alliance to spare a Gald Assassin to assist him. I’m not sure who that is, though. What matters is that we get our hands on the other tomes. Hopefully they’ll point us to even more volumes.”

“This does sound a bit like a wild hunt,” Râz said, with some measure of concern in his voice.

Zurâk gave him a comforting smile. “I know it seems like we’re grasping at straws, but we’ve already gained so much knowledge from this tome. Imagine how much more we could learn about the Luminars – or, more importantly, their relation with the Shaedon!” Zurâk said. He closed the tome with a heavy thud.

“You’re right, Master, as usual,” Râz replied, knowing when to compliment his mentor.

“Thanks, my pupil. I have prepared this holotape for you. It contains everything you should know about the tome that is supposed to be hidden somewhere deep within the Zar’aranos Empire. Hopefully it hasn’t already been taken. I don’t need to tell you this, but it is of the utmost importance that we gain possession of it,” Zurâk said with a grim seriousness as he handed Râz the holotape.

“Thanks, Master. I’ll make sure it gets delivered into your hands,” Râz said, holding Zurâk’s hands for a moment and looking at him intently. A glimmer of hope appeared in Zurâk’s eyes, Râz noticed. He took great comfort in that.

\* \* \*

“Seal the door!” Emeron shouted at another Windblade close to the library door. The Windblade pressed the button to seal the door from the inside, but as he did so, the door was blown inward, hitting him hard in the chest. Emeron noticed the Windblade was unconscious and took shelter behind a nearby bookshelf, peeking around the corner to see if anyone was coming inside. Shortly after the departure of Râz, Grummus and Xer’xis, the ship had been boarded by an unknown enemy. They had gone straight to the library; Máraxi had sent Emeron down there as soon as the intruder alert sounded. Luckily, he was already close to the library when the boarding started. It took a moment before he saw someone come through the door. Similarly to the reports he had read, a small team of polydrones marched into the library. Five of them in a tight formation. The leader was the only one with blackened eyes, Emeron noticed. He would have to take that one out first.

“Listen up! Everyone in here, show yourselves with your hands up. All we are after is a silver-bound tome. The sooner we get it, the more of you will stay alive!” the leader of the squad shouted through the room with a strangely distorted voice. From the corner of his eyes, Emeron noticed a librarian shuffle out of cover with his hands up, walking slowly towards the squad of intruders. The leader of the squad saw him too and approached him.

“You! Where is the silver-bound tome?” the possessed android demanded, pointing the gun in its right hand at the face of the librarian.

“There are many tomes here, I don’t know which one you—”

Before the librarian had a chance to finish his sentence, the man-machine pulled the trigger, blowing a hole into the librarian’s head. He slumped to the ground, smoke emerging from the boiling mess that was once his head.

“Then we will find someone who can hand it to us. Any volunteers?” the leader demanded. Silence followed; it seemed no one wanted to meet a similar fate as the poor librarian. After a short while, the leader of the squad signalled for the rest to spread out.

“Your lack of cooperation will be punished! The first five individuals we find will be killed without pardon,” the leader shouted. Emeron assessed the situation as best as he could and noticed one of the polydrones heading his way. He got into a crouching position, ready to strike as soon as it appeared around the corner. He elegantly pulled both of his blades from their sheaths and readied himself. The sound of footsteps grew larger. Three metres, two metres, one metre. He rolled over his left shoulder and jerked both blades up, cutting straight through the artificial skin of the android - at least, that’s what he thought would happen. Instead, the machine sidestepped his strike, pointed its rifle at him and pulled the trigger. Emeron only barely managed to evade the incoming burst. He recovered quickly, jumping to his feet in a balanced upright position with both blades pointed towards his target, one pointed straight in front of him and the other above his head. He quickly thrust the front blade at the rifle, hoping his foe would respond by pulling it away. The polydrone was predictable enough to do just that. With his other blade, he cut the rifle in half, leaving it unarmed. But he was not prepared for an immediate counterattack, and the man-machine punched him in the face hard. Emeron staggered, but managed to regain his balance fast. His foe pointed an open palm at him; Emeron anticipated the discharge coming from the weapon built in its arm and nimbly dodged it. With a swift strike, he struck at the arm, dismembering the android’s limb slightly under the elbow. It landed on the floor with a heavy, satisfying thud. A cocky smile appeared on his face. The poly-

drone charged the cannon in its other arm, making sure to keep Emeron at a safe distance. Right before it fired its weapon, Emeron pointed his right hand towards it and summoned a pocket of air that imploded right where the discharge would have exited the cannon, causing the discharge to head the only way it could: right back into the weapon. The man-machine's arm melted away in a mere second, leaving it completely defenceless. Emeron struck both of his blades crosswise at the torso of his adversary, slicing it to pieces. Various fluids and smoke emerged from the body. He looked down at it with a contented smile, but his victory was short-lived as he heard several shots elsewhere in the library. He counted five.

"Five have died needlessly! Cooperate and we will spare the rest of you," the voice of the squad leader boomed through the library.

"It's right here! Take it!" Emeron heard Zurâk shout from the far side of the library. He cursed the old man for being so foolish, but realized it might be the best choice, given the amount of trouble he had gone through to get rid of one polydrone. He could never face several at the same time.

"A wise choice. Come out here, where I can see you, with the tome above your head!"

Emeron peeked around the corner; he noticed the squad had regrouped. Zurâk approached them with the tome above his head.

"All right, lower it, slowly ..... Any sudden moves and you're as dead as your fellow librarians," the leader threatened. One of the other squad members stepped forward and took the tome from Zurâk.

"It was a pleasure doing business," the squad leader said.

Zurâk remained still for a moment, not knowing if replying would be the wisest of actions at the moment.

"Do you want me to kill him?" the android who had taken the tome asked, pointing a handgun at Zurâk.

The squad leader shook its head. "We have what we needed. This old man has done enough for us already," it said. The way he said it struck Emeron as strange. As if it knew Zurâk somehow, he thought.

"It would seem that we're ahead of the Shaedon, for a change," Zurâk said, with a hint of satisfaction in his voice.

The squad leader scoffed at Zurâk. “Hardly, but if that’s what you’d like to think, so be it. Where’s number four?” it asked, looking at the remainder of the squad.

“Terminated,” one of the others replied. The leader looked around the library for a moment, then shrugged.

“Fine, they got one. Seems like a reasonable trade,” the leader said as he turned towards the exit. Zurâk was still standing in the same spot, folding his arms as he watched the enemy squad leave the library. As soon as they walked through the door, Emeron stalked after them, wondering where in the prophets’ names they were headed, but as soon as he rounded the corner, they were gone.

A few minutes later, the intruder alert was turned off. There had been no trace of the squad anywhere on the ship. The only possible explanation was that they had teleported out, but their exact method of escape remained a mystery. Emeron made his way back to the library and found Zurâk kneeling right next to the mangled polydrone to inspect it. He looked up when he noticed Emeron walking up to him.

“This is your handiwork?” he stated, more as a fact than a question.

Emeron nodded at him, kneeling right on the other side of the still smouldering machine.

“We need to salvage what we can. I bet we could learn a thing or two from whatever is inside this android’s memory storage,” Zurâk said.

“I’ll have someone take a look at it. There are a few people around the ship who know their way around advanced tech like this,” Emeron said, hoping he hadn’t cut through any vital systems.

“So, why did you give them what they wanted?” Emeron asked, frowning his brow at the old man.

“Because I did not want anyone else to get hurt and between you and me, I’ve already got what I needed from that tome. Thanks to you, it seems this turned out to be quite a trade,” Zurâk replied with a satisfied smile on his face.

“At the cost of six lives, I hope it was worth it,” Emeron replied bitterly.

## Chapter 5 – Double-crossed

“It’s been nearly two hours now. How long are we supposed to wait?” Cronjo asked, fidgeting with his wrist pad. Lerion sighed and pulled the rim of his hat down further. His feet were resting on the top of the shuttle’s dashboard.

“How can you sleep at a time like this? Man, if I had known this job was this boring, I wouldn’t have taken it in the first place!” Cronjo continued his nagging, while Lerion still ignored him.

“Are you even listening to me?” he asked, after Lerion still hadn’t satisfied him with an answer.

“Look, kid, jobs like this aren’t what they show you in all those holo movies. They cut out all the parts where all you can do is wait. Which is exactly what I’m doing right now. You might as well take a nap too. The shuttle’s sensors will detect any approaching ships,” Lerion said, hoping Cronjo would shut the hell up. He wondered if Cronjo had been put in the simulation to annoy him and test his patience. They had put the shuttle in orbit around a small planet near the Zar’aranos border. Ships passed them by at irregular intervals, but not a single ship had bothered to contact them – which was exactly the plan. A freighter heading into Empire space was supposed to pass by any time soon. That’s when they would fake their accident and send out a distress signal. Lerion thought they were lucky enough they managed to get this old heap of junk to fly in the first place, so faking an engine failure would be much easier than the amount of repairs they had performed on all critical systems.

Not twenty minutes later, an alarm went off, warning the two Gald of an incoming vessel that matched the signature they were given before. Lerion removed his feet from the dashboard and checked the computer’s readings.

“Looks like she’s just around the corner. It’s show time!” he said excitedly.

“About fucking time!” Cronjo added, still sounding annoyed, but clearly as excited as Lerion.

“Their ETA is about five minutes from now. I suggest we start venting plasma from the engine, make a good show of it,” Lerion said, frantically pressing buttons on the dashboard in the meantime.

“Yeah, I’ll move to the back and get started. I’ll give you a sign when I’m ready,” Cronjo said, picking up his toolbox and dashing off towards the back of the shuttle, where the engine was located. In the meantime, Lerion had initiated the distress signal, setting it to a fairly low bandwidth so that it could only be picked up by ships in their vicinity.

Cronjo removed the top plating from underneath the engine’s control panel and reconnected several wires, so they would cause an engine failure once he’d start smashing buttons on the control panel.

“All right, we’re good to go!” he shouted to the front of the shuttle.

“The distress signal has been activated! Everything’s ready, go ahead and vent that plasma,” Lerion shouted back.

“Okidoke!” Cronjo replied while inputting several commands to overload the system, shortly after which the computer suggested to vent plasma to prevent an overload.

A trail of green smoke followed the shuttle as it drifted through space. The target ship had moved within visual range and stopped when the crew had picked up the distress signal. They were being hailed by the ship. Lerion decided to allow audio only, to make it seem like the damage to their systems was a whole lot worse than it actually was.

“Gald shuttle, this is the Alliance vessel *UP-143*, we just received your incoming distress call. What’s the problem?” a human-sounding voice called from the other side of the connection.

“*UP-143*, our engine seems to have given up on us. We request immediate aid, please,” Lerion replied, adding a little faux desperation to his voice. There was a short silence before the person on the other side replied.

“Gald shuttle, we will tractor you into our docking bay and see if we can be of any help. Please hold.”

The connection was shut off immediately after that statement. He looked at Cronjo, who was seated next to him.

“Well, looks like all we do now is wait for Vester to strike. They’ll need to lower their shields to tractor us in.”

“So, once we are safely inside that docking bay, we assist with the boarding, right?” Cronjo asked with a wicked grin on his face. Lerion shook his head.

“Nah, this is Vester’s show. I wouldn’t want to steal it,” he said smugly.

Cronjo’s jaw dropped in response to Lerion’s indifference. “Are you fucking serious?” he asked.

“Yeah, I am. You can go in guns blazing if you want. I’m good right here. Vester never gave us any orders to assist with the actual boarding of this ship. Besides, there’s bound to be a ton of people in that docking bay, just in case we pull off a stunt. It would be in our best interest to act as surprised as they are. If we even make it into that docking bay, for starters,” Lerion said. The smuggler had experienced several raids similar to this one. It was a classic and one that still worked on everyone foolish enough to have a kind, trusting heart, and Lerion had met his fair share of trusting fools. Lerion could feel the tractor beam bringing the shuttle in, which was a slow process. By now, the freighter would have to lower their shields; it was only a matter of time before Vester would spring his trap and disable the engines and weapon system of the freighter.

“Any sign of the *Claw* yet?” Cronjo asked, trying to peek on Lerion’s dashboard screen. Lerion shook his head and leaned back for a moment.

“I think they’re waiting until we’re either inside the docking bay or close enough to it, so they can’t put their shields back up. Unless they want to get us killed. Which is a possibility, if you ask me. You never know just how desperate these freighter captains become when they’re being attacked,” Lerion replied, not having the slightest idea when Vester would strike either.

They were just in front of the docking bay when Lerion noticed a ship decloaking off the starboard bow. Immediately, three plasma torpedoes

struck the freighter at very precise locations, disabling both the engines and the main cannon of their target. The ambush was near flawless, just as Lerion had expected it to be. The tractor beam disengaged and Lerion and Cronjo were once again afloat in space. Cronjo jumped into the air with excitement, both his fists raised up as he cheered.

“Awesome!” he laughed, “Did you see that?”

Lerion just shrugged at him. “Yeah, that was neatly done,” he said, sounding hardly interested in what had just happened.

“I can’t believe you’re so indifferent about all of this. Where’s your sense of adventure and excitement, man?” Cronjo asked, rolling his eyes at Lerion.

“This is just another job. Besides, I wasn’t too keen on helping one of my greatest enemies, but perhaps that’s a bit hard for a numbskull like you to understand. Now, we definitely won’t make it into the docking bay, so I suggest you enjoy whatever fireworks remain and sit your ass the fuck down, while we wait for our pickup.”

“Are you kidding? I’m going to fix our engines and then we’re going to dock inside that freighter,” Cronjo said. He stomped off to the back with all of his tools. The repairs would still take at least half an hour. Lerion decided not to stop him and leaned back on his chair, hoping the boarding would’ve been completed by the time they arrived.

\* \* \*

“Bring the ship into boarding position!” Vester roared across the bridge of the *Claw of Ra’asha*.

“Yes, sir!” the helmsman said, immediately following his order.

“Sir, I’ve just finished scanning the ship. This is definitely the one you were after. One hundred percent confirmed,” a female Kevlar bridge officer stated. A satisfied grin appeared on Vester’s face as he clenched his fist.

“All right, Ajira, ready our equipment for the boarding. I’ll meet you down at deck seven,” Vester said, looking right into his prime mate’s bright yellow eyes. She nodded at him and stood up from the chair right next to Vester.

“They are easy game,” she purred confidently as she strode off the bridge.

“Engage the boarding clamps as soon as we’re in position and cut them open,” Vester commanded the helmsman.

“Aye, sir!”

A few moments later, Vester could hear the pleasing sound of the ship latching onto its target and the laser drills cutting through the armoured hull of the freighter.

“I’m heading out. Stand by until I give the signal,” Vester shouted across the bridge as he darted after his mate.

When Vester made it down to deck seven, Ajira was already fully equipped and had just finished priming her weapons. She turned around when she heard the heavy thuds of Vester’s footsteps coming around the corner. Four other Kevar were with her, all of them female. They all wore full body armour and three of them had already put on their helmets, standing ready for the assault to begin.

“The lasers have nearly cut through the inner layer of their hull. Your weapons are locked and loaded,” she said, throwing Vester’s favourite shotgun at him. He caught it with ease and fit it to one of the weapon slots on the back of his armour.

“They’ll be waiting for us down there, as usual. Just wait for the lasers to finish cutting and engage your stealth emitter. We’ll distract them with smoke bombs. Don’t use firearms until I’ve given the order and keep your melee weapons at the ready. Understood?” Vester commanded.

He put on his helmet and engaged the infrared filter. The squad was standing right next to the laser drills as they cut through the final layer of the freighter’s hull. When they disengaged, they had cut a large, neat circle. The metal glowed red and yellow and for a moment; it didn’t seem like the disc would fall down. Suddenly, the metal creaked with fatigue and the disc came crashing in. Immediately after it fell, Vester threw several smoke and tear gas grenades down the hole to create cover.

"Jump down, now!" he bellowed through the helmet's communicator. Ajira was the first to go down, shortly after which Vester heard several men in the corridor below scream in agony. She had already slain her first few victims. Vester's hunter's instincts took over from that moment, the rush of adrenaline giving him greater strength and heightened senses. It took the entire squad only half a minute to dispose of the preliminary security team. They clearly were not trained for this.

Shortly after the rush of battle had receded, Vester almost wished their opponents would be stronger. But their raid was not finished yet. The smoke from the grenades had dissipated and Vester counted a total of ten bodies spread across the corridor. The ship was still on red alert, but no other security personnel had presented themselves in the past few minutes.

"Where are the goods we're after?" Ajira asked, hunched over one of the security people to check his communicator and see if she could tap into their frequency.

"We should pay the captain of this vessel a visit and ask," Vester replied, putting his large hunting knife into the weapon slot on his right hip. He then reached for the shotgun on his back and poked his head around the corner to check if anyone was foolish enough to try and stop them. The corridor proved to be empty. Ajira got up after fidgeting with the security guard's communicator and stalked up to Vester.

"I've tapped into their frequency; they've sent no other guards down. I don't know why," she said, sounding slightly surprised.

Vester scoffed. "They're either big fools, or they've got some trick up their sleeves. Stay focused and reengage your stealth fields as soon as we get into the turbolift to the bridge."

"Yes, sir," all of them replied to his command. They moved forward through the corridor and entered the turbolift at the end. Ajira ripped the plating off the command panel and held her wrist pad near it. When she managed to hack the system, the turbolift came into motion. Then they all engaged their stealth generators, making it seem like they dissolved into thin air.

The bridge door slid open and all four guards looked at each other in confusion for a moment. The lift was empty. One of them noticed a slight

shift in the air, but before he could shout to warn the others about the stealth fields, he was hit in the face and chest with a hail of razor-sharp shotgun bullets. The three remaining guards were quickly disposed of by the rest of Vester's squad, leaving the rest of the bridge crew standing in shock as they witnessed four well-equipped guards being mowed down.

Vester disengaged his stealth generator and walked up towards the captain. He was a middle-aged human who looked like he had seen better days. Vester shoved a datapad into his face and asked: "I'm looking for this particular object. Would you be so kind as to show me where I can find it?" He stared into the human's eyes like a hunter would at its prey. He could almost taste the man's fear and saw him shudder slightly.

"You must be mistaken, I'm just a simple freighter captain. Why would I carry something like that?"

"Wrong answer," Vester said, snapping the man's left pinky. The man screamed and fell to one knee, but Vester held his right arm and pulled him up to make him stand again. Tears ran down the captain's face, which turned red from the pain.

"Where is it? Or it won't be you who gets hurt next," Vester threatened.

"A-all right, all right! It's in our safe down in the cargo hold," the captain stuttered.

"Show me. No funny stuff, or I'll trash your entire ship. Which wouldn't be hard, really," Vester said, adding a little insult to injury. He turned to face Ajira and nodded. It was the sign for her to stay there and keep an eye on the rest of the bridge crew, while Vester and one of the others proceeded down to the cargo hold.

"You're with me, Tardessa," he said. A young female Kevar with white and red fur and bright green eyes nodded at him in acknowledgement. She followed her much larger master.

"May I ask you just one question?" the captain asked, his voice trembling as they were waiting for the turbolift to reach its destination.

"You're already asking me a question," Vester said. He could tell the human was considering if he should ask the question or not.

"How exactly did you know about our cargo? I mean, I didn't even know we were moving this item until fifteen minutes before we departed from the station."

"I have my sources," Vester answered, clearly showing he had no interest in continuing the conversation.

"O-of course you do. I was just wondering."

"When this door opens, there'd better not be any surprises, or you're dead."

The captain swallowed hard when Vester prodded the tip of his hunting knife into the man's lower back. Vester could smell his fear. He had to suppress his hunter's instincts not to kill the man on the spot. Tardessa was pointing her guns at the exit as the door slid open. No one seemed to be down there. The bay was filled with crates, barrels and containers as far as Vester could see.

"Take us to the safe, slowly," he commanded, pushing the captain hard in his back, nearly causing him to trip over his own feet. Vester threw a glance at Tardessa, who kept pointing her guns forward. She nodded at him as they went forward.

"Cover our backs," Vester said, cocking his head backward. She followed the command immediately and turned around, checking if anyone was following them. Vester heard the high pitched noise of her armour's kinetic shield being activated. *A wise precaution*, he thought. Still, he decided not to engage his own. It would encumber him too much in case the captain pulled a stunt. They kept marching through the cargo hold until they reached the far wall, where a large round safe door was set into the wall. A panel right next to it allowed a person to open it through voice command, hand print and eye scan.

"Open it and keep calm," Vester said, pushing the captain forward.

"Please, don't hurt me," the captain whined. He initiated the safe's opening sequence by putting his hand on the scanner, followed by the iris scan and finally the voice command.

"Captain John Green, authorization code U, P, one, four, three," he stated in a loud and clear manner. A short moment of silence passed before the round safe door opened, retracting into the doorway and rolling out of the way.

Vester frowned at the human. "Your authorization code is the same as your ship's designation?"

"Yes, I thought it would be easy to remember that way," the captain replied shakily.

*What a fool*, Vester thought. "Whatever, let's head inside and you can hand me what we came here for," he said, gesturing for the captain to step inside the safe. The man glanced back down the cargo hold before heading in. Vester noticed that and grabbed his left arm to stop him.

"Wait! There's no one down here, right?" he asked, motioning back to the hold.

The human's eyes widened in fear and he shook his head nervously. "No! I swear!"

"Tardessa, block the entrance to the safe," Vester commanded. She padded closer, covering the area in front of the safe without a word.

"Let's have a peek inside, human."

The captain went inside the safe and Vester followed him, ducking down so he could fit through the doorway. The inside of the safe was about five square metres and lined with shelves. There were crates everywhere, stacked on top of each other. The captain searched the safe for a while. After a few minutes, he reached inside one of the crates and retrieved a large object swaddled in a type of cloth unknown to Vester. It was a dark blue fabric with very fine golden-white embroidery.

"This is it, I think," the captain said, handing it over to Vester, who took it with both hands. It was definitely heavier than he had thought. Vester folded the cloth sideways to see if this was truly what they were after. He had never seen a tome like this before. Its cover was made of a silvery metal and looking at his own reflection in the cover felt strange and alien. He quickly put the cloth back over the book. Vester pressed a button on his right wrist and the back side of his armour opened up, so he could store the tome in it. He then closed it again and looked at the captain.

"All right, seems like our transaction is done. We'll be heading back to our ship now. I suggest you seal off the deck we boarded, before you're all sucked into space."

"Y-yes, thank you ... for not killing us all."

Just as they were about to move back out of the safe, Tardessa turned around to check if they were all good. "Did you get it?" she asked.

Vester nodded at her, but when he looked closer at her, he noticed how her eyes had shifted from their usual bright green colour to black. Two bleak-looking men were standing at her side. Vester's eyes widened in disbelief. He grabbed the captain and held him up in front of him, pressing the hunting knife against his throat.

"I told you, no funny stuff! What the fuck is going on, Tardessa?" he roared. Tardessa shook her head and grinned at Vester.

"Kha'hetra, not Tardessa. I like this body, it's strong and it has a keen mind. An apex predator's mind," she spoke with a strangely distorted voice. She looked at her hands as if it was the first time she laid eyes upon them. Vester never met a Shaedon before, but he had heard all the stories. He found the whole experience rather unreal.

"What do you want from me?" he asked, not blinking an eye.

"I believe you have something of ours, but perhaps we can make a deal?"

"What kind of deal?"

"Well, it seems the captain of this vessel is incapable of a simple delivery job," the Shaedon replied, pointing a gun at the man and shooting him in the head. Vester was taken aback by her action for a moment. He let the dead man's body slip to the floor with a thud.

"All right, seems like we got off on the wrong foot," he said, waiting for her to offer him the deal she spoke of.

"We can't let you take the tome. It's much too valuable to us. I will give you two choices. Option one: you allow me to join you on your ship and bring the tome to its destination. Option two: you take it and I will hunt you down and destroy you and your crew one by one," she said, folding her arms and waiting for Vester to reply.

"What's in it for me if I take you? My contractor is offering me a premium reward. What's your counter offer?" Vester asked, already conjuring up fifteen different ways he could deal with three opponents.

"Tell me, Vester, how much do you value your own life?" she asked, looking left and right at the men standing next to her. Vester had noticed

how they were identical and seemed to be not quite alive. They were probably androids, or an alien life form he was unfamiliar with.

"I'm getting a lot of credits for this tome. Why would I hand it to you so easily?"

"Why don't you show me how easily we can get it from your cold, dead hands?"

Kha'hetra drew both guns from their holsters and pulled their triggers, but Vester had quickly activated his kinetic shielding, causing the razor-sharp projectiles to ricochet off of it. He nimbly ducked away as he reached for his shotgun and took a few well-aimed shots. He hit one of the polydrones in the chest, the force of the shot knocking it to the floor. Another shot blew the other one's right arm clean off, but despite being damaged, it kept charging ahead. Vester intercepted it by grabbing its remaining arm and throwing it over his shoulder. He then stomped on its face with his right boot repeatedly. A satisfying crack and the noise of electronics short-circuiting reached his ears after a few stomps. When he turned around, he saw Kha'hetra standing in the doorway, grinning at him.

"You broke my toys," she said, sounding impressed.

"What are those things?"

"They're called polydrones and we've got plenty more of them. I'd say they're roughly as strong as you, just a whole lot less experienced. That will change in due time, though."

"So, now what?"

"Now you either take me with you, or I'll take the tome from your corpse, after which I will destroy the rest of your pitiful crew. I'll make sure to save your mate for last," Kha'hetra said, grinning menacingly. Vester laughed at her in response.

The Shaedon reached for Tardessa's melee weapons, two large combat knives with serrated blades. Vester put his shotgun back in its slot on his back and whipped out his large hunting knife, preferring to have his left paw free. With unnatural strength, Kha'hetra leaped into the air, both blades pointing down at Vester. He rolled backwards, avoiding her strikes with relative ease. She twirled around in a flurry of blades, pushing Vester back little by little. He waited for an opening and when he

finally found one, thrust the blade through her left side, slightly under her ribcage. She staggered, noticing she was losing blood. Vester used this opportunity to charge at her. He drove his right shoulder into her chest. The wind blew out of her lungs; the impact caused her to lose her grip on the blades. With his free hand, he grabbed her by the throat and lifted her up, ready to strike with his blade.

"You ... will ... only kill her ..." she barely managed to say.

"Then let go of her!" he hissed at Kha'hetra. She raised both of her hands up, balled them up into fists and struck down at Vester's arm. Despite his considerable strength, he couldn't help but loosen his grip on her. She grabbed his left arm and kicked him hard in the side three times, causing him to topple over. She ran for the blades that were lying on the floor. Vester only barely managed to grab her by one of her ankles.

"Let go!" she screamed, stomping on his hand. Vester growled at her. As he got up, he threw the large blade right at her. It pierced the flesh right in her lower back. She tried to remove it, but it was hard to reach. Vester had recovered and positioned himself right behind her. He grabbed the blade's handle and twisted it left, then right, then jerked it out. When he turned her around, he noticed her eyes had returned to their usual green colour.

"What ... happened?" she asked, dazed, clearly unaware of the situation.

"Tardessa?" Vester asked, his face a portrait of shock and sorrow.

"Why am I ... bleeding?"

Vester couldn't find the words. He just held her and watched as she drew her last ragged breath. He growled in pain and frustration as he gently let Tardessa's body slip to the floor.

"I will destroy you, you fucking coward! Show yourself!" he snarled. Minutes passed and there was no sign of the Shaedon anywhere. Only barely realizing what happened, Vester sat there for a moment, until he was alerted by an incoming message. He pushed the button on his wrist pad.

"Are you all right, my mate?" the voice of Ajira sounded.

Vester remained silent for a moment, recollecting his thoughts.

“Vester? Are you all right?” she asked again, with genuine concern.

“No, we lost Tardessa ...” he finally replied as he got up from the ground.

“Lost her, how?”

“We were attacked by a Shaedon and some androids ... It possessed Tardessa. She didn’t make it,” Vester replied mournfully.

“Shaedon? What do you mean?”

Truth be told, he had no idea what it all meant. He only rarely lost a crew member. They were all strong and well-trained in combat.

“After the human opened the safe, we turned around and saw Tardessa standing there with two androids. She called them polydrones. I dealt with them easily, but then the Shaedon attacked, using Tardessa’s body. I couldn’t help but defend myself. I had to kill her to get rid of the Shaedon ...” Vester explained.

“That is terrible,” Ajira muttered. She obviously had trouble finding the right words after hearing such tragic news. Despite all of this, they had acquired the tome. Vester looked at the lifeless body of Tardessa once more. He pursed his lips and turned away.

“We shouldn’t waste our time on this ship anymore,” he finally said.

“So, what’s the plan?” Ajira asked.

“We are leaving and we are blowing this piece of shit freighter to oblivion,” Vester responded, angry and frustrated.

“We’ll meet you down at the entry point. Ajira out,” she said, cutting off the communication.

Ten minutes later, the rest of the squad had made it back to the bridge of the *Claw*. Vester sat down in his chair.

“Prepare to disconnect from that freighter and blow it to pieces,” he growled.

“You want me to destroy the freighter, sir? Are you sure?” the tactical officer asked, turning her head to face Vester.

“What part of *blow it to pieces* did you not understand?”

“As you wish, sir.”

“Fire when ready!” Vester ordered as he folded his fingers together.

The freighter came into view on the tactical display on the bridge. Apparently, they had not sealed off the deck the *Claw* had clasped its boarding claws onto. Loads of objects were being sucked into space, including the bodies of those they had eliminated when they boarded. He could care less about their fate. They had taken one of his, now he would end their lives. The code of honour demanded it.

“Firing cluster charges now, sir!” the tactical officer stated.

Everyone on the bridge watched the viewscreen in anticipation of the fireworks as they saw the charge being fired from the ship, accelerating towards its target. It entered the hull breach perfectly and exploded within a second. The cluster charge spread its deadly payload slowly, but steadily, going deeper and deeper, causing chain reactions with the ship’s internal systems until it reached the ship’s core. The smaller explosions kept going for a little while, until the ship’s core reached critical mass. A white flash blinded everyone temporarily as the ship exploded into countless pieces. The burning remains reflected in Vester’s eyes as he watched the destruction of the ship and it felt good. A smile appeared on his face as he looked at Ajira. She returned the smile for a moment, but lowered her head soon after. The loss of Tardessa was only barely settling in.

“Sir, it appears the shuttle with Pryn and Nullister has been hit in the explosion as well. Shall we go and pick them up?” the tactical officer asked. Vester turned towards her and shook his head.

“No, leave them to rot. They’ve done what they were supposed to do. Pryn deserves to be taught a lesson and I never liked that other nitwit either.”

“Sir, they’re hailing us,” the coms officer said.

“Fine, I’ll tell them myself. Put them through,” Vester replied with chagrin in his voice.

Lerion and Cronjo appeared on the screen, but the transmission was heavily distorted.

“I’ll try and compensate for the bad signal,” the coms officer muttered. The image quality only improved marginally.

“Care to inform us why you blew up that freighter?” Lerion asked. The question sounded more like an accusation.

“Personal reasons,” came the short reply of Vester.

Lerion frowned at him and shook his head. “Okay. So, care to pick us up? We’re not going anywhere in this piece of shit now. We only barely managed to avoid being in the centre of the blast zone. Our engine is beyond repair now. It’s a wonder we even managed to get this heap of shit running in the first place, but eh, you know me, right?” Lerion said smugly.

Vester just gave him a cold stare in return, his face unreadable. A few seconds of silence followed.

“Are you done talking?” Vester finally asked, folding his arms. He was going to enjoy this moment. Perhaps even more so than blowing up the freighter.

“Yep. So, pick up, soon?” Lerion asked again.

“Well, we would, but I just decided you and Cronjo are no longer on my payroll. You got yourself into this mess, I’m sure you can get yourself out as well,” Vester replied with a lowered, dark voice. Cronjo stepped forward nervously. “You can’t do this! I’ve been nothing but a loyal member of your crew for these past few months!”

“Then consider this the end of your trial period. Your personality just isn’t a good fit with the rest of the team. I’m sure there are tons of other organizations that might hire an annoying, smug Gald like yourself. Back to you, Prynn. I’m sure you remember our little ordeal at the Kervol mining station a couple of years ago? Consider us even now. Enjoy your little holiday with your friend. Sylkwhisker out,” Vester purred.

The coms officer cut off the communications channel.

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“This is just fucking great!” Lerion shouted at Cronjo, who was still staring at the shuttle’s vidcom in disbelief, his shoulders hanging low.

“Hey, Cronjo, I was speaking to you, asshole. Thanks for having that bright idea, man. Perhaps if we had actually made it inside the ship, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. I don’t know which is worse, being killed in that blast, or being stuck here with you in the middle of fucking nowhere!”

Lerion grabbed Cronjo by his arms and shook him as hard as he could, because not a single word he had just said seemed to register with the younger engineer.

“Get your hands off me! I heard you, you old bastard!” Cronjo shouted as he swatted away Lerion’s hands. Lerion took a few steps back and waited for Cronjo to calm down.

“I can’t believe that he double-crossed us. Why would he do that?”

“Because he’s Vester. I’m half surprised we even made it this far without getting killed,” Lerion muttered. He wasn’t entirely sure why Vester would spare him, but perhaps that was all part of this simulation. He was wondering when this part would be over.

“The damage to the engine is too extensive. We can forget about flying this heap of junk anywhere. It doesn’t seem like we have any distress beacons at the ready either. We’ll need to create a makeshift one. I suggest we start looking for parts we could use to fashion one,” Cronjo said, finally seeming to come to his senses.

“Let’s have a look in the back, see what we can find.”

Cronjo had removed all of the cover plates from the engine. What Lerion saw was not pretty: most of the hardware had been completely fried by the shockwave they had been caught in. It took them an hour to fish out any salvageable pieces. Besides what could be stripped from the damaged engine, there were still quite a few spare parts they had lying around that Cronjo had collected over time. A few hours later, they’d spread every piece of tech they could find on the floor. Both of them were looking at their handiwork and nodded at each other in a conspiratory fashion.

“I’m pretty sure we can make something of this,” Cronjo said confidently.

“Yeah, sure you can,” Lerion said, giving Cronjo a look as if he could care less how he did it, as long as he did it.

Cronjo frowned at Lerion. “What do you mean by that?”

“You got us into this mess, you get us out. Besides, you’re the engineer here. I’m the captain, remember?”

“Captain of a ship that won’t even fly? Yeah, that’s a good one, you idiot,” Cronjo snapped, folding his arms as he leaned against the wall.

“I would just get in your way. You know what? I’ll go and take a nap while you work on this beacon,” Lerion said, raising his eyebrows.

“You know what? I actually think you’re right. You would get in the way of my superior craftsmanship, but if this beacon’s finished and we actually do get rescued, you’re buying me dinner at some fancy place and afterwards, we’ll go to some strip club and you can pay all of my drinks and the fees for some of those classy ladies there,” Cronjo demanded.

For a moment, Lerion looked at him intently with his yellow, hawk-like eyes, then extended his right hand. Cronjo shook it firmly for three seconds, exactly as prescribed in the Gald guide for business conduct.

*You got yourself a deal*, Lerion thought, knowing he had nothing to lose in this simulated environment.

\* \* \*

Vyrex had been scouting the area around Deep Space Station V for quite some time now after his departure. He had a vague clue where the *Claw of Ra’asha* was supposedly headed, but they had clearly deviated from their flight plan. He was not surprised at all. He would track them down eventually and when he did, he would apprehend Prynne and get him back to prison. He now knew everything about Vester’s ship, every strength, every weakness and how to exploit them. That would not be necessary, though. He would just sneak his way in and do what he was tasked with. Just like always.

A blinking red button alerted Vyrex of an incoming video transmission. He wondered who it was, but the call was anonymous and he didn’t feel like tracing the call first. He was more than a little bit surprised to see the masked face of the Ninth Circle’s High Councillor on the screen. Frowning at the screen, he said: “High Councillor Máraxi, you seem to have contacted the wrong agent.”

She shook her head. “No, Mr. Apollo, you are exactly the person I was looking for. It seems like you and I have a common enemy.”

“Do we? I would hardly call Prynn an enemy,” Vyrex said, wondering why the High Councillor would target someone like Prynn.

“No, I mean his nemesis, the Kevlar named Vester Sylkwhisker.”

“Oh, you mean that furball. Why would I consider him a foe?” Vyrex asked arrogantly.

“Let me put it this way. He has something we both need. He may have Prynn captive, but besides that, he has managed to get his hands on an item of great importance to me. I have contacted some Alliance officials and they gave me permission to task you with another mission – to retrieve that item as well as Prynn from that ship. You can deal with Sylkwhisker any way you want, you have a license to kill,” Máraxi said coolly.

Vyrex thought she was grinning behind that mask of hers. There was this certain glint in her eye that betrayed it, somehow.

“You’re gonna have to be a bit more specific. *Item* is too vague. What am I looking for precisely?”

“A silver-bound tome, probably swaddled in a very expensive piece of cloth to protect it from being damaged. I am sure you can do this, correct?” she asked.

“Sure, silver-bound tome shopping time,” Vyrex replied. It sounded like a boring request to him.

“I’ll transfer the official Alliance orders to you now. Wihara out,” Máraxi stated, closing off the channel. Vyrex sat a while longer, wondering how he would go about retrieving Prynn and the tome, but as always, that would probably solve itself once he was aboard the *Claw of Ra’asha*.

After scouting the border for a few more hours, Vyrex wondered just how hard it could be to find the *Claw of Ra’asha*, but so far, his search had been fruitless. There was only one place of any note left to check. Vyrex thought was a good ambush spot, near a small planetoid. He had visited several of these spots earlier, but none of them had led him to the ship of the Sons of Ra’asha. Vyrex had just pulled out of light speed and was now in the sector he would visit last. He fired up his short, mid and long range scanners and within a moment, the screen blinked at

several spots. It appeared that a vessel had been destroyed here. The amount of debris floating about proved as much. Vyrex brought his ship in closer to the debris field and initiated a more thorough scan.

“Computer, identify the origin of this debris,” he ordered the on board computer.

“Remains have an Alliance signature, attempting to remodel,” a computerized male voice responded. Vyrex looked at the viewscreen, where the computer was rebuilding the object based on available data. It took the computer about three minutes before it was done rendering the image of a ship.

“Classification *UP-143*, freighter class ship under the command of Captain John Green,” the computer added.

Vyrex rubbed his chin, staring intently at the freighter’s image. “So, what was this ship doing so far out?”

“This freighter was tasked with transport to the Zar’aranos Empire. It was one of the few ships allowed in and out of the Empire, despite the current instability between the Empire and the Alliance.”

“Looks like they got ambushed good, then. Computer, can you identify the weapon types used to destroy the vessel?”

“Working.”

Vyrex sighed. He hated waiting for the computer’s results. He fidgeted with the controls for a moment when he noticed a faint signal coming in from one of the sensors.

“Computer, what’s that signal?”

“Cannot start a new task while working on the previous one,” it simply stated in return.

“Hurry up then, you old piece of junk!”

“Possible weapons used against the ship are torpedoes or cluster charges. Another possibility is a core breach.”

“If they were raided, the attackers probably destroyed it from within. This smells like the work of our furry friend. Computer, can you track the signal coming in from the sensor array?”

“Working ... Done. The signal is coming from close to the planetoid, from a small vessel. Its engines are damaged beyond repair. I detect two life forms aboard, both are alive and stable.”

“Set a course to intercept and try to contact them.”

“Setting course and attempting communication,” the computer responded.

While he waited, he wondered who would get themselves stuck in the middle of nowhere in a shuttle. A short time passed before the computer was finally able to establish a connection with the vessel. The image was badly garbled, but there was no mistake: he was looking at Lerion Prynn and some other Gald he didn't care for.

“Well, this is a lucky turn of events, Prynn!” he said, staring at Lerion surprisedly.

Lerion frowned at the Gald Assassin. “And you are?”

“Oh, just the guy you've been waiting for!”

## Chapter 6 – Loss of Memory

Serra was seated at her desk in the small office aboard the *Seraph's Wings*. The office was located at the back of the upper deck, behind the bridge. She was having a private, audio only conversation through a secure channel with Chando Rombilius. They had agreed upon using codenames in case the transmission would be intercepted. Serra used the designation Gabriella, while Rombilius used the name Raphael, both codenames inspired by archangels from Earthen mythology. During her visit to the Bastion, she had convinced the young Kraut named Glowing Envy and the Arlin Infernis named Tyndra to join her. Tyndra had been intrigued by the young Kraut's initial reaction when Serra mentioned Guilty Ember, which had ultimately led her to decide to join as well.

"I've done a background check on the young Kraut you've picked up along with your original target. He's definitely related to Guilty, they share the same spawning grounds. From what I've read, this creates a very strong bond between Kraut. Stronger apparently than the bond between a mother and her child for most species," Rombilius explained.

Serra bit her lip in thought. "That would explain his reaction when I mentioned Guilty's name. Is this bond of any use to us for finding him, though?" She wondered if the search wouldn't turn out to be a needle in a haystack situation.

"It should be. There's a lot we still don't truly understand about the Kraut. We have our Saridion friends to thank for the extensive research on Kraut behavioural patterns, psychology and sociology. Apparently, this bond has an empathic component as well. In other words, I believe it's reasonable to assume this Glowing Envy will lead you in the right direction. Combined with the skills of the Arlin, you should have a capable team on your hands," Rombilius answered.

"Thanks for the explanation, Raphael. I guess I shouldn't keep them waiting. I've already projected a large star chart on the bridge. Hopefully the Kraut has a good idea of where we should start our search."

"I believe he will. Keep me posted and I'll see what I can do from my end to assist you with this search, all right, my dear?" Rombilius half commanded, half asked.

A sly smile appeared on Serra's face. "Have I ever disappointed you?"

Rombilius could be heard snickering softly through the channel. "You have not, which is why I hired you, my dear. Good luck and we'll talk soon. Raphael out," he said, closing off the channel. With a contented smile, Serra got up from her desk chair and headed back to the bridge.

"So, how are you two doing?" Serra asked when she entered the bridge. The Kraut and the Arlin only momentarily turned their heads to acknowledge Serra before turning their gaze back to the star chart. Serra walked up next to them and noticed Glowing Envy had zoomed in on a particular sector of space. He was staring at it intently with his fiery eyes.

"The young one believes this is where we will find his kin," Tyndra said, not sounding too assured of Glowing Envy's pick.

"The Magvula sector? Can't say I've heard of it. There's practically nothing there," Serra said as she studied the sector on the display.

"There." Envy pointed a large index finger at the fourth planet from the system's sun. Too close to be within the habitable zone for most of the Alliance's species, except for the Kraut, Gald and Arlin Infernis.

Serra frowned at the large Kraut. "Are you sure that's where we'll find them? It doesn't seem like a suitable place for a Saridion."

"Am sure. Base there, few Saridions. Underground. Assisting Kraut," he explained.

Serra shrugged and threw a glance at Tyndra, who shook her head in doubt.

"Well, let's go and have a look then. It's not far from here, I'd say perhaps five hours or so."

"What if he's wrong?" Tyndra asked. It sounded as if she thought Serra was a bit too trusting towards someone she barely knew.

"Then at least we've had five hours to get to know each other a little better," Serra answered nonchalantly. She could clearly see Tyndra was

thinking of a reply, but after a few seconds of silence, Serra knew that reply wouldn't come.

"I'll set course for Magvula IV then," Serra said as she sat down in the captain's chair and used the command panel in her armrests to set the course.

"Why are you looking for Glowing Envy's kin anyway?" Tyndra asked after they'd shared at least fifteen minutes of silence on the bridge. Envy stared at the star chart and Tyndra had been studying the bridge of Serra's ship. Human design intrigued her; their designs distinctly lacked elemental presence. Most other races had always incorporated traits of the elements they were bound to, but not humans. Their designs seemed cold, but effective to her.

"It's not necessarily Guilty Ember that I'm interested in finding, although he would be a great asset. It's the Saridion he's guarding, the Master Tinkerer Philbin," Serra said.

"You mean the same Philbin who created the virus that ended the A.I. Wars?" Tyndra asked. She was intrigued by what relation the tinkerer could possibly have with a human.

Serra nodded at her. "Yep, that's the one. I'm not sure if you're aware the Shaedon are now using androids called polydrones against the Alliance?"

"I only heard of them briefly, they seem quite resilient."

"They were designed by Philbin. Roughly five years ago, he created a prototype for a new type of android. My former employer, Chando Rombilus, hired him to perfect the design for an anonymous client. As it later turned out to be, they were Shaedon with the intent to use the androids as hosts, allowing them to move around freely in physical form with immense strength and firepower," Serra explained.

Glowing Envy had turned around, intrigued by Serra's story.

"You believe he can neutralize them somehow," Tyndra said.

Serra nodded. "We know he created a failsafe protocol. It was lost along with him, but they never found his remains. Some say he managed to escape on a ship with Guilty Ember. That's why I came looking for

help at the Bastion. We need to find Philbin in order to have a fighting chance.”

“It seems a little farfetched,” Tyndra said.

“Perhaps, but it would save us a lot of trouble if we managed get our hands on that protocol. We could do it the hard way, but I’d prefer to try this road first. At this point, I still have a choice, at least,” Serra said.

“So, we find Philbin and hope he still has possession of this failsafe protocol, then what?” Tyndra asked.

“If he still has it, we should be able to use it to disable the polydrones on site and take out the factory with minimal effort.”

“What if he doesn’t have it?”

“Then we’ll have to find some other way in undetected and hope for the best,” Serra said.

“It doesn’t sound like you’ve thought this through much, human,” Tyndra concluded. She paused briefly, then continued: “I hope for your sake Philbin is on that planet. We’ll do the best we can to help you find him.”

Serra flashed a half smile and nodded at the large bird. “Your help is much appreciated.”

“The Shaedon are not a threat to be taken lightly, anyone can see that. I have a feeling they’re much farther ahead of us than we think they are. The factory might just be another decoy to shift our attention away from what they are truly trying to achieve,” Tyndra said. Serra thought about it for a while and thought Tyndra had a good point, but there was no way she could be everywhere at the same time and there were others working against the Shaedon. All she cared about was getting even with the Shaedon for taking away Baynam and destroying Taniguchi Station, and hopefully redeeming herself and Rombilius after all they’d done.

“We’ll arrive at Magvula IV in a couple of hours. I suggest we prepare,” Serra said.

Tyndra nodded and threw a quick glance at Envy, who had turned around and was gazing at a map of the planet intently.

“I’ll help him find suitable locations on the map, if he hasn’t already figured that out by himself.”

"If you don't mind, I still have some paperwork to do in my office. I'll get back as soon as we enter orbit," Serra said. She turned around and headed back towards the door to her office.

During the flight to Magvula IV, Serra had taken the time to read various progress reports on the new station and approved several requests from the independent contractors working on it. It was not the most exciting of jobs, but it had to be done nonetheless. When she got the message from the central computer stating they were nearing their destination, she closed the files and made her way back to the bridge. When she entered, Tyndra and Envy only shortly shifted their gaze to the door.

"The young one believes this is where we will find Guilty Ember and the tinkerer," Tyndra said as Serra approached. A highlighted grid square on the map signified the point of interest. Serra studied it for a moment, then looked at the large Kraut standing to her right.

"Only one option?" she asked with about as much curiosity as disappointment.

Glowing Envy nodded. "Am sure. Only place to look."

"I have to agree with my student here. Magvula IV only has one Kraut colony and you're looking at it," Tyndra added.

Serra looked at her briefly. "All right, I'll look for a suitable landing spot."

"No need. Already know. Here," Envy said, pointing a large finger at a spot on the map.

Serra smiled at the pair as she went to the captain's chair. She used the armrest controls to gain manual control of the ship.

"This might get a little bumpy, so I suggest you two get yourself seated," she said. After a few seconds, the ship shook heavily as it entered the planet's atmosphere.

About five minutes later, Serra had safely landed the ship on the spot Envy had pointed out to her. It was a plateau overlooking an area pocked with craters and small volcanoes. According to what she had read, it was the perfect spot for a Kraut spawning pool. The Saridions had studied this phenomenon for quite some time, but they had yet to

find out what the criteria were for Kraut to come into existence in places like this. Some theories described that it depended on how elemental ley lines would converge with the planet, while others opined the planet's distance to its sun might be a key influence. Whatever the real reason was, it kept the research teams busy and the truth probably lay somewhere in the middle.

"It shouldn't take us too long to get to the pools," Tyndra said confidently.

"It's a shame I can't tag along for the ride. I would've loved to see them with my own eyes," Serra said. Although there were environmental suits for planets like these, there had been quite a few issues with the Kraut's temperamental personalities in the past, sometimes resulting in injury or worse. She didn't want to take the risk.

"Don't worry. Will find him. Back soon," Glowing Envy said, putting a large hand on Serra's shoulder. Surprised at how delicately he managed to put it there, she looked up at him and smiled.

"I'm sure you will, thanks for helping me out. It means a lot to me. Let's go down and I'll show you the way out of the ship," she said, gesturing to the turbolift. They all got in, after which Serra commanded it to transport them to the cargo hold.

The hold itself was empty, save for some necessary goods: spare parts, food and water. Serra walked up to a computer panel at the far side of the hold and pressed a few buttons. The floor in the middle of the hold shifted to reveal a staircase leading down.

"If you climb down, you'll enter an airlock. I'll depressurize the room so you two can head out," she said.

Once they had made their way down, the door slid closed behind them and Serra initiated the depressurizing sequence. When it was finished, she pressed a button to open the door leading outside. She watched the pair heading outside on a video panel next to her. As soon as they were outside, Glowing Envy stepped out of his suit, parking it close to the ship. Serra frowned; she had never seen a Kraut without an armoured suit. It looked like a large human-shaped blob of lava that moved on its own accord. Strangely enough, Tyndra didn't seem to be bothered by it at all. She had probably seen many before, having men-

tored her fair share of Kraut younglings. Glowing Envy shifted into a more comfortable form; there was no longer any resemblance to a human at all when the pair moved forward, outside of the field of vision of the camera. Serra closed off the door and turned back to the turbolift. She would monitor everything from the bridge.

Envy slithered forward in his liquid form. He was clearly enjoying being outside of his suit. Tyndra couldn't agree more. The confines of a ship always made her feel claustrophobic and there was always too little space to spread her wings and fly. She was enjoying her time outside as much as he. She swept into the sky to get a good view of their surroundings. Magvula IV was one of only a few planets that provided a perfect habitat for the Kraut. It hadn't been until their initial discovery that the Saridions decided to look for other planets with the same characteristics. Much to their surprise, they found at least four more worlds where Kraut existed, each with their own customs and cultures, but all sharing the same elemental bond and a curiosity towards alien life forms and exploration. Tyndra knew there used to be a Saridion station on this planet and if there was any place they'd find the Master Tinkerer and Guilty Ember, it would be there. In the distance, she could already see the colony.

The biggest drawback of leaving the suit was that Tyndra could no longer communicate with Envy. A built in vocoder helped them speak Alliance standard. She could see dozens of Kraut bubbling about the area in their liquid form. Envy slithered forward. A rocky outcropping formed the perfect spot for her to oversee the area and wait for Envy to return. She saw him crawl onward to one of the nearest lava pools. When he was at the edge, he dove in, seemingly merging with the rest of the lava. Tyndra had seen the Kraut do this before: the pools formed homes for many Kraut and they would often rest in places like this, gathering heat from the lava and regenerating themselves. The armoured suits the Saridions developed emulated this perfectly, allowing a Kraut to go on without rest until the suit required recharging. The Kraut had a very unusual way of communicating with each other, too.

When in their natural form, they'd get entangled, and in this fashion, they would be able to exchange knowledge and even memories. No other species in the galaxy could equal this way of communication. It was a lot harder for them to communicate when wearing their suits, though. Still, this hadn't stopped them from contributing to the Alliance. Tyndra had been one of only a few to work closely together with the Kraut over the past years. She had not regretted offering her tutorship to younger Kraut to help them master, but mostly control, their elemental skills. If any race perfectly embodied their element, it was the Kraut. She admired them as much as she cared for them. They were a relatively young race and not having developed any space travel technologies, they would often be called savages, or worse. To Tyndra, they were much like children who needed guidance. She noticed movement coming from the pool Envy had entered; he was coming out and slithering into her general direction. When he was close, he shifted to a humanoid form and beckoned for her to follow. He reverted to his liquid state and went forward into the valley. Tyndra pushed herself off the rock and into the air, beating her wings fast to take flight.

They had passed several large pools of lava and Tyndra's presence in the colony had not gone unnoticed. Many of the Kraut would stop moving for a moment and look at the large bird flying past them. They continued until they encountered a large stone wall. Envy motioned for Tyndra to follow closely. At the far side of the wall, she noticed that it changed to a white material with a small door leading inside. *They sure know where to build a lab*, Tyndra thought, descending slightly to approach the door. When they were standing in front of it, Tyndra saw a camera. It was moving, indicating there was someone operating it from the other side. A speaker crackled and the voice of a Saridion could be heard.

"What do you want?" he asked with a squeaky voice. He sounded slightly annoyed.

"We are looking for someone named Philbin. Is he inside?" Tyndra tried, hoping the Saridion would let them inside.

"What's it to you?"

She had hoped the conversation wouldn't be like this, but Saridions were stubborn creatures.

"I'm here on official Alliance business. We were sent out to rescue the Master Tinkerer," Tyndra lied, hoping he would fall for it.

"Show me some ID, then," he replied.

Tyndra threw a glance at Envy, who had just stood by her side all this time.

"Glowing Envy is with me!" she shouted.

"Who?" he asked.

Tyndra looked at her pupil, then back into the camera. "He's looking for his kin. A Forgemaster named Guilty Ember – he's affiliated with the Master Tinkerer. Look, we know he's here, just let us inside. Please?"

"Hmm, yeah, no. I'm afraid I can't — Wait, hold on," the Saridion said, seemingly distracted by someone else speaking to him. A moment of silence followed, only to be replaced by the sound of the heavy door moving down.

"You're cleared to enter, but eh, the big guy? He should put on some armour. There's one on the right just as you enter."

"Thank you," Tyndra said.

When Envy had finished entering the armour, the secondary entrance to the lab opened up. A short, blue-skinned humanoid stood in the doorway.

"Welcome to the Magvula IV science lab," he said, sounding only half interested in greeting them.

His head was entirely bald, with a pair of goggles resting on top of his skull. His blue eyes went back and forth between his guests as he inspected them.

"Thank you for letting us in," Tyndra said.

"So, you're here to see Philbin and that crazy Kraut?" he asked as he turned and walked into the corridor behind the door. Envy and Tyndra followed him closely.

"Yes, we're actually here to pick up Philbin," Tyndra replied.

The Saridion turned his head and gave her a puzzled look. "Pick him up? He's in no condition to go anywhere, not until we manage to fix that implant of his."

"How long has he been here?"

The Saridion shrugged at her. "I dunno, four years? Being down here makes you lose all sense of time," he said.

"He's been here that long? Don't you think it would be better if we had some professionals look into the problem? No offense to your skills, of course," Tyndra tried diplomatically, knowing most Saridions took great pride in their intellect, to the point of arrogance.

"Professionals, huh? You didn't just come down into the lab to lecture us, right? Fricking bird." Although she had struck a nerve there, she decided not to apologize, since she had already said she meant no offence.

"We have the CEO of NanoTech Corporation waiting for us at the edge of the colony. They can take care of Philbin."

"What?! A human? Are you out of your mind?" the Saridion exclaimed, turning around and pointing an angry finger at Tyndra.

"Isn't it true that they're the current market leader in the field of implants, bionics and nanotechnology?" Tyndra said, hoping the Saridion could be persuaded by logic.

"Perhaps, but this piece of tech is not of human design, missy. We're talking A-grade Saridion implant tech. I doubt they'd even understand the basics of its design."

"Seems to me like the same applies to you if you haven't been able to fix it for the past four years," Tyndra retorted.

He nodded at her and sighed. "Very well, but first, let's go see the man and Guilty Ember. He's been all over Philbin ever since this happened. I have no idea why, but for some reason, he's got about the same relation to Philbin as a Shrendag and its owner. We haven't seen this kind of behaviour before."

Tyndra and Envy both looked at each other for a moment in surprise.

"All right, it's just around the corner now!" he said, stepping through the doorway in front of them.

The lab they entered was just like any other lab Tyndra had seen in her life, and she had seen her fair share of them. The only difference was that this room seemed to be more like a hospital. A small bed was located in the right corner opposite the door; in it lay another Saridion. Tyndra recognized him as the Master Tinkerer. Several monitors and machines were hooked up to the bed and the patient. The screens were displaying life readings and brain activity. Beside the bed was a Kraut who was even larger than Envy. He was standing there motionless, as if he was guarding the Saridion mastermind. He turned around to see who had come through the door, but didn't bother to greet them.

"Has he been awake yet?" the Saridion asked as he walked up to the bed, checking the medical readouts while humming tunelessly.

"Still sleeping, Sandor," Guilty Ember answered, looking down at the Saridion.

Sandor sighed and ran a hand over his face. "Well, at least his vital signs are stable. We should try to wake him up," Sandor said, turning his attention to a cart with medical supplies. He took a Saridion tool called a syringe-o-matic, set it to inject a specific substance and inserted it into Philbin's neck. When he pressed a button on the tool, it ejected the residue and the used needle into a small container. He threw it away in a nearby trash can.

"These folks are here to pick up Philbin, by the way," Sandor said to Guilty. The Kraut Forgemaster turned to face the two strangers.

"Guilty!" Envy said.

Guilty stood there for a while, studying his fellow Kraut, but he had trouble recognizing him through the armour. It wasn't unusual for Kraut to mark their armour to easily identify themselves among one another.

"Glowing Envy," Envy said to jog Guilty's memory.

A short silence followed. The only noise that could be heard were the heavy thuds of Guilty lumbering towards Envy in his heavy armour. He put both hands on Envy's shoulders and inspected him for a moment, then gave him a long hug.

"You back already?" Guilty asked.

"Got mentor now. Teach me ways of Fire," Envy said proudly.

Tyndra had comfortably taken a position on Envy's right shoulder after Guilty had hugged him.

"You his mentor?" Guilty asked Tyndra.

"Not yet. He still needs someone to vouch for him. Would you?" she asked.

"This my kin. Strong bond. Became Forgemaster, he can too!" Guilty said, standing tall and proud. Tyndra nodded at him briefly. "Very well, I will take your word for it, but it remains to be seen what will become of your kin. Whether he's truly gifted or not, we shall find out soon."

"He pass tests, no problem."

"At least Guilty seems confident in your abilities, young one. Consider me officially your mentor now," Tyndra said, although she had already decided Glowing Envy would become her student. Making it official like this only served to show she would not take half measures when it came to tutoring the young Kraut.

"He's waking up!" Sandor shouted from the other side of the room. The three shifted their attention to the small blue man instantly and hurried to the bedside. It was hard to see if Philbin was truly waking up because his goggles were part of the implant, but the shifting of filters and hues in the glasses indicated he was indeed conscious. It took him about half a minute to finally turn his head towards his guests.

"Aw, geez, now there's two of them!" he said with a dry, raspy voice.

"Don't worry, Philbin, you're not seeing double. This is just some other Kraut and his 'mentor', or whatever," Sandor said condescendingly.

"What are they doing here?" Philbin said, sounding exhausted.

"They're here to pick you up and get that implant of yours fixed. Look, man, we've tried all we can. You and I both know we don't have the equipment here to repair it," Sandor said.

"If only I could remember ..." Philbin said, but as the words left his mouth, the goggle filters began shifting erratically. Philbin clenched his jaws. He was clearly in pain.

"What's going on?" Tyndra asked, frowning at Sandor worriedly.

“Well, whenever he’s trying to access memory, this happens. It usually lasts a few seconds. Normally, the implant would allow him to access his own memory and everything he’s got stored on that thing.”

“We need to get him out of here fast. He might have already sustained brain damage,” Tyndra said.

“Hmm, yeah, probably a good idea,” Sandor mumbled. Tyndra had a hard time telling if Sandor cared about Philbin at all.

“I’m all right,” Philbin said, his chest going up and down frantically after the short seizure.

“Put him back to sleep and we’ll take him to our ship,” Tyndra commanded.

As he was carrying out her order, Sandor suddenly seemed surprised by the realization that he was obeying the bird. Her commanding voice was strong. He injected Philbin with a mild sedative and within mere moments, Philbin was peacefully asleep again.

“All right, give me a minute and I’ll remove all the equipment so we can move him to your ship,” Sandor said as he rolled the cart with medical supplies towards the bed and began removing the monitoring equipment.

Moving Philbin back to the *Seraph’s Wings* had been quite easy. Sandor and several of his team mates had offered their help to set up the monitoring equipment in the cargo hold. It had taken them only an hour to complete the setup and hook the system up to the ship’s computer so they could monitor Philbin’s wellbeing from the bridge of Serra’s ship. Looking at his own handiwork, Sandor had a contented smile on his face.

“Thank you so much for your help and for letting us take care of him,” Serra said, extending her right hand. She was only mildly surprised when Sandor slapped it instead of shaking it, but then she recalled Saridion custom was not to shake, but slap hands.

“No problem, missy. Now if you don’t mind, me and my colleagues need to get back to work. There’s still a ton of research data to plough through! Shame we can’t study Guilty anymore. His behaviour towards Philbin is something we hadn’t seen before in other Kraut. But seeing as

the two are inseparable, I'll let you take him along with you. All right, guys, let's go," Sandor commanded the other four Saridions who had tagged along to help.

"So, where are we headed now?" Tyndra asked, sitting on Glowing Envy's right shoulder.

"Taniguchi Station II. I've already got a lab set up where we can treat him and repair the malfunctioning implant," Serra replied. She had used her time efficiently while she waited for Tyndra and Envy to fetch the Master Tinkerer.

"Get ready, we're going to take off soon," Serra said as she moved towards the turbolift.

The ship's heavy shaking ceased as soon as it broke through the planet's atmosphere and into space. Guilty had been at Philbin's side all this time, making sure none of the equipment would break loose or get damaged by the ship's ascension. Serra studied the star chart and, with the computer's help, plotted a course back to Taniguchi Station II, with a short stop to get some supplies along the way. Just when she was about to confirm the flight route, she was startled by an incoming transmission. The small tactical display on the right armrest of her chair warned her of an unknown ship right in front of her. She switched the main viewscreen to a frontal view to identify the ship, but she had never seen a ship like it before. It was almost entirely black, with fluorescent green lines and light coming off it. The design of the ship itself was sleek and dart-like. It was at least twice the size of the *Seraph's Wings*. She initiated a scan, then noticed she was still being hailed by the very ship in front of her. The face of her former colleague Baynam appeared on the screen when she answered. He stared her in the face with cold, blackened eyes. His skin had lost most of its colour and he had grown a full beard. Although she recognized his face, he was nothing like the Baynam she once knew.

"Serra, long time no see," he said, with the same dark, familiar voice she remembered.

"Baynam," Serra simply replied, wondering how long he had been tailing her.

"Anything of interest down on this rock?" Baynam asked. He obviously knew what she knew.

"Why don't you tell me? You've apparently done your homework," Serra replied, leaning on the right side of her chair.

"You and I both know I can't let you have Philbin. Why don't you surrender him to me?" Baynam said.

Serra shook her head at him. "I won't hand him over to you ..."

"Serra, you're making a mistake. I'll give you another chance to give me the correct answer."

"Or else what?" Serra said. She stood up defiantly and folded her arms.

"Your ship is no match for mine," Baynam said.

From the corner of her eye, Serra saw that Baynam's ship had already locked its weapons on them.

"Who said anything about fighting you?"

A wicked grin appeared on Baynam's face. "Indeed, there is no need to fight. Just hand over the Master Tinkerer and I'll make sure no harm comes to you or any other human who's not a soldier of the Alliance," Baynam offered.

Serra scoffed at him. "Wow, you're generous."

Baynam frowned at her and tilted his head slightly to the right. She had apparently not been cooperating as he hoped she would.

"If you defy me, I will make sure the Shaedon Armada marks any human as a priority target. I will have every single last one of you exterminated, like pests."

Serra hummed. "Interesting, I don't see this armada of yours anywhere." She walked to a control panel nearby and entered a few commands.

"You're awfully calm for someone who's outgunned and out-matched," Baynam said, studying her actions.

"I expected to run into you at some point or another."

Baynam smirked at her. It was obvious they had both been trained by Chando Rombilius. They were both calm and prepared. Serra recalled fond memories of the time when they worked together. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

"I guess it was only inevitable, seeming as you're so hellbent on getting even with us," Baynam said.

"I know I will never be able to see the Baynam I once knew. All I see now is a heartless monster, a puppet. But then again, I guess you always were a puppet. Isn't that right?" Serra taunted, hoping he'd open fire on her.

His face turned grim, but otherwise he retained his posture well. He just gave her a cold, dead stare.

"Rombilius was pretty good at being a puppeteer. I don't see you being any different from me in that regard."

"Perhaps, except that I'm running the show now when it comes to NanoTech and we haven't been sitting idly by," Serra said, getting comfortable in her chair.

"That makes two of us. Now, tell me what choice you've made so we can stop this senseless small talk," Baynam said, sounding eager for some action.

"I will never surrender, never back down from the likes of you. Have a nice day, Baynam," she said, pressing a button on her armrest's command panel.

Baynam's eyes widened as he looked at a tactical display, noticing an incoming projectile. "You think a torpedo will penetrate my shields?" he asked incredulously.

"Not any regular ones, no," Serra said, following the new weapon's trajectory on her own tactical display. Shortly before it was about to hit the ship's shield, it splintered and dissipated from view.

Baynam looked at his tactical display, then back at Serra. He frowned at her. "What the hell did you just fire at me?"

"About a million little friends for you to play with," Serra replied with a smug smile on her face.

Baynam shifted his eyes towards the tactical display of his ship and frantically began pushing buttons. Serra could tell the ship was already experiencing the effects of the nanobots as the lights shifted on the bridge.

"I suggest you start heading back to your base before your ship is entirely disabled," she suggested.

Baynam scoffed at her. "Let me present a parting gift to you."

A heavy torpedo rushed towards her ship. Serra barely managed to steer the ship to starboard, causing the torpedo to only inflict minor damage. The starboard shields were drained and several warnings were displayed on her tactical display, but at least the engines were still functional. As soon as she was capable, she initiated the jump to light speed. She would deal with Baynam later.

## Chapter 7 – A Matter of Finesse

Niksten Space Dock was one of the largest space docks in Alliance space. It had given birth to a lot of the fleet's finest vessels and it had also been a place of many breakthroughs in spaceship design. It was located close to the Byndari-controlled planet Klavask, home to various academies in the fields of spaceship engineering and sciences. The station was officially under command of the Alliance Fleet and currently run by a pair of Byndari CEOs. Employees of various species worked on the station, although the Byndari and Saridions were the most largely represented among them.

"Have you ever met Byndari before?" Grummus asked with almost childish interest.

"Only a few times. I find it hard to communicate with them. You never know which one you're talking to, because they continually speak for one another," Rüz answered as they strode through the hallway leading from the docking bay to the rest of the Niksten Space Dock. They had been dropped off by Admiral Xer'xis to meet with the Wynk twins, who had been working on a new prototype for a ship. Xer'xis had promised to return as soon as he could, but he had been summoned to the Bastion by one of the Xoron ambassadors. The message sounded urgent and though Xer'xis didn't have much love for politics, this was one call he could not ignore. He left Rüz in charge of inspecting the prototype and seeing if it would be any good for their covert operation within the Zar'aranos Empire borders. Within moments, they would know.

Byndari twins were almost always identical; when parents gave birth to fraternal twins, the event was often associated with the supernatural. Many Byndari believed twins like these were born for greatness; they were often treated differently by their peers. Nicol and Guid were no exception. Upon reaching their teenage years, they had already been

given a scholarship to enrol in the Irdab II university to become Magineers. They finished their studies summa cum laude and were given a position with Alliance Research and Development, shortly after which they chose a career in the development of spaceship technology.

Rüz and Grummus entered one of the many dry docks. *The Wynkshop*, a large plaque above the doorway read. Grummus had only taken a few steps inside the dry dock when he slowed to a halt. He took in the view and marvelled at the starship that was being built. He had never seen how they were actually created and seeing the vast number of workers moving to and from the ship gave him only the slightest picture of just how huge an undertaking it was. Hundreds of people working together to create a vessel capable of travelling across the stars – it humbled him. Rüz poked him after having reacted pretty much the same way.

“Come, Grummus, let’s meet those Byndari,” he said, beckoning for him to follow.

Grummus smiled at Rüz and nodded. “Sorry, it’s just that I’ve never been to a space dock before. This is amazing!” he said, following after the Windmaster, who picked up his stride.

Rüz and Grummus entered a small office inside the dry dock. A large holographic display of the ship’s design was projected from a holodesk. Two small amphibian humanoids stood to either side of it, inspecting it and arguing quietly, gesturing frantically at each other. They paused as soon as they noticed the pair of strangers. The male Byndari had grayish skin with tones of green. His eyes were black with green limbal rings. He wore a white leather suit that was padded at the joints and looked slightly worn. His sister had the same grayish skin, but with tones of blue and her eyes were bordered with a bright yellow limbal ring. She wore a similar one-piece leather suit.

“Welcome to our office! We were expecting you. Rüz Numera and Grummus, correct?” Guid said as they both walked up to greet their visitors.

“Yes, it’s nice to meet you both, Guid and Nicol,” Rüz said, nodding courteously at both of them. Grummus, who felt a bit uncomfortable

meeting a species he had never seen before, copied Rüz' gesture without saying a word.

"Please excuse our earlier behaviour. My sister and I were having a disagreement over some of the ship's final design tweaks," Nicol said.

Grummus frowned as he looked at Nicol, then at Rüz. Rüz snickered.

"Wait, aren't you Nicol? I'm confused," Grummus said, hoping they'd explain.

"You haven't met Byndari before?" Guid asked.

"No, I'm sorry," Grummus said, bowing his head slightly. Both of them started giggling, which only added to the shame he felt.

"It's all right if you haven't. Scarowyn don't travel across space much, so we don't get to meet too many of your kind either. For us, it is custom to speak for one another, so when Nicol speaks, it is actually me who is speaking. We understand that this confuses people from other races, but you will get used to it in time. If you wish to address us, just call us Wynk. We do have separate names, being fraternal twins, but that doesn't mean we are much different from any other Byndari," Nicol explained.

"Ah," Grummus said, feeling slightly relieved by the explanation.

"We heard Admiral Xer'xis was otherwise engaged. Such a shame, we were eager to show off our latest project to him as well. We've still got a way to go, but Guid and I can't wait to take it out for a spin as soon as we finish the last details!" Guid said as both of them walked back to the holographic image of the ship's design. Rüz and Grummus followed them, both of them studying the design, which was quite unusual.

"We call her the *Sprite Darter*. The first ship of its kind. We classified her as a Piercer Class ship. She's about the size of a typical cruiser, but she will have a ton of tricks up her sleeve! The engine is powered by raw magicka of the elements Water and Earth, which opens up a whole new branch of possibilities. Her shape may remind you of a flying creature with its wings spread and its tail hanging underneath, pointing forward. Well, we did that on purpose! We thought it would make for a fresh new design and because the tail points forward, it's also equipped with the main cannon!" Nicol explained for Guid.

“That’s not all! She will also be equipped with a stealth drive, allowing her to slip by the enemy unseen. Besides that, we fitted her with the latest in Alliance weaponry, from laser and plasma cannons to cluster bombs – we even managed to squeeze in the equipment needed to deploy a small mine field, to get rid of pesky chasers!” Guid continued explaining for Nicol. A few presses of buttons on the holodesk resulted in an interior view of the vessel, allowing them to see what each deck looked like.

“Unfortunately, we had to sacrifice some of the internal space for these systems, so the crew complement will be comparatively small. We’re looking at a capacity of about forty, but thirty would be the ideal number and ten is the bare minimum. Last, but definitely not least is our latest invention!” Nicol said. “Since the *Sprite Darter* runs on magicka, we thought it would be cool to use that to our advantage. We had a good look at some previous Alliance ship designs. We’re pretty sure you know the *Tectonus*?”

Both Rüz and Grummus nodded.

“Well, since the *Tectonus* allows Scarowyn Earthmasters to create Earth portals, we thought, wouldn’t it be cool if, instead of allowing troops to be deployed to the surface of planets fast, we could just teleport the entire vessel?” Guid said.

Both twins looked at their visitors with large smiles on their faces. Rüz and Grummus gave each other puzzled looks before they turned their attention back to the Byndari.

“Well, we’re not entirely sure it it’ll work, but in theory, the *Sprite Darter* should be able to teleport itself over short distances. Imagine you’re in the middle of a fight and you’re outnumbered five to one and all of a sudden, *bam!* You’re not in the fight anymore, but you’re a safe distance away from your assailants and ready to engage stealth mode!” Nicol said excitedly.

“Wow, that sounds great,” Grummus said, enthralled by the twin’s explanation of the *Sprite Darter*’s capabilities. “Doesn’t it sound great, Rüz?” he continued, wondering why his friend hadn’t bothered to add anything to the conversation.

“Hmm, I don’t know. I’m not entirely convinced,” Ráz replied, his arms folded.

“Looks like we’ve got a sceptic here, sister!” Nicol said for Guid.

“Don’t get me wrong, it sounds great, but I’ve only heard the theory. We’ll have to do a test run before we go on the mission,” Ráz explained.

“Well, she isn’t finished yet. In fact, we have yet to install the stealth drive on account of the Kevar not having lived up to their end of the bargain,” Guid said for Nicol.

“They were supposed to deliver a stealth drive for this ship? The Kevar are usually very punctual and true to their word,” Ráz said.

Both twins looked at the ground for a moment, as if looking for the right words to say.

“Well, that’s not actually ... that is to say ... They agreed to give us one, but only if we would send someone to retrieve it. We’re not sure why they wanted it this way, but you know the Kevar and their customs ...” Guid said for Nicol.

“Wouldn’t you want to meet the people who are going to use something of yours?” Ráz asked, knowing the Kevar to be a proud and honourable people. He had a great deal of respect for them, even when he thought they were a bit too strict at times.

“If you look at it that way, we guess it makes sense,” Nicol said for Guid.

“Say, if you two don’t mind, would you get the drive for us? Guid and I are swamped with work here and we really can’t waste our time going to Kevar Prime right now. You’d do us a big favour,” Guid said for Nicol. Both twins looked at each other, then back at their guests in anticipation of their answer. Grummus’ eyes had a twinkle of excitement in them, Ráz noticed. He rolled his eyes and sighed lightly.

“Fine, we’ll be your errand boys,” he answered.

Grummus clapped his hands as he looked at Ráz. “Yay! This is starting to look more like it! Travelling the stars, meeting new people and experiencing other cultures!” Grummus said, sounding as happy as a child heading to an annual fun fair.

Both twins smiled at Grummus, then looked back at Ráz, who seemed to be quite the opposite from his cheery companion.

“At least your friend is eager to jump at this opportunity,” Guid said for Nicol.

“My ‘friend’ gets excited about a lot of things. It’s his thing,” Rüz said.

He threw Grummus a stern gaze. He liked the Scarowyn, but sometimes he just couldn’t understand how Grummus could get so worked up about things that weren’t special to himself. He did realize there had been a time when he had felt the same eagerness about exploring and travelling. Nowadays he would only get that same feeling at the prospect of doing research.

“Oh, come on. Don’t be like that, Rüz! There will be times when things will get serious, but for now, we can just enjoy our time travelling together and helping the twins get the *Sprite Darter* working. There’s no need to be all work and no play, right?” Grummus asked. Five years ago, he never would have dreamed his life would turn out to be like this. He was loving every moment of it, even though he had lost friends and loved ones in the meantime.

“You can borrow one of our ships, since the *Harbinger’s Resolve* won’t be back for another week or so. We’ll make sure to upload all relevant information to it. You are supposed to meet with Patriarch Kos on Kevar Prime. He’s the current leader of the Kevar. If there’s anything he won’t tolerate, it’s weakness,” Guid explained for Nicol.

“We’ll do our best not to show any. Right, Grummus?” Rüz asked, throwing a glance at the young Earthmaster. Grummus nodded at him confidently.

“That’s settled, then. Your vessel is waiting for you down at dock seventy-four A. It’s a standard Xoron Gale Class ship, easily big enough for the both of you,” Nicol said for Guid, both of them nodded at each other, then looked back at their guests.

“Thank you, we’d best be on our way then. I’d rather not keep you two waiting too long. Time is of the essence,” Rüz said. He beckoned Grummus to follow after him.

“It was very nice meeting you,” Grummus said, extending his hand at the twins. Both of them shook his hand, as was custom for many of the Alliance’s species.

"May the winds guide you!" the twins said at the same time, hoping they'd get a smile from Rüz for using a Xoron proverb.

"Entwined hearts and pure minds to you," Rüz said, returning the favour with a Byndari greeting, a contented smile appearing on his face before heading out of the office with Grummus.

\* \* \*

As soon as the *Harbinger's Resolve* finished docking at the Bastion, Xer'xis had made his way to the Xoron Embassy on the enormous space station. He rushed inside and didn't bother speaking to the receptionist. She tried to stop him, but he held up a hand, warning her he would not stop for bureaucratic nonsense. The door to the office of Ambassador Janara slid open; Xer'xis was just about to start a rant when he noticed it wasn't Ambassador Janara sitting behind the desk. He was staring at a young Xoron female named Jessi Ruhani. Her silver hair flowed over her shoulders and her light purple skin had a healthy sheen. She was sitting at the desk, resting her elbows on the desktop with her fingers clasped. The one thing that truly stood out were her eyes, which were entirely black. Xer'xis understood he was not dealing with Jessi, but with the Shaedon, Sha'hasra, who had chosen the young woman as her host during the evacuation from Netherea.

"Admiral, please have a seat," she said with a slightly distorted voice.

Whatever words Xer'xis had prepared for his conversation with Janara seemed to melt away. He decided it would be best to hear Sha'hasra out before speaking. He walked forward elegantly and sat down.

"Forgive the deception, but I had to make sure you would come. This was the only way I knew you would," she said.

Xer'xis bit his lip and gave her an angry look, but waited patiently for her to tell him why he had been summoned here. Sha'hasra hesitated for a moment, then continued.

"My time on the Bastion has drawn to a close and it is time for me to move on. I have filed a request to be transferred to the *Harbinger's Resolve*, which was approved yesterday." A wicked grin appeared on

Sha'hasra's borrowed face as she handed Xer'xis a datapad with the approved transfer form. He accepted the datapad, took one look at it, then casually threw it back on the desk.

"On whose authority?" Xer'xis asked through gritted teeth.

"The Alliance Fleet, of course," she replied, putting extra emphasis on the last part of her sentence. Xer'xis scoffed at her and shook his head dismissively.

"Transfer denied," he said with finality.

"You clearly did not read the transfer request. It has been approved by your superiors. There is no way you can deny this transfer. I have to admit, Admiral, you wound me. Why this hostility towards me? I'm only the Ambassador to the Shaedon," Sha'hasra said, putting up a tone of mock innocence.

"You killed several of my crew, left two Windmasters with memory loss, attempted to murder my chief medical officer and you instigated the cataclysm on Netherea. On top of that, you are abusing a body that does not belong to you, but to a smart young lady. Don't you fucking play innocent with me, Madam Ambassador," Xer'xis said with a threatening, low voice.

Sha'hasra only chuckled at the Admiral as she noticed she had ruffled his feathers. Xer'xis wondered why he had lost his cool for a moment, but then he realized that there had never been anyone in his life capable of such rational, cold acts of violence as the being sitting across from him. He made a mental note not to lose his temper again.

"So, why did you request a transfer to my ship?" Xer'xis asked after a short moment of silence had passed.

"There are a few reasons. First of all, my work at the Bastion is done and the Alliance's politics bore me to tears. Secondly, your ship is the flagship of the Xoron fleet and you're spearheading all of the Alliance operations regarding Netherea. Soon, the Empire will be at your doorstep. I simply wished to witness your demise from a front row seat," Sha'hasra said with a wide grin.

