

BOOK ONE OF SALOME'S LEGACY

INTO THE BLACK

AN UNOFFICIAL ELITE: DANGEROUS NOVEL



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For the Legion
For the community
And for love of a good story

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“Cowards die many times before their deaths. The valiant never taste of death but once.”

—William Shakespeare

The woman's face was illuminated in a flash, the flame from her lighter accentuating sharp features and even sharper eyes. Thick smoke curled into the air, wafting from the old-style cigarette. It was a long time before she spoke, seated in the darkened office, the man's figure silhouetted at his desk across from her. When words were finally spoken they were not the tools of a conversation but the rapiers of a duel. His Achenarian and her neo-Slavic accents danced around the other, the former soft and the latter hard.

"Kamadhenu was a near-run thing," he began. "The Emperor is grateful for your support."

A long exhale escaped her lips, smoke from her cigarette framing her features.

"So grateful that we're practically being exiled."

Another long moment passed, neither the man nor woman's gaze flinching from the other.

"You understand the risks you take simply by existing. Your enemies from within the Empire nearly outnumber those from without. My office is the only thing keeping them at bay."

The woman shrugged. "I own each of my decisions—even the ones that painted a target upon my back."

There was a shifting noise, the silhouette leaning forward, his dark face coming into view.

"Yet, even those far from the light of Her Majesty can find redemption. Your little fiefdom will live or die depending on the coming weeks and months. There is a storm coming, one that will make Kamadhenu look like a gust of wind. The Emperor would see our roofs strengthened."

A look of disgust twisted the woman's face.

"It's the oldest story in the book, nyet? A problem isn't a problem until the high and mighty stand to lose."

The man shook his head, his features grave.

"I assure you it isn't that. The rates of incursion into the Bubble, well... they've exceeded even our worst-case scenarios. Plans to compensate have long been in motion. Kamadhenu accelerated those plans."

The woman looked away. Beyond the cold bulkhead walls of the office, beyond the thick armor of the Orbis starport, there remained thick fields of debris, the blasted remains of human and alien vessels too numerous to count. Victory and death littered the trade lanes of the Emperor's homeworld.

"And that's where we come in."

It was not a question, but a statement of fact. Slowly, the man nodded, reaching from within his simple grey jacket and producing a data disk. He slid it across the table, his eyes serious.

"There are greater things afoot than meet the eye, plans to create a dedicated squadron for this sort of thing. I believe that a suitable one has been found. Your task would be to aid them."

The woman reached forward, taking the disk. She took another drag before replying, her words sharp.

"'Suitable'. Expendable, you mean."

Earnest resolve spread across the man's face.

"We are all of us expendable. Yet not all of us need be expended. The final piece of the puzzle remains. Is there anyone you would trust to carry out such an operation?"

Another long plume wafted before the woman's eyes, momentarily lost in thought.

"Da. There is one. A true comrade. At my side during the worst horrors of Atroco."

The man nodded. "Good. There is something else, something to which you'll be less inclined to agree. You'll need a specialist. Someone who's been out there."

Amusement lifted her eyebrows.

"And I assume you'll be providing this... 'specialist'?"

Now it was the man's turn to shrug.

"Not me. An associate, who is in turn in contact with..."

His eyes smiled, though his mouth did not.

"The expendable part of your crew. A nobody from nothing. No one who will be missed once the job is complete."

Another long moment passed, the woman holding her cigarette in one hand and the data disk in the other. Her features hardened as her eyes once again locked their gaze upon her host's.

"And our... arrangement?"

The man reclined in his seat, once again cloaking himself in shadow.

"Guaranteed upon successful completion."

Nodding, the woman rose, slipping the disk into her own jacket pocket. She snubbed out the cigarette, extinguishing one of the few sources of light within the office.

"Then there is nothing further to discuss."

She turned, striding toward the door. Only the sound of his voice gave her pause.

"Kerenski?"

The woman halted, her back to the man. Her features hardened, her lips pressed together and silent. She could hear the man rise from his seat, his voice still soft but an undercurrent of urgency seeping into his tone.

"She trod this path, too. The one of uncertainty. The one of defiance. The one of greater danger for greater truth."

The woman drew herself up, glancing over her shoulder to the man.

"And her success is the beacon that lights our path."

On his desk, the final ember of the cigarette faded and died, its essence spent. The man advanced a step, his face silhouetted in the shadow.

“Her success,” he said, “and her sacrifice.”

“We’ve got one shot at this. You ready?”

Tyrran Xavian Andor’s accent was a crisp Low Iberian, even over staticky comms. For hours he and his partner had scoured the ancient ruins, their original inhabitants long extinct but traces of functional technology glowing an eerie blue. Energy pillars glowed against the darkness, illuminating the dilapidated structures, their sharp angles harsh in the low light. Everything was prepared. His partner below needed only moments, his sandpaper voice filling Tyrran’s ears.

“Don’t worry about me, pup. Just don’t miss.”

Far below the circling Cobra was an all-terrain rover. It was of the Scarab variety, nimble and suitable for nearly any ground. Within its pressurized canopy bubble was another man, older with thick silver hair and a wicked scar that ran down his face. Cecil was his name, and his flightsuit was worn and discolored, more patchwork than anything, with a garish skull painted over the breastplate. He was a contrast to his more roguish companion, the younger Tyrran in flight trousers and jacket, black with grey and red trim.

Tyrran gripped his joystick, flipping open the weapons safety and pressing the button with the target reticle upon it. The Cobra— an older model named the *Home Away*— deployed its weapons. They were nothing special, nothing like the modified gear becoming more and more common on every hotshot spacer’s ship from one side of the Bubble to the other. No, Tyrran counted himself lucky to simply have a ship to call his own. His partner, however...

Andor scowled, his dark features twisting.

Old man's done nothing but talk down to me since Rax introduced us. I swear that if the creds weren't so good...

Simple multicannons armed themselves and pointed straight ahead. This was the part for which Cecil had been necessary. Apart from having sole knowledge of the ruin's planetary coordinates, the old man's skill at handling a Scarab would be the only thing that would save him. He was no stranger to the process, an old smuggler who could get in or out of any situation. Once he'd been a hovercar racer, and had even enjoyed modest success in the Federal circuit. Now he was an outlaw, scraping out a living hundreds of light years from civilization.

Tyrran keyed his comms, leaning forward in his pilot's seat.

"Then punch it!"

Heavy-duty tires spun in place before the Scarab shot forward, bounding across the surface. For a moment, the vehicle was free, free to simply traverse the decrepit ruins, great clouds of dust kicked up and settling only gradually in the low gravity. In a moment of wild optimism Tyrran relaxed, hoping against hope that the ruin's ancient guardians were indeed permanently at rest...

Cecil's voice cut down his hopes.

"Contacts on scope! Look alive!"

Tyrran bared his teeth. *Time to go to work...*

Rising from dark recesses in the ancient structures were Sentinels, triangular custodians of the long-abandoned ruins, still functional even after untold millennia. Their alien programming— perhaps even a profane variety of artificial intelligence— directed them to move as one, making their way straight to the intruder. Ominous, cycloptic blue eyes looked upon Cecil in his primitive vehicle, hovering silently into place around him. More and more emerged, protecting the secrets of their extinct masters, executing their programming without a trace of mercy...

The lead Sentinel went first, its exotic alloys no match for the brute power of Andor's multicannons. Numerous tiny impacts exploded around it, the automated drone spinning out of control, ploughing into the ground. The others around it noted the additional aggressor and fanned out, adjusting their tactics in realtime to compensate for the new threat.

Tyrran grit his teeth, walking streams of shells into the next closest target. It was a maddening, imprecise thing to engage them; his targeting systems were designed to take on ship-sized targets. The gimbals upon which his weapons were mounted simply lacked the precision to fire accurately upon such tiny offerings.

Son of a...

Another Sentinel was damaged, veering off course with arcs of power leaping from its ruptured hull. The *Home Away's* multicannons were depleted, and would need precious seconds to reload. Over the comms came an urgent plea.

"Where the *hell* is that air support, pup?"

Andor cursed. Whatever arcane programming was guiding the alien drones had correctly identified Cecil as the primary threat. They were ignoring the Cobra and closing in on the lone Scarab, now halfway across the ruin. Blue energy bolts blazed around it, coming closer and closer to the delicate vehicle. Tyrran glanced to one side, his multicannons nearly through with their reloading cycle...

Now!

Destruction was no longer the goal; Cecil needed only to be shielded from the oncoming swarm. Tyrran flew low, the *Home Away* kicking up great clouds of dust, raking the lines of pursuing drones in long strafing runs. Back and forth he flew, the Sentinels relentless. Human weapons shredded the ancient guardians; alien blaster fire overpowered the last of the Scarab's shields.

"Now, pup!"

Andor flipped the Cobra over, disengaging its piloting assist features.

“Just get to the data node and drop that thing!”

From the canopy the horizon dropped, the Scarab speeding toward it. On its heels were the alien drones. The first hints of worry could be heard in Cecil’s words.

“No, no, *no*...”

Tyrran grit his teeth, both his ship and the vehicle converging on nearly the same spot.

“I said *punch it!*”

The *Home Away* dropped vertically down, the Scarab firing its thrusters, gliding mere feet above the ground, barely clearing as the ship ungracefully impacted into the ground. The nearest few Sentinels were crushed beneath it, stray pieces of them continuing onward. Shields flashed in protest and Andor’s teeth were nearly knocked from his mouth, but now a massive barrier had suddenly dropped between the Sentinels and their quarry. Energy bolts impacted against the shields, but they were of little concern. At such a close range even the *Home’s* imprecise gimbals could lock on to their targets.

“*Get some!*”

Multicannon fire erupted from the spinning barrels, matching alien elegance with human brute force. Drones scattered but to little avail. One after another they fell, some perforated and others torn in half. All disengaged and strove to take the long way around, but they would never catch the Scarab, not with Cecil at the controls. The older man’s voice crackled over the comms.

“We’re not done yet! Get over here and help me finish the job!”

Scowling at the man’s lack of gratitude, Tyrran pulled back on the throttle, reversing his ship to match the Scarab’s swift movement. The Sentinels seemed to be pulling back, re-evaluating the optimal strategy against such an unexpectedly aggressive foe. Andor kept a wary eye on his scope.

Just keep thinking it over, and we'll be out of here before you know it...

From his canopy he could see the Scarab bounding up the alien structure, thrusters firing in short, controlled bursts. Cecil would reach the data node in moments...

There!

From behind the massive structure rose two more Sentinels, both bearing down on the intruder. Orbs of alien blaster fire knocked the Scarab back, Cecil fighting inside for control, its bare hull scorched and charred from the onslaught. Tyrran swung the *Home Away* around, bringing its weapons to bear, but—

But the gimbals can't get a lock. Not without blasting the old man, too. Randamnious!

“She can't take much more of this, pup. I need you here now!”

Not responding, Tyrran gripped the throttle and maneuvered the Cobra to one side, sliding level while twisting to still face the newcomer Sentinels. He *almost* had a clear line of fire to them...

Just a little closer...

Streams of multicannon fire again scattered the drones, the pilot wincing as bits of ancient structure were also chipped away by his haphazard suppression. Yet it had done the trick. The two Sentinels were both damaged, hovering with an almost comical limp away from the scene, the others still too far out to stop the human duo from plundering the site's ancient secrets.

“You're clear! Drop that thing!”

The Scarab skidded to a halt, Cecil expertly drifting the vehicle to a halt right where he needed it to be. With a pull of the lever he opened the cargo hatch, dropping a priceless alien relic onto a central repository. The relic was angular and glowing, unseen fields aligning it above the opening, the pieces still fitting together with precision even after the passing of millennia. For the first time, satisfaction could be heard in Cecil's voice.

"That should do it. Standby for upload."

The ground around the Scarab rumbled, and slowly the sanctum around which the structure seemed to be built opened, its exotic segments opening one by one, pieces of a concealed door. The aqua-colored illumination for which the extinct race was known shone from within, and from its depths emerged a floating orb, crackling with energy, its secrets ready to be given up.

Tyrran's eyes widened. "Just *look* at that thing..."

The energy surrounding the orb intensified, the metallic sphere opening in the middle, pure light shining from within. Within the Scarab, dedicated equipment scanned the alien sphere, extracting its data in realtime. A low, gravelly chuckle could be heard from Cecil's throat. At Tyrran's side the transmission commenced, strange shapes and symbols flashing before his eyes.

"Aye, pup. Fend off the suitors and she'll spread like a dock knocker. Not so difficult once you learn the routine."

Recollections of the reward for pristine Guardian data flashed in Tyrran's mind.

"Profitable, too."

A low grunt could be heard through the comms.

"That it is— but don't get cocky. You're just a glorified taxi pilot, remember."

Andor's eyes narrowed.

And you're just a glorified delivery boy.

"You got the stuff yet?"

“Check your inventory.”

To Tyrran’s side the transmission completed with a satisfying chime. The alien data was secure, and worth a fortune for them both. It remained only for Tyrran to land and allow the battered Scarab to re-board the *Home Away*. From his lofty perch, the younger man looked down upon the older.

The first hints of fear could be heard in Cecil’s tone.

“You need to lower the gantry, you fool!”

Andor smiled, his decision made. A thick cloud of dust bloomed from where he’d just hovered. For the final time he keyed the comm to his surly, aging companion.

“And *you* need a lesson in manners. Sorry, old man. That’s just how it goes.”

The thrusters of the *Home Away* flared to life as the Cobra boosted away from the ruins, a great cloud of dust swirling around the Scarab. Local comms swiftly distorted. The last thing that Tyrran heard was his partner’s final, enraged epithet.

“*Traitor!*”

The babe was left— or rather, found— in a hospital in an Alliance system. There was nothing to document, nothing to verify the infant’s existence except the infant itself. Hospital staff were at first puzzled and then perturbed, for who would simply leave a near-newborn alone in a hospital? Calls were put out and visitors questioned, and it soon became clear that the squirming mass’s parents had abandoned it. Security holos were pored over of course, but its mother— a young woman with a hood obscuring her face— was never found, the footage showing her simply strolling into the lobby and leaving the babe at the receptionist’s desk while her back was turned. She had almost certainly planned it that way.

It was a third-shift nurse who decided the babe’s name. It wasn’t in any of the local genetic databases, nor could matches for its parents be found. It was as though the infant had simply sprung from the earth. Thus did she name it Tyrran— a more fashionable spelling of the archaic “terran”, and Xavian— an ancient word meaning “home”, as though to underscore the fact that the child had none. “Andor” was decided to be a better-sounding derivative of “Andoria”, the lush fields of which the nurse had always dreamt of visiting.

Tyrran Xavian Andor never knew the strength of his father's arms, nor the nourishment of his mother's breast. He was declared a ward of the state, and per the relative compassion of Alliance law assigned to a suitable foster home. There baby Tyrran was cared for but not loved, fed but not nourished, handled but not held. Yet it might have been enough, for what one has never had one cannot miss— but the Council of Admirals rose in political power, siphoning off the necessary credits in favor a programme to design and create dedicated military vessels, the first in Alliance history. It was with tears in their eyes that those who had endeavored to care for young Tyrran were compelled to give him up, for they were only ever stewards of the child, with few legal rights to challenge the will of the state.

Tyrran was four years old.

Thus did the earliest— and only— example of stability in the child's life vanish. The sudden loss of the only parental figures he had ever known was a soul-deep blow, and the pain of such enough to forever cripple the boy's ability to form attachments. He withdrew from the world, causing trouble in school and whatever home in which he found himself. Though intelligent, he had trouble making friends. Though healthy, he was ill with trauma. Overworked public professionals spent just enough time with him to document that they had; all across Alliance space, refugees from the endless conflicts of the Federation and Empire stretched local infrastructures nearly to the breaking point. Tyrran was hardly the only orphan in need of attention.

There were those who cared for him, of course. Even a faceless bureaucracy is composed of people, and certain among those people tried their best to treat the boy with compassion and kindness. Yet their benevolence only served to further paint the picture of a random, chaotic world— one where people came and went, and whose presence could mean good or ill with no way to know which would be which.

It was too much for the boy, and in moments of great anxiety Tyrran found that the only consistency, the only solace that he would ever have was within himself. His intellect came to resemble a castle, its drawbridge raised and its moat deep, allowing neither ingress nor egress—a mighty fortress to keep out any who might ever hurt him again.

Eravate was an old system— at least, old by the standards of human colonization. For nearly a millennium it had played host to its new masters, native fauna and flora either adapting or being pushed aside as befitted the needs of humanity. Not one but two of the massive Orbis-class stations ruled its heavens, artificial deep-space metropolises, marvels of human engineering.

Still, even being a titan of deep-space architecture wasn't a guarantor of strictly legal operations, and Ackerman Market— further away from the main star and the recipient of less traffic— was therefore compelled to innovate to remain competitive. Thus did a thriving grey market flourish; under Federal rule numerous commodities were illegal or frowned upon. Those with the means and skill profited from trafficking such items even more handsomely than if no restrictions had been put in place to begin with.

One Cobra slipped past the mailslot, the ship nondescript to a fault. It was neither the ugliest nor the flashiest, nor the most or least expensive, nor the largest or smallest. It was simply... *there*, amid the myriad of variety to be seen at a port like Ackerman. Even its gentle landing was so mundane as to deter attention; surely the pilot within was possessed of the purest of intentions.

The entry ramp lowered and— one magboot stepping in front of the other— Tyrran Xavian Andor descended to the cold steel deck of the landing pad. It was *always* cold on Ackerman, the cavernous docking tube warmed by the thrusters of the coming and going ships and little else. Power was at a premium in the weathered old station; to endeavor to heat the main bay was nearly to endeavor to heat space itself.

Andor looked around himself. Ships of all sizes and makes came and went, their thrusters deafening in his sensitive pilot's ears. One hand reached inside an inner jacket pocket, pulling a specialized datadisk from it. For a moment Tyrran gazed at it, wondering what secrets he held in his palm. With a snort he shoved it back inside.

Doesn't matter, he thought. As long as you get paid.

Straightening his jacket the man stepped through the nearest bay door, taking the time to order up the usual bevy of microwelds and fuel replenishment that the *Home Away* needed. Tyrran paused, remembering one last item.

Ammunition, too. How long's it been since you needed that?

Tyrran Andor wasn't a violent man. Nor was he an especially brave one, at least by the dashing standards of freelance pilots. Smuggling and salvage paid far more reliably than going after violent criminals, and the renegade considered it the height of lunacy to seek out the lethal, flower-shaped vessels of the Thargoids. His doublecrossing of Cecil was simply business, albeit tinged with personal animosity.

The data in his pocket was more valuable than everything he'd collected combined; it was a partial schematic to- *something*, he'd been told, valuable to at least a dozen monied interests. Tyrran didn't have the kind of connections to simply knock on Aegis's front door, but he *had* arrived at a mutual understanding with Rax and Cecil in a private room of a shady nightclub- which for him was just as good.

The lift door slid shut, the curious feeling of gravity being slowly restored taking hold as the lift moved closer to Ackerman's outer surface. Once again, Tyrran thumbed the disk in his pocket, already daydreaming of all the ways he could spend the credits it would fetch. The man forced the thoughts from his mind.

Work now. Dream later.

Rax Ortega could have replaced his cybernetic limb with a clone-grown one, but hadn't. He was a man used to living on the fringes of society, and the looks of horror and distrust he drew from those around him only ensured the privacy that he so richly coveted. Tyrran had never asked about the arm, and Rax had never told.

Indeed, privacy— as well as space— was at a premium on an Orbis, and the bulk of his stock resided in a warehouse on the surface of the planet around which Ackerman orbited. He had little need to inspect it; the warehouse was guarded by both kill drones and— ironically for the one-limbed outlaw— planetary Authority. Yet today's business dealt with no heavy loads or protracted haggling. It was the conclusion of a deal, albeit with a single, glaring elephant in the room— or in this case, the ramshackle office, shelves crammed with gear and data disks.

Distrust clouded Rax's features.

"Sentinels, you say?"

Tyrran adopted his most trustworthy face, his eyes sympathetic.

"Too many to count, and even with multis blazing there was no hope. Barely made it out myself."

For a long moment, Rax said nothing, his cybernetic fingers twirling a crystal shard, the kind used in handheld laser pistols.

“I’ve known that old pirate for years. Not like him to slip up. Not on a simple smash n’ grab.”

Andor looked away, exhaling.

“Everyone slips up sooner or later. He knew the risks.”

Rax looked at his client sideways.

“*And* the rewards. He was only a few years away from retiring, you know. When you’re pushing ninety you get to think about that.”

Tyrran looked at the man dead on, his accent crisp.

“If it’s all the same to you, *I’m* thinking of the credits.”

For a moment, Rax said nothing. He set down the crystal shard and extended his metal hand, palm up.

“The data.”

Andor pulled open one side of his jacket, producing the disk. He held it up for a moment before placing it in the expectant cybernetic palm, metal fingers closing around it. The pilot forced himself to look his client in the eye.

“And *who* did you say was interested in this, again?”

One eyebrow on Rax’s face lifted.

“No one you’d know. And none of your business anyway.”

In his other hand was a credit chip. An amount for both his and Cecil’s share shone on it. Tyrran held it up, inspecting it for alterations. Satisfied, he slipped the chip out of sight, in the same pocket that the data disk had rested. With business concluded he rose, smoothing his jacket.

“No. It isn’t.”

A peculiar look crossed Rax’s features as his guest turned to exit the office.

“You used to remind me of someone, you know that?”

Tyrran looked over his shoulder, smirking.

“Don’t get sentimental on me.”

Ortega picked up the crystal shard, pointing it at Andor and ignoring the quip.

“But you *aren't* him. Not by a long shot.”

Rax flicked the shard towards the man's back. Tyrran caught it in a smooth motion. He took a moment to admire the complex latticework of the artificial gem before replying.

“I'm no one but myself. It's the one advantage to being an orphan.”

It was a universal truism that guild pilots took only three things seriously: their ships, their cards, and their drinking. Tyrran was no exception, though a lifetime of being on his own had instilled a deep aversion to public drunkenness. So too was the act of renting carnal companionship distasteful to him. He'd seen too many pilots lose their way to drink, and too many fall victim to attractive strangers foolishly allowed within their ships. He was possessed of all the needs that a man had, but the desire for survival eclipsed that of debauchery.

Thus did Tyrran sit alone, sipping a Crown Jewel, in an obscure planetside bar in an obscure planetside town, the settlement barely even hosting a spaceport. It was his custom to lay low after completing a job, especially if he'd had to cut a few corners to do so. And when it came to delivering Guardian vessel blueprints...

The man looked around himself and fished a data disk from his jacket pocket. He held it up, a slight smirk lifting his lips.

You don't sell the real thing all at once. Not the first time, anyway— and certainly not when deeper purses than Rax Ortega's would happily open for info like this.

Tyrran had swindled both his partner and his client, but was at peace with the fact. The central fact of Tyrran Andor's life was that— despite being a pilot and owning his own spaceship— he was a nobody, a speck in a speck on a speck, swirling amid a never-ending Brownian movement of fellow specks. His was a small universe, consisting chiefly of himself, his ship, and whatever job was at hand. Work was plentiful. Another burned bridge mattered not at all, not in a universe with another ten-thousand more available to cross.

For hours the man drank, not to excess but still alone. A few others— a woman, and a hopeful man— tried to strike up friendly conversation, but such was futile. A muted holovision was tuned to a sports channel. On another, the news. Neon and holographic signs advertised various brands of alcohol. People spoke in low tones, and bartenders looked on with bored features. It was like most other bars he'd ever visited— folksy and bland.

Eventually Tyrran was ready to call it a night, and without drawing attention to himself settled his tab. His official Bank of Zaonce account was low, as Rax, like most of his clients, had paid with an anonymous credit pack, perfectly legal but looked upon with suspicion in many of the more decent worlds of the Bubble. He would transfer the credits later. For now, he simply wished to retire and scan the local job boards.

Just as Tyrran was rising from his stool a heavy hand clapped on his shoulder, forcing him back into it. The man spun, balling his fist, ready for anything—

Oh, Randomius Fucktora...

Before him was Rax Ortega and his old friend Cecil. Andor's heart stopped as two pairs of grizzled eyes bored into his. The twangy music cut out and every eye in the bar turned to him. Cecil was the first to speak, his voice sandpaper. The cold barrel of a blaster pistol pressed against Tyrran's forehead.

"Hello again, *partner*."

“Why did you steal Zara’s credit pack? Well?”

Tyrran Andor, ten years old, knew damn well why he’d stolen it. Zara Leandros had tormented young Tyrran relentlessly for the better part of a month. Somehow she’d accessed his personnel file, fixating on the line that specified that he was in the care of a parent and/or a guardian— with “guardian” selected. From that moment on he was known as “And/or Andor”, a mocking reference to his orphanhood.

Young Andor had been found guilty of his first theft. Even in the year 3284, schools were schools and principals were principals. Thus was he seated in one such’s office, his foster parents standing over him, the stern-faced administrator adjusting a holo-readout, clumsy with the technology.

Tyrran said nothing, knowing that it would be pointless to explain his side of the story. The Leandros family was a model of Alliance virtues: a line marriage of men and women that ensured maximum stability, with healthy, beautiful children the result of healthy, beautiful parents. Though gene tampering was frowned upon, tailor-made nutrients sustained the fortunate children from the day of conception, ensuring optimal healthfulness and development. A regimented program of social conditioning produced children with social skills akin to adults— at least, so it seemed when adults were around.

Zara had been given her own credit pack for her birthday and granted leave to spend it any way she wanted, and naturally such a prize from the world of adults was to be flaunted among her peers. Tyrran watched, alone and sullen, as his privileged classmate brandished her trophy, the differences between them transitioning from irritating to painful. All the dozens of mockeries between his lack of real parentage and her abundance of the same led him to resort to the only justice his childish mind knew.

The actual theft had gone without a hitch, the boy spending most of the day summoning the courage to slip a hand into Zara's jacket as it hung from in the common closet. It was a warm day; she would likely not wear it for the rec break. How meticulously he planned his heist; how hard his hand trembled as he feigned stumbling near the closets. How easy it was to slip his hand into the same pocket where he'd seen her shove the credit pack; how easy it was to pull it out and place it within his own.

He botched the rest, of course. Tyrran lived the regimented life of a typical ten-year-old in Alliance space. Though he often wished to be alone, he seldom was. There was nothing for a child to spend money on, no opportunity to exchange his prize for something worthwhile. His foster mother found the item that very night, clenched tightly in young Tyrran's hands as he drifted off to sleep. They were the sixth household that had taken in the troubled youth in as many years; though theirs were benevolent souls, they were also not unaware of the boy's history. With wary tones she spoke late into the night with her partner, both women agreeing that if theft was going to become the norm with their ward that something would have to be done.

Thus was the subsequent meeting a shambles, Tyrran compounding his theft with obvious—in the eyes of the adults—lies about Zara taunting him with some ridiculous schoolyard nickname. The girl herself was a model of precocious concern, her own multiple parents beaming with pride as she benevolently expressed compassion for her classmate before her principle and educator. She even offered to allow Tyrran to keep the ill-gotten credit pack, a sly twinkle in her eye as she innocently proclaimed that if he coveted her property badly enough to steal it, then he clearly needed it more than she did.

Parents and faculty radiated with approval for the girl, and found only contempt for the sullen, silent boy sitting across from her. With feigned reluctance she accepted back the credit pack, the adults explaining that to allow Tyrran to keep it would only serve to reward the act of theft. It was for his own good that he be punished and allowed to learn the appropriate lesson.

At home, his guardians lost control, striking Tyrran hard across the face and questioning why they ever agreed to take the child in. That night the boy could hear them in their bedroom, arguing about whether they'd made a mistake. There were so many lessons he needed to learn, they exclaimed, and to impart such upon him would require a tremendous amount of time and effort. For young Andor, however, the day's lesson was clear:

Don't get caught, and don't trust authority.

Tyrran's hands moved up, his eyes darting from one assailant to the other. Every patron in the bar had frozen, fear and shock in every face. The rogue swallowed, forcing himself to look up to the intruders.

"I don't want any trouble," he said, the blaster still pressed against his forehead. "The money's all yours."

Rax scoffed.

"Bit late for that, innit? And there's a lot more to this than creds, pup."

Cecil stepped forward, one gnarled hand disappearing into Tyrran's jacket, emerging with both the data disk and credit pack. He handed the former to Rax, the latter being slid to the wide-eyed bartender. Rax glanced to his side.

"Tyrran here's buying us all a round. Just another patron, he is. No need to alert authority, is there?"

The bartender's eyes grew even wider at the sight of the amount on the credit pack. It was all he could do to stammer out words from his fat mouth.

"N- *no*, sir!"

Rax patted the man's cheek with his spare, metallic hand.

"That what I thought. Now pour some drinks. Folks 'ere look thirsty."

His hands still up, Tyrran scowled.

"Just one question: how the *hell* did you make it back?"

Cecil grinned, rotting teeth complimenting a leathery face.

"You don't *really* think that we're the only ones after those alien trinkets, do you? Another ship came along within hours."

The pistol was pulled back and used to gesture to the bar's exit. Nodding with a ragged exhale, Tyrran turned to leave. Cecil kept one hand on his shoulder, shoving him outside. Rax holstered his pistol and took a final look around. Every eye was still upon him, and even the bartender was pouring drinks with shaky hands. With a side-cocked head Rax smiled, taking a pint of local brew and raising it high.

"To Tyrran Andor, the man who nobody ever saw again!"

There was a hovercar waiting outside, one that would blend into the city's traffic. Andor was shoved inside, Rax taking a seat beside him and Cecil engaging the autosteer. Without a word from either the door shut on its own, the whine from the engine crescendoing as it merged, one vehicle among countless others. His heart pounding, Tyrran looked around himself, straining to get his bearings. Above their heads ships and came and went from a central point— one to which they were driving.

"We're heading to the spaceport," he observed to no one in particular.

At his side Rax nodded, his pistol again pointing at Andor.

"That we are. You owe— *big* time."

Tyrran swallowed, lips tightening and adopting a brave face.

"Are you going to kill me?"

Cecil chuckled, a low sandpaper growl emanating from his throat. Rax shoved the pistol into the renegade's ribs.

"Ol' Cecil 'ere was supposed to retire after this job—and so he will. You just sweetened the pot for 'im, you did. Sweetened it *proper*."

Tyrran let out a ragged exhale.

"I don't have many credits. I can—"

Rax leaned forward, his eyes dangerous.

"You 'ave a ship. A ship you're about to sell— half to me, and half to Cecil. It's the *least* you can do."

Andor's eyes widened, squirming as far away from Rax as he could.

"No..."

A sinister grin spread across Rax's face.

"You're finished, Andor."

Another gravelly chuckle sounded from the driver's seat. Cecil turned, his eyes daggers.

“Relax, pup. You’re not *that* finished. Found you another job offer, we did. One you can’t refuse.”

The sale of the *Home Away* was completed that very afternoon. The shipyard’s representative was taken aback that the young pilot had insisted the payment in untraceable credit packs and not a Bank of Zaonce deposit, but dutifully complied with his request. With a distant gaze the man handed over the small fortune to his captors, greed filling the eyes of both. With a dejected exhale Tyrran forced himself to meet their gazes. He had nothing, nothing except the clothes on his back.

In silence the trio made their way down the corridors of the starport, the crowds thinning until the hangar bays were reached. Rax keyed the entry code to one, the doors sliding open. With a prod from behind Tyrran was nudged inside, the familiar scent of machine oil and ship exhaust greeting him. Landed before the men was Rax’s Keelback. The sight of the ship only further drove home the fact that Tyrran was now without one. Bitterness roiled within his chest.

“You’ve got it all, then. It’s over.”

Rax’s eyebrows raised, a jovial look lightening his features.

“That’s where you’re wrong, pup. It’s over for old Cecil ‘ere. He’s set to retire now, kick it on some holo-beach with a drink in one ‘and and a tart in the other. But *you*?”

Rax Orgeta drew himself up, a metal finger pointed at Andor.

“Upset a few people, you ‘ave. People you don’t want to be upset.”

Tyrran spread out his arms, helpless.

“Makes no difference. Nowhere to go from here.”

The finger moved, now pointed to the Keelback's open cargo bay. Before it was an empty cryopod, waiting to be loaded into its hold.

"Wrong again. Remember that new job we've got lined up for you? Get in."

Tyrran's eyes widened at the sight of the cryopod, the rogue backing up.

"No... we're done here. You can't just—"

The blaster bolt impacted into his shoulder, spinning the man around before dropping him in a heap to the deck. A faint whiff of ozone filled the hangar. Rax and Cecil stood over the man, smoke still coming from the barrel of the former's pistol. Cecil nudged the prone form with the toe of his boot, spitting upon the deck next to it.

"Shame you had to use a stun. Wouldn't have minded seeing him opened up with a proper blast."

Rax scowled down at the rogue.

"Me neither, old friend— but life is short. And it would get a *lot* shorter if I didn't deliver the data *and* the one who found it to the client."

Cecil spat a final time.

"Must be a hell of a man to lure you away from your toys."

Rax snapped his fingers. A dockworker android approached, its expression as simple as its programming. Rax turned to his friend, gesturing to Andor. Already he was being loaded into the cryopod, his head hanging limp.

"It's no man. And if young Andor doesn't change his ways, he won't live to see the first grey hair sprout from that pretty head of his."

The hangar was dark, with only the light from the holo-advertising providing illumination. The Keelback loomed above several figures, masking them in its shadow, all eyes on the cryopod as it lowered from the cargo bay. It touched down with a weighted thud, echoes bouncing from the metal walls. Without a word, Rax Ortega keyed the access code, the exterior status light transitioning from red to yellow to green.

With a hiss the pod opened, white mist dissolving into the oily air of the hangar. Within it was Tyrran— still in his civilian clothes— a thin layer of cryo fluid giving him a damp look. Black hair was matted against his forehead, and regular breathing slowly resumed. Eyes trembled beneath shut lids, his arms slowly unfolding from where they had been locked against his body. Still not fully conscious, the man leaned forward—and fell.

Tyrran collapsed to the deck on hands and knees, heaving for air. Bulky military boots appeared in the light and stepped around him, their slow tapping adding to the hangar's echoes. Andor remained face-down, barely possessing the strength to stave off total collapse onto his belly. The sharp flick of a lighter could be heard, and new, pungent scent filled his nostrils. The first coherent thoughts formed themselves within the rogue's mind.

Tobacco?

With his remaining strength Tyrran looked up. Standing over him was a woman, approaching middle age yet lean and athletic, eyes piercing and hair showing streaks of silver before its time. A self-rolled cigarette dangled from her lips, and for a long moment she said nothing. Tyrran summoned his words, hoping to mask his fear.

“Who the hell are *you*?”

Rax stepped forward, the data disk passing from his hands to hers.

“The schematics.”

The woman accepted the disk, her eyes upon first it and then Tyrran. Determination hardened her lips. A neo-Slavic accent sharpened her speech, not deigning to answer the man's question.

"We are at war, renegade. We are at war and you would betray your fellow man for the sake of credits."

Roguish defiance twisted the man's face.

"*You're* at war, not me. And which one? So many to choose from, you know?"

Advancing, the woman stood above him, looking down from her position of authority. For the first time Tyrran could see that she was clad in simple military fatigues, though no patches could be seen on them.

"The only one that matters, *da*? The one that Salome warned us about."

Andor blinked, the name recollected in the haze so common after emerging from cryosleep. Disbelieving, he shook his head.

"Fanatics and outlaws," he said. "Chasing some lost cause. You sure know to pick 'em, Rax."

Rax ignored him, clapping Tyrran on the back.

"Aye, pup. I do. Know better than to bite at the bigger dog, too."

Summoning his courage Andor rose, unsteady on his feet. The mysterious woman too stood up, seeming taller than him even though she wasn't. Again, the man swallowed, daring to repeat his question.

"Who are you?"

The woman stepped forward with the surety of one convinced of her cause. She took a long drag from her cigarette before answering, heedless of the smoke that drifted from her lips to Andor's face.

"My name is Kari Kerenski. I represent a group of people who fight for more than only themselves. I wouldn't expect a *nekulturny* like you to understand."

Tyrran looked around, the name of the station obscured against the darkened hangar walls.

“Where are we? And what is this?”

Kerenski stood tall and balanced, the cigarette dangling in her fingers.

“Lasswitz Port, in the Atroco system. It’s run by some friends of ours. And as far as what *this* is...”

The woman crossed her arms, a thin human wall. It took all of Tyrran’s willpower to not take a step back.

“We’re branching out, taking our first steps into a world where only you have been. You’re going to work for us, Andor. You’re going back out there. And you’re going to do *exactly* as we say.”

The rogue’s face hardened, the motions of negotiating the only familiar thing about his situation.

“What’s in it for me?”

A new figure stepped forward, feminine with slender curves. Violet piping ran along dark clothing. Olive features complemented thick hair. Cunning eyes held the man in disdain. The rich dialect of High Iberian Imperial escaped her lips.

“You live. You eat. You have a chance to make something of your honorless life. It is a better deal than Ortega’s cryopod, *si*?”

Kerenski glanced to her side, the slightest of smirks lifting her lips.

“This is Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura. She’ll be your partner if you succeed, and your bane if you don’t.”

Rax listened to the exchange, his eyebrows raising.

“‘Púrpura’, huh? Hail from the same homestead as Andor here? You sure sound like it.”

A look of contempt soured the young woman’s face.

“Not even close.”

Sarcasm dripped from every word of Tyrran’s, looking from one woman to the other.

“Kerenski. Púrpura. A pleasure.”

Púrpura took another step closer, the blacks and violets of her long jacket now visible. Cold passion for her adopted cause blazed in her eyes, even though Andor hardly knew what it even was.

“No,” she said. “It is *not*.”

Tyrran Xavian Andor now occupied a curious grey area between bondage and freedom. On one hand, he was free to roam the corridors of Lasswitz Port— provided that the comm device that Yolanta had given him remained on his person. On the other he had no means of escape from his situation, as his Pilot’s Federation identicard had been taken and access to the hangars blocked. Curiously for being a *de facto* captive he’d been given a modest sum of credits and instructed to purchase whatever he’d need for a long voyage. The destination remained a mystery.

A spacer’s supply depot was never far from the hangars of a Coriolis, and Andor now possessed a pair of new flightsuits and a few changes of clothing. A handful of personal items rounded out the shopping trip, and it was with wistful gaze that Tyrran eyed a selection of pistols. Yet to purchase such was an impossibility; he lacked his identification and Púrpura had forbidden the carrying of a weapon anyway. All the new items fit into a large duffle bag, carried over his shoulder and blending in with the foot traffic of the level’s main corridor.

Andor’s comm device chirped. Keeping his head on a swivel he accessed it. Orange text flashed across the surface of his flight jacket sleeve.

We leave in thirty minutes. Hangar seven. Hope you like crowds.

Tyrran acknowledged the message and closed it out. People still milled all around him, and he had less time than he thought to make his way back. An old woman with a grey bun and battered coveralls was selling spiced noodles at a compact stand. The line before her was short enough to not keep Tyrran for too long, and he hated flying on an empty stomach.

With the last of his credit pack Tyrran paid for the noodles, eating them in the old style with wooden chopsticks, close to his mouth with the occasional slurp. Humanity teemed around him, strangers coming and going, the corridor itself chilled but the warmth of bodies felt regardless. A noodle protruded from between his lips before he sucked it inside.

Where are we going that could be more crowded than this? And how does that mesh with scouting more alien ruins? It doesn't get much lonelier than that.

The man picked up his duffle, sipping the broth as he made his way toward the hangar level. The old familiar feeling of lessening gravity tickled his insides as the lift ascended.

Doesn't matter. You're working for the man now.

Hangar seven was almost immediately before him, and he keyed in the access code to the bay door. It slid open, revealing Yolanta at the base of an Alliance Chieftain. Tyrran frowned.

Or rather the woman.

Andor took a few steps forward, his eyes washing over the ship. It was a newer model of course, and lacked the telltale signs of being broken in. It was also a deep shade of violet. A humorless chuckle escaped his lips.

Púrpura... purple. Cute.

Yolanta stepped forward. She was in regular clothes, and not a flightsuit. A look of distrust clouded her features, the woman pacing back and forth, never taking her dusky eyes from her new partner.

"Los dioses me hacen enojar este día."

Tyrran stood tall, matching eyes with the woman.
“*Luego los diosis son justos, perra.*”

The old contempt returned to the woman’s eyes. Her fist clenched, controlled only with visible effort.

“As low as your Iberian. Typical Alliance scum.”

Tyrran scoffed, indulging in his own measure of disgust.

“*Knew* you were a slave-keeping Imperial. As corrupt as you are arrogant. Sound about right, *senorita*?”

Mockery had dripped from Tyrran’s final word. Yolanta raised her chin, her lip curling.

“I have never owned a slave, and I never will. And as for corruption...”

Her eyes flashed, the woman advancing upon him. Tyrran stood his ground.

“The Night Witches exist to root it out wherever it is found, *including* the Empire. Ask me about Atroco sometime, when that filthy peasant dialect has lessened.”

Andor sneered.

“Tell me, then— when you drop the runaway princess act.”

Yolanta was opening her mouth to retort when her wrist computer chimed. She acknowledged it, running one hand through her hair and looking back up to her partner, though her eyes were no less contemptuous.

“There has been a delay. Wait here until I return.”

Tyrran spread out his arms, his mouth dropping.

“What *kind* of delay? And where can I get some shuteye? Local time is killing me here.”

The woman pointed to the far side of the hangar. Between the ship’s massive thruster nacelles was a simple cot.

“The *important* kind. And you’re not setting foot inside my ship without me. I will be back when I am back. *Adiós.*”

Before Tyrran could retort she turned, one heel clicking before the other, her hips shifting as she strode away. The man exhaled, dejected. Yolanta paused, spinning back toward her hapless partner.

“Where is the leftover from the credit pack I gave you?”

Andor held up the cup of broth.

“Blew it all on the noodles.”

Indignation spread across the woman’s face, her accent intensifying.

“*Hmm!*”

Tyrran woke, and none too gently. The toe of a woman’s boot had nudged him in the side— again, none too gently. With a curse and a groan he sat up, the cot making him feel even worse than if he hadn’t slept at all.

Yolanta was standing over him, as he expected. What *wasn’t* expected was her appearance. Framing her olive features wasn’t the straight black tresses as before, but a rich, dark purple that ended in yellows and oranges at the ends, giving the appearance of flames against a night sky when her hair was down. It was all Tyrran could do to stop himself from rolling his eyes.

“‘Important delay’, huh?”

Yolanta ran a hand through her hair, clearly pleased with it.

“There is no artistry in your soul, Andor. Kerenski was right. *Nekulturny*. ”

Tyrran exhaled. “What does that mean, anyway?”

A pair of brown Iberian eyes flashed.

“That I am the brains of this partnership, for a start. There is just one more thing before we board.”

“Yeah?”

Yolanta opened her jacket pocket and pulled out a thin black ring, unclasped in the middle. It looked to be made of leather.

“Put this on. Around your neck. No arguments.”

Tyrran held it up, his eyes narrowing.

“What is it?”

Yolanta pursed her lips.

“Protection.”

The suspicion in Tyrran’s eyes grew.

“From?”

Yolanta pulled back her jacket sleeve, revealing her wrist computer.

“*You*. It is a collar laced with microneedles. Where I am from it is called an *espina negra*— a black thorn. One push of the right button and it injects you with nerve toxin. Instantaneous effect. Quite a painful way to go, I am told.”

The man scoffed. “And what makes you think you’ll need it?”

Púrpura put her hands on her hips.

“Because I am about to spend a long time alone with a strange man, about whom I know nothing except that he is a betrayer and a cheat. A little insurance is wise, *si?*”

Tyrran opened and closed his mouth, realizing that further words were pointless. Scowling, he put on the collar. It fit snug around his neck, but was otherwise unobtrusive. He gestured to his partner’s wrist computer.

“Just don’t roll over on that thing, *capisce?*”

The woman held up a warning finger.

“Do not try anything brave. There is no point anyway. Not where we are going.”

Andor smoothed his jacket and picked up his duffle.

“Which is where, exactly?”

Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura turned to board her ship, sneering over her shoulder at her hapless partner.

“Come.”

The inside of the Chieftain was spartan, but not nearly as much as other vessels manufactured by Lakon. Smooth metallic bulkheads were painted a simple grey. A surface reconnaissance vehicle rested in its bay. Two separate staterooms faced either each other just aft of the bridge. An array of pulse lasers rested within the ship’s hardpoints, their capacitors and focus matrices replaced with higher-power versions that increased damage at the expense of range. A pair of multicannons augmented their punch.

Yola strode into the bridge, orange-lit instrumentation on either side. With a proud lift of her chin she gestured around herself.

“Welcome aboard the *Rosa Púrpura*. Your stateroom is on the right, across from mine. Your seat is the upper one. Do not touch anything. Get changed and mind your bladder— we are in for a long trip.”

Tyrran looked around, distrustful.

“You still haven’t told me where we’re going.”

Her face hardening, Yolanta stepped forward until face to face with her new partner.

“The people I work for are players in a bigger game than you can imagine. This is not about politics or money or prestige. This is about making sure that humankind survives the coming storm with its humanity intact.”

Andor shook his head.

“That doesn’t tell me much.”

Brown eyes met blue as her gaze intensified.

“We need people who have experience with the xenos, *si*? The megaship *Gnosis* is leaving in two days, jumping into the middle of a hornet’s nest of those... *things*. We will be in it when it does. That is why you are here. That is why we have taken you on.”

Fear and wonder spread across Andor's face, his eyes widening.

"And... when it jumps— what will we do?"

Yolanta brushed a lock of violet hair from her face, her fingers resting on a fiery tip.

"Whatever we can, *camarada*. Whatever we can."

“So... do you not even like me?”

Tyrran Andor was sixteen, his heart pounding in humiliation. He was sat in the driver’s seat of a cheap, battered speeder, purchased with the earnings from working his first season. It was night, his foster parents neither knowing nor caring where he was. Nor did he care that they didn’t, so accustomed was he to such apathy. Yet Tyrran was still an adolescent boy with an adolescent boy’s desires, and though a loner had attracted the hesitant attentions of a seemingly kindred spirit— a classmate named Arika.

Arika was a year younger than Tyrran, walking the bridge between girl and woman. She had recently transferred in from another system, and her biological parents were only slightly less neglectful than Tyrran’s state-assigned guardians. Things had proceeded apace, and in only a few short weeks the pair found themselves alone, awkward conversation giving way to awkward affection. Nature took them along the usual path, clothing peeled aside and bodies explored. It ought to have been a refuge for them both, ought to have been the pleasurable rite of passage that most young people their age underwent in some form or another. Ought to have been, but wasn’t.

The touches and whispers and affection were too much for Andor, and his flesh failed them both, even with her inexperienced attempts to arouse him. When it became apparent that he would be unable to initiate the act, she sat up and turned away, silently smoothing her skirt back over her thighs. The question she asked him hung in the air, any answer Tyrran could give insufficient in the face of his stubbornly flaccid flesh. Yet Arika couldn’t be kept waiting forever.

“I do. I just... this is all so new to me, and you’re...”

The young woman closed her eyes, exhaling. “The first one who’s shown you a shred of attention in years. They warned me, you know. About you. About what a loner you are. How you, uh...”

Arika glanced downward, adolescent cruelty replacing adolescent affection.

“Never fit in.”

Tears threatened to form around Tyrran’s eyes, compounding his humiliation.

“I’m sorry. I don’t want you to go. I—”

Arika cut him off, her tone taking on an edge. She pulled her top back down, her teenage contempt preventing her from even looking at him.

“Just take me home. And when we see each other in class tomorrow, you don’t know me. Got it?”

Isaiah Evanson squeezed shut his eyes, replacing the blackness of space with the blackness of seeing nothing. He was thirty-five, his skin the pale hue that most spacers possessed, with dark brown hair and a neatly-trimmed beard. The uniform of Loren’s Legion gave him a militaristic look, its dark seafoam piping breaking up stark black presses. The Imperial eagle adorned one shoulder, complemented by the crest of the Legion on the other.

It hadn’t always been so. Evanson hailed from the Federation, disillusioned by it through bloodshed and tragedy, the sole survivor among his family. Yet he was also a member of the Pilots Federation and found work in the Imperial sector, falling in with the ideals— and proximity— of Lady Kahina Loren. He pledged himself to her service as a member of her personal wing, his allegiance solidifying into near-fanaticism.

Isaiah had been at Loren's— by then known as Salome— side during the entirety of her fateful dash across the Bubble. He had fought and bled, fending off foe after foe in her name and honor, until the moment of vile betrayal at the hands of the bounty hunter known only as The Besieger. Isaiah, too, was betrayed at that moment, not by a teammate but by his ship, his supercruise module malfunctioning and dropping him nearly fifty light-seconds away from where Kahina Loren was fighting for her life. Precious, maddening seconds were wasted as his drives recharged, and more were lost as he closed the final distance between himself and his charge.

It was too late. The bodyguard dropped into normal space just in time to see Loren's Clipper, the *Seven Veils*, disintegrate into pieces. To engage the traitorous bounty hunter was futile, and the following hours were a blur. Isaiah Evanson spent the following year a broken man, haunted by what he saw as his failure to protect the woman he admired— and in his most private moments, bordered on loving. He left Loren's Legion in a state of self-exile, joining the rough-and-tumble mercenary corps known as Newton's Fusiliers.

In was with the Fusiliers that Evanson emerged from the most hellish pits of his self-hatred and sense of failure. They were led by a rogue named Phisto Sobanii, a hard-charging man of clan stock with greying hair and a sense of purpose that rivaled Isaiah's. The two men became fast friends, Phisto's seeming irreverence the perfect foil to Isaiah's stolidness. Both were ace pilots of highly-modified Fer de Lances, and for the first time since meeting Kahina Loren Isaiah felt the embers of purpose stirring within him once again.

The Fusiliers' war to claim their home system of Coma from the clutches of the Patreus-backed Imperials lasted a full year. Blood was spilled and sacrifices made, but in the end sheer stubbornness won out— especially when Sobanii escalated the conflict to affect neighboring systems. The day that the treaty was signed was one of the high points of Evanson's life, a step back into the sunshine after dwelling for so long in the cave of his failure.

So too did the men lead a task force into Pegasi, aiding an upstart clan matriarch in reclaiming her homeworld in exchange for looted stellar diamonds. What was promised to be a liberation in the same vein as Coma soured into the realization that the matriarch was simply a would-be tyrant of ever-increasing megalomania. Evanson used his few remaining contacts with the deceased Loren family to re-establish the Legion, securing ships, funds, and— most importantly— Senatorial patronage in the person of Vespar Faveol and Kahina's old confidant, the ambassador Cuthrick Delaney. The Legion's heart was once again beating, and Isaiah transplanted the fighting core of Newton's Fusiliers into the reborn Legion—to the great chagrin of Valeria Larson, Prism's straightlaced Imperial governor.

Now it was Phisto Sobanii who reported to Isaiah, along with old Fusilier stalwarts such as Adam Firethorn, Amos Loren, and Renraiku Kordai. Yet the fledgling Legion was a delicate thing, propped up by the flimsiest of supports, threatening to drown in the roiling ocean of Denton Patreus's influence. Headway into the underworld was needed, and additional allies were sought. Kari Kerenski and her Night Witches were brought into the fold, flush from their success in overthrowing a corrupt Imperial government in neighboring Atroco.

The Night Witches brought a new element to the Legion's dynamic. Whereas the Legion was the light, the Witches were the darkness. Where Isaiah Evanson was the saber, Kerenski was the stiletto. All the cunning of the underworld was now at the Legion's disposal, along with the operational flexibility that it brought. They— and Atroco itself— were also to be a fallback in an uncertain universe, a refuge in case the labyrinth of Imperial politics proved all-consuming.

For all their differences, Kerenski and Evanson shared a common unifier: inspiration from the example of the martyred Kahina Loren. Her spirit alone was the glue that held their alliance together, for the light was ever slow to trust the shadow. Isaiah was determined to use the resources at his disposal to achieve two ends, both of which would depend upon the Witches' underworld contacts: first, that the truth behind The Club and all their nefarious activities be exposed. Second— and far more pressing— was to find a more immediate mission for Loren's Legion *sans* any Lorens left to guard.

It was Kerenski who suggested that the Legion turn its attention to the Thargoid menace. The idea was seized upon by both Vespar Faveol and Cuthrick Delaney, and with reluctance Evanson agreed. The first challenge before him was acquiring the latest weaponry— not the anti-xeno gear rolled out by Aegis, but the exotic human-Guardian hybrid kit and Thargoid-adapted ship components. Scattered technology dealers dealt in such, but on a one-on-one basis with individual commanders— and even then, only when the proper materials had been furnished in advance. There was simply no way for an entire squadron to adopt such a piecemeal approach.

Once again, it had been Kari Kerenski who endeavored to solve Evanson's problem. She offered the services of the Night Witches in acquiring the needed materials in the Legion's stead, freeing them to deal with more local concerns. The first step toward doing so was to produce an expert, one who had seen and worked with both alien races' ships and settlements, who knew what it took to run such a quantity of gear. Commanders came and went, rejecting or being rejected for the job, its terms far more demanding than the simplicity of Galnet-promoted crises of the week. Within weeks the search bordered on the desperate.

Finally a suitable commander was found— again, provided by Kerenski. Isaiah had taken an instant dislike of the man. He had a roguish manner to him, but not in the comradely sense that had so bonded him to Phisto. No, this man— this Andor, he remembered, was already reputed to be a cheat and a swindler, his experience the product of luck and not motivation, a man with neither a sense of honor nor a ship to call his own.

Isaiah's eyes crinkled at their sides, so hard were they squeezed shut.

And now all our hopes rest with him, he thought. Kerenski must be as desperate as I am.

Yet a greater sense of purpose flowed within Evanson. For the first time in over a year, he was able to close his eyes and see only blackness, a void in which anything was possible. Before, he only saw *her*, fair with raven hair and sharp eyes, the face of his failure. It had been with a clear head that he ordered the Legion's involvement with the *Gnosis* and its risky jump into Thargoid territory. It was the best way, he and Kerenski reasoned, to acquire Thargoids materials in bulk from unplundered sites.

Isaiah Evanson opened his eyes, an endless starfield filling his vision. Before him was an observation deck, a flight of familiar vessels closing in. Gravity was low in the *Gnosis*, but he and the Legionnaires around him were long accustomed to deep space living. One stepped forward, Phisto's silver streaks visible from the man's peripherals. Isaiah grunted in greeting.

"Looks like the Witches made the party after all. I think they're serious, boss."

Isaiah turned, looking at not only his second but the assembled Legionnaires who had volunteered to accompany him on the *Gnosis*. Firethorn, Kordai, and Loren were among them. Evanson raised his tone, addressing his pilots amid the dense foot traffic on-board the observation deck.

"I'll count them as serious when our ships are glowing cyan and crewed by little green men."

There was a general chuckle from the pilots, Isaiah grinning and turning back to the viewing glass. Phisto drew in nearer.

"If it comes to it, we'll be hard-pressed to fight the bugs. The AX gear is good, but--"

Isaiah turned to his side. One Chieftain in particular was approaching, purple with violet thruster glows. The man's face soured.

"One thing at a time, bud. For now, let's give our new friend a warm welcome."

The *Rosa Púrpura* went from dark violet to nearly black, so thoroughly was she engulfed in the *Gnosis*'s shadow. Only an array of glowing lavender thrusters signalled that she was there, one among dozens, all awaiting boarding permission. The *Gnosis* was a research and exploration vessel, but on top of that she was an *ad hoc* carrier, laden with numerous smaller ships belonging to the protective and curious alike.

From within the bridge, two pairs of eyes widened, taken aback by the sheer majesty of the megaship. Yolanta was the first to find words, flying in a long, sweeping holding pattern around it.

“This ship,” she managed. “To build such a thing...”

From above her in the co-pilot’s seat, Tyrran nodded.

“Not just this one. Dozens, maybe hundreds were built centuries ago and launched towards the stars, back when humanity was taking its first steps into the black. But they were primitive compared to this.”

Yolanta exhaled, taking in the lines of the vessel.

“I have heard the stories,” she said. “But to think of the resources... the effort...”

She swallowed. “And all for nothing, most of them.”

Andor’s expression darkened.

“No,” he said. “Not for nothing. There are... others.”

Yolanta twisted to look behind herself, her eyes narrowing.

“And you have *seen* them?”

Tyrran pursed his lips, instead gesturing to the *Gnosis*, still looming before them.

“Your pad.”

Yolanta looked, and sure enough her landing pad had just come available. Wasting no time she banked the *Rosa* toward it, the space around them thick with other vessels. There was simply no holding them all, and numerous hangers-on would be turned away before the time of the jump.

The *Rosa Púrpura* touched down with Yolanta’s deft guidance, and almost immediately was swallowed up into the megaship’s cavernous hold, the hangar readying itself for another arrival. Within the docking bay the pair passed ship after ship, of all types. Tyrran seemed to shrink.

“Looks like quite the party,” he said.

Yolanta, too, was equal parts impressed and troubled by the sheer number of vessels that would accompany the *Gnosis* into the unknown. Her face hardened, her soft Iberian features sharpening in the low light of the hangars. Ships of war and ships of peace paraded before them.

“*Si*. Some come to study, and some come to fight. Humanity’s very dichotomy before our eyes.”

The *Rosa* lurched to a halt at the end of the hangar, settling into place. A long row of ships stretched into the distance. Tyrran rose from his seat, looking down to his partner.

“And which one are you?”

Yolanta looked up, her eyes flashing.

“Come,” she said. “The others are waiting.”

The corridors of the *Gnosis* were as crowded as Tyrran expected. For every uniformed Canon crew member there were two or three itinerant ship crew, all going about their business with strained courtesy. It was two days before the jump, and tensions were high.

Still, even a ship dedicated to science and exploration wasn’t without a bar, and the bar itself not without darkened corners. Yolanta guided her reluctant partner to one such alcove, a cluster of figures dark amid the neon-lit shadows. With an outstretched hand she gestured for Tyrran to sit. He did so, recognizing the slim figure and lit cigarette of the woman before him. The same thick Slavic accent as before sharpened her speech.

“Tyrran Andor. So you made it.”

Tyrran scowled, matching her gaze.

“Some offers just can’t be refused.”

The woman leaned forward, Kari Kerenski's angular features accentuated in the low light. She and Yolanta traded a private glance before she replied.

"No," she said. "They cannot."

At Kerenski's side were two men. Both had the hard look of veterans, and both were wearing what looked to be Imperial uniforms, black with dark green trim. The older of the two leaned forward, his thick, greying hair reflecting the neons of the bar.

"So you're our bloodhound? The one who'll sniff out what we need? Maybe help dissect a few bugs?"

Andor glanced at the Imperial eagle on the man's uniform, cool defiance in his eyes.

"Don't you have slaves for all that?"

A dangerous glint shone in the man's eyes.

"Sure we do. *You*."

Andor's face hardened.

"I'm no slave, Imp."

The other man leaned forward, his features softer but his eyes equally hard.

"In the Empire, to be in debt is to live in disgrace. We're told that you managed to accomplish both. This is your chance to start over."

Tyrran scoffed. "You're a long way from Achenar, friend."

A wry smirk lifted one side of the older man's lips.

"Not that far. Ever heard of Loren's Legion?"

Tyrran opened his mouth to say something, hesitated, and pressed on anyway.

"Sure I have. Bodyguards for the Loren family. Sworn to uphold their name and protect the line."

Andor advanced, his tone dropping and eyes challenging.

"Not doing so hot on that last one, are you?"

The younger man across from him shot forward, restrained by a hand of Kerenski's against his chest.

"Nyet!"

Poison dripped from the Imperial to the rogue, teeth bared. An accusing finger pointed itself at Andor.

"I *know* you. I know all about you. You're a swindler and a cheat. No honor. Never cared for anything except yourself."

Tyrran held his gaze, spreading out his hands.

"So you've heard."

The man trembled for a moment, then turned to storm away from the bar. He paused, looking over his shoulder, contempt in his eyes.

"I've heard enough. Brief him."

A few close-by onlookers turned back to their drinks, the tense outburst passed. Kerenski leaned forward, taking another drag of her cigarette.

"You'll have to forgive Commander Evanson. He was there, you see. When she died."

Andor shrugged. "And I was asleep a hundred light years away. Didn't even find out until after breakfast."

The older man leaned forward.

"Name's Sobanii. Phisto Sobanii. And like you, this is the last place I ever thought I'd end up."

Again, Tyrran scoffed.

"You don't sound like an Imperial."

Phisto shrugged, memory in his eyes.

"Not every Imperial does. There's a lot more to the Empire than the Imperial Core."

Andor looked away, unable to face the man.

"Yeah— like the hundreds of systems under its boot."

Phisto glanced to Yolanta, silent for the entirety of the exchange. Her upper lip curled into a sneer.

"Told you he is from the Alliance, did I not?"

Kari Kerenski took a long, final drag from her cigarette before stubbing out the end.

“Empire, Alliance, Federation, indies— all those things are labels, meaningless appeals to humankind’s tribalistic nature. We’re an Imperial wing, *da*— but our mandate is so much more.”

Tyrran glanced to his side. Yolanta’s eyes were wide, wide with fervent idealism at hearing Kerenski’s words. So too was Phisto nodding intently.

“Go on.”

For a long time Kerenski only stared, scrutinizing the man. In time she reached inside her jacket pocket and lit another cigarette.

“This is about the *species, comrade*. About people more powerful than presidents and emperors, pulling the strings of all humanity. About finding the truth and exposing those who have dedicated their lives to concealing it.”

Tyrran waved away some of the smoke from his face.

“And to do that, you need *me*?”

Yolanta signalled for a drink and turned to her partner.

“*No*. What we need is someone who has been around those—” her lips pursed in revulsion— “*things*. Thargoids. Guardians. But most importantly, their tech.”