Xer'xis considered this for a moment. He realized Sha'hasra had chosen her words carefully. She had given him a hint that the Empire would mobilize against the Alliance soon. Why she'd want to be on the *Harbin-*

*ger's Resolve* still remained a mystery to him, but he would have time to discover her true intentions.

"You should know, this transfer was not only my wish, admiral," Sha'hasra said, tilting her head sideways.

"Really?" Xer'xis asked with only mild interest. Whatever Sha'hasra could say at this point did not really concern him much. Playing host to a creature that could possess anyone at will would impose a great risk to his crew and himself, he realized.

"Yes. Jessi also wished for it," Sha'hasra said deliberately slowly.

Xer'xis eyes widened at the mention of her name. "Did she now?" he reacted, trying to sound as if he did not believe Sha'hasra's words.

"Indeed. Believe it or not, but she wanted to be with you more than anything else. Probably something you said to her some time ago. Something that's kept her going." Sha'hasra shrugged.

"And when was the last time she was able to control her own body?" he asked.

"Admiral, just because I have chosen her as my vessel does not mean she has no control at all. I only make use of her services when I require them."

Xer'xis heard the words, but he had reached the point where he looked straight through her attempt at sincerity. Sha'hasra cleared her throat before she spoke again.

"I will give you some time to prepare for my arrival. Surely you will want to take some security measures before allowing me on your ship."

"Yes, you're right. I can't have a cold-blooded killer running amok on my ship," he said matter-of-factly.

"Admiral, I am not particularly proud of the things I did five years ago, but they were necessary."

Xer'xis scoffed at Sha'hasra and shook his head. "I wouldn't call killing innocent people necessary."

"The things I did pale in comparison to the massacre your people inflicted upon mine. You nearly slaughtered us into extinction."

"I do not believe any species is inherently evil, but the Shaedon are pretty damn close. As far as I'm concerned, my ancestors were doing the right thing in trying to erase you from existence," Xer'xis snapped, hop-

ing he'd provoke Sha'hasra into losing her cool attitude. Instead, he only managed to make a sly smirk appear on her face.

"Perhaps there is hope for you yet, Admiral," was all she said in return.

"I'll get the ship ready for your arrival. I'll send someone down to pick you up when preparations have been made," Xer'xis said as he got up from the chair.

"I'd prefer that you would come to accompany me personally, Admiral," Sha'hasra demanded.

Xer'xis turned around briefly. "Well, that's too bad. You're my responsibility now and I'll deal with my guests as I see fit."

If Sha'hasra had wanted to say anything else, she didn't get the chance, because Xer'xis was already out of the office when he finished his sentence.

\* \* \*

"There we are, Kevar Prime!" the shuttle pilot said to Rüz and Grummus. The Wynk twins had lent them a shuttle and a Gald pilot who still owed them a favour. Grummus hurried to the front, so he could get a better view of the planet as they approached it. He had only heard and read stories about it and how the Kevar were very proud of keeping its natural beauty intact. From their current distance, Grummus could see the planet was covered in beautiful greens and blues; although it didn't catch his eye as much as his own home world, Wyngaya, it was certainly a sight to behold.

"So, what do you think, Rüz? It's quite a sight, isn't it?" Grummus asked, looking over his shoulder at his colleague.

"Hmm, hmm," Rüz replied. Kevar Prime was indeed as beautiful as he remembered.

"All right, hold on tight, guys. We're about to start our descent to the surface. I've just received docking coordinates. We'll be touching down in the capital, Sujara, relatively close to the royal palace," the pilot said. Rüz and Grummus sat down in their seats and fastened their seat belts.

Sujara was one of the planet's largest cities, with gleaming silver towers as far as the eye could see. The station where the pilot landed the shuttle contained embassies for all of the Alliance races and the first thing Grummus noticed was that there weren't many Kevar wandering about the station itself. Once they had left the building and went on to the streets, this image changed slightly, but it was clear this city was a multicultural one, where many came to do business with the Kevar and trade for their goods. They crossed a large square with a bazaar where many merchants were selling their wares. Most of them were Kevar, but there were merchants from other races trading off world merchandise to the locals. Grummus wished they had more time to browse the wares, but Ráz had picked up his pace. Ráz knew they shouldn't keep the Patriarch waiting.

"Come on, hurry up a little, Grummus," he said impatiently, pulling the Scarowyn's arm to make sure he would keep up.

"Sorry, it's just, this is all so new and exciting to me!"

"I know. Perhaps we'll have some time later to browse here. Right now, we should really head to the palace and meet with the Patriarch. The Kevar are very strict and punctual about these matters. Making him wait could be perceived as a weakness and that's the last thing we want right now, okay?" Ráz explained as they marched through the crowd. Grummus had a hard time keeping up, accidentally bumping into people every now and then and apologizing to every single one of them.

"Just how far do we need to keep going?" he shouted as he lagged behind Ráz.

"We should be close to a terminal. From there, we can take a coach to the palace," Ráz explained as they continued to manoeuvre through the crowd.

When they finally reached their destination, Ráz walked up to a palace official, clad in royal armour. It was made of a white metal and featured the royal family crest on the chest area. She stood proud and tall as she carefully inspected the strange pair. Once they were within speaking distance, she held her right hand forward and stated: "Halt! What business do a Xoron and Scarowyn have with the royal family?"

“We were summoned here by Patriarch Kos Potsik, Great Huntsman of the Silver Plains, Heir to the Throne of the Huntress,” Ráz stated.

The royal guard gave Ráz the slightest of nods, acknowledging his knowledge of Kevar custom.

“State your names and purpose with the Patriarch,” she said.

“My name is Ráz Numera, Windmaster of the Ninth Circle. And this is —”

“Your associate can speak for himself!” the guard interrupted, giving Ráz a fierce look. She then directed her gaze towards the lanky Scarowyn.

“Uh, right. I’m Grummus, Earthmaster of the Scarowyn people,” Grummus said, his voice trembling slightly. He turned to face Ráz with an unsure look in his eyes.

“The Patriarch has been expecting you. Please board the coach,” the guard said, standing aside to let them pass into one of the coaches parked on the platform. A pilot beckoned them.

“Geez, I didn’t know they were this strict,” Grummus said as they walked towards the coach. Ráz threw a glance at him.

“They can be. Especially their royalty. The only Kevar you’ve encountered so far were probably outcasts. Just remember they will ask you questions too. Answer them honestly and we shouldn’t have any problems.”

“Will do,” Grummus said as they neared the coach. The door to the passenger’s cabin slid open and they both got on, after which it closed and the coach sped off into the sky.

The royal palace was one of the best known examples of Kevar architecture and a true feat of engineering. It was built inside the Great Hunter’s Cliff, with a couple of towers rising above the original cliff itself, allowing for a great view of the Silver Plains. It was built in commemoration of the unification of the Kevar under a single banner. From that point onward, the Kevar had always followed a monarchic hierarchy. The Patriarch assumed the role of ruler over his people, while his Matriarch and other mates were each given specific roles to fulfil. The Patriarch’s main role was to oversee the Kevar’s progress in the fields of science,

economy and culture. He also commanded their fleet and armies. The current Patriarch, Kos Potsik, had ruled over his people for the past seven years. He was the son of the former Patriarch, Potsik Junyr. He grew up with Vester Sylkwhisker and the two were close friends, but Vester was exiled from the home world because he failed to complete his pilgrimage. Kos was present when Vester was exiled and although he was heartbroken at first to see his friend go, this eventually turned into contempt as his peers pointed out that Vester was weak and unworthy of being a Kevar. When Patriarch Potsik's rule was eventually at an end, Kos was one of the prime candidates for succession. His own father vouched for him, which meant they had to face each other in a series of trials and a fight to the death in an arena. By the time the fight took place, four competitors were left out of the ten who originally started. Kos fought against his own father and two other candidates in the free-for-all battle – a fight that was still talked about today. Although Kos had a great deal of trouble facing his own father, he managed to emerge victorious. The first thing Kos did as the new Patriarch was honour his father's death by naming the Kevar fleet's flagship after his father, *Potsik's Pride*.

The coach circled over a part of the Silver Plains before descending onto a lower platform that was built inside the cliff. Grummus marvelled at the sight of the seemingly endless rolling plains and with the way the rays of sunlight glinted off the ground, he finally understood why it had been given its name. He spotted large packs of wildlife grazing and animals drinking water from pools that were scattered all over the plains. It seemed the Kevar's pride about preserving their environment and wildlife was genuinely deserved. Grummus thought it was quite a contrast with some other places he had visited, like Saridia, which were heavily polluted.

The coach landed softly on the platform and the pilot opened the doors, allowing for them to exit.

"Thanks for the ride," Grummus said to the pilot, who gave him a warm smile in return.

“They’re not used to being spoken to,” Rüz remarked as they walked onward to the entrance of the palace. Two guards stood to either side of the door, their halberd-like weapons crossed to block entry to the palace.

“I am Rüz Numera, Windmaster of the Ninth Circle,” Rüz announced.

“I am Grummus, Earthmaster of the Scarowyn, Verdant Keeper of the Earth Mother,” Grummus stated in a similar fashion. Rüz raised an eyebrow at him, but Grummus kept his face straight.

“Please proceed inside. The Patriarch is expecting you,” one of the guards spoke. She pulled her halberd out of the way. The other guard copied her exact movement. The door swung inward to reveal an enormous hallway flanked by hundreds of pillars. The light from the sun shone brightly through the windows, casting a serene glow inside. Dozens of pieces of art had been carefully given a spot on the walls. Rüz noticed the pillars were all decorated with old weaponry and pieces of armour from times long past.

“Why did you give them two titles?” Rüz asked as they made their way through the hallway. Grummus frowned at Rüz. “I thought you said they were very strict and, well, I figured they’d be impressed to hear more than one title.”

“Titles aren’t everything. Deeds speak louder than words. That’s also one of their tenets. Don’t overdo it when we’re having our audience, please,” Rüz said with an almost pedantic tone.

“Okidoke,” Grummus said, not really wanting to start an argument. He liked Rüz, but he thought the Windmaster should lighten up at times.

The hallway ended in a large staircase leading up, with row upon row of guards on it. Grummus counted at least fifty of them, all paired up neatly. As they ascended the stairs, he tried not to look any of them in the eye, but he couldn’t help himself at times. The staircase led them to an enormous double door made of heavy wood and the same white metal that was used for the Kevar’s royal armour. Two large males stood at the door and watched the approaching pair. They pulled the doors open just in time for Rüz and Grummus to pass through, into the royal reception chamber.

Grummus and Râz had both been equally impressed by the great hallway, but the royal chamber made the hallway pale in comparison. The floor was tiled with the finest marble and a black carpet with fine embroidery laid out a path to the royal throne. The walls were decorated with portraits of previous Patriarchs and Matriarchs, as well as great works by the Kevar's most revered artists. The thrones themselves were perched on a dais, six lined up in a wide V-shape. The Patriarch's and Matriarch's thrones stood in the middle and the farthest to the back, the other four were each a bit closer towards the front.

Grummus noticed three figures sitting on their thrones. One of them was the Patriarch Kos, who was clad in royal armour. A large crimson cape was draped fluidly over his shoulders. The armour was neatly polished, but Grummus couldn't help but notice there was some battle damage to it. His fur was black and white; black fur covered the top of his head down to his cheeks, below which his fur was white. It almost looked as if he wore a black mask. A thin line of white fur ran up from his nose, resembling a reversed thunderbolt. Fierce yellow eyes pierced the room and studied both visitors with intensity, yet he remained seated. Right next to him was his prime mate, the Matriarch Nikeh, who was clad in similar armour, although she had opted for a white cloak that only covered her right shoulder. Instead of standard leg armour, she wore a mesh kilt. Grummus wondered how effective that would be during battle, but then he noticed the large lasbow resting against the side of her throne. She was probably skilled in the use of the ranged weapon, rather than being a close quarter combatant. Her fur was primarily white with a few patches of orange, which contrasted with her vibrant, green eyes. To her right was a much younger Kevar female, whose fur pattern was similar to the Matriarch. She did not have any armour, but she wore a very extravagant gown. The one thing that truly stood out were her bright blue eyes, which studied both guests with an almost childlike interest. She was the only one of the three who seemed truly interested in the arrival of the guests.

Râz and Grummus had passed at least another dozen royal guards on their way to the thrones. They stood in silence for a little while as the

Patriarch stared both of them down. Neither of them dared to speak, Grummus because of what Rüz had said before and Rüz because he had never dealt directly with the Patriarch. Just before the silence would become uncomfortable, Kos stood up from his throne.

“Harbinger of Death!” he roared, his words bellowing through the room.

“Destroyer of Worlds!” he continued as he kept his fierce gaze fixed on Rüz. Grummus peeked to his left and noticed Rüz staring back at the Patriarch. He quickly turned his head again to face Kos as well.

“State your names and purpose here,” Kos said as he gestured for both of his guests to speak.

“Rüz Numera, Windmaster of the Ninth Circle,” Rüz said as he took a deep bow to the Patriarch and his family.

“Grummus, Earthmaster of the Scarowyn,” Grummus said with as much confidence as he could muster. He followed Rüz’ example and bowed.

“We were sent here by the Wynk twins to retrieve a stealth drive for their prototype ship. They said you would only deal with this matter in person. We are here to see it safely delivered to them,” Rüz explained.

Kos rubbed his chin with a huge paw. “Hmmm,” he rumbled, “And you believe I will deal with someone who cannot even introduce himself properly?”

Rüz frowned for a moment, then realized the titles the Patriarch had shouted before were names Rüz had been given by people who believed he was responsible for the current state of Netherea.

“Those are not titles I am particularly proud of,” Rüz admitted.

“In all my years, the most prestigious titles I received were Patriarch of the Kavar and Great Huntsman. Your titles strike fear into the hearts of mortal men! You should wear them with pride, rather than deny them,” Kos said.

“I don’t deny them. They were given to me without proof of my actions,” Rüz retorted.

“Ah, and yet Netherea is on the brink of destruction,” Kos continued. It seemed almost as if he wanted to provoke Rüz.

“By the Shaedon’s hand, not mine!”

"Who says you were not working with them? We all know how deceptive they are and now you show up here at my doorstep, asking for a stealth drive? Do you not understand my suspicion about your motives?" Kos asked as he stood over Rüz and Grummus with his arms folded.

"We're intent on stopping the Shaedon," Grummus intervened.

Kos' eyes shot fire at the young Earthmaster.

"Who do you think you are, speaking without being spoken to first?" he growled through impressive, bared teeth.

"Someone who cares about the fate of Netherea and its people!" Grummus said, his voice raised.

The Patriarch seemed to appreciate his honesty. "If you two both claim to have Netherea's fate at heart, as well as that of the Alliance, then you will have to prove it. Survive a pilgrimage like any young Kevar must as he comes of age, and I will give you the stealth drive. Fail and you will be banished from our home world forever," Kos said.

Rüz shook his head fiercely. "Look, time is of the essence! Every minute we waste is another minute closer to when the Empire might strike at the Alliance. We both know it's not a matter of *if*, but of *when* they will strike."

"And I say, let them come!" the Patriarch's voice boomed through the royal chamber.

"Do you truly believe we stand a chance against them? We're spread thin as it is, trying to reclaim Netherea and guarding the border. We have no idea how large their military is, but trust me when I say we'll be up to our elbows in shit when they choose to attack," Rüz replied.

"The pilgrimage will last no longer than a week. If you cannot spare that time, then consider this conversation over," Kos stated coldly.

Several guards padded a few steps closer to Rüz and Grummus in case they would not give a satisfactory reply. Neither of them reacted to the guards' approach, knowing even a slight reaction could prove fatal to their chances of getting what they wanted.

"We humbly accept," Grummus said, bowing to the Patriarch. Rüz widened his white-golden eyes at Grummus.

“I believe the Harbinger of Death can speak for himself, Earthmaster,” Kos said as he looked at Ráz with anticipation.

“We accept your honourable offer,” Ráz said, bowing his head in respect to the Patriarch.

“It is decided then! Your pilgrimage starts tomorrow morning. Tonight, we shall dine and allow you to rest! Guards, please escort these gentlemen to our guest quarters,” Kos spoke, gesturing for the guards to obey his command.

## Chapter 8 – Breadcrumbs

“Indulge me. What were you guys doing all the way out here in such an outdated shuttle?” Vyrex asked with only mild interest. Lerion threw a glance at Cronjo, signalling him to sit back and shut up.

“Well, that’s a long story, but we’re glad you caught our distress signal! We’d be grateful if you could drop us off at the nearest space station. I’m sure we can hitch a ride back to Gald Prime from there,” Lerion replied, hoping to dodge the Assassin’s question.

“I see. Well, it just so happens to be that I’m heading back to a nearby station to conduct business. That still doesn’t answer my question, though,” Vyrex said, folding his arms and awaiting an answer.

“That old heap of junk was the only vessel our family had left. We were hoping to do business with the Empire, but it broke down on our way there. The engine’s completely fried, so we fashioned a makeshift beacon and hoped for the best,” Lerion lied effortlessly.

Vyrex squinted his eyes and turned to look at Cronjo, who hadn’t said a word since they had been brought aboard Vyrex’ vessel.

“You’re awfully quiet. Mind adding anything to his story?”

“It’s true, the engine overloaded and we were stuck there. I tried to fashion a beacon out of the spare parts we still had.”

“Oh, so your engines gave out, just like that? It didn’t have anything to do with all of this floating debris I found? Not to mention the burns and scrape marks on your shuttle’s hull?” Vyrex asked.

Lerion already had a hunch that he wouldn’t buy their story.

“Listen, pal, we don’t know whatever that was about. We were innocent bystanders in that entire situation. An Alliance freighter was helping us out, but as they were towing us in, they were attacked by a Kevlar ship. A Manta Class type, I think. They boarded the freighter and after about an hour, they blew it to pieces. We were only barely outside of the freighter’s blast radius as it exploded,” Lerion said, hoping this would satiate the Assassin’s hunger for interrogation.

Vyrex rubbed his chin with his right hand, resting his elbow on his left hand.

“So the freighter was helping you with the engine trouble and then, out of nowhere, a Manta Class ship appeared and attacked them, while their shields were down, no doubt. Sounds like a classic setup to me, especially with a shuttle that shoddy. That freighter must’ve been manned by class A retards to fall for that.”

“Yeah, they weren’t the sharpest tools in the shed,” Cronjo admitted.

Vyrex looked at Cronjo with a questioning frown on his face, then laughed hard. It didn’t take long for Cronjo to start laughing as well. Lerion stood there for a while, waiting for them to stop, his arms folded as he sighed.

“Whoa, I hadn’t laughed like that in a while!” Vyrex admitted. “So, you were involved and that’s when the guy who hired you decided you were no longer of any use. He basically left you to rot.”

“His name is Vester Sylkwhisker and that bastard is going to pay for what he did,” Lerion said with clenched fists.

“Oh, he will pay all right, but I’ll be the one dishing out justice. First things first, I need to resupply and drop you guys off somewhere safe,” Vyrex said.

“You really want to waste your time dropping us off? The trail’s still hot! Vester can’t be that far off,” Lerion said, hoping to convince Vyrex that his wasn’t the smartest plan.

“That furball has to come back at one point or another. Besides, I could use some supplies and maybe call in some backup.”

“Look, I don’t really care about you chasing Vester. I want to go home,” Cronjo complained. He was clearly not interested in getting into trouble, Lerion thought. All Lerion was interested in was getting even, whether this was a simulation or not.

“I’ll set course for the nearest station and I’ll make a plan there, after I hand you over to the authorities,” Vyrex said as he used the ship’s controls to set a course back to Deep Space Station V.

Shortly after setting course back to the station, Vyrex had noticed that someone had tried to reach him through a secure channel. He had asked

his guests to stay put while he dealt with the call. Now, he was sitting in his personal quarters aboard the ship, waiting for the person on the other side to respond to his redial. He was not entirely surprised to see the masked face of the Ninth Circle's High Councillor on the vidcom when she finally responded.

"You are a busy man, Mr. Apollo," she said without so much as an effort to greet him formally.

"Gotta work to pay the bills, ma'am," Vyrex replied with a hint of contempt.

"My personal Windblade has just arrived on Deep Space Station V, which is close to where you are. I want you to rendezvous with him. He will be assisting you in the matter of the tome," Máraxi commanded.

Vyrex shook his head at the masked woman on his screen. "Sorry, ma'am, but I don't do teamwork," he said with a tone of finality.

"This is not your decision. It is not only an Alliance matter, it is also a Xoron matter and the Ninth Circle has jurisdiction when it comes to Xoron matters. You are to meet Emeron Vinran and devise a plan to retrieve the tome. Is that understood, Mr. Apollo?"

"Loud and clear," Vyrex sighed, his face one of pure chagrin.

"Good," Máraxi said as she reached for the vidcom controls to terminate the transmission.

"Hold on, High Councillor, there's one last thing I wish to share with you," Vyrex said hurriedly.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I've already captured Prynn and some other goon. Apparently they were abandoned by our Kevar friend."

"How does this concern me?"

"Well, our Gald friend is suffering from temporal displacement syndrome because he was taken out of his Sleeper Cell prematurely. We can use his disorientation to have him assist us in finding his nemesis. Prynn knows Vester like no other."

"And what if he catches on and realizes that this is reality?" Máraxi asked. From the sound of it, she didn't like this plan.

"That's a chance I'm willing to take. Even if he does, he'll still want revenge for what Sylkwhisker did to him, I'm sure."

“Fine, use him as you please. But at the first sign of trouble, Emeron will deal with him on my behalf.”

“I don’t see why that would be necessary. I can deal with Prynn myself if he goes haywire,” Vyrex said, wondering why the High Councillor would say something like this.

“I would rather have my own people deal with our problems. If it were up to me, you would not even be on this mission, especially now that Prynn has been caught. Still, you have talents that could be of use and you are known to be an excellent assassin,” Máraxi said.

“Such praise from the High Councillor. This must be my lucky day!” Vyrex said faux-gleefully.

“Let us stop wasting time here. Meet up with Emeron. I have other matters to attend to. Wihara out,” Máraxi said as she closed off the secure line.

Vyrex sat there for a moment and considered the situation. He would head down to the station, dump Cronjo and meet up with Emeron. But first, he was going to pull up a file on this Windblade from the Alliance archives on the extranet. If he was going to work with someone, he’d better know everything there was to know about that person. Then he would have a talk with Prynn and see how his mental state was at the moment. Prynn hadn’t been inside the Sleeper Cell facility long and the effects of the procedure might have worn off already. He had to know for sure if he was going to use the Gald smuggler for his own devices.

“Hey, Prynn, you got a moment?” Vyrex asked, leaning in the doorway of the bridge. Lerion turned to face Vyrex and nodded at him.

“Stay put, Nullister,” Vyrex said, halting him with a hand when he saw the young Gald engineer getting up to join them. Vyrex ushered Lerion in and locked the door behind him with the press of a button.

“Take a seat,” he said, pointing at a chair across from his desk, after which he sat himself down in his own chair. Lerion hesitated shortly. When he finally sat down, he gave Vyrex an examining look. He had not seen this particular Gald before, but the insignia on his uniform told him all he needed to know.

“So, you’re the great Lerion Prynn,” Vyrex said, giving Lerion a similar look. He didn’t look impressed.

“Yep, that’s me. You never bothered to introduce yourself,” Lerion said in return.

“You’re right. I didn’t feel it was necessary before. I’m Vyrex Apollo, Master Assassin for the Gald Board of Commerce and the Alliance Council,” Vyrex said with a smug face.

“Ah, so you’re basically a lapdog.”

It took Vyrex a little while to come up with an answer to Lerion’s witty reply.

“At least my job’s legitimate. Anyway, that’s not why I called you here. I thought we’d have a chat without that nobody, Nullister. I’ll hand him over to the authorities on Deep Space V. You on the other hand, I’m not so sure about,” Vyrex said, deliberately pausing to give Lerion a chance to speak.

“You’re not sure, because?” Lerion asked, frowning at Vyrex. He wondered where this conversation was going.

“Well, it depends on whether or not you want to cut that forty-year sentence short a little or not. If you’re willing to assist me to apprehend Vester Sylkwhisker, you can get yourself some good behaviour credit. So, how about it?” Vyrex asked as he got up from his seat and extended his right hand towards Lerion.

He was baffled for a short moment by the Assassin’s offer, but decided that anything to cut this sentence short would be for the best. So far, he had found the whole simulation to be indistinguishable from reality. He shook Vyrex’ hand firmly.

“I accept.”

“You, sir, know what’s best for business,” Vyrex said with a dirty grin on his face and a glint in his eyes. Lerion wondered if it was because Vyrex was unsure about his cooperation or if he was hiding something, but he decided it was probably all part of the program.

“So, what’s the plan?” Lerion asked curiously.

“Like I said, first we drop off that deadbeat on Deep Space V, then I’m supposed to meet up with a Windblade. After that, I guess we hunt down a hunter,” Vyrex explained.

Lerion thought he caught a hint of disdain when Vyrex spoke of the Windblade. Why the Xoron would be involved in this matter brought up more questions for Lerion, but there'd be answers soon enough, he figured.

"That meeting had better not take too long, we're already losing valuable time. I have a vague idea where Vester might be heading, but it's definitely not in this direction."

"I was hoping the Windblade might have an idea. He's supposed to be very knowledgeable. I have no idea why else I need to bother and team up with that guy. Definitely not because I need his combat skills, that's for sure," Vyrex said, flexing his arm muscles.

"Xoron are always serious about their business. That must mean that whatever you're being sent out to retrieve is probably something that belongs to them, or something they desperately need."

A smirk appeared on Vyrex' face. "You're a smart guy, I'll give you that much. Apparently, your furry friend got his paws on some ancient book the Xoron want. I have no idea what it's about, nor do I care. The only thing I truly care about is getting the job done. Since you know how this furball thinks, I thought you'd be a good asset."

A light blinked on one of the computer displays inside the office, indicating they were approaching their destination.

"Time to request permission to dock. You're going to accompany me in this meeting with the Windblade. Something tells me the only thing he's going to do is get in my way," Vyrex mumbled as he moved towards the exit of the quarters.

"Come on, Prynn," he said, beckoning the smuggler to follow him back to the bridge.

Vyrex' ship had finished the docking procedure and they were walking down the ramp leading outside into the bay. The Windblade was already waiting for them. He was standing with his arms behind his back, clad in azure blue and white. Two blades were strapped to his back in a cross-wise manner.

"Mr. Apollo," Emeron stated as he approached the trio of Gald men calmly.

“Windblade Vinran,” Vyrex said in return, giving him the slightest of nods.

“I see you’ve brought friends?” Emeron asked.

“These two bozos? Not exactly friend material, if you ask me. I was simply escorting these men to their destination. Would you mind meeting me on the promenade a little later? I’ve got a meeting with the authorities here first,” Vyrex said, already on his way out of the docking bay as he spoke. Emeron turned to face him, but didn’t bother going after him. Lerion and Cronjo followed Vyrex hesitantly.

“Where do you propose we meet?” Emeron asked, raising his shoulders at the Gald Assassin.

“Any bar will do. There aren’t that many here. I’ll find you,” Vyrex said from the turbolift they had just entered. The doors shut and Vinran sighed. He already disliked his new partner.

As soon as the turbolift’s door opened, Vyrex pushed Cronjo out hard. The Gald engineer only barely managed not to trip over his own feet.

“Move it!” Vyrex commanded.

Cronjo looked back at Vyrex and flared his nostrils. “Keep your hands off me!” he shouted.

Vyrex gave him a disinterested look. “Be glad I didn’t restrain you.”

They kept walking, passing by several station officers, who only gave the trio of Gald a passing glance before going back to their business. When they hit an intersection, they turned right and kept going until they arrived at a pair of doors with a large sign reading *Station Security* above them.

“After you, gentlemen,” Vyrex said, gesturing for them to enter.

The room was a typical reception area. A human woman was sitting behind a counter, wearing a station security uniform. Two human security guards were inside the room, flanking the double doors leading in. They greeted the trio as they entered.

“Sit down while I talk to the lady over there,” Vyrex said, pointing at a large corner couch with a salon table.

Lerion could tell Cronjo was incredibly nervous. He saw it in his eyes, which were almost begging him to find a way out. He patted Cronjo on

the back and sat down on the couch, removing his large hat for a moment and putting it on the table.

“Calm down. We’ve just hit a bump in the road. There’s probably not enough evidence to keep you in custody for a long time anyway. You do have a lawyer, right?” Lerion asked in an attempt to comfort the younger Gald a bit.

“Oh man, I’m going away for a long time!” Cronjo whimpered, resting his face in the palms of his hands. Lerion reached inside his long coat and took out a pen and a piece of crumpled paper, then fired up his wrist pad and accessed its contacts database. He carefully wrote down the information he needed and handed it over to Cronjo, then reached for his hat and put it back on.

“What’s this?” Cronjo asked, attempting to decipher Lerion’s handwriting.

“That’s the name and number of a very capable lawyer. If you’re going to use that one call they’ll grant you, make sure it’s his number you call and not your mother’s,” Lerion said with a sly smile on his face.

Cronjo quickly tucked the note away as Vyrex returned from his talk with the receptionist.

“All right, Prynn, we’re heading out. They’re going to take care of Nullister from here,” Vyrex said.

A door on the other side of the reception area opened and a Gald officer walked up to them.

“Is this the guy?” he asked, pointing at Cronjo.

Vyrex nodded at him.

“Yep. Make sure to send your mummy a postcard from prison, Nullister,” Vyrex said, patting the young Gald on the shoulder. Cronjo looked as if he wanted to punch the obnoxious Assassin in the nose.

“Wait a minute! What about Prynn? He’s committed crimes too,” Cronjo shouted in frustration as he watched the two heading out.

“He’ll serve his time, don’t worry about that!” Vyrex shouted over his shoulder as they exited.

“Prynn, I don’t know about you, but all this work is making me hungry. Let’s get some grub while we meet with Windblade what’s-his-face,” Vyrex said as they headed back to the turbolift.

“You mean Emeron,” Lerion corrected him.

“Whatever,” Vyrex said, shrugging.

Lerion sighed silently as they entered the turbolift and ascended to the promenade level. He thought he understood why Vyrex preferred working alone. The guy was such an enormous douche that people probably ended up treating him the same way he treated them. The turbolift doors slid open to reveal the promenade; it was quite a contrast to the lower deck, where they had just visited the station’s security department. People of all species were sauntering to and from the many different establishments. The air was filled with smells ranging from spicy to sweet and sour.

“Man, that smell is making me hungry!” Vyrex said as he strode onto the promenade.

Lerion followed him closely. “Where do you suppose Emeron went?”

“He’s a Xoron, so he probably went to some place where they serve Xoron cuisine. I think there’s a place on the second ring. We can always go there later. Right now, I could really go for a Hunecrab burger. Come on, I know a good joint around the corner.”

Lerion wanted to speak, but since Vyrex was leading the way and wasn’t looking at him, he kept his mouth shut. There was probably no way he could tell the Assassin it was a bad idea to keep the Windblade waiting.

“I’ll have a Hunecrab burger with some peppers and give me one of those fancy sodas on the side,” Vyrex ordered the diner’s Gald waiter. “What are you having, Prynn?”

“Oh, right. I’ll have whatever he’s having,” Lerion said, a little caught unaware. It had been quite a while since he’d had one of these burgers. They’d always been quite popular among the Gald population of the Alliance. Humans and Saridions were also known to enjoy them. It took only a few minutes until they received their order. It wasn’t at all com-

forting to Lerion: they were probably going to have a burger that'd been lying in the heater for a while now.

The burgers were carefully wrapped in paper. Lerion removed it and the typical smell of a fast food burger filled his nostrils. He already knew that once he finished it, he'd feel a little bit dirty and about thirty minutes later, he'd probably be hungry again. Still, he would enjoy every bite, especially after that whole ordeal with Vester earlier.

Just when Vyrex was about to take a bite, someone walked up next to him and slapped the burger right out of his hand. It flew through the air and landed on the floor with a disappointing thud.

"What the hell are you doing?" Emeron asked, glaring fiercely at him.

Vyrex locked his gaze with Emeron and a short moment of silence passed as he processed the fact that his meal was now on the floor.

"I was about to eat a burger and you're going to pay for a new one, that's what!" Vyrex snapped, pointing an angry finger at the Xoron Windblade.

"I don't think so. You've kept me waiting long enough. We're losing our quarry with every passing minute. Time is of the essence if we want to catch him and retrieve the tome," Emeron said as he slapped the finger away with the same ease as he had done with the burger.

"Listen up, pal, I know the clock is ticking and all, but I can't work on an empty stomach. Now let me get another burger and we'll talk, okay?" Vyrex said as he got up, pushing Emeron away so he could get to the counter to order another burger. Lerion looked up at the young Windblade and rolled his eyes.

"By the Prophets, is he always this obnoxious?" Emeron asked. He got himself seated across from Lerion, who took a bite from his own burger. He shrugged at the Windblade. He didn't really care that much at this point. It wasn't like he had any say in what the simulation was putting him through.

"I guess. I've only known him for a couple of hours. All I know is I got the better deal out of this affair. As far as I'm concerned, that's all that really matters to me," Lerion said after he swallowed his bite. Emeron frowned at him. "Better deal?"

"Yeah, you remember that other Gald we were with a bit earlier? He's heading for the can right now. Apparently, the Assassin believes I can help lead you guys to Vester," Lerion explained.

"Can you?" Emeron asked, sounding slightly sceptical.

"Can I? Do you even know who I am?" Lerion asked with audible arrogance in his voice.

"Should I?" Emeron shrugged, pursing his lips questioningly.

"You should. I'm Lerion Prynn."

"Prynn ..." Emeron tasted the word, making it sound as if he vaguely remembered the name. Lerion could tell just by looking at him.

"Wait, you were in the news earlier. Something about an escape from Sleeper Cell?"

"That's right ... Wait, what?" Lerion asked, furrowing his brow.

"Yes, it was all over the news. A bunch of Kevar posing as Alliance officials got you out with fake orders. They were saying you'd only been in the simulation for a couple of hours and that you might be suffering from temporal displacement syndrome. People have been looking for you. There's been a search warrant out for you for a week or so."

"Really? So, this isn't a simulation?" Lerion asked, slowly putting the pieces together.

Emeron shook his head. "This is as real as it gets. Are you all right?"

"Yeah. As a matter of fact, I'm perfectly fine," Lerion said.

He had been misled by Vyrex. The bastard would pay in time, for sure, but Lerion decided he would not let Vyrex know what he knew now. He would play along as long as it served him to play the fool. The strange thing was Lerion had already had the feeling that this simulation seemed a tad too real for his taste. Now at least he knew this had all been real. A chill ran down his spine when he realized all he'd been through with Vester earlier could've proved fatal. The blast from the freighter, being adrift in space with only a makeshift beacon ...

Lerion snapped out of his thoughts when Vyrex put his plate with another burger down and sat next to Emeron, across from Lerion.

"Did I miss anything, ladies?" he asked.

"Nope," Lerion said before the Windblade could say anything else. Emeron seemed to be more occupied with actually going somewhere.

“So, what’s our plan, Mr. Apollo? Assuming you have one, that is,” Emeron asked impatiently. Vyrex took a bite from his burger and chewed a few times before answering,

“I had a plan, until I was called back by your mistress to meet you,” Vyrex said with his mouth still half full.

“That’s not what you said earlier,” Lerion said, hoping to agitate the Assassin a little.

Vyrex looked up from his plate to Lerion and cocked an eyebrow. “You’re siding with the Windblade now?” he asked with just the right amount of chagrin for Lerion.

“I’m not siding with anyone. I’m just saying you said you’d come up with a plan once we got here. Which was the complete opposite of what I would’ve done, but don’t let me stop you from doing your job,” Lerion said, rubbing a little bit more salt into the wound.

“I see you two make a fine team,” Emeron said as he leaned back in his chair.

“We’re not a team. He’s simply accompanying me until he has served his purpose,” Vyrex explained.

“What purpose would that be?” Emeron asked, frowning at both Gald.

“He knows our target like no other, so it’ll be easier to catch him. He knows how the Kevlar thinks. On top of that, we could use him to surprise Sylkwhisker. He might be more prone to mistakes if he knows his nemesis is there.”

“I don’t really see how that would help us, but if that’s part of your plan, I’m sure you’ve thought it through carefully,” Emeron said with a belittling voice.

“It’ll work, trust me.”

“You see, that’s part of the problem. So far, I don’t. The first thing you did when we met was dismiss me and then I had to find you myself, which wasn’t hard to do, but still ...” Emeron ranted.

“You going somewhere with all of this? Or shall we discuss our mission plan?” Vyrex asked, chomping on the last bite of his burger and taking a big gulp of his soft drink.

“By all means, I’m all ears,” Emeron said, folding his arms.

“So, we know Sylkwhisker was heading across the border into Empire space, most probably to deliver the goods he has stolen. My suggestion would be to take both of our ships across the border, hope we can catch Sylkwhisker and his gang on some station or planet, infiltrate his ship and retrieve the stolen item, then continue to arrest him and his crew,” Vyrex said.

Emeron and Lerion only nodded as they listened to the Gald Assassin’s plan. It wasn’t much of a plan, Lerion thought.

“I can see a multitude of flaws in that plan,” Emeron said.

“Really? My plans are never flawed. I always get the job done,” Vyrex retorted defensively.

“Let’s begin with the most obvious one. How do you intend to get us across the border without rousing suspicion?”

“Oh, you shouldn’t worry about that. The Alliance will arrange that for us. As soon as we identify ourselves, they will grant us authority to cross the border on account of the fact that we’re after a wanted criminal. They’ll probably be keeping an eye on us, but as long as we don’t go too far into their region of space, it’ll be okay.”

“Perhaps. But what about infiltrating Sylkwhisker’s ship? First off, we don’t know his whereabouts. On top of that, his ship is equipped with a cloaking device. It’ll be hard to track.”

“Hard, but not impossible. I bet they don’t see many Kevlar on their side of the border. Asking the locals if they’d seen any Kevlar lately will point us in the right direction. Trust me, tracking him really shouldn’t be that hard.”

Emeron frowned at Vyrex. “Wait, so you’re saying it’s all as simple as just asking the locals?”

Vyrex shrugged at Vinran indifferently. “You never tried?”

“I never had to. This is the first time I’m being sent on a task like this,” Emeron admitted. Although he had plenty of combat experience and his investigational skills were good, he had never tracked a moving target like this before.

“So, here you are, criticizing my plan when you’re as green as grass yourself? Sheesh.”

"I suppose an apology is in order then, but that still doesn't mean your plan is flawless," Emeron said. Vyrex used a napkin to clean the corners of his mouth, then threw it on his plate.

"I'm done, so let's get going, shall we?" he asked, not bothering to clean up after himself. Lerion decided to take his plate and at least throw his garbage away.

"Here, this is for you," Emeron said, handing Vyrex a small data storage device. Vyrex held it up against the light to inspect it.

"What's on it?" he asked, carefully putting it away in a pocket on the inside of his jacket.

"An encryption key for a secure communications channel between our ships. I suggest we keep a constant line open while we're on this mission. Standard procedure."

"Standard procedure? Nothing about this line of work is standard, Vinran," Vyrex said, pulling his hood back up as he turned around and headed for the turbolift.

Lerion shrugged at Emeron. "This is going to be interesting," he said to the young Windblade.

"To say the least," Emeron said, ending his sentence with a heavy sigh.

\* \* \*

Shortly after the destruction of the *UP-143* freighter, Vester had ordered the helmsman to cloak the ship and make for Zar'aranos space. His contact there would buy the tome he had retrieved and then they would take some well-deserved rest and relaxation. When they crossed the border, they'd ran into a few scout ships, but none of them had taken notice of the *Claw*. Their destination was only a few sectors into Empire space. Vester had already received word from his contact; they were expected and no Empire ship would open fire on them for the duration of the hospitality that was granted to them. Vester had only done business with the Empire once before, and the only thing he remembered was how paranoid and xenophobic its inhabitants all seemed to be. The only race he'd done business with back then were the Saranus - large,

reptilian humanoids. Their transaction had been swift and clean, just how Vester liked his business. This time, however, he'd be dealing with another species: the Mandar. They were amphibian humanoids that lived on land or in large underwater colonies. Thankfully, this meeting was taking place in a coastal city. He had no idea why the Mandar were interested in the tome Vester had retrieved from the freighter. All he knew was that it seemed to be invaluable to them and they were paying top money for it. Enough to whet Vester's appetite for credits, anyway.

"Captain, I'm reading multiple Empire ships ahead. Do you want us to take a detour?" the helmsman asked.

"How long will that take us?" Vester asked. They still had plenty of time, but he couldn't help but feel exposed, despite the cloak.

"Shouldn't take more than a couple of hours, if you want us to stay clear of their short range scanners."

"Then do it," Vester said. He got up from his chair to address the bridge crew.

"I'll be heading to my quarters for a moment. Call me when there's anything urgent. Otherwise, I'm not to be disturbed."

"Yes, sir," several of the crew responded as he passed them by on his way to the turbolift.

"Deck three," Vester commanded. He only slightly felt the pressing sensation of the lift getting into motion as his thoughts drifted for a while. The death of Tardessa had made a deeper impact on him than he wanted to admit. The deviousness with which he was forced to kill her made a shiver run down his spine. He recalled the offer the Shaedon had made to him. Had he been a fool to refuse it? It wasn't like it mattered who got his hands on that tome, as long as he got the money. At any rate, he would never know the answer, because he had made his choice and now he would have to live with it. Just another burden to bear, along with all the other kills he had made in his life. Kills out of protection or other, less ethical reasons.

When Vester entered the corridor, he couldn't shake a feeling of unease. A strange smell penetrated his nostrils. The smell of fresh blood. His

feline alertness kicked in full throttle as he took a few more whiffs. When he looked around the corner, he saw blood on the wall. He carefully padded forward until he was within reach. The blood was smeared on the wall to resemble an arrow pointing further into the corridor. He touched it; it was still wet. Vester continued forward, pressing himself against the wall for cover. He drew his shotgun from the slot on his armour's backside and readied it as silently as possible. When he hit the next intersection, he noticed another arrow on the wall, pointing left. Without a noise, Vester pressed his back against the wall and peeked around the corner. It was empty. Careful not to make a sound, he turned around the corner and continued onward, making sure to keep his back to the wall and continuously checking to his left and right side for any sign of an assailant. He stood silent for a while, listening, but he could only hear the faint, constant hum of the ship's engine. Vester passed several doors to the crew's quarters until he came to one with blood smeared across it.

*Here.* the word was written carefully, but the blood had trickled down, causing the letters to look runny. Vester cursed himself silently. Whatever was beyond this door, he knew he wouldn't like it. These were the quarters of one of his engineers, a Kevlar woman, about the same age as Tardessa. Her name was Liduur. She'd been part of his crew for nearly a year now. Vester pressed the doorbell first, hoping to get an answer, but there was none.

"Ensign Liduur? Open this door immediately," Vester demanded.

He banged a large clawed fist on the door, but there was no answer. Using his security override, Vester opened the door from the nearby panel. The door slid open and the smell of fresh blood became pungent. Vester pointed his weapon forward as he walked into the ensign's living room area. A trail of blood led into her bedroom. He padded forward warily.

"Ensign? Are you here?" he asked, not expecting an answer. When he turned the corner, he knew there would never be an answer.

Ensign Liduur was lying on her bed, face up. Her chest and belly had been cut open and a large knife, slippery with blood, was still clenched

in her right hand. Her intestines had been pulled out and there was blood everywhere, most of it still fresh. A look of agony, shock and disbelief was painted on her face, but there was no hope for her at all. Whoever had done this couldn't be far, Vester thought. He looked up at the wall and staggered backwards as he noticed the message written on it.

*And then there were forty-two.*

## Chapter 9 – Reboot

“How is he doing?” the dark, distorted voice of Chando Rombilius resounded over the speakers of the vidcom.

“I just received word from Doctor Vanderplas that he’s transferred from intensive care to a regular room for recovery. He should be able to speak soon,” Serra replied from the vidcom in her brand new office aboard Taniguchi Station II. The office was as spacious as the previous version, with a similar view, except now the station was orbiting Caledon. Compared to Earth, it was a brighter, greener planet. Serra had opted for a very clean, white and black interior for her office. It smelled fresh and much of the artwork hadn’t been hung on the wall or placed in its designated spot yet, but the workers had finished for the day and Serra was working late, as usual.

“Let him rest for now, but make sure you speak to him as early as possible. We’re on a tight schedule, I’m afraid,” Rombilius said, sounding worried.

“I could use some rest myself, to be honest. It’s been quite a week,” Serra replied, running her fingers through her dark hair.

“You’ll need it. I’m fairly sure you’ll have your hands full once the Master Tinkerer wakes up. I most certainly hope bringing him back into the fold will help our cause.”

“What if he doesn’t remember? Then all of this will have been for nothing,” Serra replied, sighing softly. She stared through the windows of her new office. Somewhere down on the planet, her employer was sitting at the other end of the connection. The concept of being able to communicate over such great distances still intrigued her.

“While you’ve been away, I’ve been working on a plan B and even a plan C. If Philbin should prove unable to retrieve or recreate the failsafe protocol for those polydrones, I’m afraid it’ll lower our chances considerably,” Rombilius spoke with a grim tone.

“What exactly is the plan anyway?” Serra asked, getting up from her brand new desk chair. She walked towards the window.

“I have done some thinking, and I came to the conclusion that depending on the Master Tinkerer to regain his lost memories is too great a risk. That’s why I’m working on those other plans. I won’t disclose any information until I’ve finalized them. I want you to focus on our current plan. It’ll be better that way. Trust me, my dear,” Rombilius said with finality in his voice.

Serra was smart enough not to ask questions. She understood the need for secrecy all too well and she was too tired to feed her curiosity.

“Do you want me to contact you when I’ve spoken to Philbin?” Serra asked.

“Please do. My further work and research depend on his wellbeing and his ability to remember.”

“All right, I’ll make sure to relay the message.”

“Gabiella, there’s one thing before I let you go. I want you to bring the message to me personally. There’s something else I need to hand to you in person.”

“I’ll make sure to do so. Good night for now, Raphael,” Serra said as she closed off the connection. She turned around to look outside once more, folding her arms and leaning against the bulkhead next to the window. *Perhaps now would be a good time for a nightcap and some well-deserved rest*, she thought.

Doctor Vanderplas turned his gaze towards the door as it slid open to reveal Serra coming through.

“How’s our patient?” she asked, not bothering with pleasantries. Vanderplas was holding a medical datapad. He glanced at it before answering.

“His condition is stable. In fact, he’s been awake for about half an hour. You can speak to him if you want,” he said, motioning towards the curtains that obstructed Philbin from her view.

When she stepped into sight, she saw the little blue man sitting on his bed. He threw her a glance and said: “You’re my nurse?”

Serra frowned and shook her head. "No, I'm not your nurse. I'm the CEO of NanoTech. I was the one who authorized your surgery. How do you feel?" Serra asked as she got herself seated next to the bed.

Philbin shrugged. "Fine, I guess. Except that I've lost most of my mental capacity. It's like I've been hit with a ten-ton hammer. I feel so dumb right now! Almost like a human," he complained.

Serra, realizing Philbin was completely oblivious to the concept of insult, decided not to respond in kind.

"I guess that makes us intellectual equals then. We managed to stabilize your implant, but we were unable to repair it. Since this is a design of your own, my guess is that you know how to fix it?"

Philbin pursed his lips and brought a hand to his chin to think.

"Well, I've been giving it some thought and I believe I can fix it, but I will need to get to my workshop back on Saridia. I've been keeping backups of all my blueprints and designs back there someplace."

Serra turned to face the doctor. "How long will his recovery take?"

"How well does he seem to you at the moment?" Vanderplas asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You're the doctor here. I was asking for your professional opinion," Serra retorted. Now she remembered why she hated most doctors. They had a tendency to respond to questions with questions.

Vanderplas looked at the medical datapad again. "He should be back on his feet within a day, I'd say."

"There, was that so hard to answer?" Serra asked, clearly irritated. She got up from the chair and marched towards the exit.

"We'll leave for Saridia first thing in the morning. I'm heading off to Caledon first. Make sure the Master Tinkerer is fully recovered," Serra commanded the doctor.

He simply nodded at her without a word.

Just as Serra went through the door, she ran into the two Kraut and Tyndra. She had completely forgotten about them and had no idea what they wanted from her.

"Miss Gomez, a word, please?" Tyndra asked from the shoulder of her new apprentice.

Serra decided it was probably best to have a word with them before departing for Caledon.

"Of course, Tyndra. What can I do for you?" she asked, trying to sound as patient as possible.

"Guilty Ember is wondering how his friend is. They won't allow him near and he's been worried sick."

"The doctors needed their space for the surgery. I'm sure you understand," Serra explained.

"That is understandable. You just spoke to him? Is he all right?"

A comforting smile appeared on Serra's face. "He's fine. They managed to stabilize the malfunction in his implant by shutting most of it down. He's not in immediate danger anymore, but the implant requires repairing and the only one who can fix it is the Master Tinkerer himself. We'll be leaving for Saridia Prime tomorrow morning."

Tyndra cocked her head at Serra. "And by *we*, you mean *us*, right?"

"If you're willing to accompany us, then sure. I was going to offer you a free ride off the station if you no longer wished to stay."

"Guilty is irreversibly attached to Philbin. He would never leave him behind. I have not witnessed such behaviour in a Kraut before. I wish to study it, and we could be of great use to you, as we have proven before."

"I already said you can come. Now if you'll excuse me, I have an appointment and I'm running late," Serra said as she turned around.

A large, armoured hand covered her left shoulder. Guilty Ember's eyes burned with ferocity at her.

"Wait," he said with his deep, rumbling voice.

"Yes?" she asked hurriedly.

"Wanted to thank you. When implant fixed, will fight by your side," Guilty said, banging his fist against his chest. The sound of metal upon metal rang through the hallway.

"That's good to hear. I'll make sure to leave you guys a message so you'll know where to report tomorrow morning," Serra said as she sped off to her ship.

As soon as the *Seraph's Wings* touched down, Serra burst out of the ship's exit and into the enormous mansion. She was stopped in her tracks by Giles, who seemed quite surprised that she was already inside.

"Why the haste, ma'am?" he asked, urging her to calm down with his gloved hands. Serra gave him a hasty smile and looked at him intently.

"I was supposed to come down here and hand over a message. I didn't want to keep Mr. Rombilius waiting," she said.

Giles shook his head in disapproval. "Ma'am, one should know better than to barge in here. Sir is residing here for the peace and quiet. Surely sir would not appreciate it if you burst through the door of his office and interrupted his hard work, hmm?"

Just as Giles expected an answer from Serra, Chando Rombilius appeared at the top of the large winding staircase within the entry lounge. He was holding a glass and a pipe and looked over the railing with a slightly befuddled expression.

"Is anything the matter, Giles?" he asked, raising his voice slightly to ensure it carried over the distance.

Giles turned his head up. "No, sir, it's just Miss Gomez visiting."

"Why are you bothering her? Send her up already!" Rombilius ordered as he took a sip of his drink. Giles smiled uncomfortably at Serra as he motioned for her to head up the staircase.

"You will excuse me, miss?"

Serra let out a sigh as she passed him. "People have been delaying me all day. You're no different, Giles," she said, emphasizing his name.

When she reached the top of the stairs, Rombilius stood in front of her with his arms wide open to embrace her. He greeted her with a warm hug and a smile.

"You bring news regarding the Master Tinkerer, I presume?"

Serra nodded as she looked up and released her grip on him.

"They've managed to stabilize the implant for now. I've spoken to him briefly and we'll be heading out to Saridia Prime in the morning. He says he's stored the schematics for his implant on some server there," Serra explained as they both walked into the study where Rombilius had been working on his alternate plans.

As they entered the study, Serra noticed how cluttered the desk was where Rombilius had been working. It was littered with datapads, storage devices and random tools he had been using for his research. Rombilius navigated around the messy workspace with ease and sat down.

"You'll have to excuse the mess, my dear," he said as he looked up and noticed Serra couldn't find a seat. She smiled at him as she shook her head.

"It's no problem, I prefer to stand. I've been sitting a lot these past days," she said, sounding tired. Rombilius gave her an understanding nod as he steepled the tips of his fingers and rested his elbows on the chair's armrests.

"So, you will continue with plan A. That's good news. I'm afraid good news has become quite a scarce commodity these days."

Serra sighed in agreement. "I'm just glad we're on the right track again."

Rombilius shook his head as he fired up a holoscreen. He pointed at the image that was materializing in front of them.

"Sadly, we're a long way from our destination on said track. I'm fairly sure you're familiar with this little pearl of a planet?"

Serra studied the image of Netherea closely and raised an eyebrow at Rombilius. "What about it?"

"I've been doing some research on our Shaedon friends, focusing primarily on one of the biggest mysteries the Alliance has yet to solve regarding their recent incursion. Apparently, the Shaedon were able to transport troops to the planet surface and the Alliance has no idea how they managed to get past the blockades. There are some theories, of course. Stealth technology, portals and whatnot." Rombilius got up from his chair and circled the projection.

Serra frowned at him. "And you managed to solve the mystery?"

A confident grin appeared on her boss' face. "I wouldn't be the great Chando Rombilius if I didn't, would I?"

A brief moment of silence passed. Rombilius sauntered over to Serra, still focused on the holographic image.

"The Xoron have attempted to create teleportation devices for centuries, without success. In fact, the only race in the Alliance ever to man-

age true teleportation are the Scarowyn, and they don't even use technology for this. My sources tell me that shortly after the fall of Netherea, a small group of people went down into an ancient temple and actually used the teleportation devices inside. I believe our friends are using this technology to teleport themselves across great distances."

Serra looked at Rombilius sceptically and put her right hand on her hip.

"Then why don't we use it too? If it's there, all we need to do is replicate the technology."

Rombilius sighed as he looked at her. She had seen that look quite a few times and understood that the answer was not going to be something she wanted to hear.

"There is a big problem concerning this particular device. It was designed for use by the ancient Luminars. Their physiology can handle a few teleports, but the technology is far from safe for anyone else. When the Xoron tried to copy it, everything seemed fine, but as time progressed, people who used it often would start showing symptoms of nausea, vomiting and eventually burns, tumours and worse," Rombilius explained as he turned back to his desk and changed the holographic image to a star chart.

"So, they can use it without any problem because their polydrones are synthetic?"

Rombilius pursed his lips as he nodded at Serra. "Exactly, and that's why they have too many advantages over us at the moment. I'm not certain if they can only deploy troops this fast on Netherea. If they can do it anywhere, well, then only a miracle can save us."

The grimness in Rombilius' voice unsettled Serra. She had never seen him this sombre and she always looked to him for guidance when she was feeling down herself.

"The new missile worked wonders," she tried, hoping to lift his spirits a little. He blinked at her slowly.

"It's nice of you to try and make me smile, dear. We will need more than just weapons to win this war, though. But thank you for trying to make an old man smile."

Serra bit her lip as she gazed at the star chart. "So, what is this all about?"

"This is my flight plan," Rombilius said.

Serra gave him a puzzled look. "You're leaving? What about being seen in public?"

"I'll disguise myself properly, don't worry," Rombilius said as he shook his index finger at her dismissively.

"What's so important that you have to deal with this yourself?"

Serra raised her voice considerably when she asked the question. Her boss had been presumed dead for nearly five years now. Though it was highly unlikely that people would recognize him, as he had taken every precaution to avoid places with heavy human populations, she felt that secrecy was important.

"I can't tell you, but I will give you this flight plan. If anything happens to me, I want you to travel using this exact flight plan. You will find the answer there, all right?"

The question sounded like a command. Serra had gotten used to Rombilius' methods over the past years. Without asking further questions, she accepted the memory stick Rombilius held out to her.

"Don't think this argument is over yet," she said stubbornly, staring intently into Rombilius' eyes. A fond grin appeared on his face.

"We will settle this some other day. Preferably when I retire from this business."

Serra couldn't help but snicker at the remark and they both laughed for a short while.

"Right, I had better get going. I've got a busy day ahead of me tomorrow," Serra said as she nimbly stepped past the clutter inside the study.

"Good luck, my dear!"

\* \* \*

The next morning, Serra and the rest of her ragtag crew started their journey to Saridia Prime. It would take them roughly one week to get there from Caledon, which was a lot better than what Serra was used to when travelling from Earth. Still, it would be quite some time before

they got to their destination and although she had plenty of work to do, she wasn't so sure about her companions. She had retreated into her office aboard the *Seraph's Wings* and had just inserted the memory stick into her computer. Rombilius' flight plan materialized on the holoscreen right in front of her. She leaned forward in her chair to study it closer, using a trackball device to navigate and zoom through the star chart. The flight plan started off on Caledon and ended up past the border of the Zar'aranos Empire, she noticed.

"Just what are you up to, Chando?" she muttered as she continued studying the navigational path. She zoomed out at the final destination and another detail caught her eye. There was a planned stop close to a nebula inside Veraan space. She backtracked along the course and found very little of interest about the rest of the flight plan. There were a few more planned stops along the road for refuelling and supplies, but otherwise, the flight plan seemed very nondescript. She wondered if the nebula was where Rombilius had sent Baynam before he was transformed, but he had never given her the details on that mission. It seemed a bit too coincidental to have a planned stop, especially since there was no description of what was situated at the given coordinates, other than a nebula. Serra removed the memory stick from its slot and watched as the holographic image dissipated before her eyes.

When Serra entered the bridge, she was not surprised to see that only Tyndra and Glowing Envy were present. Envy was never far from her side, Serra had noticed. Both of them had turned around to see who had stepped onto the bridge, but they returned their gaze to the star chart on the main display as soon as they saw it was Serra.

"This ship has a perfectly functioning autopilot, you know," Serra mentioned as she walked across the bridge and picked up a datapad to which she had transferred all her e-messages when she had left her office.

"We're aware of that, but I'm teaching this young one a few things about navigation and plotting courses," Tyndra explained as she turned her head to face Serra.

"Useful information. Will travel alone someday," Envy added with something Serra could only interpret as a smile on his face. She returned it with a friendly smile.

"Planning to go on an adventure?"

Envy tilted his head slightly, as if he was considering the question.

"Probably needed some place. Will get calling. Everyone does."

"Yes, I suppose everyone eventually ends up answering a call of sorts ..." Serra said as she walked over to the other side of the bridge. With a few quick presses of a button, she got herself a coffee from the food dispenser. She took the mug with the hot liquid to her chair.

"You do not believe in fate?" Tyndra asked curiously.

"I've thought about the idea of fate a lot over the recent years. The way things have worked out for me and how little I've had to say in most of what has happened, but no, I don't believe in fate as much. I was raised to believe we all forge our own destiny. I could have left NanoTech after Chando Rombilius' death, but I took the opportunity to save the company and recreate it in my own image. I very much doubt that was fate. It was freedom of will," Serra said, crossing her legs and activating the datapad to start checking her messages.

"An interesting notion," Tyndra replied dryly.

Serra threw a glance at Tyndra over the edge of her datapad. "You don't agree?"

Tyndra cleared her throat. "Well, to each his own, but there are much greater powers at play that we can't comprehend. Like Chronox, our god," she said, with a slight hint of conviction.

"Hmm, yes, gods. In all of Earth's history, you can trace down the reasons for most wars back to either religion or resources. I'm glad most of us have quit religion altogether. Once we started colonizing new worlds, it became pretty clear to most of us that if there ever was a God, they'd have shown themselves to us by now," Serra said, hoping Tyndra would accept her reasoning, or at least respect it.

"Gods do not need to show themselves to prove they are there, working behind the curtains to grant us the incredible gift of life. Not to mention our powers, which we can use for the betterment of the entire galaxy," Tyndra retorted.

Serra felt like this conversation could turn into an argument quite quickly if she wouldn't stop it, so she decided to soften up a little and respect Tyndra's opinion.

"I'll admit that sometimes, things seem a little too well designed in nature and fate, as you call it. I'm not saying there's no possibility of greater powers at work, but with the amount of cruelty and death I've seen, it's hard to believe there is such a thing as a god. I do respect your opinion, though."

It took Tyndra a moment to consider Serra's well-thought-out reply, but her answer came only a second later.

"It's clear I've spent my time with people who share the same ideology and faith for too long. Your ideas are different and radical to me, but I can't help but feel intrigued by them. Perhaps we should philosophise about this some other time?"

"If we ever find the time, then sure. You'll have to forgive me for now, I have some catching up to do," Serra said, shaking the datapad at Tyndra, who nodded in agreement.

\* \* \*

Philbin and Guilty Ember had taken up residence in the cargo hold, where Philbin was attempting to build a makeshift lab of some kind. Without asking permission, Philbin had ordered the lumbering Kraut to move equipment inside the cargo hold. Since he was still a respected member of the NanoTech staff, no one had bothered to question the Master Tinkerer and his assistant. It had taken the undersized genius little time to create a setup to his liking. Guilty had stood by Philbin's side all this time, helping him move the heavier components or observing the Master Tinkerer quietly. Philbin turned on the configuration and watched as the systems booted up.

"Now, let's see if I can get a connection through to Saridia from here," he said as he frantically pushed buttons.

"Why need connection?" Guilty asked.

Without turning his head to face the Kraut, Philbin answered: "You'll see in a minute, when I get this thing working. Even without the help of my implants, this is child's play!"

"Hmm, looks simple," Guilty said as he watched Philbin fumble with the computer's controls. As a people, the Kraut weren't noted for their intelligence, but they had come a long way over the years, especially for a race that didn't explore space. Guilty had been one of the more intelligent of his species, but the Kraut's true strength lay in their ability to withstand extreme temperatures and the unique talent to mould any metal into any desired shape, as well as their ability to create alloys with the same ease as a Scarowyn could grow floral life in any environment.

"And there we go!" Philbin exclaimed with a delighted grin on his face. He had hooked up a total of four monitors to his configuration and all of them were now displaying live footage from security cameras at an unknown location. Guilty could only guess it was Philbin's house back on Saridia. Using the computer's controls, Philbin adjusted the cameras to take a peek around. Apparently, nothing of interest showed up, as the only reaction coming from the blue-skinned genius was: "Looks like it's all still there. Good!"

"Looks like what is still all there?" Serra asked. Both Guilty and Philbin were startled by her sudden intrusion. They turned to face her after Philbin had quickly shut down the screens.

"Nothing," came the swift reply of Philbin.

Slightly irritated by Philbin's behaviour, Serra stepped forward until she was within a comfortable speaking distance.

"So *nothing* is worth turning your screens off for?"

"Well, it's not like you'd understand any of it anyway," Philbin said without any measure of shame.

"Perhaps, but you wouldn't be on your way to get back all of your precious stuff if we hadn't picked your sorry arse up from that backwater planet," Serra retorted. She didn't know if it was because Philbin's eyes were covered by his goggles all the time, but she couldn't tell if Philbin was looking at her, let alone what he was thinking.

"Is he all right?" Serra asked, throwing a puzzled look at Guilty.

He looked down at his much smaller friend and shrugged at Serra.

"I'm sitting right here, so why not ask me directly?" Philbin finally asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I just thought something was the matter, since you didn't react to what I was saying."

"Yeah, that's because it wasn't worth a response of any kind. I stopped reacting to nonsense a long time ago," Philbin explained as if he was lecturing a child.

Serra rolled her eyes at him. "Fine. It doesn't matter what you were just looking at on that screen. I just came down here to inform you we're about two days away from Saridia. We'll be resupplying soon at Kervol Station. Feel free to stretch your legs for a few hours there."

Philbin pursed his lips for a second as he considered Serra's offer.

"Yeah, I don't think so."

"What about you, big guy?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at Guilty. He shook his head at Serra without saying a word. She shrugged at both of them before turning around and heading towards the hold's exit.

"Suit yourself then, gentlemen."

\* \* \*

After their stop at Kervol Mining Station, they pressed on to Saridia. Shortly after Serra docked the *Seraph's Wings* in Docking Bay Two in Herzenflag, they were standing outside on the streets. It was raining heavily and Serra wasn't entirely sure, but she thought she noticed both Kraut to be somewhat uneasy. When she looked at Tyndra, she saw the rain evaporate just slightly above her, which was quite a remarkable sight.

"Let's head down to Garl's Cantina!" Philbin shouted as he charged forward, shielding his head from the rain with both arms. Despite their armour, both Kraut went after the Saridion with considerable speed. Serra followed shortly after them.

When the door to the cantina closed behind Serra, she took off her jacket, removed anything of importance from her pockets and hung it on a nearby coat rack. The smell inside was a tad stuffy, almost like the

smell of a wet dog. Philbin was already at the counter, speaking to another Saridion who was tending the bar. Serra caught only half of their conversation as she walked within earshot.

“Give me a second, Philbin. I’ll get you the keys,” the barkeeper said.

After he poured Philbin a drink and put it on the counter before him, he shuffled out back. Serra didn’t recognize the drink, but Philbin finished it in one big gulp. He wiped his mouth with his hand and burped loudly, then looked up at Serra, who was gawking at him.

“What’s the matter, sweet cheeks?”

“You must’ve been thirsty,” she half asked, half concluded.

“Been a while since I had anything good. There’s nothing like a good, fresh glass of grub juice!”

Serra’s expression turned into one of plain disgust at the thought of drinking a beverage made of insect juices.

“Well, it really got my *juices* flowing, if you know what I mean, ha-ha! Speaking of which, what’s taking Garl so long?”

“Wasn’t he getting you some keys?” Serra asked, hoping Philbin would explain what the keys were for.

“Yes, I asked him to hold on to them until I would need them one day. Looks like that day has finally arrived,” was all Philbin revealed.

Not entirely satisfied with his answer, Serra continued prying. “Keys to what exactly?”

The small blue man put a hand on Serra’s shoulder and beckoned for her to lean a little closer with his free hand. She leaned in to hear what he was about to tell her.

Lowering his voice to a semi-whisper, he said: “Listen, I could explain all of this to you, but we’d be stuck here the rest of the evening. The keys are used to open something so that I can get stuff that will help us. Just let me take care of it, okay? All you need to bother with is keeping me safe and looking good while doing it. Do you understand?”

Serra slapped Philbin’s hand away from her shoulder, then grabbed it firmly. “Stop being such a condescending bastard, or I’ll break every single bone in your hand. Do *you* understand?”

The sarcastic question came through gritted teeth. She had finally reached the point where she couldn’t tolerate the Saridion’s incessant

arrogance any longer. Before she could continue her threats, Guilty stepped forward and forced himself between his friend and Serra. Although she had expected the Kraut to be protective, she hadn't expected him to remain so calm.

"Can't help it. He like this. Might improve if get fixed."

Serra scoffed at Guilty, but calmed herself with relative ease and let Philbin's hand go.

"Fine," she said, straightening her shirt.

Just then, she saw Garl coming back. He put a small rectangular device on the counter and smiled at Philbin.

"Here it is. Thanks for using our safe keeps system! Will there be anything else?" he asked.

Philbin picked up the device, held it against the light for a moment and then put it in one of his trouser pockets.

"Nope, that'll be all. See you around, barkeep," Philbin said as he jumped off the barstool and headed towards the exit.

"All right, be seein' ya!" Garl shouted after the group.

Serra caught up with Philbin, who was already halfway across the square by the time she got out of the cantina.

"Wait, hold on! Where are we going?"

Slightly surprised, the Saridion turned around. "Where do you think we're going?"

"To wherever it is that key unlocks?"

"Very good! Now, we'll need to hitch a ride there. Probably need two hover cars if we're taking those two big guys with us."

Serra glimpsed around the square and quickly spotted a car rental on the other side of it. She pointed at it. "Over there."

"Ah, yes, indeed. Erm, say, you wouldn't mind paying for the cars, right?" Philbin asked.

"It's for a good cause, isn't it?" she replied, already taking a credit chit from a pocket inside her jacket.

The hover car rental was a fully automated system, which was very common on Saridia. The cars were all owned by the government and

were equipped with an automated homing beacon to ensure they would always find their way back to their station once the rental period expired. Philbin had ordered two of the same type that would easily fit a Kraut each. He checked his wrist pad and entered a few commands.

“All right, I’ve shared the coordinates with both cars. Just set it to autopilot and we’ll be there in no time!” he shouted at Serra, who was inside the other vehicle with Tyndra and Glowing Envy.

Serra checked the map on the navigational display and frowned. “There’s nothing there!”

“Or is there?” Philbin asked as he leaned back and the car’s engines engaged.

Outside the village, Serra remarked how desolate Saridia was. They’d passed a forest full of dead trees and a large river, and now there was nothing but acres of dead land as far as her eyes could reach. The land was remarkably flat as well, with only the forest and the cliffs where Herzenflag was located as eye catcher landmarks. They had passed several farm houses which had long been abandoned from the looks of it.

“We’ve just passed one of my old workshops,” Philbin said over the voicecom, which he had activated as soon as they had left the confines of Herzenflag.

“You mean that old farm house?”

“Well, yes, that’s exactly what it was supposed to look like. It was more about what was going on in the basement, if you catch my drift,” the little blue man explained.

“That’s where Baynam picked you up back then, right?” Serra asked, hoping to keep the conversation going so she wouldn’t die of boredom.

“Yeah, that’s the place. Not much left there now,” he answered, snickering loudly over the voicecom.

“Only a couple more minutes and we’ll be at one of my other workshops. I had a good reason for living like a hermit, you know.”

“How many of those workshops did you have?” she asked out of curiosity.

“Enough to keep my secret projects hidden,” was all Philbin said. They continued the remainder of the journey in silence. Philbin parked

the car at the coordinates fifteen minutes later. As Serra thought, nothing of interest was to be seen. She got out of the hover car and walked up to the tinkerer.

“There’s nothing here.”

“Oh yes, there is. Follow me, it’s only a few metres from where we’re standing!”

Philbin stepped forward, followed closely by Serra and the rest. He took the key from his pocket and pressed a button on the device. A heavy noise of grinding machinery filled the sky and before long, the ground rose up in a circular area. Dust whirled up and hindered Serra’s sight. When it settled, she was looking at an entrance leading underground, with a large door shaped like an enormous gear.

“Welcome to my vault!” the small blue genius stated courteously. He walked towards the entrance and held his hand up against a palm reader.

“Open the door, daddy’s home!”

The heavy elementium door rotated out of the way to reveal the entrance to the vault. The room that was now revealed featured three heavy, automated turrets that were attached to the ceiling, guarding a turbolift at the far wall. With Philbin having deactivated the security system, the turrets still fixed on their targets, but did not fire.

“Not want visitors?” Guilty asked as he pointed at the impressive weaponry.

A sly grin appeared on Philbin’s face. “Only invited guests.”

“Whatever’s in here must be very important to you,” Tyndra said, perched on Envy’s right shoulder.

“Well, I do keep all my data stored in here, so, yeah ...” Philbin said as he stepped inside the turbolift and beckoned for the rest to follow him.

After only ten seconds, the doors slid open to reveal Philbin’s vault. Serra’s jaw dropped as she entered the large underground bunker. The room was filled with machines, computers and screens on every wall. In the middle of the room was a large generator that looked like it could run almost infinitely. An oversized screen was fitted on the far side of the room, with a small chair in front of it that was hooked up to the sys-

tem. Eight smaller screens were hung on all four sides of it. The left side of the room was equipped with workbenches and machines to craft devices and possibly weapons. Serra could only guess how the Master Tinkerer could afford a place like this, but knowing he had been part of the team that brought artificial intelligence to its knees during the A.I. Wars, he had most probably funded this place from money the government had given him.

“So, what do you think, big guy?” Philbin asked Guilty, as he folded his arms and cocked his head back arrogantly.

“Impressive. Much stuff,” the Kraut answered. He seemed to be still gawking around the room as he answered.

“Listen, I need to hook myself up to the system in order to run a diagnostic on my implant. This might take a little while. After that, I’ll have to download the entire database so we can head back. If all goes well, I should have it up and running in no time!”

“Do you mean that system in the back?” Serra asked, pointing towards the impressive rig at the other side of the room.

“Yep. You really do catch on quite quickly, for a human!” Philbin said, sounding genuinely impressed.

“How long will we have to wait?” Serra asked, hoping she wouldn’t have to waste hours of her time inside a vault.

“Diagnostic usually runs in about ten minutes. Download should take roughly the same amount of time. Of course, then I’d have to figure out how to repair the part of the implant that was shut down, but we can do that elsewhere. No need to stay in this dump,” Philbin explained as he walked to the back. The entire group accompanied him there and watched as he sat in the chair to hook himself up to the system.

“Welcome back, Master,” a computerized voice spoke. A friendly Saridion woman’s face appeared on the large screen, filling the entire room with a bluish light.

“I would say it’s good to be back, except, well, it’s not ... Anyway, run a diagnostic on my implant, then continue with a download of all blueprints and project documents. Start with implants, then weapons, android specs and finally any remaining data,” Philbin commanded the computer.

“Affirmative. Commencing diagnostic, putting user in sleep mode,” the computer said.

A progress bar replaced the face of the Saridion female on the screen, including an estimated time for the diagnostic to complete. The downloads were all stacked right behind it in order, albeit without estimation of time.

“So, now what?” Tyndra asked, looking at Serra.

“Now we wait, I guess.”

With nothing else to do, Serra had taken some time to further investigate the underground vault Philbin had somehow managed to hide for all these years. She wondered if it had been created during the A.I. wars, to help the development team stay out of trouble while they created the virus that would ultimately bring down the A.I. network. It seemed more logical than her previous assumption. Guilty Ember had not left the Master Tinkerer’s side, which had not been a surprise to Serra, but both Glowing Envy and Tyndra had not moved much from their initial spot either. Perhaps it was more of a human trait to be curious, Serra thought. Just as she was about to move on to continue her inspection, an alarm wailed throughout the vault. She immediately ran towards the big screen, where she could already see a large warning message being displayed.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, but before the words had left her mouth, she could already read the answer on the display. It was an intruder alert. All of the screens surrounding the larger one were switching to cameras outside the vault. Serra and the others watched in silence for a moment and saw the threat was quite real. Two hooded figures accompanied by at least two dozen polydrones were closing in on their location.

“Those three turrets outside won’t be enough to stop them. We need to have Philbin fixed!” Serra shouted, sprinting towards the elevator. She beckoned for the others to follow. With only some hesitation, even Guilty Ember lumbered after her.

“Can destroy them. Need you out of way,” he suggested, as he bashed a fist against his armour. Serra nodded at him.

"I'll make sure to stay clear, but first, let's see what they want. Perhaps they'll listen to reason."

"You really think they'd be willing to talk?" Tyndra asked sceptically.

Serra shook her head. She knew that would be very unlikely, but she had always been taught to stall her foes as long as she could, so she could assess the situation and formulate a strategy to take them out, should that need arise.

"We'll see what they want. I'm fairly sure we'll be in for a good fight soon."

She felt the turbolift rising fast. When the door slid open, she saw that the group of polydrones had not yet reached the perimeter, but were closing in fast in a semi-circle formation. She could see the two hooded figures more clearly now. Both were humanoid. One of them seemed to be a Veraan, its tail coming from the underside of its robe. The other looked human. Serra could tell they had already spotted their group and the turrets. They were hopelessly outnumbered and out-gunned, but as Guilty pointed out, if the Kraut would get rid of their armoured suits, they could burn everything to a crisp, including Serra. She tried to use the time they had left to formulate a strategy, but the only one that sprang to mind was to take the lift down as fast as possible and let the Kraut handle it, with Tyndra at their side.

The Veraan held his right fist up to ensure none of the polydrones would shoot as they approached Serra and her group.

"You! You are. The CEO. Of NanoTech. Incorporated," he stated with a strange speech impediment and a raspy voice.

"I don't believe we have had the pleasure of meeting yet," Serra said in return, studying the Veraan's face as best she could. His face was covered by shiny black skin with bright yellow markings, much like those of an amphibian. His eyes were yellow, and beneath them were two breathing holes instead of a nose. His robe reminded Serra of the pictures she had once seen of Veraan Death Priests. It was said those particular Veraan were capable of secreting a poison from their skin that could paralyze and even kill their victims. She made a mental note of this.

"Your former. Employer was. One of. Our associates. My name. Is Krikkrak," the Veraan said.

Serra recalled Rombilius mentioning the Veraan, shortly before Baynam's unfortunate incident.

"I do believe he mentioned you, yes. What brings you here, in the middle of nowhere?"

"We could ask you that same question," the other robed figure said. Serra turned her head towards him and saw it was another one of the polydrones, except it seemed to be much more than just an android. Its eyes were entirely black, and although the polydrone was clearly meant to resemble a male, the sound of its voice was much more feminine in nature. It had to be the Shaedon known as Shi'fisso, Serra figured.

"All right, so you followed us here then," Serra said blamingly.

"We believe. You have. Something we. Require."

Serra frowned at the Veraan. "And what would that be?"

"The failsafe protocol for the polydrones. We came here to destroy it. Now we can either do this without any of you dying, or we can do it the hard way," Shi'fisso said.

"You are. Heavily outgunned. This can. Either be. A transaction. Or it. Can be. A slaughter. Your choice," Krikkrak said as he pulled down his hood. The Saridian sun reflected on his shiny black skin. Waiting for just the right moment, Serra carefully took a step back. She glimpsed to her left and right and saw both Kraut had taken note of her careful move. If either Krikkrak or Shi'fisso would take a step closer, Serra would roll backwards and hit the turbolift button to get out of the way safely.

"So, what will it be?" Shi'fisso demanded impatiently. She took a step forward and extended a hand as a gesture to make the deal. Serra stared her in the eyes intently and feigned to shaking the hand. Right before she would, she slapped the hand away instead and shouted: "Now! Remove your suits now!"

She rolled backwards and pressed the turbolift button as fast as she could, but just before the door closed shut, Krikkrak managed to make his way inside.

Guilty Ember saw that the Veraan entered with Serra, but there was not much he could do for her now. With two heavy clunks, the front and back of his armour fell to the ground and he was free from its binding form. He maintained a humanoid shape, but he could already tell the surrounding area was scorching from the enormous amount of heat coming from his body. Glowing Envy removed his armour in a similar fashion, but without the armour's restriction, the Kraut had always preferred taking on the form of a four-legged beast.

"Open fire!" Shi'fisso ordered.

The polydrones directed their fire evenly between both Kraut, but their rounds were all absorbed by the massive fiery creatures and did not seem to hurt them in the slightest manner. The three turrets had fired at the polydrones as well, disabling a few of them before getting targeted by their foes. The turrets were turned into slag easily by a few grenades thrown by Shi'fisso and several of her polydrones. Absorbing the energy of every single shot that was fired at them, both Guilty and Envy were glowing white hot with energy. Guilty charged into a squad of polydrones and howled as he exploded into a nova of fire, leaving the androids burnt to a crisp. Envy was chasing several polydrones that had tried taking a strategic position, only to find themselves getting ripped apart by a beast made of fire and molten lava. They continued wreaking havoc until only a handful of polydrones and Shi'fisso were left.

"Stop! Stop it!" Shi'fisso screamed in frustration as she saw all of her polydrones being burned and torn to shreds. Tyndra, who had taken refuge in the skies, descended onto Guilty's humanoid form and rested on his shoulder.

"What is this? You ask for mercy?" she asked, knowing both Guilty and Envy could not speak without their suits.

"We can't beat these monsters."

Tyndra cocked her head at Shi'fisso, as if she was pondering the Shaedon's statement.

"That is strange. To us, you are the monsters."

The remainder of the polydrones had stepped in front of Shi'fisso. There were seven left. She carefully took a step back.

“Attack them!” she shouted. She took two grenades from her belt and threw them on the ground. Heavy smoke billowed out of them and hindered the view. The polydrones were still easily disposed of by the pair of Kraut and the Arlin, but once the smoke had subsided, there was no trace of Shi’fisso.

Serra got slammed hard into the back wall of the turbolift when Krikkrak speared her. The blow had pushed all the air out of her lungs and she was gasping as she tried to get up. The Veraan stood up and cast his robes aside. He was wearing tight clothes underneath that allowed him to move more freely. He looked down at Serra, who was now leaning on her elbows to get back up.

“Where is. The master. Tinkerer?” Krikkrak demanded as he put a boot down on Serra’s chest and pushed her down to the ground.

“You’ll never get out of this. Above us, every single one of your allies has been wiped out. What are you going to do on your own?”