Andor said nothing for a long moment, for once wishing that he, too, had a drink.

“So you *are* here to fight.”

Another plume of smoke escaped Kerenski’s lips.

“Kahina Loren was clear in her warnings. Our enemies are the alien invaders *and* those who would treat their fellow man as fodder to throw in their path.”

Yolanta’s features hardened, the Iberian woman gripping Tyrran’s arm.

“The Legion needs alien salvage, Andor. It needs all it can get. Salvage that certain contacts of ours are standing by to turn into weapons.”

Slowly, the man nodded.

“And then?”

Phisto Sobanii leaned forward, his eyes narrowing.

“And then things get *real* simple between us and the bugs.”

The *Rosa Púrpura* was empty, being tended to by numerous automated arms, performing the microwelds to its structure that was so necessary to ensure spaceworthiness. Her hardpoints were deployed and no system was left unchecked. With a practiced eye Tyrran looked over the ship, standing next to Yolanta in the bay’s observation deck.

“Lasers and a pair of multis,” he observed.

From the opposite side of the room Yolanta folded her arms.

“So?”

Tyrran frowned, leaning with one palm against the glass.

“So it won’t be enough. Not against Sentinels. Not against Scouts. Not even against a pirate who knows what they’re doing.”

Scowling, Yolanta joined her partner, looking down at her ship.

“They are not ordinary lasers. I have had their focus crystals modified. Range is not very good but they will melt through everything in their path.”

The man scowled, brushing a stray lock of hair from his forehead as he turned to his partner.

“No,” he said. “Not everything. Not where we’re going.”

Yolanta looked with defiant eyes to her ship.

“It does not matter. The others have come to fight. Our job is explore and collect samples.”

“Of bugs?”

The woman sighed. “Of anything we find. Our contact does not discriminate. The more alien tech we get our hands on, the better.”

Tyrran nodded, risking a long glance from the corner of his eye. His expression darkened.

“You’re young.”

It was a statement of fact, and not a question. Yolanta turned to her partner, eyes sharp.

“Not much younger than you.”

Tyrran ignored her reply.

“Young, and with a mouth full of silver from that spoon you’ve been eating from since birth. Your family is old Imperial, isn’t it? Never wanted for anything, used to getting your way. Sound about right?”

Yolanta drew herself up, her gaze and accent intensifying.

“*Randomius Dio*... you know *nothing* of me. What I am, I *chose* to be. I am sharing the danger, *si*? Same as Kerenski or Sobanii or *you*.”

Scowling, Tyrran seized her hand, holding it up for inspection and running his thumb along the softness of her palm. Contempt spread across his face.

“Just as I thought. Haven’t done a moment’s work other than point to what you want your slaves to fetch your whole life. I *do* assume your family kept slaves?”

Teeth bared, Yolanta tore her hand away, holding up a warning finger in its place. Venom dripped from her words.

“Do not *touch* me, *patán*! I will—”

Andor spat.

“You’ll *what*? Cry for your daddy to make it right?”

Yolanta advanced a step, fire in her eyes.

“*Mi padre*? I *have* no father. Not anymore. Not since I chose this life. The only things I have are my ship and my *camaradas*.”

The rogue sneered, gesturing around himself.

“No. You’ve got a home and an inheritance waiting for you. You’re not some heroic revolutionary. You’re a tourist on a cruise. Sooner or later you’ll miss the room service and go home.”

The slap was sudden, stinging and enough to knock Tyrran’s head to the side. He stood in place for a moment, fists balled and trembling, unable to look at her. A pair of enraged tears rolled down Yolanta’s cheeks. Her finger, still held up, trembled— not in fear but disdain. Her words were a choked whisper, so strong was her anger.

“*You*,” she repeated, “know *nothing* of me.”

Already the welt was forming upon Tyrran’s jaw, and in the distinct shape of a palm. Scowling through clenched teeth, he finally turned to his partner.

“I know enough.”

Smoke wafted from the cigarette, dispersing in the low gravity of the *Gnosis* before finally drifting in the direction of an air circulation vent. Kari Kerenski was a woman of few pleasures, but real tobacco was one of the rare indulgences she allowed herself. She was alone, in the darkened stateroom of her Diamondback, the holovid of her partner’s encounter playing in real time. Every word and gesture was crystal clear, the light from the display illuminating her face in the darkness. At a glance she looked to be alone, but—

A man’s voice sounded from behind her.

“Almost sounds like a lover’s quarrel.”

Kerenski turned. Leaning with arms folded against the bulkhead was Isaiah Evanson, his form barely visible. Kari remained silent for a moment, her sharp features betraying nothing. The leaders of Loren’s Legion and their new auxiliaries the Night Witches regarded each other.

“Púrpura is a true *comrade*. She will remain focused.”

Evanson nodded. “And her partner?”

Kerenski turned back to the holo image. There was now only Tyrran, striding away from Púrpura down a corridor, muttering to himself.

“A stray mutt who will do what it takes to survive. There’s a gun to his head, and she’s the one holding it. There won’t be any problems from him.”

Slowly, his eyes weary, Phisto took his place at her side.

“How can you be certain? And what *does* he want?”

A long drag from the cigarette again filled the air with smoke. Kerenski switched away from the holofeed, plunging the room into darkness.

“The same thing that every man wants: to be needed.”

The man looked away, shaking his head.

“I don’t like that our op depends on some scoundrel. This isn’t a game.”

Kerenski closed her eyes, savoring the final drag from her cigarette before stubbing it out. Smoke masked her features in the low light.

“To the contrary, *comrade*,” she said. “For Andor, *this* is the only game in town.”

The pilots of Loren’s Legion’s elite command wing all flew Fer de Lances, highly modified and deadly. Such hadn’t been the most ideal vessels for crossing the great expanse from Prism to the *Gnosis*, but all had arrived without incident.

The *Saint of Killers* was Phisto Sobanii’s steed, weapons deployed and a pair of technicians running down its operating specs. He and Isaiah Evanson were perched on the observation deck, each holding a sealed beer. Without gravity a spill of such would simply float endlessly. Neither had spoken since meeting up, only watching with disinterest as the techs did their work. Finally Phisto broke the silence, his gaze falling to his beer.

“Really gonna miss having a real drink, you know?”

Isaiah nodded.

“I hear ya. In fact—” he looked around— “I think I’ll be missing a *lot* of things.”

The man’s voice had dropped to a familiar tone. Sobanii took a sip and forced himself to stare straight ahead.

“Like tail?”

Evanson ran a hand over his unshaven jawline, his brows furrowing.

“‘fraid that tail’s gonna be the one thing we can’t shake.”

Phisto frowned.

“What are you saying?”

Isaiah exhaled.

“I’m saying that if you have any embarrassing habits, now is the time to break them. Seems this little pleasure cruise has even less privacy than a prison shower.”

It tooks only moments for Sobanii to decipher his friend’s meaning.

“The Witches.”

Isaiah shook his head.

“No. Their leader. Kerenski.”

Phisto took another long sip of his beer. In the low gravity it tasted flat.

“What about her? That habit of hers making your uniform stink?”

Isaiah exhaled.

“This afternoon she invited me into her ship.”

Sobanii’s eyebrows lifted. Isaiah shook his head.

“Not like that. To show me something. Holofootage of Púrpura and Andor. She’s spying on her own people.”

Phisto took another sip. “Awfully trusting of her to show you that.”

Evanson scowled, looking at his ship.

“It wasn’t about trust. It was about sending a message. If she’ll spy on her own people, she’ll damn well spy on *mine*.”

Phisto's expression darkened. "I think we had better allies when we were moonlighting in Pegasi."

Isaiah nodded, taking another weary look around himself.

"I know what you're saying. And she's been on the level so far. Just..."

Phisto turned to leave, his eyes conspiratorial.

"Yeah. Suffer not the Witch to get the drop on you."

“It’s the damndest thing, Andor. You’re failing every class except mine. History, civics, speech— even art, where anything goes. But not applied mechanical theory. Not the one that most students run away from. Isn’t that curious?”

Tyrran Andor sat in silence, seventeen and utterly alone. He was in the office of the only teacher into whose class he invested effort, a tiny, cluttered space. Beyond its walls were machines of every sort— tools, spare parts, diagnostic equipment and class projects. Dalil was his name— Ambrose Dalil, a darker-complected man with an obscure accent, even by the standards of the Alliance. He was neither youthful nor elderly, one hand ever trembling from a neurological disorder that stubbornly resisted even the advanced treatments of the age.

The student before him said nothing, and after a minute Dalil rose from his side of the desk and gestured for Tyrran to rise. The adolescent thought he was being dismissed, but instead was led to an auto-fabricator. Various stocks of raw materials stood by in bins, ready to be fed into the machine. He nodded to the device.

“If I asked you to create a medium grade plasma coil, could you do so?”

Tyrran looked down, mumbling something incomprehensible. Dalil put his hand to his ear.

“What’s that? I can’t hear you beneath all that self-doubt.”

Andor snapped his head up, his eyes challenging his teacher’s.

“Yes. I could. If I had the schematics and materials.”

Slowly, the elder man nodded.

"I know you could. And I bet you could make ten more just like it, and a hundred more after that."

Not knowing what to say, Tyrran looked away. Dalil joined him, his hands on the safety railing surrounding the machinery, the afflicted one for once steady.

"An educator hears rumors, Andor— rumors about the students for which they're responsible."

Andor scoffed, but otherwise remained silent. Dalil continued.

"I see you in here day after day, tinkering with machines long after everyone else has gone home. I've seen you take them apart and put them back together. I've seen you pour over fab recipes. I've even seen your eyes lift skyward as a ship is coming or going from the spaceport."

Tyrran swallowed, uncomfortable with the personal turn in the conversation. Yet still he said nothing, and still Dalil spoke.

"These machines... they aren't like people, you know? People lie and obfuscate and say one thing one week and another the next. People can come and go from your life, even if they've sworn to stay forever. People are messy, aren't they? Unpredictable."

The educator turned, feeding tiny quantities of iron, carbon, and zinc sulfide into the auto-fabricator. He keyed instructions into the controls, the machine activating, humming and whirring as it executed its command. As it did so he turned to his student, his eyes deepening in compassion.

"But this— this is different. Follow the instructions and get perfect results, ten times out of ten. No matter what's happening at home. Or inside. Or with your peers. So many students have trouble with this sort of thing, you know? Fabrication doesn't care how clever or well-liked you are. But more than that it's fair. Follow the steps and get the desired result. Don't and you won't."

The progress lights on the device glowed one after another as the machine did its work. It was nearing completion, but—

“It’s like that for nearly anything involving technology, Andor. Manufacturing, programming...”

A soft chime sounded, the fabricator delivering the finished item into its tray. It was a crude replication of the wings of the famous guild, not perfect but a worthy first effort. Its lines glowed in low light, a personal project that Andor thought he’d kept secret from his teacher. Clearly, he had not. Ambrose Dalil picked up the trinket, blew the metal shavings from it, and with his ever-trembling hand gave it to Tyrran.

“... and piloting.”

Ships were still arriving to journey within the *Gnosis* before its crucial jump. Yet even the megaship’s cavernous hangars were stuffed, and both the reckless and the curious were turned away, save a select few with credits or connections. It was fewer than twelve hours before the jump, and the tension onboard was palpable. Bags appeared beneath the eyes of crew and passengers alike, and the specter of the unknown loomed over every task there was to be done.

It was evening, at least by shipboard time. Yolanta Púrpura was sitting alone, checking and re-checking the *Rosa*’s subsystems, knowing that the vessel was as spaceworthy as possible yet unable to suppress a feeling of unease within her chest. To and fro in her bridge she went, sparing no detail, not even acknowledging her partner when he appeared. For a long time he watched her, saying nothing until she bumped into him without a care or an apology, so focused was she on her ship.

“She won’t be any more ready for you worrying so much,” Tyrran said.

Yolanta spun, irritation in her eyes.

“I am not taking any chances,” she said. “And I am *not* worried.”

Tyrran said nothing at first, only looking at his boots before again lifting his gaze to the woman.

“Well, you should be. Ever seen a Thargoid? In person, I mean. Up close.”

Her eyes flashing, Yolanta shook her head. Tyrran continued.

“Well, *I* have. And if the rumors are true...”

The woman scoffed.

“There are *always* rumors.”

Andor exhaled, shaking his head.

“All I’m saying is don’t be afraid to run. If something goes wrong, I mean.”

Yolanta Púrpura took a step closer to Tyrran, sneering up at him, her every feature sharp.

“Like *you*?”

The man shook his head, turning away and running a hand along the pristine bulkheads of the *Rosa*’s bridge.

“You’ve never been out there. You haven’t seen what they can do. You think you’re prepared, checking over every little detail of your ship—” he nodded to the diagnostics display. “But you’re going about it all wrong.”

Yolanta folded her arms. “Then tell me, Andor: what *should* I be doing?”

Tyrran’s gaze fixed upon the display. All systems were deep into the green. He frowned.

“Accept that you’ll bleed,” he said. “Your ship, *you*—against the bugs it isn’t a question of ‘if’, but ‘how much?’. No matter your loadout. No matter your skill. No matter who you think has your back.”

Yolanta switched off the display, then resolutely placed her hands on her hips.

“Is that a threat?”

Tyrran turned to leave, his tone burdened.

“No,” he said. “It’s a promise.”

Isaiah Evanson looked up from his dataslate, a drink in his hand.

“That’s it,” he said. “Everyone has docked. Everyone from the Legion who volunteered.”

Across from him in the *Bloodfeather’s* living area was Kari Kerenski. She nodded at the news and lit up a cigarette. Her Slavic accent spilled across the deck as she spoke.

“Still not very many.”

Waving away the smoke, the man closed out the dataslate.

“Lots of home fires to keep burning back in blue dot space, you know?”

Kerenski waved her cigarette as she spoke.

“And these... ‘home fires’— they are secure, *da?*”

Isaiah nodded. “I have my assurances from Old Man Vespar himself. Every eye is on the princess’s upcoming wedding. The Empire is playing nice with itself.”

The woman took a long drag, her eyes narrowing. “You mean that anything that undermines the Legion could be seen as the princess settling old grudges in a manner beneath her.”

Evanson chuckled.

“Cuthrick would make *sure* of it.”

A long plume of smoke exited from Kerenski’s thin lips.

“You’ll forgive me if the words of the Imperial *bourgeoisie* fail to assure.”

A long moment passed between the commander and his subordinate. Isaiah turned, keying a command into his dataslate. A starmap appeared, of the several systems governed by Loren’s Legion. The man allowed his gaze to wash over them before responding.

“I was more idealistic once, too. Hated everything and everyone who even whiffed of privilege. Thought I'd make the ‘verse a better place by taking ‘em all down, you know?”

Kerenski’s eyes sharpened. “And now you're just another uniform, *da*? Convinced that you're serving some higher purpose.”

Evanson turned, appearing for a moment far older than he was.

“Yeah— which included springing *you* from the clink. Don't make me regret that choice.”

The woman’s gaze remained unflinching.

“We want the same thing, you and I. We are natural allies.”

A low chuckle escaped Isaiah’s lips.

“Allies who spy on each other. Or am I to believe that your surveillance extends to only the Witches?”

Kerenski stiffened, drawing herself up with hands clasped behind her back.

“A great man once said ‘trust, but verify’.”

Evanson held up a warning finger.

“Snoop on your own people all you want— but leave mine out of it. Where I come from, folks work together to get the job done— no hidden cameras, no ‘verifying’ their loyalty. Does Púrpura know? Do you even *trust* her?”

Another thick plume of smoke surrounded Kerenski’s face, obscuring her sharp features.

“I trust Púrpura *because* I have verified her loyalty.”

Isaiah looked away, and then again to the woman before him.

“I’ve been doing this long enough to know that this ain’t what builds a team.”

Slowly, Kerenski nodded, snubbing out her cigarette and turning to leave. She stopped at the entryway of the *Bloodfeather*, pausing to glance over her shoulder.

“Have you been doing it long enough to feel the knife of betrayal sunk into your back? Or for those you once thought your enemies to become your truest friends?”

Her eyes met his, her unsmiling mouth hardening along with her tone. Evanson’s features hardened, his nostrils flaring but the man remaining silent in the face of her question. Kerenski nodded.

“That is what I thought, *tovarish*. Your raven-haired diva perished because she made the same mistake that most others do: she saw those around her as allies or adversaries. I have earned my silver streaks because I only see those I *know*...”

The woman advanced, her eyes cold and competent.

“And those I *don’t*. ”

The *Gnosis*’s bar was packed, as might be expected the evening prior to the much-anticipated jump. Everything was prepared. It was only a matter of time before the journey into the unknown would proceed in earnest. Such an agonizing wait had a way of making even veteran spacers thirsty.

Still, the men and women of Loren’s Legion had managed to claim a booth for their own, no-grav-adapted drinks in their hands and their easy laughter a contrast against the more tense mood within the rest of the bar. Commanders Adam Firethorn and Amos Loren were present, in their dress uniforms and making for a smart contrast against the rest of the crowd. A few distrustful eyes looked on with disdain upon the Imperial eagles on their shoulders, but the bar as a whole kept to the peace.

Only Kerenski, Yolanta and Andor were *sans* the uniform of the Legion. Kerenski wore civilian clothes. Yolanta was clad in a black skirt that ran down to her ankles, with a simple white top completing the look. For his part Tyrran was alone, leaning against a bulkhead at the far side of the bar, nursing a beer. Conversation from all around him blended together to create the white noise that was many voices speaking at once, filling him with the desire to return to his ship.

A scowl hardened the man's features.

Except that it isn't my ship. I'm not a Commander any longer— just a press-ganged crewman, as expendable as a miner's first limpet.

Even being at a place like the *Gnosis's* bar hadn't been Andor's first choice— he'd been more or less forced to accompany Yolanta, since she didn't trust him alone in her ship. What was more, the looks he'd gotten from Evanson warned him to stay away from the legionaries, too. It was just as well. Andor wasn't in the mood to make nice with his unofficial captors, but wasn't in the mood to cause any trouble, either.

Hours passed, and gradually the bar began to empty. Most present saw the wisdom of resting for the jump. Others were unable to. Still, it was clear to Tyrran who was there to explore and who was there to fight. Those like the Legion were jovial, able to smile and converse, long accustomed to accepting the risks that came with a career such as theirs. Others— those with a softer, more academic look about them, were visibly anxious, unable to relax in the face of the danger on the horizon, likely nursing second thoughts about their choices just as much as the drinks in their hands. Tyrran had been in a hundred bars just like this one, albeit with more gravity...

I got my start in places like this. Watched dozens of others lose it all, too. You never know when it'll all come crashing down...

“Care to be dealt in?”

Yolanta's voice jarred him from his daydream. Tyrran looked to his side. Phisto was dealing cards, and the half-trusting eyes of those around the booth were on him. The man shook his head.

"I don't play cards."

A pair of expertly trimmed eyebrows lifted.

"Suit yourself."

The bar emptied further, and though it never closed there were now few enough people that Tyrran was able to relax somewhat. He ordered another drink— a simple mixture of sparkling soda and liquor— and took his first sip. He didn't move from his spot along the wall, and even in the relative quiet couldn't quite make out what was being said among his teammates.

It doesn't matter. What matters is that Púrpura keeps it together for whatever we're in for.

Indeed, the young Iberian woman had been sipping beer for most of the night, but wasn't acting impaired or unseemly. Tyrran watched her, careful to keep his observations nothing more than isolated glances. Púrpura was exactly the same even with a drink in her hand— serious, unsmiling, yet the passion in her eyes no less intense. Andor took a sip to mask his own gaze.

So you don't let drink make a fool of you, señora. There may be hope yet.

More time passed, and several hands were played, and for real credits. It was just as well that the rogue remained aloof— Tyrran was almost totally broke, and wouldn't have been much for company anyway. Eventually the deck was put away, and conversation ceased. The previous joviality had been replaced with a more somber mood, as one final night of sleep was all that remained before the jump would commence.

Yolanta Púrpura reached behind her chair, producing a large case of a familiar shape. With obvious care she opened it, pulling an old-style guitar from within and settling it down upon her lap. It was clearly an antique, with a purple body and black neck. With Tyrran looking on the woman strummed a few notes and made some adjustments, tuning the instrument with the quiet competence of one who had done so many times before. Without a word she gazed into the distance, her fingers brushing the polished wood.

The first notes from the guitar were distinctly Iberian, as was the melody that followed. The tune was at once sensual and sharp, the spirit stirred, the woman expressing her heritage without speaking a word. There were no lyrics to accompany the plucking, only the throaty humming of the woman, seemingly alone and not in a megaship bar.

Those around her ceased their conversation and listened with respectful silence, for something as soulful as that which danced in their ears was a rare thing indeed. On Yolanta played, her fingers plucking away with skill, her eyes simultaneously focused and elsewhere. The rhythm intensified and the melody climaxed, her mouth tightening in intensity. A haunting denouement concluded the piece.

There was no applause, no shouting or foot stomping. Instead there were only teary eyes and raised glasses, from those who knew Yolanta and those who didn't. The music had touched every man and woman in the bar, bound them as one unified specimen of humanity for a single, fleeting moment. It was a reminder of why they were there. Some hearts were broken by the tune. Others were strengthened.

Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura hadn't smiled even once during the performance.

Phisto exhaled, for once at a loss for words.

"That was beautiful," he managed.

Yolanta didn't acknowledge him, didn't do anything except look away.

“It was the one thing I ever did that impressed *mi padre*. Music is part of our heritage, and he arranged for the finest tutor in the system to instruct me.”

The woman brushed a stray lock of hair from her forehead, turning to face her comrades.

“The first time I played to their satisfaction, he embraced me as his own flesh and said that I was a true daughter of our people.”

Phisto exhaled, still moved.

“And then?”

Yolanta’s face hardened, placing the guitar back into its case. The locks snapped shut and the woman rose.

“And then I knew that I would never be the daughter that he wanted. My only submission had been his only affection.”

For a long time there was silence around the table. Kerenski also rose, eyes dry though others’ were not.

“Finish your drinks, *comrades*, and rest well. Tomorrow we jump into the unknown.”

Yolanta again found herself checking and re-checking the *Rosa Púrpura*’s systems, running redundant diagnostics sweeps even though they confirmed even the most minor systems to be in the green. She was dressed down, in a tank top and form-fitting shorts, too absorbed to notice the bridge door slide open behind her. Tyrran’s crisp accent jarred her from her work.

“You won’t be any good running on no sleep,” he said.

Ashamed that she’d been caught unaware, Yola stood and crossed her arms, conscious of wearing comparatively little before the man she barely knew.

“Nor will you.”

Tyrran stood before a panel, accessing information about a system without actually reading it. The information illuminated the outline of his face as he turned to his partner.

“I’m just along for the ride, remember? *You* have to fly. Unless...”

Defiance flashed in Yolanta’s eyes.

“Never.”

Tyrran glanced to the pilot’s seat, shrugging. From the corner of his eye he saw Yolanta cross one thigh over the other, turning subtly away from him. He shook his head, averting his eyes even as he rolled them.

“Relax,” he said. “I’m not interested.”

Realizing the weakness of her body language, the woman straightened herself.

“Not with the Black Thorn around your neck, I am sure.”

Tyrran scoffed, crossing his arms.

“Not with anyone willing to pressgang to fill a crew seat. Kerenski was right. You need to be sharp. We should both get some rest.”

The *Gnosis*’s hangar bays were dimly lit, but even in the poor illumination rows of ships could be seen, stretching into the distance. Slowly, hesitantly, Yolanta joined her partner in gazing upon them. Her mouth was as unsmiling as ever, but in her tone was less haughty and more the genuine honesty that invariably accompanied fatigue.

“What is it like?” she asked. “To live your life and never believe in a larger cause than yourself?”

Tyrran turned to the woman.

“Making my own way is cause enough for me.”

The woman’s eyes flashed, glinting in the low light.

“But this is *not* making your own way. You are a puppet on a string, at the mercy of strangers. All because you chose profit over honor.”

Disdain twisted Andor’s features.

“Honor is a fine thing for those who can afford it. The rest of us have to make a living.”

Man and woman regarded each other for a long moment. Eventually Yolanta spoke.

“You could be better than this, *si*? Better than any of this. Whatever gods guide your path have given you another chance.”

Contempt hardened Andor’s mouth as he ran a finger along the band over his neck.

“The gods have given me chains. Leave it to an Imperial to mistake them for wings.”

Yolanta’s gaze, too, hardened. Again she turned away, slim hips moving in the low light of the *Rosa*’s main corridor.

“And leave it to a thick-headed *patán* to be too stubborn to learn. After this job I’ll look for you in an alley somewhere.”

The woman’s footsteps could be heard down the corridor. Tyrran turned, calling after her.

“Púrpura!”

Yolanta paused, spinning to face Tyrran, her eyes hard. She said nothing. Andor took a step forward, meeting her gaze only with difficulty.

“You really *do* play beautifully.”

The woman’s features softened somewhat.

“My teacher was a blind old man in the twilight of his life. He only had one piece of advice: play like it is your last day, or play not at all.”

Slowly, Tyrran nodded. “It worked.”

The woman pursed her lips, the late hour and the dire situation loosening her tongue.

“He was a wise man, my teacher. Today may have been my last, for tomorrow the *Gnosis* jumps, perhaps taking us all to certain death. If I am to die, I would do so with music on my fingertips.”

Another, final moment passed between man and woman.

“Are you afraid, Yolanta?”

The old hardness of the woman’s Iberian eyes returned.

“Get some sleep, Andor.”

Aboard the *Gnosis*, every man and woman was ready. Crew were at their stations, and those guests who had been granted landing clearance were at their ships' helms. Andor and Yolanta were no exception, both being in their seats and fully suited up. Despite the late hour of the previous night, there wasn't a hint of fatigue in their eyes. Like everyone else they were on edge.

The *Gnosis*'s captain—a stern-faced man by the name of Mathias Leander—was in the middle of a rousing speech that was broadcast from bow to stern of the great megaship, but the members of Loren's Legion were ignoring it. Instead they were performing final comms checks, testing the strength of their equipment in the face of a single, massive band override. Finally the speech concluded, and with great solemnity Leander terminated the general comms and threw the massive lever that activated the ship's hyperspace cycle. For a moment nothing happened, until—

Tyrran and Yolanta looked around. The metal around them groaned, straining as the numerous subsystems throughout the ship worked in unison to prepare the final stages of the jump. A spooling noise slowly crescendoed, the megaship itself trembling. Unconsciously they gripped the *Rosa*'s safety handholds, neither willing to show their unease before the other. On the Legion's general channel a single message from Phisto Sobanii appeared to all:

"Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more."

Blood ran from Tyrran's lip even as he scrambled to make sense of what had just happened. Below him Yolanta, too, was recovering from the sudden, massive jolt, having been thrown from her seat. She was gripping her arm and breathing through clenched teeth. Random motion made even staying still difficult. With pain and irritation she looked over her shoulder, settling once again into the pilot's chair.

"What *happened*?"

The *Rosa Púrpura*'s systems weren't connected to the *Gnosis*'s, and neither could know the situation. Tyrran braced himself against another long roll. It felt like the entire megaship was recklessly adrift in witchspace— a terrifying prospect. The rogue cursed and looked down to his partner.

"Nothing good..."

A familiar rattle echoed even into the *Rosa*'s bridge. Eyes widening, Tyrran planted his boots against their stirrups, locking himself into position.

"*Brace!*"

Yolanta gripped a handhold just in time, hanging on as something slammed into the *Gnosis*'s side. The centrifugal forces almost flung from her seat as before, but with a determined scream Yolanta held on. For a long time the ship drifted and yawed— seemed to, from their cramped perspective— and around them ships strained against their docking clamps, and crews strained within their ships. A final jolt nearly threw man and woman across the bridge.

Then, there was silence. Even the comms were dead. Man and woman heard nothing but their own strained breathing. Andor found it within himself to jest.

"Could be worse, I suppose."

In unison the lights of the hangar failed, plunging the dozens of ships within into darkness. Yolanta's accent grew thicker.

"It is worse."

From beyond their ship, beyond even the *Gnosis's* cavernous hull came *it*: a long, low moan, unlike anything Yolanta had ever heard. Yet it was *alive*. Alive and drawing nearer. Alive and unalone. More of the same chilled the woman to her bones.

Andor, however, *had* heard the haunting moans. He swallowed, perspiration as well as blood running down his face.

“*Much* worse.”

Tyrran left in the dead of night, away from the house— he refused to think of it as home— in which he'd stayed since adolescence. He was twenty, and had completed his final requirements for a class-B nanowelding certificate. It wasn't a particularly lucrative trade, since molecular welding done on any kind of scale was automated more often than not— but it was something, a way for him to scratch out a living amid an uncaring universe.

The young man had saved some credits from working odd jobs, not much but enough to buy a ticket off-world. In silence he sat in the starport, alone and with all his possessions in a beat-up duffle bag. People of all walks of life paraded before him, families and ship crew and slick-suited business types. He spoke to no one, not daring to miss his transport, yet something caught his eye.

It was a man, older and with lines on his face yet one who had attracted a small crowd. He looked plain enough, but carried himself in a manner that straddled the line between swagger and cockiness. Laughter came with ease, and the clinking of his mug of beer with those who surrounded him could be heard even from where Andor sat. It was then that young Tyrran's eyes drifted from those of the charismatic stranger to his jacket.

Adorning its sleeve was a familiar symbol— one of heroism or infamy, depending on who was being asked. The man bore neither the top nor bottom rank, but such was irrelevant to those basking in his presence. Here was a genuine member of the Pilots Federation, one of those who lived among the stars, seeing and doing that which those around him could only dream.

A wave of inferiority washed over Tyrran, feeling alone even though his had been a lifetime of such. A wild notion to approach the man to ask if he needed crew flashed in his mind, but was swiftly discarded. For Tyrran Andor to approach a member of the guild was akin to an insect approaching a god. In silence the younger man sat, his nanowelding certificate now laughable in the face of true prestige.

Tyrran's first encounter with a ship followed shortly after his first encounter with a pilot. He was to board a Cobra, tried and true and outfitted with passenger cabins. The sheer size of the vessel was enough to awe the man, looming over him with its grace and girth. That it was considered on the smaller end of the spectrum was nearly inconceivable, so much so that Tyrran physically paused while in line, needing to be prompted to move forward by the dour-faced old woman behind him. The line fed into the ship itself, up its ramp, flanked on both sides by the Commander and her co-pilot. Every passenger was given a warm greeting, and Andor could barely manage a reply when his hand clasped the Commander's.

The initial crescendo of the Cobra powering up was enough to stir Tyrran's blood, and the first rumble of liftoff brought a smile to his face. For one perfect moment his troubles were forgotten, his upbringing and past seemingly left behind as the city in which he'd never quite fit in shrank further and further into the distance. The blue of atmosphere became the black of space, and the first passions of wanderlust spread within Tyrran's chest.

Life, it seemed, was about to well and truly begin.

“Yes, I said *now!* My people are loaded with anti-xeno weapons and need to be prioritized!”

Another explosion jarred Phisto Sobanii from the seat of the *Saint*, the man spitting blood before re-engaging his comms. Red emergency lights illuminated the *Gnosis* from bow to stern, plunging everything into a deep, demonic glow. Crew members ran to and fro, some with medical kits and others shouting into comms. Systems worked and failed in their turn, the drawn-out, haunting moans of the inhuman life beyond the megaship’s hull chilling him to his core.

The harried tower control replied brusquely that the launch bays were operating at peak efficiency, and that all ships were being launched in standard order. Phisto cursed and struck the panel with a closed fist, bloodying his knuckles and causing the display to flicker. Strained breathing caused spittle to fly through clenched teeth. The *Saint of Killers* was fully online, needing only to be released and face whatever adversity awaited it.

Sobanii squeezed shut his eyes, the comms a jumble of screams and cries for help. The *Saint* shifted as a ship launched and the massive conveyer belt moved him one space closer to the bay exit. Another impact jolted the man.

It ain’t the fighting. It’s the waiting, trapped in some damn tomb of a megaship. This ain’t no way to be.

“You copy?”

Phisto’s eyes flew open. Isaiah was on the Legion comms, his normally even voice taking on tinges of worry. In the background could be heard high-pitched weapons and propulsion, smaller-sounding but every bit as alien. Phisto switched to wing-only, straining to hear his friend though distortion and fire.

“Talk to me, Isaiah.”

Another whine came and went, the man's breathing heavy.

"It's bad. Real bad. Adam and Ren are formed up, but..."

The staccato sound of multicannon fire interrupted, followed by the same whine—one that sounded eerily to Pisto like *pain*.

"But *what?*"

Evanson returned, his breathing ragged.

"But there's a whole goddamned pisspot full of 'em—and they ain't lettin' up!"

The conveyor belt shifted again. Pisto was only a few spaces away from the hangar. The sounds of weapons fire drew nearer—human and otherwise. The man wiped his mouth with the back of his gloved hand. It came away bloody. Oddly, his thoughts drifted not to the imminent carnage but to the clanswoman who raised him.

Alright, Tai. If those gods of yours are anything other than bedtime tales, I could sure use their help right about now.

Kari Kerenski's sharp features were accentuated in the red glow of the hangar. Like Pisto she heard every death scream and plea for help to be heard over the comms. *Unlike* Pisto she kept her eyes to her instrumentation, her pilot's mind plotting a real-time, three-dimensional map of the maelstrom as it unfolded. Icons of known and unknown vessels danced their mortal dance, some blinking out while still others appeared from a distance. There was no clear winner between human and alien, no tactics more sophisticated than that of an unruly bar fight. It was simply attrition, two diametrically opposed species feeding a meat grinder that consumed both indiscriminately.

The woman had read every scrap of data she could about the Thargoids and their incursion into human space, and at the moment that data was paying dividends. The first beginnings of a tactical situation began to form within her mind.

When opposition is strong and casualties mount, the Thargoids retreat from a system. When opposition is weak, they lay waste to everything in their path. Thus far we've held the line and bled them. That our own casualties are significant is irrelevant.

The screams of human and alien alike filled her ears. The situation became clearer.

The Gnosis itself is no more equipped to handle an attack than any other. Its complement of vessels, however...

There was no way to tell the scope of friendly casualties, nor how many vessels armed with the appropriate weapons were available in reserve. There was only the fact that the *Gnosis* was intact and the woman herself alive, which meant that the lighting-quick endgame of a typical Thargoid attack had failed to materialize. A pang of wild hope spread within Kerenski's chest, the lone emotion a beacon in the darkness before it, too, was suppressed, crushed beneath the wheel of her calculating intellect.

We can win. We're only thirteen light years from our departure point. Far, but not too far for reinforcements. Repairs can be made. Munitions can be delivered. A line can be established and held.

The woman's features hardened. Without thinking she reached into her flight jacket, fishing out a pack of cigarettes and pulling one from it with her lips. A single flame from her lighter illuminated her face. Smoke obscured her features, once again mere silhouettes in the red-lit darkness.

And the mission can therefore proceed.

Her hands steady, Kari Kerenski activated her comms.

Tyrran Andor's eyes widened.

"Kerenski wants us to do *what?*"

An impact jolted man and woman, both gripping their chairs for support. Yolanta brushed a stray hair from her face and cursed.

"She wants us to depart from the *Gnosis* and—"

Andor scowled, interrupting.

"Get the hell out of here, right?"

Yolanta shook her head, her face wet with perspiration.

"Investigate Xeno structures as planned."

Tyrran's jaw dropped, his accent intensifying.

"We're in the middle of an alien shitstorm and she wants us to *proceed on-mission?*"

Yolanta turned, her back to the man. She dared not let him see a trace of doubt on her features.

"She would not order us to do so unless she was confident of success."

Weapons fire sounded outside the *Gnosis*. It was mere moments before the *Rosa Púrpura* would be in launch position. Tyrran spat— or would have, had gravity been in effect.

"This is insane."

Yolanta spun, her gaze stern, her finger pointing to the void beyond the *Gnosis*'s hull.

"*This* is why we are here."

Settling into her chair, the woman brought the *Rosa*'s systems fully online. She allowed herself a deep breath, her hands gripping the joystick and throttle. A sarcastic sigh escaped her lips.

“Relax, Andor. Think of it as running away.”

“LRV Saint of Killers, you are cleared for launch. Stand by.”

Phisto swallowed, his mouth dry. How long had it been since *that* had happened?

It’s about damn time.

“Copy, tower. *Saint of Killers* standing by.”

The man exhaled, the familiar martial energy coursing through his veins. The platform upon which his Fer de Lance sat rose, the blackness of space around him a maelstrom of violence. Phisto’s eyes widened.

Mother of God...

Swarms of alien vessels danced before his eyes, smaller saucer-shaped ships firing a dull yellow beam at nearby human defenders. In the distance larger, more ominous flower-shaped vessels approached, some with obvious damage and others without. All shared a sickly shade of green for their hulls, an inhumanly organic commonality that drove home utterly the reality of the alien foe.

Oh, hell...

An Alliance Chieftain spun out of control, fire and debris spewing from a caustic rupture in its hull, pursued by a trio of the saucer-shaped attackers. The magnetic clamps that held the *Saint* into place released, and Sobanii instinctively diverted power to his dorsal thrusters and hit the boost, rocketing away from the landing pad, leaving blackened scorch marks upon it. A barrage of alien blaster fire further scorched where he’d just been, twisting the once-smooth platform even more.

“Phisto, report!”

Worry clouded Isaiah Evanson's tone. Phisto looked over his shoulder, the platform already descending to ready another ship for launch. The *Gnosis*'s powerful weapons opened fire, destroying one of the saucers and knocking the other off course. A trail of smoke of the same sickly green color marked its retreat. He cursed, turning to join his fellow Legionaries.

"Dirty bugs tried to waste me on the pad. How we looking?"

Renraiku replied, anger in his tone.

"Better than most, sir. The little ones are affected by our weapons. Only those new ones from Aegis even touch the big boys."

Sobanii took a long look around him. Human and Thargoid ships exchanged fire, jockeying for position, caustic fire eating away at the former and chunks of hull blasted from the latter. All along the *Gnosis* was the blackened aftermath of alien fire, patches of outer hull corroded through completely, a sickly green substance eating away at the metal. Phisto swallowed, toggling general Legion comms.

"Alright, we all here?"

One by one Phisto's heard the voices of his wingmates in his ears.

"Kordai, standing by."

"Evanson, reporting in."

"Firethorn, already needing a beer."

"Loren like the Legion, good to go."

The man's nostrils flared, the four Fer de Lances forming alongside his flanks. They were a chevron of order amid the chaos. Phisto targeted the nearest Thargoid, a flower-shaped ship with exotic reds and yellows adorning its petals.

"Good. Now listen up. The op's gone to shit, and we're in a bad way. There ain't a lot of fighters among these eggheads, so it's up to us. Everybody follow?"

Three quick affirmations sounded in the man's ear. Phisto fired his boosters, speeding past the morass of human and Thargoid ships. In his sights was the largest of the incoming Thargoid vessels, hard on the heels of the smaller saucer-shaped Scouts and bearing down on the *Gnosis*. Phisto flipped open the safety on his joystick, gritting his teeth.

"Let the others deal with the scouts. We'll take out this big one and make 'em think twice."

At his sides and rear, Sobanii could see the sleek shapes of Fer de Lances.

"Aye."

"Aye."

"Let's do it."

Four multicannons of a new design emerged from the *Saint's* hardpoints. It was a new weapon, the AX variety engineered to combat the Thargoid intruders. All four Legion ships were equipped with such devices, and all four pilots were eager to test them in battle. The Thargoid drew ever nearer, seemingly ignoring the quartet of human ships speeding towards it. The Legionaries bore down upon their prey. Phisto bared his teeth, all the savage instincts of humanity guiding his actions.

"I'm gonna scrape you off my *boot!*"

"I see it, I *see it!*"

Alien blaster fire raked the *Rosa Púrpura*, the exotic energy bleeding through the shields and scorching the hull beneath. Yolanta cursed and slammed her throttle forward, hugging along the *Gnosis's* great bulk and using it for cover. They had barely cleared the pad, rocketing away into a maelstrom of violence. Missiles and blasterfire crossed paths, the roars and whines of human and Thargoid ships in Tyrran and Yolanta's ears. Theirs wasn't a fight, but a dash for survival.

Yolanta keyed her comms, eyes wide.

“Kerenski... there are too many! We will never get clear in time!”

Another salvo of blaster fire left a blackened trail along the *Rosa*’s starboard nacelles. Yolanta twisted and dodged, but to no avail. Her leader’s voice crackled in her ears.

“Yes, you will. On me. *Now!*”

Trusting to her *camarada*, the woman disengaged the flight safeties and spun her ship around, managing to lay into the pursuing Scout with a barrage of her own. Pieces flew from the smaller ship, glowing green innards exposed as it whizzed by, a scream of *pain* coming from the ship. In the distance was Kerenski’s ship, a humble Diamondback named the *Olga of Kiev*. The two vessels joined formation.

“I am uploading a destination for you. Proceed with the mission. Return when you have found what we seek.”

Tyrran shook his head, his crisp accent thickening.

“Don’t you see what’s happening out here? We’re getting torn apart!”

Yolanta scowled.

“The *patán* is right. I—”

Kerenski interrupted, a preternatural calmness to her tone.

“You have to trust me, *comrade*. I expect a hold full of stinking Thargoid parts when you return.”

Her mind at war with itself, Yolanta shook her head. In the distance an *Anaconda*-class starship was severed into two, a massive flower-shaped Interceptor torturing it with a beam of pure energy. The woman swallowed, Kerenski’s Diamondback already peeling away.

“*Si, camarada!*”

Tyrran’s eyes widened.

“This is ins—”

His voice cut out halfway, Yolanta lifting her finger from the toggle switch for his comms. Her Iberian face settled into an expression of grim determination, restricting her partner to intra-ship communication only.

“Calm yourself,” she instructed.

Her body relaxing, the woman closed her eyes. She felt alone, alone against all the terrors of legend arrayed before her very canopy. It was not terror but memory that guided her actions. A voice from her past— bizarrely— could be heard above the screams and weapons fire that surrounded her. It was gentle voice, one of wisdom and patience. One she hadn’t heard in over a decade.

“Yola, Yola, Yola... you play too perfectly. There is no poetry in your notes. Let those without wits or passion indulge in precision.”

Exhaling, the woman pushed the throttle forward— not the crude shove as before, but a smooth glide. The *Rosa*’s thrusters flared to life, charging into the morass of alien vessels. The first plucking of the old Iberian guitar played from the Master’s fingers into her ears.

“See? Like this. Do not think. Feel.”

Yolanta’s eyes focused, the woman one with her ship. Her hands gripped her controls with a lighter touch. She moved the joystick in tandem with the throttle, placing the *Rosa* exactly where the alien blaster fire *wasn’t*.

“Music is not notes on paper. It is a dance, Yola— a dance of the soul and the body, si?”

The *Rosa* ducked and weaved, passing and bobbing between the Scouts, more and more exiting their profane version of hyperspace, swarming the Chieftain’s lone figure, alone in the black. Only the guitar played in Yolanta’s mind.

“There will be monsters, young one. Monsters from which neither I nor your father nor all the Emperor’s ships can protect you. Only the passions you harbor within yourself will see you through the darkness. You will know when the time comes.”

A single tear flowed from Yolanta’s eyes. The inhuman whines of the alien vessels filled her ears, but she heard not a single thing. A distinctly Iberian contempt swelled within her. The Thargoids were not merely enemies. They were *ugly*— an affront to all that was beautiful and right, to all that her heart held dear.

But they were not her match.

“And when it does, you will either triumph over the beasts...”

The *Rosa* banked hard to the right, weaving between two Scouts, the two ships hitting one another instead of their human quarry. It was only a little further until she was at safe hyperspace distance...

“Or you will die with music on your fingertips.”

The missile slammed home from behind, jolting Tyrran and Yolanta forward in their seats. Immediately alarm klaxons sounded, flashing lights on her display panel vying for her attention. Andor’s eyes widened.

“No... Yolanta, you have to listen to me!”

The hull readout was showing steady degradation. One by one, various systems were showing damage, steadily increasing though the impact was over. Yolanta twisted her joystick one way and another. The *Rosa* was losing responsiveness.

“What is happening? I am losing control!”

Urgency sharpened Tyrran’s words.

“Close the vents. All of them. Rig for silent running and lay on the boost. It’s the only way!”

Eyes wide, Yola looked over her shoulder.

“But we will lose the shields!”

Andor pointed to the canopy glass. Cracks were forming along the edges, sickly green substance in their gaps.

“Do it!”

With a war scream, Yolanta’s hands danced across the *Rosa*’s controls, closing the heat exhaust vents and trapping the ship’s thermal output within itself. Almost immediately the temperature started to rise, climbing until multiple safety warnings started to sound, competing with those already flashing. The ship met and exceeded its safe thermal limits.

Yolanta pursed her lips even as she dodged another salvo of blaster fire, the boost pushing the ship even further into the red.

“The Rosa— she is burning up!”

Tyrran’s eyes were glued to the cracks along the canopy glass, growing in length. The first audible chipping and breaking could be heard. Perspiration ran down his forehead.

“Good... just a little hotter...”

Now Yolanta bared her teeth, in anger and frustration.

“We are not going anywhere if we burn, patán.”

Tyrran braced against his co-pilot’s seat. It was warm to the touch, even through his Remlock suit.

*“We aren’t going anywhere if we *don’t*!”*

The alarms reached a new level of criticality, but a mad grin broke out across Tyrran’s face. The hyperspace warning light blinked off. The cracks along the canopy glass had stopped spreading.

*“Now, Yolanta! *Punch it!*”*

Regaining her earlier poise, Yolanta threw open the thermal vents, a massive blast of heat escaping from inside the ship. She moved the throttle forward, the familiar countdown displaying itself on cracked canopy glass before her eyes. A few more bolts of alien fire impacted against the *Rosa*’s hull, but—

Man and woman celebrated as one.

“Yes!”

The *Rosa Púrpura*, bloodied from the alien gauntlet that it had run, jumped into the barely-understood domain known as witchspace, leaving only a quartet of thruster trails in a long, straight wake. The alien fighters disengaged, there now being no human quarry to pursue—or so they thought.

From within the *Olga of Kiev*, a long plume of cigarette smoke escaped Kari Kerenski's mouth. The woman allowed herself a moment to gaze upon her scanners, verifying the *Rosa Púrpura*'s successful jump. She flipped a bevy of switches, releasing her own ship from silent running, once again visible to the scanners of human and alien. Thrusters flaring, she turned to rejoin the fray surrounding the *Gnosis*, a dire battle unfolding around the megaship. She spared a final glance to where her subordinates had been only moments prior, her eyes sharp.

"Dasvidaniya, comrades."

The Fer de Lances of Loren's Legion opened fire, concentrating on a single petal of the interceptor looming before them, overwhelming its shields and blasting away pieces of organic hull at the base of its extremity. The men pressed the attack, the alien vessel dodging and returning fire but unable to stop the sheer firepower being directed at it. In a great rupture the limb was severed, an inhuman moan filling their ears as they circled around it.

Isaiah blinked. "It's... it's in *pain*."

Phisto, too, was taken aback. "Sure sounds like it."

Indeed, a putrid yellow fluid was escaping into space from both halves of the limb, the ship acting more like something *grown* than something *built*. Renraiku shook his head.

"I don't like it."

The Legionaries rejoined formation, lining themselves up for another shot. Firethorn narrowed his eyes, readying another barrage from his multicannons.

“C’mon, Ren— what’s not to like?”

The Thargoid righted itself, turning to face its attackers. Its cries of agony ceased, and from within its insectoid bowels numerous tiny objects swarmed, moving in precise paths around the larger ship. They circled and circled, creating a horde of new foes. Phisto’s eyes widened.

“That. *That’s* not to like. Evasive maneuvers!”

The wing split into different paths, the swarm of smaller drones not dispersing but staying as one, whatever hive mind controlling their actions focusing on one hapless opponent. That opponent was Firethorn. The man saw the swarm approaching on his scopes, drawing closer with more speed than what should have been possible...

“Oh, *hell* no...”

The pilot dodged and juked with all his skill, but there was no evading so many blasts. Little ripples peppered his shields, his hull twisted and scorched beneath. Firethorn cursed and brought his ship to bear.

“*Blast* this thing, guys!”

Again, streams of multicannon fire poured into the Thargoid from multiple directions, but they lacked the focused precision that marked the initial barrage. The vessel suffered numerous rents and gashes, but nothing like the loss of the petal from before. Space seemed to distort around it, the vessel picking up speed. The pilots boosted and tried to keep up, but—

Phisto cursed. “Jesus *hell*, that thing can *move*!”

Cannon fire peppered the alien vessel, but again to no avail. Adam Firethorn was in a fight for his life, the swarm of drones ever coming and going in long, wide loops. The veteran spacer emptied entire clips of shells from his weapons into them.

“It’s useless! They’re too damn fast, and too damn small!”

Phisto shook his head, forcing himself to think. On one of the petals was a glowing inner structure, almost impossible to see amid the frantic maneuvering, but—

It's worth a shot.

“Legionnaires! Target that glowing spot! On me!”

The four vessels resumed their formation, with Firethorn's Fer de Lance veering slightly due to the damage it had sustained. As one they opened fire, pouring a barrage of death into the exposed core. Noxious gasses and fluids spewed into space, the Thargoid turning to hide its exposed weakness. Evanson bared his teeth, all sympathy gone.

“Pour it on!”

The Fer de Lances broke and engaged from all sides, shredding the intricate organics of the alien vessel. More of the same painful moaning crossed the vacuum of space and into the ears of the Imperials. The limb broke away like the one before it, the flower-shaped vessel now decidedly missing a few petals.

A savage grin spread across Sobanii's face.

“That's the shit!”

The Thargoid didn't retreat, as other life forms— *was* it one?— might have done. Instead it slowed to a halt, seemingly ignoring the cannon fire being poured into it. A new glow spread from its center, growing as it emanated from its very core.

Phisto was the first to notice the warning.

“Unknown energy signature.”

The man's eyes widened.

“Guys...”

The blast wasn't one of destruction but disabling. All five Fer de Lances were caught in the energy wave, their systems shutting down, the hapless human vessels dead in space and drifting in whatever directions they'd been heading.

Phisto's heart pounded, the man jerking at his now-useless controls.

“No, no, *no*...”

A single projectile shot from the Thargoid’s core, aimed at Adam’s stricken ship. Phisto Sobanii watched helplessly as the missile tracked without mercy or deviation.

“Adam, heads up! It’s—”

The man cut him off.

“I *know*!”

Phisto heard the man’s grunt as the missile slammed home, spinning the powerless ship, a putrid green cloud enveloping the Fer de Lance. Immediately he knew that something was wrong. His display flickered. The *Saint* was fighting, fighting to come back online...

“Talk to me, Firethorn!”

For the first time, fear could be heard in the man’s voice.

“It’s... *eating* away at my ship! Systems failing. Can’t...”

The comms distorted. Phisto’s fingers danced across his controls, boosting his signal.

“Adam? Come in? Talk to me!”

A new, more angry war moan sounded from the Thargoid. Like Phisto’s ship, Evanson’s Fer de Lance was slowly coming back online. The alien vessel bore down upon them.

“Boss, I hate to be the bearer of bad news— but that thing ain’t done with us!”

A new voice sounded over the comms, thick with old-world Slavic contempt. A cigarette dangled from between a pair of thin lips, its smoke obscuring a set of sharp, feminine features. Eyes as cold as the vacuum of space itself fixated upon their target.

“*Nyet, comrades— but I am done with it!*”

Closing in from behind the charging Thargoid was the *Olga of Kiev*, AX multicannons blazing. The shells penetrated deep into the wounded alien's hull, tearing through biomechanical flesh without a trace of mercy. The woman remained focused, adjusting her thrusters to stay at the rear of the stricken vessel, a midget on the shoulders of a giant, cruelly plunging a dagger into its back time and again.

The Thargoid bellowed a final, haunting moan, its hull rupturing along numerous cracks. Kerenski grit her teeth, slamming her throttle in full reverse, speeding away from the mortally wounded ship yet unable to tear her cruel gaze from its death throes.

A colossal explosion engulfed the Thargoid, the shockwave buffeting the barely-functional *Fer de Lances*. A putrid, sickly-green cloud spread from where the ship had been, a blackened husk its only legacy.

"Uh, guys? A little help here?"

Firethorn's ship drifted, the same caustic substance as before eating away at it. Kerenski glanced to the vessel, exhaling the smoke from a long, luxurious drag.

"Your friend. He must overheat his ship. It is the only way."

Phisto's mouth dropped open. "What? I don't understand."

Kerenski manipulated her controls, rocketing toward Firethorn's position. Much of the outer hull was now corroded away, the *Fer de Lance*'s sleek lines defiled by the alien substance. The woman opened a direct channel. Most of what she heard was static.

"Pilot: close off your thermal vents and raise your temperature to twice the safe limit."

Adam blinked, beads of sweat on his forehead. Already the substance was eating away at his canopy glass.

"But I'll—"

Kerenski's voice hardened.

“You’ll live. Now *do it!*”

Having no other options, the man complied. The thermal vents of the *Fer de Lance* sealed shut, trapping the ship’s reactor heat inside. Its internal temperature climbed, even its bridge roiling with sudden heat. The man shook his head and opening a private channel to his wing commander. His Remlock suit would protect from extreme environments, but—

“Phisto... buddy... something ain’t right. I don’t trust her— don’t trust *any* of these damn Witches. She—”

The heat within the ship was now causing real damage, but the cracking of the canopy glass stopped spreading. His eyes widening, Phisto maneuvered his own ship up close and switched on his flood lights. Before his eyes the sickly green substance had darkened, darkened to a scorched—but harmless— shade of black.

“She saved your ass, that’s what she did. Now cool that ship down!”

Relief spread across Firethorn’s features.

“Yes, *sir!*”

The *Fer de Lance*’s thermal vents opened, releasing a massive blast of heat. Adam Firethorn’s *Fer de Lance*, his pride and joy, was a scorched, corroded, twisted mess— but functional. The man shook his head, throwing a salute to Kerenski.

“Guess a little Witch magic was all I needed, huh?”

Phisto exhaled. In the distance, the battle raged around the *Gnosis*— but not as intensely as before. There was a general comms alert for all surviving wing commanders. The man shook his eyes, almost laughing.

“Good news. Looks like the bugs are laying off the *Gnosis*. Some magnificent bastard started dropping meta alloys, leading them away from the megaship— for now, at least. We can go back. It’s over.”

From within the *Olga*, a final plume of cigarette smoke framed Kari Kerenski's features. Her eyes sharpened as she peeled away, thruster trails in wake. Her Slavic accent stirred all who heard it.

"*Nyet*, comrade. It has only *begun*."

Tyrran pulled his jacket tight around him, the night air chilling him to his bones. The others would be awake with first light, but with luck he'd be able to catch the outgoing shuttle off-world before they noticed he was gone. He'd need to leave soon, leave before rumors and scandal caught up to him. He hadn't wanted it to be this way, had only wanted honest wages for honest work. Yet trouble always seemed to catch up to him. One hand drifted to various pockets, reassured at the credit packs felt within them. Yes, Tyrran thought— he needed to move on, but would hardly be short of creds when he did. And he'd earned every single one of them...

As planned he'd found work as a welder, paid under the table with credit packs instead of account deposits. He was far from home, located on an earthlike world in the Olgrea system. Though within the Alliance the mining rights for such had recently been acquired by new management, a sprawling Imperial megafirm called Mastopolos Mining. Indentured slaves were being flown in daily to augment the workforce of convicts that extracted tantalum from its vast network of mines, a holdover practice from its days as a Federal system. There was a rush for the metal, one the likes of which hadn't been seen in centuries. It was the core material from which frameshift drives were manufactured; already the technology had revolutionized human spacefaring, and even Sirius Corporation's legendary production facilities couldn't keep up with demand.

For weeks Tyrran had labored as part of a work crew, erecting slave quarters with breakneck speed. In truth they would have nicer lodgings than he did, for to administer the mines was a propaganda as well as business opportunity for the Imperials. Days were hard and nights were dark, and above Tyrran's head were the glows and thunder of coming and going tantulum freighters. They were a welcome distraction from the bawdiness surrounding him. There was little to do in the camps except drink and gamble, anarchic civility rather than formal law keeping the peace.

Of course, the peace could never have been entirely kept, and wasn't. There was a camp bully, a brute named Brazos, who would coerce those nearest to him into a game of cards. He was a terrible player himself but a monster of a man; for years he had virtually lived off of a diet of enhancers, some legal and others not. His arms were the size of most men's thighs, and his neck wider than his head. For weeks Tyrran had been able to avoid him; he'd spent his life as a loner, and old habits were difficult to break.

One night, however, he wasn't so lucky. It was payday, when Brazos was at his most threatening. Tyrran had failed to make even a single friend, and when he was shoved roughly inside the makeshift bar was uniquely ill-suited to expect any kind of aid. Looks of pity or indifference were cast his way as Brazos pointed to the chair across from him. It was accepted by all that Tyrran was bound to lose every credit in his possession, the rules of fair play upheld or suspended as the bully's moods dictated. As a final insult Tyrran would buy his drinks, too.

As the young, lean man sat before the hulking, cackling brute, a new feeling of wrath grew hot within his gut. The night's entertainment was a preordained affair, and Tyrran was about to lose a month's wages simply because he was physically weaker. There would be no way to protest, and no way to walk away. None had done either successfully, and appeals to management would fall on deaf ears. Brazos by himself mined the ore of three men, and it was rumored that he passed along a portion of his ill-gotten gambling winnings to various foremen. Thus was Tyrran left alone, alone to accept his fate.

The wheels of the man's mind turned, unencumbered by the typical restraints of law or fairness. The situation was simple: Brazos sought to steal his winnings, and Tyrran sought to prevent him from doing such. The brute smiled, his teeth long replaced with bullet tips, ones he liked to boast were the spent ammunition of those who'd tried to kill him. Andor smiled in return, long accustomed to masking his feelings.

The games commenced, Tyrran losing his earnings slowly but steadily. Yet he lost with a smile, always rising to buy another drink at the bar for his abuser. Round after round and drink after drink elapsed, Brazos losing himself to the thrill of dominance and the headiness of alcohol. Yet it wasn't only alcohol that Tyrran's opponent was imbibing. The drinks in question had been Planetcrackers, a potent combination of stimbevs and liquor. One flavor balanced the other to near perfection, and Brazo's pounding chest and bulging veins were proof of their effects taking hold.

Tyrran again sat down, having himself imbibed nothing the entire night. Brazos's body was awash with stinking perspiration, sweat running down his face. His hands were jittery and his very breathing rapid, but Tyrran had left a conspicuous pile of credits in view upon the table, and it was a matter of brutish pride that Brazos extract them all. His eyes boring into those of his opponent, Tyrran slid the latest drink across the table. Brazos might have protested for the man to bring him a different concoction, but to do so would have been to show weakness, and weakness was the one thing that the bully feared.

More hands were dealt and more drinks were consumed, Tyrran at last relinquishing the last of his credits to the victor. With a great, triumphant bellow Brazos rose, his clothing and chair soaked in sweat. His chest was visibly throbbing, and such was the quantity of stims in his system that the very act of walking was difficult, so quivering with energy were his limbs. The brute, though formidable, could scarcely breathe.

It was as Brazos was stumbling back to his quarters that Tyrran struck, swinging a wooden beam into the back of the bully's stubbled head. It was dark, and the majority of the workers were still at the bar, no doubt breathing easier since the hulk had extorted his share for the evening. The beam snapped as Brazos collapsed, letting out a roar of rage and pain, spinning to his assailant. As expected the bully charged, fists balled and ready to commit murder. Tyrran sidestepped the charge, his own heart beating, knowing that he was fated to win or die.

Several more times did Brazos play the bull, nearly knocking Andor to the ground but the smaller, leaner man never quite within his grasp. Sweat now gushed from his pores, his breathing strained. At that moment, the years of fatty foods and black market enhancers combined with the dozen or so servings of stimbevs. Brazos let out a bellow, but this time not one of anger. The great man stumbled forward, clutching his chest, falling to his knees, looking up at Tyrran with wide, fearful eyes. A pathetic stain spread down the inside of his pantleg, followed by an acrid stench. His jaw trembling, Brazos fell forward, balling up and still clutching his chest.

Tyrran rolled the brute upon his back, opening his jacket and with roguish skill searching its pockets, pulling the numerous credit packs that the bully had extorted from them—not only his own, but those of others as well. All told they were a small fortune, one that Andor had no intention of sharing. Why should he, he reasoned, when none in the camp had lifted a finger to help him? It was only just that their credits become his.

Rage and pain competed for control of Brazos's features. A calloused hand gripped Tyrran's wrist, one that only hours ago could have readily crushed it. Now the young man pulled free with ease, standing over the bully, the first-ever feeling of victory rushing through his veins. The life of another was in his hands. Tyrran Xavian Andor wasn't a killer— but neither was he obligated to be a savior. Andor made his decision, hurrying back to his quarters and gathering what few possessions he had, waiting in the darkness to board the day's supply shuttle as a passenger if he could, and a stowaway if he couldn't.

The whine and lights of the approaching ship broke the darkness; Tyrran would make it out in time. He felt not a trace of remorse within himself, neither for leaving a man to die nor for indirectly stealing from his coworkers. Light and wind from the shuttle engulfed him, the man taking a final look around the camp, daring at least to speak.

“Sorry,” he said, “but that's just how it goes.”

“Tyrran?”

Yolanta Púrpura turned to her partner, who was gazing out the canopy glass, head turned and expression blank. The woman frowned before repeating herself.

“*Tyrran!*”

The man snapped his head in her direction, exhaling.

“What is it?”

Irritation danced in her eyes.

“Have you not been listening?”

Tyrran opened and closed his mouth, deciding that lying was pointless.