Krikkrak cocked his head several times as if he was considering his options. He shrugged at Serra.

“You are. Not in. Any position. To make. Threats.”

“Is that so?”

With more force than Krikkrak had anticipated, Serra grabbed Krikkrak’s ankle and forced him to topple over. She got up as fast as she could, but the Veraan’s tail hit her in the left side and slammed her into the wall once again. She turned around as fast as she could. Both were now standing across from one another, watching each other intently in anticipation of the other’s next move. The turbolift door slid open and Serra saw an opportunity. She burst out of the lift and drew her gun.

“No sudden moves! Put your hands on your head and step forward slowly.”

Krikkrak followed her orders without any resistance as he studied his new surroundings.

“Nice lab,” he mentioned as he got out.

“Shut up and get over there,” Serra snapped at him, pointing her gun at where she wanted him to stand. She regretted doing that the moment she realized just how fast the Veraan was. In one fell swoop, he knocked

her off her feet with his tail and quickly snatched the gun from her hand. He aimed it at her face.

“Your combat. Training leaves. Much to. Be desired. Get up.”

Serra got to her feet rather quickly, holding her hands up as she did. She had no desire to get shot. Behind two large cargo containers, she caught a glimpse of Philbin walking towards them. He was just about to turn the corner.

“What’s with the ruckus?” he demanded as he saw the Human and Veraan standing there. As quickly as he could, Krikkrak got himself behind Serra and pointed the gun at her head.

“Any more. Steps and. She dies.”

“Whoa, calm down there, mister!” the small blue man said.

“Don’t listen to him, Philbin. He’s after the failsafe protocol!” Serra shouted. She felt the butt of the gun slam against her skull hard, but she did not pass out.

“Hand it. Over or. This one. Dies!”

“What failsafe protocol? What in blazes are you babbling about? You come here, into my private vault and you start making demands? I don’t think so, mister. Now leave, before I get crude on your ass!”

Slightly surprised by the Saridion’s statement, Krikkrak backed up.

“Fine then,” he said. He dropped the gun, but instead held his hand against Serra’s throat. Poison secreted from the palm of his hand and entered her bloodstream almost instantly. Her veins swelled up and turned purple. She screamed in agony as Krikkrak dropped her to the floor.

“We don’t. Need her. For this.”

Taken aback by the sudden move, Philbin looked down at Serra, who was shrieking as she writhed on the floor.

“Indeed, we don’t,” Philbin said with a wicked grin on his face. He pointed his right arm towards the Veraan. A dart shot out from the underside of his sleeve, hitting its target in the neck. Krikkrak reached for his neck with both his hands and pried the device out, but by then it had already done its job. Darkness overcame the Veraan as he watched the Master Tinkerer move closer.

“Fuck you, inferior creature!”

## Chapter 10 – A Pilgrim’s Burden

The early morning sun graced the Silver Plains with its gentle rays, which reflected off the blades of grass that covered most of the rolling plains as far as the eye could reach. A gentle breeze greeted Grummus; the smell of fresh air was a welcome change from the spaceships he had been travelling in these past few weeks. Far in the distance, he spotted a herd of large herbivores with thick furs and large horns on their heads. They reminded him of the Gurandabeasts that roamed the open spaces of Wyngaya. He startled slightly when Rüz poked him. He turned his head towards the Windmaster.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” he asked, returning his gaze to the herd in the distance.

Rüz nodded in agreement. “Yes, it truly deserves its fame.”

Patriarch Kos stepped forward, clad in his royal armour. A crimson cape flowed over his shoulder and nearly reached the ground.

“I hope you had a good night’s rest, because your pilgrimage is about to start.”

A flicker of determination appeared in Grummus’ eyes. He broadened his shoulders and stood up straight as he inhaled. Rüz’ posture always seemed extraordinarily good to Grummus. This time was no different. Some day, he would learn just how the Windmaster managed to stay so focused and alert, he vowed to himself.

“We’re ready,” Rüz said. Even Grummus had to look up to meet the towering Kevar’s eyes. The piercing yellow globes met his gaze and he immediately felt small and insignificant.

“Yep, we’re prepared,” he muttered, his voice slightly shaky. He cleared his throat.

“The Pilgrimage is a test of one’s strength, wit and resolve. It is a journey every youngling must undertake before they can be truly called Kevar. You are not the first to attempt this as outsiders. I have high hopes for the both of you, but you must not think lightly of this. It is both

an honour and a privilege to be allowed to undergo the pilgrimage. Many young Kevar yearn for this moment and spend years preparing both mentally and physically for this grand test," Kos explained as he walked small circles in front of them. Two young Kevar wearing light armour approached them from the palace exit, about fifty metres away. Grummus recognized the Kevar girl from their audience. It was the Pearl, with her bright blue eyes that met his as she approached. He shyly looked away from her. The other was a young man with a striped gray and white fur. They stood to the sides of Rüz and Grummus. Kos smiled at his daughter and gave the young man a quick look.

"These two younglings will be joining you on your journey to Pilgrim's Rest, your final destination. Before you make it there, however, you will have to traverse the plains, follow the flow of New Dawn Creek and attempt to make it through Ra'asha's Pass. This will be their first journey as well. My daughter is a good shot and can help forage for food. Miten is a promising aspirant warrior and tracker. He will be a good addition to your group."

Miten bowed deeply before the Patriarch. "Such high praise from the Patriarch! I am not deserving of it," he said, while keeping his head down.

"The real test is about to begin, but I have confidence in each of you. Now, I will strip you of your possessions. You will have to make do with whatever Ra'asha grants you along the way," Kos explained as he moved towards his daughter first and held a great paw out in front of her. With slight hesitation, she handed over her lasbow to him.

"You will not be needing this. Use your wits instead," Kos said as he put the bow aside. He held his daughter by the shoulders and gazed into her deep blue eyes for a moment. He then nodded at her as he moved onward to the next person in line: Miten.

"I see you did not bother to take anything. Very well."

Rüz and the Patriarch's gazes met as he came to stand in front of him.

"Harbinger of Death," Kos said half-mockingly.

"Patriarch," Rüz replied with respect instead.

"I'm afraid I can't let you take that precious orb of yours, as well as anything else enabling easy use of magicka."

Kos held out an open paw in anticipation of the Windmaster. Rāz hesitated a moment before reaching inside his robe to retrieve the Wind Orb. It glowed with pure Air magicka. Everyone else gawked at it as Rāz handed it over to the Patriarch.

“Remember, it is acceptable to use your abilities, but allowing you to carry your orb would make things too easy. The same goes for you, Earthmaster. I am well aware you were granted an orb as well. Hand it to me,” Kos ordered.

Grummus removed his shoulder bag and handed it over to Kos.

“These will be kept in a safe place, of course. You have my word.”

“Much appreciated,” Grummus replied gratefully.

Kos gave him a curt nod and inspected the entire party, circling them twice more.

“You all look ready to head out. The day is yours, make the most out of it and may Ra’asha guide you on your way, Pilgrims!”

He ushered them through the gate onto the plains.

“So, where are we supposed to go now?” Grummus asked, slightly confused by the sheer size of the plains.

The Pearl grabbed him by the shoulder and pointed towards a location in the distance.

“Do you see that glimmering in the distance?”

“Yeah,” he answered, unsure what exactly she was pointing at.

“That’s where we should go first,” she added.

“Ah ...” Grummus muttered. He pulled his straw hat down a little and stretched his arms behind his back until he heard a soft crack coming from his spine.

With a heavy thud, the large gate closed behind them. There they were, standing on the Silver Plains with roughly fourteen hours of light left. It would be a long day.

After walking across the plains at a steady pace for a short while, the party found themselves near a large tree that had toppled over. As they approached it, a group of small rodents quickly scurried away through the thick, tall grass.

“Must’ve been a storm or something,” Grummus said as he inspected the trunk of the tree. Its roots and a large chunk of earth had all been pulled up by the force that had caused it to fall.

“See if there’s any branches we can use to make weapons. A crude spear, maybe even a bow and some arrows,” the Pearl suggested. She was already picking up smaller branches that could be fashioned into arrows, if they could get their hands on a sharp rock.

Miten kicked on a thicker branch to break it loose from the rest of the tree, then held it up to the rest of the group.

“We can use this as a blunt weapon.”

“See if we can find some more. We could also use some twigs for a campfire,” Rüz suggested.

The Pearl shook her head. “It’ll be quite some time before we make camp. We should try to conserve our energy. Carrying all that wood around would be a waste.”

Rüz considered her reply and dropped the twigs he had already collected. “I suppose you’re right,” he admitted.

“How about this branch? I think it would make a good longbow with the right amount of work,” Grummus said as he proudly held up a long, flexible branch.

“Looks fine!” the Pearl replied with a smile on her face as she took the branch from Grummus and tested its sturdiness.

“Keep it, I’m no good at shooting,” Grummus admitted.

“You have other talents that will be of use to us,” she said as she winked at him. He smiled back at her and nodded respectfully.

“So, how come you’re called the Pearl of the Silver Plains?” Grummus asked.

She giggled at him. Not many people asked her that question. Then again, most Kevar already knew.

“When I was born, I was the only one of the entire litter with white, shiny fur and the brightest, bluest eyes. My father felt that I was born with a mark of greatness and started calling me the Pearl of the Silver Plains. It’s more of a nickname, really,” she explained.

Grummus pondered this for a moment. “What’s your real name?”

Rüz poked him in his side. Grummus looked at him irritably.

“Ow, what’d you do that for?”

“It’s not polite to ask her for her real name!” Ráz hissed back at him.

“Oh, don’t worry about it!” she said. “People rarely ask me any questions at all. I kind of enjoy answering them.”

“See? I was just making conversation, Ráz,” Grummus grumbled.

“My real name is Kira,” she said. She smiled shyly at Grummus.

Miten, who had pretended not to hear the conversation, walked up to them from the other side of the tree.

“Perhaps we can use this one as a spear?” He threw the branch at Ráz, who caught it with ease. Ráz tested it by twirling it around a few times and testing its balance. He nodded at the young Kevar.

“This will do fine, thanks.”

“I don’t think there’s much else of use left here,” Miten remarked.

“Let’s keep moving towards New Dawn Creek, then,” Kira suggested. Everyone nodded at her in agreement.

During the next few hours, they made good time across the plains, but Grummus noticed the glimmer Kira had pointed at was still far in the distance. They would not make it there before nightfall.

“How far do you think it is to the creek?” Grummus asked, sounding slightly bored.

“At least another day. Actually, we should start thinking of foraging for food and looking for a good place to make camp,” Kira said.

“We have roughly four more hours of light. I suggest we keep going for two more and then see if we can find ourselves a good place to camp,” Miten added. He pointed in the distance, where Grummus could only faintly see a small group of trees. “Over there, maybe?”

“That should give us some shelter,” Ráz agreed.

Once they reached the group of trees, Grummus noticed the site had been used by previous pilgrims. A large patch of ground was devoid of grass and had obviously been used for a campfire. The trees gave them great shelter from the wind, even though the weather had been mild. It would also provide some shelter from any wildlife.

"I'll see if I can hunt some game," Miten said, holding his crude wooden club. When Grummus next looked in his direction, he had already disappeared from sight.

"So, what do we do?" Grummus asked.

Kira folded her arms and looked around at the campsite. "I'll see if I can forage for some food as well. I suggest you two make our camp. Maybe you could gather some firewood, or create a shelter of sorts? There are plenty of materials to use here."

"We'll take care of it," Rüz acknowledged with a nod. She returned the nod before disappearing in a similar fashion as Miten had.

Grummus frowned at Rüz. "How do they do that?"

"Do what?" Rüz asked.

"Disappear like that. It's as if they vanish into thin air."

"They're hunter-gatherers. It's their job to be unseen."

"The other Kevar I once ran into used a personal cloaking field. You don't suppose they have one too?"

"I don't think they're allowed to use them. They're just extremely well-trained at sneaking around," Rüz replied, slightly annoyed by the young Earthmaster's constant need to ask questions.

"Hmm, I think you're wrong. No one can disappear from sight just like that! Say, what's that?" Grummus pointed towards something up in one of the trees. Rüz walked up next to him to see what he was pointing at. It seemed to be a bag, or something similar.

"I'll climb up and see what it is."

Before Rüz could even say anything else, Grummus was already clambering up the trunk of the tree with relative ease.

"Careful!" Rüz shouted at him.

"Don't worry, I've almost got it!" he said, as he tried to reach the bag that was stuck on one of the upper branches. He extended his arm as far as he could, leaned over just a little bit more, and finally managed to grab it. He climbed back down carefully and jumped the last metre. Grummus put the bag on the ground and inspected its contents.

"Anything we can use?" Rüz asked curiously.

"Hmm, I'm not sure," Grummus said, as he retrieved a laser pistol and what appeared to be a data storage device from the bag.

“We can keep the pistol for emergencies. Mind handing it over?” Rüz said. Grummus had never been comfortable holding firearms and gave it to Rüz, who held it up to inspect its batteries on a small display on the backside of the pistol.

“Looks like it doesn’t have much juice left. I’d say three shots, maybe four.”

“Are we even allowed to use it? It feels like cheating,” Grummus pondered.

Rüz shrugged. “Why not? Kos said we would have to make do with whatever Ra’asha would grant us on our way.”

Grummus pursed his lips. “I don’t think that’s what he had in mind ...”

“Good thing what he said can be interpreted in many different ways, then.”

“I still think it wouldn’t be fair to use it.”

“Listen, Grummus, we’ll only use it in self-defence, okay?” Rüz said in an attempt to convince the young Earthmaster that it wouldn’t hurt to bend the rules a little, even though he was sure this was indeed not what the Patriarch had meant.

“I wonder what’s on the storage device,” Grummus said as he held it up to inspect it.

“There’ll be time to check that later. We should keep the bag too – it’ll help us carry stuff around more easily.”

Grummus nodded in agreement.

“So, let’s find some firewood then?” Rüz suggested.

Grummus looked around, taking some time to formulate a reply.

“Go on ahead, I’ll stay here and make us some shelter,” he finally spoke absently, as he closely studied the surrounding trees. When Grummus looked back, Rüz had already disappeared from sight.

“How do they do keep disappearing like that?” he mumbled.

Nearly an hour passed and it was already getting dusky when Rüz, Kira and Miten returned to their camp site. They were more than a little surprised to find that the group of trees had been closed off by walls of brambles, leaving only one point of entry. As they came in one by one,

Grummus awaited them with a contented smile on his face. He had even created two large domes made of intertwined vines that could serve as shelters for the night.

“Nice work, Earthmaster,” Miten commented as he inspected the domes. He himself had been quite successful on his hunt as well, bringing back five large rodents which they could have for dinner. Kira had picked some nuts and berries from nearby bushes, ideal for taking with them the next day. Ráz had gathered enough firewood to start a campfire.

“Looks like we’re all set for tonight. Someone should keep watch, just in case any predator decides to snoop around,” Kira said, glancing at Miten. Their gazes met and he understood she wanted him to keep the first watch. Besides the game he had hunted, he had also brought back a few sharp rocks, which he was now using to skin the rodents so they could roast their meat over the fire. After laying a circle of rocks on the ground, Ráz had carefully put the firewood together to form a tepee. He rubbed his hands together and drew some magicka from the surroundings. Sparks flew off his hands and ignited the kindling he had put on the tepee.

“This should keep burning for a good while,” he said as he looked up at the rest of the group.

“Nice trick,” Miten said as he watched the tepee burn.

“Nothing special, really.” Ráz shrugged as if conjuring sparks were the most normal thing in the world.

Miten finished preparing the rodents for dinner, and they roasted three of them over the fire. He had learned Grummus did not require food in the same fashion as they did, so they could still keep the other two rodents for another time. The fire was now burning brightly and it didn’t take long for the meat above it to get roasted perfectly. He offered Ráz one of the animals on a stick. Ráz, who was hungry, dug in immediately.

“Careful, it’s hot,” Miten warned him.

Ráz blew on the meat before taking a bite and chewed. He looked up at Miten in surprise.

“Do you like it?” the young Kevar asked.

"It's wonderful!"

"I added some seasoning. It's rather bland without it," Miten explained with a friendly smile. He offered another one of the rodents to Kira. She accepted it gratefully and carefully took a bite. Miten looked at her expectantly.

"It's great! How'd you manage to get it to taste this good? I need to have your recipe!" she said.

A smirk appeared on Miten's face. "It's a secret ingredient," he teased.

"Tell me," she said challengingly.

"Join me tomorrow and I'll show you."

She nodded at him. "Sure, it's a date," she said. Although Kevar couldn't blush, Ráz clearly noticed Miten was slightly uncomfortable and thrown off guard by the Pearl's answer.

"A date? Surely, I-I can't ..." Miten stuttered.

She laughed at him for a moment. Grummus and Ráz both snickered.

"Right, I'll be on watch now. You guys get some rest," he finally said as he walked to the entrance of the camp.

Grummus got up from the ground. "Let me talk to him for a bit."

"She was just kidding with you," Grummus said as he patted Miten on the shoulder.

The young Kevar was nearly as tall as he was. He looked back at Grummus and nodded.

"Yeah, I know, but she's just so ... you know?"

Grummus frowned at him and had not the faintest idea what Miten was trying to say.

"Just so, what?"

"She's clearly out of my league. Besides, I'm not of high blood."

"Oh, you're talking about love? You're in love with her?" Grummus asked, sounding unsure of himself.

"She's so beautiful and smart. I couldn't possibly ever be her mate ..." he mumbled as he looked warily over the plains.

"Why not?"

"I don't think you'd understand as a Scarowyn. You guys don't have mates, do you?" Miten asked, frowning at the young Earthmaster.

"No, but that doesn't mean we can't feel love for others," Grummus explained. He found he had about as much trouble understanding the young Kevar's feelings as he had explaining that the Scarowyn weren't emotionless. This whole love thing was hard to describe and discuss.

"Maybe we should just drop the topic. I'll be on watch for the next couple of hours, okay?" Miten said.

"Sure. I'll replace you whenever you're done. I won't require rest for a couple of days," Grummus said as he ducked back into the camp.

Râz and Kira had just finished eating and were discussing what the next day would bring when Grummus rejoined them.

"We should be passing New Dawn Creek by tomorrow," Râz said as he noticed Grummus.

"Yes, and then it'll be about four days until we reach Ra'asha's Pass," Kira explained. She had used a twig to draw a crude map in the dirt next to the campfire.

"The pass will be much more rugged than the plains, right?" Râz asked.

"Yes, that's also where the wildlife is quite a bit more dangerous than here. We should be fine as long as everyone stays on their toes. I'll see if I can find the materials to finish my bow tomorrow. I'll need some material for a bowstring, and I'll have to carve arrows from those branches we found."

"What about you, Grummus? Don't you need a weapon?" Râz asked as he looked up at the tall, lanky Scarowyn.

"I'll be fine," Grummus replied, not really wanting to use weapons. His control of magicka and ability to grow plants at will usually helped in self-defence.

"I don't know. You don't have your orb. Perhaps it would be wise to learn how to wield a staff or spear?" Râz suggested.

"I believe your friend is right," Kira added.

"But I'm no good at fighting," Grummus admitted.

"You were pretty good when we defeated Langruff," Râz praised him.

“Well, perhaps I could use some pointers fighting with a weapon ...”

“I can help you with that. Let’s start by finding you a weapon tomorrow,” Rüz said. He yawned and stretched. Kira yawned shortly as well and got up from her place at the fire.

“Let’s get some rest. It’ll be a long journey before we reach the pass, and then we’ll still have to cross that to get to Pilgrim’s Rest.”

“Agreed,” Rüz said, nodding at her.

\* \* \*

The party had followed New Dawn’s Creek all the way to Ra’asha’s Pass, which they had been traversing for a few days now. All in all, it had been an uneventful week. Rüz had taken some time to familiarize Grummus with a staff and teach him how to defend himself with it. He had insisted he would only use a weapon in self-defence. Rüz had only partially succeeded in training him thus far, but he was happy to see Grummus was a quick study.

Most days passed in a similar fashion. Miten would hunt, Kira would gather berries, nuts and fruit and Rüz and Grummus would take care of making their camp at the end of the day. They had encountered a few of the more dangerous species of predators a few times, but they hadn’t attacked the party and usually steered clear of the group of four strangers.

“The terrain sure is a whole lot more rugged here than it was on the plains,” Rüz said as they were threading through a particularly rocky part of the pass. Only a thin path cut through the jagged, brownish red rocks, making it impossible to walk side by side most of the time.

“We should be wary, this place is where most injuries are suffered by pilgrims,” Kira said. She raised her voice to make sure everyone heard her.

“If we’re careful, we won’t get cut by the rocks,” Grummus said.

Kira looked back at him and shook her head. “Not by the rocks,” she whispered.

Grumus shuddered. He didn't want to think of anyone in their group getting hurt by anything.

"There should be some places where we can get higher up. Good places to make camp," Miten suggested. Kira nodded at him in agreement.

"Look, over there's a good place. We should be able to get a good view of the rest of the canyon from there," Ráz said, pointing at a rocky ledge leading upwards.

"Good idea, it feels like we've been here for ages. Everything looks the same," Kira said as she picked up the pace.

A few moments later, they were on top of the rock wall, overlooking the pass. It seemed to stretch on forever and branched out in different directions.

"Which way are we supposed to go?" Grumus asked when he saw the pass split into several paths leading further away.

Both Kira and Miten pondered the question for a moment as they studied the gorge.

"I believe we need to take the rightmost path first," Miten concluded after some time.

"I agree," Kira added.

"Let's head back down then and move forward," Ráz suggested.

"Food will be a lot harder to come by from here on, I think. We should conserve as much energy as we can. How much do we have left now?" Miten asked.

Grumus reached for his bag. It was still more than halfway full with berries and nuts.

"We're good for a little while. Two days, maybe three if we ration this out," he said as he closed the bag.

"I'll see if I can track down some bigger game later today," Miten said.

"We've still got a lot of daytime left. Let's head back down," Kira suggested.

When the day was drawing to a close, they found a great spot for a camp: a small cavern in the rock wall halfway up a ramp leading upward

out of the gully. They had found several skeletons of large herbivores, but whatever predator had used the cavern as shelter before was nowhere to be found. The cave had been used by other pilgrims as well, judging by the trash that had been left behind. Small bones and remains of a campfire were strewn about the floor and someone had even taken the time to draw tribal art on the walls.

Miten left immediately after they had found the cave and made sure it was secure. He would attempt to hunt for something for them to eat. They had spotted several large herbivores named copperhoofs before, on top of the canyon walls, where grass was much more common. They were bovine creatures and quite docile, except for the bulls, which could be quite territorial. Miten had followed the ramp further up until he was standing on a plateau overlooking the rest of the canyon. In the far distance, he could already see the end of the canyon, which meant they were only a few days away from reaching Pilgrim's Rest. He longed for that moment, which would be the end of a rather successful pilgrimage. He froze when he spotted a lone calf not far from where he was standing. It was all by itself, no other copperhoofs seemed to be anywhere near it. Warily, Miten looked around once more as he crouched down to avoid being detected by the small beast. Its desperate cries softly echoed through the canyon. Miten closed in on the calf as fast as he could, making sure not to get within the beast's field of vision. He had replaced the makeshift club with a spear that he had crafted with some simple tools. His grip on the spear tightened as he braced himself to hurl it at the calf with as much force as he could muster. Just when he was about to, he shifted his gaze to his right and spotted a large copperhoof bull. It had not noticed him yet, but they were only about five metres apart. Any sudden movement and he would betray his presence. He held his breath as quietly as possible.

The calf tottered up to its father. Miten realized it would cross paths with him, so he tried backing up. As he did, the calf saw him and cried out. The bull immediately charged forward to see what had startled it so much. Miten scrambled up as fast as he could. He was now staring into

the eyes of the bull, which were lit up with rage. He knew he would not have enough time to run from the creature. There were only two possible outcomes: either he'd get gored by the beast if it were to charge him, or he'd had to stop it by throwing his spear. Seeing no alternative, he jerked his arm back, readying the spear to be thrown. The bull rushed towards him, its large horns pointing forward. With all his might, Miten hurled the spear at it. It pierced the flesh at its left shoulder, but the beast charged ahead despite its wound. Miten tried to jump out of the way, but the bull tilted his head and heaved the young Kevar up into the air. For a moment, Miten felt weightless as he was flung up. When he hit the ground, the air was knocked out of his lungs. He gasped for air and felt the ground shudder as the bull turned around to attack him again. Grunting with pain, he got up. His left side was bleeding, but the bull's horns had only caused a flesh wound. He touched the wound and winced. His true hunter's instinct took over as the adrenaline started to rush inside him. The bull bellowed as it prepared itself for another charge. Miten hissed at it. He jumped right before it would hit him and managed to cling to its back. He bared his fangs and clawed away at the animal's muscular torso. This only added to the bull's rage as it tried to shake off the Kevar. Miten's grip loosened, but before he fell off the enormous beast, he managed to pull the spear out of its shoulder. He rolled over and prepared for the beast to retaliate. It stood and breathed heavily for a moment, focusing on him.

"Bring it, you stupid beast!" Miten shouted out in frustration.

Another deep bellow came from the copperhoof, almost as if it responded to Miten's threat. It took a step backward before it charged at him again. Miten prepared for another jump, spear pointing downward so he could attempt to wound the bull mortally, but he miscalculated the jump and the beast gored his belly with its right horn. The horn came out the other way. The bull shook its head in a frenzy until Miten's limp body slid back on the ground. Blood gushed out of the wound on both sides. He breathed heavily, but didn't dare to move. The bull had utterly defeated him. This was it. He had made a stupid mistake and now he would not only fail his pilgrimage, he would die here. He could hear the bull trot away from him, but it didn't matter. Everything went black and

he embraced the cold that crept over him. At least it had been honourable, in a fair fight, against one of Ra'asha's own.

\* \* \*

"Will he be okay?" the worried voice of Kira echoed off the cavern walls.

Grummus looked up at her, his hands covered in blood. *Too much blood*, Kira thought.

"He's stable. I believe he'll be fine," Grummus replied with a warm smile.

"Really? He's lost a lot of blood."

Kira looked over Grummus' shoulder and down at the young Kevar warrior. They had found him lying in a pool of his own blood at the top of the plateau nearby. It was clear he had been attacked by one of the beasts, as his belly had been torn by horns.

"So, what do we do now?" Rüz asked, concerned.

"We need to make something to carry him with us. He's in no condition to walk on his own," Grummus said.

Earlier, they'd had an argument over saving the young warrior's life. Grummus had objected to letting him die and had used all of his restorative powers to close the wound and stabilize him.

"We should have just let him die, like I said before. He's become a liability!" Kira snarled angrily. Grummus grabbed her by the arms, glared and pointed an angry finger at her.

"Listen to me! We're taking him with us and that's final. We can't just let him die like that – what kind of people are you?"

Taken aback by the young Earthmaster's sudden outburst, everyone stood in silence.

Rüz cleared his throat. "Listen, maybe we should vote?" he suggested.

"Then what did I just stabilize him for? We're not leaving him behind!" Grummus said, his voice still raised in frustration. He could not believe even Rüz would consider leaving Miten behind. He already had enough trouble understanding Kira's reasoning.

"I'm not saying we should leave him to rot," Rüz replied calmly, hoping that would ease Grummus, but he could already tell it would take more than that.

"Then what are you saying?" Grummus asked, folding his arms defiantly at the Windmaster.

"Listen, Grummus, the Kevar views on life are different from ours. If we would've left Miten there to die, it would've been considered an honourable death. Keeping him alive puts him and his family to shame," Rüz explained.

Grummus looked at Kira. She nodded at him, confirming that what Rüz had said was correct.

"How can you people be so merciless?" Grummus asked. He sounded defeated.

"We're not without mercy," Kira replied softly. She seemed to be a little bit lost herself.

"Listen, Grummus, if we take Miten with us in his current condition, he will be a burden to us all. I'm not saying we should leave him here, but it seems to be the best option."

"It's two against one, I see. What use will it be to vote? I already know the outcome," Grummus stated grimly.

"What's your vote?" Rüz asked Kira. She shook her head briefly.

"I say we leave him. It is the honourable thing to do," she said shakily.

"And I say we take him with us!" Grummus said as he glared angrily at both of his companions.

Rüz had never seen him so full of conviction and anger before. It was not often the young Scarowyn had lost his temper. He had never seen it in any of the other Scarowyn he had met, who were all extremely calm, to the point of pure serenity.

"I'm conflicted about this," Rüz admitted. "On the one hand, I say we leave him here. As Kira pointed out, he's become a liability. On the other hand, it's not in my nature to leave anyone behind like this."

"Then we should take him with us. Rüz, your people believe in the Greater Good, right? What good will it do us to leave him here to rot, when he could recover and live to fight another day, by our side? Isn't that what your Greater Good is all about? Would taking him with us

really jeopardize our journey to Pilgrim's Rest?" Grummus asked desperately. All of the questions filled Rüz' mind as he looked for the answers. He pursed his lips and looked at Grummus. Deep down, he knew Grummus was right, but he wanted to respect the Kevar's values as well. His biggest worry was how it would affect the outcome of their pilgrimage. Would Kos still grant them the stealth drive if they brought Miten back, or would he banish them from the planet as well? And what about Kira? How would it affect her? He would never leave a Xoron behind in a situation like this. Perhaps that was what Kos had wanted to test as well: see if they would honour their own values, or those of the Kevar. He didn't know; all he knew was that what he was taught was right. He sighed.

"I vote for. That's two votes for and one against ... We're taking him with us."

Grummus sighed with relief. "Thank you, Rüz," he said, his voice slightly shaky.

Kira just gave Rüz a curt nod. "Very well, I shall respect the group's choice," she finally said.

\* \* \*

Shortly after the sun rose, they had finally made it to Pilgrim's Rest. Grummus had conjured a makeshift stretcher out of thick vines and branches for extra support. They had alternated carrying the young warrior and had not been delayed as much as Rüz had thought they would be earlier.

Now, they were approaching the gate which led to a small outpost known as Pilgrim's Rest. The Patriarch was already on the lookout for the party and walked calmly towards them when they were within talking distance. Two of his guards followed by his side.

"You've made it," he said. He seemed happy to see Kira, Grummus noticed.

"We're a bit later than we anticipated, but yes, here we are," Kira said. She sounded relieved.

Kos' eyes widened as he noticed the stretcher and the young warrior lying on it.

"What is this?" he demanded as he pointed an angry claw at Rüz, who was holding the front end of the stretcher.

"He's wounded, but he should recover," Rüz explained.

Kos shook his head angrily. "You've made a huge mistake bringing him back, Destroyer of Worlds," he said with a deep, rumbling voice.

"We voted ..." Grummus said, although he knew saying anything at this moment would be unwise. He didn't care. He was glad they had done the right thing.

"Silence!" Kos bellowed. "The boy's fate has already been decided. Yours I will consider later. We'll retreat to the palace. You will be judged there. Now come."

The guards had walked up to the group's side to escort them back to a large coach that would fly them back to the palace.

\* \* \*

"Kira," Kos said, beckoning her to come closer to speak in private.

She walked up to him gracefully, but with her head bowed down.

"Yes, father?" she asked cautiously.

"Why did you bring Miten back here? You know that is not our way." The disappointment was clearly audible in his voice. He gazed into her eyes as he held her by the shoulders. She looked back at him with a fierce determination in her blue eyes.

"We voted," came her solemn answer.

Kos scoffed at her. "Perhaps I misjudged those two."

Kira shook her head. "No, you didn't. They are truly exceptional people. They are just not Kevar."

"Indeed they aren't," Kos growled.

"I voted against bringing Miten back, if that's any consolation. Grummus voted to take him with us. His wounds were treatable. Rüz seemed to be against at first, but Grummus convinced him and so they decided we should take him along."

"I've heard enough, my Pearl. You are dismissed. I will speak to the outsiders now," Kos stated gravely as he gently pushed her away.

Kos walked up in front of Rüz and Grummus, who had been waiting silently in front of the throne.

"You two were not what I had expected," he started. "I had hoped you would learn about our culture and embrace our way of life. Yet you showed mercy at the wrong time and now Miten's fate might as well be one worse than death."

Rüz and Grummus frowned at each other and then looked at Kos with a puzzled look painted on their faces.

"What do you mean?" Grummus asked.

"He will be banished from our world. We do not tolerate weakness and failing the Pilgrimage is where we separate the Kevar from the outsiders," Kos explained without as much as a trace of pity.

"But that's not fair!" Grummus protested.

"Fair?" Kos' voice boomed through the throne room. "He was given a chance to prove himself and he failed. There are no second chances. No mercy or pity."

"What will become of him now?" Rüz asked curiously.

"That remains to be seen. He's already been taken down to the nearest spaceport for deportation."

Grummus looked sadly at Rüz for a moment. He had never meant for this to happen to the young Kevar.

"We'll take him with us," Rüz said.

"Do what you will with him. He is no longer any concern of ours," Kos said impassively. "Explain to me, why did you decide to bring him back?"

Grummus was the first to speak. "As a Scarowyn, I value all life, no matter how fragile, weak or undeserving. Leaving him behind when he had a good chance to live went against all I hold dear. All that I live for."

Kos heard the words, but Rüz could tell they went against everything the Patriarch believed in. The Kevar nodded at Grummus respectfully and accepted his reason for what it was. A belief. A way of life.

"And what about you, Harbinger of Death – or should I call you Bringer of Mercy from now on?" Kos taunted.

“The Xoron and Kevar are not so very different in their beliefs. While we both value honour, I believe there is a fundamental difference in the way we define it. Leaving young Miten to die was not an honourable thing to do. Given proper medical treatment, he could be saved and fight for the Greater Good another day. He will learn from his mistake and come out stronger than before. You can only learn from your mistakes if you are given a second chance. We will give him just that,” Rüz replied with conviction.

The fire in Kos’ eyes burned brightly as he listened to Rüz making his statement. When Rüz finished, Kos began to clap loudly. He clenched his right fist and banged it against his chest, then bowed deeply. Others in the room followed his example, the Matriarch, the advisors, guards and everybody else in the room followed his example.

“Spoken like a true Xoron! Consider your pilgrimage completed. I will have the stealth drive transferred to Niksten Space Dock. Now leave, my friends. Fight well, die with honour!”

Kos saluted them again, banging his fist on his chest and holding it there for a short moment.

Both Rüz and Grummus returned the sign of respect, turned on their heels and walked out of the throne room.

## Chapter 11 – Marooned

“So, you got any idea where that furball might be headed, Prynn?” Vyrex asked as he looked up from the ship’s controls to the Gald smuggler. Lerion shrugged as he studied a navigational chart.

“Somewhere in Zar’aranos space. Close to where you found us,” he replied. Much of the Empire was unknown to him, but he knew there were more than just a few places Vester could have run off to.

“Maybe I should just turn you back in? I took you with me because you know the guy,” Vyrex taunted.

“Oh, I know him, all right. He just told me only half of his plan. He never intended for me to come along after I had outlived my usefulness.”

“Seems to me like you’re not very useful now either,” Vyrex retorted.

Vyrex was getting on Lerion’s nerves, but he tried to remain calm.

“Whenever the *Claw* decloaks, it always leaves a trace of Kihindra particles in space. Kevlar technology hasn’t changed all that much over the past decade, so his ship should still produce them. If we scan for those, I think we can at least find out which direction he flew off to,” Lerion suggested as he worked on the scanners to make them detect the particles.

“And you expect he’ll just keep flying in one straight line?” Vyrex frowned at him.

Lerion shook his head. “Nah, but then at least we’d get a rough idea of the planets or stations he might be visiting that are along that line. It’s as good a start as any. If that doesn’t work, well, I suppose we could always ask the locals in the Empire if they saw a Kevlar scouting vessel. After all, that was your master plan, right?” Lerion asked with a sarcastic grin on his face.

Vyrex folded his arms defiantly and raised an eyebrow at him. “In my experience, yes. He’s not exactly someone who easily blends in with his environment. People will remember seeing a big-ass armoured feline.”

Vyrex pursed his lips for a moment, as if he was trying to remember something, then punched in a few commands on the captain's seat console.

"Let's contact Emeron and see what he's up to."

The vidcom sprang to life a moment later. Emeron's face appeared on the ship's main screen.

"Vinran reporting," he stated formally.

"Hey, Emeron, what are you up to?" Vyrex asked nonchalantly.

Slightly thrown off guard, Emeron replied: "Nothing, I was just flying along with you guys. Should I be doing anything else?"

"Not really," Vyrex answered. Silence followed. Emeron frowned at both Gald.

"Good talk, Vyrex," Lerion sneered.

Vyrex gave him the angry eye. Emeron couldn't help but snicker at the smuggler's remark.

"Look, we've adjusted our scanners to detect the residual particles their stealth drive produces. Prynn will send you the info now, so you can adjust yours."

"Very well, and then what?" Emeron asked curiously.

"Then we should have an estimation of where he was headed and we fly in that general direction." Vyrex shrugged at him indifferently.

"Does that mean we still don't have a plan?" Emeron asked.

"That is our plan."

"Just fly in that general direction? How did you ever become an assassin?" Emeron asked.

"We'll find him, trust me! Damn it, why do you have to keep asking questions? Just let me do my damn job, okay? We'll find Sylkwhisker, that's a fact as much as the fact that I would sell my mother for a billion credits," Vyrex fumed. He hated working with others. And they hated working with him.

Emeron nodded at him. "Very well, we'll see how good your methods really are. Vinran out."

The main screen faded back to the star chart. Lerion turned his head to Vyrex and gave him an impassive look.

“I think I’ve figured out the direction in which he was headed. Let’s set a course for the Empire.”

\* \* \*

“Show yourself!” Vester roared in frustration.

Ajira grabbed his right arm and pulled, so Vester would shift his attention to her.

“My love, she’s toying with you, don’t let her get to your head,” she said with the same amount of frustration as her mate.

Vester seemed to calm down a bit as he looked at his mate with a fire in his eyes she had not often seen before. After finding Ensign Liduur’s grotesque corpse and the message on the wall, Kha’hetra had slaughtered fifteen more crew members. Vester and Ajira had just now discovered another one of her victims, one of the few Gald in their crew. He was one of their engineers and like the ones before him, Kha’hetra had written another message on the wall with her victim’s blood before he bled out. A look of pure agony contorted his face.

“I ordered everyone to move around in pairs! Why was he alone?” Vester demanded.

Ajira looked at him gravely and shook her head. She hadn’t the faintest idea either.

“Maybe someone from engineering will know?” she suggested.

“Or maybe we’ve been going over this the wrong way. It seems Kha’hetra will easily overpower a single person while she’s controlling someone. We should order everyone to move in groups of three,” Vester thought out loud.

“That would seem a prudent measure,” Ajira said and nodded at him in agreement.

Vester walked up to the nearest computer panel and punched in his credentials, then opened a ship-wide communications channel.

“This is your captain speaking. As of now, everyone is ordered to move around in groups of three! No less! Sylkwhisker out!”

The ship had been on red alert ever since they had detected the intruder. The alarms had almost become background noise to Vester. He

was sure the Shaedon was lurking nearby, laughing at his pitiful attempts to prevent anyone else from getting killed. He could almost sense her evil presence, but he was nothing but prey in this game. There was no way he would be able to reverse it, not even if he would get off his ship. The Shaedon would hunt his crew down until there was no one else left but him. She had threatened to do so when they were still on the human freighter. He understood now that she had meant every single word. This would not end until everyone around him was dead, even his mate. He leaned against the wall to recollect his thoughts, then he turned to face Ajira. Her eyes had gone entirely black.

“Tick, tock, time is running out, Vester,” she taunted, a wicked grin smeared on her face.

Vester shivered when he heard the words, the hairs on his back standing on end.

“You come to mock me? To tell me that soon there will be no one left but me?” he bellowed at Kha’hetra.

She almost perfectly copied the movements Ajira made when she was alone with Vester. She gently brushed her left paw against his cheek.

“My love, I would never do such a thing!” she purred, exactly as Ajira would.

“What do you want from me?” he cried out.

“What I’ve wanted from the start, my dear. Obedience,” Kha’hetra said. She dropped her act, changing Ajira’s body language and posture to fit her own personality.

“I’ll do anything you want, just please, stop this madness!” he said.

Ajira slowly shook her head at him.

“That would be too easy, my dear Vester. You need to learn your place. You need to know the price of disobedience. Besides, I’m having way too much fun! Who should I kill next, the head of engineering? The chief medical officer? Your mate?”

Vester’s instinct took over as he strangled Ajira. Her blackened eyes widened as she gasped for air.

“Go on ... kill your ... loved ... one!” Kha’hetra hissed.

Vester could feel Ajira's body losing strength as he kept pressing on her windpipe. Her eyes rolled back. He could feel she would soon lose consciousness. Any longer and she would suffocate. He slowly released his grip on her as he came to his senses. All the strength was drained from her legs as she slumped down to the floor. Vester caught her and checked her pulse. She was still alive and breathing shallowly. He sighed with relief. This was the only way he could make sure she was spared, for now. Vester was only given a brief pause.

"Captain! Ensign Kahra, the helm, she's being possessed by the Shaedon!" he heard over the internal voicecom. It was one of his bridge officers.

"I'm on my way! Keep her away from the ship's controls," he commanded as he sprinted through the corridor.

Vester breathed heavily as the lift doors slid open to reveal the bridge. Even with eight crew members present on the bridge, they had not been able to stop Kha'hetra. They lay motionless on the floor, sprawled over consoles or knocked against walls. Only Ensign Kahra herself was still standing.

"You've just missed the show," Kha'hetra said arrogantly. There was no doubt she was inconceivably skilled at possessing others. She pushed aside the limp body of the head of security, who was hanging over one of the ship's consoles.

"We should be at our destination soon. I've already set a course," Kha'hetra said as she sauntered away from the console and to the captain's seat. Vester padded forward carefully, keeping his eyes trained on his target.

"Where to, exactly?" he asked absently. The question was only meant to occupy the Shaedon as he moved within reach of one of the consoles from which he could access the engineering systems.

"Just some small backwater planet that will be used by the Armada to stage our attack on Gald Prime," Kha'hetra said, as if that would explain everything to Vester. In the meantime, he had reached the console. He just needed to make sure Kha'hetra would look away from him for a

moment, so he could adjust the settings on the stealth drive to leak Kihindra particles.

“So now what happens?” he asked, hoping she would be sufficiently distracted.

“Oh, my dear Vester, you really haven’t the faintest clue, do you? Here we are, nearing our base. You’re deep within hostile territory and you wonder what happens?” Kha’hetra said, walking around in circles. It was enough for Vester to secretly punch in a few commands on the console as he listened to what the Shaedon had to say, but she only talked without actually saying anything. He succeeded in changing the stealth drive setting. If anyone would be clever enough, they’d find the trail at least. He hoped someone would.

“Come sit with me and perhaps I’ll let the remainder of the crew live,” Kha’hetra said as she patted the seat next to the captain’s. It was where Ajira usually sat, right next to him. He sat down and kept his gaze fixed on the possessed ensign.

“You will be such a fine addition to the Armada, Vester.” She tilted her head at him tauntingly.

Again, he felt a chill run down his spine. Whatever it meant, what she had just said didn’t sound good. He would never willingly join them. They would have to force him to do it. Uncertainty filled his head. He could only guess the Shaedon’s methods. If there were none of his crew left, Kha’hetra could take control of him. Permanently? Or would he just be a slave to this demon, to be controlled at a whim? He had no choice but to accept his fate. At least for now.

“What makes you think I’d want to fight for your Armada?” he asked, folding his arms.

“It is not a matter of wanting. It is no longer a choice. That choice was made for you when you so defiantly disobeyed me. Now I suggest you go and say goodbye to this ship and your loved one. Both won’t be around in a few hours,” Kha’hetra said.

Vester frowned at her. Why would she just let him go? There was nothing he could do about it at this point, he then realized. The Shaedon had singlehandedly taken out every person on the bridge. As long as

there was at least one more person alive, she'd be able to maintain her level of control.

"How much time do I have?" he asked, sounding defeated.

"Be back here in ninety minutes," she commanded.

Vester nodded at her and got up from his seat. He walked towards the nearest turbolift, got in and turned around to face the door. Just before it shut, Kha'hetra said one last thing.

"Don't consider taking your own life."

The words resounded through his mind. He had considered it, but deep down, he knew he couldn't. He would see this through to the bitter end. He'd die with honour.

When the doors of the turbolift slid open, Vester walked out cautiously. Just around the corner was the corridor where he had left Ajira. She had barely regained consciousness and looked up at her mate. She had never seen that look in his eyes before, empty and sullen.

"What is it, my love?" her voice trembled.

Vester bowed his head, defeated, and then looked her in the eyes again. He kept staring at her. He wanted to speak, but the words eluded him.

"Vester?" she asked worriedly as she stepped forward and caressed him. He put his armoured arms around her and held her tightly. He knew she'd soon be dead. It terrified him that he did not know how she would meet her end and there was nothing he could do to prevent it.

"We don't have long ..." he finally managed to utter.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

They exchanged looks and Vester could tell that she understood. Kha'hetra had won and they had lost the moment Vester had defied her. Her eyes became watery and she was shaky.

"My huntress," Vester said gravely. He held her head up to his. Their foreheads touched and they both closed their eyes for a moment. The sound of her sobbing gave him chills.

"Is there ... nothing we can do?"

Vester looked down and shook his head slowly.

"I tried everything I could. It seems we've finally met our match. Kha'hetra has taken control of the ship. We'll be arriving at our destination in a little over an hour. That is all the time we have left together," Vester whispered.

Ajira's eyes lit up with hatred and her nostrils flared. *She has not yet lost her fighting spirit*, Vester thought.

"Death over dishonour!" she snarled.

This was what Vester admired her for. She would not back down, she would never give up. But she had not seen what the Shaedon was capable of. They were powerless against her.

"We can't win this fight, Ajira," Vester said flatly.

"Are you saying you've given up, like a coward?" she asked.

"There are some battles you need to choose not to have," he retorted.

"Then you've already lost! If we don't even try, we will surely die. I'd rather face death than wait for it to come to me."

"She controlled you before. She took out the entire bridge crew singlehandedly!"

"If she has any honour, she will allow me to fight her. One on one," Ajira said. She had the same defiance as he did. Then why did he feel so powerless? Why not try at least? Had the Shaedon already succeeded in breaking his will?

"Very well. Let's head back to the bridge," he finally said after some consideration.

Vester and Ajira walked out of the turbolift warily. Ajira spotted Kha'hetra, who was still inside the body of Ensign Kahra. She twisted her head to see who had come in, but didn't look surprised at all.

"So, you came to fight me?" she asked as she got up from the chair.

"How do you know?" Ajira asked, frowning.

"You Kevar, with your deep sense of honour and dying well ... It gets old fast," Kha'hetra smirked.

"Then you will grant me this duel to the death?" Ajira demanded.

Kha'hetra gave her a curt nod. "You do understand that you have no chance of killing me? You might kill this vessel. Then again, her death

was already a certainty. Just like yours,” Kha’hetra said as she got into a battle stance.

Ajira did the same. She drew her blades, pointing the one in her right paw forward and the other backwards.

Kha’hetra didn’t bother drawing any weapons. She nimbly dodged Ajira’s first two swings with ease. Her control over the Ensign’s body was perfect. She rolled over the floor, past Ajira’s blades and performed a leg sweep. Ajira rolled over her shoulders as she tipped forward, then quickly turned one hundred and eighty degrees to face her opponent.

“Impressive,” she complimented Kha’hetra.

Kha’hetra scoffed at her. “I’ve spent years studying Kevar combat techniques. Your dual-bladed style is flawed,” she taunted.

Ajira’s eyes widened. She looked for an opportunity to strike. Offense was definitely not the best option in this fight. She would have to wait for an opportunity.

Kha’hetra reached for the two-handed blade on her back. She held it above her head, pointed forward to her enemy, then lunged forward.

Ajira deftly blocked each of Kha’hetra’s strikes until she caught her foe’s blade, just above her head, by crossing her own. She felt Kha’hetra bearing down with considerable force, but she held firmly. She quickly kicked Kha’hetra in the groin, causing her to stumble backwards. Ajira used this opening to slash horizontally with both of her blades, which cut through one of the lightly armoured wristbands the Ensign was wearing. Blood dripped out of her left arm. The cut wasn’t very deep.

“Flawed, eh?” Ajira asked. She curled up her lip and bared her fangs at Kha’hetra.

“Fool! Your weapons will only harm the vessel, not me,” Kha’hetra shouted. Ajira thought she detected frustration in the Shaedon’s voice. She could use that against her. Without another word, Ajira got back into her fighting stance, ready for Kha’hetra to strike again.

Vester had been watching the fight. He knew it wasn’t fair, but even if he could intervene somehow, how would it affect the ultimate outcome? Then he realized something. What if the Shaedon could not detect him when he activated the personal stealth field on his armour? Perhaps

then he'd be able to turn this situation around. Ajira had just struck out at the controlled Ensign. He heard them speak, but he didn't listen. Ajira was too fixed on Kha'hetra to notice him activating the stealth field. He watched his own body disappear into thin air as the stealth generator did its work. He crouched down and sneaked towards Kha'hetra, drawing his large serrated blade. The two women were too deeply concentrated on their fight to notice him moving in for the kill. Just before Kha'hetra would strike again, he grabbed her, put his arm around her neck and stabbed her in the back. He swiftly withdrew the serrated blade, causing a large amount of blood to spill from the wound, then deactivated the stealth generator.

Both Kha'hetra and Ajira were shocked by the sudden turn of events. Vester gently put the body of Kahra down, against a nearby wall, knowing she'd bleed out in a few minutes. Her eyes were still blackened. She coughed up blood as she tried to get back up. When Kha'hetra noticed this was no longer possible, she screamed in frustration at both her assailants.

"You just killed another of your own, Vester!"

Ajira looked at him angrily. "She was mine to kill!" she hissed at him.

"You know as well as I do that this wasn't a fair fight," he said. He cared for her so much and now she was angry at him for saving her. "She's right, honour will not get us out of this alive!"

"Then you are no longer Kevar," Ajira said sullenly. Her shoulders slumped and she lowered her head. Vester leaned forward to give her a hug. She struggled a little, but gave in nonetheless. He could feel her body shaking. At first Vester thought she was sobbing, but he heard the sound becoming more and more like a chuckle. He moved her face up with his right paw and looked into a pair of bottomless pits once more.

"Poor Vester," she giggled and kicked him in the groin, hard. Vester grunted and got down on one knee after the blow.

Kha'hetra picked up one of the blades Ajira had used in their fight.

"Look at what you've done, Vester. This is what becomes of those who defy us."

As soon as the words escaped the lips of her vessel, Kha'hetra shoved the blade into Ajira's chest, piercing the heart. The metal came out through Ajira's back, slick with blood.

"No! Damn you, wretched coward!" Vester's voice tore through the bridge. He saw Ajira stumbling on her feet and barely managed to break her fall.

When he next looked at this mate, her eyes had returned to normal. He could see the life slipping away from her. He held her right paw with his own and caressed her cheek with the other.

"I'll avenge you, I promise," he vowed.

"She will destroy you," Ajira said with audible effort. She wheezed, trying to find the energy to say one last thing.

"My love ..." were her last words as her final breath escaped her lips.

Vester held his mate for a moment. He sat with her on the floor, defeated and broken. He couldn't even tell if he was crying or not. The Shaedon had taken everything from him. His instincts took over; he would survive, one way or another, until the very end. He gently laid Ajira down, closing her eyes. Then he activated the stealth generator of his suit once more. It was his only hope.

\* \* \*

Lerion and Vyrex had spent their time together in the Assassin's scout ship in silence. Occasionally they spoke, but the only topic had been if they were picking up anything out of the ordinary. They were now well past the border and at the edge of Zar'aranos space. Several patrol ships had been in the vicinity, but none of them had bothered to intercept the pair of small scouting ships. It wasn't uncommon for Alliance ships to fly through Empire space, especially smaller vessels who posed little to no threat to the patrol vessels.

"That's strange," Lerion mumbled as he went over the scans once again.

Vyrex had walked up behind him and peered over his shoulders.

"What is it?" he asked curiously.

Lerion pointed at the graph on his display. "Well, so far we seemed to be on track. I think we're getting closer. See that?"

Vyrex could clearly see the trail of Kihindra particles.

"That's not normal, right?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at the smuggler.

Lerion shook his head. "Nope, it's almost as if someone wanted to leave this trail."

"What if it's a trap?" Vyrex wondered.

"Nah, why would he set a trap for us in the Empire? Vester's got enough trouble avoiding those patrol ships, I reckon," Lerion guessed. It just didn't fit the Kevar's usual behaviour.

"Well, you know him better than I do. Let's follow the trail then."

"Sounds like a plan to me. What about you, Emeron, did you get that?" Lerion asked.

They had opened a continuous communication channel the moment they had crossed the border, just in case.

"Affirmative, I'll be right behind you two," came the answer through the voicecom.

Following the trail of particles, the trio ended up near a habitable planet.

"Looks like they went down to the surface here," Lerion remarked as he studied the sensor readings on his screen.

"What do you mean, down? As in, crashed?" Vyrex asked impatiently.

Lerion shook his head and shrugged at Vyrex. "I dunno if they crashed or landed there, but the particle trail leads there. I say we follow the trail."

"Fine. Did you hear that, Vinran?"

"Loud and clear. I'll descend to the planet soon. We'll rendezvous on the surface," Emeron stated in military fashion.

"Okidoke," Vyrex replied as he closed off the comm system.

"Strap in, Prynn, we're going to have ourselves a little excursion!" Vyrex smirked.

Lerion stepped back to the chair Vyrex' right and fastened his seat belts. He already felt the ship tipping downward as it started its descent. For a brief moment, the scout ship shook heavily under the stress of en-

tering the planet's atmosphere, but the effect subsided quickly, and they soon flew smoothly again as the ship's engines shifted to atmospheric flight mode.

"The planet is within habitable parameters. I see regular air compositions on our scanners. We should be able to leave the ship without suiting up," Lerion said as he used the monitor on his seat to check the ship's scanners.

"I would be surprised if we had to, really," Vyrex muttered as he worked the controls of the ship and prepared for a soft landing, close to their target's ship.

"Actually, it would make much more sense if they did business on a less hospitable planet, if ya ask me," Lerion said.

"Actually, I didn't ask you," he snapped. Whatever caused Vyrex to respond that way, Lerion didn't care.

The planet was only designated as B-19-W-81, which was the code used to number planets by Alliance standards. If the planet had any other name, they would surely find out soon enough. There was some minor Empire activity here, with only a few colonies on the surface. The planet was basically as much a backwater in the Empire as Herzenflag was on Saridia. Perfect for conducting business, Lerion thought.

When they broke through the clouds, the surface of the planet came into view. Heavily forested areas and bogs stretched out beneath them. The planet seemed to be dotted with archipelagos as far the eye could reach.

"Looks like one big swamp to me. Who would want to live in this dump?" Vyrex said as he watched the viewscreen.

"Anyone who favours humid surroundings, I guess. Amphibians, maybe?" Lerion mused. He knew Vyrex was just doing what he always did, even when he wasn't fully aware of it.

"Right," Vyrex answered as he turned back to his controls.

Lerion's eyes lit up as he saw the scanner's results flashing on his screen.

"Looks like the *Claw* did crash."

"Yeah, I can see that!" Vyrex said, pointing at the viewscreen. Heavy smoke was billowing out from a nearby forest. "I'll put us down at the edge of the forest."

Vyrex steered the ship further down and activated the landing procedure. Lerion felt the landing gear extending under the small ship. A moment later, it touched the ground with a small, but satisfyingly firm thud. He removed his seat belts and started for the door. Vyrex stopped him in his tracks.

"Whoa, calm down there, man! Let me go first," he said, pushing the smuggler away from the bridge exit.

"Whatever you wish, princess," Lerion snorted.

The exit of the ship slid open and a small ramp extended to the ground, allowing the travellers an easy way out. Vyrex pulled up his hood to block the sun's rays from shining in his face. Lerion was already protected from them by his hat. He turned around and saw the young Windblade heading their way. Emeron had parked his ship roughly ten metres from theirs.

"Nice little planet," he said as he met up with the much smaller Gald.

"You call this nice, kid?" Lerion said, frowning at the Xoron.

"Trust me when I say Derenthia is much less hospitable than this."

"Isn't that just a hunk of ice, basically?"

Emeron nodded. "Yep, this looks like a paradise in comparison. How do we go about this?"

They were already on their way, reaching the edge of the forest, as Vyrex had not bothered to stand still to talk.

"We spot the ship, look for survivors, hope that furball survived and bring him in. Simple enough plan for you?" Vyrex asked with a lowered voice.

"Straightforward enough," Emeron said. He peered past the Gald into the forest, hoping to spot something between the trees, but the place was suspiciously silent. There was some noise from nearby animals: small amphibians, insects and the occasional bird.

They continued into the dense forest. Both Emeron and Vyrex had taken out their blades as they kept trudging forward, hacking away at plants and vines that were in their way. Lerion could smell the fire more intensely with each step they took. After a few kilometres, they could see the flames. Trees had toppled under the weight of the ship that had slammed into them. They reached a small opening. The *Claw of Ra'asha* had crashed nose first and it was stuck in the ground at the end of a deep trench in the forest floor. Several trees had fallen over it, and some of them had caught on fire as well.

"You think anyone might have survived a crash like this?" Emeron asked.

"Unlikely. Let's see if we can get inside," Vyrex suggested as he kept marching forward.

At the back of the *Claw*, they found several deep gashes in the ship's hull that allowed them easy access. Emeron helped both Gald inside after he had given himself a slight boost by using his abilities to jump higher.

"Seven decks to check, looks like this is deck five ..." Lerion mumbled as they entered the large gash at the side of the *Claw*.

"Let's look for the bridge first, see if we can dig up any info. We should be able to get their flight data from there," Vyrex suggested as he carefully walked forward. He readied his daggers, which could be classified as dirks with slightly curved blades.

Lerion thought he noticed the air at the edge of the blades waver slightly, as if the edges were blazing hot.

"Would you mind handing me my gun back now, pal?" Lerion whispered as they neared the end of the corridor. Vyrex looked back at him, pursed his lips and reached inside his vest, then handed Lerion's blaster to him. When Lerion grabbed it, Vyrex held on to it for a moment.

"Don't get any ideas, Prynn," he said as he released his grasp on the weapon.

"I won't, who do you take me for?" Lerion asked, frowning.

"I dunno, mostly just some idiot chump," Vyrex said, then halted abruptly. He pushed his back against the wall and carefully peeked around the corner.

"And?" Emeron whispered.

"There's a bunch of crew members strewn across the hallway. They appear dead," he said as he turned the corner. There were four crew members in the corridor leading to a turbolift, three female Kevar and a Gald male. Closest to them was one of the Kevar. She was lying with her face down on the floor. Emeron poked her before turning the body over. All three stood in horror as they saw the enormous wound in the Kevar's belly. Her guts were spilling out.

"They were ... *murdered*?" Emeron frowned as he looked at the two Gald, who seemed to be about as clueless as he was.

"No shit, Sherlock!" Vyrex replied.

The other two frowned at him.

"Who's Sherlock?" Emeron wondered.

"I think he was some legendary human ... you never heard the expression?" Vyrex asked, sounding as unsure as Emeron.

Both shook their heads at him.

"Meh, it's good for a laugh back at the Alliance HQ," he muttered.

"Let's check the others," Emeron suggested as he gently turned the dead body back to her original position. When they neared the Gald, who was clad in an engineering overall, they noticed the writing on the wall. *Twenty-three and counting down*, it read.

"Looks like he wrote this on the wall himself ... Look at his fingers," Emeron said. The index and middle finger on his right hand were covered with dried-up blood.

"What would he do that for?" Lerion asked. He felt a shiver run down his spine. Whatever had happened inside the ship wasn't natural.

"I'm as clueless as you are," Emeron admitted as he continued investigating the Gald's body. His other wrist had been slit and he had slowly bled out.

"This one's been killed too," Vyrex said, slightly raising his voice from the far side of the corridor, near the turbolift.

"Why would anyone murder an entire crew and then crash a ship?" Lerion pondered loudly. He was nearing the last of the bodies in the corridor. The face of the victim was grotesquely contorted, as if she had

died from the pain alone – intense, pure agony. It crept him out and he had to suppress the urge to vomit.

“Lift’s not working. Great,” Vyrex said, sighing.

“Looks like we’ll have to climb our way up, then,” Emeron said. He pressed the button to call the turbolift, which did nothing.

“I told you it doesn’t work.”

“Always double check,” Emeron said. “Get back.”

Emeron sheathed his blade and focused for a moment, bringing his left hand above his right as if he were holding an orb. He drew magicka from the surroundings and a ball of Air magicka grew between his hands. When it was large enough to his liking, he pushed the ball forward, converting the energy into a massive blast wave that ripped the door out of its hinges. It clattered down into the shaft.

“Let’s go, ladies,” he said tauntingly.

Both Lerion and Vyrex frowned at each other. They hadn’t heard Emeron make any remarks of this kind before. *Perhaps he is finally loosening up*, Lerion thought.

The climb up to the bridge had been hard, but they were helped by the ship’s angle being tilted slightly forward. Their luck didn’t seem to end there, because the door leading to the bridge had already been blasted out, from the looks of it. The bridge was littered with corpses. Most of them seemed to have been killed in a big fight.

“This was Vester’s mate,” Lerion muttered. He had seen Ajira before, but seeing her dead was not something he had hoped for.

“Looks like the huntress got hunted, eh?” Vyrex smirked.

Lerion shook his head at him disapprovingly, but the Assassin didn’t seem to mind.

“Really? Making jokes at a time like this?” Lerion sneered. Vyrex just shrugged as he messed with the ship’s systems. He managed to activate the ship’s viewscreen; it was cracked, but apparently still functional.

“Looks like this crash was intentional after all,” he concluded after conjuring up the ship’s flight plan on the screen.

“That can only mean whoever slaughtered the crew wanted to end up here. What’s on this planet anyway?” Emeron asked as he studied the flight plan intently.

“I dunno, but I’m pretty sure we’re about to find out,” Lerion said. He continued to look for clues and checked the pockets in Ajira’s clothing. When he reached into one of the last remaining pockets, he felt something and held it up to the light.

“Hey, give me that!” Vyrex demanded as he tried to grab the device. Lerion quickly made a fist, disallowing the Assassin to take it from him.

“Let me check it first, all right?” he said irritably. He opened his palm again and looked at it. There was a blinking light on it and he recognized it immediately.

“This is our ticket to finding Vester!”

## Chapter 12 – Archangel

“Miss Gomez, now that Taniguchi Station II is finally finished, what can we expect from NanoTech Incorporated next?” Robert Swanson asked. As usual, the news reporter was dressed sharply. He wore a black jacket over a baby blue shirt. A checkered gray tie finished his outfit.

Serra was dressed in a light brown women’s suit, wearing a beige shirt underneath. She had a ponderous frown on her face for a short moment, before she began talking.

“Now that our new headquarters are finished, we will continue the development of our latest range of implants and bionics, of course.”

“Anything exciting you could tease for our viewers?” Robert asked, looking into the camera to flash a smile at the audience.

“Well, as you may know, we are very close to launching the Isis Mark V on the market, which is a very exciting release for us. It’s the first implant in a range that only requires part of the eye to be replaced. We’ve tested it extensively and we’ve reached the point where we feel it’s time for the product to be mass produced. It’s the best ocular implant we’ve ever made, that’s for sure!” Serra said excitedly. It sounded genuine, but she felt the words escape her mouth without any emotion. The realization came to her that she was just reciting her pitch. It had become nothing but a second nature thing.

“That sounds great, I can’t wait to replace my older model! Anything else? What about your great line of bionics?” Robert asked next.

“We felt that the bionics market has been stagnant for the past few years, but I can tell you that we are working on a new line for all of our bionic products. I’ll probably be able to demonstrate them the next time we speak,” Serra continued in the same fashion as before.

Robert nodded at her, seeming to hang on her lips. He gave her a short pause before he continued the interview.

“Now, Miss Gomez, would you mind answering one of the biggest questions I’ve been dying to ask?”

“Sure, shoot,” Serra said pleasantly, wondering where the interview was going.

“Is it true that Chando Rombilius is still alive?” Robert asked with a straight face.

Serra swallowed hard. She had not anticipated this at all.

“Sorry, Robert, but Chando has passed away during the explosion of Taniguchi Station I. You know that very well,” Serra retorted, her voice raised and slightly shaky.

“Then how do you explain the fact that he is still pulling all the strings from that mansion of his on Caledon? It’s no surprise the company still thrives. Its original owner is still running the show from behind the curtains, is he not?” Robert went on. His voice had changed. It had become darker, more threatening.

“That is not true! I’ve been the CEO of NanoTech Incorporated ever since Mr. Rombilius passed away. He taught me everything there was to know about running the company,” Serra explained, maintaining her calm as best as she could.

Robert shook his head at her and scoffed. “A young woman such as yourself? What do you know about nanotechnology and bionics? You don’t even have any degrees in these sciences! We’ve been following you for a good while, Miss Gomez. We know you make frequent trips down to Caledon to the Rombilius mansion. You can’t possibly be running a company with your background! Admit it,” Robert demanded.

Serra was shaking. She looked down for a moment and tried to regain her composure. When she looked up, Robert’s face had changed into Baynam’s, before his horrid transformation – except for the fact that his eyes were all black.

“We know you are hiding something from us, Miss Gomez,” Baynam taunted.

Serra jolted awake and gasped for air. It took her a moment to realize she was lying in her comfortable king-size bed in the Caledon mansion. She glanced to her left, snatched her wrist pad from the nightstand and checked the time. It was already noon. She tried to remember how she ended up here, but all she could recall was being on Saridia with Philbin,

the two Kraut and Tyndra. They had been in one of Philbin's vaults, but what happened after that was all foggy to her.

Serra sat down on the side of her bed and buried her face in her cupped hands for a while. She inhaled and exhaled calmly a few times before getting up. She put on her wrist pad and picked up her crimson robe. With ease, she fastened the soft belt around her waist and opened the bedroom door. Directly in front of her in the hallway was a small cabinet. An envelope was placed carefully on top of it, nearly impossible to miss. She picked it up, still feeling slightly drowsy. *To my dearest Serra*, it read. She turned it over and noticed Chando had sealed it in one of the most old-fashioned ways possible, with wax and his signet ring. She snickered and a smile appeared on her face as she broke the seal. When she took out the letter, she saw it was handwritten. She couldn't remember the last time anyone had actually written her one. It was a custom that had died when humanity entered into the digital age. Only a few people remained who could actually write, since it had become so redundant with the use of computers. It didn't surprise Serra that Chando, of all people, would still write sometimes. She unfolded the letter and began to read.

*My dearest Serra,*

*I write this letter to convey to you my thoughts as I am currently incapable of doing so in person. Urgent matters have called me away from here and I am not sure when it is we will next meet.*

*I am glad to hear you have made a full recovery after you were fatally poisoned by that Veraan filth named Krikkrak. Please note that I say fatal, because what I am about to write is of great importance.*

*I have reached a point in my life where I feel I have to be honest with the people that are closest to my heart. As you may know, there aren't many. In fact, you are one of the few left.*

*The wounds inflicted upon you were fatal. I watched you die and saw to it that you were reborn. Your conscience was saved, along with most of your memories. Sadly, this was not the first time you died and I fear it might not be the last either.*

*I understand all you have read so far will only have served to raise questions. Answers will be scarce, but I think you will understand why I hold you so dear if you visit the mansion's southern gardens.*

*The only question I pose to you is this. Will you stay with me? Please consider this thoroughly. If your answer is no, then please leave a message at the exact same spot as where I left this letter. If your answer is yes, then we will meet again and I will answer all of your questions.*

*Yours through the ages,  
Chando*

Serra's hands trembled as she continued reading. By the time she had finished the letter, tears were running down her cheeks. Chando was right, she had too many questions. Anger, frustration and confusion filled her. What had he done to her? How had she died? Was she still herself, or just some copy of someone she had never been? She put the letter back inside the envelope and tucked it into one of the pockets in her robe, then headed down the hallway. She was desperate to know what Chando had meant with his remark about the southern gardens.

Just before she entered the large hall, she nearly bumped into Giles.

"Pardon me, ma'am. It would seem I always run into you when you are in a hurry."

"Now is not a good time," Serra said sharply.

"So it would seem. Are you all right, Miss Gomez? You seem a little pale. Mr. Rombilius asked me to look after you. He said you need some rest. Can I do anything for you?" Giles inquired.

Serra sighed softly. Even when she wasn't friendly towards him, Giles would always stay kind and polite. It was infuriating.

“I can take care of myself, please get out of my way.”

Giles took a bow and gently stepped aside so she could pass him. “As you wish, ma’am. If you don’t mind me asking, though, where are you headed?”

“Outside, to the garden.”

“In your robe? Might I suggest you get dressed first, Miss Gomez? That robe is hardly fit for the rainy weather outside,” he said, pointing at the window.

Serra looked outside. It was definitely not a good idea to walk out into the downpour dressed like she was.

“Fine, I’ll go get dressed,” she grumbled as she turned around to head back to her bedroom.

“Miss Gomez, if you’re interested, there is a full brunch ready for you once you’re done changing clothes,” Giles shouted after her. He couldn’t tell if she hadn’t heard or if she was ignoring him, but he shrugged and headed downstairs to prepare the brunch anyhow.

\* \* \*

“How do you like this little taste of your own medicine?” Chando Rom-bilius asked the amphibian hanging in front of him. He was holding an empty syringe, which he had just used to inject the Veraan with venom.

Krikkrak was shackled by his arms and feet. The chains on both of his arms ran up to a winch Chando could use to raise and lower him. Krikkrak ground his teeth as the poison slowly took effect and burned through his entire body. He screamed in agony. It sounded like music to Chando’s ears.

“I know. What you. Want from. Me,” the Veraan said through gritted teeth. His breathing had become irregular and fast.

Chando shook his head at Krikkrak. “You think I’m doing this because I want information. The sad truth is, I already know everything you know. This is just payback for what you did to my agents,” Chando said coldly. He stared into the amphibian biped’s eyes. He was still there; the dosage had been perfect. He had to admit the Veraan had proved stronger than he had given him credit for.

"You have. Nothing left. Nothing!" Krikkrak spat at Chando.

"Neither do you. And anything you will tell me, you will probably only say with the slim hope that you will survive this little ordeal. I can already tell you that notion is an illusion at best. By now, the venom will have paralyzed most of your body," Chando said as he circled the room, keeping his gaze fixed on his prisoner.

"Then ... why. Not kill ... Me now?" Krikkrak asked, each word costing him considerable effort.

"I've always heard people saying you should not fight fire with fire. That an eye for an eye doesn't really give you the satisfaction you'd hoped it would give you. There have been times when killing someone for revenge or out of spite have indeed not given me the sweet ecstasy I was craving, but your suffering pleases me greatly. Perhaps it's because I haven't felt strong emotions over the past decades, but killing Serra was a mistake I can't let you get away with. Not to mention everything else you did to me five years ago," Chando said as he casually picked up a vial from a nearby cart filled with medical supplies. He held it up against the light. The fluid was bright green. Carefully, he filled the syringe and tested it. Some of its contents spilled on the floor.

"So ... this is ... just ... revenge?"

"*Revenge* is not the right term, my amphibian friend. Killing you slowly will only do so much to satisfy me. What I am truly after is why someone like you would willingly collaborate with the Shaedon. What are your motivations? Survival? A false sense of security?" Chando asked as he walked up to his prisoner. He injected the fluid into the Veraan's neck and stepped away calmly. Then he put the syringe on the cart and watched as his victim contorted in agony.

"This truth serum should help to get you talking. I'm not sure if it'll work on a Veraan, but it works perfectly on most other bipedal species. I speak out of experience, of course," Chando admitted to the Veraan, who was about to lose consciousness. He was quickly brought back to his senses when Chando threw a bucket of water in his face.

"Now is not the time for sleeping!"

"What ... do you ... want ... from me?!" Krikkrak shouted out in frustration.

Chando picked up a datapad and held it out in front of Krikkrak. He pointed at the display.

“Is this where the polydrone factory is located?” he demanded.

“I ... don’t ... know!” the Veraan answered. He entered a coughing fit. Chando gave him some time to recover.

“Oh, you do know ... But we both know that in mere moments, you will tell me anything. You will tell me any truth, just to keep me from hurting you.”

“Fuck ... you ...” Krikkrak spat in Chando’s face.

Green blood dripped down his cheek. Chando reached for a pocket in his suit, took out a napkin and carefully wiped his face clean.

“Good, there’s still some fight left in you. Hold on to it, you will need it.”

\* \* \*

Giles had not lied about the rain being particularly heavy. Despite her haste, Serra had been convinced by the butler to have something to eat prior to heading outside to the southern garden. She had enjoyed a sandwich and some ice cold milk from Caledon’s finest livestock. When she had finished, Giles came back into the room, holding an umbrella for her. She took it gratefully and he escorted her outside.

“This is not exactly the best season for a stroll in the gardens,” Giles commented as they stepped outside into the dreary weather. He had told Serra he would accompany her, as per Mr. Rombilius’ wishes. Although she did not particularly like the idea at first, she had agreed to it. Arguing with the butler was the last thing on her mind. They both held an umbrella to shield themselves from the rain, but Serra’s boots were already covered with mud.

The dark, gray sky and the rain made the southern gardens look sombre and dreary. The larger bushes seemed to be fine, but most of the more delicate flowers had snapped, making for a sad view.

"We really could have had better timing with this," Serra remarked, raising her voice slightly to compensate for the sound of the rain clattering on the ground.

"I couldn't agree more," Giles replied.

"So, where am I supposed to find these answers?" she asked as they strode forward.

"Please, follow me, Miss Gomez," Giles said as he walked ahead briskly.

They kept walking for a while. The garden was enormous, and carefully placed hedge walls almost made it seem like a maze. They passed a gazebo. Serra remembered drinking tea there with Chando during the spring, when the garden had looked a lot more inviting. A simple table and four chairs were still standing beneath the gazebo, all wet. Giles turned to the left of the gazebo, down a path which led to an arch. They passed underneath it and found themselves in a corridor of bushes. Serra could barely see the end of it through the rain. Once they reached the end of the corridor, they were in a small, walled-off area. She noticed the graves instantly.

"What the hell is this, then?" she asked, raising her eyebrows at Giles.

"I'd hate to state the obvious, miss. Please walk with me," he replied, beckoning. A thin cobbled path led them to a separate group of four graves. He then pointed at the most recent addition. She got down on one knee and read the text on the grave.

*Serra Gomez, the 3<sup>rd</sup>*

*Like the phoenix*

*You will rise again*

She frowned as she looked up at Giles. He smiled at her uncomfortably.

"What does this mean, the third?" she asked, her voice barely audible.

Giles raised his shoulders at her. "It means what you think it means," he stated matter-of-factly.

"So, you're saying I'm the fourth incarnation of Serra Gomez?"

Giles nodded. "Yes, and this is the fourth time we are having this conversation. First time we're having it in this kind of weather, though."

"Why can't I remember any of them, then?" she asked.

"Each time we recreated you, Mr. Rombilius allowed you to see your own grave, but as time passed, this only seemed to be a burden to you – something almost impossible to cope with, so we erased your memories of this conversation each time. This time, Mr. Rombilius thought it would be best if we let you remember everything. As he said in the letter, he wants to be honest with those close to his heart. Namely you," Giles explained.

"So, those previous times, I wasn't aware of this? How is it even possible? There have been three of me before? And they're all buried here?"

"That is correct, Miss Gomez."

"But there are four graves ..." Serra realized as she was looking at all of the headstones.

"Feel free to read them all and I will answer any of your questions to the best of my abilities," Giles offered.

Serra looked at the headstone to the left of the most recent grave.

*Serra Gomez, the 2<sup>nd</sup>*  
*The flesh is temporary*  
*The soul is eternal*

*If anything, Chando has been quite poetic with the epitaphs, at least,* she thought. She stood up and walked towards the other two, then read the second one in the line of four.

*Serra Gomez*  
*One life ends*  
*Another starts*

She then went on to read the first headstone. If all of the others were hers, then what would the first one read?

*Sarah Rombilius*

*The apple of my eye*  
*The centre of my universe*  
*Daddy loves you, forever*

Serra swallowed hard. Giles walked up to her and grabbed her by the shoulder, keeping her steady.

“Do you understand now?” he asked quietly.

She stood in silence as she kept reading the text, over and over. She couldn’t possibly be this woman. Why couldn’t she remember any of it? Why would Chando keep all of this a secret from her for so long? She turned around to face Giles. Tears stained her cheeks.

“This can’t be true,” she sobbed. Her shoulders slumped and she lowered her head.

“I’m afraid it is true, Miss Gomez. Although I should say Miss Rombilius,” Giles said uncomfortably.

“But why would he change my name to Serra Gomez?”

“You have to understand that Mr. Rombilius did everything he could to protect you. That meant hiding your true identity and changing your name, as well as some of your DNA. There isn’t much that remains in this universe for Mr. Rombilius. You are the only family he has left,” Giles replied.

Serra looked the butler in the eyes. She could tell he was speaking the truth.

“But why would he go to such lengths to keep his daughter alive?”

“I’m afraid that is something Mr. Rombilius needs to explain to you. You see, I know little of his motivations, but I do know this. Sarah, you meant everything to him. After your mother died, you were the only thing he had left to live for. When you fell ill, he tried everything in his power to save you. I suppose you can say he managed to do just that, because here you are, standing in front of me once again,” Giles said as he moved his hand away from her shoulder.

“I need some time alone,” Serra muttered.

Giles nodded at her. “As you wish, Sarah,” he said and walked away.

“It’s Serra,” she corrected him.

"Of course it is, Serra," he said, turning his head around to look back at her.

When he was out of sight, Serra let the umbrella slide out of her hands and stood in the pouring rain. She felt the heavy drops splash on her head as she slumped down to the ground on her knees.

\* \* \*

Chando walked down the ramp of his shuttle, which led him to one of the docking bays of the *Storm Crow*. He carried a large bag with him, hoisted over his shoulder. It had been particularly hard for him to arrange this meeting with High Councillor Máraxi Wihara, especially since he had to ensure that his identity would not be compromised. As such, he was wearing a mask himself. Like the one Máraxi wore, it was white, but it closely resembled a theatre mask from Earth's ancient history. The mention of a silver-bound tome had been enough to grant him an audience with the enigmatic leader of the Ninth Circle. She was not present to greet him, Chando noticed as he stepped down the ramp. Instead, he was met by an old Xoron man dressed in Windmaster robes and a handful of guards, who were also part of the order.

"You are human?" the old man asked with a deep, raspy voice.

"Indeed I am, is that a problem?" Chando asked, his voice distorted by a vocoder built in the mask. Although he resented having to wear it, he knew it would create an equality between him and the High Councillor.

The old Windmaster shook his head and extended a hand.

"I go by the name of Raphael," Chando said as he gently, but firmly shook the old man's hands. He was surprised to find that the man returned his handshake with the same firmness.

"I am Zurâk, Windmaster of the Ninth Circle. The High Councillor asked me to greet you and escort you to her office," Zurâk explained. He motioned for Chando to follow him to the exit of the docking bay.

Chando nodded at him respectfully. "Of course, Master Zurâk."

The guards walked along with them: two by their sides, one in front and two at the back. Chando wondered why the Xoron thought they

needed so many guards, but he understood the risks involved in bringing a stranger aboard, especially with the Shaedon running amok. He found it strange that they had not scanned him, though. Perhaps they had and he had simply not been aware of it. They hadn't inquired about the bag he was carrying either. He followed Zurâk into the turbolift, which was large enough to fit both men and the guards.

"Deck one, bridge," Zurâk commanded.

"Please, follow me," Zurâk said as he strode onto the bridge. Several of the bridge crew turned their heads to see the mysterious masked guest Zurâk brought along with him, but none interfered when they passed by. At the other side of the bridge, Zurâk halted before a double door. He pressed a button on the right side of it and waited. He turned to face Chando.

"The High Councillor will see you now," he said as the doors to her office slid open. He waved Chando inside, but did not follow.

The office of the High Councillor was barely lit, and the only light Chando saw came from the far wall. Cold, blue light. He saw her sitting at her desk, resting her elbows on her armrests. The tips of her fingers met each other close to her masked face. He felt her blood red eyes pierce his as he approached. She studied him as she gracefully got up. He noticed her exquisite robes, decorated with fine embroidery that formed intricate patterns. They had a mesmerizing effect on him. She extended a long-nailed hand; Chando shook it firmly and silently counted to three, then he released his grip. He found that Máraxi did exactly the same. She had most probably studied human business customs prior to this meeting, he thought.

"Be seated, Raphael," she said. There was a commanding tone in her voice along with a trace of distrust.

"As you wish, High Councillor," Chando answered as he got himself seated and set his bag aside.

"I see you wish to keep your identity a secret. That's not very human-like behaviour," she said, slightly tilting her head to the left.

"I have good reason to do so. Besides, I thought we could meet as equals and —"

Before Chando could finish his sentence, he was interrupted by the High Councillor.

"Equals?" she exclaimed. "Explain yourself, human."

"We both wear masks, and I can assure you I am a very influential man," Chando replied as he reached for his bag and gently placed it on her desk. He gestured for her to check its contents.

"What's in this bag?" she demanded.

Chando figured she would not open it herself, so he stood up and carefully took out his gift to her. Her eyes lit up with surprise as she saw the gleaming surface of the tome. Greedily, she grabbed it and held it up to the bluish light. She carefully inspected it, then put it down.

"Where did you find this?"

A smile appeared on Chando's face; he was glad the mask hid it. This was the reaction he was hoping for. This item would buy him the alliance he sought to have with the Ninth Circle.

"Where I got this is of no concern to you. As I said, I am a very influential man. I was hoping this would get your attention," he said as he pointed at the fifth volume of the series.

"What do you want from us? What could we possibly offer you in exchange?" Máraxi asked curiously.

This was it, Chando thought: she saw him as either a benefactor or an ally, or possibly a threat.

"The tome is yours, but in return, I would ask for an alliance," he offered.

Máraxi trembled. It was very slight and hard to notice, but it was there.

"What purpose would this alliance serve?" she asked, carefully putting the tome down on her desk.

"The destruction of a shared enemy. The Shaedon," Chando explained.

Máraxi nodded. "And who do you represent, Raphael?"

"I represent NanoTech Incorporated, one of humanity's largest independent parties. My superior, Serra Gomez, CEO of NanoTech, has sent

me here to offer you this alliance. I did not just come here to bring this tome to you as a sign of our sincerity. We also know the location of one of the Shaedon's polydrone factories, yet we cannot face them alone. We are seeking allies to stage an attack," Chando explained.

Máraxi was quiet for a moment. She squinted at him.

"Why not share this information with the Alliance Council?" she pondered.

Chando leaned back into his chair and waved his right hand in a dismissing gesture.

"Because we both know they won't listen. And by the time they do, it'll be too late," he said, knowing she had already come to that conclusion a long time ago. The bureaucrats would take ages to discuss the issue, only to refuse sending out a fleet, because there wouldn't be enough ships left to defend the capitol planets if the Zar'aranos Empire should launch a full-scale attack.

"I see that you are well-informed on the inner workings of our Alliance," she scoffed. Not at him, but at the Alliance, he understood that quite well.

"Then we are in agreement? Our own alliance will be mutually beneficial."

"How will NanoTech benefit from all of this?" Máraxi inquired. Her fingers gently brushed the cover of the silver-bound tome.

"Let's just say we have a score to settle," was all Chando revealed.

Máraxi nodded at him slowly to convey she understood, or at least respected that notion.

"So, where do we begin?"

"I suggest we start by making an inventory of all resources we have at our disposal. Ships, troops and materials," Chando replied.

"I will start making the necessary preparations on the double," Máraxi said as she rose out of her chair, indicating that as far as she was concerned, this meeting was over.

Chando got up as well, extending his hand towards her again. She returned the gesture once more and firmly shook his hand to close the deal.

"I shall be looking forward to our next meeting, Raphael," she said.  
"As will I," Chando said, taking a deep, respectful bow.

\* \* \*

The doors to Lab One on Taniguchi Station II slid open. Philbin turned his head to see who had just entered. It was Serra, who was wearing a very stylish white and black jumpsuit. A handgun was strapped to each of her hips. She was studying a datapad in her right hand and carrying a half-eaten apple in the other. She took another bite as she approached Philbin, who gawked at her.

"Good afternoon, Master Tinkerer," she said cheerily.

Philbin dropped the microspanner he was using a moment earlier.

Serra frowned at him. "Is something the matter?" she asked as she put the datapad away in one of her suit's pockets.

"Eh, well," Philbin stuttered, "Let's just say you looked less ... *lively* last time we met."

"I feel perfectly fine. How's your work progressing?" she asked, resting her free hand on her hip.

"Sorry ... I'm sorry, but you must have the best health insurance money can buy! I mean, gadzooks, this is some crazy-ass shit!" Philbin exclaimed. Several of his team members shifted their attention to him and their CEO.

Serra put an index finger against her lips to shush him.

"Don't draw all the attention to us, please. I'm fine."

"But you were dead," Philbin said softly.

"Do I look dead to you now?" she asked, in a lowered voice.

Philbin shook his head and pouted his lips at her. He squinted his eyes and his goggles shifted through several spectrums.

"Hmm, no traces of residual poison in your system, or surgery. Just, eh ... how?" Philbin asked, sounding as confounded as a child, which was extremely unusual for the otherwise brilliant Saridion.

"Let's just keep it at very good health insurance, all right?" Serra said with a tone of finality.

"But -"

“No buts. Let’s just drop this matter, okay? There are much more important things we need to discuss. Can we talk in your office privately?” she asked, already walking past him towards the far end of the lab, where a hallway led to several offices.

“I will know one day,” Philbin insisted, waving a finger at her. He picked up his spanner and put it back with the rest of his tools, which were lying on the worktable.

“Just a sec, I’ll start up a simulation and then we can have this talk of yours,” he said, frantically pressing a few buttons on a computer rig he had been working on. Shortly after, his creation whirred to life and the nearby computer started making calculations. Philbin rubbed his hands as he inspected his handiwork.

“Are you coming, or what?” Serra asked impatiently.

Philbin blinked as he snapped out of his fascination with his newly created device.

“Uh, yeah, whatever. Let’s go,” he said as he hurried after Serra.

“Please step into my office!” Philbin said as the door slid open. When she entered, Serra nearly tripped over several loose machine parts. She gracefully stepped aside to break her fall, then threw an angry glare at the little blue man.

“Would you mind doing your work in the lab? This is supposed to be a place where you can meet people. A clean, neat place. Do you understand?”

Philbin pouted his lips like a small child and gave her a blank stare.

“Gah, never mind,” she said as she took a seat.

She was surprised to see Philbin didn’t seem to be bothered by the mess on the floor at all. He maneuvered his way past all of the parts almost mathematically. He sat down in his special chair and raised the seat, so they would be level.

“So, boss woman, I’ve been busy in your absence, as you might have guessed. While you were out for quite some time, I’ve been quite successful in our endeavours! In fact, it won’t be long now before I will have a fully functional polydrone zapper,” Philbin said excitedly.

“A zapper?” Serra frowned at him, then leaned back in her seat a little.

“Hmm, yeah. It’ll totally fry the shit out of them. I was already thinking that when I use it, I want to say something like, ‘You’re all fired!’ It’s gonna be so good, haha!” the Saridion genius cheered with almost child-like glee.

Like Chando, Serra didn’t feel comfortable around Philbin. He had this strange sense of humour she just couldn’t quite grasp. She understood the joke, but it just wasn’t funny to her.

“That sounds great,” she replied with faux enthusiasm. She was glad to see that Philbin didn’t seem to notice.

“Oh, it’ll be so good! I can already taste the excitement,” he said, rubbing his hands together with a wicked grin on his face. He chuckled as he ended his sentence.

“Then I suppose all that’s left is to wait for you to complete the device? How much more time do you require?”

“Well, I’d still have to calibrate the positronic brainwave destabilisers, compensate for a few bugs that have been riddling some of the sub-routines in my behavioural protocol viruses, and then of course I’d need to run several more simulations on the station’s mainframe. Not to mention design a casing in which we can carry the failsafe protocol and upload it to the polydrone network, and maybe do another firmware update, just in case.”

Serra sighed loudly. “How long?” she demanded.

“Oh, eh, about three months?” Philbin shrugged at her indifferently.

She shook her head at him dismissively. “You have three weeks at most.”

“Did I say months? I meant weeks of course, if you can get me twice as much personnel and material,” he said with a straight face.

Serra waved a hand at him. “Consider it done. Just send a list to Hollister and he’ll take care of it. I hope you understand that we’re on a tight schedule,” Serra insisted, hoping the strange blue man grasped the gravity of the situation.

He gave her an acknowledging nod. “I’ve been there before. I know the drill. That doesn’t mean you need to be so serious about everything,

does it?" he said as he pursed his lips and tilted his head slightly to the right.

Serra nodded and sighed softly. "I guess you have a point. It's just hard to stay positive with everything that's going on right now."

"It wasn't much different during the A.I. wars, I can tell you that much. The players may be different, but the stage is the same."

Serra was thrown off guard by the Saridion's sudden seriousness. But he was right. This was a war, just like many others before it.

"Just remember that I'm on your side, okay?" he said arrogantly, almost nullifying everything he said a short moment earlier.

## Chapter 13 – The Ship’s Compass

Grummus and Ráz had found their way back the Sujara spaceport, but before they would head back to Niksten Space Dock, they would ensure the release of Miten. Grummus had been appalled when he heard that the Kevar allowed the Gald to sell Kevar exiles to interested parties. Whenever someone was exiled, he or she would be registered and marked, after which they were listed to be sold. Ráz had tried his best to be granted one final request from the Patriarch, but Kos had been adamant about the young warrior. Grummus and Ráz would be granted the first opportunity to buy him before he would be auctioned, but he would not have Miten released for free. Ráz had accepted the offer, knowing it might be the only chance to take Miten with them. Now they were inside the auction house, in a small office where a Gald businessman handled all of the private sales. After a short waiting time, it was their turn. Grummus was trying to barter with the Gald, with very little success.

“Five thousand credits, and that’s my final offer!” the Gald businessman stated formally, but with audible chagrin. He folded his arms at the Scarowyn and Xoron standing at the counter in front of him.

“How can you even sell him? He’s not anyone’s property!” Grummus barked at the much smaller Gald, who was wearing a very expensive suit.

“Article twenty-seven, paragraph two. Any Kevar who failed the Pilgrimage is no longer considered a Kevar, and as such may be sold as a worker to the highest bidder or to any and all interested parties,” the Gald recited from memory. Grummus’ mouth opened in a combination of awe and shock.

“Hold on a second,” he said as he turned to Ráz and took him aside a moment to speak privately.

“How can they do this?” the young Scarowyn asked.

Räz gave him an indifferent look and shrugged. “Who are we to judge their customs? If this is how they treat their exiles, then we can’t just expect them to change the rules and hand Miten over to us for free.”

“But this is outrageous! How can they treat a living person like this? To be sold as a slave to the highest bidder ...” Grummus said. Everything about this business reeked of immorality to him.

“Listen, Grummus, I agree. This isn’t moral in many ways, but that’s just how some things work. We can’t possibly change everything just because we disagree on an ethical level. The only choice we have now is whether we agree with the Gald and buy Miten’s freedom, or leave him here to be sold off to some other interested party, who will most probably treat him worse than we will. I suggest we pay the Gald and get this over with. We have to get moving soon,” Räz said. He sighed and reached inside his robe, then threw a credit chit at Grummus. Slightly taken by surprise, Grummus managed to catch it clumsily.

“Fine, I’ll play this stupid game and pay for Miten’s release,” Grummus snorted.

“Ownership,” Räz corrected him.

“Bah, whatever,” Grummus grumbled as he turned around to pay the Gald.

“Hey, Grummus. We can’t solve every single problem in the galaxy. You know that, don’t you?”

Grummus twisted and looked Räz in the eyes sternly.

“Perhaps, but at least we can try, can’t we?”

Räz couldn’t help but return a smile. He agreed that the way the Kevar treated their exiles was immoral, and he couldn’t understand why the Alliance wouldn’t interfere with this custom. On the other hand, many rich businessmen had at least one Kevar outcast in ‘employment’. There was simply a conflict of interests that would be too much trouble to attempt to fight. And so the galaxy continued the practice, turning a blind eye and ignoring the fate of thousands or even millions of Kevar that were exiled from their home world.

Grummus shuffled back to the front of the counter, where the Gald was just closing another sale with a Saridion. Just like the Gald, he was wearing a shiny business suit made of fine silk. He was fat and the jewellery around his neck and fingers didn't make him any prettier, Grummus thought. The longer he looked at the small blue blob of a man, the more disgusted he felt. The businessmen briefly shook hands to close their deal. When the Saridion turned to walk away, he tipped his large hat to Grummus and muttered something unintelligible.

"Have a nice day," Grummus said sarcastically. He was surprised when the Saridion didn't seem to understand his tone.

Grummus stood in front of the counter once more and placed the credit chit on it. The Gald frowned at him and shook his head.

"What's this?" he asked.

"What does it look like to you?" Grummus answered.

"Changed your mind then, have ya?" A grin appeared on the Gald's face. He picked up the chit and checked its balance. His jaw nearly dropped to the floor when he saw the amount of available credits. He threw a suspicious look at the Scarowyn.

"That's a lot of dough you've got on this chit. I don't think I've ever seen a Scarowyn carry this amount of credits around."

"I'm sorry, is there a problem?" Grummus asked. He hoped that the Gald wouldn't notice how little experience he had with money.

"No, not at all!" the Gald said cheerily. The grin on his face grew wider, although he tried to make it look like a smile. Grummus tried to copy the expression, but his face turned a little sour when he did.

"So, please take the money and we'll take Miten with us, please," Grummus tried, hoping this transaction would be over soon.

"Sure, of course! Seven thousand credits. Please use this device to confirm," the Gald said bluntly as he handed Grummus the identification scanner.

Grummus shook his head. "No, the price was five thousand."

"Yeah, but I figured, if you want this specimen so bad ... It's a matter of supply and demand, you know what I'm sayin'?"

"We agreed on five thousand!" Grummus bashed a fist on the counter. The Gald jumped back a little. It wasn't like Grummus had

wanted to scare him, but his past experiences with Gald had taught him a thing or two about how to deal with them.

Suddenly, Rüz appeared beside Grummus. "What's going on here?" he asked, throwing a glare at the Gald businessman.

"Eh, nothing, we were just finalizing the payment for ... five thousand credits ..." he gulped.

Grummus used the device to finalize the payment and then handed it back to the Gald, who gave him a datapad in return.

"This is your release warrant and paperwork for one male Kevar named Miten. We'll have him ready and waiting for you in your shuttle's docking bay. Have a nice day!"

"May your crops wilt and your harvests fail," Grummus muttered as they left the building.

\* \* \*

Grummus was pleased to see the young Kevar warrior waiting for them when they entered the docking bay. He had been stripped of all his possessions, save for the clothes he was wearing. It was the same simple padded leather armour he had worn before. There was an uncomfortable smile on his face when he walked up to meet them.

"I guess I'm done here, then," he said, sounding defeated.

"Looks like you earned yourself a promotion, kid," Rüz said as he patted the Kevar on the shoulder.

Miten frowned at the Windmaster, then looked at Grummus, who nodded at him.

"Promotion?" he asked.

"Yes, you're in the big league now. We're going to take you with us. We can use all the able-bodied men we can get our hands on for our mission," Rüz explained.

"Wait, am I going with you guys?" Miten asked, clearly surprised.

"Saving you may not have helped to save your honour, Miten, but I couldn't just let you die," Grummus said. He hoped the Kevar would understand. He was pretty sure Miten would, at some point.

"I am alone now. Honourless. I am *Kajet no Ra'asha*." He bowed his head in shame.

"What does that mean?" Grummus asked.

"Abandoned by Ra'asha. I will respect our traditions. I am yours to command."

"Then come with us. I promise you there will be glorious battles ahead, and you will be given a chance to redeem yourself. You have my word," Rāz said, pounding a fist on his chest and welcoming the exiled Kevar into their group.

"My life is yours now, command me and I will follow," Miten said as he straightened his back and stood proudly with his chest puffed out.

Grummus wondered how Rāz was so well versed in dealing with rituals and tradition. Then again, the Windmaster had been raised to follow rules and traditions since his childhood, and it had probably become a second nature. Although Grummus respected traditions, he still thought this was all a little silly.

"Shall we go? I think the Wynk twins might want to see us," Grummus spoke.

"You're right, we need to get going. If all goes well, the last parts for the *Sprite Darter* should arrive shortly before we do," Rāz said as he walked up the ramp leading into the shuttle.

\* \* \*

"How delightful of you to visit, Admiral!" Sha'hasra said sarcastically. She was lying on her side, her head resting in her right hand, her elbow pressing softly into the sofa's armrest. Xer'xis stood in the doorway of the quarters she had been assigned to. A few minutes ago, she had requested the Admiral's presence. Since he had not bothered to check up on her after she had tricked him into taking her along, he thought now was a good time to visit and have a little talk with the Shaedon.

"I see you've made yourself comfortable," he said as he stepped inside and pulled up a chair.

"Yes, I just wanted to thank you for giving me such luxurious quarters. The view is magnificent as well."

"You asked me to come down here to chitchat?" Xer'xis asked. He knew that was most definitely not the reason, but he wanted the devious creature to make her move first, before he would respond.

Sha'hasra sat up straight on the couch and smoothly stood up, then gracefully walked behind Xer'xis.

Although he felt uncomfortable, he remained still. He felt the gentle hands of Jessi as Sha'hasra controlled them to massage his shoulders.

"You're so tense," she said, snickering softly.

He closed his eyes for a moment, but stayed wary of the creature controlling Jessi. She was right though, he was stressed and tense. There had been nothing but work for the past months, or years even. Xer'xis sighed with relief as she continued to work on his shoulders.

"You know, there could be some who might just think you are collaborating with the enemy now. Bringing me aboard your ship. What kind of message is that supposed to convey?"

Xer'xis felt all of the tension shoot right back into his shoulders as Sha'hasra spoke. He knew the implications of bringing her aboard, even if it was a direct order. From the moment she stepped aboard, he knew any attempt to do things secretly would be in vain. He also understood she did it as a constant reminder that no matter what they tried, the Shaedon would always be everywhere, influencing politics, business and most of all the impending war.

"I heard your pet project is almost complete?" she asked as she gently removed her hands from his shoulders and seated herself on the sofa once more.

Despite her having this knowledge, Xer'xis kept a straight face. He would play this game of hers, at least for now.

"Yes, we are progressing nicely," was all he said.

A malicious grin appeared on the Shaedon's borrowed face. "Will you really send your only real asset right into the heart of the Empire in a pointless attempt to expose the Shaedon before a conflict with the Alliance can arise?"

"Even if the chances are slim, I'd rather have a chance than none at all," Xer'xis retorted as he folded his arms and leaned back.

Sha'hasra shook her head. "Truly, even the faintest glimmer of hope would be enough for you to hold on to. Why will you not accept that you've already lost?"

"Because as soon as we do that, you'll have won. As long as there are people like us who defy you, your victory will be out of reach."

Sha'hasra grinned. "And so the pawn continues its fight against insurmountable odds! I do admire your tenacity! Too bad it will be your downfall as well."

There was a moment of silence before Xer'xis continued. "Is there any point to this talk?"

"Other than letting you know that I am aware of your little project, not really. I am a little lonely, that is all," Sha'hasra said.

Xer'xis knew it was all just an act, but the fact that she was aware of the project did trouble him. It was hardly surprising, though.

"I'm sorry, Madam Ambassador, but I have other matters to attend to. If you don't mind, I will take my leave now," Xer'xis said as he rose to his feet.

"Of course, don't let me keep you from your hard work. It seems to be the only thing you care about anyway."

Xer'xis froze and turned around. It wasn't true, his work wasn't all he cared about.

"I've seen the way you look at her," Sha'hasra said.

"Which is exactly why I keep you this close."

"I have a proposal, Admiral."

"And what would that be?" he asked, glaring into the Shaedon's eyes.

\* \* \*

The voyage back to Niksten Space Dock had been smooth, and Grummus had taken some time to get to know Miten a little better. Although Grummus was only a bit older, he saw something of himself in the young Kevar. Something from the time when he was stuck on Saridia and he barely knew anything about space travel. Miten had never been inside a shuttle and had always marvelled at the stars. When he was given the opportunity to say goodbye to his former home world, his voice had be-

come a little shaky. The Earthmaster had noticed it when he asked him how he felt. The young warrior tried to maintain his posture, but his eyes had become watery and Grummus thought he saw a slight ripple in the Kevar's fur when he looked at Kevar Prime.

"We're almost docked, Grummus," Rüz said as he entered the cabin where Grummus and Miten were sitting at a table. They both looked up at the Xoron and nodded.

"This'll be your first visit to a space station!" Grummus said excitedly. He recalled how he felt when he first visited one. All the different people of various races he had never seen before had left a big impression on him, and he hoped the same would apply to his new friend.

"Is there anything I need to be aware of?" Miten asked, sounding uncertain.

"There will be a lot of people in there. You might not have seen some of the races we come across. Just stay close to us and you'll be fine."

"Understood," Miten replied and nodded in an almost military fashion.

They heard the clunk of the shuttle's landing struts touching down on the docking bay floor.

"All right, let's head out and meet with the Wynk twins!" Rüz suggested as he walked out of the cabin.

\* \* \*

The Wynk twins had arranged a small get-together in their office in the dry docks, where the *Sprite Darter* was starting to take its final shape. Grummus looked in awe at the ship through the office window. It looked fantastic, especially now that the shipbuilders were finishing the ship's paint job with azure and white.

"We wanted to thank you very much for finishing your task," Guid spoke for Nicol.

"Indeed, the stealth drive was delivered shortly before you came back! The Patriarch truly is a man of his word," Nicol said for Guid.

Miten threw a sharp glance at Grummus at the mention of the Patriarch. Grummus figured the young Kevar was probably still angry at the Patriarch, or at him. He forced a smile and nodded back.

"We just took a peek at the stealth drive and, well, it's really something ..." Nicol's voice trailed off.

Rüz and Xer'xis both frowned at each other, then Rüz asked: "What do you mean? It's not good?"

The Byndari shook their heads.

"No, no, that's not it! It would seem Patriarch Kos didn't spare any money or effort in having this drive put together. It's even more advanced than we had anticipated," Nicol explained.

A contented smile appeared on Xer'xis' face. "Good, then the ship will truly be the most advanced the Alliance has ever built," he said.

Guid and Nicol nodded and hummed at him.

"Excellent. When will the ship be ready for its first test flight?" Xer'xis asked.

"Well, we need to study the stealth drive a little more extensively and see how we can fit it into the ship. It will require some modifications to make it compatible with the ship's power supplies. And we'd need to recalibrate all other systems to make them run at peak efficiency," Nicol replied.

"You have one week," Xer'xis ordered bluntly.

The Byndari were quiet, although Grummus thought they were speaking to each other through their mental link. Their hands fluttered as if they were arguing with one another. They shifted their focus back to Xer'xis after a short while.

"We believe that should leave us ample time for some much needed R and R, sir," they said in unison.

Xer'xis raised an eyebrow at them. "R and R?"

"Yes, given our expertise in shipbuilding, of course we will be able to finish well within said time limit. That would leave us time to relax for a day, maybe even two!" Guid said.

"Very well. I will have the crew ready and standing by at the end of the week," Xer'xis said.

“Good, now let’s have some of that cake catering brought in to celebrate your success!” Guid said as he picked up the cake knife and opened the large box standing on a nearby table.

Rāz frowned at Xer’xis, who raised his shoulders back at the Windmaster.

“I’ll have a small piece, then,” Xer’xis said.

Nicol handed him a small plate with a large slice of cake. Rāz noticed the Admiral’s chagrin, but he also knew the man was too polite to refuse. Xer’xis accepted the plate and took a bite. His eyes widened.

“Hmm, wow! This cake is delicious!” he said, his mouth still full.

Nicol then handed the others a slice. When she wanted to hand Grummus a piece, he waved his hand dismissively.

“Sorry, I can’t eat that.”

She nodded at him. “Of course, how silly of me,” Guid said for her.

“It’s all right, I’m just glad to hear it’s good,” he said with a smile.

After having chatted with the Wynk twins for a moment, Xer’xis walked up to Grummus.

“Shame you can’t have the cake, it’s wonderful. Say, Grummus, can I have a word with you tomorrow? There are some things I wish to discuss with you,” he said. The tone in his voice suddenly turned quite serious, Grummus noticed.

The young Earthmaster nodded. “Of course. There isn’t anything wrong, I hope?” he asked.

“This whole mission is going to be one serious issue, Grummus. But there are some questions I have regarding the crew, and I believe you should play a greater role in this operation. I’ll explain everything tomorrow. Can you be in my office aboard the *Harbinger’s Resolve* at 1300 hours?” he asked.

“Uh, sure, of course,” Grummus stuttered. He wasn’t sure what to think about Xer’xis’ request, but he hoped all of the questions that were popping up in his head would be answered after the talk tomorrow.

“Good, then I’ll take my leave for now. We will meet tomorrow,” Xer’xis said as he patted the Scarowyn on his back.

Räz walked up to Grummus shortly after he noticed Xer'xis leaving. "What was that about?" he asked.

"He wants me to come to his office tomorrow afternoon for a talk," Grummus answered.

Räz frowned at him in surprise. "Just you?"

"Yes. Perhaps he'll ask you too? Maybe he wants to speak to everyone in private before we depart on our mission?" Grummus pondered loudly.

"No, it's something else," Räz said.

"Hey, I'm just as surprised as you are," Grummus said, hoping to ease the Windmaster's suspicion a little. He wondered what it was that Räz was so worried about. Apparently, a meeting with the Xoron Admiral was something very rare, but he had no idea what Räz was trying to imply. He would have his answers tomorrow.

\* \* \*

"Please come in, Grummus," Xer'xis said with a raised voice when he saw the Earthmaster standing in front of the open door to his office aboard the *Harbinger's Resolve*. He was sitting at his desk, going over some reports. Grummus stepped inside and heard the door shut behind him.

"Have a seat," Xer'xis said, pointing at the chair in front of his desk.

"Thank you, Admiral," Grummus said respectfully.

"At ease, Grummus. This talk is off the record," Xer'xis said in a calming manner.

Grummus frowned at the Admiral. "What do you mean?"

"I'm already dealing with Alliance officials and marines on a daily basis, so let's just drop the formality. I was hoping we could speak as friends, rather than colleagues," Xer'xis said. A friendly smile appeared on his face.

Grummus shrugged at him. "Sure, I guess. What do you want to talk about?"

"I wanted to speak to you about your role in the upcoming mission to Zar. But more importantly, I wanted to ask you a few questions about Rüz."

"What about him?" Grummus asked curiously.

"I want to make him Captain of the *Sprite Darter*, but I want to know if you think he's fit for that role. So, what's your opinion about Rüz? Do you think he'd make a good Captain?" Xer'xis steepled the tips of his fingers, resting his elbows on his chair's armrests.

Grummus was silent for a moment as he thought about how to formulate the answer.

"Well, Rüz always seems to know what he's doing, but I don't always agree with his methods, to be honest," Grummus said. He felt bad talking about Rüz behind his back.

"Would you say he's reckless?" Xer'xis inquired.

"I wouldn't call him that," Grummus replied, looking down at the floor, away from Xer'xis' gaze.

"But would you say that he would be willing to make a sacrifice, if it were for the Greater Good?"

"I think that more accurately describes his personality, yes. I mean, if it weren't for me, Miten would be dead now."

Xer'xis raised an eyebrow. "You mean the Kevar you brought with you?"

"Yes."

"What happened?" Xer'xis wondered.

"When we were on the Kevar Pilgrimage, Miten was wounded by a beast. Both Rüz and Kira, the other Kevar who went on the Pilgrimage with us, wanted to leave him there to die. I couldn't just let him die! His wounds were treatable and so I decided to heal him. We ended up voting for his fate. At first, Rüz voted to leave him behind ..." The veins under his leathery skin tightened as he spoke.

"You're clearly affected by his decision, but you convinced him to see your point of view and take him along after all?" Xer'xis asked. There couldn't have been any other way, since the Kevar had come aboard the station and was clearly in excellent shape.

“Yes, I spoke to him and convinced him that leaving Miten behind was not an option. Not if I had anything to say about it.”

“Do you two disagree more often?” Xer’xis continued his interview.

“Well, this was the biggest argument we’ve had ... But yes, we do disagree on other topics. He’s a good friend, but that doesn’t mean we should always agree, right?” Grummus asked, looking the Admiral in the eyes again.

Xer’xis snickered at him and nodded amicably. “You’re right, Grummus. Good friends most definitely don’t always agree. It is accepting each other’s flaws that turns people into good friends. Which is exactly why I think you need to be the ship’s second in command. I want you to become the ship’s Commander.”

Grummus’ jaw dropped at the sound of what he had just heard. He had never considered himself much of a leader, but he was up for the challenge.

“Are you all right?” Xer’xis asked with a concerned frown on his face.

“Yes!” Grummus shouted, a lot harder than he had intended to.

Xer’xis was startled slightly by the Earthmaster’s answer. “You accept the position?”

“Of course I do! You won’t believe how honoured I am by the offer,” Grummus exclaimed as he got up from his chair and extended his right hand to the Admiral.

Xer’xis shook it firmly. A wide, toothy smile appeared on his face.

“I’m happy you accepted the position so easily, Grummus. The ship and its crew are going to need you. Not only as their Commander, but as their compass,” Xer’xis stated matter-of-factly.

Grummus frowned at him and tilted his head slightly to the left. “Compass? What do you mean?”

“You’re a perfect counterbalance to Rüz’ personality. You will be his moral compass. The way you care about anything that lives is something Rüz needs. He tries to rationalize everything when he’s making decisions. You are someone who will always try to save everyone when possible. I’m afraid Rüz does not share this quality with you. That’s why the ship needs you, Grummus,” Xer’xis explained.

Grummus nodded at him. He thought he understood what Xer'xis was trying to say. Perhaps the Admiral's assessment of Rüz' and his own personalities was spot on. He admired the man's skill to see the qualities and flaws in people. One day, he hoped to be able to do the same.

"Thank you, Admiral. For everything," Grummus said as he tipped his hat at the Admiral.

"Don't thank me yet, Grummus. I fear it'll be a long time before this is all over," he answered grimly.

"Believing in us is a good start," Grummus said as positively as he could.

The Admiral laughed heartily. "Thanks Grummus, I needed that. It's good that there are still people with such a positive stance on things, like you. By the end of this week, I should have finished filling up the entire crew roster. I'm still dealing with some recruiters, but I've already found some very able people for this mission."

"That sounds good, Admiral. We'll bring them all back home, if I have anything to say about it," Grummus said as he puffed himself up, tall and proud.

Xer'xis nodded at him respectfully. "I'm sure you would, Commander Grummus. If you don't mind, I'll have to dismiss you for now."

"Of course, sir!" Grummus said as he tried to do the Xoron salute.

The Admiral smiled at him as he waved him off.

## Chapter 14 – Faunacide

Shortly after retrieving the transponder from Ajira's body, Lerion, Vyrex and Emeron had returned to their ships. They were still hell-bent on finding the renegade Kevar, but Emeron had suggested to return to the ships first and gear up for the search. Lerion had been quick to agree. Vyrex had, in his usual fashion, suggested to keep going, because he was of the opinion that he could handle anything, anytime.

"There's bound to be quite some wildlife in these woods," Emeron said as he finished packing his bag with more batteries for his plasma pistol. He had stuffed as much into the backpack as he could: rations, a scanning device, a flashlight, a hunting knife and flasks filled with fresh water.

Vyrex had watched him all this time without packing anything himself. Lerion had not overdone the packing, but he too had put some rations and water in his shoulder bag. It would be enough to last him a few days.

"Are you sure you don't need anything?" Emeron asked as he raised an eyebrow at the Gald Assassin.

"I make do with whatever I find," came the arrogant reply. Vyrex folded his arms as he leaned against the side of one of his ship's landing struts.

Emeron shrugged at him with a straight face. "Fine, suit yourself, but don't come begging for anything," he said. He hoisted the backpack over his left shoulder, then took the other strap and put his arm through.

"Don't expect anything from me either, pal," Lerion said as he threw a sharp glare at his fellow Gald. He wondered if Vyrex would really manage as well as he said he would, but he would be damned if he would help the arrogant bastard. Lerion refitted his hat and nodded at the other two.

"All right, ladies, let's go then?" he asked.

"Oh, so you're the leader now?" Vyrex retorted.

“Since you’re so well-travelled, why don’t you head out on your own? We sure as fuck won’t miss you,” Lerion said. He was getting really tired of Vyrex’ constant stubbornness.

“I have to agree with Lerion here,” Emeron added as he folded his arms. “You’re not really helping us with your behaviour. We’re a team, we’re stronger together. The Prophets know what’s in those woods, besides Vester, I mean.”

“Fine,” was all Vyrex said.

“Man, you’re a bigger diva than Queen Liisboth,” Lerion said, fully aware that all of the Royal Assassins were officially appointed by her.

“You dare to take the Queen’s name in vain?” Vyrex shouted. He grabbed Lerion by the shirt, his face centimetres away.

“Ah, looks like you do care about something at least!” Lerion said without blinking.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Vyrex asked, his voice low and threatening.

“Care enough about your Queen to work together just this once?” Lerion stared Vyrex down.

“Gentlemen, please. Every minute we spend bickering is a minute lost,” Emeron tried, interrupting the two arguing Gald.

“I said fine already,” Vyrex said coldly through gritted teeth.

“Then I suggest we head out, while we still have the advantage of daylight,” Emeron said as he marched towards the woods.

“Come on, pal,” Lerion said as he followed the Windblade. He heard Vyrex sigh behind him. At least now he knew the Assassin did care about his work. Perhaps he’d be more cooperative.

\* \* \*

The next fifteen minutes were spent in silence as they traversed the woods. They had already passed the wreckage of the *Claw of Ra’asha*, and just like before, Emeron and Vyrex were cutting themselves a path through the thicket. Lerion occasionally swatted away the insects that buzzed too close to his face, wondering if they would sting. He quickly dismissed the thought when they heard the stomping of an animal’s

hooves on the forest ground. They all instinctively ducked behind some bushes, hoping to catch a glimpse of the animal. Lerion looked at Emeron, who was using the scanning device as a pair of binoculars.

“Can you see anything?” Lerion whispered.

Emeron kept looking around and hummed a negative reply.

Lerion directed his gaze from the Xoron to where Vyrex was supposed to be, but he had left the spot without making a sound. He twisted his head to see where the Assassin had gone off to, but he couldn't find him, until he looked up. Lerion had no idea how he had climbed up there so silently, but Vyrex was jumping from branch to branch with ease. He stopped and threw a meaningful glance their way, then pointed downwards.

“I see it now,” Emeron said. He handed the scanner over to Lerion.

It was only a small fawn, very similar to those he'd seen before on countless other planets. Its fur was spotted with browns and blacks, making it blend in perfectly with its surroundings.

“So, now what do we do?” Lerion asked as he handed the scanner back.

“It's not a threat to us, we should just keep going, I suppose,” Emeron suggested. He turned the scanner off and put it back in his bag. They heard muffled noises coming from the fawn's direction, and they could no longer see Vyrex in the trees above it. They walked through the bushes until they could see the animal. Vyrex was standing right next to it, nonchalantly cleaning the fawn's fresh, warm blood off his assassin's blade.

“Was that really necessary?” Emeron asked, his voice hushed.

Vyrex shrugged at him as he took a skinning knife from somewhere within his long jacket.

“I need to eat, right? Just let me skin it fast. I won't be long,” he said, without even trying to be quiet.

“You don't think whatever spooked this fawn is still close?” Lerion asked, peering around the bushes. He couldn't help but feel watched.

“These types of animals scare quickly,” Vyrex muttered as he skilfully skinned the animal. The knife went through its pelt as if it were butter.

Lerion removed the clasp from his holster, took out the pistol and powered it up.

"I'm not taking any chances," he said softly, then checked the transponder. It was only a small device, but it did have a readout display that told him the direction and distance to the other transponder.

Emeron noticed Lerion was checking it. "How far do we still have to go?" he asked, not impatiently, but with some urgency in his voice.

"Quite a ways, I'm afraid," Lerion responded as he slipped the device back in his pocket. He pointed in the general direction the transponder was sending them off to.

"That's the way we need to go. Deeper into the forest."

"Why would Vester go into these woods? He'd have a much better chance of survival if he stayed with his ship and sent out a distress signal, wouldn't he?" Emeron asked.

"You're right. Vester wouldn't abandon his ship, even if it wasn't fly-able. He must know of some nearby settlement, or something. Some place he could call for help, maybe?" Lerion added.

"Okidoke, looks like I'm having roast fawn tonight!" Vyrex interrupted as he patted the bag he was carrying.

Lerion threw him a questioning look. "Did you just put raw meat in that bag?" he asked, his face puckered with disgust.

"I'll gather some stuff to season it with, but yeah, I'll be eating it later anyway. Besides, why do you care? You've got your wonderful rations!" Vyrex said pleasantly.

"Suit yourself, I guess." *At least his disposition has changed a little,* Lerion thought.

\* \* \*

"In the Prophets' names! How long does this forest go on?" Emeron asked tiredly. They'd been walking through the forest for what seemed like hours, and it had a level of sameness about it that made them all wonder if they were lost. Thanks to modern technology, they were quickly able to confirm they had been going in the right direction.

"From the looks of it, we should still have quite some daytime left. Maybe we should give our legs a little rest when we reach a clearing?" Vyrex suggested. He too had become tired of all the walking about.

"I'd prefer somewhere with running water," Lerion suggested. He had finished about half the flask of water he had taken with him. A place to refill it would be a nice bonus; they hadn't run into any rivers or streams so far during their walk through the dense forest.

"Not sure there is any here," Vyrex said.

"I'll set my scanner to search for water, hold on," Emeron said as he retrieved the device from his bag. Shortly after it had finished the booting sequence, he punched a few buttons and waited as the device scanned their direct environment for traces of water.

"And?" Lerion asked impatiently.

Emeron pointed towards the east. "That way. According to the scanner, we'll find large quantities of water in that direction. Should be about fifteen minutes."

Lerion felt glad when the scanner turned out to be right. The closer they had gotten to their destination, the louder the sound of streaming water had become. Emeron had not heard it until they were much closer, but both Vyrex and Lerion, with their ridiculously large ears, had heard the sound of the gentle stream from a few kilometres away.

"Is the water safe to drink?" Lerion asked as he turned to face Emeron.

The Windblade checked the scanner again and nodded at him. "It should be safe. It seems quite pure, actually. Lots of minerals," he said as he shifted his gaze from the scanner's display to the Gald.

Without further hesitation, Lerion poured the lukewarm water out of his flask to fill it up with the fresh water from the stream. He put the flask back into his bag and then cupped his hands to drink some from the stream itself. After three gulps of water, he wiped his mouth dry and let out a satisfied sigh.

"Sometimes there's just nothing better than fresh water," he said.

"I agree!" Vyrex said. He had taken off the top half of his clothing and was washing himself further up the stream.

A look of disgust appeared on Lerion's. He spat a few times to get rid of the sour taste that suddenly filled his mouth. He could hear Emeron trying to resist the urge to laugh out loud.

"It's not funny!" Lerion shouted at him.

The Windblade burst into laughter, as did Vyrex.

"You ... should have ..." Emeron choked out through his laughing fit, "seen that look ... on your face!"

He continued laughing until he couldn't anymore. It took a while before he caught his breath again.

"I'm sorry, Lerion, but that was just so funny," he said after a while.

"Yeah, whatever. Let's get going," Lerion mumbled as he went upstream and refilled his flask with water that hadn't been tainted by Vyrex.

\* \* \*

It was well past noon and they had walked quite a few kilometres since their initial stop at the stream, when Emeron suggested to stop at the nearest clearing in the woods. Both Gald had agreed fully. Emeron could imagine that their shorter legs would make the journey seem that much longer to them. He cut away a few more branches when he noticed the forest was starting to clear a little.

"This looks like a good spot to rest," he suggested as he looked back.

Both Vyrex and Lerion grunted in agreement.

Emeron stopped right in his tracks as he caught a glimpse of someone on the far side of the clearing. Vyrex bumped into him, apparently too tired to notice the Windblade had stopped moving.

"Shh!" Emeron hissed, pressing his index finger against his mouth.

Vyrex tilted his head to see past Emeron, then shuffled up next to him. At the far side, they saw what looked like a Scarowyn. He was hunched over a bush and appeared to be studying it intently. He wore a large pilgrim's hat. His clothes were dirty and worn: a pair of old jeans and a weathered leather vest. The bushy beard that covered most of his lower face seemed to be made of dozens of tiny reddish leaves and con-

trasted nicely with his dark green skin. Multiple jars filled with dirt and plants were strewn across the forest floor close to him.

“Is that a-a Scarowyn?” Lerion whispered.

“Looks like one to me,” Emeron replied. He had seen several Scarowyn during his time on Netherea, but why they’d find one here, so far away from Alliance space, was a mystery to him.

“So, what do we do?”

“Well, if he’s a Scarowyn, we should just go talk to him, I guess,” Emeron said. He looked at Lerion to his left, who gave him an agreeing nod, then to his right, where he thought Vyrex would be.

“Not again ...” Lerion groaned as he pointed to the bushes close to the Scarowyn.

“What in the Prophet’s name is he doing?” Emeron uttered as he looked at the Assassin in disbelief.

Vyrex took another step closer to his target. It was definitely a Scarowyn, and an old one too, he noticed as each step brought him nearer. The old man didn’t look like much of a threat, but then again, what was he doing all the way out here on some backwater planet in Zar’aranos space? Surely he couldn’t be up to any good. Just a few more steps. He felt his ankles getting tangled in something, followed by the strange sensation of being pulled upside down, right into the air.

Vyrex was hanging from a pair of thick vines, suspended half a metre above the ground.

“Let me go!” he shouted at the old Scarowyn.

Lerion and Emeron looked on as they followed the vines back to what could best be described as the love child of a canine and a flesh-eating plant. The strange green creature stood on four legs and produced a strange, ruffled barking sound as it held the Gald up into the air.

Startled by his surprise visitor, the old Scarowyn almost fell, but regained his balance just in time.

“Easy, girl, let him down,” he ordered the strange creature.

Still snarling at the intruder, the creature abruptly released its grip on Vyrex’ ankles, causing him to fall to the ground.

"I'm so sorry, my friend," the old man said as he extended a hand to help Vyrex up. Hesitantly, the Gald accepted the offer.

"I'm not your friend, pal," Vyrex growled as he dusted off his outfit.

Slightly taken aback by the intruder's unfriendliness, the Scarowyn cleared his throat. "I do apologize, little Shredna here is just looking after me. She can get a little overprotective, I must admit."

"We apologize too," Lerion said as he stepped into the clearing, followed closely by Emeron.

Shredna instantly shifted her attention to the new pair of strangers and began snarling at them.

The old Scarowyn patted her on the back to calm her down. "They are friends. Don't worry, lassie."

As if arguing with him, she continued growling in a different tone for a short while. She ultimately sat down, keeping a distrustful eye on the newcomers.

"I see you've brought friends," he said with a smile as he looked back at Vyrex, who had folded his arms and was giving them the angry eye.

"Aren't you a little far away from home, old man?" Lerion asked as he examined both the Scarowyn and his pet.

A sly smile appeared on the old Scarowyn's face as he picked up an open jar from the ground.

"Do you see this?" he asked as he held the jar up, so everyone could see its contents.

All Lerion could see was some dirt and a plant the Scarowyn had scooped into the jar. He looked up and shrugged.

"It's a plant and some dirt. Very exciting."

"To the untrained eye, perhaps," he said sagely, "but what's in here is my research. You see, I'm a botanist. One who is indeed very far from home."

Lerion nodded. He hadn't understood what the old man meant, but if he was here for work or research, then that was good enough for him.

"Oh, by the way, my name is Lerion. My Xoron friend here is called Emeron and that bozo over there is Vyrex," Lerion said.

The old man bowed at him respectfully. "Forgive my manners as well, I rarely get to speak to anyone except little Shredna here, and she isn't much of a talker herself. My name is Vladpoe Witherleaf."

"Are you here all by yourself, Vladpoe?" Emeron asked as he inspected the jars that were lying around. Vladpoe had been very busy collecting plant samples.

"Yes, it's just me and Shredna to keep me company. No other people. I prefer to work alone, really," Vladpoe added.

"How did you get all the way out here, if I may be so bold to ask?" Emeron asked.

"The Empire isn't as bad as people may want you to believe. The Alliance may not be friends with them, but they are a very welcoming people, especially the Mandar. I don't care so much for the Saranus, if I may say so, but they can be reasoned with. I simply hitchhike from planet to planet. Then I'll see if I can get the lay of the land and prospect interesting areas for research," the wrinkly old Scarowyn explained as he collected the jars in a large padded duffel bag.

"You probably haven't seen a large armoured Kevlar around, have you?" Lerion asked. The beacon was still active and far from their current location.

Vladpoe shook his head and furrowed his brow. "Can't say that I have, my friend," he answered.

"He's hard to miss. You would have spotted him from far away."

"Unless he's using his personal stealth field," Vyrex chimed in.

Everyone's attention shifted to the Assassin.

"We hadn't considered that," Emeron remarked.

"Even if he's using it, we can track him with the beacon. It's only of use to him once we get within visual range," Lerion said, holding Ajira's beacon up to eye level.

"Say, fellows, it would seem time is of the essence for you. I know the area quite well. Maybe I can help you find your friend?" Vladpoe offered as he closed the duffel bag and swung it over his back.

Lerion grinned at him. "He's hardly our friend ... but we'd appreciate it if you could help us find him faster!"

"Which way is he running off to?" Vyrex asked impatiently.

Lerion checked the beacon and pointed in the direction they were previously headed.

“Looks like he’s still moving further away from us.”

“How far, exactly?” Vladpoe asked.

“I’d say he’s got a good ten, maybe twelve kilometres head start,” Lerion said as he watched the beacon’s small display.

“Oh, no ...” came Vladpoe’s thoughtful reply.

“What’s that supposed to mean, old man?” Vyrex demanded. The way he raised his voice caused Shredna to growl at him.

“That’s not good. There’s a large military base in that direction. He might be headed there.”

“Why would Vester go to a military base? He’s in hostile territory,” Emeron wondered.

“You’re right, that makes very little sense. But if Vladpoe’s correct, then we can only assume he’s headed there, for whatever reason he may have. Perhaps he knows there’s something of value there,” Lerion said.

Vladpoe sniffed the air and looked around with a worried frown on his face.

“What is it, Vladpoe?” Lerion asked.

“Can’t you smell it?” he muttered as he wandered about the opening in the woods.

All three stared at him and shook their heads.

Shredna made a sound almost as if she was barking, but it sounded more like very loud rustling of leaves.

“You can smell it too, can’t you?” Vladpoe asked her. She continued her loud rustling.

“Smell what, exactly?” Lerion asked as he walked up to the Scarowyn.

Vladpoe pursed his lips as he tried to come up with the right words.

“It’s hard to describe. It’s not as much a smell as it is a tingling in the air ...”

Lerion tried to focus his hearing, and suddenly thought he understood what the Scarowyn had been going on about.

“Why the fuck are we still standing here?” Vyrex snapped.

“There is no need to swear, my friend. Whatever is going on, it’s bad. Really bad. Did you come here by spaceship?” Vladpoe inquired.

“Yes, our vessels are parked a good while away. It’d take us nearly four hours to get there, if we hurry. Why? Do we need to go?” Lerion asked. He tried to hide the worry in his voice. He had a feeling about this and it wasn’t good. Not at all.

“Then I suggest we hurry back, before it’s too late,” Vladpoe said gravely.

“All right, this way.” Vyrex had already moved up to take the lead and motioned for them to follow.

The way back was a lot smoother, and Emeron thought he caught a glimpse of plants moving gently out of the way as they approached more than a few times.

“So, Vladpoe, why exactly are we in danger?” Emeron asked as he walked up next to the Scarowyn.

“Well, because this is a sign that the Empire is about to deploy one of their less ... *ethical* pieces of technology to transform this planet to suit their own needs more. It’s an absolute disgrace,” he grumbled.

“Transform? How exactly?” Emeron continued.

“Some of the Zar’aranos spaceships are equipped with a device that allows them to ‘terraform’ or alter a planet. This sensation we just experienced is just their scanners trying to pick up readings from the planet, before they deploy the missiles that will alter it. They start with the elimination of all fauna and then alter most floral life,” Vladpoe explained.

Emeron’s jaw dropped. The idea was ludicrous. Why would anyone in their right mind destroy all living beings on a planet? The ethical implications of the idea alone were enough to make him feel sick to his stomach. What if, instead of using it on a planet not inhabited by intelligent life, they’d use it as a weapon? He tried not to think about it any further. They’d have to get away from this place as fast as they could.

“Are you okay, Emeron?” Vladpoe asked. The Xoron had gone silent after what Vladpoe had said, and he started to look a little pale.

Emeron gave him a friendly smile and nodded. “Yes, I’ll be fine. This thing you just told me, it worries me greatly,” the Windblade said.

“Not just you, pal,” Lerion added as they continued moving forward at a brisk pace.

It was getting dark by the time they made it through the thicket and reached their ships.

“You can come with me, Vladpoe. I have room left for another person,” Emeron offered as he pointed towards his scout ship.

“What about Shredna? She should come along as well,” Vladpoe said.

“Of course, that shouldn’t be a problem,” Emeron said as he used his wrist pad to open the entry to his ship.

“We’ll decide what to do after we get off this rock,” Vyrex said. Lerion was standing right behind him, waiting for him to open the bay door to the Gald’s vessel. They all got into their ships and fired up their engines to get off the planet and into a safe orbit.

\* \* \*

“It should be any moment now,” Vladpoe said as he watched the planet on the ship’s viewscreen. On the far side, another large vessel was in a synchronous orbit with the planet. Emeron hoped they had gone unnoticed so far. Two Alliance scout vessels suddenly emerging from the planet would not be a good thing. Thankfully, it seemed that the ship had been too busy focusing its attention on the planet.

“Looks like they’re firing something,” Vyrex reported over the vid-com. They had been in constant contact with each other, just like before.

Emeron checked his ship’s sensors. “We’re getting the same reading here,” he confirmed dryly.

He watched the sensor reading. A single projectile was currently descending towards the planet only known to them as B-19-W-81. In its current trajectory, it would make contact with the surface in seventeen seconds.

“Fascinating,” Vladpoe said as he watched the viewscreen, which was currently displaying both the planet and the sensor reading overlay.

Emeron frowned at him. “Of all the words with which you could describe what is happening, this is the one you choose?”

The old Scarowyn threw a glance at him. It wasn't fascination Emeron saw in those eyes, but rather a grim realization of what was about to happen.

"Impact," Vyrex said over the voicecom.

Time seemed to pass slowly. At first, it seemed as if nothing had changed on the surface, but then something changed in the sensor reading. A shockwave appeared. It grew exponentially; at first, it covered only a dot on the surface of the planet, but as it grew larger, it swallowed everything. The colour of the surface shifted slightly as the bluish shockwave rippled over it.

Within five minutes, the entire surface of the planet had been wiped clean. Nobody had dared to speak a word after seeing the spectacle. Emeron snapped back to reality when his sensors started beeping loudly. His eyes flashed over the sensor readings.

"Life sign readings on the planet have been reduced by ninety percent. Atmosphere has been slightly altered as well."

"This is how they treat planets for colonization," Vladpoe said grimly.

"Let's just hope they won't ever use it as a weapon," Emeron said. He was still shaken by what he had just witnessed.

"I wonder what became of the Kevlar you were looking for. By the time we got off the planet, I believe they had already evacuated their own personnel from the planet."

Emeron pondered what Vladpoe had said and shifted his gaze to the old Scarowyn.

"Wait a minute, if you knew about this and you wouldn't have met us ... then how would you have gotten off the planet?"

Vladpoe looked at him, shook his head and looked back at the viewscreen.

"Then I would have been on the surface now. Just like that other time ..." His voice had dwindled to a rustling whisper.

"You survived something like this?" Emeron asked doubtfully.

"As I explained, it seems to affect mostly the fauna. I guess I got lucky that time, but it caused me a lot of pain and trouble," the old man said, his voice trailing off.

“Wow,” was all Emeron could manage for an answer.

\* \* \*

“Now that’s what I call fireworks!” Vyrex shouted as both he and Lerion saw the projectile do its work. They both watched the viewscreen of the Assassin’s scout vessel in awe as the blue shockwave passed over the surface of the planet they had left only moments ago.

“I think Emeron’s right, though,” Lerion said. “If the Empire ever thinks about using this thing as a weapon, we’re in deep, deep trouble.”

Vyrex snorted at the smuggler standing next to him. “Yeah, right. They’ll never even get close enough to our planets to try,” Vyrex said smugly.

Lerion hummed in disagreement. “Seriously, we’re not that far from the border now. They could just pick some backwater place like this one and boom!”

“Why would they even bother? We’re not at war with them,” Vyrex said, sounding bored.

“Yet,” Lerion corrected. The more he thought about it, the more it frightened him.

Something in his pocket was beeping. Apparently, it had been doing so for a while, because Vyrex poked him.

“Hey, you’re beeping!”

Reaching for his pocket, Lerion realized it was the transponder. He took it out; it was beeping constantly and loudly. He fidgeted with it, turning it so he could check its display.

“What’s it say?” Vyrex asked.

Lerion gulped as he looked up from the display and heard the pounding of heavy armoured boots on the floor right behind him.

## Chapter 15 – Loyal Hearts

In the distance, Serra could see a small blip in the clear evening sky. It was approaching fast, and within a minute, the personal shuttle of Chando Rombilius was starting its landing sequence on the platform that was reserved for it, right next to her own vessel. With several heavy thuds, the shuttle touched down on the ground. Moments later, the shuttle bay door slid open and a platform extended from it towards the ground to allow a comfortable exit.

Chando Rombilius had rested during the trip back to Caledon and looked sharp and fit. The moment he laid eyes on Serra, he forced a smile. He was glad that she was there, but he was also anxious. The entire trip back, he had deliberately chosen not to contact her regarding her choice. The fact that she was standing here hopefully meant that she had chosen to stay with him, but even if she did stay, they would have a long and hard talk. That was one thing he knew for certain.

“My dear,” he said as he opened his arms to hug her.

Serra remained still, so when Chando moved in, he hugged her awkwardly. He stepped back and just held her by the shoulders for a moment, inspecting her and smiling at her uncomfortably.

Serra looked down, trying to avoid his gaze.

*She hates me*, Chando thought. *This is the moment where she tells me that I'm a bastard and that I should have told her about this much earlier.*

“Hi ...” Serra muttered, her voice sounding shaky and raspy.

“Hi,” Chando replied with a much steadier voice. He gently removed his hands from her shoulders and motioned for her to walk with him towards the mansion. She nodded and accompanied him on his right side.

“So, you decided to stay?” he asked as he looked her in the eye.

Serra nodded. “I will. Where else could I go?” she said with a much steadier voice.

Chando snickered at her. "Anywhere, I suppose. I wouldn't stop you if you did. I have cocked up massively."

Slightly surprised by the otherwise well-spoken gentleman, Serra giggled quietly at Chando's confession, but she kept her face straight.

"Indeed you have," she agreed.

As they approached, Giles opened the large double front doors of the mansion inward from the other side and welcomed them.

"Can I take your coats?" Giles asked as he held out his arms to accept them.

Chando gently let his coat slide off and handed it over to Giles. By the time Giles had draped it over his arm, Serra handed hers to him as well.

"Thank you, Giles," they both said.

"Will there be anything else for you, sir and madam?" the butler asked politely.

Chando shook his head dismissingly. "Thank you, but we'll need some time alone. I'm sure you understand," he said.

Giles gave him a curt nod. "Of course, sir. If you need me, you'll know where to find me," he said as he turned on his heel and walked into the hallway to take care of the coats.

"Come, my dear, let's talk in my study," Chando suggested as he headed up the flight of stairs in the entrance hall.

Serra followed him up silently.

\* \* \*

Chando shut the door behind them and walked up towards her. He wasn't surprised when she slapped him in the face hard. Her eyes shot daggers as she folded her arms.

"I deserved that," he admitted as he nursed his right cheek.

"What the hell were you thinking, Chando, or should I call you dad? Because I sure as hell don't know anymore!" Serra shouted at him.

A painful smile appeared on Chando's face. As soon as his gaze met hers, he looked down at the ground for answers, but he couldn't come up with any.

"I don't quite know where to begin," he said as he walked towards his desk chair and sat down.

"At the beginning," Serra stated coldly. There was another chair in front of the desk; she gracefully lowered herself into it as she continued staring Chando down.

A heavy sigh resounded through the study as Chando recollected his thoughts and tried to think of where to begin explaining everything.

"Would you care for a drink?" he asked hesitantly.

"Why not, it seems like we could both use one," Serra replied.

Chando got up from his seat and reached for a pair of tumblers standing on a nearby cabinet. He opened the glass doors, retrieved a large bottle of Scotch whisky from it and poured two glasses. They ended up getting a lot fuller than he would usually pour, but this time, they wouldn't be drinking to celebrate. They'd be drinking to find solace, hopefully.

"There you go," Chando said as he handed the half-filled glass of whisky to Serra.

"Thank you," she muttered as she took it from him.

Chando sat down and leaned far into the chair as he nursed his glass.

"Writing a letter was not the best way to address this, but I had to take care of something else first. Something of the utmost importance. I'm sure you will agree with me later on," he said, then took a sip from his drink. The whisky was double barrel, aged for fourteen years. Chando didn't fully catch the smell and peaty taste.

"It's hard to tell if you've managed to come to terms with everything that I've revealed to you so far. I hope that in time you will, and I very much want to explain to you why I did all of this, but I'm having trouble to find a good starting point. Perhaps it is best if I start by telling you about Sarah, my daughter ..." Chando said, taking another sip. He looked at Serra over the rim of his glass. She was looking at him expectantly.

"Please, continue," she asked with the slightest hint of anticipation.

"Sarah was my one and only child," Chando sighed as he continued. "She meant everything to me. After my ex-wife and I separated, Sarah decided to live with her. I made sure they got all the care they need. I paid for everything, made sure that she would grow up to become what-

ever she wanted to be. The moments I did see her were scarce and I could really tell that we had grown apart, but still, she remained the only little bright light in my life as a businessman. By the time she had reached the age of twenty-four, she was struck by a rare condition called Humbrington's Disease. An implant malfunction and subsequent rejection from her body caused her brain functions to degrade over time ...” Chando's voice trailed off as he looked down sorrowfully.

“That sounds horrible, but isn't Humbrington's Disease treatable?” Serra asked.

Chando pursed his lips and nodded. “It is now, thanks to the research I funded. Alas, too little and too late to save my little girl. I tried everything within my power to get her cured, but all of the treatments we had back then were experimental. We simply had no idea how to treat it properly,” Chando admitted with a lump in his throat.

“Chando, what does all of this have to do with me? I don't understand how I'm connected to your daughter. Why do I remember everything before my death on Saridia?”

Chando looked into Serra's brown eyes and grimaced.

“After Sarah's death, I was devastated. We buried her in the southern gardens here, out of reach of anyone else. I cursed myself for destroying the nanobots that are still keeping me alive in this perpetual state ... I wished that I still had some. They could have saved my little girl. So, I had a research team put together and they found a way to transfer all of her memories into a clone. The first attempts with this new technology seemed hopeful, but we kept running into problems and most of them were only short-lived experiments,” he said, his eyes shifting down as if he remembered every single attempt vividly.

“But you managed to get it working somehow. After all, I'm the fourth Serra, right?” she asked, frowning at the man sitting across from her.

He nodded. “You are, and yes. It took us years, but what little of Sarah's memories we could save, we inserted into you. Of course, by then it no longer made sense to have you look exactly like her. If we would have made a clone using Sarah's DNA, we'd rouse suspicion. So I had the team go ahead and create an entirely new person. You'd have all

of her personality traits, including her flaws, and that way, I'd still have her close to me. I am probably the biggest sentimental fool alive."

Chando took his glass and finished what little was left of his whisky in one big gulp. He clenched his jaws as the amber liquid burned down his throat. He exhaled hard as he looked back up at Serra, who was staring at him blankly.

"I don't expect you to understand. Hell, not even I am sure if I do. The truth is, I need you in my life and at my side, but I need you to want this as well. Otherwise, I might as well have created assistants to obey my every command. Excuse me, dear, I just can't seem to stop rambling," Chando said with an uncomfortable smile.

"Wow," was all she said in return.

The silence grew as time passed slowly. It wasn't necessarily awkward, but both of them had a lot on their minds. If even Chando couldn't make heads or tails of it anymore, what was Serra supposed to do? She figured that this was all she had in her life. Now that she was acting as the CEO of NanoTech Incorporated, how could she just abandon it? It simply wasn't that easy. Even if she doubted Chando's morals, he had done most of this only because of what he had lost. There was no ill will there. Still, she knew that he had done terrible things, immoral things that probably haunted him at night.

"So, what do we do now?" Serra asked as she got up from her chair and looked around the room. The study had always been messy when she visited it, but it seemed to be even more so this time. *Perhaps it is a reflection of his mind*, she thought.

Chando walked up to Serra and held her hands. She jerked them away from his grasp and slapped him in the face again, hard. Chando staggered and rubbed his cheek.

"How can I ever forgive you for all of this? Why did you withhold this from me?" she screamed at him.

Chando looked at the floor and shook his head. "I can't explain. I thought it would be in your best interest to not know any of this. Who in their right mind would ever create a clone of someone they loved, just so they can be with them again? I know it's not natural. Hell, I know you aren't even the same person. You only faintly resemble the real Sarah."

"You had no right to do any of this to me. But what can I do? I have nowhere else to go. I have no other purpose in life. Where would I go?"

"I don't know what to say, my dear ..."

"I can't leave, you know that. We need to fix what's been wronged. NanoTech might be one of the few parties that can actually make a difference in this whole business with the Shaedon. If we don't take action now, who knows what the future will look like?"

"So, you will stay then?" Chando asked cautiously.

Serra stepped to within a few centimetres of his face.

"What other choice do I have? If I leave, I will have nothing. And as the CEO of your company, I can't just disappear. People will start asking questions. The only logical choice I have is to remain, whether I like it or not. Congratulations, Chando, you've successfully managed to enslave me to your cause. You manipulative son of a bitch," she hissed. She tried to push him hard with both hands, but Chando grasped her by the wrists.

"I know I've messed up, but you are the only one left in my life that I can call family, even if it's just an illusion. You matter to me. I have no idea what I could possibly do to make you see that," he said, gently letting go of her wrists when she stopped struggling.

Serra averted her gaze. "This is all so messed up! I have no idea who I truly am. No idea if I can ever trust you again after all of this. What kind of universe are we living in?"

"Perhaps we should have another drink?" Chando offered.

"Sure, I guess," Serra said, slumping down on the chair nearest to her.

Chando reached for the bottle of whisky. He removed the cork from the bottle and poured them a glass. With a smooth move, he handed Serra her glass and raised his. She copied his movement and toasted. The glasses clinked together and they both took a nip. Serra closed her eyes for a moment as she let the liquid roll through her mouth and swallowed.

"Chando? Is this Caledon whisky?" she asked.

He chuckled and grinned at her. "I took your advice to heart and had several bottles brought in. You were right, they are in the same league as the traditional Scottish ones!"

"In the same league? Did you know that last year during the annual whisky competition, the winner was a Caledon whisky? I'd say 'in the same league' is a bit of an understatement."

Chando scoffed at her as he sampled another sip of the double barrel malt.

"Sounds like the Caledonians are doing what Japan tried to achieve ages ago on Earth. Everyone knows that the Scottish can't be beat!" he proclaimed proudly.

"Chando?" Serra whispered.

"Yes, my dear?"

"If I'm a clone, how come I have all these memories? Are they real? My childhood? Going to college? My – my mother?"

"They are real, but most of them are Sarah's. I couldn't explain to you how the procedure works exactly. I'm just the one who funded it. My expertise is not in the field of medical science. If you wish, I can make an appointment with someone who can explain everything much more clearly than I can," he offered.

"I'd like that very much," she said quietly.

"If you have any more questions, I'll happily answer them for you. Just let me know."

Serra nodded understandingly and sighed.

"Perhaps we should call it a night?" Chando asked.

"That doesn't sound like a bad idea. I'm exhausted," Serra answered. She finished her whisky and yawned.

"Don't think this is over yet. I'm still mad at you," she said as she got up from the chair.

"I didn't expect you to be very forgiving, dear. Perhaps some rest will do us both some good," he said, lingering where he was a moment longer. He watched her as she left the room and wondered if that would be the last time he'd lay eyes on her.

\* \* \*

Chando woke up when a ray of sunlight managed to get through a crack in the curtains and shone in his face. He pulled away the sheets and slowly sat up on the edge of the bed. His feet touched the floor and a jolt of cold shot up through his body. It brought him right back to the thoughts that had haunted him all night. *I hope she's still here.*

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes with one hand and stood up. Still a bit woozy, he shuffled his feet into his slippers, put on his robe, and dragged himself to the bathroom. Cold water streamed out of the faucet automatically when he held his hands under it. He splashed some of the water into his face and reached for a towel.

"Lord, I look tired," he muttered as he inspected himself in the mirror. Thoughts of the fight with Serra last night filled his head. The whisky had not given him the answers he had been seeking. Why had he gone to all the trouble of cloning his daughter and playing God? What purpose had it all served? And he'd so easily sacrificed her, just to serve his own purposes. It had kept him awake almost the entire night. One thing was certain: Serra was extremely confused, but he couldn't help her understand. After all, he didn't understand his own motivations. He'd always been a man of logic, yet none of that counted when it came to his little girl.

Chando got rid of his slippers, hung his robe on a nearby clothing hook and walked into the shower. Water came pouring down from the ceiling at his preferred temperature. He let the water wash over his head for a minute as he leaned with his hands against the wall.

*What will I do when she's gone? There's too much at stake now. I need her at my side.*

When he finally snapped out of his train of thought, he finished taking his shower. It had helped to wake him up and he felt slightly better. Chando stepped back into the master bedroom when he heard a knock on the door.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Sir, breakfast is ready," Giles' muffled voice came from the other side.

"I'll be down in a minute," Chando said as he got dressed. He reached into the closet for one of his favourite suits and carefully laid out each item in the correct order.

"Of course, sir," Giles said. Chando could already hear his footsteps thudding back into the hallway.

Ten minutes later, Chando entered the dining room. He was not surprised to find that he was alone. He sat down and gazed at the large dinner table. Why he had ever gotten a table to fit ten people was a mystery to him, but then he realized that it had probably been the idea of the interior designer, who had been paid a hefty sum of money to get the whole mansion decorated. It had proven to be most impractical; there had never been that many guests in the mansion.

Giles stepped forward and poured Chando a cup of hot coffee.

"There you go, sir," he said politely as he handed him the cup and saucer.

"Much appreciated," Chando said as he looked out the window. He imagined seeing Sarah running there, when she was younger. Those days seemed to be from another lifetime. Chando took a sip of the coffee. It was a little too hot and burned the tip of his tongue. He silently cursed himself.

Giles had done his best to serve a decent breakfast. There were fresh croissants, boiled eggs, sliced bread, butter and several types of thinly sliced meat and cheese to serve as toppings. Then there was fresh, cold milk, coffee, tea and orange juice. Chando reached for a croissant and some butter and took a few bites, but it had no taste. His appetite was gone.

"Giles?" he asked, pushing the plate away.

"Sir?"

"Have you seen Serra?"

"I'm afraid not, sir, but she should still be around. Her ship is still here. Would you like me to find her for you?" Giles asked with his impeccable politeness.

"No, thank you," Chando said as he got up. "I'll find her myself."

\* \* \*

A few rays of sunlight managed to penetrate the thick layer of foliage over the path that led to the secluded graveyard. Just as he expected, Chando found Serra there. She was sitting on her knees at the tombstone of the real Sarah. When he finally stood next to her, she looked up.

“Good morning,” Chando said sullenly.

Serra forced a smile, but Chando could see that she had been crying. Her eyes were swollen and red.

“Hi,” was all she managed to say.

Chando squatted and looked at the tombstone. Even though the graveyard was well out of the way of harsh wind, it looked weathered.

“I can’t believe it’s been this long,” he said.

“Four lifetimes, it would seem,” Serra said.

“Have you made up your mind?”

Serra looked him in the eyes.

“You know, I expected to find answers here. I’ve been sitting here for hours, and I’m no closer to finding any. I thought I might get a sense of who I really am ...”

Chando looked away from her, his eyes going over the epitaph on the tombstone.

“I can’t force you to be anything you don’t want to be,” he said.

“I know. Perhaps you were right. Things were easier when I didn’t know the truth.”

“Ignorance may be bliss, dear, but I could no longer bear this burden. I see now that perhaps that too was a mistake.”

“For all that it’s worth to you, I will be staying. I need to see these Shaedon brought to justice. I’m just not sure what will become of us,” she said as she rose to her feet.

“I know it will never be as before. I was hoping it would become something better, perhaps. It will take a great deal of time to regain your trust, I realize that, but you are all I have left. I can’t deny that. I’m willing to fight for it – for us,” Chando said. He grabbed her hands and was grateful she didn’t pull away from him this time.

“I hope you will.”

“What do you say, dear? Shall we head back to my office? Perhaps taking our minds off all of this will help. We could go over the briefing for the upcoming mission,” Chando suggested. He let go of her and turned away. Serra followed him in silence.

\* \* \*

“Please, have a seat,” Chando said as they entered his study. Serra sat down in front of Chando’s desk and waited for him to start the briefing.

“Do you want some coffee, dear?” he asked as he went to his side of the desk.

Serra shook her head. “No, thanks, I’m good for now.”

“Very well, then I’ll just have some myself. I haven’t slept as well as I should have,” Chando said as he went over to the replicator and retrieved a fresh, hot brew from the machine. He put the mug down in front of him on the desk and sat in his chair, then turned on the desk’s holographic displays to project a three-dimensional star chart across the room. He took a sip of the coffee as he walked towards a particular point of interest on the map.

“This system is where my – our – agents have located the polydrone factory,” Chando pointed out.

“How sure are we about that? Did they bring actual proof?” Serra asked sceptically.

Chando gave her an affirming nod. “Pictures, a map of the facility, it’s all there in the database. Last time we spoke, I hadn’t had the time to confirm all of this, but now I’m a hundred percent sure of it. The facility is located on a planet within Empire space, known to us as GF-128-T. It’s quite close to Veraan space, which seems to confirm our suspicions that the Shaedon might attack the Alliance through the Veraan. After all, they already seem to have at least one Veraan agent. We can only speculate on that at the moment, however. But we know where the factory is, which means we can destroy it!” Chando exclaimed with a satisfied grin on his face.

“It can’t be that easy,” Serra replied, still not sounding fully convinced about their chances.

"I know what you're thinking. How can we possibly have a chance to destroy it, with our current forces? During your absence, I've been extremely busy meeting people who could help our cause and I found one, albeit unlikely, ally."

"One ally? How will that be any good?" Serra asked, raising an eyebrow.

"This mission is one we will not win through attrition. It must be a hit-and-run. We don't need strength in numbers, we need the element of surprise, and I believe we can do this with what we have. All we need is a distraction. A small fleet that can hold its own long enough for a covert team to penetrate the Shaedon's defences unseen and infiltrate the facility, then blow it to smithereens!"

Chando said, bashing a fist into his open palm.

His confidence was affecting Serra. She stood up and walked up next to him. "So, who is this ally then?" she asked as she studied the chart.

"High Councillor Máraxi Wihara, of the Ninth Circle."

Serra jerked her head towards Chando and cocked an eyebrow. "You contacted the Xoron for help?" she said almost accusingly.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures, I suppose." He shrugged at her.

"How did you convince them to help you? They're busy enough as it is," Serra said.

Chando chuckled and placed a hand on her shoulder. "I bargained with them. Apparently, the High Councillor and her order are trying to piece together a collection of silver-bound tomes. I've had some people investigate and apparently, these tomes are of great value to them. From what I've gathered, they're supposed to be from a race that has long gone extinct. They are believed to be the original inhabitants of Netherrea, a people called the Luminars. The tomes are said to hold the secret to the location of something they seek. Arcane nonsense, if you ask me," Chando said.

Serra tilted her head and looked at him ponderously. "I've seen what they did to Baynam. I'm not sure if we can just ignore this 'arcane nonsense', as you call it. There's no denying that magicka exists and affects our very existence to some extent," she countered.

Chando frowned at her and averted his gaze. "Hmm, perhaps ..." He walked back to the desk and pressed a button on the computer's controls. Several blips and flight routes were rendered onto the map. He stepped back, closer to where the newly added routes were shown, and pointed at GF-128-T.

"Together with the Ninth Circle's available ships, I believe we have about thirty vessels available for this mission, ranging from a few cruisers to modified freighters and several fighters. We will rendezvous at this point here," Chando said as he pointed at a location within Veraan territory,

close to the border with Zar'aranos space.

"Wait. We can't just gather in the middle of Veraan space without drawing attention to ourselves," Serra interrupted.

"Indeed, we can't. Or I should say, we couldn't. I pulled a few favours. The Veraan authorities will happily find themselves equipped with the finest line of implants and bionics from NanoTech. In return, they've promised to keep an eye shut. There's only so much you can do through official means, as I'm sure you understand," he said, with a slightly arrogant grin on his face.

"That still puts us at great risk. We have no idea what we'll be running into once we cross the border. Did our agents gather any intel on their defences and numbers? What about our exit strategy? And who's going to be on this covert team?" Serra asked sceptically.

A friendly smile appeared on Chando's face. "So many questions and I'm glad you ask them! I will happily answer all of them for you," he said as he walked about the room and zoomed in on the fleet's flight path from Veraan space to the planet's system.

"As I said, this mission will need to be a hit-and-run. Our agents have discovered heavy defences in the system itself. The other systems we'll be crossing to get to our destination all seem to be low in Empire activity."

Chando walked up to the system chart and zoomed in to show what the agents had revealed so far.

"There's a space station in orbit around GF-128-T, as well as a small group of heavy cruisers and from what we heard, the facility itself has

several laser cannons that can fire at anything approaching the base from the sky. They managed to spot at least five of them, but there could be more. As for who'll be leading the team ...” Chando paused and looked back at Serra. She recognized that look. He was about to ask her to do it.

“I had a feeling I'd be the one leading the covert team,” she sighed, but she understood that she was the only person Chando would trust with this mission.

“How did you guess?” Chando's eyes twinkled.

“It was a hunch, really,” she replied, rolling her eyes. “Which brings us to the exit strategy. How do you intend to get us off the planet once we've managed to destroy the facility?”

He pursed his lips and stroked his goatee, then cleared his throat.

“That might prove to be difficult. I believe we'll be able to distract them long enough for you to penetrate their defences with the *Seraph's Wings*. It's small enough not to draw too much attention. I'm afraid that once you hit the surface, you'll be on your own,” Chando admitted and looked back at her uncomfortably.

She nodded at him. “So basically, you're sending your most loved one on a suicide mission?”

“Listen, Serra, I told you I wouldn't lie to you anymore. I've calculated our chances of success for this mission and they aren't looking good. But if we want to succeed, I'll need everyone to be where they fit best,” Chando tried to explain.

Serra shook her head in disbelief and sighed as her shoulders slumped. She looked her father deep in the eyes. When it all came down to it, was she still just some puppet to him? Was she more than that? Who in their right mind would ask this of the person they loved most, and for what?

“You're having doubts, aren't you? Serra, I'm as unsure about all of this as you are, but this might be the only chance we have. With each passing minute, they'll be growing stronger. We cannot allow this to happen. We have to right our wrongs!” Chando raised his voice as he spoke to her.

“*Our* wrongs?” Serra retorted as she pushed him away.

“All right, mine! I’m begging you, Serra. I need your help in this matter!”

Serra’s eyes became watery. Chando moved in to hug her. She struggled at first, but eventually stopped fighting and embraced him. She heard him sobbing softly. That was all she had truly needed him to do from the start – to open up and show some emotion. To show his honesty and love to her.

“I love you, dad ...” she whispered into his ear. Somehow, saying it felt right to her.

He trembled at the sound of the words that had just escaped her lips. Slowly, he looked back at her. His eyes were red and watery.

“You have no idea how much those words mean to me, dear,” he said, his voice shaking. “I’ll walk through hell and back for you.”

## Chapter 16 – Maiden Voyage

“There we go!” Nicol Wynn said as her brother switched on the *Sprite Darter’s* twin magicka engine. The large central tank that mixed both types of raw magicka from their respective sub-tanks filled up with equal amounts of Water and Earth magicka. Nicol stood at the other side of the large tank, monitoring the system readouts on several panels.

“All systems nominal!” Guid shouted excitedly through the engine room. This was the moment everyone had been waiting for. Rüz, Grummus and Xer’xis were on the second floor of engineering, where they could see everything the Wynn twins were doing through the transparent floor. Grummus was leaning on the railing to get a better look. The others present were the ship’s newly assigned crew members and a large amount of Alliance officials, as well as most of the team that had been working hard on the ship during the past months. The room was a bit too crowded for Rüz’ taste, but he understood the importance of this gathering. He was glad so many people had worked hard to build the ship they were about to fly into Zar’aranos space. It meant people still cared about the fate of the Alliance.

The engine’s main tank had filled up with the perfect mix of the two types of magicka after a few minutes. The large, swirling mass could be seen through the thick, transparent container.

“We have optimal magicka fusion rate!” both twins reported proudly.

A loud round of applause followed from all people present. The twins took a bow in concert, contented smiles smeared across their faces.

“Well done, bravo!” Admiral Xer’xis said and praised the twins for their hard work and ingenuity. He continued clapping as he stepped forward to the railing, right next to Grummus. The applause continued for half a minute; Grummus wondered if this clapping custom always took this long. There had only been a few occasions where he had wit-

nessed it and he had never quite understood it. He was glad it was over and he seized his clapping the moment he saw Xer'xis do so too.

"This ship is the first of its kind. It embodies the foundations upon which the Alliance was built in every conceivable way. It was put together by the Alliance's brightest and best, from various races and disciplines. Its new crew follows that same philosophy. Together we are stronger, together we will overcome whatever tries to attack us and our way of life," Xer'xis spoke, his chest puffed out. His gaze went across the entire room as he made his speech.

"Today, we stand at the dawn of a new time. I admit it: things are looking grim. Netherea is all but lost to us. The Empire has increased its military activity along the border. One thing is for sure: we cannot win a war on two fronts. However, we can prevent one if we play our cards right. The Shaedon threaten to destroy us not only through direct conflict with the Empire, but also from within. They play a game with us that has been rigged from the start."

Xer'xis paced along the railing. All eyes were fixed on him as he continued his speech inside the crowded engine room.

"Two can play that game. We will cheat if we must, but one thing we will no longer do. We will not be puppets in their twisted plans. Together we will stand united. Together we will persevere and this ship will be the instrument with which we will cut out the cancerous tumour. For the Alliance!"

Xer'xis pounded his right fist on his chest three times. A wild applause and salutes resounded off the metallic walls of the engine room.

"Now, it is my honour to bestow the title of Captain to Rüz Numera, Windmaster of the Ninth Circle," Xer'xis said after the applause had ceased. He walked up to Rüz and pinned the Captain's insignia on his uniform. All of the ship's crew members had been given an insignia, and although it wasn't really Rüz' style, the uniform looked great on him. Since the *Sprite Darter's* crew was expected to be on ground missions often, the designer of the uniforms had opted to go for an almost entirely black design, with teal details along the borders of the neck, sleeves and joints. The undershirt was midnight blue, but somehow

complemented the teal very well. The boots were made of black leather, similar to the belt around the waist.