“No. I was... elsewhere.”

Yolanta’s eyes flashed.

“Well, I need you to be *here*. We are about to arrive at the coordinates to which Kerenski sent us. It is an ammonia world, and even in the buggy we will need to be suited up.”

A more present look settled over Andor’s features.

“Yeah,” he said. “I know.”

The woman pursed her lips.

“Of *course* you do.”

The sector in which the *Rosa Púrpura* flew was an amalgamation of letters and numbers, relevant only to career astrocartographers and the eccentric-minded among the exploration community. It was far from inhabited space, yet closer to the region from which the Thargoids were rumored to be striking. A long moment passed before Tyrran turned back to his partner.

“How’s the ship holding up?”

Yolanta managed a long exhale.

“She bled.”

Slowly, Tyrran nodded.

“You did well, you know. Dodging all those bugs.”

Ignoring the compliment, Yolanta turned, looking over her shoulder with suspicious eyes. Before them, the sickly green horizon of their destination loomed further and further into view.

“When I was hit by... whatever it was... you knew that overheating the ship would halt the damage. How?”

Tyrran didn’t smile, didn’t turn cocky like she half-expected.

“I’m here because of my expertise. So I lent some.”

Yolanta scoffed. “The *real* experts are all working for Aegis. You are nothing but a lucky scoundrel.”

One finger of Tyrran’s traced along the black thorn, his eyes boring into hers.

“Lucky,” he said. “Right.”

“Jesus *hell*.”

The charred remnants of the caustic layer that had so thoroughly corroded the Fer de Lance’s hull sloughed away, falling to the deck and breaking into pieces. Men and women in heavy hazmat gear bearing the Cannon insignia collected the material into secure containers, and only Randomius knew if they’d find anything useful from it. The deck officer nodded at their efforts and turned to Adam, flanked by Isaiah and Phisto.

“Lots of ships are coming back with this substance on their hulls. Sometimes it’s active and eating away at them. Other times it looks like this. It’s the damnedest thing.”

Phisto stepped forward. “Cooking this ship is what saved it. Twice the recommended safety limit. Don’t ask me the hows or whys, but it’s the truth. Spread the word.”

The officer nodded and turned to Adam.

“And what about you? Any burns? Respiratory ailments?”

Firethorn snorted. “Man, all I need is a beer or five.”

He was met with a shake of the head.

“Not until you’ve been checked out by medical. I want you there right after debriefing. We can’t afford to take any chances with this.”

Grumbling, Adam threw a lazy salute and walked away, leaving Evanson and Sobanii alone with the deck officer. Automated arms continued to quick-fab replacement hull parts, working even as they spoke. Pisto looked at the man from the corner of his eye.

“We’ve been in open conflict with the bugs for damn near a year,” he said. “How is this not common knowledge?”

Weariness showed in the man’s eyes.

“Look... I’m just a deck officer, not some master strategist, but—” he looked around, his fatigue overriding his better judgement, “the effort to fight the bugs isn’t exactly being spearheaded by the superpowers, you know?”

Isaiah scoffed. “We’re Imperial navy, here with the Emperor’s blessing.”

A look of unimpressedness crossed the man’s face. “And there’s *how* few of you, mixing it up in this tin can with all the riff-raff? Aegis is throwing out these new weapons like carnival favors— but they don’t exactly come with instruction manuals, you know?”

Pisto’s eyes narrowed. “What are you saying?”

The deck officer opened his mouth and halted, catching himself. “Just, uh.... be careful out there, okay?”

Without another word the man spun, making his way toward the hangar entrance with his head down. Pisto and Isaiah looked at each other. The former shook his head.

“What do you think *that* was all about?”

Sobanii looked up, watching the last of the charred, formerly caustic substance be scraped off, falling harmlessly to the deck.

“I’m starting to think that we’re being left with just enough bread crumbs to follow them right in front of the damn bus.”

It was Tyrran who first spotted the structure, a tiny olive dot in the distance. He swallowed before pointing, even though Yolanta couldn’t see him from where she sat.

“There. Ahead of us.”

The woman blinked, banking the *Rosa* slightly toward the landmark.

“I see it. You are sure?”

“One-hundred percent.”

The *Rosa*’s boosters flared, rocketing the ship across the barren surface. The ground was covered swiftly, the structure looming nearer and nearer. It was circular, with twisted, organic shapes, partially buried beneath the lifeless soil. Age spots told the tale of something old, perhaps even ancient— and certainly not man-made. From where they flew it was easily the size of a sprawling human settlement.

Yolanta’s breath caught in her throat. “*Madre de Randomius*,” she said. “What abomination is *that*?”

Grim familiarity spread over Tyrran’s face.

“That,” he said, “is why we’re here.”

“Kerenski.”

“Evanson”

His eyes keen, Isaiah settled into the booth across from his counterpart. The *Gnosis* was still on full alert, but a line had been formed and the alien attackers held at bay. Already a relay system had been established, with various *ad hoc* wings rotating so that there was always a protective screen between the megaship and the insectoid aggressors just beyond its weapons range. The bar was nearly empty, most pilots and crew too busy or exhausted to have a drink. Such rare privacy was to their liking.

Isaiah took a long sip of beer, a cheap Federation brand. He spoke, raising his glass to his subordinate.

“Hell of a first day.”

Kerenski raised hers in return, a tiny canister of vodka measured in mere ounces.

“*Da.*”

Man and woman drank, eyeing each other with something that fell short of trust. Isaiah set down his canister, his eyes boring into hers.

“How did you know?”

Cold amusement danced in the woman’s eyes.

“You’ll have to be more specific, *comrade*. I know a great deal.”

Evanson scowled, leaning forward. “Quit playing games. Firethorn would have been a goner if you hadn’t ordered him to close his vents. No one said jack about alien slime that could dissolve military-grade hull, but *you* knew what to do.”

Kerenski’s gaze didn’t flinch.

“*Da.*”

Fatigue and irritation spread across the man's features. "I know you're good, Kerenski—I know that you were the spider in the web during the Atroco campaign. But you and your Witches are signed on with the Legion now, and if we're gonna do a lick of good we've got *trust* each other. That means sharing information *before* the last minute."

The woman's face eyes sharpened. "Information. Circles within circles within circles. Unraveling those circles is why we are here, true— but asking a woman to divulge everything like some *stukach*? Bad form, Evanson. *Very* bad form."

Isaiah gestured around them. "You think the bugs care about *form*? We're a thousand light years from the nearest place where the inhabitants only walk on two legs. It's time we got on the same page."

Kerenski's eyes went from sharp to cold. She rose, taking a final slug of her vodka.

"You took Coma by being what you are, *da*? I took Atroco by being what *I* am. We will never be on the same page, you and I— but we will *always* be in the same book. That is all I can promise."

With that the woman stalked off, the tapping of her boots receding into the distance. Isaiah hunched over his beer, the scowl renewed on his features. With no one else in the bar, he was left muttering to himself.

"What good's a book if there isn't anyone left to read it?"

Toxic winds stirred barren dust, already caking Yolanta's legs up to her knees. She and Tyrran were standing on the hostile alien planet, an eerie green tint to the atmosphere, surrounded by the twisted, organic shapes of the Thargoid structure. Environmental readouts scrolled through their helmet displays, verifying the utter inhospitality of the world. Yolanta straightened herself, her lips set and eyes filled with utter contempt.

"Abominación."

Andor glanced to his side, wary of the surroundings.

"Missing your slave-tended *hacienda*?"

Yolanta snapped her head to the side.

"What are we here to get?"

The man took a step ahead of her, surveying the massive structure.

"Anything that works, or used to. The real prizes come from... *there*."

Tyrran raised a finger to point into the distance. Yolanta squinted her eyes, and sure enough there was movement. Tiny, organic-looking drones came and went, some seemingly tending gashes in the structure and some simply journeying to places unknown. A long exhale escaped the woman's lips.

"Are they... alive?"

Her partner shook his head. "Maybe. Maybe not. But it doesn't matter. Whatever makes them work is in demand, along with samples of, well... everything."

Yolanta narrowed her eyes. "'Samples'?"

The man nodded. "Some we can simply pick up from the ground. Other things we'll have to blast away from the surface. And the drones... they're made out of useful materials. You'll have to blast those, too."

A pair of dusky eyes flashed. "*Si*. I can do that."

Tyrran nodded, making a mental note of his suit's air supply.

"Let's get to work."

Cigarette smoke flowed in a winding upward trail, the glowing tip from whence it came illuminating Kari Kerenski's face in the low light of the hangar. Before her the *Olga of Kiev* stood at the ready, nestled among other ships in the bowels of the *Gnosis*. Kerenski said and nothing, only staring at her ship's cargo hatch. In time she took a long, final drag, flicking the spent cigarette to the deck and glancing around herself. She was alone. She raised her arm, typing in the access codes to the *Olga* and watching dispassionately as the cargo hatched opened. Her nose wrinkled at the putrid smell that escaped, but only for a moment. She advanced toward the cargo bay, holding up her wrist computer, realtime holographic imagery being captured.

"You getting this?"

A long moment passed, and a man's voice answered. It was deep Imperial, competent and in control.

"Indeed."

Before Kerenski was a massive biomechanical mass, living but not. It was tethered into place with cables, but even the sight of it gave the woman inward pause. She spoke with surety, careful to not allow a single ounce of fear be heard.

"The others are gathering the lesser samples. The work continues."

A man's figure flickered into view. His features were obscured, and as usual he was at his desk.

"See that it does. You know what's at stake."

The woman ran her hands along the bay's wall. It was rough, vaguely green with organic designs giving the surface a unique texture rather than the smooth uniformity of steel. That the *Olga* even had such an accommodation was a secret. Its contents, doubly so.

“*Da*. My associates will not fail.”

The figure nodded.

“Then there is nothing further to discuss.”

Kerenski drew herself up.

“Until next time.”

The figure shimmered away, the private holofac ended. Kerenski turned to leave, glancing a final time at the secret, repulsive cargo in her ship. From within her jacket she produced a pack of cigarettes, pulling one from it with her lips. Her lighter flashed, briefly illuminating her face before plunging it again into the shadows. Bitterness clouded her thoughts.

With you, there is always something further to discuss.

For hours Yolanta and Tyrran labored, picking through the alien ruins, half exploring and half harvesting anything that seemed to be of value. Tyrran manually sifted through alien trinkets, biomechanical oddities and organic constructs loaded into the *Rosa Púrpura*’s Scarab rover, driven by Yolanta. Even from the vehicle’s bubble canopy, the woman wrinkled her nose at the sight of so much twisted alien technology.

“What *is* this *basura*?”

Tyrran held up a thick tube, brushing long-accumulated dirt from it and shaking his head. It resembled something grown more than something manufactured, grey and with all the appearance of mummification rather than corrosion.

“Don’t know. Anything that still glows is valuable. Things that connect other things—” he held up the appendage—“are also of worth.”

The woman shook her head, the trinket collected into the Scarab’s cargo hold.

“I still only see junk. Exotic junk, but junk.”

Tyrran turned away, surveying the alien ruins that surrounded them.

“There’s a lot you can learn from other people’s garbage. Some people even say that the frameshift drive isn’t entirely human in origin.”

Yolanta rolled her eyes. “And some people say that the powers-that-be are Thargoids in human skin, fattening us up for their dinner.”

Tyrran glanced over his shoulder. “A devotee of Salome, lambasting a conspiracy theory only slightly more outlandish than her own.”

Disdain spread across the woman’s features, looking down upon her partner.

“A shipless scoundrel, unable to see past his next swindle.”

The beginnings of a smile lifted one side of Tyrran’s mouth, the man spreading his arms wide.

“Aren’t we just a pair?”

Yolanta’s nose wrinkled further, but this time not at the task at hand.

“*Hmm!*”

Isaiah Evanson collapsed exhausted into his bunk on the *Bloodfeather*. Emergency protocols had been in place for the last thirty-six hours, the grueling schedule of “port and starboard” imposed on crew and guests alike. His life was now one of four hours on and four hours off, sleep never quite bringing rest and combat patrol never quite bringing security. The *Gnosis* was under constant, low-level attack from waves of Scouts, though to Evanson’s military mind it seemed more like aggressive probing. The man rolled over in his bunk, exhausted but unable to sleep.

It just doesn't make any sense, he thought. They could bring in their heavies at any moment and finish us. If the holovids of those Hydra-class terrors are to be believed...

Isaiah shook his head, forcing the thought from his mind.

No. One thing at a time. Protect the ship. See to your people. Give the mission time to succeed.

The trained combat pilots of Loren's Legion hadn't yet suffered any casualties, but the same couldn't be said for nearly any other wing onboard. Every man and woman was now living in the new reality— nonstop attack from hostile alien forces, held at bay with rotating patrols. The repair bays were a constant mess of activity, the corrosive alien sludge ever being burned away and disposed of, new sections of quick-fabbed hull ever replacing the damaged. Already a convoy of munitions had been sent and received from the Bubble, the Legionaries themselves escorting the valuable shipment on its final, mad dash for the safety of the *Gnosis*.

A humorless chuckle escaped the man's lips.

"Safety". Now there's a deal with some fine print.

The man's comm device chimed. Out of habit he answered it, Kari Kerenski's unsmiling face shimmering into view. Her sharp features looked none the worse for wear, even amid the chaos. Isaiah rubbed the sleep from his eyes before greeting her.

"Kerenski."

The woman nodded slightly.

"Evanson."

A moment passed. "You're cutting into my beauty sleep. What is it now?"

Kerenski's eyes narrowed.

"It's your people. There are plenty of others available to fight and die against the attackers. They are better deployed elsewhere."

The man exhaled.

"We're here to protect these folks, and that's what we're going to do."

Sharp features grew sharper still. "*Nyet*. We are here to protect the mission. The mission is taking place planetside."

A scowl hardened Evanson's face. "There won't *be* a mission if the *Gnosis* gets blasted into scrap. Not everything revolves around your little cauldron of witch's brew. You see to your people, and I'll see to mine."

A long moment passed, man and woman locking eyes. Finally she spoke.

"That might be for the best, Commander."

Isaiah snorted.

"Yeah," he said. "It *might*."

Tyrran Andor lay prone upon his belly, Yolanta in the scarab below him. He was perched high, having spent hours climbing the structure to gain a commanding view of it. Despite being designed to not fog or moisten, his faceplate was doing a little of both. It had been a long time since Tyrran had *climbed* as part of a job.

Still, it didn't matter. Yolanta didn't trust him with her ship, and she didn't trust him in her Scarab. She *did* trust him to act as a spotter, however— and may even have smirked with amusement as his ragged breathing filled her ears as he climbed. Now, everything was in place. The most difficult part of the harvesting could now commence— the one for which his partner had been waiting. Impatience dripped from her voice, even over comms.

"Well?"

Tyrran shook his head, though she couldn't see him.

"Not yet. There's still two others floating past. The one is still hovering in place, doing whatever it's doing to the wall. You don't want to fight too many of these things at once."

The drones tending to the structure were the final target, and the only thing around that could shoot back. In Tyrran's experience they weren't too dangerous individually, their only weapons being a low-powered blaster that a Scarab's shields could absorb— but several such drones could overwhelm a single vehicle with ease. What they could do to him on foot was best not contemplated.

“Alright. It's alone. Remember: power to weapons and lay it on.”

Anticipation rung in Yolanta's reply, the Scarab advancing toward the lone drone, its turret deploying.

“Engaging!”

VII

UNWELCOME GUESTS

On Tyrran drifted, the young man with the honest face going from job to job, some having everything and others nothing to do with nanowelding. Inward he withdrew, endeavoring to make neither friends nor enemies, yet his sullen demeanor always drawing the suspicions of those around him. As the months and years passed a curious pattern emerged: Tyrran would be hired, work his hardest, and still find himself suspected of some wrongdoing. The writing on the wall would be clear, and in his indignation the man would find some justification to swindle his new employer, capping off his tenure with his now-routine disappearing act.

Over time the swindles came to be more profitable than the actual jobs, even when he was caught. By now the man had done a few brief stints in detention, for crimes too petty for the high-minded Alliance officials to prosecute to their fullest. Yet rogues ever knew their own; a trio of dark strangers joined Tyrran one night at his favorite haunt, them on one side and him on the other. Andor sipped his drink, saying nothing. Minutes elapsed. The woman in the center leaned forward, lean with sharp features, raven hair in stiff locks across her forehead, tipped at the edges with purple. Her accent contained hints of Achenarian core, long diluted by years spent amid all manner of people.

“Heard you were looking for a job.”

Tyrran shrugged.

“Don’t know why you would have. Haven’t told anyone...”

The woman’s eyebrows lifted, amusement lightening her features.

“Then all is well, credits rain from the sky, and you don’t need any help. Sorry to bother you.”

The woman and her compatriots rose. Tyrran reached out, grabbing her arm. His eyes met hers, the faintest of smiles lifting his lips.

“... but I’m always open to opportunity.”

“Yolanta?”

“Si?”

“Remind me to never piss you off.”

The last of the wreckage was being sorted into the Scarab’s cargo bay, the still-glowing and freshly-killed trophies of several hapless drones all in a pile. The vehicle’s laser banks were nearly depleted, Yolanta taking to her task with obvious relish. Now their day— and oxygen reserves— was nearly at an end, the duo needing only to load the contents of the rover into the *Rosa*. The woman glanced to her side, the man nearly finished with the climb down from the structure’s heights.

“Then do nothing to make me so, and we will both be content.”

Andor swallowed, feeling the snugness of the black thorn around his neck.

“Right.”

Yolanta drove her Scarab to the underside of the *Rosa*, watching as its loading arms retrieved the cargo container, replacing it with a new one. There were only a few larger pieces to be collected, and their work would be done. From within the rover, Yolanta waved Tyrran closer.

“Recharge your oxygen, *patán*. Then we go inside.”

Tyrran’s breath died in his throat. He glanced behind himself, the imposing central structure looming before them.

“Inside?”

From within the Scarab’s canopy, the woman straightened herself.

“*Si*. The surrounding area is littered with trinkets— and I will not bring only junk for my *comarada*. There are secrets inside— secrets I would see revealed.”

She looked down upon her partner, approaching on foot and nearly to the *Rosa*.

“And you *do* know how to access one of these ugly things, do you not?”

Tyrran paused, his brow furrowed.

“I was never on the team that went inside.”

Disappointment could be heard in Yolanta’s voice.

“Some ‘expert’. But you *do* know how to access these things?”

The man halted, looking up at his partner.

“Yeah. But I think it’s best if we waited for the others. Even my old crew didn’t go at it alone.”

Yolanta’s Iberian features sharpened.

“A scoundrel *and* a coward. I should have known.”

Andor said nothing, only helping himself to the ship’s survival gear and recharging his oxygen. As it did so, he glanced over his shoulder.

“You and Kerenski— you two are pretty tight, aren’t you?”

Another cargo hold was placed atop the Scarab, clicking into place. Yolanta exhaled.

“What we are is none of your business.”

A bitter chuckle escaped Tyrran’s lips. “Right. My mistake. I’m sure that without you, her bunk’s as cold as *she* is.”

Yolanta’s features sharpened, in that moment oddly like Kerenski’s.

“It is not like that. She is just...”

The woman hesitated, and then continued.

“She is the only family I have known since I left my home. But you would know nothing about that, would you?”

Tyrran's eyes hardened, his accent thickening.

"Can't know about something you've never had."

For just a moment their gazes met. Yolanta broke it, turning away.

"We have work to do, *patán*."

Blake Fairchild counted himself a fortunate man in the midst of greater misfortune. For fifteen years he'd made his living as an independent spacer, leading the life of a trader. He'd made several good contacts and straddled several good routes, and had recently broken into rare goods markets. He now captained a Python, old but reliable, with the wings of the fabled guild displayed proudly upon its sides. The *Gnosis* expedition had seemed risky, but if he could be the first to return from an uncharted area of space with alien goods and exploration data, his contacts would bid themselves into a frenzy to be the first to access such.

The misjump and subsequent attack had set the man on edge. He was no combat pilot, but volunteered for the *ad hoc* defence wings because every available ship had been needed. True to his nature he'd lingered after the battle, his limpets collecting the exotic wreckage left behind by the saucer-shaped Scouts, his hold filling with valuable Thargoid trinkets.

Now the bearded, heavyset man had new reason to be content with life. He was sitting in the *Gnosis*'s bar, sipping a beer with the first woman he'd spoken to in years. She wasn't one for smiling and had an accent straight from Yuri Grom's domain— even though she claimed she wasn't. Fat, jovial eyes met dour, unblinking ones.

"So your own pals are bailing on you and you're down to hired help, huh?"

Kari Kerenski said nothing, only fishing a pack of cigarettes from her inner jacket and lighting one. The smoke wafted into the man's face, souring his expression but otherwise saying nothing. The woman took a long drag before replying.

"Times are desperate, and we must find allies where we can."

Fairchild stroked his beard, the only boundary between jaw and neck on an otherwise pudgy face.

"So all we're doing is checking up on some mates of yours... and that's it?"

Kerenski exhaled, the smoke obscuring her features.

"We're assisting their mission any way we can. Most likely that involves cargo retrieval."

Blake nodded, jovial but on guard.

"And those... things. Any chance of them being there?"

Another drag. Another smokey exhale.

"If you fear the bugs, *tovarish*, you are in the wrong place already."

Booming laughter sounded from the man, his husky form shaking.

"True enough! And truth be told, my ship's fitted top to bottom with that AX gear. Can't be too careful in these parts, you know?"

Interest glinted in Kerenski's eyes.

"Then you're in?"

Fairchild raised his glass, relishing the company.

"For what you're offering? Damn right I am. When do we leave?"

The woman raised hers in return.

"Now. Discreetly."

On one side of the table, beer was consumed. On the other, vodka. Two sealed containers were set down simultaneously. There was no handshake.

"I'll see you in the black, then."

The woman rose, standing tall over the man. Her cigarette dangled from her mouth even as she spoke.

“*Da*. And remember: discreet.”

Yolanta Púrpura’s nose wrinkled.

“It is a relief to have that *thing* off my ship!”

Before them was a live Thargoid probe, glowing and ominous. Tyrran was still on foot, hesitant to approach the alien technology. He scowled, glancing upwards to his partner.

“So when were you planning on telling me that you had alien tech stuffed in your hold this whole time?”

Yolanta’s disdain shifted from the alien to human sample before her.

“When the time was right. Which is now.”

Tyrran looked at his partner, the cargo, and then back to her.

“The other night, when you were up late. *This* is why you were so worried, isn’t it?”

The woman scoffed. “Alien filth does not concern me.”

A long moment passed, the barren wind blowing toxic dirt upon Tyrran’s atmo suit.

“Good. Because if we go in there, you’ll be ankle-deep in it.”

The Scarab’s loading arms secured the probe into place. Yolanta looked down upon the man before her.

“No,” she said. “*You* will.”

Kari Kerenski closed her eyes, rubbing her temples with thumb and forefinger. Everything inside her wanted to switch off the comms, but—

“So you can imagine the smell, huh? All that biowaste, mission failed, ship hold a mess— all because of one faulty container! Never taking a job like that again, no matter how good the pay. Can still smell it sometimes, you know? I think that some of the stuff got in the circulation, and-”

Kerenski snapped.

“*Tovarich.*”

The man paused, his breathing audible.

“Yeah?”

“Shut up.”

There was a long silence over the line, the man’s disappointment felt.

“Suit yourself. Long as your credits are good. Been meaning to buy the *Whole Hog* a few new goodies.”

Kerenski exhaled. *Of course his ship is named that.*

“And this... *thing*... opens the doors?”

Tyrran nodded. “Yes. At least, it did on the sites I’ve been to.”

“And these... sites. What did your team retrieve from them?”

Looming before Tyrran and Yolanta was the massive entryway of the structure. Already the Scarab’s instruments were flickering, its systems reading unknown interference. The same was true for Tyrran’s wrist computer.

“Never poked around in the cargo hold to find out.”

A long moment passed. Yolanta edged her Scarab closer to the structure’s massive, organically-shaped door. The flickering of her instruments intensified.

“You ready for this, *patán?*”

Slowly, the doors opened, one segment after another giving way. Darkness greeted them. Tyrran swallowed, forcing his voice to remain steady.

“I think I liked exploring alien ruins better when it was *other* people doing the exploring.”

The doors slid shut behind them, one segment extending over another, until man and woman were plunged into alien darkness. Yet the inside of the structure was neither dark nor inactive. It took only moments for their eyes to adjust, widening in unison as their surroundings became clear.

Yolanta was the first to find words.

“Madre de Randomius!”

Enveloping man and woman was no dull, sandblasted wall like what had greeted them on approach. Rather, a menagerie of biomechanical wonder presented itself. Dull green texture glowed from the walls, along which ran conduits that looks *grown* rather than assembled. The same was true for the passageways themselves, which were the uneven roundness of a cave and not the pleasing right angles of a human-made corridor. Tyrran took a step forward— and halted, holding up one boot.

“Ground’s spongy,” he said. “Like I’m stepping in sh—”

“The mission,” Yolanta said, interrupting. “The sooner we are gone the better.”

Tyrran exhaled, setting his foot back down and holding up his wrist computer.

“No arguments here. I just wish I knew what exactly the powers-that-be wanted.”

Man and woman advanced, the latter deploying the Scarab's turret, ready for anything. In the distance, more of the same organic drones went about their business, their shapes eerie in the low light of the structure. Exhaling, Yolanta flipped on the Scarab's floodlights. The immediate area before them was bathed in high-beam illumination, and that which lay beyond it was cloaked in darkness. Tyrran stepped forward, his shadow long in the Scarab's floodlights.

"Sure you don't want to wait for reinforcements?"

Yolanta hardened her features, gripping the vehicle's throttle.

"We have waited long enough."

The Scarab's engine revved, Andor stepping from its path just in time, the vehicle passing by. The man turned, watching it recede into the distance, the passageway illuminated around it. Tyrran exhaled, bringing up his wrist computer. A three-dimensional map formed itself, indicating where he was. The inner core of the structure wasn't a difficult drive, but on foot...

Tyrran closed out the display, trudging down the alien passageway, surrounded by twisting organic shapes.

"Who's this 'we'?"

"So what are we out here for, anyway?"

The *Whole Hog* and the *Olga of Kiev* were high in orbit, the ammonia world looming large before their canopies. For an hour they'd waited, comms silent and Kerensky staring into the distance. One cigarette after another was lit, smoked, and discarded, down a purpose-built receptacle in her commander's chair. It had been her only activity. Irritation in her eyes, she answered.

"Hopefully nothing. But probably something. Something my associates cannot handle on their own."

Fairchild's confusion could be heard.

“Well, why not set down and lend a hand?”

Kerenski didn't answer at first, only accessing a different control panel and typing in a command. An image of Yolanta shimmered into view. She was disembarking from the Scarab, the feed distorted. Though garbled, audio from her comrade and wingmate could be heard. Her eyes on the holofootage, Kerenski lit yet another cigarette, the smoke wafting in all directions.

“Patience. All have a job to do. We need only let them do theirs.”

Yolanta squatted down to her haunches, alongside Andor who was doing the same. Before them was an object, independent of the structure. They were in an antechamber, a biomechanical opening in the flooring seeming to be a lift but unmoving. The object before them was large, easily Tyrran's height in size, vaguely egg-shaped and glowing the same sickly green glow that he'd seen in his nightmares. Yolanta's eyes deepened.

“What is it?”

Andor shook his head.

“Some kind of resin. I've seen it be anything it needs to be. Solid, liquid, gaseous—”

The woman reached out to touch it. Tyrran grabbed her hand, halting it.

“—and *very* corrosive. It's like those probe things. Seems to... *eat*... a human ship.”

Yolanta pursed her lips, retracting her hand.

“Unless your hold is made of meta-alloys.”

Tyrran nodded.

“Unless your hold is made of meta-alloys.”

Man and woman were silent for a moment, the sickly greens of the alien resin bathing them in a dull glow. Tyrran turned to his partner, his accent thickening.

“You knew. Somehow you made the connections and got the gear. You know exactly what you’re looking for.”

Yolanta shook her head.

“No. Not exactly. The Legion knows that it is dangerous to transport certain Thargoid materials, but apart from that we needed a guide. An unknown. Someone-”

Tyrran finished her sentence.

“Expendable?”

The woman’s eyes flashed.

“I am here, same as you.”

Nothing further was said between man and woman. Using the Scarab they collected the resin sample, preparing it for transport. There wasn’t any more room in the rover, but there was more to be seen. Slowly, carefully, the pair explored the inner passageways of the site, eyes darting from outcrop to outcrop, leaving the Scarab parked where they’d left it. Around them the alien drones floated by, ignoring the guests. Smaller searchlights replaced that of the vehicle, restricting visibility and making for slow going.

Everything in their intuition screamed that to be inside the structure was to be in danger, to expect a trap at any moment. Yet, despite the utter alienness of the surroundings, there was no apparent danger. Breathing and heart rates gradually settled as they pushed further inward. There was a great chamber before them, massive and dark and central. It was the very sanctum of the structure itself.

Nothing could be seen, even with the suits’ searchlight activated. Perspiration shone upon faces, and a heavy feeling of dread settled over man and woman. Gently, Tyrran pushed his boot into the spongy floor.

“It’s different in here,” he said. “Uneven. Not like a cave, but like... like I’m stepping on tubing.”

Yolanta knelt, shining her light on Tyrran's boot. It was indeed over something, a protrusion from the floor, a discolored swelling that rose and led further inward. She rose, following the growth with her light. Iberian features hardened.

"That is no tube, *patán*. It's a... *vein*."

Man and woman looked around them. Nothing could be seen, nothing beyond the range of their searchlights. Yolanta felt a hand on her shoulder. Normally she would have twisted away, but something in Ander's voice forced her to look beyond the tactile intrusion.

"Turn off your light."

The woman glanced over her shoulder.

"What?"

"Do it."

Not knowing quite what she was agreeing to, Yolanta extinguished her suit's light. It took a long moment for their eyes to adjust, but adjust they did. The ropey protuberance onto which Tyrran had stepped ran ahead of them, joined by countless others in a fashion indeed resembling veins bulging from beneath skin. Up the dampened chamber wall they ran, man and woman's eyes following the upward trail, until their necks were craned to gaze at the ceiling directly above them.

For the first time, fear could be heard in Yolanta's voice.

"*Madre de Randomius...*"

Packed in tight clusters were eggs, immense and alien, webs of veiny tendrils providing whatever putrid nourishment that sustained them. The smallest was easily the size of a man, and they were without number, growing not from the floor but the ceiling of the central chamber. Before them was a large, central structure, one that looked like a looming queen arachnid in the shadows.

Tyrran took a step forward, his voice preternaturally calm.

"I think I've seen this holovid before..."

This time, Yolanta's hand gripped his shoulder, halting him.

"The Scarab is full," she said. "And there is nothing in this place I care to disturb. Not without a platoon of Imperial marines with plasma flamers."

A weak chuckle escaped Tyrran's lips.

"Pretty sure I've seen *that* holovid, too."

Yolanta appeared at his side, her eyes serious.

"What is here is more important than you or me. The others must know of this place— of the threat growing within these walls. We have what we came for, *si*?"

His head moving in a slow nod, Andor stepped back. The eggs remained arrayed before him, innumerable.

"My old crew," he said. "They never spoke of what they saw inside these structures, even after a night of drinking. Now I know why."

The Scarab's hatch slid shut, Yolanta engaging the controls. She drove with caution, as though the automated drones would become hostile if they sensed fear or knew somehow that the structure's guests had witnessed the contents of the central chamber. So slowed was her progress that Tyrran was able to keep pace at a walk, his own head on a swivel, ever looking to the veiny walls and dripping ceiling. The going was slow, made seemingly more so by what man and woman had seen. Neither were ignorant of the larger implications of the mission or reality of a hostile alien race. How many structures just like this one were on the planet? Others? The vast, uncharted regions of the galaxy? Was the Bubble not a bubble at all, but an island of humanity in a sea of hostile alien power?

Finally the pair reached the door by which they'd entered. Still slightly visible were the track marks from the Scarab, its six tires leaving their marks in the spongy, not-quite-living floor. For a single, harrowing moment, nothing happened. Then the doors slid open as before, its segments collapsing and the dim, toxic atmosphere greeting them from beyond the structure.

Yolanta's voice could be heard over comms.

"Go ahead to the ship," she said. "I want to collect a few more samples from outside."

Tyrran trudged on ahead, inwardly grateful to have the sickly green sunlight wash over his features. He paused to look over his shoulder as much as his atmo suit would allow.

"Just don't take too long."

The woman's tone took on a degree of mocking.

"Scared, partner?"

"Did you see that?"

Kari Kerenski leaned forward, her eyes narrowing. It had only been a flicker, a flash of... *something*, in high orbit above the site. Instinctively the woman shoved her throttle forward. The drawl of her partner sounded over the comms.

"Probably nothing. Atmo lightning, or a glint off your canopy..."

The woman considered, the wheels of her mind turning. She'd lost contact with Yolanta once she'd entered the innermost parts of the structure, and with any luck would be wrapping up the final stages of the mission. Unbeknownst to her and Tyrran, such was also the most dangerous part....

Andor was almost halfway to the *Rosa Púrpura*, Yolanta near the structure in the Scarab. The mission was nearly complete, his partner scooping the last of the readily accessible xeno technology to be found. The man paused. Something was wrong. The winds shifted, the toxic soil trembling at his feet. He looked down, and then up, his eyes widening.

“We’ve got problems.”

It was only barely visible, a speck in the distance. The speck became jagged, and the points came to resemble the petals of a flower. And the otherworldly sound it made...

Yolanta’s voice cut through the comms.

“It... it is one of *them*!”

The Thargoid was now visible, bearing down upon the structure. Tyrran turned toward his partner, dirt being kicked up from her haste to return to her ship. The movement seemed to attract the ship, the interloper shifting course toward the bounding Scarab.

“It’s coming for you!”

Irritation thickened Yolanta’s accent.

“I *know*!”

Another long bellow sounded, the petals of the Thargoid opening wide, the ship massive above their heads. Yolanta’s Scarab was caught in a bright yellow light, ceasing her movement hundreds of meters away from her ship. Desperation rang through in her voice.

“It *has* me!”

From the rear of the Thargoid numerous smaller drones detached. They moved in unison, swirling around the ship as its glow shifted from a benign yellow to a malevolent red. Tyrran blinked, looking over his shoulder to the *Rosa*. What would come next was already known...

“*Andor*!”

The man snapped his head forward, the swarm of drones already firing upon the Scarab. Yolanta fired into the morass, her blasts ineffective. For a moment the man couldn't even see his partner, so deep within the swarm was she.

And then...

The breath died in Tyrran's throat.

She's gone.

The Scarab rocketed free of the beam, landing hard on the ground, the ragged breathing of his partner coming over comms. She dodged and steered, numerous blasts impacting around her, the woman closing the distance to her ship. Tyrran turned to run, knowing that it would be a close call.

"No!"

There was an explosion, one that sent Tyrran to his belly. Scrambling onto his back, he looked up just in time to see the Scarab flip over time and again, alien blaster marks eating away at its chassis. The vehicle skidded to a halt, hundreds of meters away from the man. The ship remained within sprinting range, however...

Tyrran Andor looked over his shoulder, to the ship and the safety it represented. Everything in him screamed for self-preservation, to take the easy way out. He could take the ship, lay low someplace where work was plentiful and questions scarce, do what he'd always done...

Not this time.

"Yolanta!"

With purpose the man scrambled to his feet and dashed forward. Above his head the Thargoid loomed, its drone swarm blotting out the green-hued sun. In the sickly shade Tyrran sprinted across the barren planet surface, scrambling to the wreckage of the Scarab, pulling with all his strength on the canopy hatch. Yolanta was there, but not moving. With a cry Tyrran wrenched the hatch open, reaching inside and hastily unbuckling his partner's restraints. The insectoid whines of the drones were increasing, and soon they would be unleashed in another, final pass...

The woman's eyes fluttered open, blood running down her face from the impact. For a moment she was unsteady, her voice wavering.

"T... Tyrran?"

Andor pulled his partner from the wrecked canopy, his eyes to the sky.

"We've got to move."

The woman coughed, walking with a limp toward her ship.

"My ship. If we can—"

As one, the drones attacked. Tyrran's eyes widened.

"There's no time. Back into the structure. *Now!*"

Not waiting for a response the man grabbed his partner's wrist, pulling her alongside himself as they ran. The drones opened fire, finishing off the stricken Scarab with a withering barrage of laserfire. The explosion staggered man and woman, slamming them into the still-closed doors of the structure. The alien artifacts that might have opened them were now in pieces, burning along with the scattered wreckage of the Scarab. With tired eyes and burning lungs they looked up at the massive ship that loomed over them, drones dancing in otherworldly precision around it.

A hand gripped his, the woman clutching it not in affection but exhausted puzzlement.

“The *Rosa*,” she managed. “You were so close. You could have escaped. You...”

The woman trailed off, too weak to continue. Andor put on the bravest face he could muster.

“I’m here, same as you.”

The Thargoid’s biomechanical center opened, profane bolts of energy building, arcing in preparation for the final strike. There was nowhere to run, and nowhere to hide.

Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura stared at certain death, posture straight and eyes hard. She set her jaw, Iberian pride refusing the slightest trace of weakness. She released Tyrran’s hand, her accent thickening in her final, proud moment. A moment and a glance were spared for her partner.

“Perhaps,” she said, “you will die with a trace of honor after all.”

“My name is Annika. These two are Joss and Carter.”

Tyrran leaned back, casual interest dancing in his eyes. A long moment passed before he spoke.

“Andor.”

Amusement crossed the woman’s eyes.

“And or... what, exactly?”

Tyrran exhaled.

“And or, you stop playing games and get to the point.”

Annika smiled, her eyes daggers.

“I run a little crew. Nothing too big, nothing too dangerous. Got a ship, too— home with a frameshift drive.”

Andor shrugged.

“Congratulations.”

Joss and Carter— the former tattooed and greasy, the latter short and mousy— looked at each other. Annika continued to look at Tyrran.

“You pawned some tools not long ago. Nanowelders. Then you visited the starport. Thinking of moving on, are you?”

The man looked at his guest sideways. “How did you kn—”

Annika cut him off.

“I’ve got a lot of fingers in a lot of pies, and I keep an ear out for news. I know the owner of the pawn shop. I know your old employer, too. The one you swindled.”

Tyrran leveled an accusing finger at the mysterious woman.

“You don’t know anything about m—”

“I know that you’re in over your head. And I know that the man you’re running from isn’t just some machine shop owner. He’s got friends. Powerful friends who have a stake in the system. Any official transport you take, they’ll find out about. And then you’ll be dead.”

Tyrran said nothing, forcing himself to steady his gaze and adopt a brave face.

“And you’re telling me this why?”

The woman leaned forward, her drink swirling in her hand.

“Because he’s a filthy old bastard, and because anyone who rips him off is a friend...”

A hint of a smile lifted her mouth.

“... and because I’m short a crew slot. I need an extra set of hands. Ones that aren’t afraid to get a little dirty.”

Tyrran shifted in his seat.

“Doing?”

Annika raised her glass.

“Salvage work, mainly. It’s legal— legal enough, anyway— and there’s seldom Authority involved.”

Andor hesitated, sensing both opportunity and deception.

“But?”

The woman took a sip.

“But it doesn’t always pay the bills— and then we have to get creative.”

“Creative how?”

Annika’s smile grew, her eyes sharpening.

“Non-standard shipping to non-standard places, done for non-standard people.”

Leaning back, Tyrran took a long sip. He set down the glass.

“Your terms?”

The woman’s smile remained fixed.

"Your own bunk in your own cabin. All the ship rations you can choke down. And five percent of whatever the job nets us."

Tyrran leaned forward.

"There's four of us. How about fifteen?"

Annika, too, leaned forward.

"Even seen the overhead of a used Krait? Seven."

Andor scoffed.

"You're the one wants me on so bad. Twelve."

The woman held up her glass.

"Not that bad. Ten."

Tyrran lifted his own drink.

"For free transport away and steady work? Ten it is."

One glass clinked against the other. Man and woman sealed their arrangement with a drink. Without another word the woman rose, looking downward at her new crewman. She tossed a keycard onto the table, one with the local starport's logo on it.

"We leave early tomorrow. Bay fifteen. And Andor?"

Pocketing the keycard, Tyrran looked up.

"Yes?"

Annika looked the man up and down.

"Get yourself a flightsuit."

Isaiah Evanson sat hunched over in his ship's bunk, rubbing sleep from tired eyes. It was all he could do to look up, up to the pair of subordinates standing before him. Renraiku and Adam Firethorn looked downward at their mission leader, their features equally drawn and fatigued. Evanson let out a long exhale before speaking, his tone deceptively gentle.

"What do you mean, 'gone'?"

Adam crossed his arms, leaning against a bulkhead wall.

“Exactly that. Gone, along with her ship. No response to holofacs, either. We’re on our own.”

A long moment passed. Isaiah rose, his steps light in the low gravity of the *Gnosis*. To splash water in his face would be to send water droplets all over his cabin, to slowly settle to the deck. Instead he wiped his face with a pre-wetted towelette, doing the same for his body. It would be the closest thing to a shower that he’d had in days, and would be so until the Legion’s mission onboard the megaship was declared complete. He glanced over his bare shoulder.

“Honest answers, guys: did we make a mistake by allowing the Night Witches to join up?”

The two Legionnaires looked at each other, the unspoken concern finally given voice. Finally Adam spoke.

“Ain’t never seen Púrpura smile, but she’s always seemed on the level. That Kerenski woman, though...”

Evanson scowled.

“She’s operator enough. Did some real good work, making the Legion friends in low places back in Atroco. But I don’t think she realizes that the game’s changed.”

Renraiku shrugged.

“A covert outfit with a penchant for sowing anarchy, folded into the squadron. There was bound to be... an adjustment period.”

Alarms sounded throughout the *Gnosis*, indications that another wave of Thargoids had been spotted. Isaiah rose, already knowing that he and his wing would soon deploy. He padded over to a closet, retrieving a flightsuit. With weary eyes he turned to his men.

“After this is all over you might want to play outside. I have the feeling that mommy and daddy are in for a *serious* fight.”

Toxic wind blew dirt over Tyrran Andor and Yolanta Púrpura, pressing them against the shut doors of the Thargoid structure. They were beyond words, beyond gamesmanship or position or amends for past wrongs. There was only the end, the final moment at the hands of the alien menace before them. The shrieks of drones and the crackling of the main weapon nearly deafened them.

There was an impact and a scream of pain, but not from either of the two cornered humans. Yolanta forced her eyes open, not believing for a moment the sight before her. The massive Thargoid ship was listing to one side, one heavy blow after another forcing it away. Pieces of organic hull flew from it, the drones flying away toward some new, unseen threat. Whatever was attacking it was relentless, alternately indiscriminate in blasting chunks from the hull and precise in targeting its glowing weak points.

For a moment there was a battle. The core and petals of the ship flashed a fearsome red, staccato laserfire shooting from its core, the dozens of shots from its drones heard in the distance. A single blob of energy was launched, its trail leading somewhere unknown, unseen behind the wall of the massive structure. Yet it wasn't enough, and the alien intelligence controlling the ship knew a hopeless situation when it saw one.

The Thargoid attempted to hide, to flee its assailants, but to no avail. Sickly green substance bled from its wounds, falling to the ground in heavy, gelatinous masses. Still the punishment was applied, its biomechanical innards tortured and shredded by the merciless firepower, the alien ship losing power and altitude.

The pair of humans didn't see but *heard* the distant crash, the grinding impact and death moan, the ground shaking beneath their feet. Then, all was still. Silent. Only their breathing could be heard, their own within their helmets and of the other's over comms.

Andor was the first to find his words, taking a cautious step toward where the Thargoid had gone down. His crisp accent was thicker than normal, as Yolanta's had been.

"I used to hear tales of guardian angels..."

A gloved hand gripped his shoulder, spinning him around. A pair of specks were approaching in the distance, black against the sickly green ammoniated sky. They grew larger, larger until Yolanta's eyes shot open. A single, outstretched finger pointed to the smaller of the two.

"That is no angel, *patán*— but a *witch!*"

With a thunderous roar the ships streaked overhead, a Diamondback and a Python, passing through the rising smoke from the downed Thargoid. The Diamondback disengaged its flight safeties, flipping around even as it travelled in the same direction, settling into a slow approach. It halted above Tyrran and Yolanta, dust being kicked up as before.

Over the comms came a familiar voice, thick with dourness.

"You seem to have attracted unwanted company, *da?*"

Yolanta stepped forward, her eyes smiling even if her lips were not.

"And like a good *camarada*, you were there to keep it from spoiling the dance."

The wreckage of Yolanta's Scarab lay in ruins between her and Kerenski's Diamondback.

"The samples— you have them?"

Yolanta shrugged. "Most of them. Whatever was in my rover was destroyed when that thing attacked."

The Diamondback rose, turning to fly toward the downed alien vessel.

"It is of no concern. We have a fresh corpse to pick over."

Tyrran and Yolanta looked at each other. The man ventured a query.

"You, uh— you need help with that?"

Kerenski's reply was instant.

"*Nyet*. You've both done enough. My new friend and I will see to the task at hand. Get back to the *Gnosis* and get some rest."

Relief washed over Yolanta's features, in spite of all her efforts to mask it.

"*Si, camarada!*"

The comms link was terminated, replaced by a private one between Kerenski and Púrpura. The Iberian heard the flick of a lighter in the background, followed by the long exhale of her compatriot's first drag.

"Your partner. What have you to say about him?"

Yolanta glanced to her side, Tyrran next to her but ignorant of their conversation. Her eyes flashed, settling on first the man and then her wrecked Scarab.

"Andor was... not *completely* useless."

"Good. I want you to transfer your cargo to my ship when we're both docked. I have a new assignment for you. For *both* of you."

Disdain crept into the woman's voice.

"Still I must be confined with the *patán*?"

Another drag. Another exhale, both heard over comms.

"Still we have a job to do."

Yolanta turned. Iberian eyes flashed as they beheld her partner, his atmo suit covered in the toxic dust of the surface—the same dust that covered her own. The woman's gaze was hard, but not as hard as it had once been. Sullen lips moved, her words unheard by Tyrran.

"*Si, camarada.*"

The attack was repulsed with minimal human casualties, so adept were the *Gnosis*'s defenders becoming at repelling the numerous but individually weak Scouts. Throughout the megaship a hope was beginning to grow— wild, delicate, and soaked in blood— yet it persisted, tired eyes brightening at the knowledge that they had lived when so many others in their position had died. Already resupply convoys were arriving, munitions and staples replenishing depleted stocks, swiftly expended in the effort to stave off the constant Thargoid attacks. Crews worked with renewed vigor to repair the massively complex hyperdrive network, the task no longer seeming so futile.

Phisto Sobanii and Isaiah Evanson knew better. Their ships were in the repair bay, the day's fighting intense. There was none of the joviality of victorious brothers-in-arms, none of the optimism in their features that others so cautiously wore. There was only fatigue, battle and a few stolen hours of sleep at a time being their new realty. There was nowhere else to go except the bar, where the men had stolen away a booth, an island of gloom amid a sea of newfound optimism. Sobanii looked with tired eyes into those of his peer.

"Something ain't right," he said. "It's the bugs. They're not sending out their heavies. Only an endless trickle of fodder. They could—"

The man looked around himself, paranoid. He leaned in closer.

"They could turn this tin can into scrap any time they wanted, same as the others. But they ain't. *Why?*"

Evanson said nothing at first, only rubbing his own eyes with his thumb and forefinger.

"Phisto," he said. "Has anyone ever told you to not look a gift horse in the mouth?"

The older man took a swig from his drink, the liquid floating in solid bubbles in his sealed glass.

“I’m serious. We’ve all seen the intel on that new... thing. The one they’re calling the Hydra. One can rip apart a whole wing, no problem— so why not whistle some up and send em’ our way? It’s like they’re holding back. Waiting for something.”

Isaiah shook his head. “What, though?”

For a long time, Phisto said nothing. He leaned in closer, his fatigue loosening his lips in ways that alcohol couldn’t.

“Salome. You knew her, right? Before...”

Evanson looked down at his drink, pain hardening his mouth.

“No. Not like the others. I’m just a failed bodyguard, Phisto.”

A hand reached out and gripped the man’s shoulder, squeezing.

“All she ever wanted you to protect was the *truth*. You did, or else we wouldn’t be sitting here. Never forget that.”

Isaiah looked away, his gaze somewhere else.

“So many have *already* forgotten, you know? What she said. What she warned us about.”

“Go on.”

The pilot turned back to Sobanii.

“It isn’t as simple as everyone’s been making it out to be. A Thargoid isn’t a Thargoid any more than a human is automatically a Fed. They’re fighting *each other*, and the invasion isn’t an invasion so much a half-retreat, half-migratory dash through human space.”

Phisto looked down.

“Yeah. Oresrians and Klaxians.”

Isaiah shook his head.

“And we don’t even know who’s who.”

Sobanii’s eyes narrowed. “*Someone* does. That I promise you.”

“Then *why*? Why keep everyone in the dark? Why not spell out the differences between the goats and the sheep? Why not equip the superpower navies for war instead of letting every two-bit indy handle things on the frontier?”

Something resembling defeat spread cross Phisto’s face. His fingers drifted from his beer to his collar, the Imperial eagle glinting in the low light of the bar. Isaiah’s gaze remained hard, the twin burdens of the past and future upon his shoulders. It was all the older man could do to shake his head.

“I don’t know, pal. Any of it. I just don’t know.”

Evanson hunched over, a long, slow exhale escaping his lips.

“I don’t think anyone does. All this time and effort to conceal the truth, and then when Salome blows it all open it’s treated like a damn sideshow. And what do *we* do?”

The pilot sat up, gesturing around him.

“We do the human thing. Research better guns first and better words last.”

Again, Phisto looked around the bar, his voice dropping to ever more conspiratorial levels.

“Maybe we tried that. Maybe it failed. We all know how the last war went down— the Mycoid virus, INRA betraying Jameson, the sudden disappearance of the bugs. We committed *genocide*, Isaiah. Ain’t many words to be spoken after something like that, no matter *who* you are.”

Evanson raised his glass, a sardonic smile on his lips. “Better guns, then.”

Phisto raised his in return, his eyes grim.

“Better guns.”

“Lordy, lordy, lordy. I can tell this thing smells terrible even through the atmo suit!”

Blake Fairchild and Kari Kerenski stood before their ships, their cargo bays filled with the biomechanical innards of the downed Thargoid. For hours they had labored, cutting and separating the ship’s organs— Kerenski was beginning to think of them as such— from the husk. The pickings had been rich, and any disgust that the woman might have felt from being covered with the putrid fluids of the organic vessel was buoyed by a feeling of certainty. She now had more than what she’d agreed to deliver, fresh— though somewhat damaged— samples, the likes of which would ingratiate her with those whose interests were aligned with her own. A mercenary urge pulled at the edge of her consciousness.

The extra samples are worth a fortune. You have a buyer in that one-armed dog Rax— why not take care of yourself for a change?

“The smell of credits is never foul, *tovarish*.”

With a folksy chuckle the man slapped his cargo bay controls, the hatch closing over the alien remains. Even through his helmet his features were fat, fat from a life of bland, safe trading. It was all Kerenski could do to keep her face impassive.

Because then you end up like him. Him, and Andor, and Rax- all the bottom-feeders who keep their heads in the mud.

“And you’re *sure* you don’t mind me taking off with all this... cargo? Splattered bugs make for a real payday.”

Kari turned, her eyes flashing even through the helmet's faceplate.

"Larger things are in motion, and you risk much by helping me. I would see you to proper reward."

Fairchild's eyes twinkled.

"Could use an escort back, then. The *Hog's* all cargo bay and no shields. Why waste the space, you know?"

The woman put her hands on her hips. Her voice dropped, her tone almost chilling.

"An escort for a defenceless wingmate? *Da*. That can be arranged."

The *Rosa Púrpura's* engines spooled down, a decrescendoing whine that filled the hangar with noise and heat. Its frontal ramp unsealed itself and descended, a hiss followed by a hydraulic moan. Two figures emerged, male and female flight boots tapping on their way down, settling once again upon the flight deck.

Tyrran Andor and Rosa Púrpura weren't alone. Waiting for them was Phisto Sobanii, flanked by Isaiah Evanson and Amos Loren. The three Imperial uniforms stood in contrast to the two before them, and tension filled the hangar. Sobanii stepped forward.

"Kerenski," he said. "She's vanished."

Yolanta's Iberian eyes narrowed.

"You are mistaken, *señor*. She was with us only hours ago."

The wing leader spread his arms wide.

"And now?"

The woman folded her arms, shifting one hip to the side. At her side Tyrran looked from man to uniformed man before him, his eyes wary.

"And now she collects the samples upon which the mission depends. Perhaps your comm is malfunctioning?"

Man and woman locked eyes, the strain of the danger that both had faced pushing both to the breaking point. Phisto held up a warning finger.

“Get your ship patched up and some bunk time. The bugs ain’t let up, and we need every—”

Yolanta cut him off.

“Kerenski has already issued new orders for me... for *us*. Andor and I will be leaving as soon as we are able.”

Isaiah, now, stepped forward.

“This isn’t Kerenski’s operation. And whatever your history with her, she doesn’t have final say here.”

There wasn’t a trace of fear in Yolanta’s features. She too advanced, nearly within touching distance of the men before her.

“Kerenski was my *camarada* while you were still playing cops and robbers in Coma. I would not expect you to understand.”

Evanson’s face hardened.

“So long as you report to the eagle, you submit to orders. I wouldn’t expect *you* to understand.”

A pair of dusky Iberian eyes swept up and down the men before her.

“*You* worship your *estúpido* bird, not us. Stay and play the heroes if you wish. *I* have a job to do.”

With that the woman turned, spinning on her heels in a way both feminine and distinctly mocking of her peers’ military bearing. Andor was left alone, facing the trio of Imperials. Evanson sneered.

“And what about you, outsider? Made your choice, too?”

Tyrran looked down at his boots. They were still smudged with the toxic soil of the alien planet. Traces of the same remained on the deck, footprints from where Yolanta had strode away. He looked up, standing a little taller against his *de facto* captors before he, too, turned back toward the Chieftain.

“We *both* have, Imp. See you on the other side.”

“Oh, *hell*. She’s malfunctioning— bad. Ain’t never seen anything like this. Initiating emergency drop... *now!*”

The *Whole Hog* flashed into normal space, numerous alarms and warning lights competing for Fairchild’s attention. Perspiration beaded on the man’s forehead, numerous system statuses scrolling in ominous reds and yellows. For a moment he even worried that communications were out, until Kerenski’s Slavic accent sounded in his ears.

“Understood. Activate wing beacon. I’ll follow your signal.”

Nodding though there was no one to see him do so, Blake reached to his side and flipped a switch. In his canopy stars and nebulae spun, the Python’s thrusters only working intermittently. Onward the ship drifted, out of control, its systems failing though its hull was intact. Lights and thrusters struggled to stay aglow, blinking on or off again as damage control systems routed and rerouted power. In the distance a flash of light signalled the arrival of help.

The *Olga of Kiev* was only a fraction of the Python’s size, but the Diamondback’s boosters flared, closing the distance. Kerenski flew close by, and could see Fairchild in his seat, cursing and struggling to regain control. A quick diagnostics scan told the story of a ship in terminal decline, integrity percentages low and continuing to drop. Soon even ship comms would be unworkable.

Relief washed over Fairchild’s features.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m in a real jam. Emergency systems are holding, but only Randomius knows for how long. I’m heading to my escape—”

“That won’t be necessary, Commander. Your ship can be saved if you do *exactly* as I say.”

Blake Fairchild wasn't a man accustomed to taking orders from relative strangers, but something in the woman's tone persuaded him to trust her.

"I'm all ears."

Kerenski looked to her scans, and then to her partner.

"Your heat vents. Do you have manual control over them?"

Confusion rang through over the comms.

"Well sure. But what does that have to do with-"

"Close them."

There was an exhale.

"But-"

"*Do it.*"

Without another word Fairchild complied, the vents that allowed the Python's waste heat sealing themselves. A moment passed, worry in the man's tone.

"Alright, it's done. But now I'm cooking my damn ship. What the hell is this supposed to d-"

Kerenski cut him off.

"Patience, *tovarish.*"

The chill of space was no match for the heat building within the ship, and soon the hull itself warmed. Not long after that, it was the same temperature as though the vessel was flying by a star, recklessly scooping its hydrogen for use as fuel. On its surface the caustic substance slowed its spread, the sickly green growing darker until it was a blackened crust. Kerenski watched with eagle eyes.

"The danger has passed. You may open your vents."

Relief could be heard in the man's words.

"Thought you were *never* gonna say that!"

The vents opened, its thermal veins exposed, waste heat radiating into space. The temperature of the *Whole Hog* dropped rapidly. She was wounded, but no longer crippled. For his part, Blake's relief intensified.

“Hell... it *worked*. That alien goop ain’t eatin’ away at my modules any longer. Who, uh—”

From the bridge of the *Olga*, Kerensky could see the man look up.

“Who did you say you were with, again?”

The woman shrugged, steering away and plotting a route on her navigation screen.

“No one of importance. Only some people who would rather have a hold full of alien junk than piles of credits. I am uploading coordinates now. Head to them and wait for me. It is better if we travel separately. I will transmit enough credits to your account to compensate you for your... trouble.”

“Good enough.”

The Python’s thrusters flared, the man following the course transmitted to him. Kerensky had little reason to believe that he would betray her. She’d met dozens of men like him in her life: their sense of fairness and morality as simple as their minds. They were easy to hire, easy to order around, and easy to manipulate if you did them the slightest favor. Yet Kerenski was a woman who herself was slow to trust, even more so than the people to whom she ultimately reported. She remained perfectly still in the seat of her Diamondback, still and silent until her sensors confirmed that Fairchild was deep into witchspace.

There was a long sigh, punctuated only by the snap of Kerenski’s lighter, illuminating the woman’s face in its flash. Smoke wafted from the cigarette, obscuring her features, her ship holding position directly where Fairchild had been only moments ago. Without a word she keyed a comm code that only a handful of others in the galaxy knew.

The contact’s face shimmered into view, his eyes serious and his tone as coldly competent as ever. It took only moments for him to access the *Olga*’s systems, saving him the trouble of giving voice to needless questions.

“You have news, I expect.”

A long plume of smoke escaped Kerenski’s nostrils.

“More than that. I have an... incoming shipment. For everything I’ve agreed to provide and more. The first phase is complete.”

The man’s eyes narrowed.

“No. It is complete when the merchandise is delivered. I will not accept a cargo hold full of promises.”

Kerenski’s leaned forward, passing through the smoke, her eyes sharp.

“No one is asking you to. It is a simple choice; more time for more merchandise, or what I have on me right now. Instant gratification or a delayed bonus. The mission is accomplished either way.”

There was no visible indication of the man’s interest.

“Don’t be so certain. There has been an... alteration. The ruins for the second phase are too well-known. Plundered quite recklessly I’m told, and of little value.”

Kerenski shrugged.

“We were never going to be the only ones interested in them or their secrets.”

The man said nothing, his dark features made darker still in the low light of the *Olga*’s bridge.

“It is of secrets that I wish to speak. There is a shipment, of more samples and data than you could hope to find in a dozen ruins, leaving within days. A shipment I would see in your hands instead.”

Within the *Olga* was the familiar chime of a data package being received. Kerenski took another drag, information scrolling on a side holopanel. Like her counterpart she betrayed nothing as she read it.

“If this is true...”

“It is. The ship itself is invulnerable. Its human pilot, less so.”

Kerenski nodded. “Heading where?”

The man told her.

Another drag. Another exhale.

“You understand the risk of upsetting such powers, *da?* Not even you could protect us if word spreads.”

Intelligent eyes met intelligent eyes.

“It won’t. Not publically, at least. Those involved have far too much to lose. A single ship’s worth of material is a small price to pay for...”

“For what, exactly?”

The slightest of smiles lifted one side of the man’s lips.

“For playing the game. Having a seat at the table. Power the likes of which presidents and emperors can only dream.”

Kerenski’s face hardened.

“The shipment will be yours. That and all I have hidden away.”

Slowly, the man nodded.

“I’ll leave you to it, then. Deliver beyond the agreed amount like you’ve implied you’re able, and I’ll see about a...”

Amusement softened his face.

“... *bonus*.”

The holofac faded away, plunging Kerenski into relative darkness. The butt of her cigarette glowed, silhouetting her features in warm reds and oranges. Without a word she pulled up the transmitted data, her eyes settling on one, all-important segment:

Wreaken Construction Master Shipyards.

Col 70.

XIV NO REST FOR THE WICKED

“Almost... just a little more... got it!”

The plasma torch flared a final time, the shield generator floating free in the weightless depths of space. Tyrran balled his fist in private celebration, his fatigue and frustration forgotten. He was in the bowels of a derelict Imperial Clipper, victim of the numerous petty proxy wars that played out between the Federation of Earth and the Empire of Achenar. There hadn't been much left of the hulk, its internals long blasted to scrap, but scans had showed a few promising opportunities.

Tyrran keyed his comms. “And what did you say this was called, again?”

Annika's sharp voice rang in his ears, only a little distortion in her signal.

“This is one of the Prismatic-model units. Very powerful. Very rare.”

Joss cut in. “And a payday, believe you me.”

The woman chuckled. “Might just be able to replace that port stabilizer after this one. Carter: prepare the cargo bay and deploy a limpet to tow that thing in. Tyrran: have a look around. See if there's anything else worth taking.”

Andor acknowledged, taking a moment to watch with satisfaction as the shield generator was led away by the drone. The man activated his magboots, setting down upon the deck, debris still floating in the stillness of space. The cargo bay seemed the most obvious place to look, and so Tyrran shone his suit's lamp upon the bulkheads, following their directions to the hold. Some entryways were still open. Others had to be cut open with his torch.