“I thank you for this honour, Admiral Xer’xis Darane of the *Harbinger’s Resolve*,” Rüz replied as he looked at his insignia with pride. He looked back up at Xer’xis, who smiled at him for a brief moment. A roaring applause followed from the crowd. Xer’xis waited for it to die down before continuing.

“Wear this title with pride and respect. Your crew will be looking at you for guidance during your mission. Make sure you’re the leader you’d want to follow. We are all counting on your success,”

Xer’xis said. He smiled at Rüz uncomfortably and then turned to Grummus.

Xer’xis reached in his pocket and presented another insignia. He stepped forward gracefully to pin it on Grummus’ uniform. The young Earthmaster stood tall and proud as he received the title of Commander.

“Earthmaster Grummus, I hereby promote you to the rank of Commander, second in command of this fine vessel, the *Sprite Darter*,” Xer’xis stated loudly.

“You have my gratitude, Admiral Xer’xis,” Grummus replied as he bowed with his hands folded.

The crowd applauded once more. A broad smile appeared on Grummus’ face as he took in their reaction. He’d never seen most of these people before, but for some reason, they seemed to know him. It was an eerie sensation, but it also filled him with pride and perhaps even joy. He found it hard to describe.

“The rest of your crew were all handpicked by the Alliance Council and myself. We believe that this crew will have the best chance to succeed in your coming mission, but before you all head off into Empire space, we will be testing this fine vessel’s capabilities a little closer to home,” Xer’xis explained as he paced around the room again.

The Wynn twins had moved up to the second floor as well and were standing right next to Rüz and Grummus. They were assigned to be crew members as well – Chief Engineers, to be exact.

“You mean like a test drive, Admiral Xer’xis?” Guid asked for Nicol.

The Admiral twisted on his heels to face the twins. A twinkle appeared in his red eyes. He snapped his fingers. "Exactly!" he replied, pointing an enthusiastic finger into the air.

"It would seem prudent to test all of the ship's capabilities. We have already given this a great amount of thought, Admiral," Nicol said for Guid.

Xer'xis raised a curious eyebrow at the pair of Byndari standing in front of him. "I wanted to say I'm surprised, but you two seem to have planned far beyond building this ship. I'm curious as to what your plans are, though," Xer'xis said.

"Well, if we are to test the ship's systems, we believe the best destination to do so would be Sleeper Cell. It's the most heavily secured facility in Alliance space. If they can't detect us, we can only assume the Empire won't be able to either," Nicol explained for Guid.

Xer'xis pursed his lips and grunted thoughtfully. Then he shook his head.

"While I agree that Sleeper Cell's security is formidable, how would you feel about upping the ante?"

Slightly surprised by the Admiral's challenge, both twins looked at each other, then back at him. "We're afraid we don't understand what you are trying to say," they replied in concert.

"Surely Sleeper Cell is a good target for a test run, but there's no real danger. How about you take the *Sprite Darter* to Netherea? There's a real threat there and it would be good to get a status update on the planet," Xer'xis suggested.

The twins stared at each other again. It appeared as if they were discussing the idea through their mental link; their hands moved as if they were arguing in silence.

Guid looked back at Xer'xis and nodded at him. "We agree that this would be a great test, if our Captain agrees," Nicol said. Both twins looked up at Rüz, who was standing next to them.

"Very well, we accept the challenge!" he said confidently.

Another round of applause followed. Xer'xis smiled contently.

Grummus tried to read the dark man's facial expression. There was something odd about it, almost as if he was a bit too glad that they had

accepted the challenge for the *Sprite Darter's* maiden voyage, but he couldn't tell for sure. He would ask Ráz later.

\* \* \*

Shortly after all attendants to the ship's commissioning had left, the crew had taken some time to install themselves. Although they had been told to travel lightly and not bring too many personal belongings, there were still a few who had brought too much. Ráz had ordered security to instruct those individuals to leave some items behind, until they met their on-board luggage allowance. His new security crew had performed their job admirably.

"Captain on the bridge!" a Saridian ensign cried out as soon as Ráz stepped onto the bridge of the *Sprite Darter*. Every member of the bridge crew, including Grummus and the Wynn twins, turned towards the turbolift door and saluted him.

*Ráz looks fantastic in his new uniform*, Grummus thought, although he knew the Windmaster preferred wearing his traditional robes. Grummus himself felt quite comfortable in his own uniform. They had been individually tailored for every single member of the crew. It made him feel confident and it didn't feel restrictive to him at all.

The bridge of the *Sprite Darter* was of an oval design. The roof was slightly dome-shaped and featured several windows. Similar to the uniforms the crew was wearing, most of the bridge featured teal details, combined with black walls and a clean, white floor. At the front, a large viewscreen was installed that could easily be seen from anywhere on the bridge. Five metres away from it were three seats with computer panels in their armrests. The one in the middle was designated for the Captain of the ship, the one to the right of it for the Commander, and the left chair was where the helmsman was supposed to be seated. At the left and right side of the bridge, the walls were lined with monitors and two stations were present on each side. These positions were meant for the tactical officers on the left, an engineer and navigator on the right.

The back wall of the bridge led to two turbolifts, one on each end of the wall. The middle of the wall featured a doorway that led straight into the Captain's office.

"Everyone, at ease, please," Rüz requested. He noticed everyone loosening up a little. Grummus smiled at him. He felt grateful that the young Earthmaster was assigned to be his second in command. Even when they didn't always see eye to eye, Grummus was a good friend and he would trust him to do whatever it took to get things done. It was a quality he hoped every single member of this crew possessed, but that was something he'd have to find out during their first trip.

"Captain, we're happy to report that the *Darter* is functioning well within normal parameters. In fact, she's performing well above expectations!" Nicol said for Guid as both twins trotted forward to greet Rüz.

He nodded back at them. "I'm glad to hear it," he replied, not entirely sure how to continue. He circled around the bridge and inspected every station, shook hands with every member of the bridge crew to get introduced properly. At the helm was a young Saridion named Oline, who held the rank of ensign. The engineering station was manned by the Wynk twins. The tactical ops positions were taken by a broad-shouldered Kevar by the name of Gyn, who was somewhere in his mid-thirties, and a Veraan named Gurigeg. Rüz found it hard to see what gender the Veraan was, but he guessed male by the sound of his voice when they shook hands. The navigator was a lieutenant named Myrlana Solstrada, a very handsome Xoron woman. She knew that she was pleasing to look at, Rüz thought shortly after their brief introduction.

After introducing himself, Rüz ended up at his own chair. He examined the panels of the chair intently, trying to figure out what each button on the touch screens was supposed to do. The controls were very intuitive and self-explanatory.

"Is everything to your liking?" Guid asked for Nicol. The twins were standing right in front of Rüz with anticipating looks in their eyes.

Rüz nodded back at them with a broad smile. "The seats design is simple, yet comfortable, and I love the ease of the computer interface," he said.

They both looked at each other, smiled and turned their attention back to Răz as they hummed in agreement.

“Would you like to see your office?” Nicol asked for Guid as she pointed at the door at the back of the bridge.

“I would.”

“Please, allow us to show you,” the twins said in concert as they opened the door to the office.

Răz stepped through the door and suppressed the urge to gawk. The office was very neatly designed, spacious and comfortable. On the wall opposite the door was a large desk with a modern desk chair, with the same black and teal colour scheme as the ship’s interior. The desk itself was fitted with a large touch screen desktop, three holoscreens in a neat row and several drawers, as well as ports for data carriers and other devices.

On the left side of the office was a comfortable couch, capable of supporting three people. A small coffee table was positioned in front of it, with two large lounge chairs on the other side. The right wall featured a food replicator and several works of art, handpicked by the Wynn twins. Răz inspected them and found that the twins had done their research. The works were replicas of some of Răz’ favourite Xoron works. He turned to the twins after taking in the entire room.

“You’ve outdone yourselves,” Răz complimented.

Broad smiles appeared on their faces. “We are glad everything is to your liking, Captain,” Guid said for Nicol.

Răz shook his head. “Please, call me Răz when we’re in private.”

Both twins nodded at him. “All right, we will, Răz,” Nicol said for Guid.

“Is there anything else we can do for you? The ship and its crew are awaiting your orders!” Guid said for Nicol.

“You’re right, we should get going,” Răz agreed as he stepped behind his desk to inspect his workplace. The twins shuffled in front of the desk and looked up at him with anticipation.

“Yes?” Răz asked, frowning at them.

"Eh, shouldn't you give the order to the helmsman to get us moving?" Guid asked for Nicol.

Räz was suddenly hit by the realization that he was now in command, and he got up from his chair immediately.

"Of course, of course," he said, slightly taken aback. Although he'd had his fair share of commands, he had never been captain of a ship, and the people on his teams were usually independent and required little to no commanding. Räz stood up and tucked in his uniform's shirt. Even though it was custom made, it felt uncomfortable to him. He marched through the door and onto the bridge, the Wynk twins following suit.

As soon as Räz entered the bridge, he heard Oline shout: "Captain on the bridge!"

Räz shuddered. Was it going to be like this every single time? He decided to nip this thing in the bud.

"From now on, you will no longer announce my presence everywhere I go! Is that clear?" he demanded.

The young Saridion bowed her head. "Yes, sir," she replied obediently.

Grummus threw a disapproving glance at Räz. When Räz caught it, he realized that he could've gone about it differently.

"I'm sorry, ensign, my leadership style might be a bit different from what you're accustomed to. You don't have to salute me or use any of the other strict military customs. You may address me as Captain Räz, or Numera, whichever you're comfortable with. Other than that, everything's fine, all right?" Räz asked with a much softer tone of voice. Grummus nodded at him respectfully.

"Yes, Captain Numera, sir," Oline replied.

"Now let's take this ship for a spin! Ensign, please set course for Xoron space," Räz commanded as he sat down in his chair. He quickly called up some readouts from the ship's systems using the armrests' controls.

"Course laid in, sir," Oline announced from Räz' left. He looked at her anticipating blue face and smiled.

"Engage the engines!"

“Aye, sir!” she replied as she activated the ship’s engines.

“I suggest we engage the stealth drive, sir,” Gyn at tactical stated.

Räz nodded at him. “I agree, activate it as soon as possible. Let’s see how well it works.”

Gyn frantically pressed buttons at his station. A short moment later, the lights on the bridge dimmed slightly to indicate that the ship had gone into stealth mode.

“Captain, at our current speed and heading, we should be arriving at the Xoron border in approximately eight hours,” Myrlana stated from the navigational station.

Räz turned to face her and stroked his chin. “Very well, I’ll retreat to my office for a moment. Grummus, please accompany me. Nicol, Guid, you have the bridge,” Räz said as he got out of his chair.

“Understood, sir,” the Wynk twins replied in concert. Nicol took the captain’s chair while her brother seated himself in the commander’s chair.

Grummus stepped into the office after Räz.

“Please, have a seat,” Räz said. He gestured towards the couch and walked towards the replicator to get a drink.

Grummus admired the office for a moment and then sat down on the comfortable couch.

“Can I get you anything, Grummus?” Räz asked from the other side of the office.

“No thanks, I’m good. I still have the impression people are uncomfortable when they see me eat or drink,” Grummus replied. He looked at the stars outside the window. He still couldn’t believe that he was now a commander on a star ship. Five years ago, all he had wanted was to become an Earthmaster and save planets. Now he was doing exactly that, but it was nothing like what he had expected.

Räz returned with a cup of steaming hot herbal tea, put it down on the coffee table, and pulled up one of the chairs opposite the couch.

“I wanted to speak with you in private for a moment. To tell you how glad I am that we’re still working together,” Räz said. A friendly smile appeared on his face.

Grumus hummed agreeingly. "I think we make a good team, even if we disagree often."

"To be fair, I think that's exactly what makes us such a good team. You have a unique ability to make people see things differently. Make sure you never stop doing that, because I have a feeling things will become hard from here on out," Ráz said as he blew into his hot tea to cool it down a bit. He carefully took a sip.

"We have a lot of good people with us. I'm sure they'll all give a hundred percent to make our mission a success. As long as everyone keeps an eye out for each other, I'm sure we'll be just fine," Grumus said.

Ráz scoffed at him and shook his head. "I wish I had that same level of confidence, Grumus. Whenever I think about what the Shaedon are capable of doing, I'm wondering how we will ever be able to stop them ..." He looked down into his cup as his voice trailed off. When his gaze shifted back up, Grumus looked him in the eyes.

"Perhaps knowing how Netherea is doing will help you regain some hope. And if there's anyone who can stop the Shaedon, it's you! You proved that when we first met," Grumus tried, hoping to lift his friend's spirits a little. Memories of their encounter with the grotesquely mutated Langruff sprang to his mind. His own capabilities had only slowed the tentacled beast down, but without Ráz' newfound Luminar skills, they wouldn't have stood a chance against the Shaedon Merger.

Ráz grimaced as he reflected on their fight against his former colleague.

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of. I might be the only one who can actually destroy them, but I can't be everywhere at the same time. We don't even know what the Shaedon are truly capable of. I don't understand why Xer'xis keeps that Sha'hasra so close to him. She's all but destroyed Jessi's life and although she might not seem very threatening, she's still the enemy. How can he trust her to not kill more innocent people?" Ráz wiped his face with both hands.

*He looks tired,* Grumus thought. He pondered a moment before he spoke.

"Maybe Xer'xis wants to keep her close because she is the only one who speaks for the Shaedon? Those two seem to be playing a very com-

plicated game. Perhaps he hopes she will slip up and tell him more than she should? Who knows?" Grummus shrugged. His hypothesis was shoddy at best, but it was enough for Rüz.

"He's a smart man, but I believe Sha'hasra might be out of his league."

"She might be, but at least he's trying to win. That's what we should be doing as well. First, we check on Netherea, make sure we get as much intel as we can. Hopefully the state of the planet won't be too bad. Then we get to the Empire and reveal to the Emperor that he's being deceived by the Shaedon. We have to do this. We owe it to the Alliance, our people and ourselves."

Rüz snickered at his Scarowyn companion. He made it all seem so easy and simple.

Grummus snapped his fingers. "Oh, Rüz, I meant to ask you a question about Admiral Xer'xis," he said in his much more typical, cheery tone of voice.

"What about him?" Rüz asked, raising an eyebrow.

Grummus breathed in slowly. "Well, during the ship's commissioning, when Admiral Xer'xis asked us to go to Netherea instead of following the original plan, I thought he looked a bit too happy when we accepted the challenge. I was wondering if you had the same feeling about it, or was it just me?" Grummus asked insecurely.

Rüz gave him a ponderous look and tilted his head as he recollected the moment.

"Well, now that you mention it ... He did seem overly pleased with our acceptance, but I didn't think too much of it. I thought it was a better idea than bypassing Sleeper Cell's security. If we were caught by the facility, we could just explain our mission and be done with it. If we get caught now, the threat will be real. It's a much better test. But yes, the Admiral did seem a little bit too pleased."

Grummus nodded at his friend and smiled. "So it wasn't just me!" he said with relief. "Do you think it might have anything to do with his relationship with Sha'hasra?"

Rüz gazed out the window and shook his head.

"We can't really draw that conclusion, but it might. I suppose it doesn't really matter much right now. We're heading towards Netherea and we'll carry out our mission, regardless of Xer'xis' intent. Or Sha'hasra's. We don't know what we'll be facing there and that will be the real test," Rüz said.

Grummus could only agree; it wouldn't change their current course of action. He didn't even know what it would imply if their current mission was actually Sha'hasra's idea. Either way, he couldn't shake the feeling of unease about the way Xer'xis had smiled when Rüz had accepted their current mission. Grummus was pulled out of his train of thought when Rüz suddenly stood up from his chair.

"I suppose you're right, Rüz. If you don't mind, I'll go and check up on Miten now. He's been assigned as a recruit. He'll be protecting us when we leave the ship for ground missions. I wonder how he's been adjusting to his new situation," Grummus said.

"Of course, I don't think we have anything left to discuss anyway," Rüz responded. He took another sip of his tea as he got up and walked towards his desk.

Grummus rose from the couch. Just before he exited the office, he turned around.

"Is there anything else, Grummus?" Rüz asked from behind his desk.

"You forgot to dismiss me," Grummus teased.

"Right. Dismissed." Rüz waved him out of the room.

\* \* \*

The ship had a total of nine decks, which was quite a lot more than what Grummus was accustomed to. Deck eight held most of the crew quarters, a gym and training room. Prior to entering the lift, Grummus had asked where to find Miten. The computer had told him that he was currently located in the gym. After walking through a couple of corridors and passing several crew members, who all saluted him, he finally ended up at the door leading to the gym.

The room contained everything he expected, from free weights to fitness machines and pull-up bars. Only three crew members were currently working out. Miten and a human male turned their heads when the door opened. The Gald female didn't bother and kept running on a treadmill while listening to music on her headset. Miten waved as he noticed Grummus. The young Earthmaster waved back, giving him a friendly smile as he walked up to meet the Kevlar warrior.

"Just finishing this set of reps," Miten said as he continued doing pull-ups.

Grummus watched him perform the reps without breaking a sweat. He nodded at the Kevlar with respect when he finished the set.

"Impressive," Grummus said.

Miten's breathing had intensified and he took a few deep breaths before thanking Grummus.

"I need to stay on top of my game, you know. They said that, as a recruit, I'll be accompanying you on missions. I won't let you down, you have my word," Miten said.

Grummus frowned and wondered if the Kevlar wouldn't be blinded by his vow to protect them. Sure, it was nice to see that he was enthusiastic about guarding them with his life, but that didn't make him expendable.

"Look, Miten, maybe you're taking all of this a bit too seriously," Grummus said after a pause.

"What do you mean?" Miten asked, cocking his head.

"Well, I mean, it's nice that you take your job to protect us so seriously, but I don't want you to hurl yourself in front of us at the first opportunity you get. We are supposed to be a team. Even if you're here to protect us, I don't want you to be reckless about it, all right?" Grummus asked.

Miten glanced away, then looked back up at Grummus and nodded.

"Of course not, but if there ever might be a time when it is absolutely necessary, I won't hesitate to sacrifice myself for any of you. That is the way of the warrior! To die honourably in battle!" Miten's voice boomed through the room.

Grummus gave him a wry smile. He understood the Kevar culture quite a bit better after their visit to Kevar Prime, but that didn't mean their philosophies were always in line with his own.

"I hope you've learned that my philosophy is that we don't leave anyone behind. If we can survive without making any sacrifices, that will be the way we go about it. I hope you understand that," Grummus continued.

"Of course I do. As long as you understand that I won't hesitate to act if there really isn't any other solution."

Miten sighed. He had a troubled look on his face and Grummus could tell that he wanted to say something more, so he waited patiently for the feline to speak.

"Listen, after you saved my life, I knew that I would be exiled. That doesn't mean I should just abandon my way of life, my beliefs, my values. I hope you will respect that." Miten's nostrils flared shortly, as if some fire within him had been ignited.

Grummus grinned at him and folded his arms. "I understand. If there's anything I've learned over the past years, it's that you should always respect other people's customs, even if they don't entirely coincide with yours. I hope you'll see that my values are just as important as yours," Grummus said. He suddenly felt as if what he had just said sounded wiser than he gave himself credit for.

Miten looked Grummus in the eyes intently and gave him a curt nod.

"You have earned my respect, Earthmaster. It is an honour to serve you," he stated proudly. He used the standard Alliance salute and took a bow.

"Likewise, Miten. I'll let you get back to your training. I just wanted to make sure you're adjusting to your new situation and home," Grummus said. He returned the salute and turned around to head for the exit.

\* \* \*

Several hours later, Grummus was called to the bridge by the navigator. She had informed him that they had arrived in Xoron space and were

nearing their destination. He wasn't surprised to see Rüz already in his seat, staring anxiously at the viewscreen.

"What's our status?" Grummus inquired as he sat down in his chair.

"We'll be reaching our destination in less than an hour, sir," Myrlana told him from the navigational station.

"Long range. Scanners indicate. No ships. In the. Vicinity of. Nethere-rea," Gurigeg reported with his strange Veraan manner of speaking.

Both Grummus and Rüz looked at the Veraan and back at each other. Rüz frowned at Grummus.

"No ships?" Grummus muttered with an uneasy expression on his face.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Rüz replied.

"Hmm, they didn't use any ships during their attack either, but they had plenty of time to get their defences up. Why would they leave Netherea unguarded like this? And more importantly, why hasn't the Alliance bothered to take it back?" Grummus wondered.

Rüz stared at the viewscreen ponderously. His eyes widened suddenly.

"Actually, I think it makes perfect sense! No ships were detected during the invasion and their troops were all teleported to the surface somehow. They know we would never bombard the planet, it's the last thing we would do. What we don't know is what their defensive capabilities are on the planet," Rüz explained.

Grummus nodded in agreement. "Well, we're about to find out just how they spent their time on Netherea. Let's hope it's not as bad as we think it is," Grummus said. He looked at Rüz, who gave him a worried frown. It was very unlikely that the Shaedon would just leave Netherea as it was, but Grummus wasn't one to give up any time soon. As long as they were here, there was still some hope left.

"Are there any unusual readings from the planet surface?" Rüz inquired.

"There's not much we can tell with certainty at this distance, Captain, but the amount of life readings seems unusually low for a planet within the habitable zone of its solar system. Other than that, there's nothing

conclusive we can say," Gyn's voice rang through the bridge from his tactical station.

"No surprises there, really," Rüz concluded.

"So, once we're within range for a thorough scan, what should we do next?" Grummus asked.

Rüz looked down at the ground and gave the question some thought. He breathed in and exhaled loudly. He sounded frustrated and tired to Grummus.

"We were sent here only to check on the planet's status. That's exactly what we're going to do. There's nothing else we can do at the moment – not until we've taken care of the bigger threats," Rüz stated matter-of-factly.

He looked confident, but Grummus couldn't shake the feeling that Rüz was far from it. There were too many factors to keep track of at this point and if he had learned anything these past years, it was that the Shaedon had been planning their resurgence for ages, taking into account any factor that might cause their plan to fail. So far, it seemed like nothing could be done to change the ultimate outcome.

"I suppose you're right, there's no need to endanger the ship and our crew by taking any unnecessary risks," Grummus said.

As they came closer to Netherea, Myrlana reported that they were within short scanner range.

"Assuming a standard orbit," Oline added from her position at the helm.

"Please perform a standard scan of the planet, Lieutenant Gyn," Rüz ordered.

The large Kevar nodded and started up several scanning routines from his ops station. Gurigeg assisted him from his station. Their stations' screens lit up with several readouts of the planet.

"This is. Intriguing," Gurigeg muttered as he interpreted one of them.

"What is?" Rüz demanded, his voice raised.

"According to. These readings. There is. No significant. Change in. Seismic activity. Since the. Alliance's departure. From the. Planet," Gurigeg reported.

Both Rüz and Grummus looked at the amphibian humanoid with surprise.

“You mean to say that they’re just sitting on the planet, doing nothing?” Grummus inquired. He turned his head to face Rüz, who seemed to have the same question on his mind.

“According to these readouts, the amount of constructs on the planet has increased significantly. I’m getting hundreds of weapon readings. Supposedly surface-to-air cannons,” Gyn added to Gurigeg’s report.

“Supposedly?” Rüz asked.

“The energy readings suggest they are weaponry, but they do not match any known weapon designs, sir,” Gyn explained.

“So, they haven’t been idle during our absence after all ...” Rüz said, his voice trailing off as he looked at the viewscreen.

Grummus found it hard to read the Windmaster’s face. He knew that Rüz’ care for his home world was equal to that of his own, but the Xoron managed to keep his calm extremely well.

“Very well, finish the scans and take us back,” Rüz commanded. He stood up out of his chair and walked towards the back of the room.

“Aye, sir,” both officers said.

“Where are you going, Rüz?” Grummus asked as he got up as well, so he could face the Windmaster.

“To my office.”

Grummus nodded at him. It seemed that his friend was affected by this visit to his home world after all.

Rüz gazed out the window in his office that gave him the best view of Netherea. The planet looked just like he remembered. There was a certain duality to all of this. He felt glad that the planet had not deteriorated any further after they were forced to leave, but the build-up in the Shaedon’s defences worried him greatly. Even if they somehow managed to reveal the Shaedon’s deceit to the Empire, there was no telling if there was really any way to stop an armed conflict with them. A full-scale war was well within the possibilities, and if a war could be prevented, there was still the issue of reclaiming their home world. This seemed to be-

come harder by the minute. Time was running out for his people. For the Alliance.

Netherea was growing more distant as the *Sprite Darter* broke its orbit. Rüz pressed his right hand against the window.

“We’ll be back for you, I promise,” he muttered.

He stood in silence as he watched the planet become a distant blip.

\* \* \*

From within his office aboard the *Harbinger’s Resolve*, Xer’xis used his vidcom to contact Rüz over a secure channel. It took a while, but eventually the call was answered by the Windmaster. Xer’xis inhaled deeply.

“Captain,” Xer’xis said, making it sound almost like a question.

“Admiral Xer’xis, how can I be of service?”

Xer’xis knew that Rüz was well aware of what he wanted from him, but he played along.

“My sources tell me your ship just broke orbit around Netherea. I was curious about your findings,” Xer’xis said as he put the tips of his fingers together, his elbows resting comfortably on his armrests.

The look on Rüz’ face barely changed, but the Admiral could tell that the Windmaster wondered what those sources might be, exactly. It would remain a mystery to him, Xer’xis decided.

“It appears your sources are correct. We’ve finished scanning the planet. My officers are filing their reports – they should be ready by tomorrow morning,” Rüz said.

“Please, Rüz, let’s cut the official crap. Tell me, how is she holding up?” Xer’xis asked. His jaw clenched as he awaited the answer.

Rüz averted his gaze for a moment, took a breath and looked back at the vidcom. He sighed.

“Not well. There’s no real change in seismic activity according to the scanners, but the Shaedon are building heavy defences on the planet’s surface. It’s clear that they won’t just let us take our home back without a fight.”

Xer'xis banged his desk hard with two fists. "Damn it! Damn those fucking Shaedon!" he bellowed.

This was exactly what he had feared. If the Empire would not be stopped now, there might just be a war on two fronts and he knew that the Alliance would rather focus their attention on the Empire than re-taking Netherea. No one seemed to understand the implications of the destruction of the planet. It wouldn't just affect the Xoron people if the planet were to be destroyed, it would affect everyone, even the Empire.

Räz looked at the Admiral sternly through the vidcom screen. He had never seen Xer'xis lose his temper before. Xer'xis was glad to see that the Windmaster remained calm. He cleared his throat.

"Excuse my outburst, Räz," he said.

"I understand perfectly how you feel, sir," Räz said in return.

Xer'xis gave him a half smile. "At least now we know what we're up against. Thank you, Räz. We'll await your safe return. Xer'xis out."

He didn't bother waiting for Räz to reply and turned off his vidcom. He stared out of his office window and rested his face in his palms shortly.

"It is unlike you to lose your temper, Admiral," a distorted female voice commented from the corner of his office, where the couch was located.

"Is it? I'm tired ..."

"Was it just like I said it was?" Sha'hasra asked through her borrowed body.

"Pretty much. We'll have the reports by tomorrow morning," he replied, still looking out through the window.

Sha'hasra slipped next to him and caressed his cheek. Xer'xis grabbed the hand and stared into the dark pits in Jessi's face.

"A promise is a promise," Sha'hasra said as she studied the handsome Xoron standing in front of her.

A pained look was smeared on his face and he bowed his head.

"I'll give you some time alone now," she said.

He felt Jessi's body becoming unstable and broke her fall as the Shaedon released her control over her host.

## Chapter 17 – Coarse Correction

“You two, step away from the consoles, slowly ...” Vester ordered with a strangely distorted voice. Lerion looked to his side, only to find that Vyrex seemed to be in some kind of shock. His jaw had dropped and his smug look had vanished from his face, like a Gald who’d just lost his entire fortune in a bet. Lerion stepped away, making sure he kept facing Vester, whose eyes had gone all black.

“What’s the matter with you? Step away or I’ll blast your head off,” Vester snarled at Vyrex, who was still staring at him, completely perplexed.

“Let me try,” Lerion offered. Vester nodded at him impatiently.

Lerion walked up to his fellow Gald and slapped him in the face hard. It was enough to make the Assassin come to his senses.

“Ow, that hurt, you butt licker!” he shouted.

“I think we’d better move outta the way, pal,” Lerion said, cocking his head towards Vester. Vyrex looked at the feline humanoid and stepped away with Lerion.

“That’s better. Stay there, where I can see you two. And don’t try to do anything funny. I won’t hesitate to kill both of you if you try anything heroic,” Vester said as he got himself seated at the main console. Keeping his shotgun pointed towards them, he entered commands into the computer’s navigational systems with his free paw. The computer plotted a course, which was indicated by a progression bar that steadily filled up.

“Where are you taking us?” Lerion asked, hoping to get as much information as possible from his so-called arch nemesis.

“Back to base,” Vester replied. He turned the chair towards the pair of Gald.

Lerion wondered why Vyrex had frozen up. He had never seen the Assassin give any indication of fear or shock. He seemed to be all right now, however. Perhaps he was already figuring out a way to reverse

their situation. What if they'd be able to get a message to Emeron and Vladpoe? They would surely wonder why they altered their course.

"I probably don't have to ask ya, but you're aware our friends are in the ship right next to us, right?" Lerion asked.

"I am very well aware of that. Which is why you will pretend nothing happened. I'll let you get back to your places now."

"And what if we don't?" Lerion asked. He knew what the answer would be, in all likelihood.

"You have a choice. Either you cooperate and I'll spare your measly lives, or you don't and I'll kill both of you. The outcome will be the same to me either way."

"Just who are you?" Lerion asked.

"You may address me as Kha'hetra. I am a Collector for the Armada," the Shaedon spoke through her borrowed body.

"Collector of what?"

"Whatever is required. Enough questions. Contact your associate and inform him that you've altered course as per orders from the Alliance. If he asks why he wasn't informed, just talk your way out of it. I'm fairly sure you know how to do that," Kha'hetra said. She folded her arms as she leaned against the back wall of the room.

"I think it would be best if you hailed Emeron's ship, Vyrex," Lerion suggested.

Vyrex nodded and punched in the commands to contact their Windblade companion. A short moment passed before he answered the call. His face and Vladpoe's appeared on the viewscreen.

"Listen up, Emeron, we're altering course. I'm sending you the coordinates now," Vyrex said.

Emeron raised an eyebrow at the Assassin. "Is there any special reason we're headed there?"

"I just received new orders from the Council," Vyrex bluffed. For the untrained eye, it was hard to spot his people's ability to lie.

"Very well, adjusting course," Emeron responded as he punched in the course.

"Cool, we'll talk later. We were ordered to maintain radio silence until we reach our destination. Apollo out," Vyrex stated bluntly. He dis-

connected the vidcom without waiting for Emeron to acknowledge. The screen went black before returning to a standard view of space directly in front of the ship.

“Seems like you’re not entirely useless so far,” Kha’hetra commented as she strode forward in Vester’s body.

“So, what happens next?” Lerion asked as he fidgeted with his hat.

“You two make sure we get to our destination in one piece. After that, you’ll be free to go. It’s really quite simple. As long as I remain out of harm’s way, so will you. No more, no less,” Kha’hetra replied.

“What about Vester? He’s under your control, right?” Lerion looked into the possessed Kevar’s eyes, hoping to find a glimmer of the real Vester, but all he saw were the dark holes they had been replaced with.

“Why would you care? You hate him, if I’m not mistaken,” Kha’hetra retorted. She didn’t seem to understand his concern, Lerion thought. True enough, he didn’t like the Kevar, but knowing he’d ended up being Shaedon bait was something else. Asking more questions would no doubt aggravate the creature.

“Never mind, I was just curious,” he muttered. He pulled down his hat a little so Kha’hetra couldn’t look him in the eyes directly.

“What is it with you corporeals and your incessant questioning? Move aside, midgets,” she ordered. Vyrex stepped away swiftly and silently, giving way to the possessed Kevar so he could sit at the controls.

Lerion shrugged at Vyrex after they looked at each other briefly. Judging from the look in the Assassin’s eyes, he too had no idea how they could get out of this mess. The only thing they could do was wait and see what would happen once they made it to their destination.

\* \* \*

“You there! Can you land this thing?” Kha’hetra demanded. She pointed at Vyrex, who nodded five times in succession. With a smooth move, she rose from the chair to allow Vyrex to pilot the ship. He looked at the controls as if he’d forgotten how to fly his own ship.

“Well?” she snapped at him.

He looked up at the imposing figure standing next to him and trembled. A trickle of sweat ran down his brow.

"I think you broke him," Lerion said. He folded his arms and waited, wondering what she'd do next.

Kha'hetra looked at him and cocked her head backwards at the controls.

"You do it then! You're a pilot."

She pushed Vyrex from the chair hard. He crashed headfirst into the nearby wall. Lerion's jaw dropped in shock. He knew Vester's strength was tremendous, but it had seemed as if Vyrex was nothing but a rag doll.

"Gee whizz, there's no need to lose your temper like that. I can pilot this thing just fine," Lerion said as he got himself installed behind the controls. He glanced over them quickly and pressed the right ones to get them down to the planet.

"Eh, any specific place you want us to land?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at his captor.

She appeared next to him and looked at the planet's scan on the display. Since it was a planet unknown to the ship's computer, only a rough map could be generated.

Kha'hetra pointed a clawed finger at a small continent of the planet's northern hemisphere.

"There. Once we make it into the atmosphere, I'll guide you to the base," she ordered and took a seat next to him.

Lerion looked at the floor to his left. Vyrex was groaning, but he was conscious and had turned over to lie on his back.

"Are you okay, buddy?" Lerion asked. It was more out of politeness than real concern, but still, he felt obligated to ask.

"I'll be fine, thanks," his fellow Gald groaned as he got up.

"Better hold on tight, I'm taking this baby down!" Lerion shouted. He pressed a few buttons on the helm control panel and felt the ship pressing downwards. It wouldn't be long before they entered the planet's atmosphere.

The Assassin's scout ship broke through a thick layer of dark clouds. As soon as they were able to see the surface through the heavy downpour, it became quite clear to Lerion why they'd been brought here. Big, sprawling cities covered the small continent. They were approaching the coastal area, which seemed to be housing an enormous military base. At least a hundred warships were parked on the surface. Lerion could see most of them being loaded with smaller fighters, bombers and military personnel. The soldiers looked like ants from this distance, but with their current velocity, they rapidly became larger.

"Put us down over there," Kha'hetra ordered.

Lerion nodded at her as he altered their course. Emeron and Vladpoe were still on their tail as well. They probably had no clue what was going on, although he guessed that they probably knew something had to be off.

Kha'hetra opened a hailing frequency through the other control panel; a few moments later, an audio only connection had been established.

"Unidentified Alliance vessel, state your name and purpose. This planet is off-limits, you are trespassing," a dark raspy voice from the other side barked.

"We've flown all the way here and they've only detected us now? Talk about bad security," Lerion scoffed. His grin faded as soon as he looked into the eyes of the possessed Kevar.

"This is Kha'hetra, the Collector. I've confiscated these ships to collect my bounty. Authorization code Seven Three Alpha Dash One Nine Eight One. Confirm," Kha'hetra spoke loudly.

Silence followed, the kind Lerion had become accustomed to when reporting in for docking at stations. The static on the other side broke.

"This is Armada control, please dock your vessels at these coordinates. Will you require any assistance upon landing?" the flight controller asked.

"Have a squad of troops stand by, nothing else will be required. Kha'hetra out," she said impatiently.

“Confirmed, we shall have troops sent to your location on the double, ma’am. Control out,” the controller stated loudly, after which the connection was broken immediately.

Lerion opened a comm channel with Emeron’s ship and used it to send the coordinates to them, along with a short text message. Kha’hetra narrowed her eyes at him.

“What are you doing?”

“Just transferring the coordinates to the other ship,” Lerion lied smoothly.

She tightened her lips and raised a suspicious eyebrow. “Very well,” she muttered as she kept her gaze fixed on him.

“Get ready for touchdown!” Lerion shouted as he smoothly piloted the scout ship to its designated landing spot.

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The air outside penetrated Lerion’s nostrils. He crinkled his nose as he registered the pungent smell. It reminded him of some of the places on Saridia that had been heavily affected by the wars and subsequent pollution. He looked to his left and saw Vyrex showing a similar expression of disgust on his face. A large group was already waiting for them when they set foot outside their ships. Lerion recognized the reptilian humanoids to be Saranus, the dominant race of the Empire. They were large bipedal reptilian humanoids with dark green scales. The shape of the ridges on their skulls varied widely. Only the leader of the group seemed to have more elaborate ridges. Three large horns protruded from the top of his skull: one in the middle and two on the sides. A thick membrane connected them. His mouth was almost beak-like, unlike the others, who seemed to have a more regular-looking mouth. They all had a long tail that reached all the way to the ground. Two of them even had thick spikes on it, Lerion noticed.

All of them seemed to have the same black eyes as Vester did now. *Were they all possessed?* he wondered. Besides the group of five Saranus, there was a squad of seven polydrones accompanying them, all of them armed with combat rifles.

Emeron had parked his ship right next to theirs. He and Vladpoe looked shocked as they stepped out onto the platform. The squad of polydrones immediately pointed weapons at them. Their leader ordered them to drop their weapons and put their hands up. Lerion and Vyrex had already been disarmed by Kha'hetra prior to exiting the ship.

"Quite the display of hospitality," Emeron scoffed.

One of the polydrones punched him in the gut with the butt of his rifle. He flinched, despite his considerable strength and vitality.

"Next time, I won't be gentle," the polydrone stated coldly.

"I'll make sure to ... remember ..." Emeron wheezed.

"All right, listen up!" Kha'hetra shouted. "Remove this vessel's armour when I release control and bring him to our high security prison."

Lerion looked on in shock as he saw the enormous Kevlar's eyes turn back to normal. They rolled back in their sockets and Vester slumped to the ground with a resounding thud. The polydrone squad's leader turned around and marched up to the group of Saranus.

"Prepare a room for our guests," it ordered with a distorted voice. When it turned around, Lerion concluded that Kha'hetra had taken control of the polydrone now. *If they could truly do it this easily, how would they ever stand a chance?*

The foremost Saranus bowed deeply. "Of course, Mistress. We shall escort them to their quarters now. Will there be anything else?"

"I wish to speak with the Architect. Have one of your men prepare a secure channel for me. I'll be in my quarters for now," Kha'hetra said. She was already on her way toward a large tower directly in front of them.

"It shall be done, madam," the Saranus leader said as he once again bowed deeply.

"Suck up much?" Vyrex commented only loud enough for Lerion to hear, a half-grin painted on his face. Lerion looked at him and shook his head almost unnoticeably. Now was not a good time to make jokes.

The leader nodded at one of his subordinates; a sign that he was to ensure Kha'hetra's communication with the architect. The Saranus

bowed respectfully, turned on his heels and marched towards the same tower.

“Now, warmbloods, let’s get you to your quarters. Drones, escort them to level fifteen, then stand guard at the door until further notice,” the leader said. He motioned for the polydrones to get moving. They had already cuffed Vladpoe and Emeron. One of them did the same with Vyrex and Lerion, while the others kept their weapons fixed on the quartet.

\* \* \*

“Ouch, be careful!” Lerion growled as his cuffs came off. He nursed his wrists and gave the polydrone an angry eye. It didn’t seem to care if he felt any pain and returned a blank stare.

“Remain here. Someone will come for you soon. Any attempt to break free will result in serious injury or possibly death,” the newly assigned leader of the android squad stated impassively.

“Sure thing, pal,” Lerion said, giving it a wry smile. The only door leading out of the rectangular room slid open and the squad filed out. Lerion saw that two of them took their places right next to the door.

“There goes our exit strategy,” he commented to the others.

Emeron was rubbing his stomach. “How come you didn’t warn us of this?” he asked after he sat down at a nearby table. There were seven more chairs around it. From the looks of it, this was some sort of meeting room.

Several glasses and a large carafe of water sat on a platter in the middle of the table. Lerion stepped forward to pour himself a glass, keeping his eyes fixed on Emeron.

“We weren’t exactly in a position to do so. If you hadn’t noticed, we had that Shaedon controlling Vester aboard.”

Emeron frowned at him and shook his head in disbelief. “How did he even manage to get aboard your ship that fast? The transponder showed us that he was still quite a distance away in the other direction!”

Lerion shrugged and took a sip of the water, after smelling to check if it was really water.

"I dunno, those things are easily hackable. It could be that he, or she, whatever that Shaedon is, tricked us."

"Oh, she tricked us, all right!" Emeron's frustration was clearly audible. He groaned as he repositioned himself on the chair.

"It does not matter how she did it. What matters is, how do we get out of this precarious situation?" Vladpoe intervened. He was staring through the window. From this position, the view of the base and the distant city was quite breathtaking.

Lerion looked at him and cocked his head. "Hey, grandpa, you've had prior dealings with these Empire types, right? Can't you, like, call in a favour or something?"

Vladpoe turned around and gave him a warm smile, then shook his head.

"I wish it were that simple. When I travelled alone, all I ever ran into were a few lone scout ships and a couple of friendly souls who offered to give me a ride. I never came into contact with their military. Besides, two of us are Alliance officials. Surely, that will be reason enough to keep us locked away for a long time. They will have questions, and from what I gathered, the Empire does not shy away from torture when it comes to getting answers from the ones they captured," the old Scarowyn said. He seated himself at the table, opposite Emeron.

Lerion stroked his goatee ponderously and paced around the room. It was fairly dull, with gray floors and walls. The only things that truly stood out were the gleaming white table and chairs and a few pictures on the wall. The one that caught Lerion's eye was of a Saranus dressed in expensive clothing. *Emperor Zar'kiln, fourth incarnation*, the inscription beneath it read.

"Charming guy," he commented as he walked past it.

"That would be one of the Emperor's previous incarnations, a long time ago," Vladpoe said.

"You know much about Zar'aranos history, then?" Lerion asked. He took another sip of water as he studied the picture. *That's one ugly mug to look at*, he thought. He liked the sceptre he was holding, though.

"I figured it might be handy to know a few things. People tend to like you more if you know about their culture. Perhaps you should try it sometime," Vladpoe remarked.

"Are you implying anything there, old man?" Lerion retorted, but the Scarowyn's austere look told him that he wasn't impressed at all.

"Just giving you some friendly advice," he simply answered.

Lerion looked towards the exit and saw Vyrex standing at a nearby computer panel.

"What about you? Any bright ideas?"

Vyrex didn't answer and kept studying the panel with his hood up.

Lerion walked up next to him and poked him. "I asked you something," the smuggler said irritably.

"Shush, I'm trying to figure out how this thing works," Vyrex snapped at him.

Lerion looked over the Assassin's shoulder, but the display was in Zar'arani, a language he wasn't familiar with.

"You can read this shit?" Lerion asked.

Vyrex nodded. "I was required to take basic classes for this," he answered while pressing buttons.

"Are you sure? Because it looks like you have no clue what you're doing," Lerion said.

"Would you just shut up so I can think?" Vyrex shouted in Lerion's face. He grabbed the smuggler by the shirt with both hands and pushed him back.

Lerion brushed himself off, narrowed his eyes and pressed his lips together.

"Fine! You don't have to be such a little bitch about it," he hissed back.

"Looks like you two are getting along quite well," Emeron commented. He seemed to be feeling a bit better and had risen from the chair.

"As good as ever," Lerion said, still looking annoyed.

In the meantime, Vladpoe had shuffled up next to Vyrex, so he could read the display too. The Gald looked up at the old Scarowyn.

"What?" he asked, still sounding a bit hostile.

"I just came to offer my help. Perhaps we can make something of this together?"

Vyrex grumbled something unintelligible at him.

"Or, I could just leave you to it. You seem to be handling yourself quite well," Vladpoe said with his deep, unshakable voice.

"Fine, have a look already!" Vyrex blurted out. He stepped aside to allow Vladpoe to read what was on the screen. The wanderer's eyes flashed over the screen quickly. He shook his head with disappointment.

"This won't be of any help at all, I'm afraid."

"How come?" Lerion asked. He took another gulp from the glass of water and finished it.

"This is just a panel for the air conditioning and lights," Vladpoe said dryly.

"What? Ah ... Hahaha!" Lerion burst out in laughter. He pointed a mocking finger at Vyrex as he continued laughing hysterically at the Assassin. Both Emeron and Vladpoe had a hard time keeping their faces straight. Vyrex' nostrils flared and he folded his arms in chagrin.

"Oh come on, cheer up, pal," Lerion finally managed to say. His belly hurt. It had been quite some time since he laughed this hard at something so silly.

"I believe our best course of action would be to wait, then," Vladpoe concluded as he lowered himself onto a chair at the table again. The others all hummed their agreement.

"You think they are really preparing for war down there?" Lerion asked as he looked out at the base below.

"It sure doesn't look like they're preparing for a picnic," Emeron mumbled as he joined the smuggler at the window.

\* \* \*

The door slid open; a polydrone and a Saranus officer stepped inside.

"Gentlemen. Excuse the long wait," Kha'hetra said with mock politeness through her artificial body.

"Will you be all right, Collector?" the Saranus asked with a cold tone of voice.

Kha'hetra gave him the slightest of nods and waved him away. He nodded at her respectfully, twisted on his heels and marched out of the room. After the door slid closed, she shifted her attention to the party inside the room.

"Please, be seated. I've asked for the servants to fix you something to eat while we discuss some important matters," Kha'hetra said.

She gracefully walked towards the head of the table on the left side of the room and swept into a chair. The others followed her example, with Lerion and Vladpoe taking the positions closest to the Shaedon.

The door slid open once more and an amphibian-looking humanoid stepped through with a cart filled with food and beverages. Lerion inspected the creature's features and saw a slight resemblance to the Veraan, with some peculiar differences. For instance, the servant didn't seem to have a tail and her hands were webbed. She was also hunched over, as if she wasn't accustomed to standing on two feet.

"We have prepared some dishes that should please these warm-bloods," the Mandar servant explained as she put everything on the table. Her voice sounded strangely pleasant, Lerion thought. It had a melodic ring to it, much unlike the Saranus they had heard speaking.

The food seemed to be standard fare for people of the Alliance. There were sandwiches, fruit juice, a salad with assorted nuts and fruit and soup. The Empire had clearly done their homework.

Kha'hetra's metallic eyes followed the servant's every move as she placed each dish on the table. Once she was done, the Shaedon waited until she left the room with an empty cart. When the door closed, Kha'hetra opened her mouth.

"Please, you must be hungry," she said, gesturing for the party to dig in. Vyrex and Lerion didn't hesitate. Vyrex took a bowl of soup and a sandwich and seemingly tried to eat both at once. Lerion shoved a sandwich into his mouth almost whole. After some consideration, Emeron decided to have a bit of salad and a glass of juice to go with it, but he ate carefully. Vladpoe simply smiled at the Collector. She seemed to understand that he was not capable of nourishing himself in the same manner as the others.

"I would like to speak while you eat. First of all, I want you to know that you are not prisoners. Having said that, I was unsure what to do with the four of you. I've consulted with the Architect and he has ordered me to let you go. It is not what I would have done, but then again, I am not the Architect. I am merely a Collector," Kha'hetra said. There was the faintest trace of disappointment in her voice.

"The Architect?" Vladpoe asked, since he was the only one whose mouth was not stuffed. His thick, bushy eyebrows were raised at the Shaedon in anticipation of an answer.

A smile appeared on Kha'hetra's artificial face.

"I am surprised you have not heard of him before, Scarowyn," she answered, raising her eyebrows at him in a similar fashion.

"Have any of you?" Vladpoe asked, glancing at his fellows one by one. They all shook their heads.

"We're sorry. We mean no disrespect, but no one seems to ..." Vladpoe admitted, quickly averting his gaze.

"It is of no consequence. I have been ordered to let you go. On one condition, however."

"What would that be?" Lerion asked, having just finished his sandwich. He used a napkin to wipe some breadcrumbs from the corner of his mouth.

The Collector looked at the Gald smuggler intently and smiled. "Ah, the Gald, always on top of their business! Honestly, of all the races in the Alliance, you are the only ones I can appreciate," she said.

Lerion grinned back at her. "Thanks for the compliment."

"It wasn't meant to be one," she said flatly.

"I'll take it as one nonetheless, if ya don't mind."

She narrowed her eyes and lifted her chin at Lerion. "Do as you please, but I warn you, do not get on my bad side. You'd regret it."

Lerion gave her a half-smile and nodded, then folded his arms.

"What happens now? You mentioned a condition?" he asked, trying to get back to business.

"We will release you, but you will convey a simple, clear message to the Alliance," Kha'hetra stated as she stood up. She drifted in front of the window overlooking the base and city in the distance.

"You will head back to the Alliance Council and tell them that war is coming. Gald Prime will be the first world to fall."

The group at the table fell silent. They looked at one another with a mix of confusion, fear and uncertainty.

"So, you're staging the invasion from this planet, then?" Emeron spoke in a very formal tone. He got up from his seat as well and walked towards the window to look outside.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" Kha'hetra asked with audible pride.

Emeron swallowed hard. "That's not the word I would've used."

"Wait just one frickin' minute!" Vyrex shouted. "You're telling us that you are planning to attack Gald Prime?"

"Yes," Kha'hetra said impassively.

"And we're supposed to tell the Alliance Council?" Vyrex continued.

"Yes."

Vyrex looked about as puzzled as a Gald businessman who just heard that all the companies he had stocks in had gone bankrupt at the same time.

"Why?" he finally uttered.

"I do not question the Architect's orders," Kha'hetra answered immediately.

*In other words, she has no clue either,* Lerion thought.

"We'll inform the Council," Emeron said as he walked back to the table.

Vyrex shook his head in disbelief. "Why in blazes would you tell us? It would give us time to prepare our defences."

"Unless Glad Prime is not their primary target," Emeron muttered. Lerion thought the exact same thing. If they had learned anything, it was that the Shaedon were devious and could not be trusted.

"Oh, it is. This is not meant to be a threat, it is a promise," Kha'hetra said. She sounded so genuine that even if Lerion's ability to detect a good liar was functioning perfectly, he couldn't tell if she was telling the truth or not.

"Very well, then," Lerion said. He looked across the table at Vyrex. The Assassin nodded at him curtly.

"You have our word, Madam Collector," Vladpoe stated formally as he pushed himself up.

"Excellent. I will have you escorted back to your ships and you can leave," she said. The last word trailed off into a tinge of disappointment.

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"You really believe they're just going to let us go?" Vyrex asked. He fidgeted with his hidden blade, which had been returned to him after they had been taken back to their ships.

Lerion gave him a thoughtful frown and pursed his lips. "I dunno, man. It sure does seem like it," he said, hoping it would be of any comfort to the both of them. If anything, this whole ordeal had smelled fishy from the moment they were told they were free to go. Lerion fired up the engines of their ship from his panel at the helm and inspected the screen. Everything seemed to be in order. Their captors had even been so hospitable as to refuel their ships.

"All righty then. Let's get this baby off this rock!" the Gald said as he punched a few more commands into the helm interface.

"I still can't believe it," Vyrex said as he watched the viewscreen. He felt the ship lose contact with the ground as it ascended in a perfect vertical line.

\* \* \*

"Collector, I implore you, we can't let that Alliance scum leave! They'll betray our location to the enemy," the Saranus officer pleaded to the Shaedon. She gave him a deadly look. The reptilian humanoid understood that she was not impressed easily and immediately bowed his head.

"Forgive my insubordination," he said softly.

"Commander Grur'gesh," Kha'hetra retorted, "I am no more pleased with the Architect's decision than you are. However, we do not question him. If this is part of his grand design, then who are we to argue against it? Our personal feelings should be set aside."

Carefully, the large Saranus raised his scaly face and looked into the polydrone's black eyes, the only detail by which he could tell that he was talking to Kha'hetra. He could feel himself getting entranced by the utter blackness of the eyes he was staring into. A malicious grin was plastered on the artificial, leathery face of the polydrone.

"However ... the Architect did not order you not to take action against a pair of intruders ..." Kha'hetra said as she gazed through the window of her office. She could see the two small Alliance vessels getting ready for departure.

"I understand, Collector," Grur'gesh said, bowing his head. He rolled up his sleeve and used his wrist pad to contact the military base.

"Commander?" a voice on the other side asked.

"Shoot those two Alliance vessels down. Do not allow them to leave the planet."

## Chapter 18 – Calm before the Storm

“Lady and gentlemen, please meet Raphael. He’s an associate of mine who dabbles in the fields of intelligence and negotiations,” Serra said, waving the masked man inside the meeting room aboard Taniguchi Station. Philbin, Guilty Ember, Glowing Envy and Tyndra were seated at the large, round table. The Master Tinkerer’s goggles almost instantly switched between several spectra, Serra noticed. She wondered if the Saridian mastermind would notice he was actually meeting with Chando. If he did, she would have a word with him later.

“Well met, everyone. I’ve heard much about all of you. Especially you, Master Tinkerer. Our former employer held you in high regard,” Raphael said, his voice distorted by the vocoder built into his mask. He walked up to the enigmatic genius and greeted him in formal Saridion fashion, by slapping the back of his hand. Philbin frowned at him after returning the slap. He tilted his head a little to the right as he studied the masked human standing in front of him.

“What’s with the mask?” he asked bluntly.

Serra stepped in next to her associate and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Raphael’s delicate position makes it almost mandatory for him to conceal his face. If people would recognize him, he’d be a far easier target, would he not?” Serra replied before Raphael got a chance to say anything.

The man standing next to her nodded to confirm Serra’s statement. “Miss Gomez is correct. My job is best performed if no one knows what I look like. Surely someone as intelligent as yourself can agree with the precautions someone like me must take,” Raphael added.

Philbin pursed his lips contemplatively. “I suppose you’re right. I just find it odd that you would even conceal your face to your colleagues. That is all.”

“Very well, let me introduce you to the rest of the team. Right next to the Master Tinkerer is Guilty Ember,” Serra said as she gently pushed Raphael forward so he could properly greet the Kraut Forgemaster. Guilty stood up from the massive chair that supported his heavy environmental armour and towered well above both humans. He took a deep bow, which Raphael copied.

“Forgemaster, it is an honour to meet you,” Raphael said, folding his hands together.

“Is honour to meet friend of Gomez,” Guilty rumbled.

“This is Glowing Envy. He’s an apprentice to the Arlin over there, Tyndra Emberwing,” Serra said as she walked further along the table.

Like Guilty, Envy stood up. Although he wasn’t as large as Guilty, he still easily dwarfed both Serra and Raphael.

Envy took a bow similar to Guilty’s. Raphael followed the example.

“It is my fond wish that you’ll one day reach the same level of expertise as the Forgemaster,” he said in a respectful tone.

“That remains to be seen,” Tyndra interrupted before Envy could utter a word.

Raphael shifted his gaze towards her through his mask. “You seem sceptical?” he asked, although it sounded more like an observation.

“This young one has a long road ahead of him before he can measure up to someone like the Forgemaster here,” Tyndra said.

Raphael nodded understandingly at the large bird. “Then it will be up to you to ensure that he does, won’t it?”

Tyndra cocked her head at different angles towards him, as if she was trying to size him up.

“I see you have a way with words, human,” she responded. Serra didn’t know what to make of it. It wasn’t contempt, but it wasn’t very nice either.

“I suppose I can skip the formal introduction, then?” Serra asked as she moved forward.

“Any further formality at this point would be time wasted,” Tyndra answered briskly.

“As you wish,” Raphael said, nodding respectfully at the large, phoenix-like bird.

Both he and Serra sat down at the large table. Serra pressed a few buttons on its side, and a large holographic star chart materialized in the middle. The lights in the room dimmed to allow for a better view of the holographic image.

“This is Veraan space, close to the border with the Empire,” Raphael explained as he used a laser pointer to indicate a section of the map.

“And this,” he continued, “is where we will find the polydrone factory.”

He pointed at a planet on the other side of the nebula, in an area that seemed to overlap both Veraan and Zar’aranos space. The planet lit up as Raphael pointed at it, and with a few easy flicks on the command panel in front of him, Raphael zoomed in on the sector of space where it was located.

“This planet is known to the Alliance only by a silly coded designation, GF-128-T. We have decided to codename it ‘Bad Apple’. That way, if our friends are listening in on us, they won’t know what we’re talking about,” Raphael said as he stood up and circled the room.

Philbin snorted at him. “What makes you think they don’t already know what we’re trying to do? I mean, they really pulled the wool over your eyes before. They’re a whole lot smarter than you’re giving them credit for. Not smarter than me, of course, but still witty.”

“Of course, but using a codename is still better than using the Alliance’s designation. Surely you agree with that?”

“I guess,” Philbin said, sighing softly.

“Now, once we make it there, the first thing you will be doing is breaking away from the fleet and infiltrating the facility. You will be taking Serra’s ship. It’s small enough to get through undetected while the fleet is keeping the Empire’s defences busy.”

Philbin cleared his throat loudly.

“Yes, Master Tinkerer?”

“I don’t have to point out to you that if we are detected, we will be in a heap of shit, right?”

“We will do everything in our power to ensure that you won’t be –”

“How, exactly?” Philbin asked sceptically, folding his arms.

"We will fight them as close to the planet as possible. That way, the likelihood of your detection will be significantly smaller. And we will be able to provide suppressive fire. As soon as you are on the surface, the only thing you'll have to worry about is destroying the facility itself."

"Oh, is that all?"

"You have faced worse, if I recall correctly, Master Tinkerer," Raphael retorted. He folded his arms at the Saridion, who grinned at him.

"Human is correct. Faced worse," Guilty added. Philbin glanced sideways at the Kraut and grunted at him with annoyance.

"Perhaps, but seriously – is this the best plan you could come up with? We take a handful of ships across the border, make a half-assed attempt to infiltrate the polydrone factory, blow it up and get back home before supper? Hogwash, that's what this is!"

Slightly taken aback by the ingenious little man's outburst, Raphael stood in silence for a moment.

"Uh, did I break him?" Philbin asked, looking at Serra and pointing at Raphael.

"Hello?" he tried, waving a hand at Raphael.

"No, you didn't. I was merely thinking for a moment. I'll admit, parts of the plan could be subject to improvement."

"Parts of it? What about nearly all of it?" Philbin asked as he shrugged at the masked human next to him.

"Well, one of the main reasons why we brought you in here was so we could brainstorm about this mission."

"Yeah, how about you leave the thinking to someone who's actually capable of doing so?" Philbin scoffed.

"Rude," Guilty Ember said with a voice that betrayed vicarious shame.

The Master Tinkerer gave Raphael an oblivious look and frowned at the Kraut.

"Perhaps it would be a good idea if we leave the thinking to you two?" Raphael suggested.

Guilty looked at the human and nodded at him, rumbling his agreement.

“Will study maps. Devise strategy. Agreed, friend?” he asked, awaiting Philbin’s answer.

Philbin stroked his chin and pursed his lips. He gazed at the holographic projection in front of him and nodded.

“Yeah, we can deal with this. Just give us five minutes.”

“Very well, we shall leave you to it, then,” Serra said as she rose from her seat.

“Would you like us to assist?” Tyndra asked, tilting her head at the Forgemaster and Philbin.

“Help appreciated. Many insights from Arlin. Sharp minds,” Guilty said before his counterpart could deny the offered help.

Raphael cleared his throat, which caused the vocoder to create a strange, mechanical gurgling noise.

“We will be departing for Veraan space tomorrow morning at o’ six hundred hours. Make sure you’re on time,” he said on his way towards the exit. The door slid open as he neared it.

“Sure thing, boss man,” Philbin mocked. The masked human seemed to give him a suspicious look through his eye slits, but then turned away and marched out of the room, followed by Serra.

Serra grabbed Chando by the arm to stop him in his tracks.

“Wait,” she muttered.

He immediately halted and turned his masked face towards her. “What is it, my dear?” he asked. With the vocoder still active, the question sounded eerily alien.

She looked at his masked face, but averted her gaze towards the ground almost instantly. She pouted and frowned as she looked back up.

“Do you think he knows it’s you?”

Chando shrugged at her. “We’re talking about the Master Tinkerer. Of course he knows. Why else would he call me ‘boss man’ like that?” Chando replied, grabbing Serra by the hands and bringing them up close to his chest.

“Listen, my dear, it doesn’t matter if he knows. He won’t tell anyone. I’ll have a talk with him later to make sure he keeps his mouth shut.”

“All right,” she said, gently pulling her hands out of his grip.

“Now, I believe we both have a few matters to attend to before our departure tomorrow,” he said.

She gave him a wry smile and sighed.

“Yes, you’re right. I’ll see you later for dinner.”

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Captain Kayla Tailspin had ordered her helmsman to set course for Taniguchi Station II. At their current speed and heading, her ship *Libertalia* would arrive at their destination in no more than four standard Alliance hours. From that location, they would escort several freighter class ships to Veraan space, from where they would stage their assault in Empire space. She’d had her fair share of odd clients, but she had never expected to get hired by NanoTech Corporation for a high-risk mission like this one. The young Kevar woman stared through the window of her planning room. Her keen, emerald green eyes burned with a desire for combat. Under the starlight from the window, her gray and black striped fur had a healthy sheen. She scratched behind her right ear, which was pierced with five small rings in a row. How exactly her new employer had managed to get a hold of her remained largely unknown, but his money was good. In fact, he had already paid half of it up front; they would get the rest after the mission’s success. Failure was never an option for the crew of the *Libertalia*. The constant beeping of the vidcom pulled her from her train of thought. With a fluid motion, she pressed the button to answer. The transmission was audio-only, which was fine by her. That way she didn’t necessarily have to stay within the camera’s field of vision. She got up from her chair and slowly paced around the room as she answered.

“Tailspin here. What do you need?” she asked, blurting the words out fast.

“This is Raphael. I wanted to inform you that my team is currently going over the mission details. More specifically, the covert part where we will need to get a team on the planet to destroy the facility. I was wondering if you could transfer all the specs regarding your ship and

complement of fighters, bombers, et cetera,” the distorted voice from the other side requested.

Kayla pondered this for a moment. Sure, the human had been good for his money, but sharing all information about her ship was not something she was willing to do at a moment’s notice.

“Why should I share this information with you? You bought my services and that’s what you’ll get. Nothing more, nothing less,” Kayla stated bluntly.

A strange rasping sound came from the vidcom’s speaker.

“Miss Tailspin, our money has not bought your services, it has bought your cooperation, which is what we need right now. If you would be so kind as to share the information, my team would be able to devise a plan with a much greater chance of success. Every percentage we can get is one we will take at this point. Surely I don’t have to remind you that what we are about to do could have immense ramifications. We’re talking about an act of war against the Empire. Something that certainly won’t be taken lightly, considering the current tensions.”

“Wasn’t one of the reasons for hiring me so you would have a scapegoat if things went tits up?” Kayla responded sharply. She walked to the window of her planning room, leaned against the windowsill and watched the stars go by as her ship was flying at almost maximum velocity.

“Hiring mercenaries was the only way we could supplement what little combat ready ships we have at our disposal. NanoTech is not in the business of war, Miss Tailspin. Besides, I find your lack of faith slightly disturbing. The considerable donation you have received should be a testament to the trust I’ve placed in you and your crew. Now, will you send me the information I’ve requested?” Raphael asked, although it sounded more like an order to Kayla’s ears. It was something she had never become accustomed to. When she was being hired, her clients would usually leave her to her own devices. Most of them knew that was the best way, especially after they heard the tales of the mercenary captain’s troubled past.

“You make some valid points, *human*,” she said, emphasizing the last word. “I will honour your request. You’ll have the information within the

hour. Just remember that I will hunt you down to the ends of the galaxy if you decide to do anything dishonourable.”

Raphael seemed to consider his next words carefully, as it took him some time to speak again. If he wouldn't be put in his place, he'd probably walk all over her. That was something she was not going to allow.

“A wise decision. I would never do anything to dishonour our deal. I am a man of my word. You seem to cling to your people's code of honour quite well, for an outcast,” Raphael said.

Kayla's eyes narrowed to slits and her nostrils flared. She slowly counted to ten and felt her breathing slow down. She had probably insulted him, sure, but she had not expected a retort.

“Fine, it is settled. You'll have the ship's specs in a moment.”

“Thank you, Miss Tailspin. It's been a ... *pleasant* conversation.”

Kayla let out an exasperated sigh. How could this Raphael stay so polite after all that she had said? It was infuriating. Nevertheless, he had shown a level of tenacity similar to her own. She respected that.

“Always a pleasure, satisfying our clients. Tailspin out,” she said, disconnecting the connection before the human could reply. She slumped into the office chair at the desk and exhaled loudly. She couldn't wait to finally get into a good fight.

\* \* \*

“High Councillor, we have just received word from Raphael,” Zurâk announced as he barged into the Ninth Circle's leader's private office. His jaw dropped the moment he saw that she was not wearing her mask. She quickly covered her face, before he could get a decent look.

“You old fool! What were you thinking, entering my room without permission?” she hissed at him, reaching for the mask that lay on her desk.

The old Windmaster turned around, bowing his head in shame. He could hear her close the clasps on the mask.

“Turn around,” she ordered.

“Yes, ma'am,” Zurâk muttered as he approached her carefully, his head still bent down in a submissive manner.

“Well? Speak up!”

“You have my sincere apologies, High Councillor. The news I bring seemed urgent.”

“It better be,” Máraxi snapped. Her eyes narrowed, even through the slits in the mask. Zurâk offered her a datapad. She snatched it from his wrinkled hand, verified her identity with her thumbprint and scrolled through the text on its screen.

Zurâk waited patiently for her to finish and stood by in silence. He shuffled his feet nervously.

“It would seem that our human friend has hired guns,” Máraxi concluded after she finished reading the contents of the message.

The old Xoron furrowed his bushy brows at his superior. “Meaning what, exactly?” he asked carefully, hoping not to aggravate her any further.

Máraxi got up from her seat and slowly paced towards him.

“This whole ordeal about staging an attack on a supposed location of a polydrone factory ... It made me think. We lack numbers, and even if we have a force great enough, I have my doubts about all of this. What if this is just another one of the Shaedon’s ploys? What if we are just running into an elaborate trap?”

Zurâk’s frown grew as he listened to his leader. What happened to the fearless leader she had been? What other options did they have, but to fight?

“With all due respect, High Councillor, inaction will only lead us to defeat – even if this turns out to be a trap, as you suspect it does. If we don’t stand up for ourselves, the Shaedon will have already won.” The conviction in Zurâk’s voice was strong. He hadn’t come out of a coma only to find himself and his people lose against the biggest threat to their existence yet.

Máraxi exhaled loudly and put a hand on one of Zurâk’s broad shoulders. Even though he was quite old, he was still strong and limber.

“Perhaps you’re right. I am just wondering if I made the right choice. The tome our human benefactor has given us will bring us one step closer to unearthing the truth about the Prime Spell of Air, but it won’t

do us any good if the Ninth Circle lies in shambles after this ordeal,” Máraxi said.

Zurâk nodded at her understandingly. He gave her a warm smile and reached for her hand, which was still lying on his shoulder. She instinctively jerked her hand back before he could close his grasp on it. Zurâk looked into her blood red eyes, but she averted her gaze. He stroked his beard.

“What if ...” he started, after inhaling deeply, “What if I take the tomes with me? I have to agree that it would be very unwise to bring such valuable artefacts into a battle.”

“And where exactly would you take them?” Máraxi asked. She sounded intrigued by the offer.

Zurâk had been studying the new tome ever since it had been handed over to him. His findings thus far led him to believe that he had figured out the location of one more tome, which would bring the total amount in their possession to four. Three short of the entire collection, with one being taken from them.

“High Councillor, I believe it would be in the order’s best interest if I didn’t tell you where I would go. That way, the Shaedon would never be able to extract that information from anyone in the order,” Zurâk said, hoping his superior would understand.

“Except for you,” Máraxi stated coldly.

“Well, yes ... but surely you can see how this would benefit the entire Ninth Circle? I would become the sole guardian of our research.”

“Guardian, or liability?” the masked woman asked.

A broad smile appeared on Zurâk’s face. He could tell that Máraxi was thrown off guard. Although he couldn’t see her frown, he could tell by the look in her widened eyes.

“Now that is the High Councillor I remember!”

While she was not often susceptible to charm, Zurâk could tell that it had worked. She seemed to radiate with confidence.

“I am not going to send you out alone. There must be others to accompany you. Take all of the artefacts from the library deck. I will have a shuttle prepared for you.”

“You have my thanks, High Councillor,” Zurâk said, bowing deeply.

Just as he was turning around to leave, the masked leader grabbed his arm. Zurâk turned around and raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, ma’am?” he asked.

“I want you to contact me within three months after departure,” she ordered as she folded her arms.

“And what if that isn’t possible? I mean, we can’t be sure about anyone’s survival at this point,” Zurâk said.

“Then, by the Prophets, I pray there will be others to carry on what we have started,” Máraxi said gravely.

The old Windmaster nodded. “Three months it is.”

He turned around and stepped through the door. The hissing and subsequent soft thud of the automated door sounded to him like a stone lid being dragged in place over a sarcophagus.

\* \* \*

Serra and Chando stepped down the ramp of his shuttle. It was the first time Serra had ever set foot on a Xoron ship. Xoron designs had always been very sleek and fluid, and she was not surprised to see that the same could be said about the interior of the *Storm Crow’s* docking bay. The lighting inside was bright, and although the bay was spacious, its ceiling was not as high as those commonly seen in human ships. The walls also sloped inwardly, giving her the feeling that the upper decks were considerably larger than the docking bay.

They had docked alongside another shuttle, also of human design. Serra was surprised to see that the person emerging from the ship was a Kevlar woman in full body armour. She gave Serra a curt nod as their paths crossed to meet with the High Councillor of the Ninth Circle, Máraxi Wihara. Four guards circled around the Councillor, all clad in dark robes that had glyphs embroidered on them. Chando bowed deeply at the masked woman. He too wore his mask to hide his true identity. Serra felt a bit exposed, since she had not bothered to cover her face as well. The Kevlar removed her helmet to reveal a gray and black striped face. Her bright, emerald green eyes swiftly gave everyone a look over.

“What’s with the masks?” Kayla asked bluntly, before anyone got the chance to introduce themselves.

“And you are?” Máraxi demanded, her voice only slightly muffled by her mask.

Kayla lowered her head. Her tail seemed to copy her head’s downward motion. “Forgive my curiosity. I am Captain Kayla Tailspin. Mr. Raphael hired me and my crew to assist you with your current mission,” she said, slowly raising her head again.

“I was not informed we would be hiring mercenaries. You will explain yourself when we get to the meeting room, Raphael,” Máraxi said demandingly.

Chando bowed deeply again to show his respect to the leader of the Ninth Circle.

“I most certainly will, High Councillor,” he stated sincerely. The vocoder in his mask distorted his voice to the point where even Serra couldn’t recognize it to be Chando’s.

“Follow me,” Máraxi said.

The meeting room was located on the aft section of deck two, right beneath the High Councillor’s personal office. The back wall was almost a quarter of a circle and was lined with windows. A large, round table was located in the centre of the room. Its top was made of obsidian and gleamed under the soft light that filled the room with a near perfect amount of illumination. A total of ten very comfortable-looking chairs were placed around the table with an equal amount of space in between. The ceiling right above the table contained several holographic transmitters to allow presentations to be held. The guards had ushered everyone into the room. Two of them remained in front of the door leading in, while the other two took similar positions inside the meeting room. Serra found herself sitting opposite Chando, which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, but the seating arrangements almost felt as if Máraxi wanted to keep them from being in close contact with one another. Máraxi herself had taken a seat at the far end of the room, while Kayla was sitting right across from her, with her back towards the door. The High Councillor steepled her fingers.

“Now, Raphael, would you mind explaining what this mercenary is doing here?” she asked, tilting her head back slightly in anticipation of an answer.

“That would be fairly straightforward, ma’am. We’ve run several simulations for our upcoming mission, and although we only have an indication of what we will be facing, the outcome of the simulations showed us that our numbers would simply be insufficient. I decided to take action and hire one of the finest mercenaries I could find. One who is willing to take on such a high-risk mission. Miss Tailspin’s record is impressive, to say the least,” Chando explained, keeping his gaze fixed on Máraxi. Serra directed her gaze to the Kevlar Captain and noticed a slight change in her disposition. Chando’s flattery worked well on her, apparently.

“Very well,” Máraxi said after some consideration, “I would implore you to discuss such matters with me in the future. I do not like surprises, whether they are pleasant or otherwise.”

“Duly noted,” Chando said, bowing his head with respect.

“So, what’s with the masks?” Kayla chimed in again.

Serra looked to her left and noticed the High Councillor seemed displeased with the question, to say the least. She had folded her arms and sighed softly, but loud enough for everyone to catch it.

“There are certain positions an individual could find him or herself in that require a certain amount of discretion,” Chando said.

“Meaning what, exactly?” Kayla asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Meaning we have good reasons for remaining anonymous. That’s all you should know. Can we please drop this matter and continue to discuss business?” he asked with a sudden sternness.

Serra could tell that Kayla was nowhere near finished with the matter, but the mercenary captain nodded at him and gave him a forced smile. Perhaps it was some honour-related issue. Serra decided to make a mental note of it.

“Sure, fine,” Kayla answered, folding her arms to copy Máraxi’s body language.

“Good,” Chando said, sounding exasperated by the Kevar’s tenacity. From one of his jacket’s inner pockets, he retrieved a data carrier and held it up for everyone to see.

“This memory stick contains the plans for the strategy with the highest percentage of success. May I?” he asked.

Máraxi nodded and gestured for him to use the holographic generator. As soon as its contents were read by the computer, Máraxi engaged the holographic display and a star chart materialized above the obsidian table top.

Máraxi looked at the map that was now hovering slightly above the gleaming black table. She recognized the part of Veraan space almost instantly, the nebula being a key point of reference. Slightly before the edge of the nebula, but still within Veraan space were several coloured blips, which represented their ragtag fleet. She could only guess what the colours meant at this point, but she knew this would be explained later on. A dotted line running through the nebula and into Empire space indicated the flight path, that much was clear to her.

“Now that Captain Tailspin has joined our forces, we’ve had our best tactical minds devise a plan to ensure that a covert team will make it to the surface unharmed, at which point they will infiltrate the facility, place explosives and utterly destroy it,” Chando explained as he circled the room. He retrieved a small pointer device from his vest pocket and pointed at one of the planets in Empire space. The little animated blips moved through the nebula into Empire space, until they ended up near the target planet. The holographic projector zoomed in on the planet’s local space. There were several other blips hovering around the brownish globe.

“Our intel suggests that the planet is not heavily guarded, which seems quite odd, seeing as the factory is a great asset to our enemies,” Chando continued.

“Perhaps they are bluffing by making it seem like the planet is not heavily guarded?” Máraxi suggested, steepling her fingers again.

“Either that, or they are too arrogant to think that anyone would attack it at this point. Seeing as the Empire is currently increasing its

forces close to Gald Prime, it seems unlikely that anyone would be foolish enough to attempt a counterattack.”

“And there is still the matter of Netherea, which is occupying a lot of minds. The Shaedon know quite well that the Alliance can’t handle a war on two fronts. They really have us sitting between a rock and a hard place,” Serra pointed out.

Máraxi gave her an angry glare. She did not want to be reminded of the loss of their home world and what the Shaedon, and Sha’hasra specifically, had done to her a few years ago.

“Forgive me for bringing it up,” the human female said. She sounded genuine to Máraxi, who decided to only return the slightest of nods as a way of accepting the apology.

Chando zoomed in on the planet itself and the smaller, coloured blips took shape. Each shape corresponded to a specific type of ship, which he would hopefully explain later.

“We have thirty-two ships at our disposal, from a couple of cruisers to small one-man fighters. From what we know, the enemy has one small station in orbit around the planet, along with two heavy cruisers. They also have five to six patrols running through the system, consisting of about four or five larger scout vessels, similar in size to Kevar Manta Class ships. There is no indication of how many one-man vessels they have at their disposal, but an estimated calculation would put those at around fifty, taking into account the capacity for smaller vessels their station and cruisers are known to have.”

“Meaning they’ll outnumber us at least two to one?” Kayla asked. She was leaning forward with her hands on the table top, studying the chart.

“It would seem that way. Possibly even three to one, depending on how fast they can get reinforcements,” Chando said grimly.

Kayla’s eyes seemed to glimmer in the glow of the holographic projection. “I like a challenge,” she smirked.

Serra smiled at Kayla uncomfortably, her brow furrowed. “You seem confident about those odds,” the young woman said.

Kayla glanced sideways and nodded a few times. “With the amount of experience my men and I have, those Empire lizards will be no match

for us," Kayla boasted. She folded her arms and turned her gaze back to the star chart.

"Which is exactly why we've incorporated your lack of fear into our current strategy," Chando said. He pointed at a green ship, which belonged to their own fleet.

"This is the *Libertalia*. Now, I'll fast forward time a little, so you can see what I mean. Most of the ships of the fleet will remain within a Vic formation, with the exception of the *Libertalia*. While the remainder of the fleet provides suppressing fire, Kayla's ship will ram into the space station using its weaponized hull. Once you have rammed yourself inside, the remainder of the fleet will close in on the rest of the ships surrounding the station and deal with them one by one. During all of this, a lone ship will fly from the *Libertalia* down to the planet. That would be your ship, Serra. You will take the *Seraph's Wings* and head down to the surface with your covert team."

"And after we've rammed into this station?" Kayla asked Chando eagerly.

"I figured you'd be creative enough to figure out what you could do to cause as much mayhem as possible. In other words, it's a free-for-all from that point onward, as far as I'm concerned," he said.

"It'll be glorious!" Kayla exclaimed. She held a clenched fist in front of her face and grinned.

"We can't let the bloodlust of this *beast* jeopardize our entire operation!" Máraxi objected.

Kayla jumped out of her chair, her eyes flaring up at Máraxi. Chando turned towards Kayla and put up a hand to keep her from doing anything rash.

The Kevar clearly only had a yearning for battle. That was not how she intended to complete this operation. It would have to be swift and with minimal losses.

Chando shook his head at her and waved his hands in a comforting manner.

"Of course not, High Councillor. As I stated before, this simulation shows us the tactic with the highest percentage of success," he said.

His words did not comfort Máraxi at all. "I doubt it's the highest chance of success with a minimal amount of losses, is it?" she almost hissed.

"What would our losses be when compared to the millions or even billions of lives saved as a result of our efforts?" Chando retorted, shrugging at the masked Xoron.

"I see you understand the tenets of the Greater Good we hold dear, Raphael. That did not answer my question, however. If possible, I would like to get out of this with minimal casualties."

"As would I. As would anyone else in this room. Nothing is guaranteed, High Councillor. All I know is that we won't have much of a chance without your aid, and now would not be a good time to back out of our deal," Chando said, raising his voice slightly.

Máraxi could not believe what the human had just said to her. She knew they had a deal. She would not back out of it, but her concerns seemed to be brushed off as if they didn't matter.

"For your sake, I hope that was not meant to be a threat, human," Máraxi said, her voice lowered to a dark, foreboding tone. Her eyes burned into Raphael's. It wasn't fear she saw, but it was enough to know her point had come across.

"I did not ally myself with you to threaten you, High Councillor. We are merely pursuing the same goal, which is the destruction of a common foe. I would not ask you to go on a suicide mission. If you wish, I can have your people look at the plans that mine have come up with. Perhaps they can find some leeway and improve upon what I already found to be a sufficient tactic," Chando offered.

If there was anything she had learned so far about humans, it was that they were smooth talkers. She sincerely hoped that they would back up their words with action. If not, then she could always do the absolute minimum during the mission, as long as they'd survive to continue their own mission.

"I will take you up on that offer. If my people find anything worthwhile, I will make sure they share it with all of you," Máraxi said a lot more calmly than she had spoken up until now.

Chando bowed his head respectfully. "I'm glad we've come to an agreement," he said as he removed the memory stick from the table's data port. The image of the star chart flickered for a moment before dematerializing. The lighting in the room increased back to its normal, comfortable level. Chando walked up to the High Councillor and handed her the memory stick.

"There you go," he said, bowing slightly.

Máraxi returned the bow, knowing how much value humans gave to such notions of politeness.

"Thank you," she mumbled.

"There is still one question that remains," Serra remarked as she stood up from her chair.

"What would that be?" Chando asked.

"How do we get off the planet once we've destroyed the factory?"

The human female seemed to be concerned with the one subject her partner had not touched. Perhaps because she was going to be part of the team, Máraxi thought.

"That is a matter I will discuss with you and the rest of the team once we return to our ship," Chando insisted. The way it sounded to Máraxi, it seemed almost as if Raphael was her superior. It struck her as odd, since the woman was the CEO of NanoTech. Logic dictated that she should be superior. Why she would ever risk her neck to destroy the facility baffled Máraxi, but she felt like she was in no position to argue. This way, at least none of her own people would be at risk.

"Very well," Serra said, sighing loudly.

"It would seem that our meeting is adjourned then, High Councillor?" Chando asked politely.

"Indeed it would," Máraxi said.

"As soon as we're back on our ships, we'll set course for Veraan space. If all goes well, we should arrive there in three days. That should leave all of us with some time to review tactics and get some rest," Chando said.

## Chapter 19 – Distress Signal

“It won’t be long now before Rüz and his crew enter Empire space,” Xer’xis said to Jessi. The young Xoron woman looked at him with weary eyes. They were sitting on the large corner couch in Xer’xis’ personal office aboard the *Harbinger’s Resolve*.

“Do you really think sending him there will do us any good?” she asked, sounding as if she had already given up on everything.

“I don’t see any other viable options. We have to convince the Empire that they are being deceived by the Shaedon. It might be the only way to prevent this war. How much do you know about our plans? How much does Sha’hasra know?” Xer’xis asked carefully. He leaned closer to Jessi, so he could hold her hand to comfort her. At least, that’s what Jessi thought. He looked deep into her eyes, which had returned to their white hue, a sign that she was no longer being possessed. She couldn’t remember the last time. *How long had it been?*

“Sha’hasra doesn’t seem to care what I know and what I don’t. I see and hear everything while she controls me, but it feels as if I’m dreaming ... I’ve lost all sense of self, all sense of time ...”

Xer’xis gently wrapped his arm around her. It felt comforting, but at the same time, she knew that the time she was in control of her own faculties would be limited. After that, she would be reduced to a puppet again.

The Admiral seemed to be at a loss for words and just sat there, listening to her. She averted her gaze to the window and looked at the diamond-pocked darkness.

“Do you remember the promise you made?” she asked, her voice trembling.

Xer’xis nodded at her when she looked back at him.

“Of course. You should not give up hope just yet,” he tried, hoping Jessi wouldn’t want him to make good on the promise he made to her nearly five years ago.

"I only wanted to make sure you hadn't forgotten about it."

"I haven't, especially the part where I said I would do everything within my power to help you. Doctor Yarael is still researching the Shaedon. We're hoping he'll make a breakthrough in his studies soon," Xer'xis said with a comforting smile on his face.

Jessi smiled back at him, but only out of politeness. The thought of regaining her freedom was extremely appealing. At the same time, she had the feeling that perhaps this might just be the last time Sha'hasra would relinquish her control over her. In that case, there would never be an opportunity to ask the Admiral to end her life. Why should she want to live anyway? Her daughter had been killed, her spouse had long since abandoned her, most of her family were far away. She didn't know what, or whom, to care about anymore. Perhaps it was the fact that she had nothing left to live for that made her such a perfect host for the insidious ambassador of the Shaedon. Her eyes became watery, and before she knew it, she was crying uncontrollably. Tears ran over her cheeks and her breathing became erratic.

Xer'xis put his other arm around her and gently held the back of her head with his right hand. She put her arms around his waist and buried her head in his broad chest.

"Don't give up, Jessi. Everything is going to be okay," he whispered in her ear.

Once her crying had turned to a soft sobbing, she pushed herself away from Xer'xis' comforting hold. He wiped away her tears and held her angelically chiselled face in both of his big hands.

"Why?" she croaked. "Why? What have I got left to live for?" she repeated the question, after clearing her throat.

"There are people who still care for you. People who love you," he said, using all the persuasiveness he could muster.

She furrowed her brow and looked at him with desperation in her eyes. "Who does?"

"I do, Jessi," Xer'xis admitted quietly.

Her eyes widened with surprise. At the same time, she could feel her mind slipping away into the background. *No! Why now, you cursed parasitic bitch?*

“Playtime is over,” Sha’hasra taunted, with a malicious grin on her borrowed face.

\* \* \*

“Captain, we’ve just crossed the border. We’re now in Zar’aranos Empire space,” Oline reported from her seat at the helm.

Grummus turned his head towards his Xoron friend. The look on his face seemed to be somewhere between determination and anxiety. The tension aboard the bridge seemed to rise slightly. He could almost feel it.

“Sir, our stealth drive seems to be working admirably. There are three scout ships in the vicinity and none of them show any signs that would indicate they have detected us,” Gyn stated from his position at tactical.

“Good, let’s keep it that way. How long before we reach our destination?” Rüz asked, fixing his gaze upon Myrlana, who was tapping on her console screen frantically.

“By our current estimates, it’ll take nearly a week to get to Zar, not counting any detours we might have to take in case we run in something bigger than scout ships. That should become a whole lot more likely the further into Empire space we get,” the ship’s Navigator replied.

“All right, keep your eyes peeled for anything unusual,” Rüz ordered as he got up from his chair and walked up towards the large viewscreen. There was nothing but empty space in front of them.

Grummus furrowed his brow and stood up as well, then walked up to his friend.

“A week, huh? What are we supposed to do until then?”

Rüz glanced at him and shrugged. “All we can do. We wait.”

The young Earthmaster pouted his lips and looked at the floor. “Space travel sure is boring,” he muttered, loud enough for most of the bridge crew to hear. He could hear Oline and Myrlana snicker softly at his remark.

“Soon you might just yearn for these times, when nothing was happening, my friend,” Rüz said, patting the stringy Scarowyn on the shoul-

der. "I suggest you use this time to get yourself informed and rest as much as possible."

The newly appointed Captain walked towards the back of the bridge until he was standing in front of his office door.

"What are you going to do?" Grummus demanded to know.

"What I just told you to do," Râz answered as he stepped through the door into his office.

"Hmm, okay," Grummus said to no one in particular. He sauntered over to the navigational station and was greeted with a pleasant smile from Myrlana.

"Eh, so, what are you doing, Lieutenant?" the Earthmaster dubbed Commander asked curiously. He knew that the way he had just asked a subordinate a question probably wasn't what they were used to. Then again, it was the first time he was in command of a starship.

"I'd be happy to explain. Just grab a seat and I'll tell you all about this station's functions," Myrlana invited.

\* \* \*

Râz was startled by the intercom demanding his attention. He had been reading his former mentor and friend's research for the past hours. Zurâk had made some promising progress in their search for the remaining tomes that would ultimately lead them to the location of the Prime Spell of Air. He put the datapad aside and pressed the reply button to make the intercom's incessant beeping stop.

"Yes, Grummus?" he asked when he saw that the incoming call was from his floral companion.

"You'd better come down to the bridge, there's something of interest we've come across."

The tone with which Grummus spoke seemed to imply that whatever it was they had 'come across' had little or nothing to do with their current mission. Râz also realized that Grummus wouldn't call him if it wasn't remotely interesting, though. He rubbed his chin.

"I'm on my way," he replied.

"All right, see you in a second," Grummus said, disconnecting the transmission.

Grummus was already standing at the door to greet Rüz when he got out of his office. He was smiling broadly.

"So, what have you got for me?" Rüz asked. He almost immediately felt bad for the way it came out. It sounded as if he was doing something of the utmost importance.

"Well, eh, we've just come across a planet that has an Alliance distress signal coming from it," Grummus said, waving for Rüz to follow him.

"An Alliance distress signal?" Rüz asked, raising a curious eyebrow at his friend. He turned his head towards the viewscreen, which was displaying the planet they were now orbiting. As soon as Gyn opened his mouth, Rüz turned to face him.

"Not just any signal either, Captain. It's on a special Council-only frequency, most recently used by Alliance agents," Gyn stated from his position at ops.

"Exciting, isn't it?" Grummus exclaimed.

Rüz looked back at the screen and bent to inspect it more closely.

"What do we know about this planet?" he asked as he inspected the globe, which seemed to be a watery world with many small landmasses.

"This is one of the few we actually have a real name for. It's called Jaxxar. It's an archipelago type world littered with swamps, which makes it an ideal world for the Empire's races. It's not heavily populated, though, because of its relative distance to Zar, which seems to be a good thing for us," Myrlana explained from the navigational station. She used her computer to transfer several overlays to the viewscreen, providing all the additional information on the planet Rüz could want.

"Are there any patrols in the vicinity?" Rüz inquired as he continued studying the overlay data.

"Yes, there. Are four. Ships, two. Of which. Are orbiting. On the. Other side. Of the. Planet. We're in. Their blind. Spot as. It were. And still. Cloaked. Of course," Gurigeg said, while in turn adding several blips on the viewscreen; red deltas, each one indicating an Empire ship.

"Have we pinpointed the origin of the distress signal?"

"Yes, Captain. It seems to be coming from the northern hemisphere. We should be able to reach it safely, so we can investigate," Nicol said for Guid from their post at the engineering workstation.

Räz shook his head and waved his hand dismissively. "Not yet, I want to know what we're dealing with here. It could be a trap."

Grummus gave him a negatory hum. "We've already ruled out that possibility. I didn't think it'd be wise to disturb the captain of the ship until we were certain," the tall Scarowyn said, running his fingers through his strawy, blond hair.

Räz looked at him, then back at the screen for what seemed like an eternity.

*All right, so they're sure that this distress signal is legitimate, but we have no way of knowing what's down there. What if we're detected? We can't just risk the entire ship and crew to rescue some fellow Alliance members. Grummus will probably try to convince me otherwise, like he always seems to ...* Räz sighed and wiped his face with his right hand. "Let me guess, you're going to tell me why we should respond to this distress signal?" he asked tiredly.

A broad, friendly smile appeared on the Scarowyn's face. "Did I forget to mention that this particular signal is not only of Alliance, but also of Xoron origin?"

Räz' eyes widened at the mention of his own people's name. His face became the very portrait of chagrin. "Fine," he admitted, acknowledging the Scarowyn's devious method of luring him into staging a rescue mission.

Grummus clapped excitedly, which looked silly and unprofessional to Räz. He had to agree that this was an intriguing turn of events, though. What was a Xoron doing on an Empire-controlled planet?

"Can we get to the surface safely?" Räz asked, turning to face the Wynk twins.

"We believe we can establish a portal close to the origin of the distress signal. However, we would have to disengage our stealth drive during this time," Nicol explained through Guid.

"I'm not exposing us just so we can rescue one person," Rüz said dismissively.

"Actually, we've detected a Xoron and a Scarowyn lifeform near the signal's point of origin," Grummus said.

Rüz furrowed his brow at his Commander. "What? Why do you keep adding new information?"

"I don't know. It seemed you needed a little more convincing."

Rüz exhaled slowly and deeply. "How long would we need to get a team down there and cloak the ship again?"

"Twenty-eight seconds," Guid said.

"With our current position relative to the other ships, our chances of detection are less than three percent," Nicol added for Guid.

"Very well. Make all the necessary preparations. Grummus, Gyn, you're with me," Rüz ordered. The large Kevlar stepped away from his console. The Earthmaster shook his head and folded his arms.

"No, you should stay here. As Captain of the ship," he insisted.

"What now?" Rüz asked, widening his golden-white eyes in surprise.

"There will be a time later on when you can risk your life. Now is not that time."

"Are you serious? First you make sure I agree to this wild goose chase, and now you won't let me tag along?" Rüz' frustration and confusion were almost tangible. Everyone had gone silent as they watched the conversation between the Captain and Commander get more heated with each word.

"It's my duty as Commander to ensure the safety of the Captain. Don't worry, I'll bring back our friends in need. You can trust me," Grummus said, ending his sentence with as friendly a smile as he could muster.

Rüz directed his gaze towards the viewscreen and back at his friend.

"I'm sure you will. Better hurry up, before I change my mind and overrule you," Rüz said, giving the Scarowyn a teasing wink.

Grummus nodded at him with a glint of determination in his bright, green eyes.

"All right, Gyn, you're with me. Myrlana, contact Ensign Miten and order him to meet me in the portal room," Grummus commanded.

"Right on it, sir," Myrlana shouted from her station.

\* \* \*

The door swished open and Miten stepped into the portal room. His gaze was met by a large Kevar warrior, who looked at him with disgust and anger.

"What is this *Kajet no Ra'asha* filth doing here?" Gyn demanded. He spat on the ground.

"That's no way to speak to a fellow crew member," Grummus reprimanded him. He stepped in between both feline humanoids, who were baring their teeth at one another.

"He's no fellow of mine!" Gyn thundered, his tail swishing impatiently.

"I don't want any trouble. Let's just go to the planet's surface," Miten said, clearly in better control of his emotions than his fellow Kevar.

"Your disgrace to Ra'asha is sure to bring us great misfortune. I refuse to cooperate," Gyn hissed.

Grummus stepped within a few centimetres of the Kevar's face and stared unflinching into his glaring eyes.

"Lieutenant Commander!" he shouted, "On this ship, any past disgrace or indiscretion is disregarded. On this ship, we work towards a unified future for all species of the Alliance! Some of us may have joined for honour, while others have joined the crew to redeem themselves. Your personal opinions about the crew are of no concern to me. Miten is to be considered an equal. Is that clear?"

Gyn took a deep breath and blinked at Grummus. A sign of respect, Grummus had learned from his short visit to the Kevar home world.

"Yes, sir," the broad-shouldered man muttered.

"All right, that's better. Let's get going," Grummus said, checking his shoulder bag for everything he needed down on the surface. The most important item, his Earth Orb, was wrapped in a Silkwood leaf, big enough to cover it almost twice.

Contrary to the rest of the ship, the portal room hardly contained any advanced technology. A team of three Scarowyn Earthmasters, trained specifically in portal mastery, were standing in a circle around an erected portal, channelling magicka into it while drawing the raw elemental power from fresh soil in the room. The room's floor was covered with dirt from Wyngaya itself, which went almost two metres deep. Utilizing the ritual for portal creation, the Earthmasters were capable of erecting portals to nearby locations. *Nearby* being a very relative term, seeing as their current location was at least four hundred kilometres from where the portal led to.

"The portal is stable, Commander," said another Scarowyn ensign, whose job it was to ensure the stability of the portal and correct performance of the portal ritual.

Grummus nodded at him and put on his favourite hat. Although it was not customary for crew members to be allowed to wear headgear, Ráz and Grummus had decided that such rules were a bit too strict, and allowed crew members to incorporate some form of personal decoration to complement their standard uniform.

Grummus looked over his shoulder and saw Gyn staring at Miten.

"Are you two okay?" the Scarowyn Earthmaster asked.

Gyn nodded curtly. "Yes, we are. We shall see what this *Kajet* is worth in battle," he said gruffly.

Grummus raised an eyebrow at him. "You're expecting a fight down there?"

Gyn shrugged back at him indifferently. "We should be prepared for anything. We're in enemy territory. Ra'asha knows what we'll be running into down there. For all we know, the distress signal could be a trap."

Grummus tilted his head backward and shook it. "Nah, I don't think so. Why would they, if they don't even know any Alliance vessel is nearby? Doesn't make much sense to me."

"Gentlemen, please step through the portal," the ensign urged them.

"Of course. Sorry, Ensign," Grummus said, giving him an apologizing smile.

“We will reopen the portal as soon as we receive word from the Captain. May the Earth Mother guide you,” the young Scarowyn said as they stepped through the portal.

Grummus reached for his orb and stepped through, right onto the surface of Jaxxar.

With a crumbling noise, the portal withered and disappeared after both Kevlar passed through. The only visible evidence that remained was a small pile of clay and rock.

“Wow,” Miten uttered as he realized they had just stepped through a rift in space and time, and were now actually on the surface of the planet that he had seen on the vidcom a little earlier. It was a strange sensation, but it probably wasn’t the last time he would experience it.

Grummus smiled at him broadly. “You’ll get used to it. It’s not as bad as teleportation, from what I heard. You should ask Rüz – he was teleported countless times around that old temple where we first met. It was extremely unpleasant,” the Earthmaster said.

“Perhaps it would be best not to ask him about it, then,” Miten said in return.

“Yeah, perhaps you’re right.”

A flock of birds passing overhead alerted Miten for a moment.

“Perhaps you should consider lowering your voices,” Gyn whispered, his ears turning to follow the sound of the birds.

They all instinctively crouched. Gyn had already reached for his rifle and set it to a stun setting. Miten grabbed his blade and pistol, setting it to a mode similar to Gyn’s rifle. Grummus reached inside his bag and retrieved the green, glowing orb from it. He also took out a scanner, set to pick up the distress signal. Grummus fidgeted with the device and threw a glance at Gyn.

“We’re about half a kilometre away from the signal’s point of origin,” he said.

“Which direction do we need to go?” the Kevlar tactical officer asked softly.

Grummus pointed to the west. When Miten looked in the direction where the signal was coming from, he saw that there was no clear path, as they were in rugged, mountainous terrain.

“Looks like we’ll have to find a way around, somehow,” he said.

Trying to get their bearing, they walked towards a nearby ledge. Miten looked down and backed up as soon as he noticed just how high up they were. A small creek ran all the way at the bottom of the cliff. The way down was steep and littered with trees that somehow managed to take root in this rugged terrain. He turned his head towards the west, but all he could see was more mountains popping up on the horizon. At least the weather seemed to be fair.

“Let’s see if we can get any closer to our target,” Grummus said, putting a hand on the young Kevar’s shoulder.

Miten looked back at him and nodded. “With a little luck, there should be at least a natural path leading through here.”

Grummus hummed in agreement.

“Let’s back up, then,” Gyn suggested as he turned on his heels.

Miten had been correct about a natural path leading to the clearing where the portal had been erected, but it was narrow and seemed to follow an erratic course through the dense pine trees and other vegetation. It was a good thing Grummus was with them, he thought. The Scarowyn had used his natural talents to ‘ask’ the plants to move out of their way. It had felt very alien to him, to see the plants disentangle or bend sideways as they approached, only to return to their original position shortly after they had passed. It had made the passage a lot easier. Grummus had handed the scanner over to Gyn, who was directly behind the Scarowyn. Miten was last in line and watched their backs. Despite his earlier outburst, Gyn seemed to be fine with him now. He hoped that perhaps, one day, Gyn would at least tolerate him despite being *Kajet no Ra’asha*, but he understood the shame he had brought his people. Ultimately, Grummus had been responsible for him being alive, but he couldn’t blame him. He was very conflicted about his situation, but ultimately, he was glad to be alive and part of this mission.

Gyn suddenly stopped in his tracks; Miten could only barely manage not to bump into the considerably larger Kevar. The tactical officer raised his right fist to head level to indicate he had heard something.

"What is it?" Grummus whispered over his shoulder.

Gyn pressed a large, clawed finger to his mouth, made a shushing noise, and crouched down. He pointed to the right and motioned for the others to duck as well.

"I still can't see it," Grummus said softly.

"We've got company. There are two lizardmen over there," Gyn said, again pointing to where they were. Grummus squinted his eyes and let out a soft 'ah' when he noticed them.

"You think they're looking for our friends too?" Miten asked.

"I'm certain of it," Gyn growled, baring his large, pointed teeth.

"So, what do we do?" Grummus asked. There was something in the tone of his voice that made Miten realize that his Scarowyn friend wasn't quite as experienced as he had given him credit for.

Gyn studied the scanner's screen and turned his gaze back to the pair of Saranus in the distance.

"They're blocking our path. We're only a few hundred metres away from the signal. I suggest we sneak up and attack," the Kevar suggested. He tucked the scanner away and grabbed his rifle. After inspecting it and powering it up, he motioned for Grummus and Miten to follow him.

"You, take the left flank," Gyn ordered Miten. He cocked his head back and signalled for the young warrior to get moving.

"Commander, could you make the plants hold those men on my command?" Gyn asked with an expecting frown on his face. Grummus gave him a reassuring nod.

"Good. Wait for my signal," Gyn whispered over his shoulder as he stalked forward to his target.

A slight rustle of leaves betrayed Gyn and Miten's positions when they left, but after a few seconds Grummus couldn't tell where they were anymore. He was still crouched down, studying the two Saranus, who seemed to be just standing there. Grummus felt a little silly, just waiting. He realized he had completely forgotten to order Gyn not to kill anyone.

Since he had no prior dealings with the Kevar officer, he became aware of the fact that he had no idea what the large feline humanoid would do the moment he reached his target. At least his weapon had been set to a stun setting earlier. Another noise from the bushes. He squinted his eyes and spotted the Kevar. He was only a few metres away from the right-most Saranus. Did he signal? It certainly looked like it. Grummus drew magicka from the orb and gently 'asked' the plants to constrict both men. They looked at each other in shock as they were suddenly entangled by the nearby vegetation, but before they could scream for help, both Miten and Gyn leapt at them from the underbrush and disposed of them quickly. Miten signalled for Grummus to come out.

"There don't seem to be any more of them nearby," Gyn reported when Grummus was within earshot.

The young Earthmaster looked down to see the two Saranus soldiers unconscious on the forest floor. He let out a sigh of relief when he saw they were still breathing.

"Good work," he said, giving both men a respectful nod. They both returned the gesture, which Grummus had learned was all they required. No further compliments or pats on the back.

Gyn crouched down to inspect the bodies of both lizardmen. He took their weapons and handed one of them over to Miten.

"Can you keep them constricted?" Gyn asked, looking up at his superior officer.

"Only for a limited time. Long enough for us to be far away from them," Grummus replied, refocusing his energy to command the plants to constrict the pair. He turned around and caught a glimpse of Miten, who was admiring his handiwork with the vines.

"How much farther?" Grummus asked Gyn, who had already fired up the scanner.

"Less than a hundred metres in that direction," he answered ponderously. "Let's keep moving."

"I can see the edge of the tree line from here," Gyn said over his shoulder.

“Stay vigilant. There might be more Saranus around,” Grummus whispered. He could see the edge now as well.

Gyn took a position behind a tree, one of the last before the forest opened up in a large clearing. He peeked around the corner stealthily and gestured for Grummus and Miten to take up their positions next to him.

Grummus took a peek around the tree that he had chosen as cover. His jaw dropped when he saw a crashed vessel of Xoron design. It looked like it could accommodate three passengers, but even then it would probably be cramped. The entire port side of the ship’s hull had been blown away, but still the pilot had managed to make a crash landing. The fact that the ship was no longer smoking indicated that the crash had happened quite some time ago. There was no sign of its occupants either. Perhaps they were out, foraging for food? Or worse, captured by the Empire troops that seemed to be scouring the area for unwanted visitors.

“It looks clear to me,” Grummus said softly when he got back behind the tree. He looked to his left and then to his right to confirm that neither of his Kevlar companions saw anything either.

Miten shook his head at him. Gyn took another peek.

“It seems clear.”

“Let’s inspect the ship then,” Grummus ordered.

Gyn was the first to break cover and walk forward. He kept his weapon aimed in front of him, sweeping the area swiftly with his sharp gaze. He beckoned the others as soon as he was halfway towards the ship.

Grummus walked forward as stealthily as he could, but he felt as if he still had a lot to learn from his Kevlar peers. Their ability to move without sound was almost an art form. He couldn’t shake the feeling of being clumsy – an easy target, should any Saranus attack them.

Grummus gave Miten a sly wink as he slipped in next to him. He wasn’t sure if Miten understood that it had been a bit of a nervous tic.

Gyn was leaning with his back against the hull just left of the blast hole, his rifle pointing upward. He pointed to the other side of the hole.

Miten immediately took up a similar position, and Grummus followed his lead.

Gyn cocked his head around the corner and peeked inside. The cockpit had dug into a lot of dirt and seemed to be empty. The ship's windows were covered by a thick layer of earth and gravel. He motioned for Miten to take a look next. The young Kevar threw a glance inside. At the central room of the ship, he could see someone lying on the ground. He looked a bit like Răz, but he was wearing a torn azure outfit. His right leg was in splints and he seemed to be in poor health.

"And?" Gyn asked impatiently, but still with a hushed voice.

Miten moved back into position. "I think we found our Xoron. He looks hurt," he whispered.

Grummus cocked an eyebrow. "No sign of the Scarowyn the ship had detected?"

Miten shook his head at him. "Perhaps he's out foraging for water and food? It looks like they've been stranded here for some time. These burn marks are about three days old, according to my scanner," Gyn remarked, after which he clipped his scanner back onto his belt.

"Why don't you two check up on our injured friend? I'll wait out here. If his Scarowyn companion returns, he might want to see a friendly face. I'm not sure how he'd react to seeing a Kevar here," Grummus said, pleasantly surprised by his own reasoning.

Both Kevar men nodded at him in agreement. "You first," Gyn said with a hint of condescension.

"Sure," Miten answered flatly, and stepped inside the damaged vessel.

Emeron woke up to muffled voices. He wondered how much time had passed. He had been drifting in and out of consciousness for quite some time now. Vladpoe had been taking care of him ever since the crash. He had lost quite a lot of blood and his right leg was broken beyond the point where Vladpoe could simply heal it with his skills in magicka. The old Scarowyn had managed to stabilize him, at least. There had only been one time before when he had heard unfamiliar voices, but those

had been further away. He wasn't even sure if they had been real, or just part of some feverish delusion. The voices he heard now, they were real. He was absolutely sure of it. Vladpoe was nowhere in sight and he was just lying on the ground of the ship's central room, like a Xyranthian duck. He leaned on his elbows, so he could see his would-be attackers. A twinge of pain hit him in his side. He clenched his jaw and grunted, but at least now he was sitting with his back against the wall. A sigh of relief followed when he saw the plasma pistol lying to his right. At least the old man hadn't left him defenceless. He grabbed the weapon and felt another jolt of pain as he leaned forward. His grip on the pistol was firm and he aimed at the hole in the side of the ship. Surprise overcame him when he saw two large Kevar in uniforms enter the hallway leading to the room he was in.

"Who are you?" he croaked. A heavy coughing fit followed.

"We're here to help," the younger-looking one of the pair said.

"You're the one who activated the distress beacon?" his older peer asked.

A heavy frown appeared on Emeron's face. He couldn't remember activating a distress signal. If anyone had, it would have to be Vladpoe.

"Distress beacon?" Emeron asked, his voice sounding a lot clearer now.

"We were passing by when we caught a distress signal coming from this planet. Our Commander convinced the Captain to investigate, since the signal is of Xoron origin. My name is Gyn, by the way," the Kevar officer explained.

"I would get up and shake your hand, but as you can see, I'm in a bit of a situation here. My name is Emeron Vinran, Windblade of the Ninth Circle," Emeron said.

"My name is Miten," the young Kevar warrior said as he crouched next to Emeron. He put his shoulder under the Xoron's right arm to help him up. Leaning heavily on Miten for support, Emeron grunted as he lifted himself up.

"Well met, Miten," Emeron said, trying to manage a smile. It was just about the only thing he could muster, being in the amount of pain that he was.

"Our ship identified a Xoron and a Scarowyn lifeform. Was he with you?" Gyn inquired as he inspected the rest of the room more carefully.

Emeron nodded and coughed. "Please, get me to one of the seats," he asked.

Miten supported him and put him down in a seat. With a heavy sigh and a grunt of pain, the Xoron sat down and put his right arm over his chest.

"We picked the Scarowyn up on some other planet. He's a bit of an odd guy. Not unfriendly, just not your average Scarowyn. Apparently he's been drifting in Empire space for some time."

"We?" Gyn asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

A sudden realization hit Emeron. *What about Lerion and Vyrex? They must've managed to escape the missiles somehow. How else could the Kevar claim that their ship had only picked up a Xoron and Scarowyn lifeform during their scans?*

"Yes. There were actually four of us, but we travelled with two ships. The others must have been more successful than we were at dodging the missiles the Empire shot at us when we were *allowed* to leave," Emeron said, his voice sounding drier with every word he spoke. He felt parched and hungry.

Gyn walked towards him and offered him a bottle of water, which he had taken from a nearby cupboard. "Drink this."

"Much obliged," Emeron said, raising the bottle at Gyn. He took a few big gulps and exhaled.

"That's better," he said, then continued. "Anyway, the other two were Gald. They had their own ship as well. It was the Assassin's. Not necessarily faster than my ship, but the other guy is a very skilled pilot. He must've known some sort of trick for dodging the missiles they fired at us."

Gyn hummed. It sounded sceptical, as if he didn't share Emeron's faith in the piloting skills of a Gald.

"We didn't find any Gald life signs. Perhaps they did flee," he said, the words oozing with contempt.

"Any idea where your Scarowyn friend is?" Miten asked.

Emeron looked at him and pursed his lips, then shook his head.

“Afraid I have no clue. He’s been busy taking care of me. He can’t be far.”

Grummus was leaning against the side of the ship. Rays of midday sun shone through the branches of the pine trees and flooded his surroundings with a serene warmth. He pulled up his sleeves and let some of the light fall on his bare arms. Exhaling deeply, a sense of rejuvenation filled him. As swiftly as the feeling had come, it passed, with the knowledge that soon he’d be back on the *Sprite Darter*, back in the darkness and cold of space. He decided to cherish the short moment of silence, with only the birds twittering and the sound of insects buzzing around, making the best of the remainder of the day. A sudden rustling to his right alarmed him. He pulled his hat down a little to block the sun’s bright rays. A four-legged creature burst out of the bushes, into the open space. It turned around expectantly, wagging its tail and letting out a strange barking noise. Instinctively, Grummus reached for his orb and drew some magicka from it. More rustling came from the edge of the woods. The sound of light footfalls followed, and within seconds, a Scarowyn emerged. One with a large bushy beard and a pilgrim’s leather hat.

“Calm down, lassie, we’re back,” he said to the beast with a creaky, raspy voice. Enthusiastic grunts came from the strange creature. In many regards, it seemed to be the love baby of a carnivorous plant Grummus had often seen on Wyngaya mixed with one of the small predators he had seen on the Silver Plains.

An angry growl followed as soon as it spotted Grummus standing near the broken ship.

“Don’t worry. Shredna’s more bark than bite,” the old man said amiably.

“If you say so,” Grummus said. He couldn’t help but take a small step back when Shredna stepped forward, snarling lowly.

“Come on lass, that’s no way to treat our guest.” The Scarowyn patted the beast on the back and extended his hand to Grummus. After hesitating a short moment, Grummus shook it firmly and was surprised by the old man’s grip.

"It's a pleasure to meet a fellow Scarowyn! My name is Vladpoe Witherleaf and this is Shredna. She's been my companion for quite some time now," Vladpoe explained warmly, with a big, toothy smile.

"My name's Grummus. We came here to investigate a distress signal. The rest of my team is inside, speaking to your Xoron friend," Grummus said, pointing inside the ship as he spoke.

"Ah yes, we're in quite a pickle! I'm glad I have some technical knowledge. My friend Emeron is in a less favourable condition. I was surprised at how little injury I suffered myself, not to mention Shredna. She barely suffered a scratch! After we crashed, I used every trick in my book to stabilize Emeron. His leg is broken in a few places and beyond my capabilities to treat, I'm afraid. So I put his legs in splints, hoping he'd recover on his own."

"I think we should signal our ship that we've found you. We have a med bay on board. We can easily treat Emeron's wounds there. Not to mention that we're in Empire space ..."

Vladpoe frowned at Grummus. "What? Oh, yes, of course ..." he said distractedly.

"We ran into a couple of Saranus earlier. How did you manage to elude them all this time?" Grummus asked.

The frown on Vladpoe's face only grew larger after hearing the question. He shook his head.

"I have no idea, but if I'd met them, I'm sure I could have convinced them that I was merely travelling here. I've been in Empire space for a long time now. Some of them even know my name. You see, I'm a botanist. I collect plant samples and share my studies with both the Scarowyn Elder Council and a great friend of mine here in Empire space, Salomon Romana. He's the regent of Anugaris, one of the higher-ups of the Mandar. When I show them his letter of recommendation, they usually leave me be," Vladpoe explained as he reached inside a pocket to reveal an envelope.

"A real letter?" Grummus asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Vladpoe said in return, smiling gently.

Grummus shrugged at him. "I don't know, it seems old-fashioned. No offense intended," he corrected himself at the last second.

“None taken, lad. So while I may be able to save my hide from the likes of a Saranus soldier, I think all of you will have a much harder time convincing them not to capture or kill you. Shall we get moving?” Vladpoe suggested, gesturing for Grummus to enter the ship.

He nodded and walked in first, followed by the strange plant-dog and the old man.

\* \* \*

“Sir, we’ve just received an incoming transmission from the surface,” Myrlana stated loudly. She turned her face to Rüz, a glad smile appearing on her face.

“It’s the mission party. They’ve found the Xoron and Scarowyn near a crashed vessel. They’re requesting immediate evacuation. There are enemies in their surroundings,” she continued.

Giving her a curt nod, Rüz stood up from his chair. “Any change in the nearby ship’s movements?” he asked, turning to Gurigeg for an answer.

“Negative. They do. Not seem. To have. Detected us. There is. A good. Chance we. Can attempt. The same. Trick again. Without detection,” the amphibian humanoid answered with his croaky, stuttering manner of speaking.

“What’s your opinion, Wynn twins? Can we do this again? It sounds like we don’t really have a choice. I want our team out of there an hour ago.”

Both gave him ponderous looks, shortly after which they engaged in a heavy non-verbal debate with one another. After coming to a consensus, they turned to face Rüz again.

“The current position of one of the vessels in this sector is unfavourable. If we decloak the ship, there’s a forty-three percent chance of detection,” Guid spoke for Nicol.

Rüz grunted. He ran his right hand across his face and sighed. Staring at the viewscreen for a moment, he finally came to a decision.

“Detection does not necessarily mean we’ll have to engage in combat. If we cloak fast, we’ll have a good chance of getting away without any harm,” he reasoned.

“Captain, I do not mean to challenge your logic, but I must point out the fact that if we are detected and cloak, those ships will have a very legitimate reason to sound an alarm. It could jeopardize our mission,” Nicol said for Guid. Both twins waved their arms around to solidify their point.

Rüz pressed his lips together and exhaled through his nose audibly. He tilted his head towards the ceiling, closed his eyes and inhaled. *Why did I allow Grummus to go down to the surface on this rescue mission? If we are detected by the Empire ships, we could get into a lot of trouble. And for what? Two Alliance members, down on their luck?*

He opened his eyes again and looked at the Wynk twins intently.

“We need to get them out of there, or all of this will have been for nothing. Make the necessary preparations and make it as fast as possible,” Rüz ordered, getting back into his seat.

“Aye, sir!” the twins acknowledged in concert. They turned back to their stations and started working as fast as they could.

Myrlana opened a channel to the portal room at her station.

“Portal room, this is Lt. Solstrada. Please prepare a portal at the following coordinates. I’m transferring them to you as we speak.”

“This is the portal room, confirming coordinates. The portal can be materialized in about ten minutes. The Portal Masters require some time to prepare it,” the voice from the other side of the connection answered.

“Understood. Inform us when you’re ready. Solstrada out,” Myrlana stated clearly. She closed off the connection and turned to Rüz. After they made eye contact, he quickly looked down at the floor. *The captain doesn’t seem to be his confident self at the moment*, she thought.

“They should be ready soon, sir,” she said with a friendly smile on her face.

Rüz looked back up at her and nodded. “Let’s hope we didn’t make a mistake by sticking our necks out to help two strangers,” he muttered, his voice heavy with gloom.

“For the Greater Good,” the young Xoron woman tried, hoping to lift her captain’s spirit a little. She knew he was a firm believer in the Greater Good.

Räz gave her a wry smile and shook his head. “This hardly qualifies.” Myrlana cocked an eyebrow at him. “How so?”

“What we’re doing is investigating a distress signal that might very well be a trap. We’re risking this ship and its crew by exposing ourselves and sending out three men to search for two people we don’t even know. We have no idea of what value they might be to us. How would you say this contributes to the Greater Good, exactly? Because I don’t see it, Lieutenant,” Räz replied, sounding more agitated with each sentence.

“I’m sorry, sir, I was just trying to lighten the mood a little,” Myrlana murmured, bowing her head.

“I appreciate the attempt,” Räz said, his voice trailing off as he stared at the main viewscreen with a worrisome frown on his face.

“Sir, we’re standing by!” the comms officer in the portal room reported through Myrlana’s comm unit.

“Understood. Open the portal on my signal,” she said in return.

“We’re ready!” the Wynk twins stated in concert.

“Is the party on the surface ready?” Räz asked.

Myrlana turned towards him and nodded. “They are standing by,” she said.

“Disengage the cloak and materialize that portal on my mark. Three, two, one, mark!”

Myrlana turned towards her comm unit and ordered the portal room to begin the materialization procedure. At the same time, the Wynk twins disengaged the cloak.

“Any moment now ...” Myrlana said, crossing her fingers for good luck. A moment of silence followed, which seemed to drag on forever. Räz worried that Gurigeg would open his mouth to report bad news. Finally, Myrlana broke the silence.

“They’re safely aboard!” she exclaimed.

“Good, reengage the cloaking device!” Räz ordered the twins.

“Cloak has been activated!” Guid said.

Räz allowed himself to sigh with relief. He could feel the tension on the bridge subside.

“Ensign Oline, get us as far away from Jaxxar,” he stated.

“Aye, sir!” Oline replied, smiling at him.

Meanwhile, Gurigeg was going over the readings on his station’s monitor a few more times.

“Sir. It seems. Our presence. Has not. Gone. Unnoticed. The two. Ships on. The other. Side of. Jaxxar are. On an. Intercept. Course. They’re moving. In fast.”

## Chapter 20 – The Bold and the Feral

The late mid-afternoon sun shone its rays upon the shore of an island that Lerion had seen in the distance, through the windows of the tower they had been in not so long ago, and up close, when a missile hit their ship, blasting it right into the sea. He had tried everything he could, but malfunctioning stabilizers and a leaking, burning starboard engine had not helped. At least both of the ship's occupants had made it out alive and well. Lerion's clothes were drenched and the harsh winds on the shore made him shiver. His neighbour looked a little worse for wear too.

"Well, at least we didn't go down with the ship," Lerion commented as his gaze went over the vast ocean in front of them.

"Yeah, but we're still in hot water. Pun intended," Vyrex said, throwing him a sideways glance.

"Heh," was all that came as a reply.

Now that they were without a ship, stuck on an island full of hostiles, getting a ride away from this place seemed like an almost impossible task.

"So, you got any brilliant ideas?" Lerion asked, shrugging at the Assassin.

Vyrex rubbed his chin and rested his elbow in the palm of his other hand.

"I suggest we make camp. Looks like daylight's running out. There's probably some place a bit more sheltered nearby. We should hunt some wildlife for sustenance, but first, let's get a fire started. All we need is something to burn. Come," the Assassin said, patting Lerion on his shoulder.

Gathering wood had proved to be the least troublesome of tasks. As they had walked away from the coastline, they had entered an area littered with trees. There were some small rodents roaming the area as well. They had both taken some potshots at the creatures and hunted enough to fill their bellies. It had proven a lot more difficult than anticipated to

find a place out of sight and with relative shelter from the wind and rain, but eventually, they had run into an abandoned building, some distance away from the great walls that separated them from the military base. Most of the building's glass was shattered, but they managed to find a room on the first floor with the window still intact. It was perfect to rest after the crash and get themselves dry. Vyrex had used his skills with magicka to light the fire, which was now burning crisply. Both he and Lerion were sitting on the floor, the fire in between them.

"So, when we were crashing and you told me that I was no longer in the simulation?" Lerion mentioned as he stared over the flames, right at Vyrex.

"Hmm, what? Oh, yes, that," the Assassin replied absently, gazing into the fire. He rubbed his hands together and then extended them towards the flames.

"I knew that before we went into Empire space, ya know."

"So? Not like any of that matters now. I tried to use it to my advantage. There's nothing to gain from it anymore. Why are we discussing this, anyway?" Vyrex retorted, his nostrils flaring at his Gald counterpart.

"Well, mostly to let you know that I'm not as stupid as you think. Besides, now we're in the same boat. So it would seem that it's in both of our best interests if we're honest with each other."

Vyrex cocked an eyebrow at Lerion.

"Give me a break. Don't tell me you grew a conscience during the crash. We both know we can't trust each other fully. You'd stab me in the back for your freedom and I'd cut you down the moment I think you'll double-cross me," Vyrex said. He rose to his feet, took off his hooded jacket and hung it over a chair, close to the fire.

"Fair enough, but still, our first priority is to get off this rock and the only way we can achieve that is by working together. Right?" Lerion asked.

Vyrex wondered what the smuggler was trying to accomplish with this conversation, but he couldn't disagree. They would have to work together, but if there would ever come a point where he had to cut Prynn loose, he'd do it without hesitation.

"You're right. Even I can't do this alone. Besides, you're one heck of a pilot," Vyrex said. He spat on his hand and extended it to Lerion, who did the exact same thing. They shook firmly for three seconds, then released their grip.

"I'd give you a compliment too, but I can't think of anything," Lerion joked with a sly grin on his face.

Vyrex' eyes flared at him. "Really? Is this how you're going to play it now?"

"Oh, you made the fire with your magic thing. That was pretty good," the smuggler replied, waving his hand in a commending fashion at the crisply burning pile of wood.

Vyrex took a skinning knife from one of his jacket's inner pockets and picked up one of the rodents they had hunted earlier. He skilfully skinned and gutted the creature, skewered it with one of the sticks they had gathered, then handed it to Lerion.

"Thanks," he said, holding the stick above the fire to roast the meat.

"We should wait for nightfall and then infiltrate that base. See if we can hijack a ship," Vyrex said, while skinning another one of the rodents.

"I don't think they're looking for us anymore. That should help a little."

"We still can't just barge in there. We're probably the only Gald on this planet," Vyrex said. He held the rodent he had just finished skinning above the fire to roast it as well.

"You're a master infiltrator. I've done my fair share of sneaking around. We'll manage. All we gotta do is find a weak spot in that wall. Their ships are right on the other side. From what I've seen, there aren't many patrols either. They sure didn't look like they were expecting any hostile activity," Lerion said, sharing everything he had observed during their stay in the tower.

"You think you can fly their ships?" Vyrex asked sceptically. He took the roasted rodent away from the fire, blew on the meat and gnawed on it.

"I don't see how their controls could be so much different from anything else I've flown. Only problem I see is that I can't read their language, but I'm sure you can help there," Lerion said. He took a bite from his meat as well.

“Very funny, Prynn,” Vyrex said, stripping some more meat off the roasted animal with his bare teeth.

“The plan seems simple enough. All that remains is finishing our meal, getting a bit more warmed up and wait for nightfall.”

\* \* \*

The darkness was fading away from Vester’s mind. He opened his eyes, still feeling woozy. It didn’t come as much of a surprise to him that he was hanging by his arms and legs, suspended about half a metre above the floor. He could barely feel his arms. Quite some time must have passed since he was placed here like this. The lighting in the room was set to a minimal setting, and he could tell there was a force field erected not far from him. The tell-tale crackling of the nearby air gave away that much. He sniffed the air, but there was barely any smell he could detect. The cell was almost sterile.

“Vester ...” his name resonated through the room, or was it inside his head? He shook his head in an attempt to clear his mind.

“Where are you?” the words came out dry and soft. His throat felt as if it were made of sandpaper. How long had it been since he’d had anything to drink? The thought of fresh water filled his mind.

The sound of muffled footsteps came closer, until he could finally see someone appear in front of him. His eyes widened when he saw an android in front of the force field, inspecting his features with its artificial, black eyes.

“My dear Vester ...” Kha’hetra said through her metallic host.

Vester cleared his throat. “Who are you?” he demanded.

The android tilted its head at him and folded its arms. “Oh, you don’t recognize me in this form? It’s me, your friend, Kha’hetra,” she said with a malicious grin on her face.

Vester collected what strength he had left and thrashed in his chains as hard as he could, his eyes burning with rage.

“Spare your strength. Those shackles are made of elementium. I don’t think even you could break those. In fact, I’m sure,” the Shaedon stated in a calm manner.

"You've taken everything from me! What more could you possibly want?" Vester screamed in desperation.

Their eyes met and Vester felt a chill run down his spine. The cold, calculating look in the polydrone's eyes was enough to make the great feline shudder in fear.

Kha'hetra pressed the button left of the cell door. The force field dissipated and she stepped forward, looking at him intently until their faces were only a few centimetres apart.

"You do remember the choice I gave you?" she whispered, holding his head between her two artificial hands.

Vester spat in the android's face and hissed, baring his large teeth. Kha'hetra wiped the spit from her face and shook her head disapprovingly.

"Defiant until the last moment. I like that," she mocked.

"If you're going to kill me, why don't you just get it over with?"

Kha'hetra shrugged at him.

"I once read that cats like to play with their prey. Why kill it when you can have so much fun, giving it a little ray of hope when you know there is none? Surely you can identify with that? If I recall correctly, you did something similar to that Gald, Prynn. On multiple occasions. I don't see how this situation is any different. Do you?"

Again, Vester shuddered as he gazed into the nothingness of the polydrone's eyes. Why would she prolong his suffering like this? She did have a point. He couldn't deny that he had similarly enjoyed being in a position of power over his foes. Was this all just some kind of lesson? What purpose did it serve? He would end up dead soon enough. Broken and battered. Tattered and torn.

"Do you?" Kha'hetra shouted in his face, her voice resounding through the entire room.

Vester shuddered. A sudden rush filled him, clearing his mind as the adrenaline kicked in.

"Just end it already!"

The android's artificial eyes widened and Kha'hetra let out a mad cackle. After catching her breath, she opened her mouth again.

“Oh, my little kitty, this is not the end for you. This is just the beginning!”

Kha'hetra turned away from him, punching in a few buttons on a nearby console. The release of the shackles caused Vester to fall flat on his face on the hard floor. All of the air was knocked out of his lungs. He turned over, gasping for breath. The polydrone stood over him, grinning. His eyes widened as he saw it drop to the ground like a lifeless puppet. Silence followed. He turned over and pushed himself up. Cautiously, he approached the seemingly deactivated mechanical man. He poked it with a clawed finger. It didn't respond. Again he tried, with the same result.

*Vester*, he heard the same voice say, but this time it seemed to come from inside his head. A stinging sensation at the back of his head forced him down on his knees.

*Don't worry ... soon we shall be as one ...* The same voice flooded his head. A darkness swept his mind and he screamed in the purest agony he had ever felt. As if he was being torn to shreds. As if the essence of his being was picked clean, piece by piece.

\* \* \*

Soon after the last rays of sunlight had graced the shore area, Vyrex and Lerion had put out their fire and left the abandoned building to find a weakness in the military base's perimeter. The walls surrounding it were at least twenty metres high and with the exception of a large gate, they had not found a suitable entrance yet. Hugging the wall, they were now following it southward, in hope of finding a possible weakness. A corner was coming up in the distance, which featured a watchtower-like extension. It was their best hope of gaining entry. The only sounds they heard were the occasional vehicle from the other side and the crashing waves in the distance.

“Man, this wall just keeps going and going without so much as a ledge to climb on,” Vyrex complained quietly as they trudged forward through the muddy sand surrounding the walls on their side.

"There's gotta be some place we can get easy access. If that's not the case, maybe we should sneak onto one of the vehicles leaving the base from one of the entrances?"

Vyrex hummed ponderously at Lerion's suggestion and nodded.

"That's not a half bad idea, actually. Provided we don't find an easy way over this wall."

"I highly doubt it. It doesn't seem like the walls are going to be any different at that tower intersection," Lerion said, squinting his eyes in hopes of getting a clearer view of the wall in the distance. The lack of light didn't help much in that regard either. He sighed and picked up the pace.

"Looks like you were right, Prynn," Vyrex said, sighing as he looked all the way up the tower. The only visible entry point was a window near the top, way out of reach for them. If only he had brought a grappling hook, then they wouldn't have had this kind of trouble, Vyrex thought. Sadly, most of his gear had been lost along with his ship. He softly cursed himself for allowing himself to get dragged into this situation.

Lerion poked him and pointed at an opening in the wall, not far from their current position.

"Look, there's plenty of traffic there. If we're smart, we can use that entrance to sneak inside. What do you reckon?" he asked with a glint of mischief in his eyes.

Vyrex studied the gate for a while and he had to agree with the smuggler. There were hover trucks moving in and out of the compound through that gate every minute, and given the fact that the Empire didn't seem to bother with active patrols or guards everywhere, it would probably be a breeze to sneak inside without detection. The only thing that made it harder was the fact that he wasn't alone. He knew Prynn could handle himself, but he had no idea how skilled the smuggler was at sneaking around. He raised a questioning eyebrow at his Gald companion.

"You think you can handle sneaking in there, without getting us detected?"

Lerion folded his arms and cocked his head back. "I can handle myself just fine. Can you?"

"I was asking you first."

"I already answered your question."

"Yes, of course I can. I'm an Assassin, remember?"

"And I'm a smuggler, remember? What's your point, pal?"

Vyrex sighed, but admitted defeat. "Fine, let's get going. We should get closer, study the movement of those trucks and figure out when we should make a move."

Lerion nodded at him. "Agreed," he said, stalking forward. He could already see a small group of trees in the distance; the perfect spot to watch the trucks unexposed.

"There's no pattern in their movement." Vyrex sighed and looked back at Lerion, who was studying his wrist pad.

"Hmhm," Lerion replied absently as he continued to tap commands into the device.

"Are you listening to me?" the Assassin asked, raising his voice to a hissing whisper.

"Yeah, no pattern in their movement ..."

Pressing his lips together with chagrin, Vyrex poked his former prisoner: "What are you doing with that thing?"

Lerion slapped away the Assassin's hand. "If you must know, I'm using a trick a friend once taught me. I'm trying to access their network and hack their security grid," Lerion explained, biting his lip.

"What if we get caught?" Vyrex snapped at him.

"What if we don't, and I can get us a layout of the facility?" Lerion retorted without so much as looking back at Vyrex.

"Fine, but whatever you're doing, be careful."

"Sure, I'll be as careful as you."

Unwilling to continue the conversation, they both sat in the tree in silence. Lerion continued his attempts to gain access while Vyrex was still studying the trucks rolling in and out of the base. The traffic itself seemed to be steady, but the intervals at which they opened and closed the gates seemed irregular. There was quite a large blind spot, Vyrex had figured out, but without any knowledge of what was beyond the concrete barricade, there was no knowing if they would be able to safely sneak in. He

turned his head to his left and peeked at the glowing screen on Lerion's wrist. A sigh of satisfaction escaped Lerion's lips and he looked at Vyrex with a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

"Tadaa!" he whispered.

Vyrex' eyebrows rose and his mouth opened in anticipation of what Lerion was about to reveal.

"Look," he said, showing the screen on his wrist to his partner.

Vyrex' eyes quickly went over it. A grin formed on his face. When he looked at Lerion, he noticed the smuggler was grinning too.

"This even shows the traffic going in and out! Getting in should be a breeze now. Look, there's nothing beyond the wall. All we gotta do is take a right as quickly as possible and sneak past this hut here. Then we can just keep following the wall from where we came until we hit the landing pads! Easy peasy," Lerion said, scrolling through the map and pointing at what should be their best route.

"All we have to do now is pick the right moment. Even that shouldn't be too hard now. I can't believe how badly guarded this place is," Vyrex said, looking back up at the gate.

Lerion nodded and patted him on the shoulder.

"We're not off this rock yet. Give me one more minute, I want to check something else fast," he said, pressing commands into the wrist computer once more.

"What more do you want to know? We got our escape route," Vyrex said, raising a curious eyebrow.

"I'm trying to find out where they're holding Vester," Lerion said, eyes locked on the screen.

"What? Why?"

"So we can rescue him, of course," Lerion said.

"Are you fucking serious?!" Vyrex asked, raising his voice in his shock.

Lerion shushed him. "Are you crazy? They might hear us, you idiot!" he hissed.

"We're not taking any risks in some crazy attempt to rescue that furball," Vyrex hissed back.

"Look, I know we're not exactly friends, but you've seen what that Shaedon did to his crew. Do you really want to have his death on your conscience too?"

Vyrex shook his head in disbelief. "You really are serious about this? He's not our problem! If anything, he's the one who got us into this mess."

"Tell me something, Apollo. You've never failed a mission, right?" Lerion asked, folding his arm and looking at Vyrex intently.

"No, I haven't, but I don't see how that applies here. There is no mission. Not anymore."

"False!" Lerion said. "Your mission was to retrieve that tome, remember? And only Vester knows where it is. Your mission isn't over by a long shot. We need to get that thing. Think of your reputation!"

Letting out a long-winded sigh through his nostrils, Vyrex looked at him with chagrin. "Fine!"

"Looks like he's being held in this part of the base, from what I could gather," Lerion said, pointing on the map displayed on the screen.

Vyrex jumped down from the tree, looked back up and shrugged as he pulled up his hood.

"Well, what are you waiting for, cowboy? Let's get going already!"

Lerion reached the ground with similar ease. He dusted his jacket down a bit and pulled the rim of his hat down a little.

"All right, let's!"

\* \* \*

*The blade pierced her heart. It was done, nothing could reverse this. He had done everything he could to stop Kha'hetra from killing her. There was no doubt in his mind about it. Without her, he felt as if he was falling into a void. He was falling now, deeper and deeper as he drifted into nothingness. The image of his ship, the Claw of Ra'asha, sprang to his mind. Crashed into a forsaken planet. Turned into molten slag and debris. In many ways, he felt as broken as his ship. All warmth flooded out of him as he kept falling. Then, a realization. The death of his mate had not been in vain. The Architect had wished it. It was all part of his grand design. He required the sil-*

*ver-bound tome and anyone in his way became the enemy. The entire crew had been such easy prey too. Why was he spared?*

Unimaginable pain racked his body. Vester lay on the ground, contorted in agony. The screams echoed to the far end of the building. Shortly before Kha'hetra had entered the cell area, she had instructed the guard not to interfere, whatever he thought he heard. Vester shortly regained consciousness, but it felt like his dream and reality were mixed. His sense of identity faded. The pain became unbearable once more when another memory flashed in front of his eyes, but it was not one of his own. Or was it?

*A courtyard the size of an arena. At the top, seven balconies, each one occupied by a hooded, robed figure. The one in the front and centre of the courtyard drew his attention. The man pulled his hood back to reveal a reptilian face. A bright red and yellow frill extended around his skull, decorated with expensive-looking jewellery. His eyes were as dark as night. He felt a shiver run down his spine. This man standing there at the top – he was the one known as the Architect. Gan'darra. The one who demands obedience. And Vester? He was the Collector. Whatever the Architect wished, he would retrieve. Now he understood.*

*For now, they were as one. There was no more Vester Sylkwhisker. There was no more Kha'hetra. Only Kha'feralis remained, with a singular purpose. To serve the Architect.*

He opened his eyes as he woke. Darkness swirled inside of them. He moved his hands in front of his eyes, looking at them as if it were the first time he laid his eyes upon them. Slowly, he sat up, realizing he'd been lying on the floor for quite some time. He reached for his head. A distinct pang of pain penetrated his dazed mind. He stood up, leaning against the wall. Dizziness filled him. Perhaps he got up a little too quickly. The force field was still down. Still feeling woozy, he stumbled around the corner. A Saranus guard looked him in the eyes and instinctively looked away. Was he scared of him?

“Was the merging a success?” another Saranus asked, this one not dressed in military gear. He wore a lab coat and was holding a medical datapad.

“I’m still a bit woozy, but yes. We are one now,” Vester heard himself say with a strange, distorted voice.

“Let’s move you someplace where you can recover from the experience, then, hmm?” the Saranus scientist suggested.

He shook his head dismissively. “No.”

A pungent smell penetrated his nostrils. Was that the smell of fear on the guard? He tilted his head and studied the guard’s body language. He almost seemed to cower. *Weakness cannot be tolerated.*

With abnormal celerity, he grabbed the guard by the throat and raised him up to eye level. He looked deeper into the weakling’s eyes. It was definitely there. The fear of death.

“You are scared of my presence?” he demanded from the guard, who was struggling to breathe and was clawing at his arms, to no avail.

“F-forgive ... me ... Col-lector ...”

*Begging for forgiveness. What frailty. This cannot be allowed to exist.*

With his other arm, he clawed his way into the Saranus’ chest, reached for the heart and severed it from the rest of his body.

“This is the heart of a coward!” he said, showing it to the dying guard. The lizard’s eyes widened and a last gasp escaped his lips.

In one swift motion, he slammed the dead man’s body on the floor. He looked to his left, at the scientist, who seemed not to be emotionally affected by what had just transpired.

“I can see that rest is not required, Kha’hetra,” he said, putting his datapad away.

“You will address me as Kha’feralis from now on,” the mutated Kevar insisted.

The scientist bowed his head in respect. “As you wish, Kha’feralis.”

“I will be in my quarters now to contact the Architect. Get back to your work.”

“Most certainly, miss, sir ... eh –”

“Sir will do. We have inherited the gender of our host.”

“Very well, sir,” the scientist said, once again bowing his head. He twisted on his heels and marched through the corridor leading out of the building.

\* \* \*

“It almost seems like getting in was the easy part,” Lerion whispered, looking back to check if his companion was still behind him.

Vyrex shrugged at him. “It usually is. Getting out alive is the hard part. So, this building right across from here is where they’re keeping the tome?” he asked impatiently. Carefully, he peeked around the corner to check if there were any patrols out there. A sigh of relief followed when he couldn’t spot anyone in the near distance.

“We should be thankful that this place is so badly guarded. I don’t expect the same once we’re inside. Where did you say we could get inside without being noticed?” Vyrex turned back to face Lerion and folded his arms in anticipation of an answer.

The smuggler was checking his wrist computer and looked up from the screen.

“East side of the building should have what looks to be some sort of ventilation duct. It looks accessible from what I can see on these maps,” Lerion said, sounding fairly uncertain.

“As long as we don’t barge in through the front door, I guess that’s as good a point to start as any. Let’s go,” Vyrex said. He turned around and bolted towards the other side of the road, nimbly jumping over a pair of barrels before ducking into a smaller alleyway.

Lerion had wanted to tell him to wait, but now he had to make a similar move and he wasn’t sure he could pull it off as well as his partner. He could see Vyrex on the other side, beckoning him to move quickly. He took a few steps back and sprinted forward until the barrels blocked his way, but instead of jumping over them, he used the nearby wall, pushing himself off it with his feet and jumping over the barrels.

Vyrex nodded at him approvingly. “Not as smooth as me, but you managed. Looks like you were right, Prynn,” he said, pointing up at a grate about three metres above them.

"Damnit, how are we ever gonna get up there?" Lerion asked, stroking his goatee.

"More importantly, how are we going to remove that grate so we can get in?" Vyrex added.

A moment passed with neither of them saying a word. Vyrex caught a certain look in Lerion's eyes.

"What about those barrels? Think we can move one here?"

Vyrex pursed his lips and gave him a ponderous look.

"Worth a shot, I guess."

Lerion had rolled the barrel on its bottom until it was positioned right underneath the grate. Vyrex had kept an eye out for any possible guards. The only ones he had spotted were too far to be of any concern.

"Well, that still leaves just about another two metres to bridge," Vyrex said, putting his hands on his hips while looking up.

"You could stand on my shoulders and try to pry it open," Lerion offered, while climbing on the barrel. There was barely enough room for Vyrex to get up on it as well, but within a few moments he was standing on the smuggler's shoulders. Lerion tried to maintain his balance by leaning against the wall as much as possible. Vyrex inspected the grate, which was sealed shut, of course. No screws to loosen either. He would have to use alternative methods, which just happened to be his forte. He heard Lerion grunt under the stress of his weight.

"Can you hurry up? This isn't exactly comfortable," Lerion hissed through gritted teeth, holding on to the ankles of the Assassin standing on his shoulders.

"Just a sec, man ..." Vyrex said, still thinking of a method to remove the grate. He couldn't really see any other alternative. He'd have to blast it away with Fire magicka.

"It's going to get hot up in this bitch," he said, removing his gloves and putting them in his pockets.

"What do you mean?" Lerion asked, his voice trembling slightly.

"I'm going to blast the grate away with fire. Now shush, I need to concentrate," Vyrex ordered. He closed his eyes and exhaled deeply. Focussing his thoughts, he pictured the grate in his mind and reduced it to a smoul-

dering mess. The energy flowed through him, from his 'third eye' to his hands, which started to tingle at first. He channelled the magicka from his very essence to his palms, which were starting to get sweaty and warm. Before too long, his moist palms glowed and the sweat evaporated into the air. Just a moment longer and his palms would be as hot as churning lava. He could already feel the grate losing its shape and melting. He grabbed the side of the vent, and within a few short seconds, he pulled the grate off at its hinges, which were turned into molten slag. He threw it down and it fell with a heavy thud.

"Nice work!" Lerion said excitedly.

Looking at his hands, Vyrex saw that they were slowly returning to normal. The way was free now. He pulled himself up into the shaft and turned around. He pressed his feet against the sides of the metallic tube and extended his hands down, so he could pull Lerion up. With some effort, the smuggler finally managed to pull himself up, using the wall to give him just enough of a boost to make it.

"How much longer do we need to crawl through these ducts? It feels like we've been at this forever!" Vyrex complained, crawling in front of the smuggler through the tight space.

"I dunno, let me check at the nearest intersection. Just a few more metres upward," Lerion said. The duct had been going up at a steep angle. Luckily the material the ducts were made of wasn't slippery, or they'd be having an entirely different experience right now.

Lerion pulled up his sleeve as soon as they were at the intersection. It was a crossroads of sorts, with three paths to choose from. He fidgeted with his wrist pad for a moment and let out a satisfied hum. He tapped the screen and showed it to his fellow Gald.

"We're nearly there. Just a few more sections and we'll be right at the office of that Collector."

He shuddered involuntarily at the mention of the Shaedon. Vyrex didn't look as confident as he'd seen the Assassin before, either.

"Let's just hope he, she ... it? Hope it isn't home. I doubt we'd survive an encounter with it at this point," Vyrex said, his voice slightly wavering.

"We're two sly Galadian Foxes! We'll be going in and out without anyone ever noticing," Lerion said with every bit of courage he could muster.

Vyrex nodded at him, but the look in his eyes told Lerion otherwise. He knew that Vyrex had dealt with a Shaedon before on Netherea. Although the stories seemed to suggest that Vyrex had been a great part of the fight, every time they'd been in close contact with Kha'hetra had shown Lerion that Vyrex was very afraid of the Shaedon. Probably with good reason. After all, Kha'hetra had single-handedly destroyed the *Claw of Ra'asha* and its entire crew. Lerion tried to swallow his fear, but the lump in his throat had grown larger. It'd be showtime soon.

\* \* \*

The office door slid open and Kha'feralis stepped through. It felt familiar, yet different. Many hours he'd spent here, cataloguing items he was sent out to find and communicating with the Architect, yet none of those memories were truly his. Or were they? A talk with his master would surely set him straight. The office was clean and neatly organized. It had no windows, but that didn't bother him at all. At the far end was a large computer desk with three holo monitors and several stacks of datapads, each laid out in orderly fashion. The walls on both sides of the office were lined with shelves, and on each of them lay artefacts, collected and catalogued. The most recent addition was a silver-bound tome, one of seven in a series of ancient books written by the extinct Luminars. It required further studying. Not by himself, but by someone much older and wiser; the Architect, Gan'darra. He walked up to the computer, switched it on and took a seat. It asked him for a password; he punched it in almost automatically. It came as a bit of a surprise to him when the system accepted it. He apparently knew the password, and yet he had not seen this room before in his life. He remembered everything as if it were a dream, a distant memory. Someone else's memory. Now that the system had been opened, he continued to input commands to contact his superior. Within mere moments, the Shaedon Armada logo appeared on screen. The comm system was awaiting the receiving party's answer.

The holo screen displayed a dark, barely illuminated room. A hooded figure sat at a desk, its dark eyes reflecting what little light was present.

"The transformation has been completed?" it asked with a raspy, distorted voice.

Uncertain how to reply, Kha'hetra simply nodded.

"Good, this vessel you've chosen to merge with will prove useful in the upcoming battle. His physical strength and your devious mind are a superb combination," Gan'darra praised, assessing the newborn creation that was sitting before him.

*Was he supposed to answer now?*

"You are still experiencing confusion. I can tell by the way you look back at me. You know me, yet I seem unfamiliar. This will pass over time, when you get used to having distinct memories of two entities. What's important now is that you have something to focus on. Did you get the tome, as ordered?" the Architect asked. His voice seemed not impatient, nor demanding, but rather calming. Comforting even.

"Yes, it is in our possession."

"What about the intruders? Did you let them go, as I asked?" Gan'darra asked, steepling his fingers. A moment of silence followed. Should he tell him that they were shot down?

"You told one of the lower ranked officers to deal with them as they saw fit. Or did I miscalculate your deviousness?"

Kha'feralis lowered his head, as if he were a child scolded by his father.

"Their weak ships were shot down. One of them crashed into the mountains, the other into the ocean. I did not care to check if any of them survived. Grur'gesh sent some of his men to do so. I don't think they found anyone alive," Kha'feralis said. He wondered how he knew all of this, yet he could visualize the entire conversation with the Saranus in his mind vividly.

"I feared as much. Still, some hope remains that they did survive. While you were busy, I've had reports of an alien ship in orbit around Jaxxar. A ship of unknown design, yet its form betrays a Byndari influence. Three ships are currently investigating. It would seem our Alliance friends have not been sitting idly by," Gan'darra stated, as if lecturing the monstrosity in front of him.

“What good will a single ship do the Alliance here? We outnumber them a hundred to one!” Kha’feralis hissed, slamming a fist into the desk.

The dark eyes of the Architect widened and his nostrils flared.

“Don’t let your arrogance be your guide! The Alliance is a formidable foe. All of their races have shown great defiance against us. We may be ahead of them, but that does not mean that they cannot surprise us in any way. Patience, planning and cautiousness are what will win us this war!”

“O-of course ... Forgive me, Architect,” Kha’feralis stammered.

A brief sigh came from the other side of the connection.

“We will persevere, as long as you obey my orders. Which brings me to that topic. Your new assignment is to take the fight to Gald Prime. You shall be part of the crew aboard the attack fleet’s flagship. Second-in-command, I want you to lead the troops on the ground as soon as the orbital bombardment is completed. After that, you will take the troops to capture the capitol. The queen is to be taken alive, understood?” Gan’darra ordered.

Kha’feralis nodded. “Loud and clear, ancient one,” he replied.

“Good. Have the tome sent here. Ask this Grur’gesh to bring it to me personally. End of transmission.”

The screen went dark. For a moment, he just sat there. It felt odd accepting orders, especially from someone he barely knew, yet knew so very well. Perhaps the Architect was right. Taking his mind off things and giving him something to focus on would do wonders for his confusion. At least an attack on Gald Prime sounded like fun.

He logged out of the computer and got up from the chair. It was time for a talk with Grur’gesh and his men.

\* \* \*

Lerion clasped both of his hands in front of his mouth to prevent a loud gasp from escaping. As soon as what looked like it had once been Vester had left the room, he felt like he could finally breathe.

“Did you see that?” he hissed at Vyrex, knowing well enough that it had been hard to miss the monstrous figure in the office that they had

watched through the slits of the ventilation duct's vent. Vyrex just sat in silence, his eyes wide and a trickle of sweat running down his brow.

"Not again," he finally said, after they had both calmed down.

Lerion poked him and gave him a curious frown. "What do you mean, not again?"

Vyrex looked at him intently, as if remembering something from the past. Something horrible.

"Back on Netherea, when we were fighting this Langruff, he had mutated beyond recognition. He had become something out of a nightmare – a weird, tentacled monster. It seemed as if he was there, but also wasn't. Like a shade. I think the same thing has happened to Vester now," Vyrex said, avoiding Lerion's questioning eyes.

The smuggler shook his head in disbelief. "This thing we just saw ... it didn't have any tentacles. I'm pretty sure it was Vester, though. His voice was nearly the same. Anyway, you heard what he said. They're planning to attack Gald Prime! We need to stop this!"

"And how do you suggest we do that? Last time I tried fighting one of those Shaedon monsters, we only won because of one guy, and he's nowhere near to help us! This is hopeless," Vyrex said.

"Vester is only one guy too, you know. As long as we manage to avoid him, I'm sure we can sneak aboard his vessel and sabotage his operation as much as we can. Where's your sense of purpose, man? Are you an Assassin, or are you a coward?" Lerion asked, tilting his head to ensure that Vyrex could no longer avoid looking at him.

Vyrex exhaled softly, then looked him in the eyes. "Fine! I was planning on an early retirement anyway," he answered.

"Good. Now, first things first. Let's get that tome and get the hell out of here," Lerion said while prying the inside of the vent loose.

## Chapter 21 – Deconstruction

The *Storm Crow* broke through the edge of the nebula first, flanked by the *Libertalia*. Two more cruisers and dozens of freighters were close on its tail. When all of the ships had emerged from the nebula, they quickly formed a Vic formation, with the *Libertalia* taking a position in front of it. The fleet was now racing towards their intended target GF-128-T, or its chosen codename, *Bad Apple*.

The viewscreen of the *Storm Crow* showed the planet. It looked like a rusty ball of red, covered with ashen clouds. The space station in orbit around the planet loomed over it, like a protective dog.

“That station seems bigger than we anticipated,” Máraxi said as she stepped closer to the screen. She looked over her shoulder, seeing Raphael shaking his head dismissively.

“Only slightly. Just imagine the amount of mayhem that is about to break loose once the *Libertalia* rams into it!”

“High Councillor, it would seem that the enemy is not aware of our approach as of yet. If we strike fast, we will have the element of surprise,” a Xoron officer dressed in military uniform said from his position at a tactical station.

“Hail the *Libertalia*,” Máraxi commanded as she swept back into her seat.

Within a mere moment, the screen changed from the view of the planet to the bridge of Captain Tailspin’s ship.

“We’re standing by!” Kayla said with what Máraxi could only interpret as glee.

“We will continue our approach at maximum cruising speed. As soon as we’re within three hundred thousand kilometres of the planet, you will initiate your attack on the station.”

Kayla bared her teeth in a vicious grin, raised a fist into the air and clenched it.

"To battle! May your victory be well-deserved!"

"We shall do what we must, for the Greater Good," Máraxi said, "Wi-hara out."

The viewscreen returned to the image of the planet. There was still no sign of any ships in its vicinity, but they were there, she was certain of it. Who in their right minds would leave such a valuable asset unguarded?

As the fleet's distance towards *Bad Apple* shrunk, the *Libertalia's* engines roared louder and louder. In order to pull off the ramming of the station, they'd need sufficient force to breach its hull while preventing their own from being torn.

"Calculations complete," the tactical officer, a rugged-looking human, shouted from his station.

"Everyone, this is your Captain speaking. Brace yourselves for impact and get ready to report to your squad leaders for combat!" Kayla spoke over the ship's intercom.

"Engaging thruster boosters in three, two, one, mark!" the young Kevlar helmsman shouted as she punched in the commands into her control panel.

"Impact in thirty seconds!" she added.

"The station is hailing us!" the tactical officer said, giving Kayla a curious look.

"Put them on screen," she answered with a hiss and a glint in her eyes.

"This is Commander Nuriga'ik of the Empire station Kijadik, what in the Emperor's name are you doing?" the lizardman in military uniform demanded.

"We're about to knock on your front door and give you a hearty message from the Alliance!" Kayla said, her voice filled with anticipation of the upcoming bloodbath she and her crew were to instigate on the station.

"Fire all cannons at that ship and release the fighter squadrons!" Nuriga'ik shouted over his shoulder.

"We shall see how well you mammals fare against the might of the Empire!" he hissed.

The viewscreen went dark.

"Impact in ten seconds! They're firing at us with all they have!" the tactical officer said.

Bracing herself for impact, Kayla leaned into her chair. *It won't matter, those shots won't penetrate our shield. It's show time*, she thought.

Time slowed down as Kayla counted in her mind. *Five, four, three, two, one*. That last number seemed to last an eternity. She could hear the sound of heavy metals scraping against each other. It penetrated her very being, almost became part of her and this roaring sensation inside of her. The untamed beast that wanted nothing more than to be let out, until its lust for blood was satiated. Muffled voices tried to reach her to no avail. She didn't bother listening. These were the moments she lived for; the battles, the killing, and eventually, the victory.

"Captain?"

The tactical officer held her by the shoulders and shook her to get her attention.

Her eyes focused on him.

"Yes, Mr. Grey?" she asked, still sounding a bit absent.

"We've successfully penetrated the station's hull. Boarding clamps are in place. The first squads are about to board the station," he said with a grin smeared across his face.

"Excellent! Let's get going, my axe is hungry for reptile blood!" she said, marching towards the bridge's nearest exit.

\* \* \*

Thirty seconds before the *Libertalia* rammed into the Zar'aranos space station, Serra had fired up the *Seraph's Wings'* engines. Ten seconds later, they exited the docking bays of the cruiser and flew into the blackness of space, along with four squadrons of fighters. The planet grew larger with each passing second until they broke through its atmosphere. Then, their vision was blocked off by the thick, dark clouds they had already seen from orbit. The ship rocked heavily until its atmospheric stabilizers kicked in, allowing the freighter class ship to fly through the air smoothly. They had gotten through unnoticed. Serra sighed with relief the moment

she realized that none of the Empire's fighters had bothered to chase after them.

"I can't believe we've actually made it through without anyone pursuing us," Serra said, manually flying the ship.

"The probability of them chasing us was a whole lot smaller than the probability that they wouldn't," Philbin remarked with his usual arrogance.

"We're not done yet."

Serra bit her lip as they broke through the layer of clouds. They were fast approaching the jagged mountains that seemed to be everywhere she looked.

"I hope we can find a good place to land on this rock," she said, while pointing the ship's nose upward a little more.

"Let's locate that base first, yes?" Philbin asked.

Serra scoffed at him and pulled her lip up with chagrin. "Easier said than done, Mr. Genius," she said, keeping her eyes fixed on the viewscreen.

The little blue man cocked an eyebrow at her, then shook his head as if he had no clue what she meant.

"How's that scan going, big guy?" Philbin asked, turning his head towards Guilty Ember, who was working the ship's scanners to produce a map.

"Retrieving telemetry. Hopefully can pinpoint location soon," he answered without looking back.

Philbin nodded, humming at himself.

"Good, good," he muttered.

\* \* \*

"The *Libertalia* has successfully rammed the station," the tactical officer reported from his position on the bridge of the *Storm Crow*.

Three seats were positioned in the middle of the bridge, each one seating an occupant. The middle one, reserved for the captain, was taken by Máraxi. She was sitting on the edge of her seat, staring at the

viewscreen with her intense, blood red eyes. Seated to her right was Chando, or Raphael, as he was better known to her. He too looked tense. To her left was Zurâk, who seemed a lot calmer than the two of them. His eyes met Máraxi's, and the old man gave her a comforting nod.

"Good, that should keep them busy for a while. How are the enemies positioned?" Chando asked the same officer.

The Xoron checked his screen and transferred it to the main viewer. Red dots littered the grid around the station. Several other patrols could be seen, quickly converging on it. The question was: what would they do about the ship that was now stuck inside the hull of the station? Surely enough, shooting it wouldn't do the station any good. The fighter squadrons that had poured out of the *Libertalia's* docking bays had started their attacks on the two heavy cruisers near the station. That would mean now was a good time to advance and assist them, before the patrols had a chance to catch up.

Máraxi stepped forward and inspected the spatial grid one more time, then looked at the comms officer intently.

"Instruct all ships to move in and focus their attention on the two heavy cruisers. As soon as we're within firing range, I want all fighters to leave their ships and deal with the enemy's fighter squadrons," Máraxi said.

Raphael got up from his seat and walked up towards her.

"Yes, Raphael?" she demanded.

"Ma'am, if you don't mind, I would like to head down to the docking bay and contact my people in my shuttle. They should be on the planet's surface soon."

For a moment, it seemed as if Máraxi had not heard a word he had just said. This was unforeseen, but she had no reason to doubt that the masked human standing in front of her was indeed going to do just what he had said. Even if he would choose to leave, his shuttle had little to no defensive capabilities. Still, she had every reason to be careful.

"Zurâk, join our guest," Máraxi ordered the old Windmaster.

Adjusting his robes, he rose to his feet and gestured for Raphael to follow him. Raphael waved at him dismissively.

"Hold on a minute. Why can't I go down to the docking bay alone?" he asked.

"Zurâk knows this ship inside out, he can help you get there faster," Máraxi stated flatly, with a tone that allowed no contradiction.

Raphael didn't flinch. Instead, he nodded respectfully.

"As you wish, High Councillor," he replied politely. He turned to the old man and looked at him expectantly through his mask.

"If you would follow me, please," Zurâk said, as he headed towards the nearest turbolift.

\* \* \*

Kayla switched on her kinetic shield as she sprinted through the corridor on her way to the front of the ship. She could already hear the gunfire in the distance. This only added to her already considerable adrenaline-fuelled fury. She quickly pressed the visor on her helmet down. Once she reached the front of the ship, she could tell that the breach had been a clean one. All of the clamps were in place and force fields filled the gaps with outer space. She used one of the ramps leading into the station and could already see a squadron of her own crew, who were firing at the enemy from behind several barricades they had put up.

"How's the situation?" she demanded from the squad leader.

"We've got them pinned down at the other end of this corridor, but we can't advance," the armoured human answered. He broke his cover and took a few potshots at the enemy on the far side, then ducked back down.

"Cover me and I'll take care of them," Kayla said.

The squad leader nodded. "You heard her! Keep them busy!"

"Aye, sir!" the other five members of the squad replied in unison.

"I'll be flanking them from the left," the Kevar Captain said. She pressed another button on her armour. The crackle from the kinetic shield died away as she seemed to disappear into thin air.

Hugging the left wall, Kayla sneaked forward. She could almost smell the lizards' fear in the distance. She counted five in total. They would be no match for her if she could utilize the element of surprise. All she needed

was a way to move in behind them. Looking up, she noticed a ledge and some large pipes. If she could manage to get up there, she might be able to jump them. A salvo of laser fire would have hit her in the side, had she not ducked out of the way. The Empire goons were taking cover again, probably reloading their weapons. Now was her chance. She sprinted and jumped up, pressing her feet against the wall to grant herself the extra force to reach the ledge. Grunting with effort, she managed to pull herself up on the heavy pipes. Now all she needed to do was to crawl forward and jump them.

Only a few more metres and she would be right above them, ready to spring her trap. They were reloading their weapons again. Three behind a large bulkhead that had come down, the other two each at a corner of the intersection they were guarding. This would be easy. Kayla reached for her back and took out a large metal rod. She held it in her right hand and used the index finger of her free hand to press a button on her cloaked armour. It felt like reaching for something in the dark: she could feel the armour, but just like the rest of herself, she could not see it. A click was followed by the release of a small device. She pulled it out of the slot in her armour, twisted it and dropped it in the corridor below.

One of the guards heard the *ting* of something metallic dropping on the floor, followed by a loud hissing. Before he and his fellows knew what was going on, the entire section was flooded with blinding smoke. There was a thud, as if someone dropped down on the floor right next to him. All he could see was a metallic rod that grew larger, whirring as it became a thin, double-bladed battle axe with an edge as sharp as a laser scalpel. In one fell swoop, three of his comrades were decapitated. Their assailant gradually came into view as the stealth field deactivated. By that time, the other remaining squad member dropped to the floor with a large cleft in his skull, creating a horrible, gurgling noise. The Kevar turned to face him, but he was too shocked to react. He staggered and fell hard on his back. Only then did he realize his legs were cut off beneath his knees.

“Where can I find Commander Nuriga’ik?” the Kevar demanded, her voice coming from a vocoder on her armour.

The Saranus' eyes widened as his assailant stood over him, like a predator over its prey right before the kiss of death.

"I only cut off your legs, not your tongue! Where can I find him? Answer me quickly and I will grant you an honourable death," she hissed, her tail sweeping with agitation.

"It's, he, uh ..." he stammered.

Before he could answer, the Kevar brought down her axe hard, splitting his skull in two and splattering the blade with fresh lizard blood.

"Never mind, I'll find him myself."