There was cargo in the hold, but hardly what they had expected. Row upon row of slave pods lined the bulkheads, still held in place by their sorting arms. Gulping, Tyrran walked up to one, secretly relieved that there was no one there to witness him. With a gloved hand he brushed away long-accumulated frost. The pod still had independent power, and a low light illuminated the space within. Screwing up his courage, Tyrran peered into the viewport.

Inside was a woman, or at least the remains of such. Life support had long since failed, and without such she had peacefully transitioned from unconscious life to the slumber of death, her features only a little mummified from the harsh chill of vacuum. Tyrran's face hardened. She had been beautiful once, young and with golden hair. What had been her story? What had compelled her to exchange her freedom for servitude? Desperation? The outsized sense of honor common among Imperials?

"The 'verse belongs to the living, Andor—not the dead."

Tyrran blinked. In that moment he'd forgotten that Annika could see everything that he could, through the tiny holo-cams mounted on his helmet. The man straightened himself, looking around. None but more slave pods lined the bay. Andor stood not in a derelict ship, but a tomb.

"There's nothing here."

Carter's voice rang through the comms, an adolescent squeak in his words though he was at least twice Andor's age.

"No matter. This hunk of Imperial junk is all we need. Come on back."

The time that followed was predictable. Annika flew her Krait to a system beyond superpower control, where she could offload her wares to an old contact, drinking and haggling and arriving at a fair deal. Her crew—including Tyrran—would be at her back, across from the buyer’s associates, positioned in turn at his back. Negotiations would conclude after a spot of tension, credits and merchandise changing hands. Handshakes would be exchanged or not, and after a drink or two thoughts would turn from business, spare credits being burned on drink and rented flesh.

Yet for Andor such distractions were far from his mind. The man sat alone in his cabin, the young woman’s face burning a hole in his mind. Sleepless hours passed, and from beyond his door he heard the tapping of boots on metal deck. There was a knock, and Tyrran bade his guest enter. It was Annika, in civilian clothes and smelling of drink. She looked at Tyrran, at the spartan space surrounding him. His cabin looked all but uninhabited, so few were his belongings. Yet to comment on such wasn’t the purpose of her visit. Tyrran weathered a long, critical glance before she spoke.

“First time you’ve ever seen a stiff?”

Knowing better than to lie to his Commander, Tyrran nodded. Annika continued, a trace of mocking in her tone.

“It won’t be the last. Not in this line of work, anyway. You’re not gonna squib out on us, are you?”

Andor rose, a man’s hardness replacing the boy’s softness in his eyes. He strode up to Annika, meeting her gaze.

“Just worry about that stabilizer. I’m here to stay.”

Annika took a step closer, her gaze sharpening into something else. She reached out, to trace along Tyrran’s jawline—then stopped, inches from his face. No further did she come to touching him before taking turning to leave, looking over her shoulder a final time.

“Good.”

The disk skidded across the tabletop, coming to a neat halt inches from the edge. Tyrran's eyes lingered upon it for a moment before looking upward. It was dark in the nightclub, gyrating illumination coming from holodancers for the penniless rabble and fleshy ones for those with credits. A repetitive techno beat drummed its way into the man's head, some Federal sonicjockey's work making it all the way to the periphery of human space. Not far away the young and reckless pressed together on the dance floor, narcotics, perfumes, and perspiration creating a stink that the chems never quite washed away entirely.

Tyrran was cloaked in shadow from where he sat in the booth, but the same couldn't be said for the pair of women across from him. Yolanta Púrpura and Kari Kerenski wore the same dour masks upon their faces, but the similarities stopped there. The former had a richness to her features, a roundness that hinted at rustic nobility. The latter was angular and lean, hungry-looking no matter how well nourished she was. Púrpura's duskiness complimented Kerenski's light-starved paleness—and while the latter sported a simple ponytail for her greying hair, the Iberian's tresses were now a brilliant silver, all manner of neon and holographic lights subtly reflecting from its sheen.

The man held up the disk, unsmiling.

“And what is this?”

Kerenski leaned forward. Even if the nightclub or one of them were bugged, it would take clever algorithms indeed to pick out the right human voice from so much digital noise.

“*You*. Or more specifically, the identity that you're to assume. A little something from Rax— something that you'll need to complete the next phase of the job.”

Andor turned over the disk. Pressed to its back was an identicard, either Pilot's Federation or the best fake he'd ever seen. Dull orange illuminated its letters. His own face—Randomius knew how the Witches had acquired it—stared back at him as he read out loud.

“‘Virgil Titmouse’. Harmless. Aimless.”

Kerenski nodded.

“But a *bona fide* Tycoon, according to the guild. Just the kind of greedy bastard that would risk life and limb to run some special cargo.”

Andor scoffed.

“I don't like me already.”

Yolanta's eyes flashed, the woman taking a long sip of locally-crafted beer.

“Cheer up, *patán*. At least you have a ship again.”

A dataslate was produced, a wireframe schematic shimmering into view above it. The image slowly spun, Tyrran shaking his head at the sight.

“That,” he said, “isn't a ship. It's a barge that grew a bank of engines.”

Indeed, the Panther Clipper was one of the largest ships that could be independently owned. They were as obscenely priced as they were obscenely difficult to fly, and to acquire one was typically the work of decades. It was the ultimate trader's ship, boorishly single-minded in its purpose, lacking the martial utility of the Federal Corvette or the crowning elegance of the Imperial Cutter. Yolanta toggled her dataslate. The wireframe disappeared.

“Then it is good that you will not become attached, *si*? It and all its cargo are to be delivered to a secure deep-space location. That is all you need to know for now.”

Andor pocketed the identicard, shifting from his seat.

“And you?”

Yolanta softened her features and batted her eyes, submissive. She held out her hand, dainty and soft, brushing along Tyrran's.

"Your loyal second-in-command... your protege... and who knows *what* else?"

Submission turned to mocking. The hand was withdrawn. With an Iberian sneer the woman stood, finishing her beer. Tyrran looked down, to where her hand had been. It was only with effort that he lifted his gaze to meet hers.

"Right."

The Iberian nodded to the contents within her partner's jacket. "The disk contains the basic flight operations of a Panther. I suggest you familiarize yourself with them."

Andor held out his hands, dryly repeating his earlier question.

"And you?"

Yolanta's fingers ran through her silver tresses. Unlike her *camarada* she was dressed in the manner of the young women around them, a black dress that flaunted her figure while revealing none of it. Silver trim the same as her hair accented its— that was to say *her*— curves.

"Off to see if the locals can dance as well as a Púrpura. It has been far too long. I would ask *you*, but—"

The woman glanced downward, one eyebrow lifting.

"But it appears that you forgot to pack your dancing shoes, *si?*"

Tyrran, too, looked down at his clunky flight boots. Roguish sarcasm threatened to lift one side of his mouth.

"Must have lost them in the move."

Yola's mouth hardened, yet her eyes...

"Pity."

With that the woman turned, one with the writhing crowd after only a handful of paces. Immediately she moved with a fusion of grace and sensuality, an inborn rhythm guiding her body in a way that no amount of formal instruction could. For a moment Tyrran was transfixed.

“She isn’t for you.”

The man snapped his head to the side. Already Kerenski had lit a cigarette, the smoke drifting before her features. His face hardened in response.

“Excuse me?”

The woman gestured to the dataslate, her eyes piercing.

“The ship. You’ll be around it only as long the mission requires you to be. It isn’t yours. It could *never* be yours. So don’t even think about it.”

“I wasn’t.”

Another puff. Another exhale. Another sharp look, first to a dancing Yolanta and then to the man before her.

“Yes, you were.”

Tyrran, too, rose from the table, indignant. He held up the data disk.

“Doesn’t matter. Looks like I’ve got some studying to do, anyway.”

Slowly, Kerenski nodded.

“Stay focused, Andor.”

The wing of Fer de Lances flew in formation, the hulk of the *Gnosis* behind them. The ships weaved and bobbed, massive to behold yet moving like fighters a fraction of their size. Within them, the pilots of Loren's Legion were on edge, strung out after days of being on constant alert. Hands shook slightly from the constant intake of stimbevs, and wary eyes looked into the void with dark bags beneath them.

Isaiah Evanson's ragged voice sounded in Phisto's ears. "Looks like the bugs are staying gone. Ain't seen one yet today. I still don't understand."

Sobanii checked his scanners. It was true— nothing showed except himself and his wingmates, plus the other assorted ad-hoc defenders of the megaship.

"Maybe they got tired of being scraped off our boots."

Renraiku shook his head. "If they even count losses as losses, that is. Randomius knows how these critters think."

On the wing flew, patrolling the area around the *Gnosis* in long, wide loops. From its bowels a Python rose, an Orca liner not far behind. Both ships' thrusters flared, rocketing away from the sticken megaship. Isaiah's gaze lingered upon them.

"Folks are leaving," he said. "The trip was a bust, and the worst is over."

Phisto, too, looked out from his ship's canopy.

"The Witches have already gotten their hands on the xeno samples. The bugs have pulled back. So what are *we* doing here?"

A moment passed before Renraiku answered, his words tinged with sarcasm.

"Ensuring the security of the *Gnosis* and all aboard. Like good Space Scouts."

It took only moments for Isaiah to arrive at a decision.

"Phisto, I want you get the boys prepped for departure. The mission is a bust- for the *Gnosis*, and for us. Head to Prism and get some R & R."

Concern could be heard in Sobanii's tone.

“What about you?”

Isaiah’s Fer de Lance peeled away from formation, thrusters flaring.

“The Witches have all but ditched us. The bugs are holding back. The superpowers are playing nice— *too* nice. We’re here for answers, pal— and that’s exactly what I intend to get.”

Tyrran awoke, his body aching, the cot next to the *Rosa Púrpura* more a punishment than anything conducive to rest. His dataslate was on his chest, a still image of a Panther Clipper upon it. Exhaling, he sat up, the cot and his body creaking. The weight of slumber burdened his limbs, and his eyes burned with insufficient sleep. Out of habit he looked to the dataslate, checking the time and certain that he’d been robbed of enough sleep.

Three hours. Not nearly enough. Not for what’s in store.

In the hangar the clink of metal on glass could be heard, even above the whirling fans of the bay’s ventilation shafts. Tyrran rose, still fully clothed, one boot stepping with caution before the other. The *Púrpura*’s entry ramp was extended, but Yolanta hadn’t bothered to wake him. One hand dropped to where a pistol might normally be, the man noting with a scowl that he was unarmed. His voice fell to a whisper.

“Yolanta?”

There was no reply. Tyrran crept around the landing gear, sleepiness forgotten, his body hunched low in the shadows. Again there was a clink of glass on metal, and the sound of a body shifting. Not knowing what else to do, Tyrran bunched up his fist. He paused, just behind the Chieftain’s entry ramp.

These things I do...

Andor rounded the corner, fist raised. Before him was Yolanta Púrpura, dagger in hand, equally ready to strike. For a hair-raising moment the blade was pressed to Tyrran's throat. Then lucidity returned to her eyes, her hand lowering. In the other was a bottle of beer, held tight. Tyrran blinked, looking sideways at his partner.

“You could have responded, you know.”

The woman retained her Iberian composure, taking another swig from the bottle. One side of her dress was opened at the slit, the dagger sliding back into its sheath, cunningly concealed along an olive thigh. Her accent was thick upon her words.

“And *you* could have approached from a less suspicious angle, *patán*. Fools die for less.”

Tyrran exhaled. “What are you doing here?”

Yolanta turned away from Tyrran. Though her curves were completely concealed, much of her back was exposed, her silver locks cascading down its lines. She took another drink, her words and actions as sharp as ever.

“The *Rosa* is my home. I am saying goodbye.”

Tyrran looked at the Chieftain, and then to his partner.

“A high-born Imperial, flying Alliance gear. What, did Gutamaya run out of stock?”

The woman turned to face her partner, her gaze imperious.

“Only a fool judges based on such things. It is a good ship, the *Rosa*...”

A hint of mischief flashed in her eyes.

“... and it infuriated my father to hear of it. Some things cannot be purchased with mere credits.”

Again, Tyrran looked upon the vessel, settling into the stairs of its entry ramp.

“The rich plantation princess who defied her father for the sake of her ideals, roughing it with the kind of riff raff she might otherwise have looked down upon. Sounds like the plot for every two-bit holo-drama on the net.”

Yolanta narrowed her eyes, one hip shifting to the side.

“Have you ever believed in *anything*, Andor?”

The man shrugged. “Ships are expensive. Beliefs, even more so.”

For a long time, man and woman held each other in their eyes, their gazes neither affectionate nor disdainful. Yolanta straightened her dress and approached, sitting at the man’s side, the bottle in her fingers held in the manner of a commoner and not a Patron’s daughter. She took another swig.

“You are right, *patán*— but not in the way you think. My beliefs have cost me a father and any place I might ever have had in polite Imperial society.”

Tyrran looked sideways. Yolanta stared straight ahead.

“Seems you’re doing alright in *impolite* society.”

The woman didn’t meet his glance, continuing to stare ahead, memories and not bare metal hangar bulkheads before her eyes.

“Things had always been strained between my father and myself, but it was not until I left my— *his* home to attend university in Cubeo that the break was made permanent. It was there that my eyes were opened.”

Yolanta sighed and took another swig before continuing. “The Empire is a grand old palace, *magnifico* to behold but its foundation rotting. That rot is corruption. Abused slaves, the rigidity of the social classes, the wasteful pomp... all of it.”

Another swig. Another hard gaze.

“I learned to fly during seasonal breaks in classes, and was a guild member before I even graduated. After university I wanted to get out and *do* something. I traveled with a group of fellow activists from system to system, eventually settling upon Atroco. At the time, it was under the boot of an oppressive Imperial puppet government, and war was in the air. It was there that I met Kari Kerenski.”

Yolanta sighed, her eyes elsewhere.

“She was everything I had been seeking, the answer to my frustrations. University students, well— they are long on words but short on action. She was different. Serious. *Connected*. Within a year I had abandoned my old life for good. Abandoned everything to join the Night Witches.”

Tyrran scoffed.

“Sounds like a match made in heaven.”

Yolanta’s face hardened.

“No, *patán*— it was hell. It is one thing to say that you wish to burn the corruption from within one’s midst, and another thing entirely to see the flames. It was a test, what we did. A test to see if I could go all the way.”

The man nodded.

“And you passed.”

Iberian pride shone in Yolanta’s eyes, a warm island amid the coldness of her features.

“What a *Púrpura* does, she does with passion. Nothing held back. Nothing faked. No room for doubts or second guesses.”

Their eyes met, and Tyrran found it difficult to form words.

“I know.”

The woman’s gaze deepened.

“Oh?”

Andor exhaled, suddenly aware of how close he was sitting to the woman.

“I’ve seen you fly your ship. I’ve heard you play your guitar. And I’ve seen you dance.”

For a moment the woman said nothing, shoulder-to-shoulder with the man, her face mere inches from his. Yolanta’s hand extended, approaching Tyrran’s jawline— but then halted, curling into a fist. The old sharpness returned to her features, and the woman rose to stand over her partner. With an imperious air she looked down.

“You have seen nothing.”

With that she turned, striding up the *Rosa’s* ramp, curves shifting beneath her dress. At the top she keyed the entry code, turning to face Andor, still at the bottom. With a final pull she drained her bottle.

“This will be our final night before we leave again. The spare cabin is yours. I would have you rested before the mission.”

Tyrran rose, the old roguish distrust in his features as well.

“And you?”

Yolanta pursed her lips.

“In my stateroom. *Alone.*”

The door to Yolanta’s private stateroom slid shut, the woman at last allowing herself to frown. What had happened with Tyrran, sitting next to him on her entryway ramp? Why had she felt the need to touch him— almost had, even, before proper sense reasserted itself. The woman scowled and held up the empty bottle, everything inside her wanting to blame the night of dance and drink. And yet—

And yet you did not drink to excess. You said and did nothing in the way of indiscretion.

Yolanta turned, her back pressed to the door, as though the act of doing so would add an extra layer of privacy for herself. She held her breath as she heard Tyrran's footsteps down the corridor, pause, and then enter his own stateroom. She exhaled, resuming her own discomfoting line of thought.

What you do, you do for all of humanity— and now you are going soft for some scoundrel of a patán? You cannot afford such estupidez— you are Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura, not some cow-eyed peasant girl!

Even as she completed the thought, the woman inwardly scolded herself. She was upset that she'd opened herself to Andor even slightly— and was now upset that she was upset. There was little else to do except pace within her cabin, hands on hips and pausing before the holo-mirror, a vision of perfect poise though there was no one else to see her be such.

Finally Yolanta exhaled. She unstrapped the dagger from her thigh, placing it within a storage compartment by her bunk. Next she kicked away her heeled shoes, turning to pad her way to the spartan washroom. Without a word Yolanta commenced the same routine that was established in her adolescence, removing her makeup and taking a step back. From her purse she fished out a pack of cigarillos, organic and hand-rolled in the old style, along with a flip lighter with a tip that glowed red hot from the power pack within. She pulled a cigarillo from the pack with her lips, lighting the tip and tossing aside the lighter, closing her eyes to enjoy the first, blissful drag. Smoke wafted around her features, the woman finally relaxing and opening her eyes to the holo-mirror.

Staring back at her was a woman of her people, with dusky features and slim curves, full lips and passionate eyes. The cigarillo dangled from her fingers in a way not unlike an advertisement. Yolanta Púrpura was not a vain woman, and certainly not fastidious to the degree of a typical Patron's daughter— but she *was* a woman, and with a woman's eye evaluated her appearance. One hand ran down her silver hair.

Something darker next time? Something that hints at natural color without actually being such. Something for a woman on a mission.

Satisfied, Yolanta laid down upon her bunk, still in her dress. The material was soft, and slumber was fast approaching. Yet even as her eyes closed and sleep replaced wakefulness did she catch herself again contemplating the prospect of *touching* someone for once. Hers was a life of purpose— yet needs were needs, and the woman was hardly made of stone. Andor had simply *been* there, in the way during a moment of weakness. He'd been there for the worst of the alien encounter, too— neither flinching nor fleeing even as death seemed certain...

Yolanta Púrpura squeezed shut her eyes and indulged in another drag. Her mouth hardened in defiance of herself, her Iberian eyes opening to stare at her cabin's ceiling. A single, solitary light stared back. The woman's mind turned upon itself, renegade thoughts of affection drowned in the sea of greater purpose. Tyrran's face was replaced by that of Kerenski's, and the sharpness of her eyes should she suspect that her *camarada* was compromised. The tendrils of self-rebuke banished the forbidden thoughts into the void of the impossible. The cigarillo glowed hot with a final drag, the woman's eyes flashing in the darkness.

Estúpido.

For once, Tyrran Andor needed a drink.

The man was stripped to the waist, the flight characteristics of a Panther Clipper scrolling before him on his dataslate, seen but not read. His thoughts were dominated by what had happened— didn't happen, rather. He, too, had noticed Yolanta's fingers approaching, almost touching his jaw before the woman pulled away. There had been a moment between them, a brief, fleeting moment where they weren't partners on some fool's errand but a man and woman, alone and with no one except each other.

Tyrran scoffed, de-activating the dataslate and tossing it upon the deck. He rose, running his hands through his hair, his every shred of coveted independence screaming at him.

It was nothing. She'd been dancing and had a few to drink. That's it.

Yet the man's thoughts persisted, tormenting him with memories of her fingers brushing his, the mocking look of submissive affection in her eye, the way her curves moved beneath her dress as she danced...

Tyrran halted, closing his eyes and clenching his fists.

That dress. That damned dress...

The *Bloodfeather* reflected from the ocean's surface, the sleek vessel skimming along at low altitude, mist rising high into the salty air. It was flanked by a pair of escorting Imperial Eagles, the trio of ships a sight of grace and Imperial might. The Garian Sea of the moon Chione was vast, in the storied Prism system and home of the now-deceased Loren family. Ahead of the Fer de Lance was an archipelago, a magnificent structure rising from the largest of them. It was the Imperial Palace, surrounded by carefully manicured gardens and the shining orb of Daedalian ever perfectly framed before it.

The late Senator Algreb Loren's exquisite tastes had prevented anything as blandly utilitarian as a landing pad to mar the aesthetic perfection that was his estate, and so Isaiah Evanson was forced to make do with landing on a lesser island, where the supply freighters came and went. An undersea tunnel ran deep beneath the waves to ensure that the view remained as unsullied as possible. Permission to land was requested and duly granted, and the escorting Eagles peeled away, leaving the *Fer de Lance* to proceed with final approach alone.

With all the grace of a visiting dignitary the *Bloodfeather* landed, the vessel's lines a compliment to the flowing Imperial architecture that surrounded it. With a hydraulic hiss the entry ramp lowered, the squadron commander descending in the full, formal uniform of his rank. Dark Legion green complimented a greater assortment of black, all the decorations of his station on display. One hand drifted to his weapon, a formal sabre rather than a blaster. With an exhale the man proceeded, his footsteps tapping on the metal deck.

Waiting for him was a solitary figure, a pair of uniformed Legionnaires standing a respectful distance behind as bodyguards. Behind *them* were a pair of slaves, a man and woman, eyes to the ground and almost ridiculously attractive. The figure was a man, his body and face obscured by a long grey cloak, a simplistic contrast to the finery of Evanson's uniform. An weathered hand rose to signal that the guards and slaves remain behind. The figure advanced, its face obscured by the cloak's hood. Isaiah stiffened.

The man halted before him, straightening itself. Aged fingers pulled back the hood to reveal an equally aged face. A bald head and short, silver beard complimented long-established worry lines, their bearer too stubborn to remove them via cosmetic processes. Grey-blue eyes swept up and down the guest, saying nothing. There was no handshake.

"It isn't often that *I* feel underdressed."

The barest of smirks lifted one side of Evanson's mouth.

“Senator Vespar Faveol, slumming it at a loading dock. This *is* an occasion.”

Faviol drew himself up, the years and lines lending him all the dignity of his station.

“The palace is a prison; its staff, my jailers. Even the most indebted slave lives a life more free than the one I now lead.”

Isaiah’s eyes drifted to the pair of slaves, each wearing the simple tunic of their indenturedness.

“Yes. You poor thing.”

Cold amusement dripped from Faveol’s words, his tone dropping.

“One reports to the IISS, and the other to the Inquisition. And those are the ones I *know* about. I keep them close so that their reports can be complete and accurate.”

Evanson looked away, the slaves’ attractiveness diminished. His tone, too, dropped.

“I’ve got troubles with my ‘friends’, too— but mine at least have the decency to cause trouble openly.”

Faveol grunted. “Then they aren’t the ones you need to worry about. What news from the black?”

The older man gestured for the younger to follow, the guards and slaves falling in line behind. The tunnels to the waiting mag-train were only a short distance away, and any semblance of privacy would be fleeting.

“The bugs spared the *Gnosis*, and only Randomius knows why.”

A look of faux-impressedness crossed Vespar’s face.

“Perhaps they were overwhelmed by the skill and might of the Legion— and the other defenders, of course.”

Scowling, Isaiah glanced to his side.

“They were holding back. Something big is happening— and no one will tell me jack about it.”

With the wisdom of his years, Faveol nodded, resuming his forward gaze.

“Then we have both of us the same problem.”

The Senator’s private mag-train waited ahead of the pair, sleek and appointed with all the obscene luxury that one would expect. It was also doubtlessly ridden with listening devices. Isaiah paused, turning to the elderly man at his side.

“You’ve kept the rain off our heads so far, and we’re grateful. But the people who want to shut us down...”

Evanson gestured above their heads, the skies of Chione clear and beautiful. Faveol smiled, looking almost grandfatherly.

“Let me worry about Patreus and his ilk. *You* worry about building the better insect trap. Speaking of which...”

Isaiah looked away, his scowl renewed.

“The Night Witches have disappeared, along with that ‘expert’ they brought along and every last piece of alien junk they scavenged. It’s anyone’s guess as to whether or not we’ve been played.”

Faveol nodded, understanding.

“I’ll send my people to find them.”

The younger man shook his head.

“Don’t. You need all your resources to deal with the politics. I can handle the Witches on my own.”

One of the slaves went ahead, opening the magtrain’s door, its ramp extending with grace toward its noble passenger. Faveol took a step forward, pausing for a final glance at his guest.

“There is something of a social occasion tonight, and your absence from such would be noted. A room has been prepared for you in the palace.”

Isaiah looked at his host sideways.

“Oh?”

Rare traces of joviality danced in Vespar’s eyes as he patted the man on the shoulder.

“You’re a squadron commander now, and I am your Patron. It’s time you learned to face adversaries worse than any human or Thargoid. Prepare yourself for your first Imperial ball.”

“This is it, Andor. You need to be Johnny-on-the-spot with that heatsink. Got it?”

From his station in the Krait’s bridge, Tyrran nodded.

“I’m on it.”

Annika nodded from the Commander’s seat, keying internal comms.

“Carter— we happy?”

Over the line the man’s mousy voice could be heard, the thrumming of the ship’s powerplant in the background.

“Reactor is rigged for zero-sig, boss. Might get a little toasty, though.”

The woman settled into her seat, hands gripping the throttle and joystick. She glanced over her shoulder to her newest crewmate.

“Not if the kid does his job. We’ve got a lot riding on this one, fellas. Let’s do this!”

The Krait’s thrusters flared, orange glows illuminating the area around them. The massive Orbis stardock that was Donaldson loomed before them. Joss glanced to his side, eyeing Tyrran.

“If we can smuggle here, we can smuggle anywhere. Welcome home, kid.”

Permission to land had been requested and given. The station grew closer and closer, slowly at first but its size growing truly massive as they approached. Andor kept a close eye on the reactor's temperature readout. The Krait's thermal vents were manually shut, preventing the waste heat from its systems from escaping. It was at the moment almost impossible to detect via scanners. Tyrran spared a moment to return the glance.

"I'm not from Alioth. Never even visited, in fact."

Joss shrugged. "Well, that's about to change."

The first warning alarm sounded, an indication that systems temperature was high and climbing. Andor brought up the heatsink controls.

"Now?"

From her seat, Annika shook her head.

"Not yet. SysAuth will detect the ejected sink and trace it back to us. Wait until we're right next to the thing, then punch it."

"Got it."

Over the comms the station controller expressed concern that the ship had fallen off the scopes, but Annika ignored him. The mail slot loomed larger and larger, coming and going vessels now in close proximity. The reactor temperature arrived at and surpassed safe operating temperature, the bridge now uncomfortably warm. Perspiration broke out upon the crew's faces. It was no secret that the capital system of the Alliance was crawling with Authority, ever on the lookout for even the slightest of suspicious flight patterns— and Annika's Krait was loaded with enough narcotics for three Donaldsons.

A massive Beluga starliner was exiting the slot as the Krait approached. Annika gripped her joystick, her fingers dancing across her controls.

"Now!"

Tyrran threw the switch that activated the heatsink. A sucking noise could be heard throughout the ship's hull as the device collected the massive heat buildup that had accumulated, both the readouts and internal temperature noticeably dropping as it worked. The device, packed with all the concentrated heat of the vessel, ejected as the Krait passed through the slot, white-hot but less detectable to sensors next to the massive Saud-Kruger starliner's thruster wake. It floated harmlessly across the surface of the station, the ship gliding undetected into the cavernous docking tube.

Three roguish grins broke out from within the bridge. The most dangerous part of the run was behind them, but they weren't in the clear yet. There was still contact with the buyer to be made, the final deal to be honored, and the agreed-upon amount of credits to change hands. Double-dealing and betrayal weren't unheard-of for face-to-face work, but Annika was a crafty one. She never met privately, and she always kept at least one crew member armed and out of sight in case of any duplicity on behalf of the client.

The rest of the day's business proceeded without incident, the cargo and the credits exchanged with the underworld straightforwardness of dealers and smugglers. The parties went their separate ways and Annika paid her crew, granting them forty-eight hours of personal leave, with neither curfews imposed nor questions asked.

Joss and Carter vanished immediately, no doubt to wallow in debauchery. Tyrran retired to his cabin, adding his credit packs to those he'd accumulated. There he stayed, resisting the urge to explore the station and spend his earnings on frivolities. No, he reminded himself, there was a greater purpose to his work, something more important than drink and rented flesh. He rolled over on his bunk, accessing the secure storage, his hand searching for and failing to find the item inside...

"Looking for something?"

Andor spun. Annika was standing at his cabin's entrance, holding out the imperfect Pilot's Federation pendant that Tyrran had made years ago in school. The man rose, indignation in his eyes, looking hard at his captain. An accusing finger leveled itself at the woman.

"You had no right."

Annika's hand closed around the trinket. "It's my ship. I have every right."

"Give it to me."

The woman did nothing, only looking at her crewmate hard in the eye.

"Dreams are funny things, you know? They sustain you right up to the moment they betray you."

Tyrran scoffed. "This coming from a woman with her own ship and crew. You could sell the thing tonight and retire."

The faintest hint of a smile softened Annika's face.

"Would you?"

Andor took a step closer.

"No."

Annika, too, took a step closer.

"There was someone, once. When I first got into the game. Went in together on the ship. Used to sit right where you do."

Tyrran looked away, and then back to his captain.

"What happened?"

The woman's face softened further, though bitterness shone in her eyes.

"The dream sustained us— until one day it didn't. Not both of us."

"And since then?"

Annika's eyes deepened, taking another step closer to Tyrran.

"Whatever I have to, one day at a time. One job at a time. And every once in a while, I even do what I want."

Her lips met his, hungry and probing, arms around his neck. Tyrran returned the kiss with youthful vigor, the feeling of her tongue brushing his electrifying. There was a rustle of fabric as Annika lifted away his shirt, the man raising his arms to accommodate her. It took only moments for her to shed her own clothing, his and hers laying in a heap by their bare feet. She took his hands, placing them upon her body, laying back on his bunk and encouraging him to explore it. Lips rejoined and wandered low, Annika gasping in pleasure before lucidity returned to her. She held his head in her hands, her fingers raked through his hair, looking down at him between her thighs.

“You’re not going to fall in love, are you?”

Tyrran crawled over his captain, favoring her with a long, deep kiss before replying.

“No.”

Annika relaxed beneath him, drawing him close.

“Good.”

In a hurry, the woman relieved her new lover of the last of his clothing, opening herself for the carnal act. The stolen pendant fell from her hand to the deck, the first cry of their joining audible down the length of the Krait’s main corridor. Masculine and feminine moans of urgency soon followed.

This time, Tyrran’s body did not fail him.

“She was here, you know. In this very station, when she stole the meta-alloys.”

Yolanta Púrpura gazed in wonder, hands on hips and head craned toward the eternal night sky of Darnielle’s Progress. Above her head ships came and went, their thrusters like fireflies against the blackness, stars too numerous to count beyond them. At her side Tyrran kicked with the toe of his boot at the scuffed metal deck. In his eyes it was exactly like that of dozens of other backwater outposts he’d seen. A soft chuckle escaped his lips.

“Our ship is boarding soon. Perhaps if you use the facilities you’ll sit on the same privy as her, too.”

Yolanta spun, Iberian eyes narrowed.

“You think this is a joke, *patán*? We are nearly helpless, dependent on others, doing something that has never been done from a place that is only rumored to even exist.”

Tyrran’s smile remained, though his eyes were serious.

“I know. I don’t like depending on a ride, either.”

Yolanta turned, her back to him and visibly tense. Maia was a storied system, in many ways the epicenter of the Thargoid incursions. The ship on which they’d arrived had a heavy escort of AX-equipped fighters, on the lookout for the alien ships that seemed to rule witchspace. It was possible for dedicated wings— and the most skilled of solo human pilots— to home in on their signals and destroy them piecemeal, but a never-ending stream of the mysterious flower-shaped vessels seemed to be moving through the Pleiades at any given time. There was simply no stopping them all.

“Are you my passengers?”

Tyrran and Yolanta spun, the new voice catching them unawares. Standing before them was a man in a flightsuit, blonde hair long on top and short at the sides, tied back in a ponytail. He was young, but with strong features and hard eyes. A short beard completed the look.

Yolanta stepped forward.

“Perhaps. Where are you heading?”

The man, too, approached, distrust in his gaze.

“Where most can’t. I’m hauling parts and a single pilot. Name of—”

He tried and failed to suppress a mocking smile.

“Titmouse. Know anyone like that?”

Without a word, Tyrran reached into his jacket and produced the illicit guild identicard. The mysterious man took it.

“You’re it, then. And you?”

Yolanta took Tyrran by the arm, Iberian eyes flashing. Her voice had dropped, softer and more sensual than Tyrran had heard from her.

“His... first mate.”

The man handed the identicard back to Tyrran with a grunt.

“Right. My name is Jerome Albion, and I hope you’re prepared to leave. You do *not* want to keep these people waiting.”

“Soon please, Commander. You do *not* want to keep these people waiting.”

Isaiah Evanson straightened himself, face to face with a holographic projection of himself. At his side was the palace’s chamberlain, his appearance perfect to the point of looking almost artificial. He was dressed in a more formal version of his Legion uniform, braids and sashes adorning his shoulders and chest. The pointed eagle of the Empire glinted in the suite’s light. In the distance an Imperial Clipper could be seen, its entry ramp extended. Elegantly-dressed dignitaries were debarking, slaves and staff in tow. It was a late afternoon on Chione, and one after another the cream of Imperial society were received by Faveol as they arrived via magtrain.

Evanson turned to the chamberlain, frowning. “What’s the occasion, anyway? An old grouch like Faveol wouldn’t throw a ball for the stimulating company.”

The chamberlain stiffened. “The Senator sees the necessity of such occasions. And if I may say so, so must the squadron commander. It is a political post you occupy as well as a combat one.”

Isaiah scowled, straightening his sword’s baldric.

“Any advice?”

The man nodded, his features flawless.

“Be charming but not memorable; competent but not ambitious. Do not insult your betters by approaching them; if you absolutely *must* speak, say either nothing or the obvious.”

Evanson exhaled. “Anything else?”

“Master your every bodily movement. Pay attention to what you are saying just by the way you are posed. Govern your facial expressions in particular; even an improperly-raised eyebrow can cost you and your patron favor among their peers.”

Isaiah looked back at the holo-image of himself.

“I don’t belong here.”

A new voice called out from the suite’s door, sure and welcome. Phisto Sobanii strode through, his uniform as formal as Isaiah’s, his old cockiness giving him a roguish air.

“Relax, pal. If anyone looks down on you, just cough ‘*Coma*’ into your fist.”

Both men smiled, clasping hands. The chamberlain frowned at the newcomer.

“That would be *most* inadvisable.”

Isaiah deactivated the holo-mirror, the life-size image of him shimmering into nothingness. His every gesture was more relaxed than it was a moment prior.

“Still looking out for me, huh?”

Phisto shrugged.

“What, you think I’d leave you to fend for yourself against the *real* insects? Thargoids at least come at you head on.”

Evanson looked away. Still more dignitaries were stepping from the train, each seemingly more opulent than the last.

“What are we doing here? We’re a couple of outlaws stuffed into a uniform. Faveol’s being a fool to dangle us at these people.”

Sobanii joined his squadron commander, staring down at the cream of the system. His face hardened, the wheels of his mind turning.

“No, he isn’t. Give yourself more credit, bud— you just returned from safeguarding the *Gnosis* against the greatest threat of our time.”

Isaiah scoffed.

“Against an enemy that was holding back.”

Phisto took his friend by the shoulders, locking eyes with him.

“But they don’t know that. In their view, we’ve succeeded where others haven’t. Our presence at this little shindig gives the Senator *teeth*. It gives our *mission* teeth.”

Isaiah looked to his boots, sighing with ragged breath. The chamberlain had said nothing, but now checked his wrist computer, discreetly concealed beneath the folds of a long tunic. He cleared his throat, stepping closer to the two uniformed men. Some of his poise receded as he swallowed.

“It is time. The Patrons are assembling. And... if I may say so...”

The man pulled aside the front of his tunic, revealing the insignia of a formally indentured slave. The flickering holo-badge told the tale of long service. His eyes transitioned from impersonal formality to something approaching bravery.

“... the Loren family’s downfall was triggered at an event like this. Trust no one.”

Phisto turned, irony in his eyes.

“Don’t sit in front of the band. Got it.”

The starfield that whizzed by in the window wasn't real, of course. In fact, the window itself wasn't even one, simply a cleverly-integrated holo-screen to give the passenger cabin a stately appearance. Tyrran and Yolanta sat across from each other, saying little. Both were hunched over, wary and silent. Both had tried to sleep at one point or another, yet slumber came only with difficulty. There was simply too much at stake, and the only amenities available to them were in the confines of their cabin.

Yolanta stretched out on her chair, cigarillo in her fingers and her gaze at the holo-screen. Her unsmiling lips closed around the tip of her cigarillo, taking a long drag. Tyrran rose from his own seat, leaning against the bulkhead next to the holoscreen, looking over his shoulder at his partner. His accent, normally crisp, thickened to the point of sounding almost like Yolanta's.

"Have you ever done anything like this?"

Another drag. Another cool gaze.

"Have *you*?"

Tyrran looked away, at the false viewport.

"Once."

Yolanta looked up.

"And?"

"And it didn't work out."

Another pause. Another swaying feeling of the ship orienting itself for a jump. Yolanta leaned back.

"Seems like not a lot in your life has. Perhaps you are not the roguishly competent operator you like to think."

Tyrran's face hardened, his eyes locking onto his partner's.

"What I *think* is that I came from nothing and rose to own my own ship. Nothing handed to me."

Superiority washed over Yolanta's features.

"But not a lot legitimately acquired either, *si*?"

The man snorted. “Don't talk to me about legitimacy. How many lives were ruined when you Night Witches threw in with the Raiders to seize Atroco?”

Yolanta stood, her eyes blazing.

“Do not lecture me, *patán*. The Imperial government of that system was corrupt to its core. We set an example for all.”

Tyrran locked gazes with his partner. “And pocketed the credits along the way. Maybe we're not so different after all.”

The woman's wrist was caught midair, inches from Tyrran's jaw. Yolanta drew herself closer, an intimate distance from the man.

“You know nothing.”

Tyrran held the woman's wrist, standing his own ground.

“I know I'm not one of your field slaves, and I know you're a long way from home. Daddy can't help you where we're going.”

“Attention, passengers. We are in supercruise to our final destination. Please secure yourselves and prepare for landing.”

Silence and tension thickened between man and woman. Yolanta held position for just a moment before yanking her hand back.

“No one can help us except each other. Remember that if you want to live.”

“Relax, pal. I'm here to help you get through this. You'll live. Remember that.”

Isaiah straightened himself at Phisto's whisper, the ball's formal commencement at hand. He was posed a fair distance from Vespar Faveol, his position as commander of his personal wing guaranteeing a spot close enough to be honored, yet not close enough to be truly important. At Faveol's side was Valeria Larsen, the Legion's governor who administered all of Prism in their name. From there, senior patrons, admirals, and other bastions of power comprised the august gathering, and as always the spouses of such were considered choice morsels if the main courses themselves were otherwise preoccupied. Surrounding Isaiah was the finery of Imperial high fashion, recklessly flamboyant by the standards of the Federation yet relatively conservative by Achenarian standards. The cuts of suits and dresses were designed to flatter instead of reveal, and subtle hues supplanted the kaleidoscopic trends of gaudier Imperial circles.

Vespar Faveol had continued the Loren preference for a live orchestra, and the initial notes of a willowy string section crept into the background. The great double doors of the ballroom opened, and the guests were announced one by one, hand-in-hand with spouses or favored courtesans. The orchestra maintained a suitably low-key tune, one of subtle elegance yet not threatening to overwhelm the chamberlain or the prestige of the guests that he announced. With perfect poise the newcomers approached the waiting senator and his retinue, and with perfect poise they were received. Handshakes, bows, and kisses upon outstretched hands were offered as rank and favor dictated. A few of them— admirals, mainly— were known to Isaiah. The rest were recognized only by last-minute coaching from the chamberlain.

Isaiah forced a formal smile upon his face, the first of the guests approaching earshot. Phisto, too, straightened himself, his whisper dropping into something even softer.

“Just remember— we bent over scented asses like these back in Coma.”

Evanson glanced to his side.

“War’s over, bud.”

Phisto Sobanii, too, had adopted a gracious smile, but his eyes remained sharp. One of the elderly figures shaking hands with Faveol bore the distinct eagle of Denton Patreus upon his arm. On his shoulder was the mark of an Imperial admiral. Phisto took a subtle step closer to his friend and leader, ice in his voice.

“Not for everyone it ain’t. Keep them hardpoints deployed.”

The introductions proceeded, not a single one of the incoming guests the least bit interested in paying attention to Evanson more than protocol dictated, which was mercifully very little. Equally merciful was that the man had been given ample opportunity to overhear names and manners of appropriate greeting from others closer to the senator, and so was never at a loss of what to say or how to welcome the man or woman before him. One by one the man went through the motions, his mind in a state of self-imposed martial law, all normal emotions of anxiety crushed beneath the importance of the occasion. There would be ample time to decompress later. Now, his every verbal inflection and facial tic would be scrutinized. Commander Isaiah Evanson needed to be as perfect as though fighting a dozen Thargoids.

At last, arrival and introductions concluded, and the orchestra was allowed to intensify the timbre of its offering, soaring notes and majestic melodies reassuring all of the continued grandeur of the Empire itself. There was no introductory speech from Faveol, who was already in polite conversation with a gaggle of impossibly coiffed men and women. Isaiah and Phisto were left standing next to each other. The former swallowed, his voice low.

“What now?”

Phisto took his place at his friend's side, no longer needing to stand a suitably subordinate distance behind him. An informally formal energy had descended upon the occasion, there appearing to be no itinerary for the ball.

"Seems like Old Man Vespar wouldn't skimp on the wine for something like this."

Evanson exhaled. "Yeah. I could use a drink, too."

A slave with a tray of flawless crystal glasses walked by, and both men took for themselves a sample of what was being offered. For a moment Sobanii's eyes lingered upon the slave, both slim and curvy to feminine perfection, golden hair cascading down her back. Forcing his gaze from her, he took a delicate sip. The flavor was subtle at first, but then intensified into something not quite fruity and not quite alcoholic. Rich carbonation gave him the impression that he had imbibed liquid air. The flavor disappeared as he swallowed, leaving his palette refreshed to experience the next sip anew. At his side, Phisto chuckled.

"Never did see the point of champagne, " he said. "Especially after the imps got a hold of it. Give me a real drink anytime."

A new voice behind them, caused both men to spin, deep and gravely and aged.

"Then perhaps you'll allow me to pour your glass sometime, Phisto of the Sobanii."

Standing before them was the same aged man, his face a deep tan framed by silver hair, lines making their way across his features despite the cosmetic technology to which he enjoyed access. A life of hard military discipline had kept his body lean, and his eyes had the hardness of a man accustomed to daily rigor. It was with almost mechanical precision that Evanson recited his name in greeting.

"Admiral Marcus DeLalarier. A pleasure. Thank you again for your presence."

For his part, Phisto had said nothing, an animal gleam spreading across his features.

"I haven't been addressed as a clanner since I left the old homestead. Someone's been doing their homework."

DeLalarier, too, straightened himself, matching the younger man's concealed animosity.

"It is wise to study the ways of one's adversaries, is it not? Even if the struggle is ultimately fruitless."

Isaiah looked from one man to the other, holding his glass up in a gesture of reconciliation. A cautious edge remained in his eyes.

"Thousands of systems teeming with human life, and yet the universe remains a small place. You two have met, I take it?"

Phisto, too, held up his champagne.

"Never face to face. Closest I ever came was watching the good admiral sign the treaty that guaranteed Coma its freedom."

A pair of silver eyebrows lifted.

"So you *were* there. Spying, I presume."

It was a statement of fact, not a question. Sobanii smiled with perfect roguish grace.

"Lovingly observing. From a distance. With a... *friend*."

The men locked eyes for an uncomfortably long moment. DeLalarier spoke, his voice sandpaper.

"And now the eagle graces your arm, as well. What would the rebel of then have thought of that? His old comrades? This mysterious... *friend*?"

Sobanii's smile remained fixed, though his voice took on a dangerous edge.

"The man would know that it ain't about the threads on your sleeve. His comrades, the same. And the friend?"

He shrugged.

"She would have thrown a shoe."

If Marcus DeLalarier was phased by Phisto's reply, his features betrayed none of it. His eyes washed over the pair of uniformed men before him.

"Phisto Sobanii and Isaiah Evanson. Two men whose allegiances are more transitory than the most desperate mercenary. Truly you have found a fitting patron in Lady Kahina's memory."

Isaiah stiffened, his eyes flashing. Yet he said nothing, held in check by iron self-control. Phisto, with less to lose, spoke first.

"I've wanted to meet you for a long damn time, admiral. First it was to blast that pretty white *Majestic* of yours into a flaming wreck. Then it was to look you in the eye when you put pen to parchment. But you know what I've learned?"

Easy amusement danced in DeLalarier's eyes.

"I'm sure you're about to tell me."

Phisto took a step forward— and raised his glass in salute, holding it in earnest between his face and the admiral's.

"It doesn't matter. Any of it. Not me, or you, or who won and who lost. It doesn't matter who controls Coma. It doesn't even matter if it's the skull or the eagle that's painted on my ship."

The admiral let out a chuckle, low and gravelly.

"Nihilism suits you even worse than that uniform."

Evanson stepped forward shook his head, urgency in his tone despite the delicacy of the situation.

"It isn't that. We've been out there, admiral. We've seen the storm on the horizon. Phis- Commander Sobanii is right. Coma is nothing. The Empire and the Federation and every two-bit indy faction from here to the Pleiades are nothing— or at least, they will be if we don't set aside our differences."

A smile that bordered on the mocking lifted one side of DeLalarier's tight mouth.

“Then I and much of the admiralty have been mistaken. You are not starry-eyed idealists carrying on the legacy of a traitor after all, but a rare species of loyalist. A thousand apologies.”

His features hardened, the sandpaper of decades in command returning to his voice.

“Do you think I haven’t reviewed the holotapes a thousand times? Scrolled the lists of destroyed ships and names of the perished? Demanded every scrap of intelligence concerning the alien threat? Heard account rendered from the Merope Expeditionary Force over the massive losses sustained in the Pleiades?”

Phisto took a sip of his champagne, all pretense rapidly fading.

“Sounds like you’ve done everything except *something*.”

The three men’s gazes met, uneasy and tense, with perfect poise and yet all the animosity of the past threatening to break free. A feminine voice interrupted the moment, soft and Achenarian, yet unmistakably authoritative.

“Oh, I simply *knew* the admiral would find you!”

Phisto and Isaiah turned, a woman in an elegant, loose wrap approaching. The yards of cloth draped around her body hinted cunningly at being a *stola* of antiquity without actually being one. Hues of whites and greys and blues outlined a lean figure. Her skin was fair and smooth, intelligent eyes and fluid motions making every movement a vision of grace. Thick black hair was cut in precise angles, complimenting the aquiline lines of her jaw. She might have been twenty, and she might have been sixty. It was impossible to say with upper-class Imperials.

The admiral bowed slightly.

“Commanders, may I present the Admiral of the Fleet’s personal representative, Consul Cassadoria Durant.”

The woman extended a gloved hand. Three pairs of lips kissed it. Arrogant modesty dripped from her every word.

“The admiral is mistaken, I fear. It is *under*consul, one of only several in Denton Patreus’s patronage.”

Isaiah drew himself up. Phisto regarded the woman impassively. The former was the first to speak.

“It is a shame that the Admiral of the Fleet couldn’t grace us with his own presence.”

The underconsul’s smile remained affixed, yet coldness flashed in her eyes.

“The Admiral is a busy man. And since his last visit to this place, he has developed an aversion for—”

She glanced at the orchestra, the air still filled with subtle, elegant strings.

“*Live* entertainment. You understand, of course.”

Evanson bowed. It took all of Sobanii’s willpower to not roll his eyes.

“Of course.”

A slave with a silver tray of drinks passed by. Durant took one, holding the impossibly thin stem between dainty gloved fingers. She turned to the men, the diplomat’s smile upon her face.

“It is a curiosity, is it not? For Loren’s Legion to persist *sans* any Lorens left to serve. Yet ours is a forgiving nature, and the shame of a single misguided soul shouldn’t be borne by those honorbound to her family. To say nothing of certain... *concerns*.”

Isaiah’s eyebrows raised.

“Oh?”

Cassadoria took a delicate sip of the champagne, the golden liquid washing down a throat that had yet to bear its first wrinkle.

“Atroco. An Imperial-held system not twenty light-years from here, fallen to lawlessness and anarchy. A most unfortunate turn, what with such cancer being so close to the very heart of the Legion.”

Isaiah and Phisto exchanged a look. Evanson nodded and bowed in acknowledgement.

“Unfortunate, as you say. Yet the Legion received no calls for aid.”

Graciousness dripped from every word of the underconsul’s.

“Oh, I didn’t mean *that!* The Legion cannot be expected to see to every crisis outside its space. My only concern is for the safety of Prism and the millions who call it home. We wouldn’t want such—”

Her eyes washed over the two men before her, one hand curling around the admiral’s arm.

“*Undesirables* among us, now would we?”

Phisto shrugged. “True enough. No telling *what* kind of backwater riff-raff is standing between polite society and the horrors of the void.”

Durant’s eyes sharpened, her tone sinister in its lightness.

“Or indeed the fortunes of tired old Senators who have been reduced to depending on such.”

Before either Legionnaire could respond, the admiral interjected, his manner now a model of graciousness.

“Your role in safeguarding the *Gnosis* has been an inspiration to us all. Vespar Faveol is the toast of the Senate for his selfless contribution to its well-being.”

Isaiah scoffed. “Not bad for riff-raff.”

Marcus raised his glass. “Oh, come now. Even we Imperials can let bygones be bygones. In fact...” he took a sip, re-toasting the Legionaries before him. “I think that Cassadoria here is correct. There exists every chance for the Legion to rehabilitate its image.”

Phisto narrowed his eyes, his hand falling instinctively to his saber.

“‘Rehabilitate’? We’re the only one of your gleaming squadrons taking the fight to the bugs.”

The admiral’s eyes softened in gentle correction.

“At present, yes. Surely you’ve seen the remnants of our initial effort to repel the Thargoid menace.”

Isaiah shook his head, wary of the admiral’s appeal to tragedy.

“You and the Federation both took your licks. *I’d* send the indies to fight and die after that, too.”

Durant’s eyes gleamed their diplomatic gleam.

“We, commander. We have all of us sworn our allegiance to the Empire.”

Phisto drained his crystal glass of champagne in a single, decidedly un-Imperial pull, placing it back upon the platter of a passing slave.

“Yeah,” he said. “We’re all one big, happy family.”

The admiral bowed his head in mocking agreement.

“Well put,” he replied. “And like in any household, the task of cleaning up unsightly messes is a responsibility shared by all. It was a pleasure, commanders. We look forward to the further employment of your expertise *quite* soon.”

Admiral and underconsul shared a superior glance, toasting the duo a final time. Isaiah raised his in return.

“A pleasure, as you say.”

Formal bows were exchanged, and the pilots were left alone, still surrounded by opulence and opulent people alike. In the background the orchestra had moved on to a lively, whimsical waltz, partners already pairing off. Phisto and Isaiah looked at one another. The latter, too, drained his champagne. The same golden-haired slave as before took his glass with a wordless, subservient smile.

“I don’t know about you,” said Evanson, “but I’ve danced enough for one ball already.”

Phisto kept a pair of wary eyes on the man and woman who had so pompously looked down upon them. Already they were all smiles, whirling in perfect unison to the music.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “That was more than Patty’s people sizing up a former foe. They’re here to interfere with the mission itself.”

Isaiah snorted. “And our response?”

Phisto of the Sobanii grinned, more wolfish than man with his greying temples.

“Interfere *back*.”

“All incoming personnel: please report to corporate human resources for processing.”

Tyrran Andor and Yolanta Púrpura stood in the station’s cavernous hangar, ships coming and going above their heads, the scaffolding of a hastily-constructed inner hull telling the tale of a massive-scale rush job. It was cold in the docking bay, Yolanta trying and failing to stop herself from shivering. Both had packed lightly, and a single duffle bag for each rested at their sides on the deck. At their backs was Jerome Albion’s Anaconda, looming large and already being tended to by the bay’s auto-loaders.

“I think that is for you, *patán*.”

Tyrran snorted, shouldering his pack.

“That’s ‘Titmouse’. And what about you? You’re not just expecting them to simply let you pass, are you?”

The woman’s eyes flashed. “I will be fine. Worry about yourself.”

“Right.”

Man and woman advanced toward the main hangar entryway, spinning in unison at the voice behind them.

“You’ve got more to worry about than that.”

Jerome was leaning against the massive ramp of the Anaconda, auto-loading robots descending and ascending behind him. In his hand was a cigarette, a brand from a system that had recently broken away from the Federation. Yolanta looked with envy upon it. Tyrran's eyes narrowed, meeting those of Albion's.

"What did you say?"

The pilot shrugged, rugged in his battered flightsuit and jacket.

"First time out here?"

Man and woman nodded in affirmation, Tyrran's eyes wary and Yolanta's sharp, the latter fishing out a cigarillo from her pocket. Without a word Jerome produced a lighter and lit it, smoke wafting from the tip as she took her first drag.

"What is it to you, *pilot*?"

Tyrran took his place at her side, the three huddled close together. None of Albion's rakish demeanor left him.

"We're in a place that not many can go, and even fewer have spoken of. You seem like a nice..."

His eyes washed over Tyrran and Yolanta, one eyebrow lifting.

"... *couple*, so how about some free advice?"

Tyrran scoffed.

"Sure."

Albion took a drag of his own.

"Don't eat, and don't drink. Water, booze, food, *air*... Nothing from Wreaken, and nothing onboard whatever ship you're assigned to. Unless of course you're okay with, you know..."

He pointed to his head, tapping a temple with his finger.

"Not remembering anything."

Yolanta blinked and cocked her head to the side.

"One moment, *señor*— you are not saying that—"

Albion's features grew serious.

“I don’t know how they do it, but they do. People come in as steady as you or me. Then they leave and can’t describe the place to save their lives. To survive in these parts, you need to stay hungry and thirsty. Use your Remlock’s air the moment you’re granted control of your ship. Don’t talk to anyone. Don’t buy anything. And for Randomius’s sake, don’t ask any questions.”

Tyrran stepped forward.

“Why are you helping us?”

Jerome took a drag and stuck a finger in Andor’s chest.

“See? That’s a question. Maybe let the lady do the talking, huh?”

Yolanta’s eyes narrowed, Iberian cunning in every feature.

“We are not here to *talk*.”

Jerome motioned with his cigarette. The greeting announcement replayed itself over the loudspeaker, filling the massive chamber with noise.

“No, you aren’t. Don’t keep these people waiting. Don’t panic. Don’t act any more or less important than you are. And whatever you do, don’t *ever*—”

The announcement repeated itself, with a warning that tardiness would result in docked mission pay. Yolanta grabbed Tyrran’s arm, leading him away. The man shook his head, walking backwards.

“Don’t ever *what*?”

Jerome Albion took a final drag of his cigarette before flicking it away. In the low gravity it soared the length of the landing pad before finally bouncing on the deck. A hard look danced in his eye as he answered.

“Ask questions.”

“They say it’s bad luck to attend an occasion like this alone. *Are you alone?*”

Phisto Sobanii straightened himself, a feminine specimen of Imperial radiance before him.

“My commander retired early, so you could say my dance card is clear.”

The woman who had sauntered up was a vision of subdued opulence, her slim figure wrapped in a form-fitting gown of aquas and whites. Her hair was a tasteful shade of crimson, just a little too vibrant to be natural yet looking for all the ‘verse as though it might have been. Modest jewelry adorned her wrists and throat; a dainty hand extended itself. On one finger was a ring, the angular eagle of Denton Patreus’s crest prominent upon it.

With scarcely-concealed contempt Phisto bowed before the strange woman and kissed her hand, hoping that the gallant gesture wouldn’t cause some kind of scandal. He looked up, roguish eyes meeting hers.

“Phisto Sobanii, of the Senator’s personal squadron.”

The woman cocked her head to the side, her gaze sharp.

“Tessia St. Antonius, assistant to the underconsul.”

Slowly, Phisto nodded, rising from the bow.

“If you’re looking for your boss, I haven’t seen her.”

A charming smile lightened the woman’s features.

“Oh, I’m not looking for *her*. I just... had to meet you for myself. See that the rumors were true with my own eyes.”

Now it was Phisto’s turn to look sideways at the woman before him.

“Rumors?”

Tessia took a glass of wine from the same slave as before, the two women's eyes meeting before the latter's shot to the floor. Submissive beauty cowed before that of its better. The former took a superior sip, the proper social order upheld. Satisfied, she turned back to the uniformed man before her.

"Yes. If there was a shred of justice in the galaxy, you would be on trial for crimes against Her Majesty. Yet here you are, disgracing the eagle, your very presence an insult to the Fleet Admiral. The Senator must truly be mad."

The woman allowed the fact to hang in the air between them. Phisto took a step forward, his voice dropping.

"I'll tell you what I told Durant: this ain't a game."

In the background the music swelled, the orchestra transitioning into a fine waltz. As before, partners paired off, bowing to each other in the old style. Tessia's features softened into confident amusement.

"Not a game, as you say— but it *is* a ball."

Gloved fingers curled around Phisto's thicker digits, leading his hand to her waist and the woman drawing herself toward him. Her other hand settled upon his shoulder, nudging him around in time with the music, man and woman imitating the steps of those around him. Phisto blinked.

"I don't d—"

Tessia cut him off.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll lead."

With passable grace the unlikely duo waltzed, distrust in their eyes, hands on shoulders, the ballroom and the other guests surrounding them. The rhythm slowed, and Tessia's arm snaked across Phisto's neck, drawing him in close. Her lips hovered inches from his ear, her voice dropping into a whisper.

"Not everything is as it seems, Commander. Your friends are in danger. *You* are in danger."

Phisto scowled, his hand gripping the woman's waist.

"Patreus doesn't scare m—"

Tessia, too, pulled Phisto close, their bodies pressed together even as they kept to the steps. The couples nearest them pretended to not notice.

None of the urgency had left the woman's tone.

"Tonight. In your suite. I'll explain more."

The waltz rose to a climax and faded into its denouement, man and woman bowing before each other, holding the pose for a long moment per Imperial custom. Distrust washed over Phisto's features and he looked up, his eyes meeting hers. His voice was a low growl.

"I still don't trust you."

Man and woman drew themselves up, each the other's equal. Cunning sharpened Tessia St. Antonius's every feature.

"Then perhaps," she said, "you are not a *total* fool."

There was no favoritism, of course. Annika was as generous or snide to Tyrran as she was to Joss and Carter. They were a crew, running legitimate jobs when they were available and becoming legally creative when they weren't. In time Tyrran settled into his new position as the gopher; his job was to do the work that required someone to be outside of the ship. Sometimes it was to spacewalk inside a derelict hulk. Others, it was to drive the rover around a crash site. They were salvagers, mainly—working on hot leads or rumors, and other times for a client who needed discrete work performed. It was a good life; destroyed vessels didn't fire back when having their components stripped and the deceased crew inside didn't protest.

By day, Tyrran would do his part as a member of the crew. By night he would rest, wondering if Annika would discretely enter his cabin. There was never any way to tell. Sometimes she would visit him for consecutive nights, and other times entire weeks would pass between intimate embraces. Their trysts were never spoken of, neither in the moment nor in daytime conversation. It was as though Annika was interested in having an escape more than a lover, a tiny pocket of refuge from whatever demons nipped at her heels and whispered into her ears.

On one night their lovemaking was particularly vigorous; in the aftermath of their climaxes Annika curled up to the younger man and locked him into a long, deep kiss.

"The ship is getting some upgrades," she said, "and I got you something special."

There was a giddiness to her tone, a lightheartedness that made her seem almost girlish. Tyrran drew her closer, letting her raven hair fall around his head as he indulged in another kiss.

“And what would that be?” he asked.

There was a final kiss, and the rustling of sheets as the woman rose from his bunk. Her slim outline was barely visible in the darkness as she dressed.

“You’ll see,” she said.

Before the younger man could say anything, he felt his hand in hers, something small being placed inside it. His question was stifled with a final kiss, her hands curling his fingers around the mysterious item.

“I think that you’ll be wanting this, though. For luck.”

With that the woman turned, the cabin door sliding shut behind her.

For a moment Tyrran remained still, unsure of what Annika had placed in his hand. He reached over to turn on his bunk’s reading light, his eyes widening as he uncurled his fingers.

There in his hand was the Pilots Federation pendant, dreams and years returning to the man in a burst of shock and hope. For a moment the man simply stared at it, a relic from what seemed like another life entirely.

Tyrran Xavian Andor laid back in his bunk, his smell and Annika’s still lingering on the sheets. The path that he’d taken to be in that moment played before his eyes, and within himself the man experienced a new feeling. It was in his chest, light and warm, like one’s first breath after nearly drowning.

For the first time in his life, Tyrran Xavian Andor felt that he was exactly where he belonged.

“Of *course* I belong here. I’ve already signed all your damned paperwork. Can’t you read the manifest?”

The hangars of Wreaken Construction’s main Orbis were the most guarded that Tyrran had ever seen. Armed men and women patrolled the corridors, and the space beyond the hangar was thick with ships, scanning and re-scanning every coming and departing vessel. Holographic bioimagers monitored not only people but their physiological responses. If one exhibited signs of anxiety or fear, they were detained and questioned as to what they had to be nervous about.

Still, Tyrran had long ago learned the value of a confident lie, and so wasn’t averse to a bit of posturing. The dour-faced security guard had said nothing as a long line of verification metrics scrolled on a holoscreen. Andor— that was to say Titmouse, as far as everyone was concerned— waited with impatience on his features. The list of holodocuments completed, ending the verification process with a satisfying chime. A gloved finger went from Tyrran’s chest to the dusky woman at his side.