\* \* \*

Guilty Ember had found a suitable site to land and the *Seraph's Wings'* crew was now exiting the ship, packed with all the gear they required to blow up the facility. It had not been hard to locate, but it had been a lot harder to touch down unnoticed and well out of range of any defences the Empire might have put up. Serra was checking her sniper rifle, making sure it was ready for action. A confident smile appeared on her face as she looked at Philbin and the others.

"That waste pipe should lead us right into the facility," Philbin said, pointing at what seemed more like a tunnel than a pipe in the near distance.

"Let's not waste any time, then," Serra said, hoisting the rifle over her shoulder and fastening it with a leather belt. She marched down to the edge of the stream of heavily polluted water, if one could even call it that.

"Whew, did someone cut the cheese or what?" Philbin said, crinkling his nose and using a hand to wave away the air in front of it.

Serra looked over her shoulder and threw the blue genius an angry glare. "Let's keep quiet. We have no idea if there will be any patrols around here," she whispered.

They quietly marched forward, the only sound coming from the footsteps of the two Kraut in their heavy armour.

Philbin released three small probe drones that flew off into the pipes, with the exception of one, which illuminated their way. Five minutes

later, the other two returned and attached themselves into compartments in his backpack. He took a look at his wrist computer. Serra took a glance at it as well and noticed that there seemed to be some sort of progress bar on it, which was gradually filling up.

"Looks like we've still got about three kilometres to go," Philbin said with a sigh.

"That's not too bad. If we keep going like this, it should be about half an hour, right?" Serra asked softly. She didn't like the look on the Master Tinkerer's face one bit when he looked back at her.

He pursed his lips and cocked an eyebrow at her. "Afraid not."

"How so?"

"Because in about half a kilometre, we will have to continue our way upward."

Serra sighed and rested her hands on her hips as she turned to face him. Philbin shrugged at her and gazed at the screen on his wrist for a little while.

"According to the drone's telemetry I've just received, there should be some way to get up from there. I guess we'll find out when we get there, eh?"

"I could fly ahead and check if you want," Tyndra offered.

Serra looked up at Tyndra, who was sitting comfortably on Glowing Envy's left shoulder. She nodded at the phoenix-like bird.

"First sign of trouble, I want you to double-time it back to us, all right?"

"I wasn't planning to put myself at risk," the bird answered, with a tone that Serra could only interpret as slightly condescending. Before Serra could say anything else, Tyndra had taken off and was already fifty metres ahead of them, the walls of the pipe glowing from the light she emitted.

Serra brushed away a few stray hairs that were stuck to her face and turned around, sighing softly.

"No worry. Will come back. Smart lady," Glowing Envy said as they trudged forward.

"More like a smart-ass lady, if you ask me," Serra said.

Silence followed. It was fine with her. There really was no need for chatter. If anything, it would be best if they would all be as quiet as possible. But with the two Kraut along, that was like trying to sneak with leaden boots on.

After following the pipes for a while, Tyndra found herself at the point where the pipes were supposed to lead upwards, according to Philbin. He had been right about the place, but the pipes didn't continue upward. Instead, the pipe opened up into a cavernous space. In the middle was a large, round platform, surrounded by churning water. Tyndra could see that the pipe at the far wall was actually going further down. She startled when she realized that she was not alone in here. On the platform, two Saranus were instructing a group of at least six polydrones to move heavy cargo crates onto an elevator leading up. At least getting up would no longer present a problem, but getting a ride up without being noticed would. Without further hesitation, she spread her wings, and beating them as fast as she could, she turned back.

\* \* \*

Chando banged an angry fist on the console.

"Bloody hell, I can't reach them!"

"Perhaps the planet's atmosphere is blocking the signal?" Zurâk asked, cocking his head and stepping forward to face the human.

"I hope you're right. At least the transponder seems to be working. That means Serra's ship is in one piece, at least."

He looked up at the ceiling, leaned back into his chair and let out an exasperated sigh. He didn't get much of a break; the shuttle shook heavily and the sound of energy weapons pounding on the *Storm Crow's* shields resounded throughout the docking bay.

"Sir, do you wish to remain here? I believe my talents are better put to use on the bridge," Zurâk said with a worried frown on his face.

Chando turned his head to his right and nodded. "I doubt your High Councillor would appreciate it if you were to return without me. Let me just send a simple message to Serra's ship and I'll join you," he said,

punching in some commands on the console. He gave the old Xoron a curt nod and stood up from his chair.

“Let’s have a stroll to the bridge. I doubt we’ll be around here for long, by the sound of it,” Chando said as another salvo of incoming fire rocked the ship.

“Concentrate all fire on the cruiser furthest away from the station! Bring down its aft shields and target the engine and weapon systems,” Máraxi commanded, her voice being transmitted to every other vessel in their fleet. On the main viewer, she could see the shift in fleet movement as the ships all followed her instructions. Fighter squadrons were engaging the enemy ones, desperately trying to keep up with their overwhelming numbers. Several of them disappeared from the overlay in a matter of minutes.

“Ma’am, we’ve lost two squadrons of fighters so far. The rest of them are regrouping,” the tactical officer reported from his station.

“How many do we have left?” she demanded to know.

“Four full squadrons. The remaining fighters will be joining the existing squadrons. We can’t hold out much longer. Captain Kayla had better remove that station from the equation soon, or we might have to retreat prematurely.”

The turbolift door slid open and both Zurâk and Chando stormed out to check on the current situation.

“I knew that Kevar was not to be trusted,” Máraxi hissed, waving an angry finger at Chando.

“I’m fairly sure she’s got her hands full at the moment. Just give her a few more minutes.”

“She’d better hurry. Those patrols are converging on our position. The first one will be within firing range in ten minutes,” Zurâk stated matter-of-factly.

“Ten minutes is all she will get. If she hasn’t disabled the station by then, we will have to retreat,” Máraxi said, giving Chando an angry glare through the slits in her mask.

He stood a few centimetres away from her face, his eyes blazing.

“We’ve still got people down on that planet. I will not abandon them!”

“And I will not stand for any unnecessary losses, just because your hired help does not perform as well as you thought she would. We are risking a war against the Empire here,” Máraxi snapped back at him unflinchingly.

“That war is coming, no matter what. You know that as well as I do. We can tip the scale in our favour here, and we should, or we may have already lost the war before it even starts.”

A sudden change in Máraxi’s behaviour threw him off guard. Her body language changed, she seemed to calm herself down. Perhaps it was some technique she had once been taught.

“She has nine more minutes,” she said resolutely and with an almost austere calm in her voice.

\* \* \*

“How are the other squads doing, Commander Grey?” Kayla asked, looking at her communicator screen. The man on the other side of the connection looked a little worse for wear, but seemed fine otherwise.

“One thing’s for sure, they had not anticipated our arrival. The station is poorly defended. We’re about to converge on the station’s command centre,” he said. Incoming weapon fire distorted the sound of the communicator as the commander ducked behind cover.

“I’ll join you shortly. We’ll flank them. Tailspin out,” she said, closing off the connection and returning the communications device into its slot in her armour. She turned around and looked at her squad. None of them were hurt badly and all were still eager for battle. It was something in their eyes, she thought.

“We’ll take this corridor, that way we should end up on the other side of Commander Grey’s squad. Let’s get moving!” Without waiting for her men to respond, she twisted on her heels and marched forward.

Kayla could only barely dodge a barrage of incoming fire when she turned the corner. Silently cursing herself for being reckless, she scrambled behind cover and took a peek over the edge. Her team had taken defensive positions on both sides of the corridor. One of them, another Kevlar fe-

male, reached for her bag and took out a cluster of seeker-spider mines. Kayla nodded at her.

"I counted at least three of them, but I'm willing to bet there's more of them dug into that position. We need to act fast!"

"Yes, ma'am," the Kevar answered, priming the mines and setting them free. Little, metallic legs extended from the disc-like mines and crawled over the floor towards their intended target. One of the station's security crew must have caught a glimpse of at least one of them. He took an aimed shot at it, causing it to explode about halfway through the corridor. The explosion was still enough to cause a distraction, allowing one of her other squad members to take the security guard down with a well-aimed headshot. The other tiny, metallic spiders continued scrambling their way forward. The resulting explosion and screams of their victims echoed through the corridor. Carefully, Kayla broke away from her cover, engaging her stealth field once more, just in case.

"Wait here," she ordered as she seemingly dissipated into nothingness.

By the time she reached the site of impact, it seemed that the spiders had done a terrific job. No one had remained alive in this place, or perhaps the explosion had made them fall back. She disengaged the stealth field and beckoned for her squad to follow. While they were catching up with her, she checked her armour's readouts on her wrist. The stealth field generator could only be activated for a short time before it required a recharge. A minor setback, but she knew she could manage without it. They were getting close to the command centre. When they got there, she would have that lizard filth surrender, or execute him. After that, they would have a little fun with the station's weaponry.

"Let's keep moving, it seems like they're still having a stalemate over at the command centre's entry," Kayla said, once again running onward.

The remainder of the Empire's forces were all dug in in front of the command centre's heavy security door. They had even set up two one-man turrets. Barrages of heavy laser fire lit the corridors with menacing red light. Kayla was fairly sure they hadn't hit any targets so far, or at least

none on Commander Grey's team. There would be time for casualty reports later. She looked over her shoulder. Every one of her squad members was looking at her with anticipation.

"They seem to be too distracted. Brunswick, can you take a shot at the turret furthest from our position?" she asked the team's sniper. The black-haired man nodded without saying a word, got down on a knee and carefully took aim.

"Wait for my command!"

Calling Commander Grey with her communicator, Kayla continued to keep a watchful eye on the turrets. They were still focused on the other corridor.

"Yes, Captain?" the rugged man answered.

"Can you keep the turrets distracted? Brunswick will take one of them out as soon as I give the order, but we need to make sure they're too busy to notice one of their men has been shot. I will take care of the other. Do you copy?" she asked.

"That sounds lovely! I'm ordering my men to fire. Grey out!"

"All right, Brunswick, as soon as we are within firing range, I want you to take the shot," Kayla ordered.

"All others, follow me and start taking defensive positions as soon as we're within firing range. I'll take care of the remaining gunner. Make sure you don't aim anywhere near him, or you might hit me."

"Aye," the other four answered as they followed Kayla.

As she sprinted forward, she looked at the readout on her armour panel once more. Forty-two seconds of stealth was all she could drain from the armour's batteries without risking loss of her kinetic shielding. The turret came into view. Adrenaline kicked in and her killer instinct sharpened her vision. She engaged the stealth field once more. Sure, they might hear the clanking of her armour on the floor, but that sound would easily be drowned out by the exchange of weapon fire that was currently going on. She reached for her axe and pressed the button to unfold it. Its whirring sound was like music to her ears. The prelude to a bloodbath. She counted the steps remaining.

*Five*, the sound of a round being fired from a sniper's rifle.

*Four*, a gurgling noise from the turret's occupant as he was hit in the throat. A sloppy shot by Brunswick.

*Three*, covering fire from the remainder of the squad.

*Two*, jumping over the makeshift barricade the station's security crew had put up.

*One*. The killing blow. Blood splattered on her visor and armour as she pulled the axe out of the Saranus' back. An electric discharge could be heard when her stealth field collapsed. Without hesitation, she pulled the body of her victim from his seat, took his place and fired at the oblivious remainder of the squad. Silence followed. *Another perfectly executed attack*, she thought.

"Nice work, Captain!" the commendation came from her Commander as his squad joined hers.

A nod was all she returned. She could still feel the kick of the adrenaline rushing through her, but her breathing became calmer.

Grey inspected the heavy doors leading to the command centre.

"Looks like we'll have to blast our way in, if the Commander decides not to be smart," he stated gruffly.

"Let's see what he chooses to be," Kayla said. The words had barely left her lips when the doors slowly whirred open. She pulled her helmet's visor up and frowned at Grey, who gazed at her with a similar look on his face.

"Looks like he's smart," he muttered.

\* \* \*

Serra pressed her eye closer to the rifle's scope, then disengaged and put the rifle down.

"This is shit. I might be able to take one of them out, but once I do, they will certainly be alerted to our presence."

Philbin cleared his throat and waved an index finger in the air.

"I wouldn't be much of a Master Tinkerer if I hadn't foreseen an event such as this, right?" he said, puffing his chest forward and putting his hands on his hips.

Serra cocked an eyebrow at him. "I'm listening," she said, folding her arms.

"Those polydrones can easily be disabled with one of my probes. They're equipped with an E.M.P. detonator. Hell, it'll even keep those lizardmen occupied for a while, rendering them incapable of action. Just enough time for our Kraut friends to deal with what's left of them, and allowing you ample time to shoot down as many as you wish. It'll be like a lit up shooting range!" The plump blue genius giggled almost childishly.

"Do it," Serra said bossily.

The Saridion nodded at her and punched in commands on his wrist pad. One of the probe drones whirred loose from his back and hovered just in front of him.

"And just one more command ... aaand we're done! Go, little guy, make daddy proud!" he said with the excitement of a little kid in a candy store. The drone sped off into the distance and flew around the platform once.

"What's that?" they heard one of the Saranus say as he pointed at the whirring disc. Before they could react, it dropped down on the floor, right in the middle of the group of polydrones. The soft *clank* of the disc dropping onto the metallic platform was followed by a bright, blue ball of lightning; the air crackled as the E.M.P.'s radius expanded, causing the polydrones and the Saranus to shake uncontrollably while the electric current passed through them.

Serra took aim and pressed the trigger, once, twice and one last time. The bodies of both Saranus she hit slumped to the floor immediately. She had missed two shots due to their erratic movement. By that time, the pulse had died down, leaving the polydrones lying on the floor in contorted positions. Just before the Kraut would reach the platform, three androids had managed to clamber back up, having been shut down and restarted by their self-diagnostic programming. Philbin knew this, because he had created their programming to act like that. He also knew that they would not be able to withstand two Kraut stomping down on them. Before too long, the only thing that remained of the entire group was scrap metal and two dead Saranus.

Serra went through the pockets of the lizardmen. The only thing she found was a datapad, but it was useless to them since none of them were capable of reading the Imperial language.

"I guess we use this platform to get up, then?" Philbin asked, inspecting the nearest control panel at the far wall from where they had entered the large, open area.

"Do you have any idea how it works?" Serra asked as she appeared next to him.

Philbin pursed his lips and looked up at her. "Well, there's two buttons. One for up and one for down. Even you could have figured it out!"

"Thanks for the compliment," Serra retorted, giving him a faux smile.

"It wasn't meant to be taken as one."

"I'm still going to."

"Hmpff," the blue man muttered unintelligibly.

With a simple press of the button, they rode the platform upward until it came to a halt in the middle of an enormous cargo bay. Carefully picking their way between crates and barrels, they managed to avoid a group of Saranus workers who walked past them.

"Sounds like we're finally where we're supposed to be. I think I can hear the production line in the distance," Serra said.

"Indubitably!" Philbin added, releasing the two remaining probe drones into the air. He looked up from his wrist pad at the rest, a sly grin on his face.

"I've set the drones to scan for electromagnetic devices. The strongest reading should be the mainframe. From there, we can destroy this facility. After we've transmitted my failsafe protocol to any remaining androids, of course."

"Of course," Serra said, copying his grin mockingly.

\* \* \*

“Our frontal shields are nearly depleted, High Councillor!”

“Take evasive action and put some distance between us and those cruisers. What in the Prophet’s name is taking that mercenary so long?” Máraxi barked, pacing up and down in front of the viewscreen.

“She’s still got three more minutes,” Chando stated in a businesslike manner.

“We’ve already lost too many ships, Raphael. I don’t intend to add this one to the list,” Máraxi snapped at him.

“Ma’am, something’s happening! The station’s weapons are locked on to the nearest cruiser. It’s about to fire all available weapons!”

Her eyes flashed at the tactical officer and her body tensed up. “What?”

The officer’s fingers darted over his control panel frantically. “The cruiser has been destroyed.”

“She’s done it!” Chando exclaimed, pounding a fist up in the air.

“The remaining cruiser is being targeted next. It should be easy prey, since we’ve already disabled it.”

“What? There is no need for excessive bloodshed. Hail the station,” Máraxi ordered.

“Attempting to establish a connection, ma’am,” the comms officer said.

It took only a brief moment for the call to be answered. The face of the Kevlar Captain appeared on screen. Her armour was caked with dried blood.

“Yes, High Councillor?” Kayla asked with mild surprise.

“Cease your fire on that disabled cruiser immediately!” she commanded.

The mercenary captain gave her a shrug and shook her head. “Sorry, I can’t do that. I was hired to kill and that is just what I’ll do. Now, if there’s any— “

“You will not fire at that ship, that’s an order!” Máraxi snapped at her, then turned to face Chando, who seemed to be watching their conversation with great interest. He stepped forward and raised his hands to plead for everyone to calm down.

“There is no need for all of this bickering, ladies. Please, Captain Tailspin. I think we’ve evened the odds enough. There is no need to take

more lives than we have to. Now, leave that ship be. That is a direct order from your contractor," he stated with a calm that was unbecoming the situation.

"Grey, don't fire! Orders from our contractor!" Kayla shouted to someone in the back of the room.

"Ma'am, the station has released its lock on the cruiser, but its weapons are still powered up," the tactical officer reported.

Máraxi exhaled deeply, her shoulders sagging.

"Captain Tailspin, you may do with the station as you see fit after we have left. Until then, keep using its weapons to disable targets. Please, try not to spill any more blood. Our goal is to destroy the enemy's factory, not to take lives. Are we in agreement?"

A slight hesitation on Kayla's part followed, but she nodded back at him. "We are," she replied with a false grin.

"Good. We expect the enemy reinforcements to be within firing range in less than a minute now. I suggest we all prepare, regroup the fleet and focus our attacks on the incoming cruisers and patrol vessels. Let's just hope our team down there will return to us swiftly and successfully."

\* \* \*

Sneaking around with two heavily armoured Kraut had proven to be close to impossible, but fortunately, the cargo hold appeared to be almost devoid of personnel. As they had traversed the hold, they had already planted several explosives on pillars inside. When they carefully proceeded into the factory halls, the noise became so loud they could hardly hear one another.

Production lines stretched as far as Serra could see. An almost endless stream of polydrones were being constructed. She tried to get an estimation of the numbers, counting twelve separate lines with androids in various stages of completion on them. The hall was glowing with red light from the forges that were used to melt the metals as they were poured into several moulds. How the Empire had managed to streamline the production of the polydrones in such a short time almost seemed impos-

sible to her. She looked over her shoulder and saw Philbin having similar trouble believing what they were seeing. He shook his head and walked up to her. His lips moved, but she couldn't hear a word he said. She got down on one knee, allowing the small, blue man to reach her ears.

"I said: This is not possible! The construction of the brain is too complex for them to create these polydrones at such a staggering rate!" he shouted in her ears. She winced and comforted her ear for a moment.

"Then what is this?" she asked, her voice raised enough for everyone to hear.

"Beats me! Let's find that mainframe, maybe it'll give us the answers we need!" Philbin shouted back.

She grabbed the tinkerer by the arm and yanked him behind a large cargo container. The others had already seen the Saranus workers closing in on their position. As they got closer, the party made sure they were out of the reptilians' sight.

"That was a bit too close for comfort," Serra said, catching her breath after holding it for nearly half a minute. They kept hugging the wall as they marched towards the far exit, where the mainframe was supposed to be located, if Philbin's readings were correct.

Besides the occasional group of workers, the conveyor belt area seemed to have little to no people around. Which was just fine, Serra thought, but it also made her feel uncomfortable. With the exception of the group they had taken out earlier, the place seemed to be extremely poorly defended, in all likelihood because the Empire wasn't expecting anyone to attack it. But even if that were true, she couldn't shake an uneasiness that went through her, like a shiver from a cold wind. Especially after Philbin's statement about the production process being nigh impossible.

The door leading to the server area slid shut behind them. Now, she felt a shudder as she entered the air-conditioned area. The sound from the production line became a muffled background noise.

The server room was a lot larger than she had anticipated. It was rectangular, with rows of servers all hooked up to one big computer core in the centre. The walls were at least seven metres tall. Four cooling tanks were

attached to the enormous, cylindrical mainframe, which stood at least five metres tall and two metres wide. Wires and pipes connected everything in the room into one massive 'think-tank'. At the far side of the room was a door similar to the one they had entered through.

"Can hear others again," Guilty said as he let his burning eyes pass over the room.

"Yep. Now just let me get to work on this baby and we'll get the hell out of here!" Philbin said, already heading towards the largest machine inside the room.

A click from behind Serra alerted her. When she turned her head to the door, a red light flashed above it. Meanwhile, the door on the other side of the room slid open. She walked to the door with the red light, but it didn't open like it had before. Perhaps her conclusion had been a bit premature. Maybe this had been an elaborate trap after all. Footsteps came from the other side, accompanied by the sound of someone clapping slowly.

"Well done! You've made it to the mainframe," a dark, distorted voice said. Serra's jaw dropped as Baynam, her former colleague and friend, stepped from behind a wall of servers. Another figure accompanied him: the prototype android, NTT-36, possessed most likely by Shi'fisso. Its face was heavily scarred with burns, but otherwise it seemed to have survived their encounter back on Saridia.

"And I see you've brought friends! The Master Tinkerer and his burning buddy. I see you are both still alive and well. I still wonder how you two managed to escape from our little party on Taniguchi Station," the merged Shaedon/human said.

Up this close, Serra finally had a chance to study him. He had grown at least half a metre taller and had become more muscular after the merging. Otherwise, it seemed like only his skin colour had changed to a dulled gray and seemed to be transparent, if only slightly so. A half-consumed cigar dangled from the corner of his mouth. He took a big whiff and exhaled the smoke, then threw it on the floor.

"So, you've got us here. Now what?" Serra asked defiantly.

Baynam's eyes widened with mild surprise. His smile turned to a grin.

“What I want is your surrender, so we can use you as a bargaining chip with NanoTech and the remainder of your so-called fleet. They are doing quite well, actually. We are just sending in a couple more patrols, to make it seem like we actually wish to defend this place.”

Philbin’s mouth opened with the realization that he had been right all along.

“Aha! So this place is just something you conjured up to distract us from getting to the real factory?”

Again the Shaedon applauded. “We are dealing with a true genius here!” he said excitedly. He was enjoying every moment of this conversation, Serra realized.

“That would also explain why those other androids were so easily disposed of. You are just creating them as cannon fodder,” the little blue man concluded.

“Oh man, you are right again! If only you would have been on our side. Things would have been so much easier,” Baynam said, his smiling face soon fading into an annoyed grimace.

“Then the destruction of this facility would still be a loss to you,” Serra said. From the corner of her eyes, she had seen Philbin working on something on his wrist pad by touch only. He had been holding his arms behind his back all this time, and seemed to be inputting every command from memory.

“We’d love to stay for a chat, but we’ve got a ship to catch,” Philbin said, as he completed the final sequence on his wrist pad.

“Ta-dah,” he said as all coolers shut down and the mainframe’s lights started flickering.

“So what? You’ve just hacked into the system. You’ll never leave this place alive.”

Baynam nodded at Shi’fisso. The Shaedon controlling the prototype aimed the palm of its right hand at the Master Tinkerer. The weapon was charging, and within three seconds, a blinding stream of energy shot out in the direction of the small man. Right before it would hit him, Guilty Ember moved into place, damaging his armour and tearing the torso apart. The Kraut reverted to a liquid form and poured out of his protective shell, flooding the area with heat.

“Now this is more like it!” Baynam exclaimed, drawing his guns.

## Chapter 22 – Empirical Evidence

“How long before those ships will be within weapon range?” Ráz asked, turning his gaze towards Gurigeg. The Veraan looked up from his station’s control panel with a troubled frown.

“Less than. Ten seconds. Their weapons. Have been. Charged,” he replied.

“Raise our shields and hail them. Perhaps they’ll listen to reason.”

“Attempting to hail the ship in the lead,” Lieutenant Solstrada said as her hands darted over the communications station’s controls.

“Activate our weapon systems, Mr. Gurigeg. I want them to know that we will defend ourselves if necessary.”

“Aye, sir,” the Veraan said while studying the information on his screen.

“Three more. Seconds,” he added.

“They’re not responding to our hails, sir,” Myrlana stated a little louder than she had to. The tension was growing all over the bridge, enveloping all of them with a sense of apprehension, perhaps even fear. Ráz wasn’t sure what it was he felt. Mostly regret for having allowed this stupendous rescue attempt.

“Incoming weapons—” Before Gurigeg could finish his sentence, the ship rocked. Its shield had been hit by incoming enemy fire.

“Return fire! Focus on the leading ship!” Ráz shouted as he only barely made it back into his seat.

“Returning. Fire!”

The leading scout ship fired another laser salvo at the *Sprite Darter*, peppering its shield, which crackled under the stress. It held firmly, though. The front row of laser batteries on the *Sprite Darter* charged up with bluish white light. Half a second later, bright beams burst from them, blasting the aft side of the enemy ship apart. Its lights dimmed as it drifted forward, its back side reduced to molten slag. The other ship

evaded its ally nimbly, passing by the *Sprite Darter* while in turn pounding on the shield of its adversary. Its crew, probably realizing they were no match for the alien ship, created distance between them, awaiting the arrival of the two ships in the vicinity. As if it were a hungry predator, the *Sprite Darter* chased its quarry. Just as it was about to catch up to it, the other two ships joined in, flanking the interloper's ship and attacking it bravely. Anticipating such a manoeuvre, the *Sprite Darter* nimbly went into a barrel roll, causing nearly all of the incoming fire to miss. Making a quick loop, it managed to get behind one of the three ships and blasted right through its meagre defences. The other two bravely, or foolishly, returned fire at the exact moment when their comrade was destroyed. Their focused attack caused the shield on the starboard side to momentarily collapse, exposing the hull to further attack. The two ships regrouped and turned around to face their foe head on. Just as the *Sprite Darter* turned around too, a projectile was launched from its aft side, emitting an intense, menacing green glow. As if it were orientating, the torpedo sat still for a moment, then propelled itself forward with an ever growing velocity until it hit one of the remaining two ships in the side and exploded into bright light. Only floating, burning debris remained of the ship. The other one continued its course toward the intruder, coming in ever closer. Apparently attempting a kamikaze manoeuvre, it fired upon the *Sprite Darter* as it charged forward, but in the blink of an eye, the trespassing ship seemed to implode and vanish from sight. The remaining scout ship flew onward with maximum velocity, quickly setting course back to the nearest planet. Just as it reduced its speed, as if out of nowhere, the nimble Alliance ship came in hard from its port and blew it to smithereens.

"That was. All of. Them, sir," Gurigeg reported with a sigh of relief.

"Good work, everyone! Damage report!" Ráz shouted, his hands still clenching the armrests of his chair.

"Minor damage to the shield emitters. Several crew members have reported to sick bay with bruises and mild concussions. The twin magicka core will need some recalibration after that stunt we just pulled off," Guid said for Nicol.

Räz gave both twins a good look. He exhaled deeply and got up from his chair.

Grummus and Gyn stepped out of the turbolift as its door slid open.

“What just happened?” Grummus asked, his eyes going over the entire bridge until his gaze met Räz’. He didn’t like the look in the Windmaster’s eyes one bit. It came across as a mix of relief and regret. The sad frown on his face seemed to agree with his eyes.

“We were just in a fight with four scout vessels. I didn’t see any other option but to destroy them,” Räz said, his voice sounding grave. He seemed to avoid Grummus’ bright green eyes, which annoyed the Scarowyn to no end.

“Why not just disable them? Now the Empire will wonder what destroyed those four vessels, won’t they?” Grummus asked.

“We tried hailing them, Grummus, but they didn’t respond. The next thing we knew, they opened fire on us. We only acted out of self-defence,” Räz said in an attempt to justify the destruction of four ships and their crews. He turned his head away from Grummus again, who just stepped aside to ensure that he could no longer look away. He grabbed Räz by the shoulder.

“You did what you had to do,” he said.

“If we hadn’t gone on your so-called rescue mission, we wouldn’t have taken so many lives and risked our own!” Räz spat back. Only then did Grummus realize the words had come out wrong and sounded more like an accusation than anything else.

“I didn’t mean to —“

“Those two guys better be worth everything we just risked, Grummus. Please get out of my sight now, before I do anything else I might regret doing,” Räz said, his voice lowered to a dark rasp and his eyes narrowed to slits.

“I-I’m sorry ...” the young Earthmaster muttered as he turned around and headed right back into the lift.

\* \* \*

“Hold still a moment, please,” Doctor Tyria Sarendis said, giving the old Scarowyn a stern look with her bright white eyes. The Xoron doctor brushed aside a strand of her graying hair that was blocking her vision, then reapplied the scanning device to Vladpoe’s chest to continue her inspection. The device beeped a few moments later, and she inspected its diagnostics on her computer. The old man gave her a warm, toothy smile and looked at her expectantly. She looked over the top of her screen, smiling with her eyes.

“I’m going to give you a clean bill of health!”

“Thank you, dear doctor,” Vladpoe said, getting up from the biobed and putting his hat back on his balding head.

“Will he be all right?” he asked as he cocked his head towards Emeron, who was sound asleep on one of the other biobeds in the sick-bay.

“All he needs is some rest. Fixing a broken leg isn’t that hard nowadays. He’ll be up and running in a couple of days, or well, perhaps not running ... Pardon the expression.”

The old Scarowyn snickered softly at her. She couldn’t help but giggle in return.

“Well, if there’s nothing else you are going to keep me here for, I’ll be on my way to speak with this Grummus. You wouldn’t happen to know where I can find the lad?”

Tyria shrugged at him and shook her head.

“Never mind, good doctor. I’ll find him myself. He can’t be far,” the Scarowyn said, tipping his hat at her.

Stepping into the corridor, Vladpoe nearly bumped into Grummus, who hadn’t been paying any mind to his surroundings.

“Whoa there, lad. Careful where you’re going!”

“I’m sorry ...”

“It just so happens I was looking for you,” Vladpoe said with a friendly twinkle in his eyes.

Grummus frowned at him for a moment, then returned a smile. “You were? I’m not exactly in a mood to talk right now. I was just on my way to my quarters.”

“Perfect, then you can show them to me and we can have a chat. It’s been so long since I’ve spoken to a fellow Scarowyn,” the old man said, putting a comforting hand on Grummus’ shoulder, gently urging him to walk on.

“What are you doing in Empire space anyway?”

A chuckle came from the old man. “That’s a long story, but I’m sure we have some time on our hands, eh?”

Grummus shrugged as he threw the old man a glance. “I suppose.”

“Listen, I wouldn’t want to impose too much, but seeing you just made me so curious how things are on Wyngaya. It’s been too long and perhaps this old man should return home, finally.”

Just after they went around the corner, Grummus stopped in front of a door and deactivated its lock. The door slid open with a gentle hiss. He turned to face Vladpoe and welcomed him in.

The first thing Grummus noticed was that the Wyngayan sprout he had brought along had fallen over during the attack. Soil had spilled out from the large pot, but otherwise it seemed undamaged. Besides the sprout, his room had been decorated almost entirely with natural materials, a polished wooden table and a comfortable sofa. The only pieces of technology found inside were the ones that had to be there: environmental controls, artificial lighting and a mandatory computer terminal with access to the ship’s database. The bedroom had been altered to accommodate its Scarowyn occupant. Instead of a bed, there was a large container filled with rich soil for him to regenerate in. In fact, it had been a while since he had done so, and realizing just that made him feel all the more tired.

“Please, have a seat,” he said, sitting down himself.

Vladpoe picked the other side of the sofa and put his hat down on the table, revealing his balding head. He gave Grummus a warm smile and sighed softly.

“Like I said, it’s been a long time since I’ve been on Wyngaya. I can’t even remember how long, to be honest. How is Mulgayus these days? Is she still as vibrant as ever?”

A glint of pride appeared in the young Earthmaster's eyes. He nodded at Vladpoe.

"Yes, she's doing great. All of Wyngaya is doing well. Our efforts are mostly off-world nowadays. Helping the people of the Alliance to mend their broken worlds, allowing them a second chance," he said with pride.

"I'm glad to hear that, son. Tell me, how is old Leafbeard doing? I've been sending him my research findings whenever I've had the chance to do so."

The mention of the Elder's name filled Grummus with a sadness he thought he had buried somewhere deep. He looked at Vladpoe with watery eyes, then looked down at the floor.

"Did he return to the Earth Mother?" the old man asked, sounding a little uncertain.

Grummus just nodded, staring at the floor, recalling the very moment the Elder had been fatally wounded by Langruff.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Before I left Wyngaya many years ago, Leafbeard and I were good friends, but then I got the wanderlust and I just couldn't stay anymore. I had to go and see the galaxy and explore ..." Vladpoe paused a moment, as if he wasn't sure that Grummus was listening to him. He was, he just didn't feel like talking anymore. However, he was curious about Vladpoe and his story. He raised his head and their eyes met; a sense of understanding hung between them.

"You've got the wanderlust?" Grummus asked politely.

Vladpoe hummed. "Yes ... It's been a cause for both sadness and joy."

The old man sighed and looked as if he remembered something far in his past.

"It's been nearly two hundred years since I left the home world. I've seen all of the Alliance's biggest worlds. Leafbeard made me promise to do research on all flora on each planet I'd visit. I happily agreed with him and always sent my notes back to him. Usually there would be some freighter captain heading to Wyngaya, or I'd find some other way. I made new friends, lost most of them too, in the end," he said wistfully.

"How did you end up in Empire space?" Grummus asked.

Vladpoe sat and stared with glazed eyes for a moment, a thoughtful frown smeared across his face.

"I usually manage to hitch a ride some place ... I can't quite remember. Some fellow heading into the Empire was kind enough to bring me along for the ride. At least, that's how I usually manage to get around."

"You never got into any trouble with the Empire?" Grummus asked, raising a curious eyebrow.

The old Scarowyn shook his head. "Not really," he said, clearing his throat before continuing. "The Empire isn't so bad, to be fair. They didn't pay me much mind, since I was on my own. I abided by their rules and most of my time was spent outside of their cities. I would only occasionally visit them, if I had a need of supplies."

Grummus nodded understandingly. He could stay away from 'civilization' for long periods of time too. He understood Vladpoe all too well.

"How did you end up with that Xoron fellow?"

"Emeron?"

"Yes, the Windblade."

"Well, I was just minding my own business, really. It was by pure chance, if you will. Now that I think about it, I was quite lucky to have met them when I did."

"How so?"

"The planet we were on was marked for terraforming. We only just managed to get off it in time before the Empire applied their technology on the planet. It wiped pretty much all fauna from the surface."

Grummus' eyes widened and his jaw dropped at the words of his fellow Scarowyn.

"They have technology that can do that?" he asked, his voice trembling.

Vladpoe pursed his lips and nodded. "Wasn't the first time I've seen them use it either. In fact, I was on one planet when they applied the terraforming process. It was a strange, tingling sensation. I was glad and lucky to have survived at all!"

Thinking of the implications of such technology made the young Earthmaster's head spin.

"This is bad. What if they were to use it as a weapon?"

Vladpoe shrugged at him. "I suppose they could. I hadn't thought about that, actually ... The Empire may seem war-oriented, but that's

only because of the Saranus. Have you ever met the Mandar? They are very much like our distant cousins. Their Gun'ja masters are extremely skilled in the use of Earth and Water magicka. Their cities are wondrous and made entirely of natural materials. They even grow trees and plants in such a way that people can live inside of them!" the old man said, his eyes full of wonder, as if he was picturing their cities in his mind's eye.

Grummus hung on every word Vladpoe had said, but then the grimness of reality came back to him. His thoughts wandered back to this world-altering technology.

"We need to tell the others about this," he said.

"Oh, I agree! If there's anything we should be doing now, it would be visiting the Mandar! My old friend Saloman Romana should be of great help to us," Vladpoe said, clearly oblivious to Grummus' intended subject. Grummus gave him a curious look and swallowed the words he had intended to speak. Instead, he asked: "You have friends in the Empire?"

"Oh yes. In fact, Saloman isn't just any Mandar. he's the Regent of Anugaris," Vladpoe boasted.

"Let's head up to the bridge. We need to speak with Rüz about this."

\* \* \*

Although Rüz had not been in a particularly good mood after having made the choice to destroy the pursuing scout ships, he wasn't mad at Grummus anymore. Both he and the old Scarowyn had come into his office. The old man had told him everything he told Grummus a moment ago.

"I don't quite see why we should be visiting this friend of yours. Our mission is to seek out the Emperor and see if he's willing to listen to reason," Rüz said. Hearing the words as they passed his lips, he realized just how foolish that sounded. If the four scout ships already attacked them without so much as a word, why would the Emperor treat them any differently?

Vladpoe shook his head with his gaze fixed on the floor, then looked back at Rüz.

"I'm afraid you will not be able to speak to the Emperor at all."

"Why is that?" Rüz asked, tilting his head slightly.

"Because the Emperor is no longer in power. Hasn't been for the past ten years or so. I'm surprised you didn't know."

Rüz threw a questioning glance at Grummus. The Scarowyn gave him a blank look and raised his shoulders.

"What happened to him?" Grummus asked.

"Saloman explained this to me once, the Emperor enters a rebirth cycle every couple of centuries. During the start of the cycle, he is no longer capable of running the Empire, until he reaches a certain age. He should be nearing the proper age soon, though."

"And what happens to the Empire during this time?" Rüz asked, looking at Vladpoe intently.

"Well, obviously the Empire can't be run by just one person. Even an Emperor needs councillors and sub-rulers. That is why during this time of rebirth, there is a council which takes over the Emperor's responsibilities. They are known as the Council of Seven, each of the members concerning themselves with different aspects of the Empire," Vladpoe explained.

Both Grummus and Rüz sat there for a moment, pondering what this meant for their mission. The silence was broken when Grummus asked: "Couldn't we just plea to the Council then?"

Vladpoe gave him a warm smile and shook his head. "You could, but the Council will not listen to you. Your only hope will be to speak with the Emperor himself. I'm absolutely certain of this," he said gravely.

"And you think Saloman will listen and help us find the Emperor somehow?" Rüz asked doubtfully.

"I know the least he will do is listen. That is more than what you can expect from the Seven."

The Windmaster looked out the window of his office, ran a hand through his hair and sighed softly. He looked at his friend and first mate, whose bright green eyes seemed to glow with a determination he had trouble finding himself.

"We need to do this, Rüz," Grummus said.

Despite his better judgement, Rüz realized that if what Vladpoe had just told them was true, then this was probably their best option. Their only option, even.

“Would you happen to know where Anugaris is, if we showed you a star chart?” Rüz asked cautiously.

The old Scarowyn nodded at him, a confident smile appearing on his face.

“Then let’s hope your friend will be as helpful as you think he will be. If he isn’t, I don’t see any other option but to return back home empty-handed.”

Grummus got up from the couch and put his right hand on Rüz’ shoulder. The same flicker of determination appeared in his vivid eyes.

“We are not giving up, Rüz. Not now, not ever. Defiance will always find a way, like weeds through the cracks of concrete,” he said with a confidence that Rüz had never before seen in him.

Rüz stood up and nodded at him. “Agreed. Let’s do this, my friend.”

\* \* \*

“Now nearing Anugaris, sir,” Oline said, looking over her shoulder towards Rüz.

“Very well. Any ships in the vicinity?” Rüz asked, turning to face the tactical officers.

“The amount of ships here is considerable, Captain. We will not be able to decloak without being noticed. Our scanners have picked up at least a dozen ships in this sector. Most of them seem to be converging on the planet,” Gyn answered as his gaze went over the display at his station.

“Any bright ideas?” Rüz asked in general. A short silence followed; nearly all of the bridge crew seemed to be considering the limited amount of options they had.

“I don’t mean to be rude,” Vladpoe said, breaking the silence, “but wouldn’t it be a good idea if we hailed the planet and announced our intentions to the people of Anugaris? It seems a bit rude to attempt to transport there covertly. Wouldn’t you agree?”

"I think Vladpoe is right, Rüz. If our intentions are peaceful, shouldn't we at least make it seem like they truly are?"

Rüz pursed his lips ponderously as he paced around the bridge.

"We didn't travel this far just to hide in the shadows," Grummus added carefully.

Rüz agreed that going back wasn't an option, but at the same time revealing themselves would expose the ship and its crew to a possible attack. Even if this so-called friend of the old Scarowyn was friendly, others within the Empire might not be like him. The attack by the four scout ships earlier had been evidence of that fact. Why would the captains aboard the other vessels be any different in the way they treated alien vessels?

"Mr. Gyn, if we decloak our vessel, what would our chances of escape be if we would find ourselves in a combat situation?" he asked, hoping that the Kevlar would supply him with a positive outcome.

The Lt. Commander studied his tactical display, as did his direct colleague. They briefly exchanged glances and Gyn nodded at Gurigeg to indicate that he could speak.

"Most of. These ships. Here are. Of lesser. Design than. Our ship. We would. Easily. Outrun them. However. There is. A convoy. Not far. From here. If they. Were to. Intervene. We'd be. In a. Heap of. Trouble," the Veraan answered. Although Rüz had trouble listening to the amphibian humanoid, his point had come across clearly.

"In other words, we would be at considerable risk?" he asked, folding his arms.

Both the Kevlar and Veraan nodded at him.

"In other words, we don't really have any other option," Grummus said, moving in front of Rüz.

"I don't care much for a repeating of what happened earlier. Surely you understand," the Windmaster said to his friend.

"I do, but given the situation, I think you shouldn't just assume that these people are all hostile towards us."

"Those ships we engaged earlier wouldn't even answer to our hails. None of them. Why would it be any different here?" Rüz retorted, waving his hands around as he tried to make his point.

"Gentlemen, it is obvious that you are in disagreement. Wouldn't it be prudent to agree to disagree?" Vladpoe asked with his typical calmness.

"That won't solve this problem. I'm not willing to put my crew at risk just to see if this friend of yours is willing to talk," Rüz said.

The old man just nodded at him understandingly, then shifted his gaze towards the young Earthmaster.

"What is your opinion, Grummus?"

The Earthmaster shook his head and shrugged. "I don't see Rüz and me agreeing on this. Perhaps we should vote with the bridge crew. I think everyone here should have a say in this matter. It shouldn't be just the Captain's choice, if you ask me."

Vladpoe cocked an eyebrow at Rüz. "Would that be acceptable? In that case, it would serve the Greater Good, would it not?"

"I don't believe you truly understand the Xoron definition of the Greater Good ..." Rüz sighed. "But for the sake of my own conscience and that of the crew, I suppose a vote would be acceptable. Let's meet in the conference room in five minutes," Rüz said, already heading towards the door leading there.

The voting had not taken long and had been nearly unanimous. With the exception of two, Rüz and Gyn, everyone had voted in favour of contacting the authorities on Anugaris. The tension grew on the bridge as everyone waited for their captain to give the order to decloak.

Rüz threw a sideways glance at Grummus. The young Earthmaster thought he detected a combination of determination and purpose in those golden-white eyes. Perhaps Vladpoe's interference in their argument had been a good thing. At least now they were finally getting somewhere. He agreed with Rüz on many things, but they had to take this chance.

"Chief engineers, please take us out of stealth mode. Lieutenant Solstrada, open a channel and hail the planet on all frequencies," Rüz said. His voice was unwavering, but his breathing had changed. Grummus could see it easily. The Windmaster was holding his breath in anticipation of an answer. A brief, uncomfortable smile appeared on Grummus'

face as he looked at his friend once more. A slight startle followed as the viewscreen changed to the image of an amphibian humanoid. Its skin was a combination of bright blue and green, and its eyes were mostly black, with a yellow edge. The very frog-like creature seemed to study the contents of the viewscreen intently. The Mandar wore official, regal-looking clothing made of a fine red fabric that reflected the light of the room smoothly.

“Unidentified vessel, you are in violation of Empire law by trespassing in our territory. State your name and identification, in the name of the Eternal One Zar’Kiln,” the Mandar said, with a raspy, croaking voice.

Rätz stepped forward and made a friendly greeting gesture.

“I am Captain Rätz Numera of the *Sprite Darter*. We come in peace and seek an audience with the regent, Saloman Romana.”

The Mandar twisted its head a few times, as if it was attempting to validate Rätz’ statement.

“You are a Xoron. A member of the Intergalactic Alliance. And you,” the Mandar said, pointing at Grummus, “you are a Scarowyn. All you people are Alliance members, are you not? Why are you here?”

Grummus stepped forward, next to Rätz, and gestured with his hands for the Mandar to calm down and listen to him. It looked at him with curious eyes.

“We were sent here on a diplomatic mission to stop a war from happening between the Alliance and the Empire. It is of great importance that we speak to your regent, please.”

The Mandar’s eyes widened and it seemed distracted by something off-screen.

“How did you even make it this deep into our territory?” it asked, its voice changing a little to mild curiosity.

“This ship is equipped with a cloaking device. It was our only way of ensuring we’d make it this far,” Rätz explained. From the corner of his eyes, Grummus noticed Vladpoe stepping in next to him. The elderly Scarowyn cleared his throat.

“My dear, would you be so kind to tell the great Saloman Romana, Regent of Anugaris, Master of Gun’ja and son of Munatan Romana, that his old friend Vladpoe Witherleaf has come to visit?”

Again the Mandar turned its head off-screen, then looked back and nodded.

“Please stand by,” the Mandar said. The viewscreen went dark for a moment, without disconnecting the session. A moment later, the same Mandar appeared.

“The Regent will grant you an audience. Only five of you may come down to the planet’s surface. Choose your company and we will welcome you to our home world. I will transfer coordinates for our meeting. Long live the Emperor!”

The connection was broken before anyone could reply. Rüz and Grummus turned towards each other. The looks on their faces were similar in both surprise and shock. Grummus turned towards Vladpoe, who was just standing there, giving him a warm smile.

\* \* \*

Grummus was the last to pass through the portal to the surface of Anugaris. It immediately crumbled to pieces with the sound of rumbling stone. The remains turned to dust until no trace was left of its existence. He adjusted his hat and checked if everyone was all right. Rüz, Vladpoe and the Wynn twins all seemed to be. A delegation of nearly ten Mandar was already waiting for them at the agreed coordinates. Grummus found the planet to resemble some places he had visited on Wynnaya. Where they were currently standing, the ground was firm, but everywhere he looked the surface was covered with freshwater swamp forest. Only a few pieces of land seemed to have been spared the wetness that covered the forest floor like a thick, reflective sauce. The air was swarming with insects, and although Grummus himself didn’t mind them so much, the others in his company were constantly swatting at them as they came into contact with their skin. He noticed that Vladpoe didn’t seem to be as bothered either. Perhaps because the insects were only attracted to non-floral lifeforms. The air was humid and smelled unpleasantly murky.

“Vladpoe Witherleaf, our Regent and Gun’ja Master, the honourable Saloman Romana, welcomes you and your party to Anugaris. We trust your intentions are peaceful, but nevertheless, we would ask that you transfer any weapons you might carry to one of the guards here. They shall be returned to you upon departure from our home,” the Mandar dressed in formal gown said as she stepped forward with a grace that seemed oddly pleasing to Grummus’ eyes. It was strange to him, because the only amphibian race he had encountered before were the Veraan, and they were entirely different in both appearance and demeanour. Two others stepped forward, their hands open to receive any weapons the party might carry with them. Both of them were dressed in a sleek type of gleaming white armour made of a non-metallic material Grummus could not quite place. Thick, red, velvety capes were draped over their shoulders and back.

Ráz looked at him over his shoulder. “Did you bring your orb?” he asked.

Grummus nodded at him as he took it out from his bag and handed it over to one of the guards. Ráz reluctantly reached for his orb as well and gave it to the other guard.

“None of you carry any weapons, right?” Ráz asked, giving the others a quick look-over.

Vladpoe shook his head at him.

“Our only weapons are our brains,” the Wynk twins said in concert.

Grummus could hear Vladpoe snickering softly at their witty remark.

“Very well. Follow us, please,” the Mandar said, beckoning as she took the lead. The remaining Mandar formed a circle around the party. It made Grummus feel slightly uncomfortable, although he didn’t feel like they were in any immediate danger.

The party continued their road to the regent over the hardened parts of the swamp forest floor, which seemed to form an elaborate network of paths. Small, glowing plants grew along them, bringing their warm, green illumination to the environment that was starting to grow dark as the sun set. Ráz had tried speaking with the Mandar representative shortly after they had left their meeting spot, but she had been adamant

in remaining silent until they had spoken to the Regent himself. Now, Ráz seemed to be studying their environment with his eyes wide open, taking in every detail of this strange, new place. Grummus had done the same thing the moment he had stepped through the portal. It made him realize just how appealing it was to visit new worlds. In a sense, he understood Vladpoe's urge to travel. With the difference that Vladpoe's wanderlust was not just an urge, but more like a mental illness. At least, that's how most of Scarowyn society seemed to think about the wanderlust. An uncontrollable thirst to explore the unknown, never being able to stay at one place for extended periods of time.

Halting at a hollow tree, the representative turned around and gestured towards it.

"Please, enter," she said, although Grummus found it sounded more like an order than a request. Ráz was the first to enter. As soon as he did, a strange bubble formed around him, and he immediately dropped out of sight. The others followed suit, with Grummus being the last remaining party member. He frowned at the Mandar.

"Where is this taking us, exactly?" he asked. Why the others had followed her order so blindly, he could only guess.

"To our esteemed leader. Please, it's perfectly safe," she said in a reassuring manner. With slight hesitation, Grummus entered. There was a brief moment of silence, followed by the sensation of being entirely weightless as the bubble surrounded him. A tingling inside his belly slowly built up as the bubble went through the tube with increasing velocity. The darkness confused him, and before too long, he had no clue which way was up, or down. In the distance he could see a faint light, growing brighter and brighter until the pipe became transparent. He was in some kind of underground lake, completely hidden from the surface. When he gazed around, he realized that the ceiling was truly solid rock. The light instead seemed to come from thousands of translucent bulbs that grew in large bunches on the rock wall. Deep within their core shone a bright, greenish-blue light that made the rest of the underwater cavern all the more surrealistic to Grummus. A large school of neon-coloured fish passed him by. They were even emitting light them-

selves, as if nature had decided that down here, where the sun could not reach, every creature and plant should help illuminate the wondrous environment. Large coral reefs popped up in the distance, as well as some gargantuan domes. The closer Grummus came, the more details he picked up. A skyline of large buildings that were all made from natural materials. Almost as if the city itself had grown, instead of had been built. He could see hundreds of Mandar moving through the city. One of the domes had an opening on the side where a group of them came out to work on the crops of underwater plants. They were using simple diving gear to sustain themselves. He was almost at the end of the tube now.

With a soft pop, the bubble ceased to exist. Grummus found himself in a lobby with signs pointing towards more tubes, each of them leading to different destinations. The others had assembled at the other side of the room. The floor was covered with a layer of crimson tiles, while the walls were covered with a creamy white layer of unknown material. It reminded him of plaster. The air was humid and warm, similar to that on the surface. He dusted down his uniform and put his hat back on the right way. Shortly after him, the Mandar representative emerged from the tube. With the same grace as she had displayed before, she placed herself in front of the visitors.

“Welcome to our fair city, Catesba.”

“We are humbled by your hospitality,” Rüz said, bowing deeply. The Mandar seemed to appreciate the flattery. Grummus caught a glimpse of a faint smile on her broad mouth.

“This city truly is a work of art,” Grummus added, smiling warmly at the representative.

“The Regent’s gardens are just a few streets away from this building. He will greet you there. Afterwards, depending on how your meeting goes, we might be able to give you a tour of our city and its many wonders,” she said, walking forward towards the room’s only exit. The doorway was a semicircle with a transparent door. As soon as she approached it, the door made a popping noise and the translucent material was gone, similar to how the bubble had disappeared before. Grummus

frowned curiously at Râz, who seemed to be similarly surprised at the door's mechanism. As soon as everyone had passed, the thin layer was built up again from the sides until it closed off the entire arch.

As they walked through the streets of Catesba, the party caught the eye of many passers-by. Some of them poked one another and pointed at them from a safe distance, whispering at each other. Most of them moved out of the way as soon as they saw the representative, the guards and the party heading in their direction. The streets contained a similar type of crimson tiles as the gathering hall, which were overgrown with a layer of bluish moss. When they turned the corner, Grummus noticed an archway that was covered entirely in vines and beautiful light blue flowers. It was at least three metres in height and allowed everyone a glimpse inside. Several streams, fountains and small bridges were the first things that caught Grummus' eye. It became evident that whoever had designed this garden had put a great deal of effort into its design and layout. As they passed through the archway, he saw that the streams of water flowed in an elaborate pattern to form a symbol of sorts. It was both pleasing and relaxing to gaze at.

In the middle of the garden, a person was tending to the flowers. He wore robes similar to the ones the representative was wearing, but they seemed even more elaborately decorated. He looked over his shoulder as he heard the group enter the gardens. A broad smile appeared on the toad-like face. The regent was a small, obese-looking man. His green-skinned head was covered with dark green warts. His eyes shone with a serenity and wisdom that Grummus recognized from the Scarowyn Elders. Leafbeard had had the same sort of look in his eyes when he had greeted the younger Earthmasters. The regent beckoned them over as he got himself seated on a tree that was conveniently shaped to form a bench of sorts.

"Master Witherleaf, what brings you to our fair city?" Saloman asked with a deep, dry, croaky voice.

Vladpoe stood in front of the regent and bowed deeply before he spoke.

"Wise Regent Romana, I've come here with friends. They wish to speak to you on behalf of their Alliance."

The regent fell silent as he gave everyone a good look. He hummed and closed his eyes momentarily, as if he was contemplating something. Grummus threw a puzzled glance at Rüz, who returned a similar look as he raised his shoulders.

“There is no ill will among any of you,” Saloman said, his eyes still closed, “Your coming here had been foretold by the waters of this very garden.”

The bright yellow and black eyes of the regent opened again. He turned his head towards Rüz and looked at him intently as he got up and moved within mere centimetres of the Windmaster’s face.

“Your eyes are not your own,” Saloman said. He held Rüz’ head with both his hands and gently turned it, so he could inspect the Xoron better.

Rüz opened his mouth, but before he could speak a word, Saloman shushed him.

“These eyes are ancient ... they have seen times long forgotten. Yet you have not. Only shards of the past. An incoherent mess of old memories, which you fail to grasp. In time, you will see the past once more and then, clarity will come to you. But that time has not come yet.”

The regent gently let go of Rüz and took a few steps back. With a broad smile on his face, he turned his attention to Grummus.

“The Scarowyn! Before Vladpoe I had only heard of you people. Such a gentle folk. You know, the Mandar and Scarowyn aren’t that much different. We both value life and we care little for technology. I would welcome you to stay here once, when time permits it. For now, you have a job to do, I believe.”

Saloman moved on, until he was standing before the Wynk twins. He twisted his head curiously a few times.

“I do not believe I have ever heard of your species before, but I sense a deep connection between the two of you. An unbreakable bond,” he said, closing his eyes again.

“A bond with the element of Water, ha!”

His eyes opened again. Both twins simply nodded at him respectfully without saying a word.

The regent shuffled back towards the tree and sat down again.

“Now, what is it that I can do for you?” he asked, giving Rāz a questioning look, “You, the one with the eyes that are not your own. Speak your mind.”

With slight hesitation, Rāz cleared his throat to speak.

“We were sent on a mission to the Empire to prevent a war from happening between our peoples. We believe the Empire is under the control of an ancient enemy of my people. Our intention is to expose them and show the Empire its true enemy,” he said, never pausing or stuttering as he made his statement.

The Regent shook his head as he pressed a finger against his lower lip.

“This deceit by the shadow creatures has already come to my attention. The Council of Seven is no longer working in the best interest of the Empire. The usurper has skilfully deceived everyone else within the Empire. They follow blindly, not knowing who is truly in control. Yet, there might still be hope,” Saloman smiled as he got up once more. He crossed one of the smaller bridges and beckoned the group over.

“Walk with me, please.”

Opposite the entrance to the gardens, a passageway led inside the Regent’s palace. It was barely lit and winding and it seemed to continue almost infinitely, until they finally ended up in a storage room. From there, it was only a small distance to the chambers where the Gun’ja master received his guests. A raised platform with a sizable sofa, where he could sit comfortably, was located at the far side. The rest of the chamber was decorated with vases filled with flowers that spread a calming aroma. The soft light from the same luminous plants that they had seen before filled the room. Saloman got onto the platform, making sure everyone was present. The guards each took up a position in the room and the representative took a place in front of the platform.

“There is someone you should meet,” Saloman said. A door behind the platform opened. A small, boyish figure emerged from it. It was a Saranus wearing simple clothing. Everything about him was ordinary, with the exception of his eyes. They betrayed an age and wisdom unbecoming of such a young child.

"You wished to stop this war? Who better to plead to than our Emperor Zar'kiln?" Saloman said, gesturing for the child to come closer.

"Who are these people?" he asked, furrowing his brow as his eyes inspected each and every one of them.

"These are people from the Intergalactic Alliance. Our neighbours, as it were. They know about the deceitful creatures that are controlling the Empire. They've come to help us," the regent explained as he got onto the edge of the sofa.

"Excuse me, I remember the Alliance only vaguely," the child said apologetically. "It hasn't been long enough for me to regain most of my older memories."

Rüz stepped forward, but before he could get any closer, he was pushed back. Only the slightly wavy air betrayed the fact that a person was between him and the child emperor.

"Leave him be, Avatica. That is an order!" Zar'kiln said.

The air changed colour and within a mere moment, Rüz found himself standing face to face with an alien he had not seen before. Her eyes seemed to have the upper and lower lids joined together, with only a pinhole large enough for the pupils to see through. Each eye moved separately, giving Rüz an uncomfortable feeling. Her skull was quite big and ended in large, but elegant ridges. She turned to face the Emperor and bowed.

"As you wish, Eternal One," she said with a lisping voice.

"Avatica is my personal bodyguard. She is from a people called the Karakydilus. As she demonstrated just now, she is capable of blending in with her environment."

Avatica bowed respectfully to Zar'kiln, before turning her attention back to Rüz and the others.

"Emperor Zar'kiln, if the deceit by the Shaedon is already clear to you, why have you not taken any action against them?" Rüz asked as politely as he could.

"The process by which the Council was corrupted was gradual and precise. By the time the corruption was detected by Saloman, it was too late."

Grummus stepped forward, right next to Rüz.

“My friend and I have faced a Shaedon before. As far as we know, Rüz here is the only one who can inflict harm to them. They are nearly impossible to defeat. If we can get to Zar, maybe there’s a chance we can abolish this corruption and restore you to power,” the young Earthmaster stated full of confidence. He patted Rüz on the shoulder.

“Is this true?” Zar’kiln asked, giving Rüz a look.

“Four years ago, on my home world, Netherea, we fought one of my former colleagues who had been corrupted by the Shaedon. It took us considerable effort, but in the end, we managed to defeat him.”

The child emperor turned to face Saloman. Without asking the question, the Gun’ja master answered: “I sense only truth and sincerity coming from both of them.”

“You said you fought one of them. The Council consists of seven members. We can only assume that all of them have been corrupted. Do you truly believe you stand a chance against them?” Zar’kiln asked, the question oozing with doubt.

Rüz shook his head and pursed his lips. “I don’t, but there is no other option. If we allow them to continue, we’ll be facing a war that would tear both of our societies to pieces.”

“We have already given this a great deal of thought. You shall be given an opportunity to treat with the Council. But if you fail, we will have to resort to more resolute measures.”

“I understand,” Rüz said, “can we count on your help to get to Zar?”

The boy nodded and gestured towards his personal bodyguard.

“Avatica will join you, along with a team of her best men and women.”

“But—“ the Karakydilus tried.

“I will be fine. Your Emperor demands that you help these aliens,” Zar’kiln ordered.

A simple, understanding nod was all she gave in return.

The Mandar representative went ahead, towards the exit. The guards moved from their positions to escort the party back out. Rüz and the others turned away, after bowing to the child Emperor once more.

“Wait, you,” Zar’kiln said, pointing at Rüz.

“I shall speak to you in private. The rest of you, leave us.”

## Chapter 23 – A Price to Pay

Xer'xis took off his uniform jacket and unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt before pulling it over his head. Water came running out of the faucet when he put his hands in the sink. A few splashes of cold water in his face had seemed like a good idea, but now he wondered if it had really made any difference. He felt only marginally refreshed and it was as if someone had pulled him back to the cold, hard reality that he was now facing. It had been ages since he had heard anything from the *Sprite Darter* and the *Storm Crow*. It felt as if what little control he had left was slipping away, like grains of sand passing through one's fingers. He reached for the nearby towel and dried his face. A gentle but urgent sound came from the door leading into his quarters.

"Come!" he shouted from the bathroom. The sound of the sliding doors reached his ears, followed by soft, elegant footsteps entering the living room area.

"I hope I am not disturbing," Sha'hasra said with the strangely distorted, double voice of Jessi. Her blackened eyes widened as they fell on the naked torso of the Xoron Admiral.

"It's never a good time when it's you," he replied as he walked towards the closet to fetch himself a clean shirt.

"Your features are quite ... *chiselled* ... I think that is the proper term," Sha'hasra said, following his every move.

A sly smirk appeared on his face. Even if she wasn't sincere and this was all just going to lead to more bad news, it somehow felt nice to get a compliment. Even if it was from one of the most devious creatures he'd ever encountered. He pulled the clean shirt over his head and buttoned it up while facing her.

"I would return a compliment, but sadly, your body is not your own."

"My choice of host should be worth a compliment. Jessi's body is young, limber and ... *favourable* among males of your species," Sha'hasra said, a grin forming on her borrowed face.

Xer'xis reached for his jacket and put it back on. He went inside the small kitchen area and fetched himself a hot beverage: Xoron ash leaf tea, made from a plant indigenous to Netherea's many volcanic areas. He took a sip after blowing into the cup.

"I doubt you came here to chitchat," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"Quite perceptive of you. Tell me, have you ever heard of a planet named Jaxxar?" she asked, draping herself over one of the living quarter's armchairs. Xer'xis took a seat in the other one, across from her, and took another sip of his tea.

"It's a planet in the Empire, close to the border with Alliance space. What of it?"

"My reports indicate that four Empire ships have been destroyed in its vicinity, without any trace of their attacker. The Empire has been investigating the destruction of the ships. Of course, they haven't been able to track down the ones responsible for this heinous crime, but rest assured, all signs point towards the Alliance."

She seated herself properly in the chair, comfortably resting her arms on the armrests, and gave him an expectant look, but he would not give her the satisfaction of gloating. In all probability, it had been the *Sprite Darter*. They would pass Jaxxar before heading further into Empire space. Xer'xis was more interested in the implications of the Shaedon's information.

"The Empire was on edge already, but this attack has confirmed what they thought had been true all along. The Alliance is a threat to them. Did you know that Jaxxar is a staging ground for their invasion of Gald Prime?" the Shaedon continued. She apparently knew that Xer'xis was not going to indulge her. She seemed a bit too eager to speak, almost as if she was genuinely excited about what she had just revealed. He tried not to, but the shock in his eyes could not be hidden, not even in the slightest.

"Time is running out, my dear. In three days, the largest Empire fleet in the history of armed conflict between them and your Alliance will wrest control of the economic heart of your society. A promise is a promise, after all. If you remember what I said four years ago."

She threw her head back and cackled loudly.

Xer'xis jumped up from the chair and flung the cup on the floor. It broke into a hundred pieces.

"Get out of my sight!"

His breathing had become erratic and his eyes burned with a primal anger.

"With pleasure," she said, gracefully drifting towards the exit, "my dear ..."

It took him considerable effort to calm himself down, but once his breathing had returned to normal, Xer'xis hailed the bridge.

"Yes, Admiral?" the voice of the commanding bridge officer sounded through the intercom.

"Set a course for the Bastion, maximum velocity. I'll be up there in a minute."

"The Bastion, sir?"

"I'll explain when I get there."

\* \* \*

"Can you see anything?" Lerion asked Vyrex, who was standing on his shoulders. The Assassin remained silent as he peeked through the grate of the maintenance tube they were hiding in.

"Hey," he tried again, raising his voice to just above a whisper.

"Quiet, there's a group coming down the corridor," Vyrex said, ducking out of sight and climbing off the smuggler's shoulders. Lerion could hear the sound of boots on metal getting louder. Two or three guards passed by their position, after which the sound grew distant again.

"That was a brilliant idea, hitching a ride on this ship."

Lerion rolled his eyes at Vyrex. Surely, it had been pretty much their only ticket out of there, but now they were constantly dodging the Saranus troops. They didn't even know where the ship would take them, but they had felt it when the ship broke through the atmosphere. And they had seen the grotesquely mutated form of Vester boarding the ship. Which was exactly why they had chosen to sneak on board.

"We've gotta find a way to check the ship's flight path," Lerion suggested.

Vyrex nodded back at him. "Agreed. A map of the ship wouldn't hurt either. We need to find some way to access the ship's computer."

"Maybe if we keep following these tubes in any direction, we'll be able to access the ship's network. There's bound to be a place where we can tap into it unnoticed," Lerion said, pointing at the far end of the maintenance tube.

"How about that way?" he asked.

Vyrex shrugged at him. "Seems as good a direction as any, I guess. I think this deck is mostly just quarters, from what I can see. Up from here would be better. Assuming the bridge is located there."

"Let's just get moving. We're bound to find something if we keep going," Lerion said, taking the lead and crawling forward through the tube.

The corridor led them to a small door, which they could open using a switch right next to it. It had revealed a tube with a ladder leading both up and down. Assuming that up had been the right way, they had progressed nicely, until they reached the end of the ladder. From there, a similar door leading into a horizontal tube was their only option. They had taken a right turn at two consecutive intersections, which had eventually led to a room where multiple tubes came together, disappearing into the ceiling. A small panel with a screen was located just below where all of the tubes joined.

"Hmm, this seems hopeful," Lerion said, studying the small screen, hoping to find some sort of access port close to it.

"Looks like a bunch of mumbo jumbo to me. We can't even read this stuff."

"No, but if I can access the network somehow, we can have it translated. Do you see any ports?"

Vyrex gazed around the room while Lerion fidgeted with the screen. The Assassin was right, there was no way they could read what was on that screen. But Sedora had always taught him that no system was unhackable, as long as you could find an access port.

Vyrex poked him in his side and pointed up. Lerion squinted his eyes. Only a short distance away was a closed off panel, but it was slightly out of reach.

"I'll give you a boost, Prynn," Vyrex said, huddling down so that Lerion could get onto his shoulders.

"Thanks." He nimbly got onto the Assassin's shoulders and took a good look at the panel. After a short inspection, he pried it loose, using the panel's release clip. A soft green light shone in his face when he looked inside.

"Bingo!" he said cheerfully.

"I take it you found what we're looking for?" Vyrex asked through gritted teeth as he held the ankles of the smuggler on his shoulders.

"Yep, now just hold on a sec," Lerion said, opening the side of his wrist pad to reveal a short cable. He inserted the plug into one of the panel's ports. It fit, but only barely, meaning he had to hold it in order for the data transfer to work. With his free hand, he fired up the download on his wrist computer. Soon, they'd be able to get an idea of just where this ship was headed. The progress bar on the screen seemed to take forever to fill. He could feel Vyrex getting tired of holding him up, but he'd have to power through this at least a full minute, if not longer.

"How much longer? I'm not sure I can hold on anymore."

"It's at thirty-two percent. You can do it!"

Lerion pressed the connector firmly against the port, ensuring the transfer would be successfully executed. His bright yellow eyes were fixed on the screen on his wrist. Time seemed to slow down to a crawl as the meter filled up gradually. Vyrex was getting wobbly on his knees from supporting him, he could feel it getting worse.

"I can't hold on anymore, Prynn!"

The words hadn't left the Assassin's lips before Lerion could feel himself toppling over. Before he fell down, he pushed himself off Vyrex's shoulders and held on to a nearby tube as firmly as he could. Eighty-nine percent, the screen told him. He gritted his teeth as he tried to maintain his grip, but he was slipping. With the last of his grip fading, he fell down nearly two metres and landed flat on his back. The air was knocked out of his lungs. He quickly turned over and gasped. Once he regained his breath, he sat down and checked the screen of the wrist pad. It was still in one piece at least, but the download had only been completed partially.

"Did you get it?" Vyrex asked, not bothering to ask if he was all right.

“Not all of it. I guess we’ll just have to hope that we got what we needed. I’ll fire up the translator program,” he replied while working on the device.

“Once we get a rough idea of where this heap of junk is going, I guess we should start worrying about food and water. For all we know, this ship’s not just going on a day trip somewhere.”

“You don’t have any rations left?”

Vyrex shook his head at him. “We wasted all of those a long time ago. I guess our first goal would be to check where they keep the food, and then get us some.”

Lerion hummed positively as his eyes widened at the screen.

“I’m glad I got one of these top-of-the-line models. Translation is complete. Now, let’s see what we’ve got ... At least we have the ship’s layout, but it looks like the ship’s navigational log is corrupted. We’ll have to find ourselves another port somewhere else,” Lerion said, shifting his gaze to Vyrex.

“So, where’s the nearest place we can get ourselves some grub on this tub?” Vyrex asked impatiently.

Lerion looked back on the screen and studied it for a moment, adjusting the view with the controls a few times.

“From the looks of it, we’re fairly close to one of the cargo holds designed to hold food. I guess that’s our first stop then. After that, let’s see if we can get somewhere closer to the ship’s core. There’s bound to be more access points there, so we can find out where they’re taking this ship.”

“Agreed. Which way, Prynn?”

“That way,” Lerion said, pointing in the direction where they had come from.

\* \* \*

He had no idea how long it had been since he had slept. The constant supplies of Xoron ash bean coffee and other, less orthodox drugs to keep him awake had had the adverse effect of erasing all sense of time. All he knew was that he hadn’t gone this long without any proper rest in ages.

The door to his office slid open. Xer'xis didn't bother to look up. The door had opened nearly every minute of every hour ever since the Alliance Council had tasked him with coordinating and setting up defences around Gald Prime. It was already too late, he realized. Whatever ships could get there in less than a day would be too little, too late. Reports had been streaming in of a massive fleet, consisting of at least a thousand ships encroaching on the border of Alliance space. The fleet supposedly ranged from cruisers to small fighters. It was already clear that the Alliance would be heavily outnumbered, but it was too late to start an evacuation procedure. The planetary defences on Gald Prime were considerable, but with lack of support from space, they would be easily bombarded into oblivion. All they could hope for was to last long enough for the other fleet regiments to aid them. Xer'xis raised his head, looking over the edge of the datapad he was holding.

"Admiral, how long have you been awake for?" Doctor Yrael asked him, a stern frown on his face.

Xer'xis rubbed his palm past his forehead and pinched the bridge of his nose. He slowly opened his eyes. They felt irritated and burned a little.

"If you're here to tell me I should get some rest, then I have some bad news for you, Yrael."

"You do realize I can order you to rest, my old friend?" Yrael asked jokingly, but there was a deeper truth behind the words, Xer'xis knew. A half-hearted smile appeared on the Admiral's face.

"Not unless I'm in a life threatening situation. At this moment, everyone on this ship is, I'm afraid," he said gravely, averting his gaze from the doctor.

"We were told to make all the necessary preparations in sickbay. From what I gathered, it's looking bleak. Is it even worth it to defend Gald Prime?"

Yrael's question sparked a genuine feeling of unease within him. All his life, he had been taught to live by the tenets of the Greater Good. He too knew that defending the Gald home world was a useless endeavour. Millions, even billions of lives could be lost, for nothing. The Xoron were part of a bigger community now, however. One that did not as easily make rational choices if the Greater Good demanded it.

"As members of the Alliance, it falls to all of us to defend our homes. I doubt it will be possible, but perhaps the Empire can be reasoned with. They might just be trying to bluff us into submission," Xer'xis said, but he knew his reasoning was flawed.

Yarael nodded at him understandingly. "If only we could just write Gald Prime off as a loss. Then we'd be able to regroup and stage a counter offence. Did you receive any word from our other operations?"

Xer'xis shook his head disappointedly. "Both the High Councillor and the *Sprite Darter* have been out of range for a long time. There's no knowing if their missions were successful. I hope by the Prophets that their outlooks are more positive than ours. I have a hard time believing that, though."

Yarael walked up towards the large corner couch and got himself seated. He gazed out the large window. The stars streaked past as thin, white lines.

"Sometimes faith is all we have. If not in the Prophets, then perhaps in your case, in people."

Xer'xis had gotten up from the desk chair and plopped down on the couch. He leaned back and sighed heavily as he too looked through the window and into the endless expanse of space.

"Sometimes even faith slips away from you as you watch everything crumble to dust, realizing that one day, you too will be nothing more than a speck of dust. Nothing but a memory that is only kept alive by those you leave behind."

They shared a long moment of silence, until Yarael finally rose to his feet and headed towards the exit. Before leaving, he turned around.

"Better make it a memory worth dying for, then. And get some rest, for the Prophets' sake!"

\* \* \*

A deep, gurgling noise came from the Saranus soldier as blood pulsed down his throat and into his lungs. Vyrex maintained his grip on the big humanoid, holding the head of the lizardman with his right hand while keeping the hidden blade firmly within the throat with his left arm. The

Assassin's legs were clamped firmly around the much larger humanoid's torso. Vyrex could feel its strength slipping away with each passing second. The struggling had stopped and it wouldn't be long now before death would claim him, or her. He couldn't really tell from their looks.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Lerion asked, his mouth wide open as he watched Vyrex push himself off the back of the soldier, whose body slumped onto the floor. A pool of fresh blood grew larger with each passing second. Vyrex turned around and cleaned his blade on a piece of the soldier's uniform, then retracted it. He gave Lerion an indifferent look and shrugged.

"I didn't have a choice," he said nonchalantly. Of course he had had a choice, but he chose the easy way. It wasn't like anyone was going to miss a low-ranking soldier on a ship this size. Prynn's methods hadn't exactly gotten them anywhere fast, and he was getting fed up with him. He portrayed himself to be some sort of rogue, but in reality everything seemed to point to him being a goody two-shoes. At least when it came to hurting people, or killing them.

"You didn't just say that."

"Come on, man, he was about to call for help when he saw me. What was I supposed to do?" Vyrex asked, raising his voice considerably.

"You could have knocked him out, maybe? That sounds like a much better idea than just cold-blooded murder," Lerion said, pushing Vyrex back hard. The Assassin only staggered back a little as he balanced himself with trained ease.

"And then what? He would have woken up and there would be search parties all over the ship. Come on, help me get rid of the body."

Lerion grabbed him by the shoulder and jerked him around.

"Listen, pal, even if we get rid of his body, there's a giant pool of blood on the floor. How do you propose we get rid of that?"

"We could cover it up with those crates and no one would know the difference," Vyrex said, cocking his head back at a heap of cargo. This wasn't the first time he had to cover up blood; usually, lean and mean methods had worked perfectly fine. By the time the crew would find the traces, they would be long gone.

“Fine. Let’s store the body in one of those barrels at the other end. Some of them were empty when I checked.”

Lerion closed the hatch leading back to the maintenance tube. It had taken them about ten minutes to hide the dead soldier in the barrel and cover up the blood with the crates while Lerion kept watch. This hadn’t been his doing, so it was up to Vyrex to solve their problem as far as he was concerned. At least they had finally gotten their hands on some food. After crawling back a safe distance, they sat still for a moment to eat. Lerion took one of the pre-packed sandwiches, removed the wrapper and took a bite. His face went sour and his chewing slowed down. Vyrex raised an eyebrow at him.

“Something wrong with your food?”

Lerion swallowed with some effort. “Man, this sandwich is soggy and it tastes mouldy.”

“Sounds a bit like you then.”

Although Lerion was still angry at Vyrex, he couldn’t help but laugh. Vyrex joined in until they were both out of breath.

“We should head up a few more decks,” Lerion said after checking his wrist pad. According to the ship’s layout, they would make it to the ship’s main computer core with relative ease, using the maintenance tubes to stay out of sight.

“Let’s get going.”

The humming of the computer core’s cooling system had grown louder with every metre they had crawled and climbed upward through the ship’s maze of maintenance tunnels, but here they were, right under the core room. Through a few slits in the grating of the floor, they could look right into the room.

“There’s at least four of them, but these aren’t soldier types,” Vyrex whispered as he kept studying the room from under the floor. There was a hatch nearby they could use to pop out and enter the room to access the computer. Lerion hadn’t found any access points in the tubes, so their only option was to get out. But this posed the problem of having to deal

with the engineers inside the room. Lerion tugged Vyrex' arm to draw his attention. He glanced over.

"Is there any chance we can find a non-lethal way to deal with these goons?" Lerion asked.

"That's hard to tell. It shouldn't be too hard to take all four of them out, but there's always the risk that one of them manages to set off an alarm or call for help. We'll need some sort of distraction, preferably."

"You didn't really answer the question," Lerion said, rolling his eyes.

"I'm not geared for a mission like this. If I had known we'd be going on a Zar'aranos cruiser before I left Alliance space, maybe I would have brought some tranquilizer darts or tear gas. So, we either deal with it and face the consequences later, or we back out, but that wouldn't exactly get us anywhere, would it?" Vyrex asked through gritted teeth, raising his voice just a little.

Lerion put his index finger against his mouth to shush him. He had no idea how well Saranus could hear, but it was better not to take any risks.

"What if we loosen one of the coolant supply tubes? That would create a distraction. At least one or two of them would have to leave the room. We could make it look like a genuine failure," Lerion suggested.

Vyrex gave him a thoughtful frown and nodded. "I like it, where to?"

"Just back a little, follow me," Lerion said, after checking the map on his screen.

Backtracking, they found several coolant tubes leading right to the computer core. Even if one of them failed, there'd still be three left as a backup for the core. It wasn't unusual to see critical systems like this having at least two or three backup systems, in case one of them failed.

"Let's destroy this one," Lerion said, pointing at one of the many tubes.

"Okay, how?"

"Do your fire thing, that way it'll look as if it was some sort of malfunction, I guess."

Vyrex raised an eyebrow at him. "You guess? Well, whatever, let's just do this," he said, already drawing energy from within to superheat his hands. After a while, the tube glowed until it ruptured. Pressurized air escaped from the tube, causing it to pop open loudly. Two adjacent tubes

were damaged in the process, but at least they got what they wanted. A faint alarm sounded through the tubes, coming from the core room, most likely. Lerion could hear hurried footsteps and men calling each other with raised voices.

“They’ll probably use the access point nearby. Let’s go back!”

The alarm was still buzzing, and a menacing red light shone into the maintenance tube from the core room.

“Two of them have left. The others seem too occupied to notice us. We need to strike now if we’re going to do this. I’ll take the one at the panel, you take the other one,” Vyrex ordered. He looked back at Lerion, who nodded at him with a fierce determination in his sharp, yellow eyes.

“Try not to kill them this time,” Lerion said.

Without reacting, Vyrex popped the hatch open and crouch ran forward. About two metres from his target, he launched himself into the air and punched the Saranus hard into his left temple. Lerion could hear the bone crunching as he himself was almost at his target. The man turned around as he heard his comrade being attacked. Lerion hesitated for a moment. A mistake he shouldn’t have made.

“Who are you?” the Saranus demanded, quickly reaching for his firearm. He aimed the simple laser pistol at Lerion.

“Uh, we’re just the new maintenance crew,” Lerion tried.

“Both of you, put your hands up where I can see them!”

“Sure thing,” Vyrex said. As he raised his hands, he aimed his left hand forward and triggered a release button with his ring finger. A *swish* penetrated the air and in an instant, the Saranus staggered back, dropping his weapon on the floor.

Lerion turned to face Vyrex, a puzzled look on his face.

“Never hesitate, buddy,” the Assassin remarked as he reached for a pocket and inserted a new dart into the spring mechanism hidden under his sleeve.

Lerion quickly turned around and ran up to the Saranus, who had toppled over and was now lying lifeless on the floor. The dart had penetrated the skull right between the eyes. The look on the face of the now

dead man could only be described as shock. Lerion reached for the pistol and checked its setting. It had only been set to stun.

“Let’s block the entrance,” Vyrex said, patting Lerion on the shoulder.

Without looking at Vyrex, he set the pistol to a higher setting and fired at the door controls.

“That should lock ‘em into place.”

“Looks like you’re starting to get the hang of it. Now, next time don’t hesitate, and we might be able to pull things like these off without making casualties.”