“Not you. *Her*.”

Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura folded her arms, Iberian eyes narrowing.

“If *he* is here, then so am I. We are both of us with the guild. What is the problem?”

The guard crossed his arms, looking at the man and woman before him.

“There was never any mention of crew. And even if your documents *do* check out—”

Tyrran interrupted. “Then there’s no problem, is there? Have you ever *seen* a Panther? You expect me to fly one of those alone?”

“We expect you to do the job. Nothing less—”

His gaze settled upon Yolanta. “And nothing more. Even if you *are* the pilot’s wife.”

Tyrran blinked. Yolanta put her hands on her hips.

“Virgil and Esterlita Titmouse do not *need* this job, you know. And it would be *most* unfortunate if Wreaken missed such an important outgoing shipment because some stuffed shirt decided to play SysAuth, *si*?”

The guard let out a low chuckle.

“Lady,” he said. “You have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

Púrpura’s eyes blazed.

“I could say the same thing.”

A ship’s thrusters echoed through the security station. The man held his fingers to his ear, listening to an incoming transmission that only he could hear. His head snapped back up, looking upon them both with suspicion. He took Yolanta’s— Esterlita’s— guild identicard and ran it through a device, handing it back to her. The same chime as before sounded.

“You’re clear to board the ship. Don’t deviate from the flight plan. Don’t go anywhere except the bridge and living quarters. And don’t contact anyone. Comms are for emergency use only.”

An access card was offered by the guard and accepted by Tyrran. On it was Wreaken’s corporate logo. Andor held it up between them.

“Thanks.”

“*Madre de Randomius*, this ship is *huge!*”

Yolanta’s eyes bulged at the sight of the Panther. Indeed, the vessel towered over the pair, its forward bridge bubble tiny compared to the greater bulk of the freighter. Neither man nor woman broke stride toward it, the need to present themselves as consummate professionals overriding their impulses to gawk at the vessel. Yet the woman wasn’t wrong— in a profession where one’s person was often dwarfed by one’s ship, most ships were in turn dwarfed by the Panther.

Man and women stepped on the lift, elevated high above the hangar deck until it came to a halt. The exterior doors snapped shut, Tyrran glancing to his partner now that they were out of sight.

“There must be enough alien junk in this ship to—”

Yolanta nodded, finishing his sentence. “Equip the entire squadron, *si*. We just have to—”

Now it was Tyrran’s turn to finish. “Get it the hell away from *here*. Quick.”

The door slid open, Yolanta’s hands drifting to her hips as she beheld the main corridor. Utilitarian furnishings greeted them, not a single detail spared for the sake of esthetics.

“And there is nothing quick about this beast. Come. We must hurry.”

Man and woman strode down the corridor, mag-boots keeping them in place, two hearts beginning to pound with anticipation, the reality of what they were attempting sinking in. Without a word they settled into their seats, Tyrran in the main chair and Yolanta occupying the co-pilot’s position. His Pilot’s Federation— that was to say Virgil’s— authenticated with a satisfying chime.

For her part, Yolanta had pulled up the ship’s cargo manifest. Information scrolled past her eyes.

“It is as I thought,” she said. “Reactors, weapons, hull samples— everything the Legion needs to destroy the Thargoids. We even have some kind of prototype fighter onboard.”

Tyrran’s fingers danced across the display, flipping switched and bringing the ship online one system at a time. The low *thrum* of life echoed around them. A scowl crossed his face.

“It won’t mean anything if Wreaken finds us out. We won’t have much time even if we successfully jump. This ship is tagged, or else I’m from Achenar.”

Slowly, Yolanta nodded. “And there is no time to find the tracking device.”

“Not on this whale.”

Tyrran checked the navigation systems. The course for the ship’s journey was already plotted, a winding route that led into the Bubble. Even the final destination was deliberately obscured, not to be revealed until a handful of jumps beforehand. There was no fuel scoop, and barely enough fuel for the programmed journey. Manual re-plotting was disabled. The presence of the human pilots was more of a formality than anything.

Permission to depart was requested and given. Man and woman strapped themselves in, acclimating to the spartan surroundings. Tyrran turned to his partner, his hand on the throttle.

“Ready for this?”

Yolanta’s eyes flashed.

“Are *you*?”

Tyrran said nothing, manipulating the controls and moving the throttle forward. The Panther's engines rumbled to life, powerful yet sluggish. The deck beneath their feet shook, the gargantuan ship rising slowly even in the low gravity of the hangar. Gently, deliberately, Andor nudged the Panther forward, the mailslot growing larger and larger in the canopy. Yolanta remained tight-mouthed, her expression betraying nothing yet her hands gripping their rests a little more firmly than usual...

"Clear."

The ship passed through the slot, bare meters to spare on all sides. Yolanta's nostrils flared, exhaling even as her eyes sharpened. Her accent thickened.

"No. Not until we are landed and the cargo is delivered. We have no idea what we are up against."

Tyrran was opening his mouth to reply, but his eyes drifted from his partner to the view beyond her. He blinked, holding up one hand to point.

"Yes. We *do*."

One eyebrow on Yolanta's face lifted, the woman's eyes following the line from Tyrran's finger to where it was pointing. For a moment, the woman forgot to breathe, though she otherwise maintained her unsmiling composure. Her words escaped as a hushed whisper.

"*Madre de Randomius...*"

Stretching into the distance were capital ships, Imperial and Federal, massive and foreboding, too numerous to count. Flowing cream lines of *Majestic*-class starcruisers contrasted against the no-nonsense angles of the *Farragut* battleships, yet it was clear that Wreaken was in the business of constructing them both.

Tyrran scowled. "Playing both sides like the corporate filth they are. Typical."

Yolanta exhaled, her mind racing. "No. I have the feeling..."

The Panther flew onward, nearing its jump point, dwarfed by the massive hulls of the behemoths, some still under construction. The woman within found the words to complete her thought, so profound was it in the face of the evidence arrayed before her.

“... that there were never really sides to begin with.”

It was late on Chione, the evening’s weather having been engineered for the ball to transition to the palace’s expansive balconies under a perfect, starry night. The cream of Prism’s Imperial society did exactly that, gossiping and posturing before itself. Staccato laughter, as artificial as the very night, rose upward until it reached the ears of Phisto Sobanii, leaning from the perch of his suite’s balcony. He was still in uniform, having gracefully— as gracefully as possible, anyway— excused himself from the evening’s socializing. Isaiah was nowhere to be seen, but Sobanii was certain that at that moment his Squadron leader had retired to either his quarters or his *Fer de Lance*. Phisto was alone.

The man glanced over his shoulder.

No. Not alone.

Tessia St. Antonius was only a silhouette in the suite’s low light, but her presence was unmistakable. A slender hand rested itself upon a slender hip, her High Imperial accent setting him on edge.

“I’m taking an awful risk, you know. Being here with you.”

Phisto of the Sobanii turned, his eyes wary.

“I could say the same thing.”

The woman sauntered up, a glass of wine in her free hand, her gaze never leaving his.

“Don’t mistake my presence for anything that it isn’t.”

Phisto took a step forward, challenging her.

“Then what *is* it?”

Tessia didn't answer, only taking a cunning sip of her drink.

"I want what you want. So does Patreus."

The man scoffed. "I doubt that."

A sensual chuckle. Another sip. "You're not in the Fusiliers any longer. The time for villainizing every Imperial you meet is passed."

Phisto turned to look away, and then back to his guest.

"And you didn't come here just to rehash old grudges on Patty's behalf. Get to the point."

Tessia's smile vanished, her features hard.

"You and your friend... Everson. You're trying to turn an honorable cadre of men and women into glorified exterminators."

She took a step forward, joining Phisto at the balcony. With an elegant sip she surveyed the palace grounds, pretending to be interested in them.

"I'm not mistaken, am I?"

The man glanced to his side, distrust in his eyes.

"Not exactly news, that. Got anything solid, or am I supposed to be impressed with the obvious? And it's Evanson."

Below, there was a cheer. Faveol was addressing the assembled crowd, orating as was the custom of senators. It was impossible to tell what was being said, but his tone carried in it the conviction appropriate to his office. He held his hand aloft, capping off whatever he was saying in the typical Imperial flair for the theatrical. Another cheer, louder than the one before it, rose from the guests. As it reached a crescendo, Tessia spun, an intimate distance from Phisto. Her voice dropped even amid the cheering.

"Tell me: what do those who serve beneath you think of your mission? Truly?"

Phisto looked away, distrust in his features.

“Isai— Commander Evanson and I are outsiders. The only reason that they even accept him is because he flew at *her* side. And as for me?”

He turned back to Tessia.

“Let’s just say that I don’t get bought many drinks at the officer’s club.”

The woman nodded, her every feature one of understanding.

“It would be difficult, answering to one who so recently fought against the Empire. Even more so after the loss of one’s Patron.”

The man grunted. “A third of them are ready to go indy. Another third have put in for transfers to other legions. The *other* third are up in arms over the idea of fighting Thargoids.”

“Can you blame them?”

Phisto was silent for a long moment.

“No.”

Starlight caressed Tessia’s fair skin, perfect beneath the Chionian night. With Imperial poise she finished her wine, reaching out to place the glass on a non-existent platter a little too absent-mindedly for her own good. The surprise in her eyes was convincing.

“You do not keep a slave?”

Sobanii shook his head, his eyes dark.

“Not my style. Never was.”

Innocent acceptance softened the woman’s face.

“Then we *are* alone.”

In the distance below, Faveol had finished orating. The cream of the sector was once again mingling among itself; the fine hues of Cassdoria Durant’s evening gown could be picked out, as could the more stolid colors of Admiral Delalier’s military tunic. Phisto gestured to the assemblage.

“Aren’t you supposed to be laughing at the underconsul’s jokes or something?”

Tessia smiled. “That’s everyone *else’s* function, not mine. The affairs of state must be managed in realtime, and my Patron’s affairs are no exception. My evenings are typically spent exchanging pleasantries with those who aren’t *quite* important enough for an audience with the underconsul herself.”

The pilot exhaled, shaking his head.

“Remind me to never have your job.”

The woman, too, joined her host in looking downward at the distant guests. A breeze caught her hair, marring its perfect arrangement.

“Traveling at the side of those in power or thanklessly fighting Thargoids. Remind *me* to never have *your* job.”

That brought a grin to Pisto’s lips, however slight.

“If Isaiah and I are going to do this, we’ll need all the help we can get. You know that, right?”

The woman turned, her eyes intelligent.

“Quite. And my Patron is *most* invested in the Legion’s success. I think we’ll be working together quite closely, commander.”

Another breeze, this time against the woman’s gown. A pleasing figure was outlined for the briefest of moments. Sobanii stepped closer, his eyes softening into hers.

“*How* close?”

Tessia’s hand slid to the back of the man’s head, pulling him in. His lips met hers, tongues exploring. Her kisses trailed along his jaw, her lips settling over his ear. The woman could barely summon a whisper, masked in the cheering below.

“*Close*,” she said. “As close as we can *get*.”

“Hold here, *patán*.”

Tyrran looked up from his controls. The Panther was several hours into its journey, jumping from system to uninhabited system, its fuel allotment precise. There was neither room for error nor time to waste.

“What is it?”

Yolanta rose, one hand on her belly.

“None of your business.”

Tyrran rolled his eyes.

“Make it quick.”

The women said nothing, only turning to exit the bridge. She paused, her partner calling out from behind her.

“And try to go *before* we leave next time, huh?”

Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura wrinkled her nose, lifting her chin with her lips pressed together.

“*Hmm!*”

The flash of light illuminated Kerenski’s face, soon obscured by the cigarette smoke, wafting in all directions without gravity to direct it. The woman was seated in the *Litvyak*, the blackness of deep space enveloping her in the Krait Mk II’s canopy. A simple black flightsuit and the glow from the cigarette tip made her sharp features the only thing visible so far from any star. Yet she was not alone.

An armada of Night Witch vessels flanked her, a massive Anaconda at its center surrounded by numerous lesser ships. All were painted black, and all were piloted by trusted associates. All were rigged for low-sig, their thrusters dark and their reactors on minimum power. It was just as well. They were hundreds of light years from home, in a place where detection meant death.

Kerenski took a long drag, forcing her thoughts to focus. It was almost time. The task before her was vital to her purpose, yet the woman felt no fear.

The Void is dark and full of terrors, she thought. And we shall be among them.

Yolanta knelt at the end of a narrow corridor, removing an access panel to the Panther's main comms array. It was a risk, what she was doing—

The woman steeled herself. *But what is not?*

Iberian fingers, long accustomed to the demands of the guitar, moved with precision. Modules were accessed and disconnected, set aside one by one until Yolanta found the master comms relay. Saying nothing she pulled out her dataslate, fingers tapping holographic controls and harnessing the power of the ship's communications suite for herself. Exhaling, she keyed a code that only a handful knew. Her dataslate activated and transmitted, sending its signal into deep space.

The woman closed her eyes, nothing left to do except wait. Her and Tyrran's fates were sealed. They would be discovered— and whether they would live or die depended on who arrived first.

There was a crackle of scrambled comms, followed by the low noise of a signal being homed in upon. Kerenski took a deep drag and watched dispassionately, her eyes not reacting to the new signal but focused on it nevertheless. The transmission clarified itself; the sight and sound of one she knew well shimmered into view before her. Her lips remained tight but her eyes softened.

"Comrade."

The deadpan visage of Yolanta Púrpura dominated her view. Contentment shone in her eyes, though she spoke though unsmiling lips.

"We have it."

Kerenski indulged in another drag, exhaling the smoke as she replied.

“All of it?”

Yolanta *almost* smiled.

“*Si*. Enough for every ship in the squadron. No more rooting through INRA’s junk pile.”

Kerenski nodded.

“How long do you have?”

Yolanta’s almost-smile turned into a scowl.

“Not long. Wreaken’s security as absolute.”

“And Andor?”

The woman’s lips twitched.

“Not completely useless.”

For a moment, neither woman said anything, sharing a glance from across light years.

“Then prepare yourself. And say nothing to Andor.”

From her space in the comms access, Yolanta nodded.

“*Si, camarada.*”

Moving swiftly, the woman disconnected her dataslate and replaced the panels, rising to rejoin her partner. She strode with purpose down the corridor, knowing that the ship was already overdue for its jump. No doubt Wreaken had already dispatched units to investigate...

The woman frowned.

We needed more intelligence for something like this. It was a stroke of brilliance to bypass security and be granted a ship—but it would have been better still to know the location of its tracking beacon.

Yolanta paused, standing at the entryway of the ship's bridge, the infinitude of space beyond its expansive canopy. Somewhere in the black were allies, enemies, and the alien intellects of something else entirely. The woman exhaled, forcing her own composure and locking eyes with Tyrran.

This one's going to be close...

The woman gestured to his partner, his hand already on the throttle.

"Took you long enough. Strap in. We've got to hustle if we want to—"

Yolanta shook her head, her hand over his, keeping it in place.

"No. We wait."

Suspicion clouded Tyrran's features.

"For?"

Iberian eyes blazed.

"Whoever finds us first."

Phisto Sobanii woke, nude and smelling of carnality. It was still dark in his suite, and the lithe form of Tessia St. Antonius was nowhere to be found. He called out the appropriate voice command, the row of picture windows that constituted the bedroom's wall losing opacity until nearly transparent. Morning light flooded the suite, nearly blinding the man.

Shielding his eyes, Phisto rose, looking around as he stumbled to the washroom. There was no sign of the woman, there or in any other part of the suite. The man let out a chuckle. It wasn't the first time he'd been bedded and abandoned— but it *was* the first time he'd been so at the hands of someone in Patreus's circle. Alone, Phisto of the Sobanii sat upon the bed and exhaled. Tessia was well and truly gone.

Yet, there *was* a reminder of her presence. On simple, old-style paper was a hand-written note, waiting by itself on the nightstand. His curiosity piqued, Phisto picked up the note, unfolding it and holding it up to the light. An eyebrow raised.

“The Witches will soon return, and at their heels will be monsters. Prepare yourselves.”

XII

HIGHWAY ROBBERY

“Do you like it?”

Inside the Krait’s cavernous bay was a new addition, all bare metal and angles. The Taipan fighter was ubiquitous throughout independent space, manufactured by the millions and cheap to maintain. With the money from the latest run, Annika could finally afford to equip her ship with one— and she had just the man in mind to be its pilot.

Tyrran turned to his Commander, his eyes unable to leave the sight of the ship entirely.

“It’s beautiful. I mean, yes— it’ll help out considerably.”

One feminine hand curled around his. Annika’s eyes deepened.

“Then it’s yours. Flight training begins today. Your cut gets upped, too. Fifteen percent.”

Tyrran Xavian Andor blinked, unaccustomed to even the slightest amount of generosity. It was several moments before he was able to speak.

“I don’t know what to s—”

Her hand squeezed. Eyes sharpened.

“Then say nothing. Listen to my instruction. Master your craft. A Taipan is no Krait— she’s even more unforgiving of recklessness than I am. But it’s the first step.”

The man forced himself to look at his Commander.

“Toward?”

Annika's hand uncurled itself from Tyrran's— yet in his palm something was left behind. Without thinking Tyrran looked down, uncurling his fingers. Laying face-up was the guild insignia, crudely machined in his adolescence when dreams alone sustained him. His breath left his mouth in a ragged exhale. It was only when Annika lifted his jaw did he tear his gaze from it.

“What you wanted all along. You're going to be a Commander someday. You'll have your own ship. Crew, too, if you want. Go anywhere and do anything.”

In one hand, Tyrran gripped the pendant. With the other he brushed the outline of the woman's jaw.

“And if I said I was happy here?”

Annika's eyes remained hard, though a secret sadness threatened to break to the surface. She took her hand in his, moving it away.

“First rule of the life, Andor: all jobs are temporary.”

Tyrran turned, locking eyes with his partner. The Panther was dead in space, all systems except life support powered down. The blackness of space filled the canopy.

“You should have told me that we'd be sitting ducks for half of this job.”

Yolanta Púrpura took a deep drag of her cigarillo, her own eyes cool and her mouth unsmiling.

“It was... necessary. The fewer people know of the true plan, the better. Taking a tracked ship into our home port is an unacceptable risk. Surely you see this.”

Tyrran advanced, holding up a warning finger. His accent thickened.

“And how many *other* things haven't you told me?”

Yolanta cocked her head to one side, looking the man up and down.

“A great many.”

The man allowed his gaze to linger upon his partner for another moment, turning to once again view the void before him.

“You should have trusted me.”

A plume of smoke exited the woman’s lips.

“Like Cecil did?”

Tyrran scowled.

“Cecil Andross was an old bastard who berated me every chance he got.”

A sharp chuckle could be heard behind him, followed by another drag.

“And for that he deserved to die? For Ortega to be swindled?”

The man glanced to his side, his tone one of subtle mocking.

“It was... necessary.”

Yolanta now advanced, stopping a close distance behind the man.

“You are not running small-time scams any longer, Andor. This mission— what we do— is for humanity as a whole. The sooner you embrace that, the better.”

Tyrran spun, his eyes hard.

“No. *You’re* the one with the lofty goals. I’m the expendable one, remember?”

Indignation hardened the woman’s voice.

“I am here, the same as you. Never forget that, *patán*.”

Man and woman were standing close, so close that both became aware of it simultaneously. Yet neither ceded ground, the tension rising until an alarm sounded from the main sensor readout. Tyrran glanced at his side, green dots filling the holographic space. The man grunted.

“Among others, it seems. We have company.”

The moment passed. Yolanta pressed her lips together before speaking.

“*Si*. The Witches have arrived to take the cargo. Things are proceeding as planned.”

Tyrran scoffed. Already the small armada was within visual range.

“For *you*.”

One cargo container after another was ejected from the Panther’s cavernous hold, dutifully whisked away by one of several waiting limpets. Night Witch ships, configured to hold cargo, surrounded the larger one in their midst. Small, more nimble escorts patrolled the perimeter, their thruster glows like fireflies in the void.

From within the gargantuan ship itself, Andor’s eyes narrowed. Images and data scrolled before him on the Panther’s sensor readout.

“Changing the plan halfway to Atroco. And not a single Legion ship among you. Are you *sure* that I’m not the only swindler here?”

At his side, Yolanta Púrpura crossed her arms. She had been at her own control terminal, manually ejecting the containers one by one. “The Witches work under the Legion, but we are *not* part of the Imperial navy. The arrangement between Evanson and Kerenski is... informal. Yet we are bound to each other.”

Tyrran gripped the throat of his flightsuit, the deadly collar just beneath.

“Yeah,” he said. “Lot of that going around.”

A long moment passed, and Tyrran rose from the pilot’s seat, pacing a short distance. He turned to his partner.

“What are you, exactly? The Night Witches, I mean.”

Yolanta turned away, advancing a few paces before Tyrran, staring into the blackness of space before answering.

“The enemy hides in the shadows, never openly declaring itself. Yet it is out there, *si?* Out there and working plots within plots to maintain power. Those who oppose them must do the same.”

Tyrran snorted.

“‘The Club’,” he said. “We’ve all heard the rumors.”

Yolanta spun.

“They are not rumors, *patán*. Forces larger than we know have been preparing for some kind of calamity— and have been doing so for decades. They manipulate everything to serve their own ends.”

“Who in power doesn’t?”

Yolanta stepped forward, her eyes blazing.

“It is more than that. They harbor secrets— secrets that should be known. They regard most of humanity as pawns, fodder to absorb whatever is coming. They work for themselves— and how hard they work! Yet all inspired by *her* example work, too— we will expose them. Expose them, and defeat them.”

Again, Tyrran scoffed.

“And to defeat them, you have to hijack a ship full of alien tech?”

The woman’s nose wrinkled. A feminine finger jammed into a masculine chest.

“*We, patán*. You may not have a shred of honor, but you work for those who *do*. And I expect—”

An alarm klaxon sounded, dire red triangles appearing one after the other on the Panther’s scope. Tyrran and Yolanta glanced to it simultaneously, both realizing in an instant their situation. Yolanta spun, her unsmiling visage even more dire than usual. Near the center of the readout were friendly green icons- their number rapidly being matched by the red. Yolanta straightened herself, a pair of fingers darting to an ear.

“*Camarada?*”

From the bridge of the *Litvyak*, Kari Kerenski scowled.

“Wreaken security, earlier than I thought. *Pizdets!* We have no choice. *Witches!* Form attack wings and engage!”

As one, the vessels that had been protecting the cargo transfer peeled away, thrusters flaring and hardpoints deploying. At their forefront was their leader’s Krait, its angular lines pointed in the enemy’s direction. Her ship was a marvel of engineering, with weapons and systems obtained through discrete connections— such as the Imperial Prismatic shield array— and from those of less-scrupulous sources, such as the black market Pack-hound swarm missiles. She would need them against such an adversary.

Wiry fingers danced across her seat’s panels, opening a private channel to her second. It took only moments for Yolanta’s face to appear, suspended before her mentor and friend. Kerenski nodded.

“The cargo. It is more important than you or me. I will buy you as much time as I can—”

The woman’s wrist flicked, pulling the *Litvyak* to one side, dodging an incoming dumbfire missile fired from extreme range.

“But you must be quick. Eject it all and let the haulers take what they can. They know where to go. The Panther is compromised, as we expected. It must be scuttled here.”

A pair of holographic Iberian lips pressed together. An Iberian gaze intensified.

“And you, *camarada?*”

The women locked eyes.

“The cargo is more important than either of us,” Kerenski repeated. “I have spoken. Carry out your orders...”

Her tone dropped, only slightly less sharp than usual.

“And good luck.”

With the press of a button, Kerenski cut the line, steeling herself for the battle ahead. Already the two fleets were closing rapidly, and in moments the tranquil blackness of space would erupt in an orgy of fire and death...

Kerenski's dour image cut out. Yolanta blinked, and then straightened herself.

“New orders. We release the cargo. *All* of it.”

Tyrran shook his head, his eyes on the departed escorts. Already they seemed like a swarm of distant fireflies, but he knew that they were deceptively near.

“And then?”

Stoicism hardened the woman's every feature, looking for all the 'verse like her mentor rather than herself.

“And then we do our duty.”

Tyrran shook his head, retreating a few steps.

“What about the Legion? Can't you—”

Yolanta cut him off, sternness in her voice.

“No. They do not know that we are here, remember? And it would be hours before they arrive anyway. We do not have hours.”

Tyrran's own accent thickened in the tension of the moment. He pointed a finger to the battle about to happen before their eyes.

“We don't even have *minutes*.”

The vessels of the Night Witches smashed into those of Wreaken security, neat formations struggling to maintain order amid laserfire and cross-crossing missiles. Yet it wasn't a dogfight in the normal sense— the Wreaken pilots were under orders to retrieve or terminate the errant Panther and deny its valuable cargo to its hijackers. The Witches were under orders to preserve it. Thus did the attackers focus their attentions onto the mammoth ship only kilometers away, and its defenders focus their attention onto the attackers. A cruel arithmetic came into play, Wreaken ships being swatted down one by one but their greater numbers insuring their advantage.

Yet it was still a battle. Various wings of Wreaken vessels— nimble Vipers, mainly— peeled away to engage the Witches, who themselves flew a menagerie of vessels. Now the Witches took casualties, men and women dying in their vessels, weapons fire exchanged in earnest. For kilometers, space became a chaotic assemblage of death, a mortal ball with dozens of masked dancers vying with their hated partners.

There was only one way that such an engagement could end. With each death, with each valuable ship cascading into a fiery death spiral, it became clear that the Witches were outclassed. The vessels and pilots of Wreaken security were among the finest that credits could buy, and all the spirit and dedication of their foes weren't enough to hold the line against them. Formations were disrupted and cries of futility screamed into comms. There was only one way that the Witches could prevail— and there was simply too much cargo to be transferred before the inevitable closed in upon the doomed Panther— and its doomed hijackers.

The *Litvyak* shook from the recoil of her multicannons, large and powerful beyond their original design. The Wreaken Viper in Kerenski's sights twisted and smoked, black-market corrosive acid from her rounds eating through its internals. The smaller vessel's reactor went critical, engulfing it in a ball of nuclear flame, quickly snuffed out in the airless chill of space.

There was time for neither celebration of her kill nor despair at how few of her comrades were left. Swiftly, the woman acquired another Viper and disengaged her maneuvering safeties, flipping the Krait around to face it. Kerenski keyed her comms even as she tracked the vessel. It wasn't turning to engage her. Nor were many of the others.

"They are coming for you, *comrade*. There is not much..."

Wreckage from a Night Witch Asp sped by the woman, the victim of too many hits. Kerenski had known its pilot well. The woman's eyes followed the flaming hulk before snapping forward, her voice sharp.

"Of anything that can stop them. Instruct the haulers to jump, and then do so yourselves. We'll regroup elsewhere."

Traces of concern betrayed themselves in Yolanta's tone.

"The others... are they—"

Kerenski cut off her second.

"The cargo. Move it to safety. I will..."

In the distance a wing of Wreaken Eagles opened fire upon the Panther at once, missiles flying in unison, its target far too large to miss. Kerenski's eyes widened.

"*Nyet!*"

Tyrran saw it first, so consumed was Yolanta with ejecting the last of the cargo containers. The missiles were small with distinct trails, streaking in fast, seemingly in formation. The man acted on instinct, turning to his partner and spinning her to face the new threat. Irritation twisted her features.

“What are you *doing*, you—”

A finger shot out, pointing to the incoming threats.

“*Down!*”

The volley of missiles slammed home, crippling the Panther and sending it into a spin. Decks and cargo bays were torn open, parts and valuable Guardian technology blasted and sent into the void, condemned to drift in their singular directions for eternity. The ship itself fared slightly better, its sheer bulk keeping it intact. Engine glows faded and died, and within the doomed vessel the lights went dark.

Yolanta blinked, on hands and knees, her head spinning.

“What... what was...”

Something strong gripped her arm, pulling her to her feet in the low gravity. Tyrran turned to face her.

“They’re focusing on us. We have to—”

Yolanta tore herself free of his grip.

“We have to safeguard the cargo. It is more important than any of us. More important than—”

Another volley sent man and woman to their knees, the deck beneath them quaking. Emergency alarms wailed, the ship again going dark before auxiliary power activated red-tinted emergency lighting. Yolanta scrambled to her feet, yelling into her wrist computer and stumbling toward the commander’s seat.

“Any remaining haulers— *leave!* Take what cargo you have and jump. I will contact you if—”

Multicannon fire raked across the Panther's canopy, spiderweb cracks growing ominously across it. From behind her Yolanta heard Tyrran cry out.

"It's no good. We have to *go!*"

The flaming wreck of a Krait— Yolanta swallowed— tumbled past the canopy. She pressed her lips together, not fear but duty filling her heart.

What would Kari do? And how would she do so?

Straightening herself with all the pride of her people, Yolanta Púrpura turned to her roguish partner, his own movement less like a man's and more like a cornered animal.

"No. The cargo is more important than any of us. We must—"

The woman's world went black, the impact from the final blow cutting off whatever she'd intended to say. Light faded and noises drifted away into oblivion. The final thing she was aware of was the voice of her partner, his hands already upon her.

"Not to me, it isn't."

XIII SMELLING THE FLOWERS

Tyrran proved adept at flying, the Taipan fighter becoming a natural extension of himself within months. So impressed was Arrika that she showed him the far more delicate art of flying a full-sized ship, her instruction very much unofficial yet Tyrran learning tricks that the guild would never have taught. Joss and Carter, too, noticed the two spending more and more time together, exchanging looks between themselves whenever the captain and young pilot-in-training would disappear. Yet their gossip was ill-timed; Tyrran and Annika's spell as lovers had passed, the woman erecting the same barrier between them as before.

Success followed success, and Arrika led her crew to ever more dangerous jobs. Opportunity called, and Arrika answered; it wasn't long before they were engaged in the risky business of fetching alien relics. The risk to ship and crew was great, but the rewards greater. That mysterious system failures seemed to plague the stations most involved in the underground market was of no concern to them— they were paid and light years away before the effects were felt.

For a while the gambles paid off; the Krait was abused by the demands of transporting the mysterious alien technology, but the payoff more than covered the costs of repair. No longer did they scratch out a living scavenging ships or running cargo; captain and crew alike were flush with cash. Tyrran himself could well afford his first Sidewinder, needing only to pass the exams to become a member of the guild. He was even granted the opportunity to fly the Krait itself; first in the safety of deep space and then over barren, airless planets. Annika sneered at the use of computer-assisted docking, and drilled young Tyrran time and again until he, too, looked down upon those who depended on the device instead of their own skill.

In time he was as proficient as any recruit bearing the wings of the fabled guild, though the process took several months. For the first time, the young man knew contentedness, feeling that he was exactly where he needed to be, the captain and crew the first family he ever truly felt a part of. It wasn't perfect and the jobs only became more complex as demand for alien trinkets increased, but ship and crew were by now a well-oiled machine. Tyrran's own experience with the mysterious artifacts grew, and before long he was spending more time in the Pleiades than in the Bubble.

Yet the reach of the superpowers was long, and soon the elegant whites of Imperial vessels and the stark, no-nonsense lines of their Federal counterparts were to be seen in even remote systems like Maia and Merope. There was a crackdown on everything related to the trade of alien artifacts, both governments doing what they could to hoard them for themselves. A black market sprung up overnight. To deal in them was both exponentially more profitable and exponentially more risky. Furthermore, capital ships established what could only be seen as battle lines. The cold war between the forces of Earth and Achenar was heating up, and outlaws like those of Annika's crew faced a simple choice: profit or die.

Yolanta awoke, aware of two things: the throbbing in her head, and the beat of a heart. Not hers, curiously, but of the one within the chest against which her head was pressed. She fluttered her eyes, her hair in her face. Her head was spinning, vaguely aware of motion- twists and turns- but it was all wrong, with the feeling of moving backward instead of forward. There was the tough fabric of a flightsuit, a man's body pressed against hers, her legs straddling his. It was only then that she saw instrumentation, close and cramped, a bubble canopy and stars speeding by. She— and someone else— were in a fighter, tiny and cramped, two people occupying a space meant for one.

Madre de Randomius, what is—

The woman bolted upright, nearly hitting her head on the canopy.

“Get down!”

A hand pushed her head aside, Tyrran's voice ringing in her ears. Yolanta blinked, the first flashes of weapons fire speeding close by. Her last memories came in a rush, she and her partner standing in the bridge of the Panther, alarms sounding around them, their faces silhouetted in the red of the emergency lights. And then...

The woman cried out, drawing herself up, face-to-face with the man. The throbbing in her head intensified, made worse by the realization of what had happened. Iberian teeth bared themselves, the woman squirming in his lap. That under any other circumstance theirs would have been a position of passionate lovemaking occurred to her in an awkward flash.

“You hit me!”

Tyrran threw the fighter to one side, narrowly dodging a missile, his accent thick.

“I saved you. Now keep your head down so that Kerenski can save us!”

“*What?*”

Yolanta turned, twisting to see behind herself, the faint glow of a Krait’s thrusters closing rapidly in the distance. In an instant she understood what was happening. Tyrran— damn him— had knocked her unconscious and carried her to the experimental fighter onboard the Panther. There he stuffed them both inside its cockpit, blasting away from the doomed hulk amid the swarming Wreaken security vessels. The fighter— an exotic craft, all angles and the eerie cyan glows of Guardian technology, its triangular wings suspended by crackling energy— was nimble but delicate, its tininess saving them from harm only as long as none of the laser blasts or missiles aimed at it actually hit home.

A standard docking maneuver within the *Litvyak* would be impossibly dangerous. No, Tyrran and Kerenski would have to fly perfectly in sync, the smaller ship entering the larger with no room for error— all without either being destroyed by their pursuers.

The docking clamps lowered themselves from the Krait’s hull. Tyrran would ignore them, flying straight into the docking bay and counting on the ship’s safeties to secure the smaller fighter. And then—

Yolanta gulped, hoping that Tyrran neither saw nor felt her neck swell against his chest.

And then we punch it, meeting with the others and salvaging what remains of this desastroso mission!

The Krait continued to close, a stream of multicannon rounds narrowly missing them and raking Kerenski’s hull, sending bits of it into space past them. Tyrran ignored it, keeping the smaller ship at full speed. Yolanta blinked, individual lines and features of the inner docking bay rapidly becoming visible. She gripped the collar of Tyrran’s flightsuit, her heart pounding.

“No, no, no...”

The man shoved the throttle forward, committed to the maneuver. The bay had nearly enveloped the speeding ship.

“Yes, damnit!”

Yolanta grit her teeth, feeling metal scraping metal and a sudden jolt backward. Only her grip on the man prevented her from being thrown against the control panel to her rear. The sound of hydraulics could be vaguely heard. The sound of her partner’s voice was loud and clear.

“We’re in. *Get us out of here!*”

The fighter shook a second time as the bay closed, the clamps grabbing its sides, securing them into space, the bay doors sealing themselves beneath them, normal sound seeping in around them as they did so. Hyperspace warnings could be heard, along with the familiar spooling of a frameshift drive. Another impact hit home, shaking them both even inside the larger ship.

A ragged exhale escaped Yolanta’s lips, looking around the bay and willing the Krait’s systems to work faster. The front of the fighter’s glass canopy was bent, an ugly crack spider-webbing from where it had impacted within the bay.

“Jump, you—”

The countdown reached zero and the frameshift’s calculations completed. Technology that was universally used yet almost universally misunderstood engaged. Quantum space folded around the vessel, cutting itself off from normative dimensions and moving at supralight velocities, the ship within merely along for the ride. Man and woman screamed in unison, a victory yell that was more instinctual than planned.

The woman blinked, still invigorated, her heart and Tyrran’s beating nearly on top of each other.

So I will live to see another day...

All that remained of the Krait was a pair of thruster trails, a mocking reminder that the day was not entirely Wreaken’s.

The courtyard around which the Imperial Palace was built was vast, the most exotic flora of a dozen worlds painstakingly modified on the genetic level to be compatible with Chione's climate while losing none of their beauty. Cobblestone paths suggested an old-world decadence, a manicured grove of natural beauty though entirely manmade. They, and not the viceroy's chambers, were where local Imperial politics played out, cunning smiles and perfect manners amid almost ridiculously picturesque scenery.

Such an occasion was by no means the exception as two figures strolled down one path, one rigid and military, the other robed in the soft fabrics of a Senator. Isaiah Evanson wore the stern expression of his rank. Vespar Faveol was more relaxed, a benevolent smile on his face even as his aged fingers brushed the odd specimen of flora. He nodded to it, gesturing at his counterpart.

"And this one? How does it make you feel?"

Isaiah held the petal to his nose, inhaling. For a moment he said nothing, only blinking and straightening himself.

"*Good*, actually. Really good... even though I shouldn't."

Faveol nodded.

"They're called Prophet's Blossom," he said. "A novelty from Utopian space. Algreb had a fondness for them. I've instructed my personal chef to find out how to make tea from it. No luck so far."

Isaiah grunted, turning away from his patron.

"My heart's breaking for you," he said. "But you didn't bring me out here just to smell flowers and talk about tea."

The older man's eyes flashed.

“No. I didn’t. I brought you here to discuss the responsibilities borne by that of a squadron commander.”

Evanson glanced over his shoulder.

“Ah.”

Faveol advanced, standing beside his subordinate without looking at him.

“Yes. ‘Ah’. Your first duty— aside from that of serving the Emperor, of course— is to look after your people. *All* of them. Even...”

He turned, his eyes cunning. “The ones not on the payroll.”

Isaiah’s face hardened, averting his gaze from Faveol’s.

“The Witches will be found,” he said. “And held to account, if need be.”

Faveol’s fingers extended toward another specimen. It was a different plant, one of oranges and blacks, with long thorns that secreted a mucous as his hand approached. The man stopped just short of contact, his aged fingers curling into a fist.

“The squadron hangs by a thread. There are numerous interests who would only be too happy to see it disbanded or destroyed. The very name of Loren remains bitter upon many tongues, not a few of which belong to my colleagues in the Senate. And now, if your friends in low places have betrayed you...”

Evanson spun, irritation in his voice. “I *said* I’d find them.”

Faveol nodded, taking longer than normal with gesture.

“There is another matter. One more, ah— intimate. Your second-in-command. Sobanii.”

There was a long exhale, the younger man’s uniform creasing.

“What’s he done *now*?”

A majestic Cutter passed overhead, its outline barely visible, flanked by a pair of Imperial Eagles. The Senator took his place beside his subordinate, both watching the vessel disappear into higher atmosphere before answering.

“Not ‘what’, I’m afraid. Security holos have been brought to my attention. A certain underconsul’s assistant in the service of Denton Patreus was seen entering his suite. She did not emerge until several hours later, late at night— and if you’ll excuse me for saying so...”

A hint of a smile pressed the man’s lips together, a twinkle in his eyes.

“... looking rather hastily put together.”

Again, Evanson exhaled.

“Just because Phisto bedded someone of Patreus’s doesn’t mean that—”

Faveol finished his sentence.

“He’s in bed with Patreus himself? Please. Even supposing that such *isn’t* true, the gossip alone would create a scandal.”

Isaiah shook his head. “No. I know him. Back when we were fighting in Coma, the look in his eye when someone even *mentioned* Patreus or the Empire...”

Again, he turned to his patron. “No. Not Phisto. I don’t believe it.”

Wisdom danced in the older man’s eyes.

“Yet he now wears the eagle, as do you. Men like Phisto Sobanii have a way of making sure that they’re *always* on the winning side. Surely you know this.”

Isaiah’s features hardened. “The only thing I know is that we need to *trust* each other— or else the thread we’re hanging by really *will* snap. But it wouldn’t have been the Feds or Patreus or anyone else who cut the string. It would have been *us*. And I’ll be damned if I let the venom of politics poison what we’re building.”

Vespar Faveol nodded, his features severe.

“No one ever built *anything* without such venom working in their favor. Do not be so hasty to dismiss it.”

The younger man turned, clenching his fists.

“Is Patreus really trying to dissolve the Legion?”

The Senator ran his fingertips along the stem of a rose, genetically engineered to thrive in the local climate. Its thorns were of no concern; so long as he conformed to their grain his digits remained unbloodied. Were he to rub along the opposite direction, however...

“My colleague in the Senate will not rest until her name is eradicated from memory. Surely you know this.”

Evanson stiffened. “I’ve defeated him once. I can do so again.”

“*Have* you? Do you plan on rallying the Legion to take up arms against the mother Empire they now serve? Do you think for a moment that you can turn them into another version of Newton’s Fusiliers?”

Isaiah shook his head. “That was different. Those people were fighting for their *homes*.”

“Yes. Quite different. You will *not* convince the Legion to rise up against the Empire. So what *can* you do?”

Evanson shook his head, knowing where Faveol’s questions were leading.

“Only what I’ve *been* doing: give them a new purpose.”

The old man nodded, pleased.

“Precisely. Harness their instincts and reframe their mission as protecting mankind itself— and not merely a handful of its more privileged specimens. To do that, you must work with what you have.”

Evanson spat.

“Including Patreus’s web of lies?”

Faveol released the rose, turning to face his subordinate directly.

“Listen to me very carefully, young one. Denton Patreus is many things: ambitious, cunning, even ruthless. But he is *not* a liar. To the contrary, he is the rarest type of man you will ever encounter: one who does *exactly* what he says he will do. That should terrify you more than his battlefleets. Tell me: did he ever make any specific threats against the Legion?”

Isaiah scowled. “Of course not. He knows better than to be so obvious.”

Vespar nodded.

“And at Coma, the site of your vaunted triumph. Has he ever attempted vengeance? Gone back on his word?”

For a long time, the younger man glared.

“No.”

The Senator exhaled.

“The Fusiliers pay the same onerous taxes as the Imperial government they overthrew. As far as Patreus’s coffers are concerned, there is *no* difference between the two. Can your little revolution truly be said to have changed anything?”

Isaiah Evanson turned, taking in the almost obscenely beautiful gardens around him. In the distance the same pair of comely palace slaves bowed their obsequience to the squadron commander. At length he spoke.

“Anyone can be beaten. That’s the belief that kept *her* going, even against cynics like *you*.”

An aged, gnarled hand rested itself upon his uniformed shoulder. Concern softened the Senator’s tone.

“The most formidable enemy is not the one that fights the hardest, but the one that can reframe the battle itself so that it doesn’t *have* to. Always remember that, young Evanson. *Always.*”

The doors to the *Litvyak* slid open, Tyrran and Yolanta striding into the bridge, both looking worse for wear. There was scant need to ask their leader as to what had happened; the screams of their compatriots and flaming wrecks of their ships had told the story of a disaster. In view of the canopy were several other Witch-aligned vessels. Some were intact, and others were being tended by emergency repair limpets, the flashing of auto-welders illuminating their hulls. Yolanta stopped mid-step, her face hardening as she noted how few had survived. Her gaze dropped from the ragtag survivors to her booted feet, her heart pounding.

Madre de Randomius...

“Comrade.”

The woman’s head snapped up, the voice of her friend and mentor jarring her from her inner grief. Kari Kerenski had risen from her commander’s chair toward her guests, not in greeting but in stern debriefing. Three pairs of eyes locked with one another. Yolanta pressed her lips together before responding.

“Comarada.”

The older woman fished a pack of cigarettes from her breast pocket, pulling one from it with her teeth and lighting it with an old-style torch lighter. She said nothing, only taking a long drag, the smoke wafting everywhere and nowhere in the low gravity.

“We don’t have much time. Wreaken will be sweeping every system within fifty light years of the battle.”

Púrpura gestured to the canopy, her accent thickening. “And the rest of our *camaradas*? Is this it?”

Another drag. Another unflinching gaze.

“Alive or dead, they did their duty. That is all that matters.”

Kerenski took a step closer, her eyes on her subordinate.

“You were injured.”

Already a welt was forming down the side of Yolanta’s face, marring her Iberian features. She glanced at Tyrran, her teeth baring themselves.

“It was... during battle. The ship took many hits.”

Kerenski’s eyes narrowed, her gaze shifting from Yolanta to Andor and back to Yolanta.

“So it did.”

With that, the woman spun, striding with purpose to her command seat. She paused, looking over her shoulder, her cigarette dangling from her mouth.

“There is much work to be done, *comrades*. Take a station, both of you. And Púrpura?”

The younger woman stiffened. “*Si?*”

A final plume of smoke escaped Kerenski’s lips.

“It is good to see you alive. Too many have died this day already. You understand what I mean, *da?*”

A flash of something approaching bitterness deepened Púrpura’s features.

“*Si, camarada.*”

“So it’s true? You and the underconsul’s—”

Isaiah Evanson's jaw had dropped, and for the first time real anger threatened to undermine the brotherly camaraderie that he and Phisto had developed. The two were in their flightsuits, all traces of the previous day's ball gone— for Isaiah, at least. The Legion's hangar afforded them privacy, at least from any but the most focused listening devices. Around them ships came and went, and pilots and crew went about their business. The main docking tube of Hiram's Anchorage was never a slow place, and that day was no exception.

Sobanii held up his hands.

"Just hear me out, okay? What Tessia did, she did for a reason."

Evanson turned, his face hard.

"It doesn't matter. I know how you are, Phisto— but can't you keep it in your pants for one damned night?"

Phisto shook his head.

"It wasn't like that. And it wasn't a honey trap, either. She didn't want anything. Didn't ask anything. It was like..."

The man looked away, and then back to his commanding officer.

"Like she was trying to form a partnership."

Isaiah exhaled.

"There won't *be* a partnership if word gets out. A former Fusilier and someone in Patreus's circle? Faveol already knows."

Again, Phisto shook his head.

"Never mind who knows. Something big is happening. I told you what the note said: 'and at their heels will be monsters'. She *knows* something, bud— just what I don't know."

Evanson closed his eyes, the man rubbing the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger.

"I always forget that Imperials can't ever give a straight answer. What do you think it means?"

Phisto, too, exhaled. “I think that we should hold off on any more road trips for the time being. And she mentioned witches, too. That *can’t* have been a coincidence.”

Isaiah straightened himself, his anger now at his erstwhile comrades.

“No,” he said. “It isn’t.”

Phisto took a step forward, his eyes serious.

“They’ve disappeared, haven’t they?”

Evanson nodded. “As of this morning. All their ships. All their people. Not even a holofac from Kerenski— and she isn’t answering her comms.”

A long silence settled between the two men. Phisto scowled.

“Right when an entire shipload of Guardian tech just *happens* to be on its way.”

Slowly, Isaiah nodded. “Either Kerenski knows something we don’t, or the Legion’s been had in a big way.”

Phisto looked to the *Saint of Killers*, saying nothing. From the corner of his eye he glanced to his commander.

“So what’s the call, boss?”

Isaiah, too, had his eyes on the various ships coming and going above his head.

“That St. Antonius woman mentioned monsters at the gate, right?”

“Yeah.”

Resolution hardened the man’s face.

“We don’t have time to wait for the good stuff. All Legion ships are to carry AX gear from here on out.”

Sobanii blinked. “So you don’t think that the Witches are going to come through?”

Evanson shook his head.

“Only two possibilities, bud: that they don’t, in which case we need to be prepared for anything— or that they *do*, in which case we need to be prepared for...”

A long moment passed. Phisto looked into the distance, ships coming and going through the station's mailslot. Beyond it was the infinite blackness of space. In his fingers he held the note, his thumb running along its surface.

"Yeah. Monsters."

The remnants of the Night Witch Fleet landed without incident at Lasswitz Port, though the journey took nearly two days. Under Kerenski's leadership, the ragtag force randomized its course back to the Bubble, the ships laden with precious Guardian technology and never certain whether or not a Wreaken ambush force would be waiting for them. Several vessels broke down en route, necessitating further delays as repairs were made. The *Litvyak* too suffered from its battle wounds; the women stayed inside as Tyrran donned an ill-fitting spacesuit to access equipment panels in the weightless vacuum of space.

The trio said little to each other in their time together, their days consisting of tense waiting for the fleet as a whole to be ready or uneasy sleep in uncomfortable spare bunks. Kerenski had been clear in her orders— rather than scattering, the survivors were to stay as one, a cohesive force that would aid one another in their journey home. Within their holds was the Guardian technology that had been so dearly bought, and she intended to lose none of it to bad luck or carelessness.

Atroco was loosely governed by the Raiders, a faction of freedom fighters who answered to no one save themselves. Kerenski was known to their leadership, and it was understood that she was exempt from both dock fees and customary inspections, as were the other Night Witches. The alien gear was more secure in the bays of her ship than the vaults of Achenar itself, and she would have had it no other way. Her personal quarters on Lasswitz could wait—the cargo was of paramount importance, and she would sleep in the *Litvyak* before embarking on the next phase of her mission.

The rear hatch to the Krait opened, and the trio stepped out, not in flightsuits but in clothing more suited to blending in—Yola, with leggings and a short jacket over a tunic-cut blouse, and Tyrran, with cargo pants and a black leather flight jacket. Only Kerenski retained her usual dark fatigues, with no identifying patches and her usual stern visage. She advanced halfway across the hangar, turning to frown slightly at the sight of her damaged ship. Tyrran and Yolanta trailed, weariness in their steps. Kerenski shifted her gaze to them.

“The last several days have been hard, and you two did well to retrieve what you did. Not all is lost, but our strategy will have to adapt. Both of you are granted two days’ leave. Púrpura, I will contact you with new orders when the time is right. As for you, Andor...”

Her lips pressed together, her chin lifting.

“You will be released once your obligations to us are complete, not before. Yolanta Púrpura is still your superior, and we still have a job to do.”

The woman paused, reaching into a pocket and pulling out a credit chip. She tossed it, caught by Tyrran with one hand.

“That should get you by for a few days. Don’t leave Lasswitz. Otherwise you are free.”

Tyrran spread out his arms, his own crisp accent thickening.

“You wanted your toys, and now you have them. As far as I’m concerned we’re through.”

He pointed to his throat, the Black Thorn barely visible beneath his jacket collar.

“Now take this thing off and pay me properly.”

Yolanta blinked. Kari’s lips hardened, the older woman advancing across the hangar with surprising speed. Tyrran held fast, neither flinching nor stepping backward. Kerenski halted, her face inches from his.

“Listen to me like you’ve never listened to anyone in your entire worthless life. You’re not running small-time scams any longer, and the only reason you’re no sucking void for *that*—”

She nodded to Yolanta’s welt, still visible after two days.

“Is because I know people better than you think. Nothing happens within my crew without me knowing about it. *Nothing.*”

Tyrran, too, leaned forward, looking downward at the woman.

“Should be easy times ahead for you, then— the crew’s a lot smaller than it used to be, isn’t it?”

Kari did nothing. She didn’t *need* to— the crackle of the Black Thorn and immediate cry from the man as he dropped to his knees was enough for her hardened features to shift into a hardened smirk. Behind Tyrran, Yolanta released the controls to her wrist computer, the collar-like device deactivating from its lowest setting.

Tyrran rolled onto his back, clutching his throat and coughing. The Iberian woman stood over him, running a finger down the side of her swollen face.

“Now we are even, *patán.*”

Tyrran Xavian Andor had dealt with nearly all forms of adversity over the course of his thirty Earth-standard years of life, but on that first night of so-called “leave” he encountered a new problem: boredom. He had no ship, no job, no identicard, and too few credits to even bribe his way aboard a transport. Kerenski had known what she was doing, tossing him just enough money to keep him both out of trouble and on the hook.

Thus did Tyrran find himself alone at a bar, sipping on a beer and keeping to himself. The solitude was an island of familiarity amid his new situation. An outlaw twang from some Federation-based band filled the air, the bar’s atmosphere a decidedly blue-collar switch from being a former Imperial holding. Even with the system under the management of so-called criminals, a beer was still a beer, and for the first time in weeks the man found himself able to finally relax.

The relaxation came to an abrupt halt when the first whiff of cigarillo smoke hit his nostrils. Tyrran turned, stiffening at the sight of his partner, pulling up to take a seat beside him. Neither man nor woman acknowledged the other, the former turning back to his beer and the latter ordering one of her own. The twang played on and minutes passed. Finally Tyrran broke the silence, looking into his beer instead of his guest.

“How’s your face?”

Yolanta took a long drag from her cigarillo, coolly glancing to the man at her side.

“Healing. How is your neck?”

One hand of Tyrran’s felt around his throat. “The same, I guess.”

Another length of time passed. The woman at Tyrran's side pursed her lips together, as if resisting something within.

"I never said thank you."

Tyrran glanced to his side. The swelling on Yolanta's face was nearly gone, the leftover bruise concealed by makeup.

"You never needed to."

The woman's features didn't soften, didn't become more convivial as the drink and cigarillo were consumed. Her eyes remained as sharp as ever.

"I saved you too, though you do not realise it. The way you spoke to Kerenski..."

Tyrran scoffed, taking another drink.

"Just another leader who can dish it out but can't take it. They're all over the Bubble."

The woman shook her head.

"No. It is not that. What you said... a lesser woman would have pulled out her pistol and shot you on the spot. The shock from the Black Thorn was a mercy compared to..."

"Compared to *what*?"

Yolanta's eyes flashed.

"One does not become the leader of the Night Witches by refraining from deeds *necessario* to the cause. That includes dealing with insubordinate *idiotas* who speak when they should not."

One side of Tyrran's mouth curled into a sardonic smirk. His neck, too, still stung slightly.

"Any particular *idiotas* in mind?"

Yolanta rose, finishing her drink and stubbing out her cigarillo. She straightened her short jacket, glancing to her companion. Her unsmiling mouth had relaxed somewhat, along with her tone.

"Where are you staying tonight?"

Tyrran shrugged, holding up the credit chip Kerenski had tossed him.

“Wherever this gets me into. You’ll have your ship all to yourself.”

The woman cocked her head to the side, hands on her hips and her eyes on her partner. For a long moment she said nothing, the wheels of her mind turning. At last she spoke.

“Where I am from it is considered *de mal gusto* to drink an entire bottle of wine oneself. Save your credits. Come.”

The man scoffed, pointing to his throat.

“Or else?”

Yolanta looked the man up and down. Then she looked to the bar and its down-and-out patrons.

“Or else I will never again believe that you indies have a nose for the better deal.”

It was dark within the *Litvyak*, almost too dark for Kari Kerenski to even see where she was walking. Red tactical lighting illuminated the Krait’s corridors. In her hand was a bottle of vodka, the contents swishing to and fro, her paces less steady than normal. Her communicator emitted a soft chime, the woman acknowledging it and padding her way to the ship’s bridge.

To one side of such was a communications station, and with weary precision Kerenski activated it, an encrypted holofac transmission patching itself through. The holoscreen shimmered into view, a jovial, well-fed face filling it. Blake Fairchild was all smiles, his well-lit ship in stark contrast to the woman’s surroundings.

“Well if it isn’t my friend from the *Gnosis*! How you been?”

Kerenski nodded, speaking more slowly than usual. “Well enough. And fortune smiles upon you after our last job, I take it?”

The man whistled. “I ain’t been this pampered since Momma’s tit. Got the *Whole Hog* a few goodies I’ve had my eye on for awhile, too— and I don’t think I’ve been sober in a week.”

Kerenski tried and failed to stop herself from making a face. She swiftly recovered.

“Then the time is right for you to be so. I have need of your services. Do you still have the coordinates of where the Thargoid hulk went down?”

The man’s smile grew, visions of credits dancing in his eyes.

“The *Hog* never forgets.”

Kerenski pursed her lips together before replying. “Then the salvage rights are yours. Hire a crew and bring back whatever you can of value from it. When you re-enter the Bubble, contact me and I will pay you double for whatever intact Thargoid technology you can deliver.”

Fairchild’s eyes widened.

“*Double?*”

The woman nodded. “Double. The technology is in... high demand by my clients. Even more so than the brokers.”

Blake whistled. “This keeps up, and I’ll be flyin’ an Annie by year’s end.”

“Then that’s a yes?”

The man laughed. “*Da. Ja.* However you people say ‘hell yeah’.”

Kari didn’t smile. “I’ll be in touch.

The man was just beginning to raise a glass to her when she cut the transmission, closing her eyes and exhaling. One bit of business—the easy bit— was finished. The other, far more difficult still waited. It took another healthy swig of vodka before the woman keyed the appropriate transmission code, one known to only a handful of others throughout all of humanity. The holoscreen shimmered into view, a familiar yet not entirely welcome face materializing before her. As usual the man was in a shadow, his voice as quietly confident as always.

“Our mutual acquaintance has sent word. The delivery was... less than anticipated.”

Kerenski straightened herself, her sharp eyes meeting his.

“The delivery was very nearly nothing at all. Focus on the resources you *have*, not the ones you *wish* you had.”

Slowly, the figure nodded.

“It is of resources that I wish to speak. Your losses were... significant.”

The woman clasped her hands behind her back, one hand squeezing the bottle’s neck.

Of course you already know, you snake.

“That is for me to worry about, not you.”

Dark fingertips formed a tent, pointed in Kerenski’s direction.

“It would be unfortunate if the remaining materials had to be procured elsewhere. So much work gone to waste, an entire system sacrificed for nothing...”

The woman’s lips trembled, not in fear but indignation.

“The work will continue as agreed. The Empire will have everything it requires— including its whipping boy.”

A low chuckle sounded from the holographic screen.

“Whipping girl, more like. Tell me— do you think that she’d have approved of your actions? The ones done in her memory? The sacrifices of lives and ships and systems?”

Kerenski looked away.

“I think that she understood the meaning of sacrifice more than anyone.”

Again, the figure nodded.

“And so she did. The work will continue, as you say—but Kerenski?”

The woman snapped her gaze to the man, his holographic image flickering.

“What is it?”

There was a pause, the figure leaning forward. A new menace could be heard in his timbre, so subtle that only Kerenski’s refined senses could even detect it.

“There is a storm coming, and only so much room in the shelter. It would be a shame to see one such as yourself drown in the flood.”

With that, the holofac terminated, plunging the woman into darkness. A ragged exhale escaped Kerenski’s lips, and with her usual sharp expression she turned, walking the corridors of her Krait to her private quarters. The ship’s reactor was powered-down and on station hookup, and so there was no noise except her boots on the metal plating.

To call the woman’s quarters decorated was to insult the concept of decorating; the same bare metal floor plating as in the corridor matched the drab grey of the bulkheads. There were no pictures of anything save an animated holographic portrait of a pair of cats; they ran to and fro, the aged holopic still faithfully playing even after the passage of years. A simple bunk with simple dark blankets occupied a dedicated space within one side. Above it was a row of lockers. A small table with an attached chair was next to the bunk. A combination shower and head waited behind an adjacent door.

Kerenski gave the holopic a slight smile before sitting on her bunk. She was a woman who valued simplicity and cleanliness, in both her surroundings and herself. It was her usual routine to shower before laying down for the night, but on that occasion she could bring herself to do neither. With neither a word nor a change of expression she pulled out her dataslate, keying in a few commands. Within moments, a roster of Night Witch agents was pulled up. The names of most were green, indicating active membership.

A few more commands were typed in, and the names changed along with their color. Now there was a vast procession of red, marking the man or woman as deceased, interspersed with the occasional yellow or green with a ship icon next to the name. Again, the woman's face remained stony as she keyed for the list to repeat.

The third time she commanded the list to scroll, Kerenski no longer saw names but faces, friends and comrades who were gone forever. Her breathing became ragged and the bottle touched her lips. The vodka's burn as it washed down her throat was ignored, and the numbness that soon accompanied it welcomed.

The red-lettered names of those who had followed their leader to their deaths in a remote, inhospitable system burned into her eyes, her memory, her very spirit. Alone, and with no one but the dead to keep her company, Kari Kerenski at last allowed the first tear to wet her eyes.

The living quarters of the *Rosa Púrpura* were spartan, but Yolanta wasn't a woman who dwelt much on fastidious decoration. That her hair color and style changed on a regular basis was one of her two vanities. The other was her choice of wine. The woman reached into a ship's compartment, purpose-built for its task. Secured in specialized racks were bottles of the same, nearly two dozen, stacked higher than her head. Yolanta selected one, holding it gently for Tyrran to see. Something approaching nostalgia softened her features.

"This was made with grapes from *mi padre's* own estate. It is a taste of home, the only one I ever have anymore."

The woman set down the bottle, reaching inside a separate storage and producing two wine glasses and a corkscrew. She opened the vessel with practiced speed, holding it to her nose and closing her eyes.

"When I was ten, I became fascinated with the process of making wine. The method we use is old— ancient, in fact— and involves slaves mashing the grapes with their bare feet. To a young girl it looked like playing."

Two glasses of the noble rot were poured, at the level where the wine breathed the most. Even from where Tyrran sat, a rich aroma caressed his nostrils. He accepted a glass as Yolanta continued.

"One day I snuck out and 'helped' them with the work. My father would never have approved, of course— and the knowledge of such made me feel *alive*, even at that age. Yet I never forgot the varietal or the year— and that is the batch I liberated when I left his *hacienda* forever."

Tyrran looked into his glass. "And that's what we're drinking? Yola-foot wine?"

"I prefer to think of it as a piece of my past."

The man sniffed the glass's contents. It smelled like wine to him. He took a sip, swallowing.

"It's good... I guess. Never did have much of a taste for this."

Yolanta took her first sip, letting the flavor fill her mouth.

“When you called me a ‘plantation princess’... how did you know?”

Tyrran said nothing at first, only sipping his drink.

“I didn’t.”

A long silence descended over man and woman, the air filled with the unspoken. Yet it wasn’t an awkward silence, wine sipped and gazes comfortable met. Tyrran looked to his own glass, and then to his hostess.

“You mentioned leaving your father’s estate forever. So what are you, some kind of disgraced noble?”

Iberian passion filled the woman’s eyes.

“*Hmm!* I am not a noble. Not even close. My *padre* was a Patron on the planet Keytree, the owner of many slaves and many kilometers of land. I grew up on his coastal estate, near the city of Nueva Tarragona.”

Tyrran grunted.

“You poor thing.”

Yolanta leaned forward. “It was not the idyllic paradise that so many imagine. It was a prison, at least for someone like me. I lost my mother when I was young. My father wanted the usual Imperial life for his daughters— proper upbringing, advantageous marriages— and advancement into the upper echelons of system politics for himself.”

Andor rolled his eyes. “And you were the rebellious one.”

Yolanta raised her glass. “I was the one who thought for herself, *si*. My sisters... they are good people. What they are is not their fault. My father... is an example of everything wrong with the Empire.”

“Oh?”

The woman's expression soured. "He is close-minded. Arrogant. Stagnant in his thinking. Treats slaves as property and not people. Cares only about social advancement and appearances. I always disagreed with his ways, but it was not until I went to university on Cubeo that I learned of the true corruption eating away at the Empire."

Tyrran raised his own glass, his old sarcasm returning.

"I suppose your next hair coloring will be a bright blue?"

Yolanta shook her head. "The 'people's princess' had nothing to do with it. I would not expect some Alliance *patán* to understand. I owe everything to Kerenski. It was her who showed me my true path... how to make a difference instead of chanting protest slogans like some broken android."

The man snorted under his breath.

"Yeah. And a lot of people are dead because of that path. You were almost one of them."

Two Iberian lips pressed against each other. Tyrran looked up, expecting the worst. Instead, there were only hints of pain beneath the woman's hard gaze. She said nothing, only finishing her wine in a single pull and rising. From within a storage locker she retrieved a case, shaped like a guitar because it contained one. Without a word she sat down, resting the purple instrument on one thigh and strumming it. Rich notes filled the space of her living quarters.

Yolanta's eyes relaxed, the woman seemingly forgetting to scowl. The music and the woman were now as one, the latter's soul and purpose given strength by the notes, her body swaying with the rhythm. Tyrran laid back, watching the musician and her instrument. In time, she spoke again, her voice softer than before.

"Do you know what my greatest fear is?"

Andor's eyes drifted to where his partner's face had swollen. Memories of the Panther being destroyed around them filled his vision.

"Not death, I would wager."

Yolanta's eyes flashed.

"Failing in my duty. To myself. To my *camaradas*. To what I believe in. To die for something worthy is noble. To live in failure and disgrace is..."

The old haughtiness returned, the woman lifting her chin at the man before her.

"Well, I'm sure *you* would know."

Tyrran exhaled, looking away. Yolanta stopped playing, her lips pursed.

"Forgive me. That was unworthy."

Tyrran furrowed his eyebrows, matching the woman's posture.

"You Witches lost a lot of people, didn't you?"

The woman's lips stayed pursed.

"*Si.*"

Tyrran looked away, and then back to his partner.

"I'm sorry."

For a long time, man and woman sat, Yolanta plucking away at her guitar, the Iberian melody filling their hearts. Tyrran took another sip of wine, noting how perfectly it accompanied the woman and the music. She had long since changed from her flight suit, and her garment was a simple tunic-cut blouse, with leggings that did nothing to conceal her figure. Her hair cascaded across her shoulders, framing a dusky Iberian face.

Thoughts of the impossible flowed like the wine. Tyrran again looked away, not from some misplaced sense of respect but for fear that his gaze would betray him. The guitar and the wine threatened to carry him away, away to whatever idyllic place Yolanta reserved for herself in her most private moments.

The woman's voice roused him from his daydream, her accent intensifying with the wine and the hour.

"Where is home for you, Andor?"

The man blinked.

"Anywhere I lay my head for the night."

Yolanta shook her head. "No, I mean... before all this."

Tyrran, now, pressed his lips together.

“There was never a ‘before all this’. Not for me.”

The woman continued to play, but more gently, so that her notes didn’t drown out their voices.

“Parents... friends... *familia*...”

There was a long pause before Tyrran answered.

“No.”

The woman’s playing intensified. Another long pause thickened the air between them.

“Lovers?”

Tyrran looked to the deck.

“None worth mentioning. You?”

A complex flamenco riff burst forth, the woman’s fingers dancing across the instrument.

“None worth mentioning.”

The song rose to its climax, the denouement swift. Yolanta rested her hands upon the guitar, her brown eyes rising to gaze upon her partner. The man finished his wine, holding up his glass.

“It’s late.”

Nodding more formally than her tone, Yolanta rose, setting the instrument aside. She pressed the door controls, gesturing to the co-pilot’s— that was to say Tyrran’s— quarters.

“*Si.*”

The man also rose. Yolanta didn’t step out of the way, standing in the entryway of her own room. Tyrran paused, man and woman intimately aware of how close they were. Eyes only inches apart gazed into each other. His voice dropped to an intimate level.

“You really do play beautifully.”

Full Iberian lips pressed together.

“And I am... grateful that I am around to play.”

Tyrran leaned in close, one finger tracing along the deadly collar that ringed his neck.

“Grateful enough to trust me?”

Yolanta, too, leaned in close, her lips inches from his ear, her voice dropping to a whisper.

“No.”

She withdrew, her mouth unsmiling but her eyes something else.

“Goodnight, *patán*.”

Tyrran drew himself up, looking downward at his partner. He could still feel the heat from her body being so close to his.

“Goodnight, princess.”

Tyrran was by now a pilot, not as skilled as his mentor Annika but every bit as suited to handling the Krait in which they lived and worked. So too was he accustomed to the horrors of the macabre battleground that was now the Pleiades; the eerie, green-tinted aftermaths of such were his new bread and butter. Corroded hulls and mutilated human remains were a fact of life at such sites, but Annika and her crew continued to deliver, reaping the rewards of spaceborne grave-robbing. Galactic events continued to unfold, and the stakes rose ever higher. Eventually, even the clientele was famous.

The Federation had initiated a blockade over the Palin Research Center, a mammoth Farragut battlecruiser hovering in low orbit over the installation. The professor and staff within stubbornly clung to their work, and the eyes of the galactic community turned to their plight. Ships bearing the markings of the superpower's fleet kept constant vigil, the blockade all but impenetrable. Yet the task force assigned to isolate the reclusive professor refrained from forcefully entering his facility via the use of shock troopers; the political cost of such far outweighed the gain of a single installation, even for the Federation of Earth.

The installation wasn't entirely self-sufficient, and required outside supplies to stay operational. Only the most daring smugglers accepted the task of doing so, promises of credits or unique modification to their vessels enough to persuade them to accept the risk. Such running was unique amid the underworld norm; whereas most smugglers slipped in beneath the noses of authority, to make the Palin Run, as it came to be called, required to openly and brazenly defy the blockade, skimming along the surface until too close to the installation for the Federation to risk further fire.

Annika and her crew were among those contacted by representatives of the reclusive engineer. He wanted the basics, of course— food, alcohol, medical supplies and consumer goods. But he also wanted something more. Something far more dangerous to acquire.

Officially, they were called Unknown Fragments. Unofficially, they were called all manner of names, none of them flattering: Spacer's Bane, Xeno Bones, and— perhaps most tellingly— Bug Shells. They were the blasted remnants of the mysterious probes— if indeed they were probes— that had been sighted in the outer Pleiades, vital to the creation of meta-alloys. Professor Palin coveted them, and traded his expertise for ever more specimens. His terms were music to Annika's ears; after only one job, her ship would perform maneuvers far beyond what Faulcon-Delacy's engineers had thought possible.

For weeks the crew combed the Pleiades, a chill, uneasy feeling gripping their insides whenever more of the mysterious fragments were stowed in their cargo bay. Over meals they debated; eventually it was agreed that the merchandise was alien in origin, and best regarded with the deepest suspicion. Finally the bays were full, and the time had come to make their fateful run. At last, on the verge of jumping back into the Bubble, Annika called for her crew to gather in the ship's galley.

The plan was simplicity itself; there would be all manner of Federation vessels circling over Palin's installation like buzzards over a corpse; it would require all of Annika's skill to evade them. Tyrran was assigned arguably the more dangerous job—he would fly the Taipan, doing his best to distract the Federals and draw fire to himself. The man at first rose to protest this inglorious assignment, drawing the ire of the captain herself. Annika rose to match him and dismissed Joss and Carter from the galley. The two men left, eyes downcast, leaving the young man and his captain alone. It was then that she spoke the words that would change his life forever.

"Do not think that I am blind to the risk I ask you to accept," she said, hands on hips.

Tyrran scoffed.

"This isn't risk," he said. "It's suicide. With as much ordinance as those Feds are going to fire at me, even a damned fly won't be able to dodge it all."

For a long moment, Annika said nothing. Tyrran locked eyes with her, and it struck him that her usual youthful appearance was marred by lines, lines he'd either overlooked or had formed recently. Finally, she turned to the man, eyes tired and the first traces of vulnerability showing through. Her words came slowly, with hesitation.

"One way or another," she said, "this will be the last time you ever fly for me. The reward from this job is greater than anything we've ever done. Enough for you to purchase a proper ship. You're ready, Tyrran. There's nothing left for you here."

Now it was Tyrran's turn to say nothing, looking to his boots and blinking. Finally he managed a single word.

"Why?"

A sad smile lifted Annika's lips.

"You're happy here. Happier than you've ever been. You feel like you belong. Don't deny it."

Tyrran said nothing, only looking away. Annika continued.

“And that’s my final lesson to you. My final gift. Being a spacer isn’t about belonging. It’s about survival. It’s about doing what it takes to get the job done. Even...”

Her featured hardened, though her eyes softened.

“Even if it means saying goodbye to the only thing that warms an otherwise cold universe.”

It was unusual for a squadron commander to participate in a routine patrol. It was even more unusual for him to have his closest wingmates at his side.

Yet Isaiah Evenson wasn’t a typical Imperial, and Loren’s Legion wasn’t a typical Imperial squadron. Even the patrol itself was anything but standard; superpowers largely stuck to their own territory, and Atroco hadn’t been counted as one of Her Majesty’s systems since the violent overthrow of its Imperial benefactors. In the eyes of many it was a fallen system, lost to an uprising of raiders and outlaws, a disgrace to the Loren name for being so close to their homeworld.

That it was probably the secret hideout of a supposed ally was of no comfort to the man whatsoever.

The comms squawked, the man looking around himself in the bridge of his ship, the *Bloodfeather*. It was in formation with three other Fer de Lances, deadly and loaded with AX multicannons. As it always did in supercruise, distance became relative. The other members of Evanson’s wing were almost incalculably far away by terrestrial standards; yet from where he sat they seemed almost within visual range, bright supercruise drives illuminated in the distance and the four flying in something that resembled faster-than-light formation.

“Anything?”

Phisto Sobanii's voice rang clear, as did the disappointment within it.

"Nothing. Not even a fly in the cargo bay."

System traffic remained normal, or at least as normal as could be expected for a system with such a precarious political situation. Freighters and the odd wanted ship crossed their scanners, yet the real objects of their search remained stubbornly inconspicuous.

"This is hopeless," Sobanii said, thumping the dashboard in frustration. "Kerenski and Púrpura know this system from end to end. If they don't want to be found, we sure as hell ain't gonna find 'em just by buzzin' around like this."

"I guess you're right," Evanson replied, though he was loathe to admit defeat. "They might not even be in here at all. We need to come up with a different plan. Any ideas?"

Phisto considered.

"Negative. We've got eyes and ears out for them, but Atroco ain't our turf. And we can't have more than a wing or two of Legion ships flying around before people start asking questions. Speaking of which- any word from our feelers on Lasswitz?"

Renraiku answered, frustration dripping from every word.

"Not a peep."

The wing continued to patrol, steering clear of the main trade lanes but scanning every vessel that passed regardless. Radio silence carried the day, though no formal order had been given. Not a man in the wing cared to give voice to his unspoken dread— that the Legion's new allies had betrayed them, that they had been played as fools, and that an entire star system had been needlessly sacrificed on the altar of such foolishness.

Adam's voice came through the comms.

“We’re not thinking like the Witches. They don’t stick to trade lanes. They don’t register their ships in docking logs. We need to dig deep. *Really* deep.”

Isaiah looked around himself. Only the blackness of space looked back.

“Agreed. I want a three-dimensional sweep, separated by quadrant. I’m sending coordinates now— everyone split up and take a look. Power to scanners, max area. If anything smells fishy, I want you to stick your nose inside. Legionnaires, deploy!”

The wing of Fer de Lances peeled away from one another, four divergent fireflies in the blackness of Atroco’s space. There was no chatter, and indeed no need for it. Each pilot knew the stakes, and each went about his business in earnest.

Phisto Sobanii in particular felt the weight of the issue upon his shoulders. It had been he who had first made contact with the Witches, and he who had vouched for them as allies of the Legion. He had even been the one to personally lead the sortie to spring them from prison— first Kerenski, and then Yolanta, and then all the others who had been imprisoned by the local Imperial authorities. From there, the glorious revolution against the corrupt Atroco Emperor’s Grace proceeded, brief but bloody. The Legion aided the Witches, and the Witches aided the Raiders. It had been a hell of a risk— an Imperial acting against other Imperials— but he had been assured that he would be protected from on high. So far there hadn’t been any word of his role in helping the Witches ascend to power, but—

The man scowled, the system’s main star shrinking behind his vessel until it, too, was merely one pinprick among many.

But that was before they pulled their disappearing act, along with all the alien loot. How the hell are we supposed to be the Empire's premier anti-xeno squadron if we're stuck with second-rate equipment? It'll take months to scrape up that much gear again.

The stellar distance between Phisto and everything else in the system grew, the ship's relativistic speed hundreds of light-seconds per real-time second. In truth, Phisto was in need of the solitude, times like the present making the man question everything. The tumult of the past several years played out before his eyes, all the events that had led him to this moment. The man sighed.

The clan, the jobs, the years with the Fusiliers playing freedom fighter. Standing with Salome. The side-work in Pegasi. The new life as an Imperial. And for what?

Sobanii looked to his side, to the Fer de Lance's empty co-pilot's seat and the void beyond.

Disappointment. One after another, failures compounding failures. And to what end?

A barren planet was by now filling the man's viewpoint. Though metal-rich, it was nearly devoid of human settlement. Phisto pulled back on his throttle, slowing to orbital velocity. Something about the planet had caught his eye, a flash where none should have been. It was probably nothing, but...

There was a slight jolt, a bump as the *Saint of Killers* dropped into normal space, its thrusters flaring as it skimmed along where the planet's upper atmosphere would have been—had it any to begin with. Beneath Phisto was an endless grey waste, not a dot of human habitation visible from where he flew.

Yet there it was, a pinprick of light disappearing over the horizon. Still there were no readings on the *Saint's* sensors. Phisto banked his vessel toward it, moving his throttle to full speed. The planet's gravity slowed his vessel, and catching up to the anomaly was slow-going, even at superluminal speeds. Gradually the glows drew closer, enough to be defined into—

“Isaiah, are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

Worry sounded over the comms.

“Sure am. But who the hell are they? The Witches?”

Sure enough, the pinpricks weren’t one source of distant light, but three. Everything about them looked like supercruise wakes, but the Legionnaires’ scopes remained clear. Pisto ground his teeth, pushing forward.

“Whoever they are, they’re got some answering to do. Ain’t nobody goes on joyrides around barren worlds in Atroco— not with the Raiders in charge.”

The ships closed the distance, and if the mysterious guests were alarmed by the newcomers, they didn’t show it. The sensors flickered and registered, a profile finally materializing.

“It’s... a pair of Ferdies and a T-9. But they’re not returning names or factions.”

So, too, was Isaiah’s display showing an error in its readout. Over the line, Renraiku chimed in.

“I don’t like it.”

Pisto checked a readout to his side, his fingers dancing over the holo-keys.

“Me neither. But they’re coming from somewhere... down *there*. Boss, you copying this?”

“Affirmative. They came from the surface alright.”

Automated frameshift warnings sounded in all four men’s ears. There would be no way to interdict the intruders, not when the sensor’s lock on them was tenuous at best. The trio of ships vanished into hyperspace, leaving nothing behind but a decaying wake signature. Soon there would be no trace of them at all.

Pisto cursed. “And that was all she wrote. I’m not set up for pursuit. Anyone else?”

“Negative.”

“Nope.”

“Don’t like *that*, either.”

Again, Pisto cursed.

“Well, whoever they were, they weren’t just sightseeing. Boss, what say we do a little snooping of our own?”

Resolution sounded in the wing commander’s voice.

“Whatever they were doing down there, I want to know what it is. No time to whistle up a ground team— this one’s on us. Everyone packing?”

Adam Firethorn chuckled. “What are you saying— set down and slum it as ground-pounders?”

“That’s *exactly* what I’m saying.”

A course was plotted and entered, the ships’ heads-up displays guiding them to the exact rendezvous coordinates. Four Fer de Lances dipped toward the sea of grey below, engines flaring. Renraiku’s voice cut through the comms.

“Now *that* I like.”

Morning came early for Tyrran, a loud knocking on his cabin door. He was in the *Rosa Púrpura*, face-down on his bunk with one foot hanging over the end. He blinked, momentarily disoriented, his breath coming in ragged gasps. He’d been deep in slumber, dreaming of—

The man blinked. *A foster home. One of them. A new bed, new faces...*

Tyrran sat up, rubbing his eyes. The dream rapidly faded into nothingness. The knocking continued.

Some things never change.

There was the beeping of an override code, and the door slid open, Yolanta stepping through the entrance. She was already dressed, in stylish leather trousers with an asymmetric stripe down one side. A slim-fitting flight jacket was zipped to the top, dark and fashionable. Flowing, vibrant hair cascaded over her shoulders. Iberian lips pressed together in disapproval. Hands went to hips as her eyes narrowed, looking downward at her partner. It was all Tyrran could do to meet her gaze.

And some things definitely do.

“Kerenski is expecting us. Meet me on the bridge in ten minutes.”

The man exhaled. “Right.”

Yolanta paused, traces of hesitation in her voice. “Andor?”

“What is it?”

The old sharpness returned to her eyes.

“Last night. The wine... the conversation. As far as Kerenski is concerned, it never happened. Is that clear?”

Tyrran rose, his trousers unbuckled. Yolanta blinked, lifting her eyes to the man. Her hand gripped the doorway. Full lips pressed further against one another. The man halted, again only inches from her.

“And as far as *we’re* concerned?”

Yolanta sniffed, looking the man up and down. Her nose wrinkled.

“Depends. When is the last time you had a shower?”

Tyrran shrugged. “It’s been a long week.”

The woman spun, hands still on hips, glancing over her shoulder. Her tone was sharp, but not as sharp as it could have been.

“Make it fifteen, *patán*. We are meeting someone critical— and first impressions are important.”

Tyrran stripped off his shirt, moving to the shower unit. He chuckled, glancing to his partner.

“Oh? And just who are we impressing *today*?”

Yolanta’s gaze lingered over the man for just an instant longer than normal, turning to once again face him.

“An old associate of Kerenski’s. A pirate hailing from Pegasi itself. But he can sneak anything anywhere, or else I am *Alianza*.”

Andor chuckled. “I like him already. What’s his name?”

A knowing look glinted in Yolanta’s eyes.

“He goes by only one: Ouberos.”

“Doesn’t look like much. You *sure* we’re in the right spot?”

Four men in armored atmo suits stood before a dilapidated structure, barely the size of a terrestrial warehouse, floodlights flickering against corroded metal plating in regular intervals. The building was itself dwarfed by even their ships, the four Fer de Lances landed in close proximity to each other. Across from it was a loading dock, one large enough to accommodate the T-9 they had seen speeding away. No signs of habitation could be seen, and no one had contacted the Legionnaires via radio. The world was barren and devoid of atmosphere, grey soil beneath their feet and the blackness of space above their heads. Gravity was present in sufficient quantity that the dust from their landing had settled.

Phisto Sobanii stepped forward, his eyes weary within his helmet’s face shield. Information scrolled past his face, the man turning to verify the coordinates on which he stood.

“Yeah. This is it. This is where they came from.”

Isaiah Evanson stepped forward, taking a look around.

“This place is... wrong. It shouldn’t be here. It isn’t on any maps, and it doesn’t serve any purpose except to... what, exactly?”

Adam stepped forward, a laser carbine in his hands.

“Only one way to find out.”

Isaiah nodded, making his decision.

“Open her up!”

Renraiku advanced, a blasting charge in his hand. He affixed the bomb to the outside of the main doors, his gloved fingers moving quickly as he set the timer.

“Armed!”

The men stepped back, to one side of the entrance. When they were at a safe distance Renraiku placed one finger on his wrist computer.

“Fire in the hole!”

The blast was silent in the airless environment, but its effects were clear. There was a flash, followed by a shock and tremble. The door was torn open, its thick steel no match for the shaped charge. A white rush of oxygen escaped through the breach.

Isaiah was the first to advance, drawing an old-style laser pistol. He held it up, one foot stepping before the other.

“Well, if they were ignoring us, they aren’t now. Let’s go!”

The four men stepped inside the entryway, nothing but darkness greeting them. A few unbroken lights detected the motion, flickering on as they advanced— but curiously there was no alarm. Without a word four sets of searchlights were turned on, revealing nothing except bare metal bulkheads and basic instrumentation panels. Pisto pointed past them.

“Door.”

Guns leveled, the four stepped deeper into the building. The door to which Pisto had pointed was unlocked; it opened with a simple turn of its handle. Again, air came rushing out from the darkness within, but there remained no sign of habitation.

Slowly the men advanced, their pace light, each suspecting a trap. The facility remained mostly powered-down; only a few safety lights provided illumination apart from their weapon-mounted lights. The four searched every room they came across; nothing of value was discovered. Empty utility closets and equipment access were all that were found. A row of unused crew quarters yielded nothing.

Adam glanced down a long corridor, prominent and bare. At the end were prominent blast doors, large enough to transport shipping containers.

“Here! Think I found something.”

The four advanced down the corridor. Phisto toggled the door’s controls, the light switching from red to green. At first nothing happened, mechanical locks from within the doors clicking rhythmically. They then unsealed themselves, splitting along a giant center seam and parting ways, strained machinery moving them aside. Phisto shone his carbine’s light within.

“It’s a giant lift!”

The rest of the wing gathered around him. Sure enough, there was more to the facility than met the eye, the surface building merely the tip of a metal iceberg. Sobanii glanced to his side.

“What’s the call, boss?”

Isaiah stepped forward onto the lift, turning to the others.

“We proceed inside. Adam, I want you to stay up here as backup. Radio in a ground team to secure the area, and let us know if there’s any company. Phisto and Ren, you’re with me.”

Adam nodded. “Aye, sir.”

The three men stepped within the left, large enough for a hundred. Isaiah keyed the controls, loud industrial hydraulics straining as they descended, lights moving from their feet to their heads. Gloved hands gripped the weapons within, not even Phisto cracking a joke as they were lowered deeper and deeper within the bowels of the mysterious facility. At the bottom was another set of blast doors, equal in size to ones on the surface. Like those, their controls were simple, unsecured.

Renraiku shook his head.

“Not exactly grade-A security, is it?”

Phisto looked around. Bare metal bulkheads surrounded them.

“This place’s location is better security than a hundred guards. We got lucky even finding it.”

Isaiah took a deep breath, one finger on the controls.

“Everyone ready?”

Renraiku and Phisto leveled their weapons.

“Aye.”

“Do it.”

Isaiah punched the button, and with a deep rumble the doors parted in the middle, slowly sliding apart, darkness looming beyond. The men stepped through, weapons raised, heads looking all around. It took a moment for their eyes to adjust, but when they did...

Phisto’s jaw dropped.

“Mother of *God*...”

Surrounding the men were eerie, angular structures, alien cyan glowing from within. Rows and rows of gear could be seen, weapons and parts and scavenged structures. The structures went on for as far as the men could see, rows of it, rising high above their heads. Isaiah swallowed, his face hardening.

“Anyone else getting the impression that the Witches have been holding out on us?”

Renraiku held his searchlight aloft, a massive Gauss cannon before him.

“By Randomius... there’s enough gear here to waste an entire Thargoid fleet.”

Phisto scowled. “And not a single bit of it on our ships. The Witches accomplished their mission, alright. They just forgot to tell *us*.”

Isaiah turned to his wingmates.

“Kerenski has a lot to answer for, but she’s for *me* to deal with. For now, we need to get this...”

He glanced to his side, narrowing his eyes at the alien technology.

“*Equipment* offloaded from this place. With or without their help, the Legion has what it needs. Now *our* mission can move forward.”

Deep bass notes permeated the nightclub, penetrating even the walls of the private room in which Kerenski sat. She was flanked by Púrpura and Andor, each seated in an overstuffed chair. Gaudy neon lighting bathed their faces and clothing in pink and green hues. There was a small table before them, metal and entirely in line with the industrial aesthetic of their surroundings. A bottle of clear liquid sat upon it, next to which were two small shot glasses.

Smoke from the tip of Kerenski's lit cigarette mixed with that of Púrpura's cigarillo, the former reclining and the latter leaning forward. Andor nursed a drink, gazing coolly from his chair, saying nothing. He was well-advised to do so— most people would have been at a loss for words at the sight that the trio was beholding.

Reclining in a couch was a man, slim and in pristine black leathers, his age indeterminate, star-tanned skin almost artificially smooth. A thin beard framed his face. Around his neck was a thick palladium chain, weighed down by a genuine Void Opal. In one hand was a drink. In the other, a joint that smelled vaguely of onionhead. Curled around his parted legs and sitting on the floor were a pair of young women, one with jet black skin and the other almost ghostly pale. They were both of a like type, clad in almost nothing yet feral devotion burning in their eyes. Tyrran was certain that an unspoken war had already been waged between them and the women next to him.

For a long time, neither the man nor those sat across from him said anything. The former put the joint to his lips, indulging in a final, extended drag. He flicked it away, his voice a smooth Pegasi timbre.

"It's been a long time, Kari. I was certain that you'd be rotting in some Imperial stasis cell by now."

The woman's eyes narrowed, taking her own drag before answering. Her accent began its dance with his.

"Only my friends call me that, Ouberos. And I'm no stranger to so-called Imperial justice."

A light, disarming laugh emanated from the man's throat. The women at his knees coiled themselves further around him.

"I'd have hoped that you'd consider *me* a friend at this point."

The slightest of smirks lifted Kerenski's mouth.

"I seem to recall some bastard of a pirate once telling me that friends are the most expensive commodity of all."

A look of faux-consideration danced across the man's face. He raised his glass to the woman before him.

"That *does* sound like me."

Kerenski's eyes sharpened. "*Da*. And do you know what *else* sounds like you? Getting in on a good thing before anyone else."

Slowly, Ouberos nodded. He reached down with his one hand, caressing the heads of the women at his feet. His eyes never left those of Kerenski's.

"Do you hear that, my pretties? That's the sound of our friend here getting to the point."

Kerenski leaned forward, urgency in her features.

"There is a ship full of valuable Thargoid materials incoming. A Python. I have the coordinates of where it will be. I want its cargo— *all* of it."

The pirate shrugged. "Sounds simple enough."

Kerenski took another drag of her cigarette. “There’s more to it than that. I want the ship and its crew unharmed, too. And I want you to *give* something to them when you’re done. Something rare.”

One eyebrow of Ouberos’ went up.

“Oh? And what might that be?”

The woman’s eyes shifted, glancing to the priceless Opal on the man’s chest. He blinked.

“You *must* be joking.”

Sensing her advantage, the woman leaned in further.

“I assure you that I am not. My reasons are my own. The payment will be most reasonable, I think you’ll find.”

An old mercenary gleam danced in the pirate’s eyes.

“*How* reasonable?”

Kerenski told him. The man chuckled.

“Make it double, and you’ve got a deal. I’ll be needing the *Dusk* for this job, and you know an Annie makes *everything* more expensive.”

The woman took another drag on her cigarette.

“Twenty percent, *tovarish*. Plus twenty percent of the loot.”

The man spread his arms.

“Three years ago that’d have been a sweetener. Nowadays you can’t take five steps without tripping over alien tech. Market’s flooded, I’m afraid. Fifty percent. Of both.”

Kerenski exhaled, smoke obscuring her features.

“Not *that* flooded. A third more on the payout, and a third of the cargo you collect. *Plus* we’ll put you in touch with Palin himself, get you a nice set of meta-alloy cargo racks for your trouble.”

Ouberos scoffed. “You don’t have those kinds of connections, *witch*.”

Tyrran, who had up to that point remained silent, spoke up, his crisp accent breaking through the throbbing bass of the nightclub.

“Yes, she *does*. ”

All eyes went to the man. Ouberos leaned forward, nearly shoving the waifs at his feet away.

“So the extra body *does* speak. And who the hell are you, some kind of—”

The man paused, his eyes drifting to the Black Thorn around Tyrran’s neck. A knowing smile grew across his lips.

“Ah. I see now. You’re in until she says you aren’t. Don’t feel bad. You wouldn’t *believe* how handy those were when she was muscling her way into Atroco. Just possessing one was a life sentence, if I recall.”

It was now Yolanta’s turn to lean forward.

“This man is Tyrran Xavian Andor, and he is our... *especialista* in all things xeno. If he says we can get you something, we *can*.”

Ouberos shifted a dangerous gaze to the younger woman.

“And the understudy, too? I remember when you were green as synthgrass, looking like you’d do *anything* for a pat on the head from Kerenski here. Some things never change.”

Kari Kerenski took a final drag of her cigarette, flicking it aside and fishing out another. Ouberos produced a gaudy skull lighter, a gas-fed flame appearing with a flip of its cap. The woman leaned forward, lighting her cigarette, inhaling it and blowing the smoke into the already thick air. Again, her eyes met his.

“And some things *do*. Greater things than me, you, or even the Witches are afoot. *Much* greater. This is your chance to be part of that— and turn a profit in the meantime.”

Ouberos took a sip of his drink, smiling and resembling a shark for doing so.

“Still getting others to do your dirty work, eh? I suppose the only question is: whose dirty work are *you* doing?”

Kerenski smiled in return, her eyes cunning.

“Then we have a deal?”

Ouberos nodded.

“The contents of one Python, minus my one-third cut. No blood. No crippled ships. Payment in credit chit, B of Z certified. Introductions to Palin’s people and meta-alloy racks for my ship— the *big* one.”

Kerenski shot a look to Andor before turning back to the pirate.

“Agreed.”

The pirate gave his final nod, reaching for the bottle.

“There’s an old Pegasi tradition,” he said, “that no deal is really a deal until a pair of glasses have been raised. I like to observe it. Makes me feel like I’m home, you know?”

Kerenski nodded, watching in silence as the man poured a clear liquid into two crystal vessels, pushing one of them toward his guest. A strong caustic odor emanated from them, causing Yolanta’s nose to wrinkle. Kari took the glass and held it up.

“To home, then.”

Ouberos matched her gesture.

“May I never see the wretched place again.”

Man and woman drank, neither showing the slightest reaction to the rotgut. Two shotglasses were slammed down upon the table. The pirate relaxed, gesturing to the writhing masses beyond the walls of the private room.

“Will you be on Lasswitz long?”

The woman took a long drag, not saying anything as she exhaled thick smoke. She stubbed out the cigarette.

“As long as we can be.”

There was no handshake. The trio before the man rose, smoothing their jackets and exiting the private room. The throbbing of techno music momentarily intensified as they left, the pirate's eyes on them. The door shut, and Ouberos gathered his barely-dressed consorts to himself, reclining in the chair and allowing himself to relax. They knew his moods well, and already they were unbuttoning his leather trousers. The man allowed his eyes to drift, already planning the details of the heist.

"Kerenski," he said, "what *have* you gotten yourself into?"

"Boss," said Adam Firethorn. "What *have* we gotten ourselves into?"

The four men were standing outside the structure, their Fer de Lances a short distance away. Already the first teams of Legion marines had arrived to secure the facility, and armored vehicles had set up a perimeter over the barren soil. Isaiah observed with a commander's eye, and turned to his wingmate.

"The chance to become a *real* anti-Thargoid squadron, that's what. Free from being dependent on those dealers. Free from needing to harvest Guardian tech. It's all here."

Phisto nodded, the first massive shipment of gear being carried away by industrial auto-loaders. There was a Legion Cutter on the landing platform, bays opened for the cargo to come.

"And the Witches aren't. I think it's safe to say that we're through with them."

Isaiah sighed. "Randomius knows what they had planned for this motherload. Weapons, data, raw material, salvage from ruins— it's everything we partnered with them to provide. With any luck, we'll be out of here before anyone notices that it's gone."

Sobanii paused, looking down at his boots.

“It’s just... I thought that Kerenski was on the level. Púrpara, too. I led the op to spring ‘em out of prison myself, just before they were due to be executed. And how do they repay us? With a knife in the back.”

Evanson put a hand on his wingmate’s shoulder.

“It’s my fault. I’m the one who inducted them, started getting involved with their cause even before we were even finished in Pegasi. She talked a good talk— about Salome, the Club, making the ‘verse a better place. Faveol was right all along. I wanted a shortcut to getting the Legion xeno-ops ready, and I got suckered instead.”

Phisto chuckled, tapping the ground with his boot.

“Almost.”

Evanson allowed himself a half-smile.

“Yeah. Almost. But we got lucky, that’s all.”

Phisto of the Sobanii broke into the cocky grin for which he was known.

“Don’t you remember the first thing I said when I took you on in the Fusiliers? *‘It’s better to be lucky than good.’*”

That caused Evanson’s half-smile to grow into a full one.

“Yeah, I do. And you followed it up with *‘but be good, too— just in case your luck runs out.’*”

Phisto turned, gesturing into the blackness of space above their heads.

“Well, guess what? Let the Thargoids come. They’ll be dealing with the luckiest bastards this side of the Pleiades!”

Evanson was just beginning to nod in agreement when he paused, turning away and holding up a hand for silence. He said nothing, listening to a voice that only he could hear, acknowledging the transmission. For a moment he did nothing, only standing with his back turned, opening and closing his fist. Finally he turned, looking to his wingmates with sharp eyes.

“Speaking of luck, we just had a stroke of it. Kerenski’s been spotted.”

Three heads snapped to attention at the woman's name. Phisto took a step forward.

"Where?"

Isaiah Evanson gestured to the starry sky above them.

"Right here, in Atroco. At a nightclub. Doing business, from the sounds of it. We can be there within the hour."

Renraiku and Adam traded a glance. Phisto scowled.

"Then I think it's time that her *business* gets a little audit."

Garish neon lights strobed in sync with throbbing techno beats, lending an unwitting rhythm to Kerenski's strides. She was flanked by Andor and Púrpura, their eyes all business while the eyes of others washed over them. The three reacted to the attention in their own fashions, with Tyrran looking downward and Kerenski stiffening her gait. Yolanta pursed her lips and lifted her chin in an air of disinterest. Her hips, curiously, swayed almost imperceptibly *more*.

The techno beat lessened to a dull background noise as the nightclub doors slid shut behind them, passersby coming and going in a crowded corridor on Lasswitz. Yet the trio wasn't alone. Waiting for them was a familiar, yet unexpected sight. In plainclothes stood Evanson, Firethorn, Renraiku, and Sobanii, arms crossed and eyes dangerous.

Kerenski halted, raising a hand for her two compatriots to do the same. For a long time, nothing was said, the two groups only exchanging icy stares. Isaiah stepped forward.

"Celebrating?"

Kerenski, too, stepped forward, hands clasped behind her back.

"Working."

Sobanii scoffed, glaring at the woman.

"For *whom*?"

Kari glanced from side to side, stealing glances at passersby.

“How many are there?”

Evanson shook his head. “It’s only us. Not everyone is a snake, you know.”

The woman’s eyes flashed, her accent thickening. “We are *not* your enemy. And we have much to discuss. But not here.”

A long silence passed between them. Isaiah stepped closer, looking his counterpart hard in the eye. Yolanta and Tyrran tensed, not knowing what to expect.

“‘Discuss’? There’s nothing to discuss. We found your little cache— Randomius knows how long you’ve been hoarding Guardian tech. It’s over.”

The woman blinked. “Cache? Guardian tech? What are you talking about?”

Now Pisto of the Sobanii stepped forward.

“The underground complex on the barren moon. There’s enough new gear and raw salvage to furnish the entire Legion. Don’t play stupid, Kerenski— it isn’t your style.”

A ragged exhale escaped the woman’s lips.

“What Guardian technology I was able to acquire has already been delivered to my contact...”

Púrpura joined her leader, a defiant gaze hardening her Iberian features.

“And was *dearly* bought, *amigos*. Whatever you have discovered has nothing to do with us.”

Evanson scoffed. He turned to Tyrran, standing silently.

“Yeah? And what about you, newjack? Got anything to say?”

Tyrran looked up, his own eyes hard.

“It’s true. The job... it went wrong. You want to take the Witches down, force us from Atroco? Go ahead. There aren’t many left.”

Isaiah was opening his mouth to retort, but Kerenski cut him off.

“You’ll be getting your first shipment of weapons soon, *tovarish*. First the Guardian technology, and then Thargoid-based. Everything is in order.”

For a long time, Evanson simply glared, of two minds as to what to do. Finally he spoke.

“Am I to understand that the Night Witches are no longer a viable unit?”

Kari Kerenski held up a warning finger, inches from the man’s face. The two groups closed in, standing nearly chest to chest.

“You are to understand that the Night Witches *accomplished their mission.*”

Isaiah scoffed.

“That’s for me to decide, not you to dictate. This *partnership* will never work if you and yours go off the grid for weeks at a time to slink around in the shadows.”

Tyrran, now, rolled his eyes.

“Thought that’s why you needed us in the first place.”

Evanson stepped to one side, face-to-face with the rogue.

“What the Legion *needs* are dependable allies, not backstabbers pulled from the bottom of the trash heap.”

A sly smile curled one side of Andor’s lips.

“Then what am *I* doing here?”

Isaiah’s fists balled, but the looks of passersby stopped him. He turned back to Kerenski.

“It’s like this: if that tech shows up, I’ll know I have a partner. If it doesn’t, I’ll know I *don’t*. And at that point...”

He turned to leave, turning his head to one side, a distinctly Imperial sneer contorting his face.

“You and your Witches are on your own.”

It was a long time before Tyrran Xavian Andor was able to speak, even to those trying their best to be kind. He was in a dark office of the Palin Research Center, a filthy flightsuit still covering his battered body. The words of the sharply-dressed man across from him were only barely registering in his numbed mind.

“So as I was saying, since half the cargo was able to be salvaged, my employer is willing to pay half the agreed price.”

Tyrran said nothing. The agent adjusted his tie and changed tack, traces of sympathy in his tone.

“Shame what happened, really. They very nearly made it.”

And so they had. Annika had piloted brilliantly, maneuvering the old Krait like Tyrran had never seen, dodging all manner of incoming fire from the Federal blockade. She ducked and wove, spiraled and flipped, twisted and faked, making a mockery of the superpower’s highly-trained pilots. Tyrran himself was ignored, him and his snub fighter low on the Federals’ priorities, himself not doing anything like the damage needed to pull his boss’s pursuers away from her. For a long time, it looked like she wouldn’t have even needed him, so skillful was her piloting.

Yet in the end the Federation did what it did best, answering the problem before it with overwhelming force. Dozens of Condor fighters combined their firepower, the barrage impossible to avoid forever. The fire overwhelmed the ship's shields, and burdened by the cargo lacked extra layers of armor plating. The physics of destruction turned against the only true home that Tyrran had ever known, and with a scream he watched as the Krait burst into a flaming hulk, speeding toward the surface.

Yet neither the ship nor its commander were ready to accept defeat, and there remained only a lone Condor in pursuit, pressing its attack when the rest of the Federals were ordered to disengage so close to the facility. Even amid flame and smoke the Krait was intact, and Tyrran could almost see Annika fighting for control in the center seat of the bridge, cursing and shouting orders to Joss and Carter. Tyrran shoved the Taipan's throttle forward, opening fire on the lone Condor. For a wild moment hope burst forth within his heart, his multicannons knocking the Federal off course, seeing Annika regain control of her ship bit by bit.

It wasn't to be. The much faster Condor, now damaged irreparably, was unable to stop itself from losing control, careening into its target from behind, slamming into the already damaged engine nacelle and dooming the Krait once and for all. The larger ship spun from the impact, a spiraling smoke trail telling the story of its final, doomed descent. All time was lost to Tyrran; the man might have screamed or might have remained silent, remembering nothing except the sight of the ship slamming into the barren soil, pieces of it being flung for kilometers, its remaining fuel exploding in a final, cataclysmic fireball.

The man had no memory of landing near the wreckage, nor any of him being forcefully pulled away from it. It was as though time itself had hiccuped, flinging him into the future with nothing but memories of death and failure.

The voice of the man before him brought Tyrran to the present.

“As a token of appreciation for your, ah... dedication, Mr. Palin has offered his services to you. Such access in turn nearly guarantees acceptance into the Pilots Federation. And don’t worry about finances— even half the reward is still a substantial sum. As a pilot, you would be well on your way. Do we have a deal?”

Tyrran said nothing, only reaching inside his pocket and pulling out something tiny. It was the crest of the famous guild he had machined all those years ago, still crude compared to the real thing yet unmistakable for what it was. He uncurled his fingers, staring down at the badge that he had for so long so coveted. Again, the man repeated his question.

“Mr. Andor, do we have a deal?”

Tyrran’s hand formed a fist, rising to stand over the man across from him.

“Yeah. We have a deal.”

The agent nodded, making a few notes into a dataslate, a holo-document materializing before Tyrran. Without a trace of hesitation he signed, the document validating in real time and the chime of more credits than he’d ever seen in his entire life hitting his account. He looked up, not as a crew member of a destroyed ship but as a Commander, his life’s ambition purchased with the blood of those he had counted as family.

The holo-doc closed out, leaving only the agent before him. He smiled, looking for all the ‘verse like a shark.

“Thank you for your patronage, pilot. And look on the bright side: you get to keep all the money.”

With that, the man turned and left, leaving his guest with nothing but his credits and his guilt. From within the bulkhead walls, he heard the roars of ships coming and going. The sound used to fill him with excitement. He again opened his hand, the wings of the famous guild now a mocking reminder of his failure.

Commander Tyrran Xavian Andor had at last achieved his dream, and Commander Tyrran Xavian Andor had never felt more lonely in his entire life.

The Imperial Palace glinted in the gentle Chionic sunlight, the Senator having expressed his wish for a mild summer's day. Its skies were clear and bright, a gentle breeze cooling but not chilling, the exotic flora of the gardens rustling. Two figures walked alone, trailed by those in the unmistakable garb of palace slaves, following a respectful distance behind.

Senator Vesper Faveol straightened himself, a figure of aging dignity amid the carefully manicured beauty.

"The only thing more tedious than these gardens," he said, "is wondering whether or not your allies are your allies. Wouldn't you agree?"

At his side, Isaiah Evanson exhaled.

"So you've heard."

Wizened eyes bored into more youthful ones.

"What I heard is that the Witches took dreadful casualties far from home, yet still came through with the goods. And I heard that their only thanks was near-exile."

Isaiah scowled. "That's still more than I heard from that damned Kerenski woman during the entirety of her op. Communication isn't exactly her strong suit."

Faveol's lips curled in gentle remonstrance.

"And it hasn't occurred to you that her withholding such is a *favor*?"

A look of disbelief widened the man's eyes.

"In what universe is my subordinate's lack of contact with me an asset?"

For a moment, Faveol said nothing, strolling a short distance, letting his gnarled fingers brush the tips of colorful flora. He turned, his face hard.

“In the universe where an Imperial squadron commander has no business consorting with sordid revolutionaries. In the universe where the slightest hint of scandal can undermine one’s career. In the universe where Imperial politics are a greater danger than the nearest Federal fleet.”

The younger man shook his head, eyes downward.

“I wasn’t born into this culture,” he said. “Speak plainly.”

Faveol spread out his arms. “The vastness of the universe is something that every pilot ponders at length. You must accustom yourself to thinking of politics in the same way. You are not an island, young Evanson— but a child splashing a stick into a pond, every ripple in the water making its way outward, and every errant water droplet hitting home in some unseen way.”

“And... the droplets of others can hit me, as well?”

The older man smiled.

“Always. Unless you take or are given shelter— which up to this point, you have.”

Isaiah scoffed. “But which is it? Has the Legion earned the respect of its enemies within the Empire, or has someone been keeping the rain off our heads?”

The Senator resumed his stroll, Isaiah striding with purpose to catch up.

“The Legion will always have enemies as long as it bears *her* name,” he said. “That is as unavoidable as politics itself.”

For a long time, neither man said anything. The summer— simulation of such, anyway— breeze picked up, bringing the first hint of evening chill. Isaiah shook his head.

“Then what am I to do? The Legion is no usual Squadron. Our mission takes place beyond the Empire’s borders. I *need* those connections.”

Faveol paused.

“‘Mission’? What *is* your squadron’s mission, exactly?”

Evanson knew that he was being patronized, but pressed ahead anyway. He straightened himself into a military posture before answering.

“To be the Empire’s premier anti-xeno squadron.”

Faveol’s eyebrows lifted, his eyes piercing.

“And what is your *real* mission?”

Again, Isaiah scowled, purpose hardening his gaze.

“To seek the truth. The truth that *she* sought, until the end.”

Slowly, Faveol nodded, almost mocking gentleness in his tone.

“And to do that, Thargoids must die?”

Evanson didn’t answer, only turning to stare into the distance. His gaze fell upon not the cobblestone paths and perfect gardens before him, but to the blue skies above, slowly darkening into night. In the distance the engine glow of a gleaming Clipper could be seen, flanked by a pair of Imperial Eagles. At last he summoned his answer.

“No.”

The figure garbed in the flowing robes of an Imperial Senator stood in contrast to the one in pressed military uniform. A gentleness to the former’s tone flowed from his lips, too gentle to be anything except honeyed words to ease a greater, more painful truth.

“Have you given much thought to the future?”

Isaiah kept his gaze skyward.

“I’ve thought of little else.”

Faveol nodded with the wisdom of a man of his years.

“As have I. You are young, Evanson, and the path before you is unwritten. Yet one thing is certain: by this time next year, you might be any number of things— but what you will *not* be is an Imperial squadron commander.”

The younger man opened his mouth to protest, silenced by the older raising his hand.

“Do not take offense. There is work to be done, by our side and by theirs. Things are moving quickly, and there is precious little time before the true plan is revealed.”

Isaiah shook his head. “But what is there left to reveal? The doomed scouting missions, the backup locations, the plans to treat humanity as a pawn in the game of its own survival. And now that the Thargoids are here—”

Faveol interrupted, his voice taking on an edge.

“You’re foolish enough to believe that that’s the extent of it?”

Evanson bit his tongue, returning sharp gaze with sharp gaze.

“I don’t know *what* to think most days. Everything is...”

He shook his head, looking down to his polished boots. It was only with effort that he looked back up.

“I don’t know how you do it, Vespar. Navigate the labyrinth of lies. Of deception. Of half-truths cloaked in shadow.”

Another ship passed overhead, this time a Cutter, alone and majestic. Faveol nodded towards it.

“And I don’t know how you pilot a vessel the size of a palace wing with such grace, yet you do. We have each of us our abilities, and each of us our strengths.”

A look of pain crossed Isaiah’s features.

“You’re saying that I’m unfit for command.”

A gnarled hand gripped a uniformed shoulder, squeezing.

“I’m saying that if you are to find the truth you seek, you will need *all* your assets— and not only the ones who directly answer to you.”

Isaiah exhaled, a slow stream of air escaping his lips. At last he turned to his master and mentor.

“When the first shipments of Guardian technology arrive, I’ll validate that the Witches upheld their part of the deal. But I won’t brook insubordination, and I won’t be made some woman’s fool.”

Vespar Faveol's eyes danced in amusement, the elderly man turning to depart for the palace. He paused, looking over his shoulder.

"We're *all* some woman's fool in the end, I'm afraid. The only question is: which one?"

Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura gazed with satisfaction from the observation deck of the outfitting bay. The *Rosa Púrpura* was undergoing repairs. A mixture of human and automated hands worked to replace damaged hull and corroded components. As for the woman, a cigarillo dangled from between her fingers. A glass of wine was held in the other.

Behind her, Tyrran Andor lounged, a drink in his hand. It had been a week since the confrontation outside the nightclub, and Kerenski had ordered that operations be suspended to allow the Witches time to regroup. The technology brokers with whom she did business had begun to deliver, and Yolanta had been granted additional leave to recuperate. Though grief-stricken along with her mentor, the young woman declined to leave her side. Only her ship's repairs truly competed for her attention. That, and her new partner— with whom she'd been arguing.

"All the technology we've suffered and fought to acquire," he said from behind her. "And you'd turn your back on it?"

Yolanta glanced over her shoulder.

"I do not trust it, *patán*. It is an alien thing, not fully understood."

Tyrran scoffed. "The frameshift drive isn't fully understood, either— but I don't see you using the old Faraway network."

The woman's eyes sharpened, now turning to fully face her partner.

“I will not enslave myself to one alien race simply to defeat another.”

Andor rose, taking his place at her side to gaze down upon the *Púrpura*.

“Hard to be enslaved to something that hasn’t been alive in thousands of years.”

Púrpura turned, looking up to her partner. She moved not an inch at the man’s approach, the two almost touching.

“Nevertheless, I prefer something... human.”

Tyrran glanced to his side. His tone softened.

“What now?”

A single eyebrow of Yolanta’s lifted. “You stay with me until Kerenski has decided that you are of no further use.”

The man sighed, taking another sip.

“No, I mean between the Legion and the Night Witches. We’ve been cooped up on Lasswitz for over a week.”

The woman’s face hardened.

“Oh. *That* ‘what now’...”

She looked away, to her ship, no longer truly paying attention to the repairs.

“In truth? I do not know. There are... not many of us left.”

Tyrran nodded, giving the woman time. Yolanta took a long drag of her cigarillo before continuing.

“We may have to move on from Atroco. We no longer have the influence here that we once did, after all.”

Andor shook his head. “But weren’t you a key part of overthrowing Imperial rule? Of bringing the Raiders into power?”

Yolanta chuckled, her words tinged with bitterness.

“Milagro Hardy is not a woman known for her gratitude. If the Witches have been reduced to a non-factor, she will treat us as such. It is Kerenski’s goal to convince her otherwise.”

“And if she can’t?”

Another drag. Another bitter chuckle.

“Then we will, what is the expression? ‘Go on a road trip’?”

Tyrran shook his head. “A band of idealists, living out of their ships, struggling against some galactic conspiracy.”

Yolanta said something in Iberian, her gaze distant. Tyrran turned to her.

“What was that?”

The woman snubbed out her cigarello, her eyes sharp.

“Something my mentor— that is, my old guitar instructor— used to say. ‘It is in the struggle that you find yourself, not comfort’.”

Tyrran smirked. “Good advice for a Patron’s daughter.”

“*Si.*”

Man and woman turned to resume observing from their perch, each nursing their drinks. In time, Tyrran turned to his partner. His fingers brushed along hers.

“I have to ask you something.”

Yolanta’s eyes flashed, but not in irritation. “If you must.”

Tyrran looked down, and then back up to his partner.

“After everything we’ve been through...”

The woman looked at the man before her, her eyes widening.

“Yes?”

He continued.

“And all the danger we’ve shared...”

She stepped in close, her mouth unsmiling yet not unyielding.

“Go on...”

Tyrran, too, leaned in.

“And since we’re not going anywhere...”

Yolanta pursed her lips.

“*Si...*”

Confidence rose in Tyrran Andor's tone. His hand released hers, tracing along the Black Thorn.

"Can we finally get rid of this stupid thing?"

Yolanta's eyes hardened, her mouth opening and closing. For the first time, her voice dropped to an intimate whisper.

"No."

Tyrran stepped away, stopping himself from pacing. Finally he turned, his tone sharp.

"You're no spoiled slaver. I see that now. So why keep me around? Job's done, after all."

The woman folded her arms across her chest.

"The job is done when we *say* it is done. And Rax told Kerenski and myself *all* about how you backstabbed Cecil. Am I to believe that you have magically changed your ways?"

Tyrran held up a warning finger, stepping closer.

"I never backstabbed anyone who didn't have it coming. And all I want you to believe is what you've *seen*, not what you've heard."

Yolanta Púrpura stepped forward, her eyes no longer soft.

"I am not a fool, *patán*. Everything I know about deception I learned from my *bastardo* of a father— I am not some *adolescente* girl to be romanced!"

Tyrran cocked his head, advancing further. He halted, his face almost touching hers. His Low Iberian accent thickened.

"Who said anything about romance? Other than you, of course."

With that he turned, striding out of the observation bay, Yolanta lifting her chin in defiance behind him. The door slid shut, and Iberian hands went to Iberian hips.

"*Hmm!*"

Blake Fairchild reclined in the commander's chair of his Python, the *Whole Hog*. It had been a hard week for him, first hiring a salvage crew and then undertaking the risk of flying so close to Thargoid-infested space to salvage a downed Interceptor. But salvage it they had, and his ship's cargo hold was packed to the brim with choice parts of the alien vessel. It was a treasure, for the insectoid ships had a way of exploding upon destruction, leaving little to be picked over. His contract with the Kerenski woman had called for only one shipment, but the enterprising commander was certain that there remained enough wreckage for at least two more trips.

Thus was he the only one awake onboard his ship, the exhausted salvage crew asleep in their quarters. Even with powered exo-frames, the task of cutting up and loading the Thargoid ship had been exhausting, and after a week of fifteen-hour days the men and women could barely stand. Yet it would be worth it; undamaged samples of alien technology fetched a far higher premium than the odd leftovers from a destroyed hulk. Each man and woman would part company in possession of a small fortune. The ship's commander would do even better.

It was only a handful of jumps before the *Whole Hog* would re-enter the Bubble proper, and already Fairchild had visions of credits dancing in his eyes. It had been his lifelong ambition to purchase a Faulcon-Delacy Anaconda, the massive ships suitable for nearly any role he wanted it to fulfill. Such a vessel was now nearing his reach, and would be closer still if the location of the Thargoid wreckage remained a secret.

The man ran a hand along the worn metal dash of his ship, affection in his eye.

You've been a good old ship for me, Hog... don't take it personal when I trade you in, okay?

The Python dropped into normal space, cruising around a white-hot star as superluminal speeds. The ship's fuel reserves were nearly empty, and within the bridge Blake manipulated his controls, slowing the ship at a safe distance and opening his fuel scoop. A low rumble could be felt throughout the vessel as mass quantities of stellar hydrogen was scooped and processed into fuel, the ship's temperature rising but never quite hitting dangerous levels. The man scanned his instrumentation, satisfied that everything was in order.

Still... alien parts are alien parts.

Blake rose from the commander's chair and made his way to a panel along the rear of the bridge, his magboots simulating gravity. He had performed the refuelling maneuver hundreds of times and wanted to run some routine diagnostics. A healthy sense of caution had pervaded his actions for the duration of the job; though there had been none of the steady corrosion from before, he was weary of all things xeno being aboard his ship. His fingers danced across an old-style keyboard, holographic images of his ship materializing into the air before him. A bow-to-stern scan of the *Whole Hog* confirmed that his systems had suffered not at all from the cargo. The man breathed a sigh of relief.

Thank Randomius for th—

The jolt was enough knock the man to his feet, only his magboots preventing him from sliding across the bare metal deck. The ship was now drifting even in its superluminal cocoon, a quantum tunnel stretching out before it. In an instant Fairchild knew what was happening.

Interdicted? All the way out here? Oh, hell!

The man scrambled to his feet, dashing to the commander's chair at the front of the bridge. He threw himself into it, not waiting for the chair to lock his suit into place, his hands gripping the joystick and throttle, manipulating his controls as the *Hog* careened through the unstable tunnel. It took all of Fairchild's skill simply to right the vessel, but by then it was too late. The frameshift drive could no longer sustain the quantum bubble that enabled superluminal speeds, ejecting the vessel into normal space, tumbling forward as the direction thrusters tried in vain to establish control. Already the ship's internal comms were sounding off with various crew members demanding to know what had happened; Fairchild ignored these, switching them off. He now had a far more dire problems before him.

Specifically, he had an *Anaconda* before him, jet black and foreboding. The massive vessel closed in, cruel-looking multicannons deploying from within. The bigger ship had enough firepower to shred the *Hog* within moments. Blake hesitated; he had heard rumors of rogue commanders who killed simply to kill—but the other vessel had yet to open fire; only Randomius knew what an escape attempt might provoke them to do in response.

The comm system chimed; the intruding vessel was attempting to communicate. With a trembling finger Fairchild accepted, his heart pounding nearly out of his chest. He took a deep breath in the moment that it took to establish a connection.

On the screen before him was a man in a simple black flightsuit, over which was worn a black leather overcoat. Garish white skulls adorned the man's shoulders. A thin beard contrasted against fair skin. The man's eyes smiled as much as his mouth; under any other circumstances he might have been described as charming. Under the present ones they only served to increase the dread within Fairchild's gut.

"Good evening, Commander. First of all, I wish to thank you."

Blake gulped. “*Thank me?*”

The man spread his arms wide in a gesture of benevolence.

“Of course. It’s *such* a bother to travel the distance that you have. I feel that I owe you. Almost.”

Fairchild took a deep breath, his tone approaching something resembling bravery.

“Wha— what is this? And who are you?”

An innocent look softened the stranger’s face. His smile remained fixed.

“Oh, forgive my manners! My name is Ouberos, and like you I’m in the acquisition business. All I need is a moment of your time and I’ll be on my way.”

There was a pounding on the bridge door. No doubt frightened surface crew were on the other side, demanding answers to why they had all been jarred from rest. Like before, Blake ignored them.

“You mean... no. You can’t do this!”

A bright light emerged from the Anaconda’s hold, followed by four more that stayed put. Fairchild blinked, recognizing the first as a black market hatchbreaker limpet. His eyes followed the device on his scanner, the icon drawing closer and closer to his ship. His hand gripped the throttle, involuntarily moving the *Hog* in reverse. The pirate’s voice, still smooth, jarred him from doing so.

“Uh-uh-uh... you see, I also deal in the *salvage* business. Which one I’m in today depends entirely on *you*.”

The multicannons spun in place for a second, never firing but reminding Blake of his situation. The man squeezed shut his eyes, perspiration pouring down his fleshy face. He opened them to see his only choice.

“Fine. Just please don’t kill me.”

Benevolence shone through in every word of Ouberos’.

“Now *there’s* a smart commander! Jettison the cargo. *All* of it.”

Blake's finger hovered over the switch that would jettison the hard-salvaged Thargoid ship pieces... and then moved to the frameshift controls. The waypoint was nearly dead ahead, and with any luck he could—

The man shook his head, his eyes again squeezing shut.

Are you insane? This maniac would turn your ship into scrap before the count even reached ten.

His finger moved again to the switch that released the cargo. With a final exhale he flipped it, the airy noises of canisters and large components being ejected into space. In his canopy glass the pirate's waiting limpets dove, dutifully retrieving the floating pieces.

What am I going to tell the crew?

The first canister sped into view, loaded into the pirate's cavernous hold. Blake shook his head.

I tell them that I saved them, that's what. That we can always go back and harvest more.

Dejected, the man turned to his side, flipping a few toggles and activating the ship's general announcement system.

"This is the captain speaking. We're being pirated. Everyone remain calm, and we'll all get through this. I, uh... that is all."

With a flip of the switch Blake terminated the comms, still ignoring the incoming calls from his crew. Now that he wasn't in fear of his life, other pessimistic thoughts sank in.

All that time, wasted. The crew will murder me if I don't pay them something— even if it comes out of my savings. And what then? Convince them to head back out? Risk being the fool a second time?

Visions of bulging credit accounts and new Anacondas faded into bitterness, prompting Blake to raise comms with the pirate. The pleasant face of Ouberos greeted him. Fairchild rose from his commander's chair.

"How did you know where to find me?"

Another benevolent smile. Another section of Thargoid ship loaded into his own.

“I believe in a higher power, friend. This higher power speaks, and I go where it tells me.”

Fairchild blinked. *Kerenski. It had to have been. No one else even knows I'm out here. Or was it perhaps one of the crew?*

“Just... don't hurt the ship, okay?”

I swear to Randomius, I'm going to find out who tipped this asshole off...

The humiliation dragged on for several long minutes, the larger ship keeping its guns trained on the smaller. Cargo limpets went back and forth, transferring the priceless cargo into the Anaconda. At last the process completed, the last of the Thargoid components disappearing into the pirate's hold.

Fairchild sighed, miserable.

“Are we done?”

Ouberos only grinned wider, bowing in a gesture of grace. Blake's humiliation increased.

“Not quite. You've been excellent— simply excellent. As a token of my gratitude, *I* have a little something for *you*.”

Blake's pulse jumped. “You... do?”

Ouberos nodded, his every gesture one of magnanimity.

“Certainly. Only a scoundrel would leave such a good little pup empty-handed. And since you've been *so* cooperative...”

A single canister was ejected from the bowels of the pirate's ship. From sheer curiosity Blake scanned it. His eyes widened.

“You're leaving me a... Void Opal? A *real* one?”

With a dramatic flourish, Ouberos bowed, the star's light reflecting from his black leathers. He smiled, the danger flashing in his eyes for the first time. Blake gulped.

“The higher power looks after us *both*. Pleasure doing business with you, commander.”

For the second time in as many weeks, Tyrran Andor found himself at a nightclub bar. He needed to get away from his partner, to get away from everything that his life had turned into. He was free, but not. A Commander, but without a ship. Part of something nobler than himself, but ignobly so. The only escape from such was in the company of strangers, inserting himself into the mindless white noise of the teeming bodies that surrounded him. It was a paradox for one who had been a loner for so long— yet there he was, finding solitude even amid the masses.

One stiff drink had led to another— and while he was by no means drunk, his thoughts roamed far more than usual. Long-forgotten memories paraded through his mind, faces and locations from the past. For a moment they were more real to him than the inebriated forms writhing nearby, more real than even the few men and women who tried to strike up friendly conversation with the man. The glass went to his lips, the man staring into the distance, garish neon lights washing over him.