Lerion bit his lip. It would only be a matter of time before the entire ship’s crew would be alerted to their presence, and then they’d get caught at one point or another. Especially with Vyrex’ reckless style.

“I’ll start downloading the navigation log,” he said, moving towards the core’s main terminal.

“We should hide the bodies.”

“One of them is still alive,” Lerion said, looking up from the console.

Vyrex shrugged at him. “We might as well kill him,” he said indifferently.

“Are you out of your mind? There’s no reason for us to kill him!”

“Uh, yes, there is. What do you think he’s going to do when he wakes up? Just continue working as if nothing happened?”

“Just tie him up, we can use some cabling to do that.”

Vyrex sighed with chagrin as he dragged the corpse of the Saranus he had killed over the floor, towards the hatch they had used to get in. They could easily stash the body in the maintenance tubes at a junction.

“Fine, Pryn,” Vyrex said, grunting as he dragged the body over the floor, “We’ll do it your way, but I guarantee you, we’ll be up to our balls in shit in no time and I won’t hesitate to cut you loose to save myself.”

“Fine,” Lerion said, while working on interfacing his wrist pad with the terminal.

“Fine!”

Vyrex dropped the body down the hatch. A thud echoed as it hit the floor of the maintenance tube. When Lerion looked up from the terminal, Vyrex had disappeared from sight as well. The Saranus at his feet was

still unconscious and it seemed it would stay that way for quite some time still.

He had finally finished the linkup with his wrist pad and had just initiated the download again. This time it had been a bit easier, seeing as he could just navigate through the translated databank structure. Even the process of downloading the navigation logs was a whole lot faster than during their previous endeavour. He quickly disconnected the wrist pad from the terminal and went through the logs. He startled when Vyrex emerged from the hatch.

“The alarms have stopped. It won’t be long before the others will try to get back in here. Did you get the files?” the Assassin asked as he cut loose some of the cabling behind one of the panels in the room.

Without replying, Lerion went through the navigational logs. It had taken him some time to find the most recent one, with its corresponding flight path. He studied the screen intently, trying to decipher the flight path. The Empire used a different set of star charts, which was logical, but also made it harder to understand exactly where the ship was going. His eyes widened with shock.

“Oh no ...” he said, eyes still fixed on the screen.

“What is it, Prynn?” Vyrex asked. He had already begun tying up the unconscious lizardman.

The smuggler checked his wrist pad again, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Prynn, what’s wrong?” Vyrex demanded to know.

“This ship. It’s part of an entire fleet of warships. They’re heading to Gald Prime.”

\* \* \*

“Admiral, we’re being hit hard! We’ve already lost over a quarter of the available ships!” Lieutenant Charl reported with a raised voice. The *Harbinger’s Resolve* rocked heavily as its shields were once more pounded by incoming enemy fire.

“How are the planetary defences?” Xer’xis asked, turning to face the lieutenant.

“They’re doing better than we are, sir. Only a few of the cannons on the surface have been destroyed, but that’ll turn around quickly if they keep decimating our numbers up here.”

The Admiral nodded at his subordinate and stroked his chin. Leaning against the tactical overview table, he had an excellent view of how the battle was progressing. As predicted, they were losing. He looked at the ongoing fighting on the viewer. Like this, it seemed nothing more than a hologame. The green and blue blips were disappearing faster than the red ones. The red ones outnumbered the others ten to one with ease. It didn’t take a master of tactics to figure out that this battle was one-sided. Like a child being beat up by a grown-up. Xer’xis snorted at his own thought. *Even a child could still come out victorious. Perhaps there’s something I missed here. A weakness in their formation.*

“Sir, we’ve just deployed another wave of fighters. I’m sending them to assist the other ships in orbit around Gald Prime,” Charl stated.

Xer’xis looked up, taken back to reality by what Charl had just said. He gave the man a sharp look and shook his head.

“Belay that order. I want them to flank the enemy flagship. Send them here, along with these ships and our own. Perhaps if we can destroy it, they’ll be listening to reason.”

Xer’xis pressed a few commands on the viewer’s console and created an overlay showing the ships and their trajectory towards the enemy flagship. Charl watched as the simulation was projected over the ongoing battle.

“Sir, that’s suicide,” he objected, looking at Xer’xis intently.

“Fighting on like this is suicide too. What’s your point, Lieutenant? If we’re going to fight them, this is our best and only option of stopping them in their tracks.”

Charl nodded at him. “Very well, sir. I’ll relay your orders to all selected ships,” he said, hurrying away to a nearby communications officer.

Xer’xis looked outside the enormous windows of the bridge and sighed. Fire lit up the space around the planet. Explosions and burning ships could be seen in the distance. Perhaps Yarael had been right. But this would not be his end, not if he could help it.

"Admiral, we've just received reports from the surface. The enemy has started deploying troops there," an ensign unknown to Xer'xis said as she hurried towards him.

"How is that possible, Ensign?" he asked, taking the datapad she handed over to him.

"According to these first reports, they're deploying the same androids they were using during their insurrection on Netherea."

Xer'xis frowned at her. "Their fleet is not even anywhere near the surface. Are they using the teleportation tech again?"

"Yes, sir. According to one of these reports, they appeared out of thin air. There's more bad news, sir ..." the ensign said uncomfortably.

"It gets even worse?" Xer'xis asked, nearly losing his temper.

"They seem to know exactly where to deploy their troops. All sightings were near the largest weapon batteries," the ensign stammered. She lowered her gaze, averting his.

"Thank you for your report, Ensign, but we can't help the troops on the surface. They'll have to fend for themselves," Xer'xis said, putting a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him grimly and nodded. *Poor thing*, he thought, *this is not what she possibly could have hoped to sign up for. All this violence and destruction.* He gave her a comforting smile.

"You're dismissed, Ensign."

"Yes, sir!" She saluted him, turned on her heels and marched away.

When he looked back at the table, more blue and green blips had been snuffed out. The red ones just kept coming, like a swarm of insects. He could see the squadron created to assault the flagship moving behind enemy lines to stage a surprise attack.

"Is it not time to give up, my dear?" asked a voice that caused a chill to run down his spine.

"As long as we live, we will defy you with every bone in our body," he answered without turning around. He clenched his fists involuntarily. Was she here to gloat? To state the obvious fact that they were fighting a losing battle? To say: 'I hate to say I told you so, but I told you so'? Whatever her intentions were, she would be going down with this ship. That was the only trump he held. The only one he held on to.

“By this time, I’m sure you know that we’ve already deployed troops on the surface. It won’t be long now before we take control of the Royal Palace and force the queen to surrender unconditionally. I do have to say I admire her for staying with her people until the bitter end,” Sha’hasra said, purposely standing next to him so he could no longer ignore her.

He threw her an angry, defiant glare. She returned a grin.

“You will only be turning her into a martyr if you kill her.”

“Oh, yes. A martyr for a people who are losing a war against a superior foe. That will surely help,” she snorted.

She was right. If Gald Prime would fall so easily, it would only be a matter of time before the entire Alliance would be dismantled. Even with all the defences they had mustered in such a short time, it had become clear to him that they had underestimated the power of the Empire. Perhaps the treaty had made the Alliance lazy in their effort to defend themselves, thinking that it would never come to this, because the Empire would never risk a war of attrition. Now here they were, at the very start of what might become one of the largest wars in history known to Xer’xis.

“You know what’s funny?” Sha’hasra asked, after seeming to realize that he wasn’t going to indulge her anymore.

“What?” he asked, just hoping to get rid of her.

“This attack on Gald Prime. It could have been so easily avoided, if only you hadn’t tried to restore your precious home world. We are only taking this world to make a very clear point. We always keep our word. You were given a choice and you chose to ignore our offer. Now the blood of millions, perhaps even billions will be spilled. How does the weight of that choice feel, now that this world too is going to be burned down to its foundation?”

The coldness and logic with which she picked the words shocked him. Had the Alliance, with its stance on not dealing with the Shaedon, really brought this upon themselves? Had this been the same pride that came before the fall, just like the Xoron Empire had once experienced?

“How does it feel to cause such bloodshed? Does it bring you joy, doing all of this? Setting us up against the Empire like this? They probably don’t even know it’s you behind all of this, do they?”

Xer'xis asked, his voice filled with anger. His blood was boiling.

Sha'hasra waved a correcting finger at him. "One question at a time, Admiral."

It cost him nearly all of his discipline not to strangle her, but he breathed in deeply and exhaled slowly.

"Does all of this bring you joy, some sort of sick and twisted pleasure?"

Sha'hasra shook her head.

"It does not, but it doesn't sadden me either. It is merely a reaction to your action. Bringing down Netherea, now that will be a true joy. To be fair, if I were the one in control of our operation, I'd not have bothered with all of this," she said, gesturing at the ongoing battle on the tactical viewer.

Xer'xis furrowed his brow. "You wouldn't?" he asked, wondering who was truly in control of the Shaedon Armada. He knew that Sha'hasra was designated as their ambassador, a title that did not fit her role entirely. It wasn't as if he could negotiate with her.

"I believe this to be a waste of resources. It will take us years to turn the planet into a profitable asset," she answered, shrugging indifferently at him.

Could this mean that even within the ranks of the Shaedon, only one of them ruled? If that was the case, perhaps removing just their leader would cause disarray, possibly even victory over them. He made a mental note of it.

"So, you disagree with your leader's choice?" he tried carefully.

"I do not question the Architect's will. If he thinks this is the best step to take, who am I to question him?"

The way in which she said the word 'him' almost made this Architect sound like some sort of godlike figure to Xer'xis. In many ways these creatures did seem superior to all of them. Controlled at a whim, leaving them as nothing but puppets who obeyed their master's every command.

Before he could ask another question, a squadron of enemy fighters flew past, causing the *Harbinger's Resolve* to rock as its shields were hit by incoming fire.

“Sir, the squadron is in position to attack the flagship,” Lieutenant Charl stated as he ran towards them.

“Order them to commence the attack, we have already lost too much time as it is,” Xer’xis ordered.

Sha’hasra studied the viewer and noticed the squadron far beyond enemy lines. Her eyes widened and she raised a curious eyebrow at the Admiral.

“A bold move,” she commented.

“Even a child has a chance to beat up a grownup, if they play their cards right.”

A sly smile appeared on his face. If the squadron wouldn’t succeed at their task, it would still throw the Shaedon off balance, if only a little.

“I shall leave you to your little game, then.” Without waiting for him to say anything else, she whirled around and marched towards the turbolift.

“Would you mind telling me what all that was about, sir?” Charl asked, pursing his lips.

Xer’xis looked him in the eyes. “Oh, just someone who’s frustrated that she’s not a decision maker. My advice would be to ignore her as much as possible.”

Charl gave him a curt nod. “As you wish, sir.”

\* \* \*

“Watch it!” Lerion shouted as he pushed Vyrex out of the way. A laser bolt seared past his head, only barely missing him. He nodded at the smuggler thankfully. Ever since they had busted into the ship’s core computer systems, there had been search parties to root them. All this time they had managed to elude them, until now.

“We gotta retreat, there’s three of them safely behind cover. There’s no way we’re getting through there,” Lerion said, ducking behind cover himself as one of the Saranus opened fire in his direction.

“Which way?” Vyrex asked, breaking his cover so he could take a few potshots with a rifle he got his hands on earlier during an ambush.

Lerion pointed towards the left side of the intersection behind them. "There should be a small room there, second door from the left. There's an access point there we can use."

"Cover me!" Vyrex said.

Lerion pointed his pistol around the corner and fired blindly, enough for the soldiers to return fire once more.

"Go!" Lerion shouted at him, backing up from his cover at the same time. They sprinted through the corridor and scrambled into the room. As quickly as possible, Lerion opened the hatch leading into the maintenance tubes. Vyrex entered first. Lerion took a shot at the door controls, frying them beyond repair.

"It won't be long before they find us again," Vyrex muttered as they crawled through the tubes. Although he hated to admit it, Lerion knew that his partner was right. As soon as the security team would notice their escape, they'd just contact other teams on all nearby decks to root them out. According to the log, the trip to Gald Prime would take nearly three days, and when they had downloaded the logs, the ship had only been on its way for eight hours. Being chased had most certainly blurred Lerion's sense of time, survival being the only thing on his mind. When they came up to the next intersection, he urged Vyrex to stop for a moment.

"Let me just check something quickly," Lerion said, working on his wrist pad. He quickly navigated through the device's systems to check the estimated time of arrival.

"According to this, we have arrived at our destination fifteen minutes ago."

Vyrex pursed his lips ponderously. "That would explain the amount of intercom chatter. We need to act fast if we want to disable this ship. How far are we from the ship's core?"

"About five minutes from here," Lerion replied, after some careful studying of the ship's layout.

"Let's get going then."

"Listen, Vyrex, we don't know what we'll be running into there. Do you really think they'd leave the ship's core unattended? They know they've got a couple of saboteurs on board."

Vyrex shrugged at him. "We'll have to get creative, I guess."  
A hard blast coming through the tubes startled both of them.  
"We'd better get moving. I think they just blew a hatch apart."

The ship's core room was located near the aft side of the ship. The core itself was at least three stories high and surrounded by four shielded coolant systems. Lerion and Vyrex had a fairly good view through the grate leading into the room's top floor. Every deck occupied by the core featured a transparent floor, allowing the engineers in the room to access maintenance terminals and systems, while also allowing them to see their colleagues. *This is bad news*, Vyrex thought. If anyone would spot them, they'd surely be caught and most probably killed on sight.

"We need to create some sort of distraction," Vyrex said as he studied the room. He had spotted at least six Saranus inside the room, but he had a feeling that there were more out of his line of sight.

"What do you suggest we— "

Before Lerion managed to finish his sentence, the floor under his feet trembled and a ship-wide alarm went off as the entire room was flooded with a menacing, pulsating red light. Almost immediately, the room was brimming with panicked voices shouting at each other.

"They must be attacking the ship," Lerion said with a smirk on his face.

Vyrex hummed at him agreeingly.

"You wanted a distraction? I can't think of anything better than this. Perhaps our luck is turning around!"

"Perhaps, but we still need to deal with these pesky fuckers in the room," Vyrex said, trying to formulate a plan of attack. There were only two engineers on the same level as them, but now they were constantly moving. The attack may have been a great distraction, it also made things less predictable. No doubt the engineering crew would be on their toes now.

"Taking those two out will be a piece of cake, but we'll need an exit strategy. Even then, we'd still have to find a way to destroy the core," Vyrex continued.

"All we have to do is disable or destroy the coolant systems. That way the core will start to overload. And then, boom! According to the layout, it's only three minutes to the nearest escape pods, but we'd have to exit the room on the lowest level," Lerion added, studying the wrist pad screen.

Vyrex considered every word he had just heard. If he would leave Lerion to deal with the coolant systems, perhaps he'd be able to go in guns blazing.

"All right, listen up, Pryn. If the ship is under attack, I don't think we've got much time anyway. As soon as we're hit again, I'll burst out and deal with those two goons. I want you to work your magic on that coolant system. Let me deal with the engineers. They probably can't fight for shit anyway," he said, looking at Lerion intently.

With slight hesitation, Lerion agreed.

"I'll probably need some time to disable them. Our guns won't have any effect on their shielding."

"Do whatever you can and I'll hold up my end of the deal, we cool?"

"Yup, we cool."

Seconds seemed to last an eternity as Vyrex and Lerion were both building up the courage to burst out of their cover. Lerion stopped counting at ten. Maybe the ship wasn't even under attack? Perhaps it had just been some sort of space anomaly? He felt his heart racing and his breathing became short. The floor shuddered once more; for a moment, he was unsure if he was just imagining it or not. Vyrex kicked the grating out and within seconds, both engineers dropped to the floor.

"Come on!" Vyrex shouted at him, but the words sounded muffled and didn't register until the Assassin was nearly in his face and repeated the words as he tugged him by the jacket. Lerion pushed him back and got out, onto the floor.

"I'll check those terminals," he said.

"Hurry up!" Vyrex said, already at the nearest elevator platform leading down.

Lerion could hear the other engineers shouting up at them. They'd been spotted.

Vyrex hunched down on the platform, so he could start shooting before it reached the level he was headed to. Three, he counted. All of them had taken cover behind whatever they could find. Most of it being terminals and the shielded cooling tanks. He took a few shots to suppress the two nearest Saranus and rolled onto the floor, right to the other side of where one of them was hiding behind a coolant tank. With a quick slide, he passed by the engineer, who was expecting him to be higher up. He missed his shot and crashed to the ground when Vyrex slit his ankles with his hidden blade. The engineer hissed in pain as he lay there on his back. The Assassin nimbly jumped on him, pressed the blade deep into his chest, then twisted it. A laser bolt barely missed him as he rolled over, taking cover on the other side. The remaining engineers were attempting to approach him from two sides, but he had already seen the one behind him. A swish followed by a thud reached his ears. The dart shot from his wrist had penetrated the engineer's skull cleanly. He heard the elevator moving down; his buddies were trying to reach them. Fools. Three bolts hit the coolant tank he was using for cover. The remaining engineer on the floor was attempting to keep him there, no doubt. He peeked around the corner quickly. The engineer had foolishly broken cover. Vyrex rolled over the floor, aimed and shot the confiscated rifle at the Saranus. The salvo of shots hit him hard in the chest. The smell of burnt flesh reached Vyrex' nostrils.

"Prynn, how are things coming along?" he shouted, studying his handiwork.

"Still working on it!"

Vyrex looked down. The rest of the crew on the lower level had not been sitting idly by while their friends were being slaughtered. Instead of going up themselves, they had sent up a polydrone. Its cold eyes studied Vyrex. The Assassin fired at it, but just like himself, it managed to dodge its way to safety.

"Oh, crap ..." Vyrex said, not knowing what to expect next. He peeked around the corner, but the android was nowhere to be seen. A tap on his shoulder sent his heart racing. He felt a lump in his throat as he turned around. A synthetic face grinned at him. The android swung at him hard

with a right hook and although he tried, he was too late to dodge it. The fist landed hard on his nose and he could swear he heard it break. Water filled his eyes and he tasted the metallic taste of his own blood in his mouth. Again, the android struck at him. He quickly grabbed his assailant's arm and used its momentum to throw it against the coolant tank. Vyrex spat on the ground.

"Nobody punches me in the face and gets away with it!"

Without uttering a word, the android got up and charged at him. He could only get out of the way at the last moment, causing it to crash shoulder first into a console. It gave Vyrex enough time to recover and create some distance between them. He focused his energy as fast as he could. Looking down at his fists, he saw they'd turned to stone.

"Bring it, bitch!" he shouted at the synthetic man, who was nearing him slowly, measuring him up.

They stared each other down for a moment, circling around one another and anticipating the other's first move. Vyrex feigned an attack. The polydrone immediately responded by attempting to make a quick jab at him. Vyrex rolled over, jumped up and dealt the android an uppercut. The jaw of the mechanical man crunched under the force by which he had propelled himself up. He couldn't help but laugh inside. The polydrone lay on its back now, but was already starting to scramble to its feet. Before it could do that, Vyrex jumped onto it. The android pulled its knees up and kicked him away with enough force to propel him a few metres up into the air. Vyrex backflipped and landed on his feet.

"You'll have to do better than that, pal!"

The ship rocked hard as it was apparently attacked by the Alliance once more. The distraction was enough for Vyrex to take advantage of. He charged forward and jumped into the air, then knocked the polydrone down again with a right hook. This time, he used the android to break his own fall. He punched into its face. And again. And again. Until there was nothing left of the head but a mess of scrap metal. In his blind rage, he had failed to notice each of his punches had also created cracks in the thick glass floor, which were now spreading fast. The engineers on the floor below fired at the glass. Before he could scurry away, he felt the floor fall away under him. Using the android to break his fall, he collapsed onto

the floor below. When he got up, he was surrounded by a group of five Saranus pointing their weapons at him.

“Well, at least you blew the roof off, right?” he asked weakly.

“Drop your weapons!” one of the Saranus hissed at him.

“I don’t have any,” Vyrex said, raising his hands.

“Search him,” the same Saranus ordered one of the others.

“Coolant system failure, core overheating imminent.” A computerized voice resounded throughout the room. The Saranus who had been ordered to search Vyrex looked up to where Lerion was messing with the systems.

“Get the other one!” the commanding Saranus ordered. Two of the others rushed towards the elevator platform. When he looked back at the Assassin, his jaw dropped. Vyrex had shanked the man who had been ordered to search him with his hidden blade, and he was now using the body to shield himself from the fire coming from the only other man left. The commander took cover and yelled: “We need assistance in engineering! The saboteurs are here!”

Using the weapon of the man he had just killed, Vyrex shot at the other, but missed him by a hair’s breadth.

“They’re coming up for you, Prynn!” he shouted.

After finally managing to get into the coolant system controls, Lerion grabbed the weapons of both men that were lying lifeless on the floor. He studied the design of the handgun and took out its battery pack. Just as he expected, it would be fairly easy to overload the battery and use the gun as a makeshift explosive device. He reinserted it, set the gun to its highest setting and then used his own pistol to heat the battery. He counted down from ten. At three, the battery pack would be too unstable and it would explode in two or three seconds. He reached seven; the elevator platform had nearly made it to the top. Quickly, he tossed the gun through the opening. A loud explosion followed and both men screamed in agony as a ball of flames rose up. Lerion fist-pumped as he enjoyed his small victory. Turning around, he got back to the coolant system controls. According to the warning on the screen, it would take fifteen more minutes before the core would reach critical levels of heat. Long enough for

them to reach the escape pods. Without further hesitation, he pointed his gun at the controls and blew them apart. Their fate was sealed now. There was no going back. He sprinted towards the platform and headed down. Through the glass, he could see that Vyrex had already dealt with the remaining Saranus, and although he didn't like having to kill people, these were the enemies who were attacking their home world. Even if Gald Prime had long since ceased to be his home, it felt good fighting the attackers off. If only they would live to see another day now.

"You sure took your sweet time, Prynn," Vyrex said as the smuggler reached the ground floor of the core room.

"We succeeded, that's all that matters."

Vyrex shook his head at him. "What matters now is getting off this tub," he said, heading to the exit.

The door slid open and they walked into the corridor.

"We'd better hurry—"

Lerion stopped mid-sentence. Standing directly across from them was the grotesquely mutated form of Vester. Since the last time they had seen him, he had changed even more radically. His fur had grown thicker and looked more rugged. He had become larger still and parts of his armour seemed to have melded into him. Black holes for eyes were fixed on them.

"So it was you!" Kha'feralis' voice boomed through the corridor.

Vyrex and Lerion threw each other a glance, their eyes wide and filled with shock and fear.

"Your security is really sloppy," Vyrex said, his voice shaky. He swallowed hard.

"I should have guessed that you would be so lucky to survive a crash, Prynn. Now, it seems you have only delayed the inevitable. You're not getting off this ship alive," the Shaedon monstrosity said, stalking forward. Instinctively, both Gald took a few steps back.

"Come on, let's go!" Lerion shouted, pulling Vyrex by his arm. They sprinted through the corridor as fast as their legs would take them. In the distance, they could hear the heavy thuds of the full body armour hitting the ground. It seemed as if the Shaedon wasn't in any hurry to chase after them. They turned the corner and found out why. Staring directly into

their eyes were a pair of polydrones. Lerion swiftly took out his pistol, set it to maximum and shot one of them between the eyes, causing its head to disintegrate. While the other polydrone was distracted by its counterpart's quick demise, Vyrex charged towards it and bashed its head in before it could react to him. Kha'feralis stepped around the corner.

"There's plenty more where that came from! Time is running out!"

Lerion recalled the path leading to the escape pods. If they would take the maintenance tubes instead, perhaps they'd be able to avoid the rest of these, and the Shaedon definitely wouldn't fit through.

"Come, Vyrex, I have a plan!" he shouted, quickly turning another corner. As he kept running, he charged his pistol for another shot. This would be its last at maximum power before the battery would be depleted, but it would have to do. As soon as it had charged up, he fired it at the entry point of the tube, blasting the door away.

"Follow me!" he said, after hurrying into the tube. He held a hand out to help Vyrex enter.

"It's just up a few decks," Lerion said, crawling forward. They reached the ladder leading up.

"You can't hide forever!" they heard Kha'feralis shout in the distance.

"Forever? It's more like twelve minutes," Vyrex muttered as they climbed up the ladder. They passed the first hatch, leading to the first deck above the core section. One more and they'd be in the home stretch. Just as Vyrex had passed it, the hatch opened with a hiss. A polydrone came crawling through, spotted them and climbed up the stairs after them.

"We've got company!" Vyrex shouted up, sounding panicky.

"Almost there!" Lerion said, pressing the button to open the hatch from their side. He was glad to see there weren't any more surprises for them in the tube ahead. Turning around, he extended his hands to help Vyrex up. The Assassin climbed up, but just as he was about to reach Lerion, the polydrone grabbed him by the ankle.

"He's got me! Aah!"

"Kick him down!" Lerion shouted at him, crawling back a little so he could get within reach of Vyrex.

The Assassin made a few attempts to do so, but his legs were short and the android dodged every kick with ease.

“Shoot him!”

“I can’t, my pistol’s battery’s dead,” Lerion shouted back.

“Use mine,” Vyrex said, cocking his head back towards the rifle on his back.

Lerion crawled forward, trying to reach the weapon. When he finally managed to get a hold of it, he pointed it down, carefully took aim and shot, barely missing Vyrex’ feet. The android’s grip loosened and it fell down.

He pulled Vyrex up into the tube and they both took a moment to catch their breath.

The hatch led them straight into a room full of escape pods. Most of them had already been launched, but there were still a few left.

“Quick,” Lerion said, leading the way towards one that was still open and ready to be deployed.

“Going somewhere?” Kha’feralis bellowed.

“Yeah, the party’s been fun, we’re out of here!” Vyrex said, sounding a whole lot more confident than he had earlier.

The Shaedon reached for its back, pulled out the shotgun from the armour’s back slot, aimed at the Assassin and pulled the trigger. Vyrex kept running, dodging the hail of bullets. He rolled over and aimed his fists at the Shaedon. He clenched his teeth and opened his palms in Kha’feralis’ direction. The stone skin shattered and dozens of razor-sharp pebbles hailed down towards the Shaedon, creating the perfect distraction. He kept running towards the escape pod, Lerion close behind him.

“You think a few measly pebbles will stop me?” Kha’feralis roared, aiming the shotgun again while darting forward. Vyrex entered the pod. Lerion was close, but still lagging behind. Shots fired and hit the ground between Lerion and the pod, causing the smuggler to stop in his tracks.

“Weapons are too easy. I’ll strangle you to death,” Kha’feralis growled in a very Kevlar-like manner. Vyrex could hear the shotgun clattering on the floor. He could hear the heavy thuds of the armoured boots gaining momentum as the Shaedon charged towards Lerion. Fear filled the eyes

of the Gald as he tried to reach the escape pod. Only a few more metres and he would be safe. Then he saw it. The door closed, shutting him out. Lerion banged on the window, looking at Vyrex as if he knew that his fate was now sealed.

“I’m sorry, Prynn ...”

“You fucking bastard!” Lerion shrieked.

He had barely finished the sentence when Kha’feralis charged into him, knocking him away from the window. Vyrex felt the pod come into motion; it launched in mere seconds. The enormous ship shrunk smaller and smaller.

Minutes passed, although they could have been an eternity to Vyrex. He had been sitting in the pod motionlessly, staring out the window, at the ship. Alliance ships had made a pass a few times, but they seemed to ignore the escape pod. Derelicts, burning ships and debris were all he could see around him. Then, a bright flash of light as the Empire flagship exploded into a great ball of fire.

“I’m sorry, Prynn ...” he said, putting a hand on the window.

## Chapter 24 – Meltdown

Philbin quickly turned the corner for cover after Guilty Ember had caught the shot that was supposed to hit him. Although he was thankful the Kraut had done so, they now had another problem on their hands: his armour had been damaged and Philbin could think of no easy way to fix it. He could hear the sound of Baynam's railgun charging again. When he looked to his left, he saw Glowing Envy pour out of his armour as well. It whirred open at the back side, allowing the Kraut to leave. As soon as he had exited the armoured suit, he took on the form of a four-legged beast and rushed forward. Philbin could only hear several shots being fired and didn't have the courage to look.

"Philbin, you have to finish the upload!" Serra shouted from behind a pillar opposite him.

"I know, but I need to access the console to do that," he answered.

Serra took a peek around the corner, but got back into cover fast when a gunshot hit the pillar from the side. The bullet ricocheted off it.

"Stay back, I'm warning you," she heard Baynam say. Another shot from his railgun followed, piercing the air with a sharp sound.

"What? How is that possible?" Baynam asked, his voice full of frustration.

Philbin activated the infrared filter on his goggles, giving him a garbled view of the room. The two Kraut produced such a staggering amount of heat that it was nearly useless, as they were in between Philbin and Serra and their foes. He turned it off and peeked around the corner. Baynam had taken a shot at Guilty, but it had done no damage whatsoever. Instead, it seemed he had simply absorbed the shot's energy. If he and Serra could stay out of harm's way, this would be an easy victory, Philbin thought.

"We have to activate the sprinklers!" Shi'fisso snapped at Baynam.

"Keep them busy," he said, backing up from the two Kraut.

The possessed android, NTT-36, marched forward. It activated one of its many weapon systems and aimed at both Kraut, who were standing side by side. A clunk resounded through the room. The grenade tore open and smoke billowed into the air. Within mere moments, it was near impossible to see anything. Philbin quickly pressed a few buttons on his goggles to compensate. Serra was blinded, and Philbin could see her getting down on all fours so she would at least be a hard target. He quickly scrambled towards her.

"It's me, stay close, I can see better than you in this smoke," he said, reaching for her hand.

"My eyes, I can't see anything!"

Guilty could almost sense the Shaedon nearby. It was circling them, trying to get a good vantage point from which she could attack them. Their weapons were useless, but the sprinkler installation would pose a problem. That or extreme cold, but he deemed it unlikely that they had anything here that could create such conditions. He heard Glowing Envy moving away from him, disappearing into the smoke. The grenade had expired. The smoke would start dissipating any moment now. He walked forward, trying to recall the room's layout. It was important not to damage the mainframe, at least not until Philbin had finished uploading his failsafe protocol. Reverting to his liquid form, he slithered forward, to the other side of the room. Baynam would probably be there, trying to activate the sprinklers.

Glowing Envy tried to take each step as silently as he could, but he knew that he was an easy target. Even in this form he had taken on, he was still a burning light in the smoke. He heard footfalls close by. When he turned the corner past the row of servers, he was glad he hadn't jumped Philbin and Serra, who were taking cover there.

"Over there," Philbin pointed into the smoke.

He nodded at them and moved forward in the direction the Saridion had indicated. Not knowing how long the android would still be there, he decided to sprint forward as fast as his four legs would take him. There she was! She fired a few shots at him, clearly meant to distract

him as she backflipped and jumped up on the row of servers. He leapt at her and swiped, but missed. The row of servers toppled over. He got onto his feet as nimble as a cat and chased after her.

“Hurry up, Baynam,” she shouted as she kept running forward.

He was gaining on her with each step. She jumped over the railing near the far wall from where they entered. Running parallel from her, he chased her from the other side until she was cornered.

“No, please, don’t,” she begged.

Glowing Envy produced a thundering growl and tore out the android’s throat, melting every single piece of the artificial body he touched. He mauled and pounced until there was nothing left but molten slag, barely recognizable as having been an android.

“Shi’fisso?” Baynam yelled through the room. The smoke was starting to clear out. He had heard the ruckus and his fellow Shaedon’s cry for help, followed by silence. He had finally reached the controls for the sprinkler installation when he saw the other Kraut slither forward.

“Hold it right there, or I’ll activate this,” he threatened. The Kraut stopped in its tracks.

“Your partner is reduced to a pile of scrap metal,” Philbin said as he walked around the corner, a small pistol aimed at Baynam. Serra followed behind him, aiming her weapon at Baynam too. They were fools if they believed he would be this easily defeated.

“Where’s the other Kraut? You all get in my sight, this instance,” Baynam said, keeping his finger above the button and aiming his bionic arm at Serra and Philbin.

From the other corner approached Glowing Envy, still in his beast form.

“You destroyed NTT-36?”

No answer came from the Kraut.

“They can’t speak without their suits, dummy. But yes, he did. Now what? You don’t stand a chance against us. You’re outnumbered and outgunned,” Philbin said, cocking his weapon sideways to indicate that Baynam should step away from the console.

Baynam shook his head. If anything like this were to happen, his orders were to abandon the facility and report back to HQ. He wasn't planning on doing anything other than that. Shi'fisso would most likely linger here for a while in her incorporeal form, while recovering from the extended length of time during which she had controlled the android.

"This is only a minor setback. You already know this facility only produces cheap cannon fodder. Destroying this facility will still just delay the inevitable. I don't even understand why you try so hard to fight us. We have given you plenty of chances to live."

"And you'd still destroy Netherea? We can't just let that happen," Serra said.

"Why do you care about that planet? It's not even your home world."

Serra shook her head at him in disbelief. "That planet is part of our nation and we will fight tooth and nail to defend that which is ours. If there's even a slight part left of your old self, Baynam, you'd understand."

The truth was that he did. But that didn't make it any less annoying how the Alliance seemed to be so fiercely set on defending itself, even if its plans were flawed and the victory of the Armada was a certainty. The Shaedon part of him felt a burning hatred boiling up from deep within. How dared these corporeal beings defy him?

"This is far from over, Serra. For now, I have to leave," he said, pressing the button. The sprinklers activated. He fired the charged shot from his railgun at Serra to create another distraction. To his dismay, it was only a glancing shot. He scrambled towards the door and sped out.

"Get into your suits, fast!" Philbin shouted at the Kraut. Steam rose up from them as they were showered with cold water. Both of them slithered back to their suits as fast as they could. Glowing Envy managed to get back into his with relative ease, but Guilty's had been damaged at the torso. A large gash still exposed him, with water gushing down into it.

"Help him get out of the room," Philbin ordered Glowing Envy, who put a shoulder under the damaged suit's right armpit and helped his fellow Kraut out.

"We have to finish the upload," Philbin said, turning to face Serra. She was pressing down on the gunshot wound on her upper left arm with her right hand.

"You're right," she said, nodding at him. The sprinklers had stopped, leaving a pool of water in the room. Thankfully, the designers had ensured that the casing of the servers was waterproof. Tyndra flew down from a position she had taken near the ceiling of the room. Serra looked up when she saw her gliding down.

"Where have you been all this time?" she asked, with a combination of worry and accusation.

"I'm sorry, but the moment the fighting started, I thought it would be best if I were out of the way. There's little to nothing I can add to combat situations, as you may have already guessed," her stark reply came.

"I wish I could fly, because the same applies to me, sadly," Philbin added.

Serra knew they were both right, but still she didn't have to like it.

"Very well. Let's just finish the upload, activate the timer for the explosives and head back to the ship."

\* \* \*

"No, no, no," Chando's voice boomed through the bridge. He slammed an angry fist into the nearest wall.

"We're not leaving without them!"

The eyes of Máraxi met his with fury.

"We cannot stay here any longer. Our long range scanners have detected enemy reinforcements. They will outnumber us easily. I will not risk my ship and my people to save a team of five. You should know your place, Raphael," she hissed at him.

"My place? If it weren't for me, we'd have half the amount of ships at our disposal. The mission would have failed before it had even started."

"They still haven't destroyed the facility. The mission has failed. We are retreating. You can get your shuttle and attempt a foolish rescue attempt. I don't care what you do, I'm pulling my people out right now." She whirled on her heels to address the helmsman.

“Take us out of here and into the nebula, we’re retreating,” she ordered.

“Yes, ma’am!” the dark-skinned Xoron man replied, working on his controls to turn the ship about.

Chando stepped in front of the High Councillor and pointed an angry finger at her.

“Consider our agreement over. I’m taking my shuttle. I hope you choke on that tome I gave you.”

With a serene calm, Máraxi gave him a curt nod.

“As you please. Men, escort this human back to his ship.”

She turned away from him and headed towards her chair without speaking another word.

A broad Xoron Windblade stepped next to Chando and grabbed him by the arm. He immediately shook the man’s grip loose and turned to him. “Keep your filthy hands off me! I’ll come peacefully.”

The Windblade squinted his bright white eyes and cocked his head.

“Very well. Move,” he said, gesturing towards the turbolift.

The short moment on the turbolift gave him some time to collect his thoughts. He was certain that Serra and her team would complete their mission sometime soon, but the risk of taking his shuttle down to the surface was too great. Especially with the inbound reinforcements. The only thing left to do would be to send her a message from his shuttle. He’d have to head back to HQ and stage a rescue mission. He couldn’t just let her fend for herself. Máraxi had no doubt ordered all ships to start their retreat by now. She would pay for this one day. He had added yet another enemy to his list. Even if she was part of the Alliance, this cowardice was unacceptable.

The turbolift doors slid open. He stepped out into the docking bay, towards his shuttle. The Windblades followed him every step of the way, until he walked up the ramp of the vessel.

“I’m not going anywhere else, lads,” he said, turning around.

“Our orders are to make sure you don’t,” the one that had grabbed him earlier said, his arms folded.

“Will you relay one message to the High Councillor for me, please?”

Both Windblades furrowed their brows at him.

“What is it?” the other Windblade asked, after giving his colleague a questioning look.

“Tell her that if my people down there, risking their necks for the Alliance, are not returned to me alive, I shall inflict pain upon her thousandfold for each and every one of them that doesn’t make it back in one piece.”

“Are you threatening us?”

“No, I’m promising you,” Chando said, turning around and entering his ship. The ramp closed until it was firmly back in place.

Chando removed the mask and let it fall to the ground as he continued his way towards the transmitter in the cockpit of the shuttle. With hesitation, he activated the communications device. He looked out the window and out of the docking bay. The ship had turned about, giving him only the view of the nebula. The system finished its booting sequence.

“Connection established with the *Seraph’s Wings*,” the computer’s male voice told him.

“Hail them,” he commanded it. A whole minute passed. *Damnit, no response*, he thought. Stroking his goatee, he cancelled the call.

“Computer, send a recorded message instead.”

“Affirmative, recording now.”

He cleared his throat, pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. *Where to begin?*

“Serra, I am so sorry ...”

His voice trailed off and he stared out the window again. The *Storm Crow* had begun approaching the nebula.

“There is not much time for me to talk. Máraxi, that Xoron witch, has ordered the fleet to retreat. There are Empire reinforcements inbound. Her reasoning is that we can’t risk our lives for you, even though you are doing all the hard work. Just try to survive and hide somewhere safe. As soon as I’ll be back at HQ, I’ll send for help. I promise! I ... I love you ...”

A lump blocked his throat and his eyes had become watery. He pressed the button to end the recording.

“Sending message,” the computer informed him.

With both hands covering his face, he leaned back into his chair. It had been a long time ago when he had last felt so powerless.

\* \* \*

The sun blinded Serra momentarily as they exited the large tunnel they had used earlier to access the facility. She put her arm in front of her face to block the blinding rays. Philbin had finished uploading the fail-safe protocol and had activated the beacon that would send out the signal to every single polydrone created in the facility. Every android itself would then send the signal on to all those near it. It would only be a matter of time before they all shut themselves down after being exposed to a series of logical paradoxes that he had programmed. All that remained now was to head out, set off the explosives and return to the ship. However, there was still the issue of Guilty Ember's armour suit being damaged beyond repair. It was not just the plating on the chest area itself that had been torn by Baynam's shot, its integrated coolant systems and heat mitigating plating had also been compromised. Both Kraut and Tyndra had been lagging behind, well out of the way of Philbin and Serra.

"Any bright ideas on how we're going to deal with Guilty's broken armour?" Serra asked as they walked out of the tunnel and onto the rugged plains. She could already see her ship, which was in one piece, thankfully. She threw a glance at the little blue man, who pursed his lips and shrugged.

"I can't think of any workaround to fix the problem either. Our only option might be to leave him here, get a new suit and return."

By the way Philbin said it, Serra could feel that he cared more for the strange creature than she'd given him credit for. If anything, Philbin had always been peculiar in his behaviour towards others. *Sympathetic* was not a word she associated with him in the slightest.

"I'm sure you'll think of something," she said, giving him a friendly smile.

"You know what? I'm sick of this place. What do you say we blow it to pieces?" he asked with a noticeable change in his posture and mood, an almost childish enthusiasm at the prospect of a large scale explosion.

"The honour is all yours, Master Tinkerer," Serra said, handing him the remote control to set off the detonators.

"Much obliged." A wicked grin appeared on his face as he held the device. He waited for the Kraut and Arlin to get a little closer.

"It's time for some fireworks!" he shouted with glee. He flipped the top of the device open to reveal a red button.

"You're all fired, motherfuckers!"

His thumb pressed down on the button. They could hear a deep rumbling within the facility as dozens of explosive packs they'd planted detonated. Ten seconds later, a blazing ball of fire emerged from the other side of the mountain, creating a mushroom cloud as the facility's computer core reached critical levels.

"Boom! Hahaha!"

Philbin jumped in the air with joy. Serra chuckled at him. It was silly to see a grown man, who was roughly the size of an eight-year-old human child, jump into the air with such happiness because of an explosion.

"That was good one," Guilty Ember said. The voice coming from his suit was distorted, but still audible.

"Yeah, those suckers didn't see that one coming for sure."

"Listen, Philbin. I hate to ruin your moment of glory, but I think it's in everyone's best interest if we find a way out of this for all of us. The fleet won't be waiting for us forever," Serra said. The ramp of the *Seraph's Wings* descended for them to enter and she walked up into the ship, turning around once to beckon him.

Philbin turned around towards Guilty.

"We'll figure something out, my friend," he said, his voice filled with a sudden sadness.

"Is all right. Will wait. Get on ship," the Kraut said.

"We're not going anywhere," Tyndra countered.

The blinking light on the communications console indicated that new messages had arrived during their absence. This came as no surprise to Serra, but she had the ominous feeling that it would be bad news. She sat herself down in the captain's chair and booted up the ship's systems. Philbin entered the bridge. His posture was hunched and his shoulders were slumped. *Not a good sign*, she thought.

"Take a seat," Serra offered.

Philbin replied something inaudible, but he did take the offer.

"Looks like we received an urgent message from ... Raphael," she said, nearly making a slip of the tongue as she spoke the name.

A moment later, the ship's audio system crackled to life. The message was audio only. She heard the words, but they didn't register until after the playback had stopped. Staring at the floor in front of her, she realized that perhaps this mission might just be her final one. Anger filled her heart – anger and frustration. Not aimed at Chando, but at something else, something intangible. She relaxed her hands when she noticed she had clenched her fists.

"So, I guess none of us are leaving, then ..." Philbin murmured. He stared down at the floor when she turned to face him.

"This ship is fast enough. We can make a break for it as soon as we breach the planet's atmosphere."

"And leave my friend behind here, to rot? You heard what he said. We need to sit tight here and wait for help!" Philbin's voice shot up.

Serra shook her head. "I'm not staying, God damn it!"

"I doubt there's any gods involved here. Listen, if your friend makes good on his promise, we'll only have to sit tight for a couple of weeks."

"And I doubt they'll be bringing a spare Kraut armour suit. We'd still not be able to take Guilty with us, unless they happen to have a ship capable of supporting the heat he produces."

"In that time, we might be able to salvage some junk from the facility and fix the armour. We don't really have any other options right now. And in the event that your rescue comes, I'll gladly stay behind here with Guilty. But going out there now, with an entire fleet on its way here – that's suicide and you know it! Think logically, woman!" Philbin shouted.

“Fine, but that still leaves us with the problem of hiding the ship. I’ll find some place nearby and head back to you guys, if you head back into the tunnels,” she said with a much friendlier tone of voice. She had to admit that perhaps it hadn’t been the best idea to try and double-time it back home with a fleet on their tail. They would just have to wait and she would bide her time. Just as she had always done.

\* \* \*

“Admiral, there’s an incoming message for you,” Lieutenant Charl stated from his station on the bridge.

Xer’xis gave him a puzzled look. “Who’s it from?”

“The *Storm Crow*, sir.”

“I’ll view it in my office at my earliest convenience. How is our retreat coming along?” Xer’xis asked. If anything, the message was probably more bad news. He’d have to make sure every ship that was still able to fly would be able to retreat from Gald Prime. The assault on the planet had continued even after the destruction of the Empire flagship, with thousands of those androids being teleported to the surface by the Prophets knew what kind of technology. The planet had been lost, just as he had predicted. The last images of the planet he had seen were the once mighty cities going up in flames. The royal palace had been overrun with those polydrones. No one knew what had become of the queen, but in all likelihood she had been killed.

The most curious thing was that the flagship’s destruction had not been at their own hands, but seemed to have been an inside job. Perhaps one day he’d know the cause. In the end, targeting it may have been a foolish exercise, but it had felt like a small victory to everyone and had given the desired effect of boosting the troops’ morale. Telling them that no matter what the odds were, there was always a chance of winning.

“The remainder of our fleet will join the others in Kevar space. All of the other fleets have been ordered to converge there, so we can mount a counteroffensive,” Charl said.

“We’ll need repairs first, not to mention give our troops some time to catch their breath.”

Xer'xis rubbed his weary eyes. There was little left to do now but wait until they would all meet up with the other Alliance fleets. He'd take a look at the message and then he would finally get some much-deserved rest.

"Lieutenant, I'll be in my office, watching that message."

"As you wish, sir. We'll keep you posted," Charl said, saluting the Admiral formally.

Xer'xis returned the salute and marched towards his office.

When the door closed, he took off his jacket and threw it on the corner sofa on his way to his desk. With a heavy sigh, he slumped down on his chair and activated the computer system. There were a whole lot more messages there. Dozens, maybe even hundreds of damage reports, casualty lists, combat logs and messages from Alliance officials. He ignored all of them and searched directly for the one coming from the *Storm Crow*. He mentally braced himself for more bad news.

The masked face of Máraxi Wihara appeared on the screen. The quality of the image left much to be desired; he hoped the sound would be at least audible.

"Admiral," she spoke with her typical, formal voice, "we have retreated back into Alliance space through the nebula and should be in Veraan space soon. The Empire sent reinforcements, forcing us to retreat. We had to leave the covert team behind on the planet, but I'm happy to report that their mission was a success."

Xer'xis sighed with relief. He could not believe what he had just heard.

"I can hardly believe it myself," Máraxi said, almost as if they were having a video conversation.

"The factory has been destroyed, and according to our technicians, the failsafe protocol has been successfully uploaded and distributed. This means that every polydrone will eventually shut itself down. I can only hope everyone else is safe."

That last sentence seemed very uncharacteristic for Máraxi, but Xer'xis supposed that even though she always seemed to have a cold

exterior, deep down she cared for her people. Even if they weren't part of the Circle.

"As soon as we're back in Alliance space, I will contact you. We may have achieved a small victory, but the real threat is far from gone," she said with a sudden graveness.

Xer'xis pursed his lips and nodded at the masked woman on his screen. She was right. Even with the androids taken out of the equation, the Empire was still a formidable foe. He could only hope Ráz and his team had been just as successful as Máraxi. Then, perhaps all of this would not have been in vain.

## Chapter 25 – Empires and Architects

Ráz and Grummus were standing next to each other, both staring at the viewscreen of the *Sprite Darter's* bridge. Despite the enormous amount of traffic around the planet, Zar looked like a wonderful pearl of bright, lush greens, with blue and azure hues. A truly wondrous sight to behold.

“Approaching Zar, sirs,” Ensign Oline said, her eyes wide open with awe at the beauty of the Throne of the Empire.

“Follow the instructions from the lead ship. We need to make this look convincing. Everyone, get ready for departure,” Ráz ordered.

Shortly before leaving Anugaris the Emperor, Saloman and Ráz himself had devised a plan to get them to Zar. It would involve five ships to accompany the *Sprite Darter*, making it seem as if they had been captured by Empire forces. The leading ship's captain would arrange for their arrest and present them to the Council of Seven, who had received word of the trespassers. The Architect had proven to be easily baited, or perhaps he was confident enough that a single ship and crew could not pose any threat to him. It was the hour of truth, Ráz realized. Of course, their restraints would be fake or otherwise easily compromised, to give them a fighting chance. They would be taken to the Council Chambers, deep within the Imperial Palace. All soldiers present on the five Empire ships would escort them there, to further enhance their ruse. According to Avatica, these were the best men in the Empire, trained to protect the Emperor as his personal legion. Judging from those he had seen, Ráz could only agree. They had keen eyes, well-trained physiques and equipment that rivalled that of the Kevar.

“Incoming transmission from the lead ship,” Myrlana reported, establishing the connection directly, without waiting for approval. Everyone turned their attention to the viewscreen. A broad Saranus appeared on it.

“The Council will receive us within the hour. You will receive coordinates. Make sure everyone is there in twenty minutes,” he said with a

lisp. The screen went dark, after which it switched back to the view of the planet.

Grummus raised an eyebrow at Rüz. “Well, they certainly don’t waste any time on pleasantries.”

“No time for that now. Let’s get ready, my friend,” Rüz said, resting a hand on the Scarowyn’s shoulder. Grummus nodded back at him, his eyes glinting with determination.

Avatica and several others of her kind had joined the *Sprite Darter* crew when they had departed from Anugaris. They were the ones that would stay behind with the Earth Portal masters, which would be necessary to get everybody back on board once they had finished their business on the planet. This also served the purpose of making it seem as if the ship had been captured by the Empire. Everyone who was to be presented to the Council was getting cuffed, with their hands behind their back. All of them had also been given concealed weapons, in case they were needed. The portal had been erected. Looking through it, Rüz was surprised to see that the planet’s surface was a whole lot less attractive than the view of the planet as a whole had been. Dark, greenish brown clouds loomed over the spires of the Imperial Palace. The path leading towards the enormous construction seemed unnecessarily long, and was clearly designed to humble all those approaching it. This was about to become their walk of shame, he figured. Would the Architect really be this easily fooled? Could someone who pulled the wool over the eyes of billions really be misguided himself? And what if the intentions of Saloman and the Child Emperor had all been just an act to lure him and his crew here? No. He could not allow himself to think like this. There had to be honest people. People like Grummus, who would never dare to betray him. All they could do was hold on to the hope that their plan would succeed, however unlikely it seemed.

A shiver ran down his spine as he entered through the portal and felt the cold, wet air of the planet. The palace itself was surrounded by nothing but flooded plains, with the edges of the imperial city far away from it. Why anyone would not build the city around the palace eluded Rüz. The

clouds rumbled, and half a minute later he could feel the first drips of rain on his face. This was about to become a long, long walk. For every member of his crew, four legionaries escorted them. From the spires of the palace, they would have looked only like ants, scuttling through the rain over the seemingly endless path leading to the large double doors that formed the palace entrance.

“Everyone’s accounted for. Let’s get walking, Alliance scum!” Avatica shouted from the front of the line. Ráz and Grummus were closest to her. Avatica had suggested to put everyone in a line according to rank, with the highest ranking officers taking the front. All the way at the back, they had hidden Zar’kiln himself. Despite the long argument they’d had over his presence and the amount of danger he would find himself exposed to, he had ordered Avatica to take him along. Ráz and Grummus had both been surprised that she had accepted the order, despite her reluctance to do so. Ráz had to agree with Avatica. What could he possibly hope to achieve by being here? His powers were nowhere near what they were supposed to be, and if the Architect would get his hands on him, he’d have another bargaining chip. Most likely, he would just get rid of the Emperor altogether. However, Zar’kiln had been adamant and had told Avatica that he knew every nook and cranny of the palace, including all of its secret traps and emergency exits.

Ráz’ train of thought had made him lose his bearings for a moment. He bumped into one of the escorts in front of him, and now found himself standing in front of the massive double doors of the palace. They had to be at least thirty metres tall. His clothing had been drenched by the downpour, he noticed. Without any words from either side, the doors swung open inwardly, producing a sound unlike anything Ráz had ever heard before. Grinding stone came close, but amplified a hundred times. After a long time, the doors came to a halt, and the captives were ushered in by their escorts.

The sound of dozens of footsteps echoed throughout the large hallway. Before them were seemingly endless rows of pillars and an elaborate flight of stairs leading up, further into this wonder of architectural inge-

nuity. Green marble floors and walls. Decorations made of gold and silver lining the walls. Glowing globes attached to each side of every pillar which produced a bluish and white light spectacle. Imperial guards were stationed at even distances all the way up, standing across from one another, weapons at hand. None spoke or moved, but their eyes followed the captives' every move. Once they'd reached the end of the flight of stairs, they found themselves in a circular courtyard. In the middle was a large circle decoration made of tiles. It featured seven smaller circles placed at even spaces, each one filled with a portrait of a Saranus. They had to be depictions of every current council member, or perhaps the original ones, Rüz thought as he studied the extremely detailed tile mosaic. Someone pushed him towards the centre, along with Grummus. He flared his nostrils at the Saranus involuntarily. Several doors led out of the courtyard, further into the palace. None of them as large as the entrance had been, with the exception of one pair of doors, which was directly opposite the flight of stairs. Rüz began to wonder what purpose this area served.

"Welcome to Zar!" a distorted, dark voice echoed through the courtyard.

Rüz tried to see where the voice was coming from, but couldn't see anyone on ground level. One of the escorts poked him and pointed upward.

All the way up in the courtyard were seven small balconies, each with a set of doors leading to it. The one in front of them was occupied. It had to be the one where the voice had come from. From this distance, Rüz could hardly make out any details, but the Saranus at the top wore dark purple robes and was of a slender build. He had a frilled neck, which was bright red and yellow.

"I see we have a lucky catch today. I know you ..." the Saranus said, pointing a scaly finger at Rüz.

"You are the one some call Harbinger of Death."

*Could it really be that my infamy precedes me?* Rüz thought. "You seem to have me at a disadvantage, sir."

The balcony produced a grinding noise and descended slowly.

"A disadvantage? That is quite the understatement. Do you wish to know how I know of you?" the Councillor asked. His features became clearer with each passing second. Rüz could now clearly see the jewellery adorning the frilled neck and cranial ridges of the reptilian man.

"I'm sure you're about to tell me regardless," Rüz said defiantly.

A smirk appeared on the Councillor's face.

"Because you killed my son."

Rüz threw a glance at Grummus, who seemed to be as lost for words as he was.

"Who? I have no recollection of killing any Saranus," he said with a puzzled frown.

The balcony elevator had completed its descent and the man jumped over it with uncharacteristic agility. He shook his head at Rüz as he approached slowly.

"No, no, no ... surely you remember killing Pur'ganis. Or Langruff, as he was known to you," he said, carefully weighing his words as he spoke them. His eyes turned to slits as he hovered within a few centimetres of Rüz' face.

Despite his best effort not to, the Windmaster couldn't help but stagger back a step. His golden-white eyes stared into the darkness of the Architect's. Flashes appeared before his eyes – images of memories that were not his own, but part of the collective memories of the Luminars he had inherited from the Custodian A.I. on Netherea. There was no doubt about it that this was him.

*Gan'darra*. The name rang through his mind, as if someone had just banged the largest gong in existence. The creature standing in front of him was as ancient as the Luminars themselves.

"Your son? That was your son?" Grummus asked, his voice stammering.

The eyes of the ancient Shaedon shifted to the Scarowyn.

"You were there too. Such an unlikely combination, a Scarowyn and a Xoron!" *Gan'darra* shook his vessel's head. Rüz wondered if there'd be anything left of the former owner's mind if the Shaedon released its control over this body. He had sensed the immense power when he gazed into its eyes.

"Yet you were not instrumental in my son's demise. Only this one has the power," he said, turning his attention to Ráz once again. A malicious grin formed on the lipless face, rows of razor-sharp teeth glinting in the light from the glow globes.

"Tell me, young man, how exactly are you planning on defeating all of us? You are only one. Indulge me." Gan'darra folded his arms and cocked his head back as he waited for an answer.

"One at a time," Ráz replied without the slightest hesitation.

The possessed councillor laughed. "While the rest of the galaxy is burned down to the ground by our hand? I admit, I admire your tenacity, but you don't stand a chance. You never did."

"Then what about the rest of the Council? Surely they have their suspicions about your motives?" Ráz asked in an attempt to keep the Shaedon busy. He had already checked the others. Everyone was ready.

"The Council?" Gan'darra asked, frowning his brow. He shook his head and smirked.

"You think so small, Harbinger of Death. Look!" he said, gesturing at the other balconies above them. All of them were occupied by a council member, each of them slowly descending. The other six robed figures joined the Architect, three on each side, moving in an unnervingly well-orchestrated manner. They all opened their mouths at the same time.

"I am the Council," they all spoke with a singular voice.

"That's impossible, right, Ráz?" Grummus asked, his voice trembling with deep-rooted fear.

"No, it is not ..." the Windmaster concluded after seeing all of the councillors' faces. They all had the same eyes, which shared the same consciousness. He wasn't sure how he knew, but he knew it. He *felt* it.

"If only you had been more careful, Ráz Numera. You would have made a formidable foe one day. Gald Prime already lies in ashes. Netherea won't be long either. Your Alliance is broken and defeated. As are you. Guards, deal with this filth. I have other matters to attend to," the Council spoke in unison.

"No," Avatica stated loudly, striding forward to reveal herself to the Council.

With a look of only mild interest, Gan'darra shifted his attention to her.

"You would defy your ruler?" he asked, this time only using the body of the eldest councillor.

Avatica spat on the ground. "You are not my ruler! The Eternal One is!"

"And where is he, then?"

"Right here!" the voice of Zar'kiln echoed through the courtyard. The crowd shuffled, giving way to the emperor until he was next to Avatica.

The eyes of all council members widened in shock, followed by wicked smiles. They laughed until the sound became a mad cackle.

"You are an elusive one," the Architect said, after catching his breath. "I still wonder how you managed to keep yourself so well hidden from me, but it is of no consequence. You are a fool for showing up here."

"I just came to witness the corruption that you wrought upon my people and to tell you your 'reign' has come to an end," Zar'kiln spoke with a sense of righteousness and conviction in his voice.

"And how will you achieve this, then?"

"We will fight you," Rüz intervened, stepping to Zar'kiln's other side.

"Must it all end in violence with you corporeals? Can't you just accept defeat? I will allow each and every one of you to leave alive, with the exception of you, Harbinger of Death," Gan'darra said, pointing a clawed finger at Rüz.

"Unacceptable," Grummus said, putting himself between the Council and Rüz.

"Can't you see the futility of facing me? What makes you think my control over the Council doesn't extend any further than that? Guards!"

The large double doors at the back of the courtyard ground open. Saranus soldiers poured out until they encircled the entire group. Their eyes were cold and lifeless, almost as if they were puppets.

Grummus looked over his shoulder. Rüz nodded at him. Avatica seemed to be anticipating combat at a moment's notice.

"Will you spill the blood of all these men and women in a futile attempt to destroy me?"

"We must do what we can to root out the cancer that has corrupted the Empire!" Zar'kiln shouted.

The Council took a few steps back, immediately covered by the soldiers that had poured from the doorway.

“Then violence it is. You will not leave this palace alive,” Gan’darra said.

Räz could see the balcony elevator ascending, as well as all the others. Just as he had thought, the Architect did not want the council members to be harmed. He gazed around the room. There were maybe two hundred of them. The guards were legion.

“Fall back!” he shouted. Avatica nodded at him, then dissipated into thin air. The next thing he knew, Räz saw two soldiers close to him drop to the ground, their throats torn out. Blood spilled out of the deep gashes. A collective, primal roar echoed through room as the palace guards charged towards them.

“Get to safety, Emperor!” Räz yelled, urging the child to move towards the centre of the group. A golden-white haze appeared in front of his eyes. He could hear himself screaming and releasing the Pure Light beam from the palms of his hands, as if he were in a dream. A large gash formed in the ranks of the guards that were charging at them, cutting them down by the dozens.

When he regained control over his faculties, he was looking Grummus straight in the eyes. The Scarowyn extended a hand to help him back up, as he had gotten down on one knee after the release of such a massive amount of magicka.

“Quick, we’ve got to get back to the ship!” Grummus said, barely dodging a blade from one of the guards. Räz nodded at him, reached for his orb and channelled the Air magicka to blow their assailants away with a gust of wind. All around them there was violence. The clashing of blades, the screaming of men and women, the sound of energy weapons being fired.

Grummus whirled around, pointed his arms towards the ground and then raised them upward. Roots shot out of the courtyard’s floor, entangling a row of guards that were only a few metres away from them. Räz spotted Gyn and Miten ten metres away, fighting back to back. Their size made them easy targets, but they seemed to hold their own. One guard charged at Gyn, who used the force of his assailant to lift him over himself, throwing him right into another group of Saranus. Räz could see

that the group was trying to fight their way back towards the hallway leading out of the palace, but with the amount of numbers they were facing, they were only barely managing. The men he and Grummus had stopped were already back on their feet, he saw when he looked over his shoulders. They had to push back if they wanted to make it out alive.

“You fight well, for a *Kajet no Ra’asha!*” Gyn said, throwing a glance at Miten. The young Kevlar had been keeping count of the enemies they had defeated. He had already reached well over twenty, with just the use of his double one-handed blades, but he had suffered a few cuts and bruises. The adrenaline rushing through his body had disabled all of his pain receptors and he had given in almost entirely to his instincts of survival. Two more Saranus rushed at him. He leapt into the air, swivelled around the left one and plunged both blades into its back. The other opened his mouth in shock, surprised by the swiftness of the warrior. Gyn used the distraction to rid themselves of him by twisting the guard’s neck. It snapped like a twig. A shot from a laser weapon hit him in the right shoulder. Gyn twisted around and hissed madly. Three more shots hit him straight in the chest, bringing him down to his knees. He reached for his back to pull out his fire weapon. Breathing became harder and he coughed. The Saranus standing over him pointed his weapon straight at him. The large feline closed his eyes, determined to make his last moments count. Miten stood at a few metres’ distance, too far to assist. He charged forward and roared, both blades ready to strike at the guard, but he was already too late. The guard pulled the trigger at point blank range, burning a clean hole right between the Kevlar’s eyes. Miten stabbed and stabbed until the Saranus was nothing but a bloody mess of flesh and bone. It took a while for his breathing to return to normal and the red in front of his eyes to disappear. He looked down at the corpse of his Kevlar brother.

“You died well!”

Myrlana, Oline and several of the Saranus were stuck in the middle of the group. Myrlana had seen the beam of light that had blasted right through the ranks of the guards at the back of the room. They could use some-

thing like that to clear the entrance leading downstairs, but Rüz was still fighting his way there and it seemed that the attack had cost him a considerable amount of energy. The soldiers surrounding her fired their weapons in nearly every direction, and the return fire had killed a lot of men in front of her. Their ranks were thinning faster than ice exposed to flame. The man in front of her was hit in the head and toppled over. She tried to stop him with all her might, but she couldn't help but fall down herself. Oline had disappeared out of her sight; the small Saridion had been able to squeeze through and rushed forward towards the hallway. At least some were making progress towards getting there, but their losses were heavy. Pushing the body on its side, she peeked over the edge of the dead man's flank. Nearly everyone had scrambled away from her position. She was surrounded by the dead and injured. She grabbed the man's rifle and took a few well-aimed shots at nearby guards. This was not a place she could stay in for long. Gritting her teeth, she decided to count down from three and make a run for it. *Three, two, one.*

Jumping over the bodies, she ran as fast as her legs would take her. It was only another twenty metres before she'd reach the hallway, where she could take cover behind the pillars. Ten more metres, she was half-way there! A jolt of pain shot right up her left thigh as she crashed to the floor, holding her hands in front of her to break her fall. Smoke emerged from her uniform where she'd been hit by laser fire. She crawled forward. There would be time to face the pain later.

"Grab my hand, quick!" she heard someone say from behind her. It was Grummus, who had become a target as much as she had. He ducked, dodging the fire only barely. She extended her hand and he dragged her forward, until they were safely around the corner, out of the line of sight of the enemies shooting at them.

"Thanks, you saved my life," she grunted, panting from her sprint.

"You're welcome," he said, taking his hat off and inspecting the hole that had been shot in it. "Looks like I got lucky."

He threw his hat to the ground, right next to Oline, who was lying face down on the floor. Getting down on his knees, he turned her over. Dead eyes stared at nothing. She'd been hit in the chest.

"Oh no ..." Grummus muttered, drawing magicka from his orb.

Myrlana tugged at his uniform. He looked up at her, his eyes watery and sullen.

“She’s dead, Grummus. There’s nothing you can do,” she said, putting her hand on his shoulder. He looked down once more, his hands glowing with green energy.

“You’re right. Let me treat your wound then, quickly,” he said, converting the raw elemental power into a stream of healing energy. She could feel it wash the burning sensation away. It filled her with a gentle warmth, which grew more intense with each passing second, until it stopped abruptly. When he removed his hands from her thigh, the skin tissue had been regenerated as if nothing had happened. Only her uniform remained tattered.

“Captain Numera, the Eternal One has been brought to safety. We need to get everyone out of the courtyard and into the hallway, so he can shut the doors. He has successfully gained access to the palace controls. Come!” Avatica said. Although Rüz could hear her voice, he only saw a shimmer in the air that alerted him to her position.

“That’s exactly what we’ve been trying to do!” Rüz shouted at her, his eyes glowing with an intense white light. They were all near the exit now, or what was left of them anyway. Bodies littered the floor of the courtyard; both sides had suffered substantial losses.

“Can you fire one more of those white beams? I will have my team cover you,” the Karakydilus woman asked, still camouflaged.

Rüz nodded in her general direction. “I think so, but casting those beams is extremely draining. I will need help to get out of here afterwards,” he said, getting behind a pillar for cover.

“On my mark then. Three, two, one, mark!”

As Rüz broke cover, he saw five men drop dead on the floor for no apparent reason. One guard had his weapon aimed at Rüz, ready to fire. Just as he was about to pull the trigger, the same fate as the others befell him. With all the energy he could muster, Rüz gathered the raw elemental energy from his orb. It had been drained considerably during the battle; this would have to be one of the last spells he could cast before it would have to be recharged. He closed his eyes and felt the flow of the magicka

coursing through him. Its primal power. With all his willpower, he channelled it towards his hands, building a ball of white light between his palms. It grew larger. Larger. This was it, he could no longer contain it, the time for its release had come! He opened his eyes, but all he saw were the flashes. Again! The memories that were not his own. They showed the possibilities of the powers he possessed, but could not grasp. He let them take over. The energy flowed out of him, pointed in one direction, the centre of the courtyard. The intensity of the light blinded him. It was all he could feel, the warmth of the light. All sound became a muffled mess. He could hear the screaming of men, the crumbling of stone and his own voice. Screaming in agony, or was it bliss, perhaps? Suddenly a darkness surrounded him. He drifted away into it, falling. Forever falling into the endless depths of the abyss.

\* \* \*

“Ráz, wake up!” Grummus shook his friend as hard as he possibly could. He had heard the enormous explosion coming from the courtyard. The doorway leading to it had collapsed, leaving both doors stuck in odd angles. Piles of rubble and debris had come tumbling down, blocking all access in or out.

“He’s drained,” Avatica said, now clearly visible as she stood next to Grummus to tend to him. She had dragged his limp body through the doorway shortly before it collapsed. Miten walked up to them. Grummus looked up and gave him a half-hearted smile.

“Is he okay?” Miten asked.

“He’ll live, but we need to get moving soon, before the Architect calls in reinforcements,” Avatica said, getting up from her kneeled position.

“Let me carry him,” Miten offered, getting down to grab Ráz’ limp body. Grummus helped him lift the Windmaster up, so Miten could carry him over his shoulder. It wasn’t until then that the Earthmaster noticed the many wounds the young warrior had suffered.

“Are you sure you can do this? You hardly look in any state to be carrying him,” he said.

“I’ll be fine,” Miten said, already stepping down the flight of stairs.

Grummus looked around him. Not many had survived the massacre in the courtyard. There were Myrlana, Miten, Ráz close to him. A little further down the steps he saw Nicol, but Guid was nowhere to be found. Tyria was tending to some wounded Saranus further down. There were maybe twenty to thirty of them left, and there was no guarantee that they'd be able to get safely back aboard the *Sprite Darter*. The portal masters had been informed of their approach and had initiated the ritual. They had maybe five minutes to get down there. At least the enemy had been blocked off, but the real threat was still there. How could they ever hope to defeat him? Perhaps the Architect had been right, perhaps their efforts had been futile. All they had lost was not worth what they had just attempted to do. If he controlled not just the Council, but all those other Saranus, how could they ever defeat him? What if Ráz' given powers were not even close to being strong enough? Langruff had only been a Shaedon for a short time, an infant. This Architect seemed old, ancient even. They would get out of here and think of something. They had to. This abomination could not be allowed to exist! Grummus could feel it in his body, this intangible feeling that this Shaedon was unnatural. The Earth Mother demanded its destruction.

What little guards remained in the hallway were quickly disposed of by Avatica and her unseen squad of Karakydilus. The cold efficiency with which they took them down sent a shiver up Grummus' spine. He was glad they were on their side. The entrance was getting closer. He could already see the outside. Dark clouds still poured down their heavy rain-drops.

"You go first, we'll watch your backs," Avatica said, urging Grummus and the others through the door while she stood at the enormous doorway. The portal had been erected and was within their reach. Relief washed over Grummus as he could already see the *Sprite Darter's* portal room on the other side. To his surprise, the field surrounding the palace was eerily empty. They had finally made it back aboard in one piece.

\* \* \*

With the last of the survivors safely aboard the *Sprite Darter*, the Scarowyn portal masters had ceased their channelling to maintain the portal, after which it had crumbled to dust. Doctor Sarendis and two other surviving medics had sped off to her medical bay to tend to the wounded. Rüz had come to, and despite his exhaustion, he had ordered Miten to bring him up to the bridge. Along with Avatica and her entourage, the Emperor had expressed his wish to join Rüz and Grummus on the bridge, so they could discuss their next step.

"Thanks, Miten. I'll be fine now," Rüz said. Dark rings under his eyes told Miten otherwise.

"Please head down to sickbay at once, Miten," Grummus ordered the Kevar.

Miten gave him a look of understanding and went his own way.

To Grummus, Rüz looked exhausted and on the brink of losing his consciousness again. The emptiness on the bridge was a grim reminder of their unfortunate run-in with the Architect. The empty stations seemed to be irrevocably so. The viewscreen was still displaying Zar, which seemed much less beautiful now that they'd paid a visit to its surface.

Zar'kiln walked up towards the viewscreen. He sighed and let his head hang low. A long moment of silence passed as everyone in the room was processing what had just transpired. The young Emperor turned around, a grief on his face that was so profound it could almost be felt by those looking at him. Zar'kiln looked at Rüz, who was leaning back in his captain's chair, still recovering from the spell he had cast. He had never released so much energy in one single beam at once, not even when he had faced off against Langruff. This had been different. He wasn't even sure how he had achieved such a feat. Everything from the moment they had started the fight felt like a blur. His memories were foggy and all he wanted to do was rest, but now was not the time. Not yet. One last thing remained. He realized that now was the time, when the Emperor turned towards him with that expectant look on his face.

“Do it, Harbinger of Death, by my command,” Zar’kilm said, his voice trembling at the prospect of what was going to happen in mere moments.

“Do what?” Grummus asked, stepping in front of the child.

“What needs to be done,” Ráz said, grunting as he got up from his chair and made his way towards the communications station.

Grummus looked into the eyes of the Emperor, who didn’t speak a single word. He gazed around the room, at Avatica and the other five Karakydilus commandos.

“What is going on?” Grummus asked. He turned to Ráz. “Ráz, what are you doing? Why won’t anyone answer me?”

Ráz sat down, initiated the communications array and hooked it up to the nearby ships surrounding them. The Earthmaster yanked his left arm, giving him a demanding look.

“Tell me what you’re doing, right now!”

“What must be done. Now leave me alone,” the Windmaster snapped at him with a pained look.

The display on the communications panel changed; all ships indicated a ready sign. All that was left was to issue the final command.

“I’m sorry, my friend ...” Ráz said. He pressed the button and leaned back into the chair, covering his face with both his hands. He exhaled loudly.

“What have you done, Ráz?”

“Look,” Zar’kilm said, pointing at the viewscreen.

Grummus’ jaw dropped as he watched the missiles impact Zar at five different locations. In mere moments, the explosions caused shockwaves as the payload did its job. This had been the technology Vladpoe had told him about, the terraforming bombs that erased all fauna. He was witnessing the destruction of a world. Tears ran down his cheek as he stood there watching, powerless to do anything against it. Was this the Xoron’s Greater Good at work? Destroying one world so that all the others would be safe? And how could the Emperor agree to such an act of genocide? He clenched his teeth and balled his hands up into fists.

"You ..." he said weakly, his voice shaky. He swallowed hard and tried to stabilize his breathing.

"How can you justify this? We were sent to prevent destruction, not cause it!" he screamed at Rüz, pushing him hard. The Windmaster staggered and fell on the ground.

"There was no other way, Grummus. I'm –" Rüz said, slowly pushing himself up.

Grummus' nostrils flared. "You're not sorry! This was part of your plan all along! And how could you approve of this? Don't you care for your people?" he asked, shifting his attention to Zar'kiln.

Avatica stepped right between him and the emperor.

"Do you think this choice was easy? Never in the Empire's history has there been so much death as what was just caused"

"Then why do it? There had to be another way!"

"No, Grummus, there wasn't. Gan'darra's influence would only grow. You saw how many he was able to control at once. This would have only got worse, until he would have the entire population under his control," Rüz tried to explain.

"You believe this – this nonsense?" Grummus asked, looking back at Zar'kiln incredulously.

"Yes. Earthmaster, I do not owe you an explanation. What is done, is done. There is no way back now. All we can do is join forces and eradicate this cancer from the galaxy. We will contact your people and send you back home, with the exception of Mr. Numera."

Realising he had been shouting at the leader of an entire Empire, he slowly came to his senses.

"What about Rüz?" he asked softly, looking at the exhausted man on the chair.

"I will pay for my deeds ..." he said, grunting.

"Mr. Numera agreed to be taken into custody for his own protection. He will be placed in a maximum security prison after his trials. The people will demand it. In reality, we will give Rüz time to explore his true powers. We need him to fully understand them. Other Shaedon remain who must be eradicated," Avatica explained.

Grummus frowned. "What?"

"I'm sorry, Grummus ... this is all for the ..." Rüz said, each word costing him considerable effort.

"Greater Good," the Scarowyn finished the sentence for him.

Two commandos took Rüz under the arms, supporting him so he could walk.

"Don't worry, he's in good hands," Avatica said, giving a faint smile.

Zar'kiln stepped in front of Grummus and asked him to come down to his level. The Scarowyn got down on a knee, a grave look on his face.

"If anything, Earthmaster, this whole ordeal has brought our people closer together than ever. We need to join forces against the Shaedon. The Empire will do its part. I can only hope this goes for the Alliance too. This common foe has perhaps paved the way to a great friendship. Never forget that."

Grummus tried to understand the words, but they felt hollow, meaningless.

"I hope so too," he muttered as he stood up straight.

"Grummus?" Rüz asked, already standing at the nearest turbolift with his two helpers.

"Yes?" the Scarowyn asked, turning towards him.

"You cannot give up. Continue what we started. Look for the High Councillor, she will know what to do."

He gazed into the golden-white globes of Rüz' eyes. His shoulders slumped and his expression was one of great sadness.

"I don't know if I can," he said, thick tears rolling over his cheeks.

And with that, the moment had passed and they parted. The doors of the turbolift closed and he was standing there by himself. Alone in a galaxy he could not comprehend, repeating the only mantra that he cared for. All life is sacred.

*All life is sacred.*

## Character List

**Baynam Macintyre** – Young man in employment of NanoTech Incorporated. Gets sent out to find the enigmatic Master Tinkerer.

**Bin'rassa** – Shaedon Possessor, part of the employer's board.

**Chando Rombilius** – CEO of NanoTech Incorporated. Humanity's single largest company in cybernetics, bionics and as its name suggests nano technology.

**Elder Cacturis** – Scarowyn Elder, part of the Scarowyn Council.

**The Custodian** – Ancient A.I. created by the Luminars to protect their history and knowledge deep within their temple in the Xarani desert.

**Deruni** – Engineer, part of Raggard's squad.

**Lieutenant Charl** – Lieutenant and bridge officer aboard the Harbinger's Resolve.

**Gard** – Saridion farmer and friend of Somin.

**Garl** – Saridian barkeep who runs a cantina in the small town of Herzenflag on Saridia Prime.

**Prime Ministers Glynt** – Byndari twins who together fulfil the role of Prime Ministers of the Alliance. Stationed aboard the Bastion space station.

**Grummus** – Young aspiring Scarowyn, who is aiming to become a renowned Earthmaster.

**Elder Greentrunks** – Scarowyn Elder, part of the Scarowyn Council.

**Guilty Ember** – Kraut Forgemaster, expert at creating alloys and transmuted metals.

**Holly** – Holographic assistant to Chando Rombilius. Part of a larger A.I. wired into the Taniguchi Station mainframe.

**Jessi Ruhani** – A young Xoron female, trained as a medic. Lives with her daughter Rini.

**Krikkrak** – Veraan spokesperson for employer of Chando Rombilius.

**Langruff** – High Councillor Máraxi's personal Windblade. Acts as an agent and is heavily trained in martial arts and limited use of magicka.

**Elder Leafbeard** – Scarowyn Elder, one of the most renowned Grand Earthmasters of all Wyngaya.

**Lorin** – Coms officer, part of Raggard's squad

**Lerion Prynn** – Infamous Gald smuggler with a penchant for risky jobs. Mostly known for kidnapping the Pearl of the Silver Plains.

**Máraxi Wihara** – High Councillor of the Ninth Circle. An order of Windmasters with the sole purpose of retrieving lost artifacts and knowledge.

**NTT-36** – Prototype android created by Philbin, the Master Tinkerer and his team.

**Philbin, the Master Tinkerer** – Enigmatic Saridion genius who's an expert on artificial intelligence and cybernetics.

**Pur'ganis** – Shaedon merger, who eventually merges with Langruff.  
*(not named in book I)*

**Pur'shadla** – Shaedon merger, who eventually merges with Baynam.  
*(not named in book I)*

**Commander Raggard** – Veteran marine of the Xoron Fleet. Leader of a squad of commandos.

**Räz Numera** – Talented Xoron Windmaster and member of the enigmatic Ninth Circle.

**Regi Polus** – Owner and bartender of the Stripmine, a nightclub on the promenade of the Kolvar space station.

**Rini Ruhani** – Daughter of Jessi Ruhani. She lives with her mother in a small research settlement on Netherea.

**Sedora** – Gald slicer and associate of Lerion Prynn. Adores Lerion and considers him her boyfriend.

**Serra Gomez** – Agent of NanoTech Inc., shares a history with Baynam Macintyre and is close to Chando Rombilius.

**Sha'hasra** – Shaedon possessor who acts as the ambassador of the Shaedon Armada.

**Shi'fisso** – Shaedon Possessor, part of the employer's board.

**Somin** – Old Saridion fisherman from the backwater town of Herzenflag.

**Private Sonill** – A young Xoron soldier who's assigned to the Harbinger's Resolve during the evacuation of Netherea.

**Tryu** – Mentor to Grummus, Tryu is an Arlin Terraris, a subspecies of the avian Arlin race.

**Tyria Sarendis** – Doctor aboard the Harbinger’s Resolve and assistant to Yarael.

**Doctor Vanderplas** – Surgeon specialized in bionics and cybernetic implants. Works for NanoTech Incorporated.

**Vester Sylkwhisker** – Kevar mercenary and leader of the Sons of Ra’asha, a Kevar outcast organization.

**Vyrex Apollo** – Gald Assassin, assigned to Grummus’ and Leafbeard’s team when they search for Rüz.

**Ensign Vulin** – Soldier, part of the 67th regiment of the Xoron Fleet.

**Xer’xis Darane** – Captain of the Harbinger’s Resolve, the Xoron fleet flagship.

**Yarael** – Chief medical officer aboard the Harbinger’s Resolve. Has a long history with Xer’xis.

**Zurâk Keroni** – Rüz’ former mentor and fellow member of the Ninth Circle. Works with Rüz on a research project.