All the homes. All the jobs. All the backstabbing. It was all I knew, wasn't it?

Tyrran's thoughts deepened, threatening to slip into *bona fide* melancholy.

It's a big universe. Too big for it to all catch up to me. That's what you always told yourself.

A bitter chuckle escaped the man's lips.

Yeah, right.

Andor took another drink. Newer, more recent memories asserted themselves.

Annika... Yolanta. Just when I think I've stumbled onto something good, it's always taken away. Never forget that.

The man squeezed shut his eyes, trying to resist the thought of the Iberian woman to whom he was bound. His memories came not as images but as feelings, remembering with all five senses everything that she was.

The sound of her guitar.

The motion of her hips as she danced.

The smell of the wine on her breath.

The way her eyes see a man to his very soul.

And the touch of—

A hand gripped his shoulder, jostling the man from his daydream. He spun around, heart racing, prepared for anything except what was before him.

Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura stood firm before the man, a picture of dusky Iberian beauty. Her hair had lost its artificial sheen; now only natural ebony tresses flowed to the middle of her back. So too was her dress a study in elegant simplicity— soft black fabric both covered and accentuated her curves, tailored to hint at but not flaunt. Her feet were clad in shoes with heels high enough to shape her calves and thighs, but short enough to allow the dancing that nourished her spirit.

Tyrran took the moment he needed to collect himself, forcing himself to meet his partner in the eye.

“Yolanta.”

An unsmiling set of lips moved in reply. Her eyes, however...

“*Patán.*”

A humorless chuckle escaped the man’s lips.

“Here on business again?”

The woman shook her head, her features perfectly framed in her hair, long and feminine.

“No.”

Tyrran shrugged.

“Pleasure?”

A single eyebrow of the woman’s lifted.

“Perhaps. I have not yet decided.”

Tyrran allowed a sad smile to spread across his face. He gestured to the writhing masses behind Yolanta.

“Well, you should be. The dance floor is a second home to you.”

The woman’s eyes widened, her breathing seemingly intensifying. She took a step back, looking her partner up and down. A slender arm extended itself. Tyrran swallowed.

“What are you doing?”

Yolanta’s eyes intensified.

“I have opened one home to you already, *si*?”

Tyrran blinked, hardly believing his ears. Against all reason and self-restraint he rose, taking the woman’s hand in his own.

“Why?”

Iberian eyes flashed.

“We have almost died together, *patán*. Should we not also *live*?”

Tyrran Andor looked Yolanta Púrpura hard in the eyes.

“What good is fighting for humanity if we lose track of our own?”

The woman said nothing, only pulling the man forward, leading him to the very center of the writhing masses. Without missing a beat she closed her eyes, letting the deep techno bass permeate her, its rhythm guiding her every movement. She turned to her partner, helping him overcome his own reservation.

In that moment Andor imbibed not alcohol but his partner’s form, intoxicated with her sensual movement, feeling a rush of heat within himself. He too tried to feel some semblance of what animated Yolanta, moving with the beat as best he could.

The woman moved in close, her body an intimate distance from his. Her hands gripped his, moving them to her hips without breaking motion. Her eyes bored into his, her accent thick.

“Don’t think,” she said. “*Feel.*”

Hurriedly, Tyrran nodded. The woman released his hands, drifting up to wrap her arms around his neck. Yet her lips remained unsmiling, a hitherto unseen sensual intensity in her eyes. The man exhaled his reservations and surrendered, surrendered to the feeling of the woman in his arms and the pulse of the music.

For a single, perfect moment man and woman were alone on the dance floor, their private universe one of neon-lit shadow, dance, and touch. Tyrran’s body moved with hers, their foreheads touching even as their bodies, too, pressed together. It took all of the man’s concentration just to summon words.

“You were right, you know.”

Amusement grew within Yolanta’s eyes.

“Oh?”

Masculine hands explored feminine curves. Faces nearly touched.

“Better to be inside something... *human.*”

The woman’s lips parted. Her fingers caressed along his jaw, his lips, his neck. They traced along the Black Thorn, along the delicate lock that only she could release. Masculine and feminine lips drifted so close that they warmed the other with their heat. Iberian eyes closed, at last surrendering.

“*Tyrran...*”

The techno cut out, halting all who had been enthralled in its beat. A general, grating alarm immediately replaced it, followed by an automated emergency declaration. Tyrran and Yolanta's eyes shot open, the mood broken, shielding themselves against the sudden bright light that now flooded the nightclub. Holo-screens flickered from techno imagery to the local news, a stern-faced uniformed Authority delivering a live announcement. It was difficult to make out his words, but at last the screens cut away to a grainy, poorly-captured image. Ominous, flower-shaped ships bore down seemingly on the clubgoers themselves, a collective gasp heard from even the most drugged or inebriated.

Yolanta's eyes widened.

"Madre de Randomius... they are here."

Almost immediately there was a rush for the club exit, Tyrran and Yolanta holding each other for support amid the tide of a panicking mob. Andor looked around himself, seeing little alternative for escape. He shouted above the din, seeing a balcony exit that led to an upper level. With an outstretched finger he pointed to it.

"Quick!"

Man and woman fought against the mob, shoving and elbowing through the panicked clubgoers. Comm devices chimed all around them, the waves burning with sudden worry. For a moment, the techno cut back in, again interrupted by the automated declaration of emergency. Lights flickered and went dark.

Yolanta stumbled on a heel; cursing, she slipped off her shoes, Tyrran shielding her from being trampled. She looked around herself, her own comm device chiming with the dire news. Already the surviving Witches were appraising the situation. She brushed a stray lock of hair from her face, her eyes hard.

"We have to get to my ship," she said. "The system needs us."

Tyrran took his partner in his hands, holding her by the shoulders at arm's length.

"The Legion. Any chance of patching things up with the Legion?"

The overhead screens flickered and updated. New images of amateur deep-space photography came into view. A colossal Hydra-class ship could be seen, moments before the feed cut out. Only static played through after that.

Yolanta took Tyrran's face into her hands, her eyes boring into his.

"Remember what we witnessed aboard the *Gnosis*, *patán*. To save this system, we need more than just the Legion," she said. The woman swallowed, her features hardening with resolve.

"We need *everyone*."

“What kind of ship did you say you had, again?”

Tyrran Andor reclined in the booth, the bar’s shadows obscuring his features.

“Cobra. Third-gen. She’s up for it.”

Across from him, the client lit a cigar, smoke wafting from the glowing tip. He took a few thoughtful puffs, evaluating the man before him. He was young, too young in his eyes for the job— but then again, there was no shortage of eager pilots volunteering for the work.

“No doubt. The only question is: are you?”

Andor took a drink, careful to make it neither too long nor too short. Confident, but not cocky.

“I’ve got those new meta-alloy racks, so yeah. I think so.”

The client raised his eyebrows, momentarily impressed.

“Then you’re in good with Palin? I thought that he only dealt with...”

He glanced to the guild crest on Tyrran’s collar. It was the rank of one who was a member, but barely.

“... well, you know.”

Andor held up his drink, smiling.

“He deals with anyone who can get the job done. My membership with the guild is... recent.”

The client raised his own glass, mirroring Tyrran.

“I see.”

Neither man said anything, a contemplative silence settling over them. At last, the older one spoke.

“My employer can match the top market rate per artifact, plus twenty percent if delivery is within a week.”

Tyrran looked away, feigning disinterest.

“Those things don’t exactly grow on trees, you know. And I’m pirate bait even with one or two in my hold.”

The man leaned forward, his silver hair glinting in the neon lights of the bar. In the background a twangy tune from Federal space droned on.

“Higher risks fetch higher rewards. Just remember: we require a minimum of ten.”

Andor turned back, his eyebrows raised.

“That’s quite a few. Who did you say you were with, again?”

Teeth like bullets glinted as the man smiled.

“No one you’ve ever heard of. Just some concerned citizens willing to pay top cred to put things to rights.”

One eyebrow of Tyrran’s lifted.

“And to do that, you have to get your hands on these... things?”

The man held out his hands, shrugging.

“As long as you get paid, do you care?”

For a long time, he got no reply. It was an open secret as to what the artifacts did— one or two of them could disable a ship, siphoning its critical components as long as they were in the cargo bay. Enough of them in one spot could shut down an entire station. On the other hand, to sell them at a black market was obscenely profitable.

Tyrran Xavian Andor finished his drink, setting down his glass.

“I really don’t.”

News of the Thargoid incursion into Atroco got out, of course. Word spread across human space, with Aegis— the cutting-edge paramilitary organization that had sprung into existence seemingly overnight— dispatching the *Vanguard*, one of the pair of megaships in its arsenal. Yet the battle that began wasn't a battle, but a series of skirmishes. Reinforcements were slow to arrive, with not many hunters willing to risk their lives for a system fallen to lawlessness and anarchy. A holding action was implemented, with Aegis's regulars flying out to hunt down and destroy whatever Thargoid forces were weak enough to be engaged on favorable terms. Yet the calculus of war took its toll, and casualties soon mounted.

Commerce came to a halt almost immediately, and the price of basic supplies and foodstuffs soared. Smugglers descended upon the system *en mass*, unscrupulously offering their services to gouge the desperate factions of their credits. A black market for even the bare necessities was soon flourishing, with Milagro Hardy marshaling the Atroco Raiders not in defence of the system, but in exploiting its people.

The space in which it was safe to fly became tighter and tighter, an alien noose constricting around Atroco's throat. Outlying surface settlements were attacked and razed, thousands losing their lives as the Raiders did nothing to aid them. With ruthless efficiency the alien menace moved from site to site, opening fire and shrugging off all attempts to return it. By the time Aegis reinforcements arrived, the damage was done. Only the core stations and settlements of Atroco were intact, Aegis and its auxiliaries forming a tight defensive ring to safeguard Lasswitz Port and the metropolises on the planet below. Gloom weighed heavily within the hearts of those within, for all had seen the Galnet footage of burning stations, the oxygen within consumed and those souls trapped within left alive to spend their final moments in gasping misery.

Options and manpower dwindled for the few remaining defenders of Atroco, no aid incoming for the system not worth saving. Each man and woman prepared for the end after their own fashion. The Raiders filled their bodies with narcotics and wallowed in debauchery. The common folk huddled in fear, clutching their loved ones. Those aboard the *Vanguard* prepared their ships and weapons for the looming onslaught, when space itself would fill with the innumerable insectoid intruders. There was nothing to do for them except wait, wait and prepare for the bitter end, ship and body eaten alive by caustic alien filth.

All over Lasswitz Port, panic gripped the populace. Storefronts were smashed and security forces overwhelmed. Those who couldn't afford to flee locked themselves into their living units, forced to ration with whatever food and supplies they had on-hand. Those who had ships departed the system almost immediately. At least, *most* did.

It was too dangerous to stay in their quarters, so the remaining Night Witches remained in their ships, secure in their hangars. Yolanta Púrpura and Tyrran Andor were no exception, the pair in the bridge of the *Rosa*. The woman was smoking a cigarillo, the man pacing back and forth. Outside, the whirs and whines of hydraulics never ceased. Ship traffic to and from Lasswitz was never-ending.

Yola nodded to her partner.

"If you wear a path into my deck, I am sending you the bill."

Tyrran halted, one arm pointing out to beyond the canopy.

"They're *here*, and we're just sitting around."

The woman took a long drag, nodding.

"*Si.*"

Tyrran shook his head.

"So don't you think that we should be out there *doing* something?"

Yolanta shrugged. “Like what? Deploy our few remaining wings to perish in a blaze of glory?”

“No, I— this just isn’t like us.”

Cigarillo smoke blew from between the woman’s lips.

“What we are and are not like is still not fully grasped by you, *patán*. Kerenski will give orders when the time is right.”

Tyrran threw his arms up in the air.

“And when will *that* be?”

Again, Yolanta shrugged.

“When the time is right.”

A particularly heavy-sounding thruster roar shook the *Púrpura*. Tyrran jerked his thumb toward the noise.

“Do you hear that? A Corvette. There are some *big* guns showing up for this thing.”

Yolanta pushed herself away from where she had been leaning, making her way to the edge of the bridge, resting one hand over her commander’s chair. She glanced to her partner from over her shoulder.

“You have been involved in the resistance, *si*? Of other systems under attack by... *them*.”

Tyrran took his place beside her.

“I wouldn’t exactly call it that. Let’s just say that there are a lot of opportunities in a war zone.”

Saying nothing, Yolanta nodded. She took another long drag before continuing.

“And what was the difference between those systems which stood and those which fell?”

Tyrran looked away.

“Almost none. None, except the number of Thargoids killed. But there’s no pattern to it, no minimum casualty figure they seem to respect.”

Yolanta nodded. “Brute force,” she said. “Violence. Mindless attrition.”

A moment passed before Tyrran answered.

“Yeah.”

The woman activated the commander’s holodisplay, accessing the local news. Emergency bands and pre-recorded instructions played out on a loop, left over from the previous administration.

“All citizens are urged to remain in their homes and await Imperial reinforcement. The Emperor will not abandon us so long as we do not abandon our duty as loyal citizens. Further instructions from the Viceroy’s office are incoming...”

Yolanta killed the transmission, taking another drag. Tyrran nodded to the holodisplay.

“The Raiders aren’t exactly up for this, are they?”

The woman scoffed. “Milagro Hardy is an overgrown thug. Even now she will be plotting to exploit her own people instead of protect them. If Atroco is saved, it will be in spite of her leadership, not because of it.”

Tyrran shook his head. “What a mess. No wonder reinforcements have been so scarce.”

Yolanta said nothing, only snubbing her cigarillo out and turning to her partner. Her eyes were sharp, yet something within her tone...

“No one would blame you, you know. If you ran.”

Andor glanced to his side, suddenly aware of how close he was to Yolanta.

“What are you saying?”

The woman drew herself up, her lips pressed together.

“I am saying that we are under attack, and by an enemy that is as deadly as it is relentless. You know this more than any of us. Only a fool would remain in their path who did not have to.”

A moment passed. Tyrran turned to his partner.

“After all we’ve been through...”

The woman reached out to trace along Tyrran’s jaw—but halted, her fingers nearly touching him. Iberian eyes sharpened.

“You are not one of us, *patán*. You are free to go...”

Yolanta withdrew her hand, turning to leave. She paused, looking over her shoulder.

“But it would mean a lot if you stayed.”

Kari Kerenski hunched over in the darkness of her ship, her face illuminated in the harsh light of a holofac. Her breathing was ragged, and her hands curled into tight fists. Already her features were a hardened mixture of focus and frustration. The dark figure before her wasn't one that she dared to contact on any but her own line, and the comforts of Lasswitz Port—such as they were—were once again forsaken.

The figure leaned forward, his tone almost mockingly intelligent.

“In truth, no one can predict what worlds will be targeted by the Thargoids. They seem to prefer ammonia worlds and have been known to target Aegis assets. Apart from that we know nothing. Atroco was just as likely as Prism.”

Kerenski shook her head, an accusing finger rising to point at the man.

“*Nyet*. *Someone* knows. Someone knows, and is using them as a weapon.”

The figure turned his head to the side. “Ah. More of this ‘Club’ business, I take it?”

Kerenski squeezed her eyes shut, her fists trembling. “I don't know. I *can't* know. Everything is so...”

She opened her eyes. “Atroco needs help. Hardy is helpless against them, the indies aren't coming in fast enough, and there's been a break with the Legion. Unless you pull some strings, people will *die*.”

The man's eyes sharpened. “People will die regardless. The more pilots you summon to the system, the fewer there are to defend others. You know this.”

Now the woman's face, and not her fists, trembled.

“Then it’s as I always suspected. We’re pawns, the first to be sacrificed. All our work for nothing.”

The figure’s eyebrows raised in cold amusement.

“I think that’s the first trace of defeatism I’ve ever seen from you. The work only means nothing if you *allow* it to mean nothing.”

Kerenski exhaled, a ragged breath escaping her lips.

“Why did we put such a selfish tyrant like Hardy in power, anyway? You must have known what she was.”

The man nodded. “A two-bit crime boss, every bit as corrupt as the government she overthrew.”

“Then *why*? Why her?”

Holographic fingertips rested against one another to form a tent. The man’s tone deepened in thoughtfulness.

“Because she’s as honest as a crook can be, in her own way. When you buy her, she stays bought.”

Kerenski shook her head. “You’re a fool to trust her.”

The figure shook his head. “What I trust is that an animal like Milagro Hardy will always look out for herself first and others a distant second. That makes her predictable— and isolated.”

Slavic eyes sharpened, the woman taking a long moment to process the situation.

“And that means that as far as allies go, we’re the only game in town.”

The man nodded, his holographic image distorting.

“Correct. She owes her position to the Night Witches even more than her own minions. *That’s* leverage.”

Kerenski shook her head. “A month ago? *Da*. But now, with only a shadow of the force I once commanded? Those alien trinkets were too dearly purchased. With the loss of ships comes the loss of influence. I’m nothing to her now.”

The figure broke the tend that was his fingers, gesturing to the space outside the woman’s ship.

“You’re a lifeline to the outside. To the only chance she has of remaining in power. *Use* that. Extract terms. Fight. Triumph. Rebuild.”

Kari Kerenski straightened herself, her featured hardening in resolve.

“And our agreement? What of *it*?”

An innocent look spread across the man’s face.

“The rain has yet to collapse anyone’s roof. Do your part, and I shall continue to do *mine*.”

The woman turned, reaching for a nearby bottle of vodka. She poured a finger of it into a glass, raising it in mock toast.

“To friends in high places.”

The man, too, had ready access to alcohol. He raised a glass of his own, a splash of darker liquid in it.

“*And* low.”

Phisto of the Sobanii stood at attention, frustration that bordered on anger in his eyes. He was in the Governor’s Office on Hiram’s Anchorage, a magnificent affair with a view to match. At his side was Isaiah Evanson, both men’s hands clasped behind their back. Surrounding them was Imperial luxury itself— old-world furnishings mated with the latest in technology. The gravity in that particular part of the gargantuan station was nearly Earth-norm, and as such was highly coveted. Yet such wasn’t the focus of either, for to cross the woman before them was to invite dire adversity.

Governor Valeria Larsen was the overseer of everything administered in the Legion's name, which was to say over a dozen systems' worth of assets, with stakes in a dozen more. She was bathed in political power in a way that even Vespar Faveol was not, and enjoyed *de facto* veto over the senator's designs. She was old, old and deeply entrenched in Imperial politics, her eyes having lost none of their cunning even as her appearance retained the smoothness of youth thanks to vigorous progenitor cell therapy. She was in every way the real power of the system, surviving the turmoil of the reclamation war from years prior and even deep association with the doomed Loren dynasty. Now she faced a new challenge: dissent from her highest-ranking officers.

The woman rose from her desk, slowly walking to the office's observation deck, itself the size of an Anaconda's cargo bay. The magnificent jewel that was Chione filled her view, a blue waterworld, puffy white clouds completing the view. Her manner of dress was stark, a long black garment that might have been an evening gown had it been made of lighter material. Instead it was heavy and scaled, with a matching cape with legion green trim. Adorning her fingers were rings made of precious metal. Around her neck was a simple green necklace, rumored to be crafted from the first batch of tantalum extracted from the surface. She paused, knowing that neither of the men would speak unless spoken to, drawing out the moment to remind them of their station. At last she turned to them, her authority bolstered by the gleaming planet behind her. A dangerous innocence lightened her tone.

"For nearly twenty years I have been under the impression that the Legion exists to safeguard the late senator's sphere of influence. I am not mistaken, am I?"

Isaiah stiffened. "No, governor."

The woman raised her eyebrows. “I have further the impression that Atroco is no longer an Imperial holding, fallen as it has to disorder and banditry. Again: I am not mistaken, am I?”

“No, governor.”

Larsen nodded, a slight *hmm* of understanding coming from her closed lips. She turned back to the globe before her, her back to her guests.

“Yet you would have me send armed ships into a foreign system on some foolish, Quixotic quest? Meddle in affairs that are not my own?”

Isaiah and Phisto exchanged a glance. Valeria Larsen was *infamous* for her meddling. The former cleared his throat, stepping forward.

“I would have you take action to save the lives of the innocent. To prove the Empire’s benevolence. To expand the Legion’s influence.”

A sneer crept across the woman’s face.

“To grant a gang of children leave to play with their new toys, more like. I am not blind to this foolhardy endeavor of yours and Faveol’s to reinvent the Legion.”

Wariness clouded Phisto’s features.

“Then why did you allow it?”

The woman spun, causing both to tense.

“Because we have all three of us the same problem: there are no more Lorens left to guard. It has taken everything in my power to stop the legion from being annexed into the navy proper. There isn’t a day that goes by when I don’t feel Patreus’s foul breath upon my throat, teeth bared and waiting for the perfect moment to tear open my jugular.”

Isaiah gestured to the observation glass, his voice taking on an edge.

“Then strike *first*. Not against your political foes, but against those who the last Loren warned against. Validate our work and let us do our jobs.”

Larsen shook her head. “Your *job* is to safeguard *Imperial* holdings against the beasts, not crusade against them in foreign systems.”

Evanson looked at his boots, shaking his head.

“‘Foreign’. Atroco is a single jump away. You make it sound as though I’ve requested that we relocate to the Pleiades.”

The woman turned to once again observe the heavens beyond the viewing glass.

“Atroco, the Pleiades— Colonia itself. It makes no difference. I approved this course of action with strict limits in place— limits that I expect you to honor.”

Phisto looked away, irritation in his eyes.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d accuse you of being in bed with Patreus *himself*.”

A new voice, Imperial and feminine, answered from behind them.

“No, Commander Sobanii— that’s *your* style.”

The two men spun. Newly arrived was a sight that neither had expected to see again. Underconsul Cassadoria Durant sauntered past them, her assistant Tessia St. Antonius in tow. The latter’s eyes flashed as they made contact with Phisto’s, the young woman lifting her chin at the sight of him. Power radiated from the underconsul, her presence as intimidating as the Fleet Admiral himself. They took their places alongside Governor Larsen, the three staring down the two before them.

Isaiah bared his teeth, all pretense of civility gone.

“What in the nine hells are *they* doing here?”

Durant snapped her fingers. A nearby slave produced a glass of wine. She took it, now the dominant figure in the room.

“We’ve *always* been here. This system belongs to Denton Patreus, and has for years.”

Isaiah stepped forward, undeterred.

“This system belongs— *belonged*— to the Loren family. You’re only a band of squatters.”

The underconsul laughed, the arrogant staccato of her voice filling the room.

“‘Squatters’? Please. You didn’t *really* think that a buffoon like Algreb grew as powerful as he did without the blessing of a higher power, did you?”

Valeria Larson joined her benefactor in the gloating, signaling for her own glass of wine.

“Or that tantalum revenues alone could account for the Legion’s rapid growth. That money came from *somewhere*, commander.”

Isaiah blinked.

“Patreus. The Lorens were indebted to *Patreus*.”

Larson raised her glass.

“With interest. Only it won’t be *me* who pays the debt.”

Phisto now stepped forward, joining his comrade.

“Governor... what have you *done*?”

Cassadoria Durant answered, Imperial arrogance dripping every word.

“Not her. Not even me, in truth. *You*.”

Both men exhaled, taken aback. Evanson’s eyes narrowed.

“Us?”

Durant advanced, all the cunning of a predator in her eyes.

“You’ve been preparing a long time for this, have you not? All your little schemes with your little allies. The jailbreaks. The heists. The procuring of cutting-edge alien tech... and all in some foolish woman’s name, aiding a cause you don’t fully understand.”

Valeria raised her glass.

“I’ve had a change of heart, Commander. I think I *will* allow you to take the fight against the Thargoids in Atroco—under *our* conditions.”

Isaiah’s eyes narrowed.

“Which are?”

Cassadoria stalked the width of the viewport, her eyes blazing.

“To slay the beasts in *Patreus’s* name, not the Legion’s. His personal eagle shall adorn each of your ships— or else you shall have none at all. The glory will be his. The victory, his. *You* shall fade into nothingness like the common rabble you are.”

For once, Isaiah Evanson was at a loss for words.

“This... this has all been about *image*?”

Durant toasted her guests, sipping her wine in victory.

“Denton Patreus is master of the Imperial Senate. He single-handedly kept Archon Delaine’s Kumo Crew from breaching Imperial space, and then brought the Emperor’s Dawn to its knees. He was raised to Admiral of the Fleet by the Emperor’s own hand. The traitor Salome was brought to justice by his doing. He tires of having only *human* trophies upon his mantle.”

Phisto of the Sobanii grit his teeth.

“And we’re just the chumps to make it happen.”

Durant glaced first to Tessia, and then to Phisto.

“It *was* impressed upon you that monsters would be coming, was it not? My assistant saw to *that*.”

St. Antonius lifted her gaze to meet Phisto’s, for once matching her superior in arrogance.

“And he redoubled his efforts to prepare for them. One of the Fleet Admiral’s more worthwhile investments, in my view.”

Phisto held up a warning finger, advancing upon the woman he’d trusted.

“I’ll *never* work for your master. Ever.”

Again, Durant laughed her staccato laugh.

“My dear, dear commander,” she said. “You already *do*.”

Valeria Larsen raised her glass to the pair of men before her.

“You will save the lives of the innocent. You will prove the Empire’s benevolence. And you *will* expand the Legion’s influence into Atroco. Everything you ever wanted. Aren’t you *thrilled?*”

Phisto cursed beneath his breath.

“Get one thing straight: we’re not doing this for you.”

Larsen’s tone sharpened.

“Never mind what scruples you cling to. Just see that you clear that system of Thargoids, *commander*. Or else the double-I-double-S might be paying a discrete visit to a certain band of wayward clanners...”

Phisto of the Sobanii saw red, advancing toward the woman.

“You *b—*”

Isaiah stopped him, his voice dropping to a whisper.

“Not here. Not now. This is what they want.”

At war with himself, Phisto gulped air, his hand opening and closing into a fist. At the governor's side, Cassadoria Durant and her minion Tessia St. Antonius lifted their glasses in a final, mocking toast.

“To the Legion. Long may it be victorious!”

“And so,” Kari Kerenski was saying, “you *need* us.”

Milagro Hardy was a woman who disdained luxury, even though she was the most powerful woman in a system of millions. She’d eschewed finery and kept to the basics that had propelled her to power. Her attire and demeanor alike remained the same patchy affair that they had been in her raiding days. The woman lit a coarse cigarette, waving it around, its smoke mixing with that of her guest’s.

“What, all dozen of you that are left? Everyone knows you’re done for.”

Kerenski settled into her chair. Hardy's office was barely worth even being called such, resembling more of an outlaw den. Not far away all manner of vice and debauchery was being practiced, flesh and substances in full view of anyone walking by. Kari ignored it.

"I'm not talking about the Witches, though we're at your disposal. I'm talking about saving the system— and your grip on power."

Hardy took a long drag, evaluating the woman before her. She gestured to the roughneck standing at her side.

"Do you remember that Allene fellow? The bald-headed one?"

The man nodded, sooty eyes deepening with memory.

"The Imperial councilman from the old government."

Hardy looked to Kerenski, locking eyes with her as she spoke.

"Have him arrested. His family, too. Treason charges— let's say... Thargoid sympathizing. You know the rest."

"Aye, Chief."

Hardy dismissed her lackey with a wave of the hand, taking another drag and turning back toward Kerenski.

"As you can see," she said, "my grip on power is *very* much secure."

Irritation spread across the other woman's Slavic features.

"Don't you *understand*? The Thargoids won't care if you're Milagro Hardy or the Emperor herself. They will come, and they will kill us all. Unless I stop them."

Hardy scoffed. "*You*? It isn't like the old days. You can't just slap those damned death collars around people's necks and force them to do your bidding."

Kerenski shook her head. "Not me. My contacts. They'll send in forces that dwarf yours— *if* they can be convinced that Atroco is a system worth saving."

Deep concern spread across the Chief's face.

“*If*”? I need better than ‘if’, Kerenski.”

On the opposite side of the den, a rhythmic woman’s moan could be heard, along with a man’s rapid thrusts. A table shook before him, a pair of heeled ankles over his shoulders. Kari’s throat constricted at the sight, swiftly returning her gaze to the woman before her.

“There may be a certain... *optics* problem to be overcome.”

Hardy’s eyebrows raised. Kerenski’s body tensed.

“‘Optics’, huh? I can see to that. What kind of help can we expect?”

Now it was Kari’s turn to take a long drag. She was gratified that her hand wasn’t shaking.

“There is an Imperial anti-xeno wing that is trained and equipped for just such an incursion. I can summon them to Atroco.”

The outlaw’s eyebrows raised. “Imperials? Don’t need more of *them* here.”

Kerenski leaned forward. “You need *these*.”

“And in return?”

The Witch exhaled. “I imagine they’ll want a piece of the pie.”

For a long moment, Hardy considered.

“Which Imps are we talking?”

Kerenski took another drag. “Our esteemed neighbors: Loren’s Legion. Their involvement will lend legitimacy to your struggle. More help will follow.”

Hardy froze. Another long moment elapsed, until the outlaw actually *laughed*, gesturing to the athletic woman before her with her cigarette.

“They talk about you, you know that? Never been seen with a man. Woman, either. Rumor has it you’re as frigid as deep space itself. Kerenski the Cryo Pod, they call you. Turns out you’ve had the Empire’s cock up your backside the whole time!”

Kerenski's eyes sharpened even as her accent thickened.
“This is not productive.”

Milagro grinned, pleased with herself.

“Sure, sure. No hard feelings. You want some Imps to fight and die so that *we* don't have to? Fine. Whistle 'em up. But get one thing straight.”

The outlaw leaned forward, her leathers stretching.

“No one rules Atroco except *me*. I'll cut the Legion a piece of the pie— as long as they agree to keep their hands off of *mine*. Maybe I'll even throw 'em an outpost to call their own. But if I get the slightest *whiff* of bullshit from you and yours...”

Hardy smiled, her teeth daggers.

“I'll come after every last one of you Night Witches, past aid be damned. And I'll start with that dusky Iberian thing you've always got hanging from your side.”

Kerenski exhaled, her gaze unflinching as the smoke framed her features.

“And you'll be wishing that you'd taken your chances with the Thargoids if you so much as *touch* her.”

Hardy snubbed out her cigarette, shrugging.

“That's what I like about you, Kerenski. Balls that put an enhanced he-slave to shame. You missed your calling, you know that?”

The other woman rose, distrust in her eyes.

“Hold the line. If all goes well the Legion will engage within days.”

Hardy shrugged. “Make it snappy. The proles are just about out of creds.”

Kari Kerenski straightened her jacket, taking a final drag of her cigarette.

“You're all heart, *Chief*.”

Isaiah Evenson's eyes narrowed. He'd expected a holofac from the woman on his screen, but that didn't mean that he'd looked forward to seeing her. He was in his ship, and his guest clearly in hers.

"Kari Kerenski," he said, folding his arms. "Heard you had a pest problem in your neighborhood."

The woman, too, was anything but pleased— yet she forced a cordial tone upon herself.

"*Da*. And I happen to know some exterminators next door."

Evenson raised a finger, pointing to the holographic image.

"And *I'm* still waiting on those Guardian weapons. Besides, didn't Aegis park one of their megaships in Atroco?"

Kerenski shook her head. "Aegis can only do so much. Lone xeno hunters can only do so much. What we need is a massive, coordinated resistance."

Isaiah Evenson looked to his boots, and then back up to the woman before him.

"No. What you need is to be pulled out of the fire. You used us, Kerenski— and now you're crawling back."

The woman's image flickered, her eyes betraying nothing. Isaiah half-expected some witty retort or sharp rebuke, but instead the woman remained silent. Her features relaxed into something approaching defeat.

"I cannot say anything that will change how you see us, *comrade*. I see that now. All I ask is that you take into consideration what *I* see."

Evenson exhaled, shaking his head.

"And what is *that*?"

Kerenski's eyes softened.

"I see a man who will not stand idly by as innocents are slaughtered. A man who would not allow the contempt of an unworthy partner to overrule his sense of justice. And I see many, *many* others at his side who feel the same."

The man's eyes narrowed. "This isn't some meeting between a patron and new client. Flattery won't alter the fact that you had your own agenda this entire time."

For a long time, the woman was silent. Finally, she spoke, real emotion in her voice.

"You are correct, *comrade*— but not in the way you think. I must go now. The remaining ships of the Night Witches are nearly finished rearming, and we are resolved to fight the beasts ourselves."

The woman turned to leave, and then hesitated.

"I will not say *dasvidaniya*, commander— for I may never see you again. But I know that you will do the right thing."

The holofac terminated, leaving dark space where the woman's image had appeared only seconds ago. Isaiah blinked, clenching his fists, his mind at war with itself. From the shadows of his bridge there was movement, Phisto Sobanii emerging from the darkness. His eyes were as wary as his commander's.

"Gives a pretty good speech when the chips are down, doesn't she?"

Evanson shook his head, bitterness seeping into his tone. "Doesn't matter. We have our orders, remember? Purge the foul xenos in the name of Denton Patreus."

Sobanii chuckled, leaning against a bulkhead wall and crossing his arms.

"And *she* 'll think that it was all because of her."

Evanson held out his arms, the greens and blacks of the Legion's uniform in his view.

"I was a fool to think that I could start a new life in the blasted Imperial navy and *not* get caught up in something like this. A fool to think that Faveol and Delaney's patronage would let me focus on the mission."

Sobanii looked away, to where the pilot sat at the fore of the *Bloodfeather's* bridge.

“You’re doing exactly what she’d have wanted you to do. Never forget that.”

Isaiah scoffed. “Being Patreus’s puppet?”

Phisto shook his head. “No. Standing up for the folks who can’t stand up for themselves.”

Evanson looked away.

“You didn’t know her like I did. It wasn’t about being some popular hero for her. Never was. In fact, she’d have probably turned up her nose at the very ‘folk’ we’re supposed to save.”

Phisto of the Sobanii shrugged.

“Yeah, well... what’s that old saying? ‘Never meet your heroes’?”

At that, both men laughed—bitterly.

“And so we have come full circle,” Kari Kerenski was saying, “with the Thargoids on *our* doorstep instead of we on theirs. I have contacted our estranged allies from the Legion for help, but nothing is certain. Atroco is *our* home, not theirs.”

The gathering of remaining Night Witches was small, painfully so for those who beheld their diminished number in its stark reality. They were standing in Lasswitz Port’s main hangar tube, their leader’s Krait above their heads, ships and crew prepared for what many expected to be their final battle. Kerenski drew herself, amplifying her voice above the roars of coming and going ships. Traces of urgency seeped in to what was normally a deadpan tone.

“The race to save Atroco will be a marathon, not a sprint. I will need you—*all* of you—in the days to come. If any of that alien filth starts to eat at your ship, do not hesitate to turn it into an oven. I need *live* Witches, not dead heroes...”

The woman hesitated, her lips pressing together. After a moment she continued, the passion rising in her voice.

“For we have enough of those already. Strike from the shadows, *comrades*— and strike hard! This is not the time for subtlety or finesse. You must kill, and you must be relentless. You must fill the space around Lasswitz with their corpses.”

Kari Kerenski stalked back and forth, baring her teeth, an unseen ferocity animating her every movement.

“Atroco will not be a conquest, but a tomb. They are not human, our enemy— but by battle’s end we will teach them *fear*. Go now, and show the beasts that they are in *witchspace*!”

With a single battle cry, the assembled Night Witches raised their fists into the air, savagery in their eyes. As they departed to waiting ships, leaving only Kerenski and her loyal lieutenant Púrpura. The latter nodded her approval; she had never seen the Witches so inspired nor her leader so passionate. Likewise, Kerenski maintained her own stern visage as she watched her people leave, only relaxing somewhat after the bay doors slid shut. Pride shone in her eyes.

“They are fighting. All of them. Not a single deserter or shirker, even after the disaster in the Col Sector.”

Yolanta again nodded.

“They fight for you, *camarada*.”

Kerenski shook her head. “No. They fight for something greater. Freedom. The truth. Humanity.”

A sardonic look settled over Yolanta’s features. “Then let us hope that we live long enough to see those things, *si*?”

The first traces of a smile lifted the older woman’s lips. “Anyone who rises to break their chains already has all of those and more. And we won’t lack for company. Even that stolen Guardian fighter has a pilot.”

Yolanta suppressed a sneer.

“Oh? And what *idiot* volunteered to fly *that* thing?”

Kerenski cocked her head to one side. “I think you’d better have a look for yourself.”

Dusky Iberian eyes gazed upon the man before her. She was clad in a flightsuit of violet and black. He, in one of battered patchwork. Behind her was the *Rosa Púrpura*. Behind him was the stolen fighter, exotic components within glowing with the telltale cyan of Guardian technology and hovering in place. Man and woman's eyes met.

Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura advanced, her gaze never leaving that of her partner's. She paused in intimate distance away, her chest nearly touching his.

"You stayed."

It was not a question, not even truly a statement. It was something more, though it was neither the time nor the place to explore exactly what.

Tyrran shrugged.

"No ship, no employer, no rides left off-port. The Witches are the only game in town."

Yolanta looked down, forcing her features to remain hard.

"I do not want you out there. Not in that alien deathtrap. Fly with me in the *Púrpura*. Monitor the secondary systems and—"

A gloved finger lifted the woman's chin.

"You know I'm of more use in the deathtrap."

The woman's unsmiling lips pressed together, her head nodding in ascent. One hand drifted up, across Tyrran's chest and around his collar. The black thorn was barely visible beneath. Iberian eyes sharpened.

“*Si*. You are. But remember one thing, *patán*: come back alive, because if you do not...”

Yolanta pulled him in, her lips meeting his in savage urgency. Her tongue traced along his, her other hand gripping the back of his head. She broke the kiss, her gaze even sharper, her forehead pressed against his.

“I will *kill* you.”

“Reports continue to flow in that the station is crippled. All facilities are offline, and the starport itself is on lockdown. Best estimates place emergency reserves of power and supplies at—”

Tyrran turned away from the holovision, tuning out the breathless narration from the news anchor. He took another sip of his drink, unconsciously hunching down amid the bar’s other patrons. The system in question was light years away, yet news of its plight had spread far and wide. Those around him grumbled their opinions on its situation. Some blamed one construction firm or another for shoddy work. Others claimed it was sabotage, the start of something greater. Still others said nothing, minding their own business like the reclusive pilot himself. One drunken patron bumped into him as he passed, but he paid the intrusion no mind.

Tyrran Andor didn’t know that his delivery of the mysterious alien artifacts had been the cause of the station’s ruin. He didn’t know that just because the strange orbs seemed to eat at a ship’s very structural mass that they would necessarily bring an entire station down. And he didn’t know that he’d been the only contractor with the job of surreptitiously delivering them. And yet...

“Poor bastards,” a voice said. It was masculine, rough and laconic. Andor glanced to his side. Sitting adjacent to him was a man as rough as the voice had promised, olive-complected like Tyrran but with no discernible accent. He was middle-aged, with black hair that had been slicked back, doing no favors for a receding hairline.

His eyes briefly met with Andor's, the younger man turning away. Yet the connection had been made. Tyrran couldn't see but felt the man's gaze upon him from behind, knowing without looking as the former took a seat by the latter. For a moment there was silence. Then the man spoke again, this time in a way that only Tyrran could hear.

"Do you know who I am?"

Tyrran glanced to his side, saying nothing. He shook his head. The man didn't react except to grunt.

"Well, I know who you are."

Tyrran scoffed, not too rudely but not too subtly either.

"I doubt that."

The stranger leaned in. "You're a pilot. With the guild, too. Not too good at hiding it."

Andor shrugged. "Maybe I am, maybe I'm not."

The man laid a fist down upon the bartop. It uncurled, revealing Tyrran's crudely-machined Pilot's Federation pendant. The younger man's eyes widened, shooting up to meet the strangers'.

"How did you—"

A thick finger rose to point. Tyrran followed it to see the same man who had bumped him earlier. He was old, with silver hair and a lined face. He raised his glass to the young man, mocking deception in his eyes.

"His name is Cecil, and he's been in the game longer than you've been alive, pup."

The man slid the pendant across the table. Tyrran grabbed it, humiliated that he'd been pickpocketed so easily. He took a long drink, hoping that his trepidation wasn't showing.

"What game are we talking?"

The man turned, staring ahead like Tyrran.

"One thing at a time. I'm a betting man, you see. And right now I'm betting that you dropped off some merch to that station—"

He pointed to the holoscreen, his voice again dropping.

“And that you needed some pretty exotic cargo racks to haul it.”

Tyrran glanced to his side, his heart pounding.

“What was your name, again?”

The man didn’t answer, only taking a long drink of his own, his dark eyes on Tyrran’s.

“Tech, pup. I deal in tech. Doesn’t matter what kind, but the more unique it is the more I tend to like it. And I’ve never seen meta-alloy cargo racks this deep in the Bubble.”

Another drink. Another knowing glance.

“Those are meta-alloy racks in your ship, I assume?”

Tyrran turned to his other side. Cecil was watching him like a hawk, all traces of his previous feigned inebriation gone. One hand was on the drink. The other was unseen, concealed ominously beneath the table.

“What’s it to you, anyway?”

A heavy hand clapped upon Andor’s back, spinning him around to face the imposing stranger.

“Oh, it’s quite a lot to me. The name’s Rax Ortega, and you and I are going to get along just fine.”

Powerplant online.

Tyrran squeezed shut his eyes, forcing himself to focus.

Sensors online.

Within the man, a war raged. Thoughts of pleasure and beauty dueled with those of danger and violence. The red of lips and the red of blood faded into one another.

Weapons online.

With the satisfying hum of cutting-edge technology, the fighter—the main holoscreen designated it as “XC-7 Trident”—thrummed to life, slipping its moorings and floating mere meters above the hangar. Energy crackled and arced, connecting a trio of inwardly-hooked triangular wings to the main body. There wasn’t much to it save its exotic lines and the obvious use of Guardian technology in its design. Unlike most human fighters, it had a single weapon, underslung along its centerline.

Tyrran Andor exhaled.

Focus. And hope that this gear is all it’s cracked up to be. What do I have?

Gloved fingers danced across a holographic keyboard.

A plasma autocannon. Sounds promising.

Yolanta Púrpara’s voice crackled in his comms.

“It is time, *patán*.”

Tyrran toggled his targeting display, bringing up a Krait.

“Copy. Standing by to dock with the *Litvyak*.”

From his cramped cockpit, Tyrran could see Yolanta salute, a violent figure in a violet ship. The *Rosa*’s thrusters flared, the Chieftain rising from the deck, the man watching it rise and point toward Lasswitz Port’s entry slot. His hands gripped the controls; he, too, was clear to depart.

What are you doing, Tyrran? Strapped inside another fighter for another woman. No pay on the line, only the line itself. You aren’t a warrior. You’re a scavver without a ship. What are you doing here?

The man looked out the canopy glass. A brave few transport pilots had volunteered to evacuate refugees from Atroco's outer settlements off-system. The desperate stood by in their hundreds, with nothing except fear in their eyes and the clothes on their backs. The adults were ragged and weary. The children would have been the same, had they not been awed by being so close to spaceships that they'd only seen on holos or in their imaginations. For a long moment Tyrran gazed upon them, feeling a pang of guilt in his chest.

Whining about not having a ship— when how many others have lost everything? Maybe you really are what people say about you. Maybe it really is time to step up.

A gunboat slipped in through the mailslot, listing to one side, thrusters barely functional, sickly alien sludge corroding its hull. It drifted into its docking bay, not landing so much as skidding into place. It was brought to a rough halt by the emergency docking clamps.

Tyrran's stomach twisted.

And you picked a hell of a day to do it.

The remnants of the Night Witch fleet streaked out from Lasswitz Port, one ship following another, the sum of their strength impressive even when diminished. The vessels formed up, their thruster glows a swarm of fireflies. They were each of them equipped with AX weaponry, missiles and multicannons based on conventional designs but laced with Guardian technology.

There was no set-piece battle, no tidy ranks of vessels in neat formation facing off from across a starry battlefield. There were only skirmishes, humans tracking down the signals of the Thargoid intruders and closing to knife-fighting range, with no greater sense of momentum or strategy to guide them. There were only scattered pockets of violence, the Witches or Aegis or independent wings of hunters engaging the eerie flower-shaped vessels. Even when the defenders had a clear advantage in numbers and firepower they took casualties, the caustic weaponry of the foe eating away the hulls of the victorious. Even the most skilled died screaming in their ships, their lungs and hulls blistered and boiling, dying not far from the husks of the ships that they themselves had killed.

Neutral commanders gave Atroco a wide berth, for to journey even near the system was to risk being what had come to be termed “hyperdiction”. Such was the act of being violently pulled from the kaleidoscope of hyperspace, to be attacked or not by the ominous flower-shaped vessels. Only the bravest or most desperate of commanders dared risk crossing into Atroco space.

Some of those who rose to fight the invaders were glory-seeking hotshots, flying Eagles or Vipers that they couldn’t truly afford. Others were motivated by more noble intentions, seeing themselves as guardians of humanity. Still others rode the cutting edge of deadliness, their skills razor sharp, seeking the ultimate in adversities against which to test their mettle. And finally there was one, himself no stranger to the inhuman vessels but utterly unaccustomed to fighting them.

Tyrran Andor sat in darkness, his features silhouetted in the cyan light of the Trident's exotic controls. The fighter was itself in the launch bay of Kari Kerenski's Krait, and the emergency alert had just gone out. A non-human signal source had been spotted, and Kerenski had ordered the command wing itself to engage. Naturally Yolanta was at her side, along with two other stalwarts of the squadron. Soon the time would come, and Tyrran would live or die.

Kerenski's slavic speech came through the comms, though to Andor her words seemed detached, barely audible above his pounding heart. The man squeezed his eyes shut. It wasn't fear that gripped him, not exactly. It was...

The chance you never thought you'd have— along with the war you never wanted to fight. You cannot have one without the other, it seems.

There was a jolt, the Krait dropping into normal space. Tyrran barely noted it. The mechanical noise of hardpoints deploying accompanied the hard acceleration the *Litvyak's* thrusters boosting it ahead. It would be only seconds before he, too, would be launched.

Tyrran opened his eyes, seeing only the way ahead. His gloved hands gripped the Trident's joystick and throttle.

So be it.

The bay doors opened, the fighter being lowered from its position within the Krait. Already he could see the flashes of weapons fire, human in origin, converging on a central point. Tyrran blinked, the Thargoid vessel now barely visible, a dark green shadow against the greater shadow of space. It was swift, swifter than Tyrran had seen one move, its hull a menacing black with orange, organic spikes at the tips. Already several human vessels drifted, lifeless and corroded nearly to their frames, the sickly green acid consuming them.

Mother of—

“Scan is complete. Medusa class. Witches, on *me!*”

Kerenski's voice shook him from his foreboding, the Trident rocketing forth from the bay on its own. Manual control was almost immediately granted to Tyrran, and the zippy nimbleness of the hybrid fighter was once again his to control. All around him was the wing of Night Witches; Kerenski on his left and Yolanta on his right, with the other two pilots bringing up the rear. Tyrran deployed his only weapon, the experimental energy device that was the plasma autocannon. Already the fear was withering away, replaced by a cold resolve that was hitherto unknown to the man. He glanced to the violet Chieftain to his right, the sight of it giving him focus.

I'm not dying today. And neither are you.

The scene before them was a bloodbath. The Thargoid had sustained severe damage, two of its petal-like wings severed and bleeding from numerous puncture wounds. It had bested the wing of independents that had challenged it. Yet that wasn't what made Tyrran's skin crawl.

The way it moves... it isn't like a ship, but a cornered animal. Wounded, fighting for its life, teeth bared.

The comms chirped, Yolanta's voice coming over the line. Her Iberian accent was as thick as Tyrran had ever heard it.

"Today we dance the dance of death, *camaradas*. Do not let the *monstruos* lead!"

With that the *Rosa*'s thrusters flared, the vessel charging headlong at the Thargoid. So too did the others, plunging like daggers at the menace before them. It was then that the monstrosity answered their challenge.

Tyrran Xavian Andor had never heard the bestial roar of a Thargoid in battle, despite his experience picking over their remains. The sound of it chilled him to his bones, his gaze drifting to the lifeless human vessels. For the first time in his life, the renegade bared his teeth in aggression.

Your time is over, monster.

As one the wing opened fire, missiles and cannon fire raking across the Thargoid's hull. The scream of challenge turned into a scream of pain, deep red pulsing from within the alien's outer carapace. Swarms of thargon drones launched from its thorax, moving as one toward one of the wingmates. The Thargoid answered fire with fire, golden energy bolts flying from its center, raking Kerenski's shields— yet the attack was pressed, organics chunks blasted from the monster's hull. The wing streaked by, the Thargoid turning to follow— and opening itself to the fighter behind it.

From within the Trident's cockpit, Tyrran bore down upon the foe. His finger tightened around the trigger. For a moment nothing happened, until—

Sweet Randomius!

Tyrran's face was illuminated in white-blue flashes, the martial technology of an extinct race lancing out before him, not hitting but *searing* the alien vessel before him. A fresh bellow of pain emanated from the stricken ship, filling Andor with savage glee.

The Trident was swift, too swift for the Thargoid to engage. Though the autocannon had pushed reactor temperatures up, Andor hit the boost, feeling the familiar momentum *push* him into his seat. The fighter passed unharmed past the alien vessel, watching as the four Witches were again turning to engage. Kerenski's voice crackled in their ears.

"The beast is vulnerable. Target the hearts and have no mercy. *Engage!*"

Gritting his teeth, Andor disengaged the flight assist software and flipped the Trident around, the fighter turning to face the Thargoid even as it continued to speed in the same direction. As one the Witches closed, missiles and cannon shells aimed at the biomechanical organs of the wounded alien. Organic hull was blasted away, its innards shredded, a final, haunting death moan echoing into the void.

Tyrran was last to open fire, pouring a stream of plasma fire into the center of the Thargoid, whatever systems that had been keeping it together at last failing, the once-mighty Medusa rupturing along its organic lines.

“Get clear!”

The wing of Night Witch vessels peeled away, the pursuing Thargons spiraling in random directions as whatever unseen guiding mechanism broke down. At last the Thargoid erupted in a great ball of fire, debris spewing in all directions, leaving nothing except a sickly olive cloud and blackened husk.

As one the Witches screamed in victory— even Tyrran. For a moment the man looked with longing eyes at the alien wreckage, already spying with his smuggler’s eye valuable salvage. He shook his head.

No. I’m here to create the wrecks, not pick over them.

“So you have survived, *patán*.”

The *Rosa Púrpura* had formed up alongside Tyrran’s Trident. The rogue threw a lazy salute her way, reminded of how tiny his vessel was next to hers.

“And others did not.”

The *Litvyak* slowed to boarding speed, Tyrran adjusting his own to match it. The hatch to the fighter bay opened, a row of holographic rectangles shimmering into view to assist him in re-boarding. The Trident passed through them, Andor feeling the familiar bump of the automated systems taking over. He released the controls, stretching out his fingers. The *Rosa* passed beneath him as the bay doors slid shut.

Kerenski’s voice sounded into the comms.

“The others were not the Night Witches, *da*? Prepare yourselves— the abomination we slew was merely one of many.”

The others in the wing radioed their acknowledgement, and the Krait's frameshift stirred to life. Soon Tyrran would be again plunged into battle, yet the trepidation that had gripped his heart was vanquished, replaced by a savage lust to once again open fire on the inhuman adversity. A quick scan of his holodisplays confirmed that the Trident was unscathed.

Tyrran Andor's hands curled into fists, memories of the beast's death scream giving him strength.

I can do this all day...

"Status report."

Isaiah Evanson's words were not a question, but an order. He was seated in his Fer-de-Lance, armed with AX weaponry, surrounded by dozens of Legion vessels. They were formation around Hiram's Anchorage, numerous Imperial vessels standing by to jump.

Phisto's voice crackled in his ears.

"It's bad. Real bad. Engagements all over, and the defenders are dropping like flies. The *Vanguard* is there, but there just aren't enough."

Isaiah nodded, flipping some switches, diverting power to shields and weapons.

"Well, that's about to change."

His finger toggled one more switch, opening a channel to every ship in the Legion. For a moment the man said nothing, squeezing his eyes shut. Then, he spoke.

"Pilot's of Loren's Legion. This is your commander."

His hand moved to the throttle. Everything was prepared.

"Since your first days at the Imperial academy, you have trained to fight the enemies of the Empire. Then, you were selected to defend the Loren dynasty from *its* enemies. The flesh and blood line is gone, but their— *her*— mission remains."

“Today we face no mere insurrection or rogue Federal faction, but something utterly inhuman. *This* is what she would have wanted! Humans coming to the aid of their fellows, regardless of politics, debt, or past animosity.”

Evanson shoved his throttle forward, his frameshift drive activating. The low hum of the device spooling up echoed throughout the ship.

“Strike hard, legionnaires! For the Emperor. For your fellow man. For your own freedom. Prepare to jump on my mark!”

Isaiah killed the comms, exhaling. His heart was pounding, the reality of the— *his*— legion’s first great test a burden. The man swallowed, thinking not of Thargoids but of that fateful, agonizing day.

Space broke down, the tunnel of witchspace stretching out before him. Isaiah Evanson steeled himself, seeing only piercing eyes and raven hair.

And for her...

Kari Kerenski cursed, wiping blood from her face. It had been hours since the initial engagement, and the *Litvyak* was in critical shape. The canopy was cracked, the blackened crust of the caustic alien substance baked off of her hull several times over. The same was true for her wingmates, with only Yolanta and Tyrran still at her side. The others she’d sent back to Lasswitz, their vessels too damaged for them to continue.

Before her was the blasted-out husk of the latest Thargoid that had fallen to her wing. It had been a hard fight, all the more so because of her ship’s failing systems. Yolanta’s Chieftain had obvious hull damage, and Tyrran had avoided death only narrowly. The comms crackled, the other woman’s Iberian thick in her ears.

“It is not good, *camarada*. My reactor has a coil leak from the last time I overheated it. I can lock it down, but—”

Kerenski shook her head, interrupting.

“We have fought enough, and now we must repair. The *Vanguard* has the superior facilities. We will make our way there and—”

Tyrran’s voice sounded over the line.

“More of them!”

The woman snapped her head up. Sure enough, tiny ripples in local subspace were appearing on her scanner. Her finger hovered over the fight bay controls, but hesitated.

“There’s no time to dock, Andor. Can you fight?”

There was a trace of hesitation in the man’s voice. “Plasma banks are nearly spent.”

Kerenski scowled. “And you, Púrpura?”

“Ammunition is low,” her wingmate said. “And my ship is barely holding together.”

Kari Kerenski took a deep breath, dispassionately analyzing the situation. Losses had been fearful, with several Night Witches dead or too wounded to continue. Nearly every vessel under her command was damaged to a degree. The leader made her decision.

“Andor, I want you to dock. *Now*. I am disengaging the bay’s safety protocols. It may be... rough.”

Already Kerenski could see the Trident spinning to align with the Krait.

“On my way. Just hold still.”

Already the whines of Thargoid Scouts could be heard. Kerenski grit her teeth, cursing her luck that it was the smaller, quicker intruders gaining on them.

“Púrpura, I need cover!”

There was a stream of Iberian over the comms, but the *Rosa* broke away, violet thrusters flaring as it sped toward the incoming Scouts. Multicannons opened fire, shredding the nearest circular ship, the Chieftain banking hard to one side to avoid the expanding caustic cloud. There were more ships and more subspace disruptions.

Kerenski glanced to her scanner. The icon that was Tyrran's Trident was closing, but not swiftly enough to guarantee Yolanta's safety. The woman keyed the comm, her Slavic accent thick.

"Today, Andor!"

There was a metallic crashing noise from within the Krait, the larger ship itself thrown askew by the violent impact. Yet the fighter bay lights moved from yellow to green, the docking clamps settling over the Trident. More than a little resentment could be heard in Andor's words.

"I'm in. Let's punch it!"

Kerenski didn't acknowledge him, instead turning to look at her wingmate's ship, now a distant, violent speck.

"Púrpura, disengage!"

The speck grew brighter as the woman laid on the boost, yet the dance of her ship and the dull green ones of the Thargoids failed to cease. Kerenski swung the *Litvyak* around, deploying her hardpoints.

"I said *disengage!*"

Strain dripped from every word of Púrpura's.

"I cannot... there are too many. Shields almost gone. If one of those *bastardos* hits me with those acid missiles..."

Kerenski, now, engaged her ship's boost, speeding to the defence of her wingmate.

"They won't. Now get out of there. I'll— *wait!*"

Other, more ominous signals flooded Kerenski's sensors. The woman's eyes widened.

"No..."

All around the same subspace anomalies heralded the arrival of more Thargoids. The largest promised that a full-sized interceptor would soon emerge. Tyrran could be heard, a slight shakiness replacing his initial enthusiasm.

"I think they like us..."

A new voice, self-assured and familiar, sounded over the comms.

“Well, let’s not jump to conclusions.”

In neat diamond formation a full wing of Fer de Lances jumped in, black with the familiar green stripe. Kerenski’s eyes narrowed even as she, too, dodged fire amid alien swarm.

“You’re late.”

From within his cockpit, Isaiah Evanson armed his hardpoints. Gloved hands gripped his controls, his teeth bared at the numerous alien signals on his scanners.

“And you’re lousy at staying in touch. Get behind us!”

As one the Legion ships opened fire, clearing the path for the damaged Night Witch vessels to follow. There was no hope in fighting so many, not without calling in more Legion ships to assist. The screams and low bellows of the Thargoid monstrosities filled their ears. Errant Scouts caught in the onslaught were batted aside, hull sheared away and spinning out of control. Isaiah’s gaze lingered upon the Interceptor as it streaked by.

“Attack wings Gamma and Delta: I’ve got a heavy. Drop on my beacon!”

The wing leaders acknowledged, and within moment human reinforcements dropped upon the Thargoids’ rear, opening up with missile and multicannon fire, the screams of dying Thargoids once again filling space. The Interceptor at last turned away from the fleeing vessels, Isaiah peeling off to join his pilots in the action.

“You’re clear. *Jump!*”

Kerenski nodded, though there was no one around to see her do so.

“Copy. And... thank you.”

The urgency in Isaiah’s voice was real.

“Thank me when we’re equipped with Guardian gear. Now get out of here!”

With shaking hands, Tyrran lifted himself from the Trident's cockpit. There was a ladder, its steps magnetically suspended, the man not at all trusting to its stability. Yet it held, and with a wave of his hand retracted itself into the ship, leaving not even a seam. At his side, Yolanta scowled.

"I am not impressed," she said. "All I see is just another thing to break down. Wings held together by energy— who has ever heard of such a thing?"

Tyrran took a moment to gather himself. They were within the *Litvyak's* fighter bay, the larger ship itself resting inside one of the *Vanguard's* docking bays. Already automated repair drones were at work stripping away corroded sections of the hull, and the Krait's internals were being nanolathed back to optimal condition. The ship would be something akin to repaired by the following day.

The bay door opened, Kari Kerenski entering. Without preamble she spoke.

"One in five of the Witches who flew at our side this morning are dead. A handful of ships have been salvaged, but they are more flying scrap than anything spaceworthy."

Púrpura straightened herself, glancing with haughty eyes at Tyrran.

"I would not wish such a vessel upon even the *patán*. In his fighter he is..."

The woman checked herself, her lips pressing together. Her eyes met Tyrran's, her words harsh— but her gaze...

"Not *completely* useless."

Tyrran scoffed, though his gaze, too, held a secret. "Nor were you in the *Rosa*."

Kerenski regarded them both with narrowing eyes.

“I have been speaking with both Evanson and our wing leaders. The Legion is engaging all over Atroco and giving the first-line defenders some breathing room. With any luck we will have enough ships repaired to relieve them by morning. And then we will kill more of the monsters.”

Yolanta cocked her head to the side. “And that is it? ‘Kill monsters’? No grand strategy or unified offensive?”

Kerenski glanced to Andor. With weariness he spoke.

“Against the Thargoids there can be no such thing. All you can do is bloody their nose worse than they bloody yours. Tactics seem to be a *human* trait.”

Yolanta’s eyes sharpened. “How do you know this?”

Tyrran lifted his gaze to meet hers.

“I was there. In the Pleiades.”

Yolanta’s nose wrinkled.

“Fighting?”

The man shrugged.

“Not exactly.”

Kerenski interrupted. “I want you both to get some sleep. There’s no telling how long we’ll be at this.”

There were nods all around, *sans* any of the enthusiasm from that morning. Tyrran and Yolanta turned, exiting the Krait and trudging across the hangar, their magboots compensating for the low gravity. Yolanta keyed in an access code for the *Vanguard’s* bay corridor. The door slid open— and the woman gasped.

Spread along the length of the corridor was a great carpet of humanity, desperation in every face and fear in every eye. They were civilians, fleeing their homes with nowhere to go, huddling in the *Vanguard* until the emergency had passed. And even after it did, it was anyone’s guess as to if there would be a home to return to.

Yolanta pressed her lips together, exclaiming under her breath. For a moment she was unable to take her eyes off of the pathetic mass of humanity, sprawled down the corridor as far as the eye could see. A few Aegis crew members could be seen, distributing rations or doing their best to calm frightened refugees.

“Madre de Randomius...”

Tyrran took the woman’s hand, stone-faced and pressing forward through the throng.

“Come.”

Yolanta blinked, still gazing upon the masses crowding their path. *“My ship. It... it is in bay thirteen.”*

Tyrran spun, his gaze hard. Immediately every desperate soul within earshot rose, crowding the woman with pleas.

“Please, I’ve lost everything...”

“My child... can you take my child? She’s only four...”

“I’ll pay you whatever you ask. Please, just take us away...”

Yolanta’s mouth hung open, her usual sharp gaze replaced with shock.

“I. I...”

Tyrran pulled her away, his own accent thick. He addressed the nearest of those begging for help.

“Our ship will never fly again. We crash-landed after being ambushed. I’m sorry.”

Without waiting for a response he pulled Yolanta along, ignoring the subsequent pleas from the desperate. The pair fought their way down the corridor, eventually reaching the correct bay, the woman keying in the code to access the hangar. Without a word they slipped through, the noise from the teeming masses silenced as the door slid shut. Yolanta turned, her back pressed to it, saying nothing.

Tyrran looked upon her with fresh eyes.

“I thought you had been in situations like this before.”

Yolanta composed herself, her gaze lifting to her partner.

“Not... *exactly* like this. I have fought, from my ship and on the ground. And I have stood at Kerenski’s side while hard choices were made.”

Tyrran nodded. “But you never came face-to-face with the *results* of those choices.”

The woman’s face twisted into a scowl.

“The result was that a corrupt Imperial government was overthrown, replaced with something more useful.”

Andor regarded his partner for a long moment.

“That’s a ‘no’, then.”

Yolanta held up a warning finger.

“You know nothing of the business of Night Witches.”

With that, she strode away, hips tight and chin lifted high. Scoffing, Tyrran followed, irritation in his eyes. It was only when man and woman were inside the *Rosa’s* living quarters that the woman spun, mere inches from her partner. Tyrran cocked his head to one side, speaking before his partner could.

“You and me— we have unfinished business of our own, don’t we?”

Yolanta folded her arms, looking with defiance up to the man before her.

“*Do* we?”

Tyrran shook his head, his eyes hard.

“You *kissed* me.”

Now it was the woman who sneered.

“What are you, twelve?”

Tyrran exhaled, shaking his head. Neither man nor woman took their eyes off of the other.

“I don’t have time for this.”

With that he turned, unfastening the attachments of his flight suit, stripping it away to the waste. Yolanta watched as he strode to the shower unit, her lips pressed together. The door shut, followed shortly after by the sound of running water. Without a word she turned, making her way to her quarters, opening up a sealed container of wine. Still in her flight suit she drank, the day's filth and grime still upon her. One thought led to another, and from a nearby storage compartment she retrieved a familiar black case.

The first notes of the Iberian guitar betrayed none of the day's peril. The passionate chords and intricate, plucky melodies rose and danced from her fingers, telling nothing of the misery and desperation the woman had witnessed. On she played, the only one in her room, her ship, the universe. She thought of everything and nothing, of love and war, of passion and cruelty. She thought of death, both her own and those comrades so recently lost. Iberian fingers coaxed Iberian notes, and even the mechanical whirs and hydraulics of nearby hangars were drowned out by something so richly human.

It might have been minutes, or it might have been an hour. Yolanta rested, taking a long sip of her wine, not knowing of but *feeling* the presence behind her. Her head turned to glance over her shoulder.

"How long have you been standing there?"

Tyrran Andor was leaning against the entryway into the woman's quarters, arms folded and in clean clothes. Still-damp hair clung to his forehead, his eyes as soft as hers were hard.

"Long enough."

Yolanta took a deep breath.

"I was part of the Night Witch command wing. I saw Kerenski's genius for manipulation and planning. I watched as conspiracies unfolded and came to fruition. I saw common criminals overthrow an Imperial government."

Tyrran folded his arms.

“That’s a lot of words to say that you were never exactly in the trenches.”

Yolanta’s face hardened. “We used slaves. Convicts. Those we captured. Thousands of them, in mobs. They had each of them a black thorn around their neck, their only choices being to win or die. It was how we took the settlements so quickly.”

For a long time Tyrran said nothing, his fingers drifting up to his own neck.

“Your righteous high ground is starting to crumble.”

Yolanta rose, hands on her hips. “It was not the Witches that used the collars, but the Raiders. Milagro Hardy cares for nothing but her own grip on power. It was not until after the system was won that Kar— Kerenski leaned the true extent of her depravity.”

The woman’s face soured. “On the day she took power, Hardy gave me one as a sick gift. ‘One day you will learn the ways of the ‘verse’, she said. *Putá*.”

Again, the man’s fingertips traced along the black thorn around his neck.

“And so you did.”

The woman turned, her back to him.

“I will not be made a fool of, *patán*. The Witches have a base of operation, *si*— but at the cost of being in bed with common thugs. A vagabond like you cannot *comprehend* the scope of my shame.”

Andor shrugged, speaking slowly. “So much for your glorious revolution.”

The woman’s hands clenched themselves into fists. Her features twisted into an expression of disgust.

“There is such *ugliness* in the ‘verse. I was born into it, groomed by my father to be a party to it. At university I learned of the true scope of the corruption that plagues the Empire. At Kerenski’s side I learned of Salome’s crusade to burn the rot from humanity itself, to cut the strings that *they* use to make us dance to their tune. And at Atroco I witnessed one tyrant overthrow another.”

Yolanta squeezed shut her eyes, her voice trembling.

“No. I *helped* one tyrant overthrow the other. And every face in that corridor was a reminder of my guilt.”

Tyrran looked away, and then back to his partner.

“You can’t blame yourself for what has happened. The Thargoids—”

The woman stamped her foot, her eyes intense.

“The people were desperate even before the monsters showed up. I had simply shut my eyes to them. I cannot do so again. I *will* not.”

Andor’s gaze deepened, stepping closer to his partner.

“You can’t think like this. One of both of us might die tomorrow, another twisted body in a derelict ship. You can spend your final night worrying about things you can’t change, or...”

His words came with difficulty, the man taking another step closer.

“Or you can see what’s in front of you. What’s *been* in front of you.”

Yolanta’s mouth opened and closed, her own eyes running the gamut of emotion. Finally she crossed her arms, her usual unsmiling sharpness returning. Her voice wavered as she spoke.

“Leave it to a lying, cheating, honorless *vagabondo* to tell me my business with others. I am a fool to have let you so close. You can die screaming in a cloud of alien filth, Tyrran Andor— and the ‘verse will be better for it. Now leave.”

Tyrran stepped back as though shoved, shaking his head. His finger rose to point at his neck.

“So much talk about ugliness, when the truly ugly thing is *you*. Do me a favor and trigger this damn thing, will you?”

Again, Yolanta stamped her foot.

“*Hmm!*”

Sleep came only with difficulty that night, Tyrran tossing and turning despite the day’s fatigue. A parade of nightmarish images was running through his mind. The faces of the desperate faded into the faces of the dead, the corpses of pilots and crew, no match for the alien invaders. The screams of dying wingmates and the haunting moans of dying Thargoids, joined together in death as the only true masters of the void.

Tyrran squeezed shut his eyes, trying in vain to resist thoughts of bitterness and regret that weighed upon him. It was true what he had said. There was every possibility that he’d die the next day, blasted by a caustic missile or stray energy blast. Or perhaps he would be caught in a shutdown wave, drifting helplessly, watching the screeching thargon swarm bear down upon him...

And for what? The knowledge that my life held some meaning? For a woman who doesn’t smile? For a cause greater than myself?

Thoughts as ugly as the ones he’d accused his partner of having rose.

Kerenski mentioned damaged ships. I could take a shuttle to Lasswitz, find one that still flies. Jump to the nearest repair yard and get it running like it should. Do some jobs in systems that don’t check ship logs too closely...

The man shook his head, repulsed at the idea.

And throw away everything accomplished at her side. Everything she was daring to believe about you. No. My place is here, wherever that path might lead.

Memories of the day's evening returned, of the utter contempt in Yola's eyes as she ordered him away. Yet beneath the hardness there had been a pain, something that she dared not admit to even herself.

Maybe she's as mixed up about everything as you are.
Maybe—

The soft hiss of the cabin's door sliding open overrode the man's thoughts, his eyes shooting open. He sat up, his eyes adjusting to the soft light from the *Rosa's* corridor. There was a familiar figure approaching, soft and feminine. The door slid shut, once again plunging the room into darkness. On hands and knees the figure crawled up to him, saying nothing and halting an intimate distance away. It was all Tyrran could do to speak.

"Yola, I—"

A finger pressed against the man's lips, the woman's eyes boring into his, the only thing he could see in the darkness. Her voice was an urgent whisper.

"Say nothing. We may die tomorrow."

Slowly, the man nodded. Yolanta shifted position, straddling her partner in his lap, her legs and arms wrapped around him. Man and woman were intimate, bodies pressed against the other's— yet neither's hands drifted in prelude to lovemaking. Yolanta traced along Tyrran's jaw, her eyes soft yet her mouth unsmiling. It was a long, long time before she spoke, nestled against him in the darkness.

"Tyrran?"

The man swallowed.

"Si?"

The woman pulled him closer.

"How would you spend your last day... if you knew it was your last?"

Tyrran's hands now drifted up, over the woman's neck and through her thick Iberian hair.

"I would listen to you play. And I would watch you dance."

Slowly, the woman nodded, her eyes deepening. She slid off his lap, gesturing to the door.

“Fetch my guitar, *patán*.”

The man rose, returning with the instrument and handing it to her. Yolanta sat cross-legged upon the bed, making a few adjustment to the tuning pegs. Then her fingers began their dance, plucking the Iberian notes, filling the space with acoustic passion. Her body relaxed, swaying to one side and the other from the rhythm, losing herself to the music of her people.

The first touch of Tyrran’s hands upon her was greeted not with indignation but a gasp, her lips remaining parted as he sat behind her, his hands running down her arms, her hips, the smoothness of her thighs. Her own breathing deepened as she felt his lips pressing against the nape of her neck, his fingertips caressing her belly. Yet still she strummed, the music springing forth, the passions of body and tune coursing through her as one.

Yolanta played, not to amuse but to feel alive. Tyrran touched, not to seduce but to connect. Her head rolled back, pressing against his, kissing his temple as he kissed her shoulder. On she played, her eyes closed, reclining into the man’s arms. Her nostrils flared as unsmiling lips pressed together, willing the moment to last forever...

With a ragged exhale the Iberian melody reached its climax and halted, the woman held by her lover, her breathing such that the swell of her breasts brushed his fingers as she inhaled. No words were necessary as she set the instrument aside, laying down and pulling the man beside her, legs intertwined, faces nearly touching. The same fingers that had made the guitar sing now raked themselves through Tyrran’s hair. It was with a whisper that she finally spoke.

“Before, in the hangar. I said that if you died, I would kill you.”

Tyrran nodded, his eyes solemn.

“You did.”

Passion animated the woman's features, pressing her lips to his, holding his face in her hands. For a long time she held the kiss, her tongue tracing along his. Finally she spoke.

“Do *not* die, *patán*. For it would kill *me*. ”

Life was good for Tyrran, despite the somewhat press-ganged nature of his relationship with Rax Ortega. The older man was quick to laugh and quick to pay, despite the underworld nature of his profession. Tyrran found himself engaged in all sorts of tasks, from smuggling to data running to surveillance. His skill set as a pilot grew; the only downside was being constantly paired with Cecil, Rax's surly old friend.

Cecil was cantankerous and crude, and never without a biting remark. Everything from Tyrran's ship to his manhood was routinely insulted, and tensions skyrocketed between the men. Cecil was tasked with driving the all-terrain vehicle that was installed into Tyrran's Cobra, acting as Rax's liaison for various unsavory contacts as well.

When the first wave of anti-Thargoid gear hit the market, Rax was fascinated. When hybrid Guardian samples began circulating, he became obsessed. So much black market gear found its way to Rax's hidden warehouses that he became an unofficial technology broker; still he paid top credit for the genuine articles, and Tyrran once again found himself headed into the black. It was an easy job for him to take, since he had the most experience of Rax's contacts with xenological technology. And the pay would put him on Easy Street for a good, long while.

Yet such depended on Cecil accompanying him, and for the extended voyage the old man was even more contemptible. He treated the ship as though it were his own, and Tyrran merely the chauffeur. Always drunk, Cecil was obnoxious, crude, and intrusive. He looked down upon the younger man and never passed an opportunity to berate him. Nothing was good enough for Cecil. The ship rations were tasteless, the landings too rough, and nothing about his partner or his vessel was as good as such things had been in the old man's prime. Tyrran wanted to lash out, to drop his partner off at a remote outpost and move on— but the mission's generous reward compelled him to bite his tongue and push deeper into unsettled territory.

At last they arrived at the job site. Guardian ruins, already ancient at the time of humanity's birth, stood fast amid the ravages of time and geology. They were undiscovered, their still-functional parts worth a fortune for any other scavver. Yet the real prize was the information on ship design they contained, locked away in a data core that had lain dormant for untold millenia. To access it would be a challenge, lacking as they did the complex decryption algorithms of the extinct Guardian race. Instead, the more brutal method of forcibly powering up the site's network pylons and then extracting the data using black market translation software would be needed. Rax had never tired of reminding Tyrran what an effort it had been simply to acquire the latter item.

It was as the men were suiting up that the final indignity unfolded. Cecil turned to Tyrran, his lined face contorted with contempt, his gut causing his flightsuit to bulge in the middle.

"Did some digging around on you, Rax did. You've come up from nothing, 'ave you? Nothing but some Alliance brat, bouncing from 'ome to 'ome. You know they found you in a hospital? Crying for your mother's tit, no doubt."

Tyrran said nothing, a dark look on his face but turning his back to the man as he continued to suit up. Cecil's old, mocking voice grated in his ears. Even with his back turned Tyrran could smell alcohol on the man's foul breath.

"Nothing on file for your parents, either— even in the gene libraries. Hell, maybe I'm yer pappy. Sewing a lot of wild onionhead in those parts, I was. Why don't you try it on for size? 'Papa Cecil'. Go on, then. Say it."

Andor spun, holding up a warning finger.

"We do this job together— and after that, I'm finished."

Low, drunken laughter escaped Cecil's lips. "Oh, there's some bollocks on you after all! Was worried I had a daughter there for a moment."

Shaking his head, Tyrran turned away, activating his flight suit and making his way toward the bridge.

"Just mind the rover and get that data."

Even as the door slid shut, Cecil's gravelly taunting could be heard.

"Bloody worthless, you are. Can't even look a man in the eye. I'd have abandoned you, too."

Tyrran stood alone in the corridor, trembling with anger, fists balled. It was at that moment that Andor coldly decided that only one of them would ever leave the Guardian ruins, partnership with Rax be damned. The decision crystallized itself in his mind, the young man set upon his righteous betrayal.

I'll teach you about abandonment, he thought. And it'll be the final lesson of your long, miserable life.

Blood, both human and Thargoid, continued to spill across Atroco. The arrival of Loren's Legion brought with it both relief and hope, but the transitory nature of the alien menace ensured that the tactics of attrition were the only ones that would be observed. The men and women of the squadron tore into the Thargoids with professional fury; first dozens and then hundreds of kills were tallied, mostly of the smaller Scouts but a significant number of Interceptors falling victim to the Imperials as well.

They had aid, of course. The Night Witches flew what missions they could, the far smaller group isolating and destroying stray Interceptors instead of taking them on *en mass* as the Legion did. So too did the Aegis regulars and indy hunters do their parts. The former was small in number but highly professional. The latter was composed of numerous freelancers but lacked the discipline of the military units. Casualties were particularly high among them.

The situation stabilized somewhat; after a few days, the first aid convoys arrived from supercruise to dock at Lasswitz Port. Milagro Hardy herself made a systemwide holofac to commend the foreign defenders and resoluteness of "her" fellow citizens. In practice the supplies were seized by her thugs almost as soon as they were unloaded, hoarded by the Raiders and sold at wildly inflated prices to the citizenry. Isolated incidents of civil unrest broke out at some of the more remote settlements—the ones that had survived, anyway—but were ignored. All the Raiders' resources were bent toward keeping Lasswitz Port open and safe.

Around the mammoth station ships came and went in never-ending lines. Hangar space was at a premium, and only those most intimately connected with Milagro Hardy and her Raiders were assured of a place within it. Many repairs were made in the area just beyond the Coriolis itself; powered-down ships floated in place, the steady lights and sparks of repair drones doing what they could to ready them for the next bout of fighting. Others weren't so lucky, succumbing to the exotic Thargoid weapons and drifting through space on their own, abandoned by their crews and easy game for any scavvers desperate enough to pick over acid-drenched husks.

The ships within the station fared better. Secure within a darkened hangar was a Chieftain—battered, purple, and awaiting its turn in a repair bay. Within *it* was a man and a woman, both as olive-complected as the other, weary and half-asleep in the commander's quarters. A bunk meant for one currently accommodated two.

Tyrran Andor was curled in a fetal position, his head resting upon Yolanta's lap, his eyes closed as she stroked his hair. Both were still in their flightsuits, the fighting's toll sapping whatever strength they had. The woman, too, was resting her eyes, a soft Iberian tune in her throat, sleep beckoning to her as well. His hand took hers, moving it from his hair to his lips, kissing the open palm and pressing it to his cheek.

"Was it like this... when the Witches were taking Atroco?"

Yolanta opened her eyes, exhausted.

"No. It was more precise. More focused. Not like..."

She blinked, the screams of the dying still fresh within her mind.

"Well, this."

Andor nodded, his hand still holding hers. It was a long time before he spoke. When he did his voice was soft.

“I always made sure to never actually be around them, you know?”

Yolanta’s face hardened, her mouth unsmiling. Yet she squeezed the man’s hand in her.

“Who?”

On her lap, Tyrran shrugged, his gaze fixed ahead of himself.

“The Thargoids. Those who stood against them. And those who fell.”

The woman’s voice was soft, unusually so for her.

“You are here now, *si?*”

Exhaling, Tyrran turned his head, staring up at his partner. Again, he kissed her palm, shaking his head.

“I’m not a fighter. Never have been. These past days have been...”

The man shook his head, looking away. Yolanta turned him back to her, leaning over him, her expression hardening.

“No one is *ever* a fighter, *patán*— until they *are*. And *you* have fought, or else I am no Púrpura.”

Yolanta’s other hand drifted to the bulkhead wall, tracing along it. Unsmiling concern danced in her eyes.

“You were right, you know. “

Tyrran's breathing had deepened, his eyes again closed.

“Oh?”

The woman nodded. “The *Rosa* has bled. Us, too. There is no elegance to fighting the abominations. Only numbers. Only brutality.”

There was a shift, the Chieftain moving along the automated landing pad, its queue in the repair bay line ended. Yolanta looked around herself.

“It will not be long now. We should get some rest.”

There was no reply from the man at her lap, his chest rising and falling, his breathing now deep and slow. Gently Yolanta slipped her thighs from beneath him, laying his head down upon the bunk's pillow. She glanced to the shower unit adjacent to her quarters and shook her head.

Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura stretched out beside her partner, the day's grime and sweat still trapped against her body within the flightsuit. It mattered little. Soon the mechanical noises of a ship being repaired would fill the air, and soon after that it would be ready for duty. Then she and Tyrran would again fly into the violent morass to live or die.

Fatigue weighed heavily upon the woman, her eyes closing as she rested her head upon Tyrran's shoulder. Her fingers raked through the man's hair a final time before they, too, rested. Yolanta opened her eyes to gaze upon her man.

Si, she thought. You have become a fighter, but not in the way you think. Draw your Espada, Tyrran— and become the man that no one but I have seen.

“What's the damage, Sobanii?”

Phisto rubbed his eyes, hunched over the comms terminal of his Fer-de-Lance. Figures were scrolling past him, the man forcing his weary mind to make sense of them. Some involved the Legion. Others updated the repairs being made to his ship in realtime, the mechanical noises of ammunition being loaded and hull being nanolathed echoing outside the hull.

“As of midnight local time, the Legion's bagged three-hundred and thirty eight of those little Scouts. Eighty-nine Interceptors, too, broken down by type. We're hurtin' 'em.”

Isaiah Evanson nodded, his holofac distorting for a moment.

“Casualties?”

Phisto sighed.

“Thirteen killed. Another twenty-seven wounded. All ships are considered a total loss. That caustic shit just eats up the hull too fast.”

Isaiah’s lips pressed together. Words came only with effort.

“Damn,” he said. “Damn.”

Sobanii nodded, the losses keenly felt by him as well.

“The good news is that those Hydra bastards seem to be staying away. Even *one* of those...”

Evanson nodded. “I know. And the Legion is already on port and starboard time. I’m authorizing the release of combat stims. We can’t afford to have sleepy pilots.”

Phisto grunted. “Port and starboard” was the age-old term for wartime combat schedules, four hours on and four hours off for the duration of an emergency. It was meant to maximise flexibility but had the deleterious effect of minimizing sleep.

“And the Witches?”

Isaiah’s features hardened. “They’ve stayed out of our way, so we’ll stay out of theirs. This was never their kind of fight anyway.”

For a long time, neither man said anything, the holofac line flickering in places. At last Phisto cleared his throat and spoke.

“Kamadhenu all over again, then. Kill until the bugs call it a day.”

Isaiah shook his head, a scowl twisting his features.

“No. Kamadhenu saw Imperial squadrons from across the Empire rally to defend Her Majesty’s homeworld. This is different. The only real forces in place at Atroco are Aegis and ourselves.”

Sobanii took a deep breath, wishing wearily for sleep.

“And still no Guardian tech.”

The fact hung between them. Isaiah, too, sighed.

“And still no Guardian tech. The missiles and cannons do their job, but...”

Phisto balled up his fists.

“But if those Hydras or even Basilisks made an appearance, we’re goners short of a ten-to-one numerical advantage. And we don’t have that many ships.”

The squadron commander shook his head.

“No, we don’t. And it’s times like this when I feel like the bugs aren’t the only things we’re fighting.”

“What do you mean?”

Evanson scoffed.

“Look around. Look at Aegis. Producing AX weapons on a mass scale— but limiting how many can be fitted. Restricting the best gear for those who can cough up Guardian materials. And don’t think I buy for a *second* their explanation that they can’t be scaled up to capital-class.”

Phisto glanced downward, scanning his instruments to make sure that they were on a secure line.

“I hear you, boss. Just—”

Isaiah cut him off.

“Just the entire idea behind partnering with the Witches was to secure the good stuff without all the bullshit. And now, here we are...”

Sobanii nodded. “With all the bullshit and none of the good stuff. I know.”

An alarm on Phisto’s wrist computer chirped. Isaiah nodded toward it.

“Ship ready?”

Phisto exhaled, glancing toward the alert. “Scratched up and patched up. Time to head out. Ren and Amos are already standing by.”

Evanson stood taller, saluting in the manner of an Imperial. Phisto returned it, albeit in his usual lazy manner. His squadron commander frowned.

“You take care of yourself. Wake me when it’s port again.”

Sobanii chuckled, though the humor was gone from his tone.

“I’ll try not to kill them *all*.”

Like her comrades, Kari Kerenski was wishing mightily for a full night’s rest. *Unlike* her comrades, the demands of leadership acted to keep her from such. She, too, was engaged in a dour holofac- though the man on the other end was hardly a friend. As usual he was at a desk, his features cloaked in shadow, his voice its usual timbre of intelligence and purpose. Yet at that hour it only served to make his words run together, forcing the woman to focus harder than she usually did.

Unusually for that session Kerenski had something akin to leverage on her mysterious contact, the woman folding her arms across her chest and gazing hard into the man’s holographic eyes.

“Still nothing— for us *or* the Legion. We had a deal, *da*? We had a deal, and we’re *still* fighting the Thargoids with basic gear.”

The figure pressed his fingertips together, forming a tent with his digits and tilting it slightly at his associate.

“The same gear you had at Kamadhenu. It did not impede victory.”

Kerenski spat— or would have, had she not been standing in her own ship.

“When we had ten times the support. This is different. No Imperial squadron will take up arms to fight for a lawless, fallen system. We *need* that gear, or our arrangement will be at an end.”

The man’s eyebrows raised in amusement. “A threat you have no doubt heard from Evanson and now see fit to pass to me. But ask yourself: who *needs* our arrangement more?”

Kerenski seethed, but maintained her composure.

“I will need more recruits when this is over. And no more starry-eyed idealists. Soldiers. Men and women of action. Specialists.”

The darkened figure shrugged.

“Most of the type you want aren’t the type to take orders. The rest you’d have trouble affording. I’m afraid you’ll have to make do.”

Kerenski squeezed her eyes shut, claspings her hands behind her back to conceal how hard they were trembling. Her words came between clenched teeth.

“I need *something*.”

Slowly, the figure nodded. A look of conciliation softened his features.

“When Atroco has been secured—”

The woman held up a warning finger.

“*If*, you mean.”

“*When* the threat has passed, I will deliver a... bonus. A ship, modified to be nearly undetectable and outfitted with the latest gear. You’ll have your usual... *privileges*, of course.”

Kerenski shook her head. “Don’t fob me off with toys.”

The man lost none of his composure.

“This in addition to the agreed-upon merchandise, naturally. But I must ask for your patience. Demand is... high.”

“So is the price paid for every day that passes without delivery.”

The holographic image of the man flickered. He smiled in a manner that could almost pass as warm.

“Rest assured that your sacrifices are neither in vain nor overlooked from on high.”

Kerenski scoffed. “Then long live the Emperor. May she rule a thousand years.”

The figure nodded, amusement in her eyes. “Arissa invicta, as you say. I’ll be in touch.”

With a shimmer the holofac cut out, leaving the woman alone in the darkness of her ship. Almost immediately she slumped, her breath escaping her lips in a ragged exhale. She turned, magboots on hard metal deck, trudging in silence down the main corridor to her quarters. She sat upon her bunk and in the darkness undressed, not bothering with a shower or doing much else other than loosening her ponytail. Without ceremony she lit a cigarette, her eyes piercing the darkness, hard and unblinking.

Even disrobed Kerenski's wrist computer adorned her forearm, and with practiced precision she keyed a series of holographic toggles. Almost immediately a hologram shimmered into view, low-quality but unmistakable for what it was. Inches from Kerenski's face was the sleeping form of Yolanta Púrpura, eyes closed and breathing softly, her head on a man's— Tyrran's, almost certainly— chest. Kari soured at the sight but remained focused on her young protege, exhaling smoke from her mouth. In the low gravity it wafted and curled, framing the woman's face, her gaze unbroken.

I will need you in the days to come, she thought. There has been much bloodshed, and much foolishness. See that you do not succumb to either, tovarish.

The harsh star-blue light from the Trident's autocannon illuminated Tyrran's face, highlighting his features in the darkness of space in rapid, staccato bursts. A war scream escaped the man's lips, loud in his cockpit but of no consequence in the silence of vacuum, his heart pumping in his chest as the insectoid ship before him bellowed its final, haunting death moan.

"Get clear!"

Night Witch vessels banked hard and boosted away, Tyrran alone skimming the razor edge of safety and peril, drinking in the sight of the Thargoid's final moments. The ship buckled and drifted, petals blasted away and leaking viscous fluids into space. At last it erupted, a grand explosion engulfing its organic lines, jagged pieces flying in all directions. Only a blackened husk remained, a sickly green caustic cloud spreading from it.

Cheers and shouts broke out over the comms, the Witches celebrating their latest victory. By now a cold, brutal routine had established itself as their tactics adapted. Different Witches took on different roles. Some were equipped mainly with flak cannons, hanging back and blasting the inevitable swarms of Thargon drones. Others focused on the flower-like Interceptors themselves, sending volleys of missiles or emptying clips of multicannon ammunition into their insectoid hulls. Those like Tyrran in snub fighters focused on either distracting the mammoth ships or—in his case—incinerating the exposed Thargoid Hearts, the so-named biomechanical cores that governed the very integrity of the foe's vessels.

Kari Kerenski's voice sounded over the comms.

"One fewer monstrosity, *da*? Get repaired and rearmed. The day is young and there are many m—"

Every sensor of every ship lit up at once, a harsh alarm interrupting the Witch's instructions. Subspace ripples appeared in the distance, shimmering flat portals that filled the hearts of all with dread. Yolanta was the first to speak, alarm in her Iberian dialect.

"Repairs will have to wait. They are *coming*!"

Tyrran shifted in his Trident's cockpit, his hands dancing over his controls, checking his systems.

"With any luck it's only a Cyclops or two. I've got enough ammo for—"

There was a sharp intake of air. Kerenski's voice filled comms, urgency in her words.

“They’re *not*. All units— *retreat!*”

Tyrran blinked, instinctively turning his ship to face the threat. His breath died in his throat.

No...

Emerging from the subspace rifts were insectoid, star-shaped abominations, but their petals spanned far wider than the others that preceded them, coming to deadly points. There were three of them, and already Thargon drones were swarming in thick clouds, numerous and too many to count. It was hopeless.

“Hydras!”

Gritting his teeth, Tyrran swung his Trident around, laying on the boost for Kerenski’s Krait. It was no secret that to face a Hydra under any but the most ideal circumstances was to invite death. They were the deadliest known Thargoid vessel, capable of taking down wings of veterans. Even Guardian weapons had trouble inflicting lasting damage upon them.

The *Rosa*, too, was boosting away, its engines flaring in a violet glow. The hunters were instantly made the hunted, alien vessels pursuing human. Thargon drones sped ahead of the mammoth Hydras, opening fire with yellow-tinged blaster fire, the human shields not entirely absorbing the damage. Scorch marks appeared on even the best-shielded Night Witch vessel.

“Hurry, Andor!”

Tyrran ignored Kerenski’s warning, the holographic guidance squares filling his view. The Trident lurched as manual control was disengaged, a swarm of Thargons passing on all sides. Insectoid shrieks echoed in Andor’s ears. The man grit his teeth as the autopilot pulled him into the bay, far too slow for his liking.

“C’mon, c’mon!”

At last the Trident was pulled inside, the docking clamps securing him into place. Even as they did so he keyed his comms.

“I’m in. Let’s punch it!”

The Hydras opened fire with their own main weapons, catching the rearmost Witch in the barrage, his Cobra disintegrating into pieces. The flaming wreckage passed under the Krait's docking bay as its doors shut, Tyrran following it with his eyes.

"Yola— speak to me!"

Strain came through on the comms.

"If you distract me again *patán*, I am making you polish my hull by *hand*! Jumping now."

Tyrran exhaled in relief. Already the steady crescendo of a spooling frameshift echoed around him, though his heart still pounded in his chest. The man blinked, the dire outline of the Hydra still before him.

And now the bugs have brought out their heavies. What have we to fight them with?

"I see them, *I see them!*"

A bestial, ominous challenge echoed through space and into the ears of the Legionnaires. Isaiah grit his teeth, the sight of the Hydra filling his view. He wasn't scared, not exactly—yet his mind raced, comparing what he knew of the legendary monstrosities to the first-gen weapons with which his ships were equipped. What it came up with wasn't encouraging.

"Ren, Amos, Adam— it isn't happening. Not against these. Not with only four of us. I'm going to contact some wing leads and fight these things with a dozen-to-one advantage."

From the cockpit of his Fer de Lance, Amos nodded. His Federation drawl bled through the comms.

"Good. Ain't in the mood for a fair fight myself."

Isaiah boosted away, flanked by his wingmates. The multicannons, decently reliable against the lower-grade Thargoids, retracted into his ship's hull.

"Fair' would be *twenty*-to-one with these popguns. I'm just feeling generous!"

The holo-footage of the latest engagements was distributed by Aegis, the battle having entered a new, far more dire phase. Deep-space scanner algorithms were uploaded to every ship, the better to gauge the probability of running afoul of the hideously powerful ships. The isolated battles continued all over the system, but the Thargoid battlegroups led by the imposing Hydras swept aside all opposition in their path, leaving trails of death and destruction in their wake. More surface settlements were razed, with Hudson Penal Colony leveled to the ground. Those inmates who managed to escape to the lower levels were cut off, left to the mercy of whatever aid that Milagro Hardy and her Raiders would deign to send.

Hundreds of ships were detailed to protect the major surface settlements and starports, patrolling nonstop around the clock. Hunters still operated solo or as parts of teams, and like before dozens of ships floated inert around Lasswitz Port, many in the process of being repaired, the appropriate limpets going from spot to blackened spot along their hulls.

One of those vessels was the *Litvyak*, powered-down with only life-support activated, its sole occupant pacing back and forth, mag-boots clomping in the lightness of null-gravity. A familiar holographic face flickered before her, though she loathed that she had been reduced to contacting him yet again.

“No, this isn’t a heist,” she was saying. “More like a... message.”

Ouberos of Pegasi raised an eyebrow, his rich voice grating in Kari Kerenski’s ears.

“Then send a holofac. A hand-written note. A fruit basket, even.”

Kerenski’s features soured.

“The message will be that either Rax Ortega or *you* will dock at Lasswitz Port with a shipful of Guardian weapons within twenty-four hours, and that his little operation in Eravate will stand or fall depending.”

The pirate shrugged. “So you want me to say ‘please’ to the man. Only question is, how hard are *you* saying it to *me*?”

Kari named a figure. Ouberos again shrugged.

“What am I, fresh out of the District? That’ll barely pay for my H-fuel.”

The woman grit her teeth. “It’s the easiest million you’ll ever make, and you know it. Besides, you *owe* me for that last softball job I tossed your way.”

A baritone chuckle escaped the man’s lips. “Thought that bloke would soil his spacesuit, I did. You have *got* to start hiring a better class of scum to help you on these little crusades.”

Kerenski glanced aft, where the Trident fighter was kept. Her eyes narrowed for a moment before turning back to the holographic figure.

“I’m working on it. So can you hurry things up with Rax or not?”

As before, Ouberos shrugged.

“Poking the nest is the easy part. Only question is: what kind of hornets will go buzzing out of it when I do? I’m a one-man operation, after all.”

The woman’s Slavic accent thickened. “You leave the hornets to *me, tovarish*. Things are desperate here.”

Another shrug. Another baritone chuckle. “Meaning that *you’re* desperate. Alright, I’ll do it- if for no other reason than to see you squirm. It’s a rare enough sight.”

Slender fingers danced over holographic controls.

“Good. I’m sending half to your account right now. The other half—”

The pirate interrupted. “Don’t bother. I’d have done it for free.”

Kari Kerenski’s eyes darted up, narrowing. “*Free?*”

Ouberos flashed a contented smile.

“Free. That Thargoid salvage was enough to fetch some *primo* upgrades for the *Dusk*, and the girls, well-”

There was a giggle in the background, soft and mindless and feminine. The pirate’s smile grew.

“Well, let’s just say that *they* got some upgrades, too. Atroco’ll be *littered* with Thargoid junk— all I want is access to your ship’s logs for the coordinates.”

Kerenski forced a bland smile so that she couldn’t blanch.

“How romantic. When the battle is won I’ll *personally* fly you to where every monster was slain by the Witches.”

Cockiness grew in the man’s features.

“Sounds like a date.”

The bland smile sharpened into something colder.

“Twenty-four hours, *tovarish*— or else we’ll *see* who gets the ‘upgrades’.”

Phisto of the Sobanii stumbled down the entry ramp of his Fer de Lance, his footing uneven. His eyes were bloodshot and his features drawn, his hand trembling slightly as he keyed his wrist computer. A holographic representation of the *Saint of Killers* shimmered into view, ugly red zones along its hull, indicating where serious damage had been taken. The man exhaled, pacing to the edge of the hangar, willing himself to close out the hologram and look upon his ship.

A burnt, acrid odor filled the hangar and stung Phisto’s nostrils and eyes, but still he forced himself to look upon his vessel. The Fer de Lance before him was a slagged ruin, ugly burnt gashes along her normally smooth lines. The caustic Thargoid substance had only been stopped by virtue of repeated overheatings, dangerous for the ship but less so than allowing the rot to spread to its internals.

Already a repair drone was tending to the *Saint*, a length of the blackened alien substance sloughing off the side, revealing corroded components beneath. A chill spread within Sobanii's gut. The internals of the ship themselves had been compromised, vital systems malfunctioning, the ship barely able to make it back to port. To continue against a Hydra was out of the question.

The man unsnapped a flask at his side to take a long pull of Lavian Brandy, the smooth-tasting liquor washing down his throat. His eyes never left his ship, but his vision danced with images of death and futility. The new Thargoid ships had been a force of nature, bristling with firepower and death, endlessly vomiting forth Thargon drones and seemingly impervious to attack. In truth, Pisto doubted if he'd even scratched its insectoid hull even after emptying clip and clip of multicannon shells into it.

Another pull brought with it clarity but not peace. Pisto Sobanii was a wing leader of the Legion, the eagle of the Empire he had once despised adorning his ship, marred by another length of the putrid rot. A hard look solidified the man's features, his eyes fixating upon the tarnished eagle. The same had adorned those vessels of his wingmates, now drifting in deep space somewhere in Atroco, their own frozen, unblinking eyes forever to stare into the void.

The communicator of his wrist computer chirped, a secured transmission incoming. Without thinking Pisto answered it. The concerned face of Isaiah Evanson materialized before him.

"So you're still alive," he said. "Thank God."

With his other hand, Pisto raised his flask.

"Yeah. And a lot of others aren't. Some god."

Evanson exhaled, fatigue in his features.

“A handful of Hydras are pushing the line in further and further, leading a whole bevy of lesser Thargoid vessels. They’re corralling us inward, closer to the major population centers. Even the *Vanguard* is falling back closer to the main planet.”

The ice within Phisto’s stomach grew.

“They’re preparing their final strike. The one where they wipe us out.”

Isaiah nodded. “Same as the other systems. The ones that didn’t make it.”

For a long time, Phisto said nothing. He looked up to his ship, frowning.

“The *Saint* is a wreck, but I think she’s got one more fight in her. Any word from our Witch friends?”

Evanson shook his head. “They’re in the same boat we are. No Guardian weps. Ships falling apart.”

“Then we need to contact Larsen. Have her send reinforcements.”

A grim smile settled over Isaiah’s features.

“She hasn’t exactly been taking my calls.”

Phisto Sobanii scoffed. “Do we need to knock her door down?”

The next day brought with it increasing death and ruin for the human defenders. Appeals to the galactic community were redoubled; compassionate souls arrived to evacuate refugees, often to distant worlds. Still others armed themselves to help their fellow man against an adversity as fearsome as it was enigmatic. Still more surface settlements were razed to the ground, the news of which even the ruling Raiders couldn't entirely suppress. Even Milagro Hardy found herself beset with crisis; hers was a gang of bullies, not soldiers. Desertion hit her ranks hard, and Atroco—even by the standards of the system—was plunged into a state of lawlessness. Supplies, already sold at monstrous upcharge, became scarce. Weapons and food were hoarded and fought over, the remnants of local Authority powerless to halt the Balkanization that pitted citizen against citizen.

The lines drawn were composed of everything and nothing; families banded together, of course— but so too did occupants of a single deck or hab block. Some sought those who shared a common spiritual belief— it was only then that doom—saying zealots of the Far God religion slithered from the woodwork, screaming prophecies of death and repentance on hijacked comms systems. Their rivals, the Church of the Eternal Void, soon inserted themselves into the fray as well. A proxy war, pale and pathetic, between Thargoids and Guardians erupted within Atroco. Clashes between the two factions left even the commons of Lasswitz Port a dangerous, deserted place. The same dynamic played out on nearly every surface settlement as well.

A deep morbidity infected the spirits of all who remained, and those who were spared from immediate harm dealt with the impending threat in their own ways. Some—particularly those with children— simply mimicked everyday life as best they could, adopting their bravest faces. Others fell to despair and ended life on their own terms. Still others saturated their bodies with narcotics and indulged in communal debauchery, determined to meet their ends in a state of mindless bliss.

Yet amid the fear and despair were those who retained focus in the face of mind-shattering violence. Those whose will remained forged of iron within the crucible of adversity. Those who strapped broken bodies into broken ships, flying time and again against a foe as inhuman as it was relentless. They were men and woman, young and old, who had trod roads high and low. Though their backgrounds were as diverse as the myriad of systems that humanity called home, the wings of the fabled guild adorned every ship they flew. Voices lowered into whispers when a vessel with the fullest of those wings came or went. To even see the crest of such would be the closest to greatness that most ever came.

No such symbol graced the hull of the massive Anaconda that was granted last-minute clearance before the heavy blast doors of Lasswitz Port slid shut. The Coriolis station was now sealed, and whether it would prove a fortress or a tomb was in the hands of those who had sworn to defend it.

“Using the emergency band?” Valeria Larsen was seated at her desk, her holographic image suffering the occasional flicker. “*Bad* form, commander.”

Isaiah Evanson paced in his flightsuit, unshaven and with a military stimbev in his hand. The *Bloodfeather's* bridge was mostly powered down save the comms terminal at which he stood. The whirs and mechanical noises of his ship undergoing quick-fab repairs could be heard around him.

"I'd say that news of your squadron being locked in battle with alien invaders is pretty goddamn emergent," he said. "Have you even *seen* the casualty figures?"

Larson raised a glass of wine, indulging a long, arrogant sip.

Always with the wine, he thought. Goes well with a patrician sneer.

"Heroes, all of them," she replied, raising the glass in mock toast. "Most, anyway."

Isaiah scowled. "This is no time for games."

The woman took a sip, exhaling in casual annoyance.

"What is it you *want*?"

A finger shot out, pointing to the space beyond the Fer de Lance's canopy.

"Reinforcements. If you and Durant want your glorious victory, you need to send the rest of the Legion."

Larson shrugged.

"Done."

Isaiah blinked. "Thank you."

A sly look sharpened the woman's eyes.

"When the time is right, that is. Your contacts have come through with the Guardian weapons, by the way. Better late than never, I suppose— but the Legionnaires seem eager to test them out. A pity that circumstances prohibit their deployment."

The man set down his stimbev and clasped his hands behind his back, straightening himself. One hand curled into a fist, trembling in rage so that the man himself *didn't*.

"I just *told* you that this is no time for games."

For a long time, Valeria Larsen said nothing, only casting a superior gaze upon her subordinate.

“It is the opinion of several fine officers within my Patron’s circle that you can be salvaged. The Legion, too. That you were on the wrong side of the Coma incident cannot be held against you in perpetuity. It is my understanding that Captain Sobanii was the head of Newton’s Fusiliers, not *you*.”

Isaiah replied, speaking slowly, his words chosen with caution.

“I don’t understand.”

Again, the woman raised her glass. A gentle smile softened her features, though her eyes remained sharp.

“You are fighting a formidable foe, and casualties are expected. Yet the Empire will *always* prevail— and its memory is long. We never forget who our enemies are— or the ones who bring them to justice.”

Isaiah’s face hardened. “You want me to turn on Sobanii.”

Larsen laughed, a haughty staccato noise. “Nothing so dramatic as that. In fact, it would be better if you *didn’t*— not so good for squadron morale, no? You need merely ensure that your friend dies a hero, fighting to save the lives of strangers.”

Her tone lowered, sinister in its gentleness.

“It would be a kindness, really. I’ve seen what happens to *other* traitors who fall within our grasp.”

Evanson’s teeth bared, his whole body going rigid.

“*Fuck you.*”

The Governor’s eyebrows lifted in amusement, the last of her wine consumed in a delicate sip.

“Pity.”

Contempt twisted Evanson’s features.

“Are we finished here?”

Valeria Larsen’s gentle smile stayed put.

“I don’t envy you, Commander— truly I don’t. Not only for having to face off against an utterly inhuman adversary, but for the knowledge that each day your friend lives is a day that scores of innocents will die unnecessarily. The moral arithmetic is not in your favor.”

The woman leaned forward, her mockingly benevolent gaze infuriating.

“I know you’ll do the right thing, Evanson. You’ll have no choice, after all. Not in the end.”

The task force from Loren’s Legion was assembled, all Fer-de-Lances and sleek Gutamaya hulls. There were dozens of them, a mere fraction of the squadron’s strength, arrayed in neat formation before the cavernous mailslot of Lasswitz Port. They were not alone. Aegis contractors were arrayed at their flank, fewer in number but possessing more advanced weaponry. Scattered in haphazard fashion and outnumbering them both were the hunters and the idealists, independent commanders who had pledged themselves to combating the Thargoid scourge. They were anything but consistent. Their ships were state-of-the-art or near-scrap, and the disparate men and women within experts or wide-eyed novices.

A similar picture was playing out over every major surface settlement and outpost, but the force defending Lasswitz Port was by far the largest. There was nowhere else to go, no deep-space skirmish in which to engage. The specialized sensors on the *Vanguard* confirmed the dread within the hearts of all: Thargoid signals were closing in on the system’s main population centers, and fast.

The battle would be a win-or-die affair, and all present knew it. Few had ever seen so many ships assembled in one place before. Engine glows illuminated the station almost of their own accord, the ship themselves too numerous to count. Sensors were nearly solid with signal icons. Those who knew too little of Thargoids felt that such a force couldn't lose. Those who knew too much had already witnessed them do so.

Within the human armada was a pair of Fer de Lances, the hulls of both discolored from crude patchwork and the internal modules within running on quick-fab nanolathing. The Imperial eagle in its distinctive green was marred on either, there being neither the time nor the resources to re-paint the now-infamous crest.

Isaiah Evanson glanced to his side, the outline of his friend and comrade Phisto Sobanii visible from within his own ship. The years and battles scrolled before his vision, victory and death hardening his features in equal measure. It had been a long journey for the man, a tale of loss and heroism, of stands and falls. He had been a soldier of conscious, and a soldier of fortune. The man looked around him, determination and pride that so many good men and women were at his side.

So here we are. Waiting. Together. Not a bad way to go, all thing considered.

The sensors alarmed, distant warp signals detected. It was seen by all. Isaiah's fingers squeezed the controls, willing himself to become one with his ship.

It won't be long now.

The farthest-seeing among the human defenders saw movement in the distance, mere specks against a starry backdrop. Minutes passed. The specks increased in number.

A general, automated warning was sent from Lasswitz. Isaiah ignored it. The specks in the distance could now be seen by all. His stomach roiled, not from fear from anticipation. The first, faint echoes of the foe's haunting moan could be heard.

Mother was wrong. There are monsters in the darkness.

The comms chirped. Phisto Sobanii's voice was soft.

"Boss," he said, "for reasons that only Randomius knows, there's a general line open. You key it, and every soul here will listen."

Evanson exhaled. "I'm not one for speeches."

There was a low grunt. "Comes with the territory, pal. Like it or not, we're the closest thing to law and order this system has right now. And I don't think most of these folks are ready for what's coming."

The Imperial shook his head, his eyes fixated on the approaching foe. The closest of them could barely be seen, the points of insectoid petals menacing in their alien design.

"You were always better at this than me."

There was a gentle scoff, marred slightly by static.

"When we were busting up one set of pirates to help another. This is the big time."

The private line cut out. Isaiah's hand extended over the controls, inches away from opening up the general comms. Not a soul was using it, though all would hear.

She was better, too.

"Pilots and crews of the Atroco Defence Force—"

I guess that's what we are, right?

"This is Commander Isaiah Evanson of Loren's Legion. We're an Imperial squadron, pledged to defend the Loren line from all who would do it harm. We now defend their memory."

Well... hers, anyway.

"We are living in remarkable times. For generations the Thargoids were little more than myth and rumor, bedtime stories used to frighten children or entertain the gullible. Yet now we see that they were lurking in the shadows all along, inhabiting the realm our elders call 'Witchspace'."

Isaiah swallowed, hoping that such wasn't audible. Beneath his flightsuit his heart was pounding.

“We know further that the Thargoids aren’t the only monsters that have cloaked themselves from view. Thanks to the sacrifice of Lady Kahina Loren— Salome, to many of you— a conspiracy larger than the Bubble and darker than the void was unearthed. There is a handful of individuals, flush with power, who have pulled humanity’s strings for generations. They work for their own ends— and how hard they work! There are no names to shout, and no direct lines to draw— but they are as real as you and me.”

The man shook his head. *No, Isaiah. Stay focused.*

“They fear only one thing: the day that we rise up and cast aside their yoke. Yet they cannot be exposed until this existential threat is dealt with. The Thargoids are not invincible, and they have known defeat at the hands of humanity once already. It appears that they need reminding!”

Scattered whoops and cheers sprinkled the line. Isaiah grit his teeth, pressing forward.

“There is no word for ‘mercy’ in whatever abomination of a language these insects chitter among themselves. You too must drive it from your mind. You must fight them as honorably or as deceitfully as victory requires. There was a secret war, once— one that safeguarded all of humanity. We must not rest upon those laurels. Now it is *our* time, in the open- and the eyes of all who will ever live are upon us all. Take it! Take it, and *scrape these insects from your boots!*”

There was a collective cheer, a war cry that flooded the comms as hundreds of boosters flared, rocking forth from the proximity of Lasswitz. The freelancers charged with the most alacrity, thrusters flaring, their enthusiasm getting the better of them. Yet neither were the more professional forces at a standstill. There was no unified command, no formal coordination between those like Aegis and Loren's Legion, yet a collective, unspoken strategy formed on its own. The ships of the Empire banked to one flank of the engagement; Aegis, the other. Wings, four vessels strong, fanned out like diamond constellations, enveloping the flanks in three-dimensional stratagem.

Isaiah became acutely aware of his own breathing as the foe drew nearer and nearer. There were more Thargoid vessels than he'd seen in his entire life, speeding to meet the reckless head-on attack of the independent ships. Flower-shaped vessels now seemed less adorned with petals and more like exotic daggers; so too did the sheer number of Scouts make them seem more like the buzzing Thargon drones.

Amos Loren's drawl came over the Legion comms.

"Sure as hell are a lot of them, ain't there?"

Isaiah bared his teeth, purging any remnants of fear within himself.

"Sure as hell a lot of *us*, too."

The wild charge of the indies smashed head-long into the alien line, all semblance of a unified action degenerating into a mass bar-room brawl. Human war cries and predatory Thargoid roars sounded across the void, missiles and laserfire crossing paths as the two species traded death for death. The vessels became a swirling morass, the weakest of them dying first. Saucer-like Scouts were blasted apart by even the most basic human weapons, and the flaming wrecks of Cobras and Sidewinders soon followed, their hulls weakened by caustic alien missiles and disintegrated by the exotic energy weapons of the foe.

Yet the opening minutes of the battle were cathartic for many of those in it; frenzied shouts of victory rang true, the aliens' aura of invincibility shattered. It was now a winnable fight, and hope soared in the hearts of those who before had only known dread. Scouts fell to even human weapons fire, spiraling away to explode in toxic clouds of filth. Thargons were blown to pieces with the right equipment. Cyclops Interceptors bellowed and persisted, but they, too, proved fallible to sustained barrages. Before long debris of Thargoid vessels littered space, the main danger being that of accidentally flying through one of the cloud of toxic substance before it could dissipate.

All the while the forces of Aegis and the Legion had held back, continuing their long, wide loop around opposite edges of the main engagement. Hard concern dripped from Phisto's voice.

"So what the hell are *they* waiting for?"

Isaiah, too, eyed the distant Aegis squadron with weariness.

"Same thing we are: the varsity team."

The Thargoids proved as relentless as feared, and more and more wake signatures heralded the arrival of the second wave of insectoid invaders. The independents composing the center of the human line, so jubilant over their progress, were now in the midst of a life-and-death struggle. Pilots cursed and died, some to Thargon swarms or blaster fire. Others succumbed the slow death of caustic damage, either from the dreaded alien missiles or through carelessly flying through a cloud of the corrosive filth. Soon the screams of those outmatched by the inhuman adversary flooded the general comms.

Isaiah Evanson watched the unfolding battle with the same professional eye as his counterpart in Aegis, and within moments of each other game the same order.

“The indies are in trouble. Legionnaires, on me!”

The lead Fer de Lance peeled away, its thrusters flaring as it boosted toward the morass of death. Dozens of the same followed, a human swarm approaching from the rear of the Thargoids. So too was Aegis vectoring toward the same point, both forces needing the insectoid intruders to stay occupied just a moment longer...

“Engage!”

Missiles and cannonfire erupted from a dozen Imperial vessels, forcefully diving the aliens’ attention to the new threat slamming into it from behind. Scouts cartwheeled out of control and larger Interceptors bled, the barrage sustained by subsequent Legion ships. Deep moans of pain echoed through the three-dimensional battlefield.

There was a new alien gate, larger than the ones before it, opening in the midst of battle. Through it materialized a new vessel, numerous insectoid petals coming to menacing tips. It bellowed a challenge to all around it, dozens of Thargons already swarming around its bulk. Without hesitation it opened fire, catching an Aegis Viper in a barrage of putrid yellow blasts. The ship disintegrated, its debris continuing in the same direction as had the formerly intact ship. A chill gripped the hearts of all present.

“Hydra!”

In an instant all attention was diverted to the Thargoid champion. Multicannon fire and missiles raked new scars across its living hull, but the titan spun and resisted, regenerating at a pace that outmatched even the combined firepower of the human ships. A massive wave of energy fired from its core, disabling the nearest human vessels. The unrelenting swarm of Thargons went to work on the helpless, drifting ships, their pilots inside screaming as their hulls were rent from dozens of tiny blaster marks. Others were blasted apart by concentrated blaster fire. Still others were hit by caustic missiles. The Hydra cut a path through the human ships like a scythe through so much wheat.

Phisto dodged a blast, cursing as a Legion ship disintegrated beside him.

“That thing’s gonna kill us all!”

A new voice sounded over the comms, feminine and cold and Slavic.

“Nyet,” it said. *“It will not.”*

Bright bursts of energy erupted from a new direction, cyan blasts from a black Krait. They impacted the Hydra with *force*, physically spinning it around, new echoes of pain coming from the nigh-invincible monstrosity. From within the bridge of the *Litvyak*, Kari Kerenski narrowed her eyes, already preparing a new salvo. Raw energy flickered and intensified from a trio of plasma chargers, weaponry not seen or heard in untold millenia once again answering the call to annihilate the ancient foe.

The second salvo was joined by those of the others, incinerating the Hydra's dagger-like wing. Again, the haunting moan of pain echoed through space, the Thargoid turning to engage the new arrivals. As one the Thargon swarm altered course away from Firethorn, the man watching in wide-eyed awe. His fingers danced across his controls, engaging damage control systems and taking the moment to initiate emergency reboots.

From the bridge of the *Rosa Púrpura*, Yolanta Púrpura bared her teeth, a gloved finger tightening around her joystick's trigger.

"For my *camaradas* in the aftervoid!"

Cyan energy blasts shot forth from the Chieftain's hardpoints, further boiling away twisted, insectoid hull. The Hydra answered with a barrage of yellow blaster fire, but like a dancer the woman dodged and juked, weaving her ship between them. She was focused, yet relaxed; in her mind she heard not the screams of the victorious and dying but her Iberian guitar. Her touch was light; the *Rosa*, an extension of her body and will. Another plasma salvo laid bare the biomechanical innards of the alien ship. The Thargons it had summoned were closing in. Yolanta knew without thinking that they were fixated upon her.

"Now, *Tyrran!*"

The *Rosa* peeled away, revealing the Trident fighter that had been masked in the heat of its thruster trails. Tyrran Andor now bore down upon the wounded champion, his plasma autocannon fully charged. Real contempt hardened his featured as he squeezed the trigger.

“Just another bug...”

White-blue plasma charges sprayed forth, incinerating the biomechanical guts of the flower-shaped monstrosity before him. Renewed alien screams filled his ears, the being’s pain only driving him to press his attack. He was joined by other Night Witch vessels, each equipped with their own Guardian weapons. The brutality of glowing shard fragments combined with the ruthless precision of Gauss rails, finishing the job of butchering the mighty craft from within.

The first of the telltale explosions and directionless drifting alerted Tyrran to the foe’s imminent demise. He alone was able to warn his squadron.

“*Get clear!*”

The Night Witch ships pulled away, giving the mortally wounded Thargoid a wide berth. For a moment the behemoth simply drifted, biomechanical systems trying and failing to regenerate the catastrophic damage. Organs failed and deadly substances had their way.

The explosion was sudden, jagged insectoid debris thrown in all directions, naught but a blackened husk left. On it drifted, within a sickly green cloud of caustic gasses, dissipating in the infinite reaches of space.

As one the Witches cheered, save Kerenski who with cunning eyes evaluated the situation around herself. The Legion had suffered but could still fight. Aegis, too, was severely diminished. A private channel on her comms opened up, one reserved exclusively for command.

“You been holding out on us, Kerenski?”

Isaiah Evanson had tried and failed to project levity, his tone betraying the day's strain. A scorched Fer-de-Lance pulled up beside her in something akin to formation. The woman turned and saluted, her eyes flashing.

"We have *all* been victims of a... *delay*. I have spoken to Raider command. Your people are free to dock at Lasswitz. There I have arranged their ships to be fitted with new... *toys*."

Isaiah laughed. It sounded more like crying.

"Kerenski, I could buy you a dozen roses right now!"

The woman blanched. "I would settle for dying flowers of a *different* sort. Be swift, *comrade*. The Witches will hold as long as we can."

"Aye! And... thanks."

The comms line cut out, the Fer de Lance peeling away. Almost immediately the other Legion vessels did too, making a beeline for Lasswitz Port through the ongoing battle. Kerenski watched their thruster glows recede into the distance, the station itself on a dull grey speck.

The Hydra's defeat wasn't lost on the other human forces, and word spread swiftly. Ships turned and rallied, given new resolve by the sight of the Witches. Thargoid ships were blasted in turn by the exotic white-blue fire of their ancient foes, and by the brute force of explosives from the new. The Night Witch vessels tore into the alien menace, each of their pilots consumed with vengeance. Soon the screams of dying Interceptors filled the void, followed shortly thereafter by the triumphant shouts of the human pilots who took them down.

A few Night Witch ships peeled away from the greater squadron to pursue the insectoid stragglers. Kerenski cut them short with a terse order.

"*Neit, comrades*. Let the others mop up. This isn't over."

The pilots acknowledged her command, rejoining the greater bulk of the Night Witches, still numbering dozens. Repair limpets were deployed and caustic damage neutralized, the woman scanning her controls. The alien signals were fast disappearing, yet in her chest she felt only trepidation. Her fingers danced across her controls, opening a private channel.

“Púrpura, I want you to take Andor and inspect the remaining defenders. We have prevailed too easily, and I want to know where we are weakest.”

There was little hesitation. “*Si, camarada.*”

In the distance a violet Chieftain's thrusters flared, speeding for the Coriolis station. It was followed soon after by a lone Trident fighter. Kerenski turned her attention back to the ships surrounding her, her brow furrowed.

No. They would not give up like this, not after the first hint of adversity. Does a Thargoid even think in terms of such? Are we fighting a foe that cannot feel discouragement or fear?

The woman's hands steadied themselves, the *Litvyak* rocketing to the front of the Night Witch formation. Sharp Slavic eyes stared into the abyss. She could almost see witchspace tunnels opening before her...

But listen to your ears. They can feel pain. They can suffer. And that's good enough for me.

Tyrran scanned his instruments, the readout of an early-generation Cobra tell the story of a ship out of its element. He commed his wingmate over the private channel.

“This one is useful only for cannon fodder. Like too many others.”

Irritation dripped from Yolanta Púrpura's voice.

“*Si.* I do not mind heroic sacrifice for the greater good—but this is *estupida* sacrifice toward no good at all.”

Tyrran weaved like a bee in between the larger ships, a frown on his face.

“And Aegis has taken a beating. It’s going to come down to the Legion. And us.”

The Chieftain was ahead of the smaller fighter, making long, lazy loops around the Coriolis.

“Our allies are being refitted as swiftly as the dock techs can fit the new weapons. It won’t be long now.”

Tyrran nodded. “Looks like that smooth-talking pirate bastard came through where Rax didn’t. We’re *swimming* in Guardian tech.”

Disdain colored the woman’s reply. “I use this alien gear from necessity, not choice. I do not trust this glowing junk any more than I would a Thargoid co-pilot!”

Phisto of the Sobanii exhaled, taking a long walk around his ship, scrutinizing every aspect of the Guardian weapons that were being loaded into the *Saint of Killers*. They weren’t unlike plasma accelerators— in fact, they were officially named “plasma chargers”, which demanded so much energy that they required a charge-up period before their full destructive power could be unleashed. At least, that was what the data disk given to Phisto had claimed. His ship would be equipped with four of them.

That wasn't all. The *Saint's* hull had been restored to its usual smooth lines, the patchwork armor replaced by a new type, an alloy that had been augmented with that found on Guardian vehicles. *It* was supposed to both strengthen the armor and have a resistance to the caustic effects of the Thargoid missiles. It also drew power from the reactor to do so, though the process by how it did so wasn't understood. When the armor was laced with the alien alloys, it simply *did*. Again, Pisto exhaled, shaking his head.

Armor that draws power. Who the hell's ever heard of that?

The last of the alien weapons settled into place with a loud *click*, the massive loading arms of the outfitting bay retracting. The exotic ammunition used by the plasma chargers was already loaded, and the ship had been given a once-over by the nanolathe. It was as ready as it would ever be, given the dire circumstances.

The door to the hangar bay opened. In strode Isaiah Evanson, the Imperial crest on his shoulders. Pisto waved to his commander.

Jesus, he looks like hell.

"You ready to go with your new toys?"

Sobanii nodded. "Ship's glowing a pretty shade of cyan. I just hope *I* won't when all is said and done."

For the first time in weeks, there was real hope in Evanson's voice. "Yeah. Me too. But I've been running the holos, and the gear's legit. The Witches have been racking up some big kills."

Neither man said anything. Pisto turned back to his ship.

"Then we can win this thing. Even with our backs to the wall."

A pair of Fer de Lances roared overhead. Phisto shielded his eyes from the engine thrust, recognizing them as Adam Firethorn and Amos Loren's vessels. He threw a lazy salute their way.

Give 'em hell, boys.

"I needed to talk to you about that. I've been in touch with Prism, and... it isn't looking good."

Phisto paced, scoffing at his friend.

"Not looking good *how*?"

Evanson sighed, his voice taking on an edge.

"It's Larsen. *They've* been getting the gear that we were promised. Won't send reinforcements, though. 'When the time is right', she told me."

Phisto cursed. "Timing, my ass! The old lady could spacewalk from one end of Legion space to another with her life savings and never even *hear* about a pirate. She's holding out on us, pure and simple."

There was another long silence on the line. Finally Isaiah spoke.

"There more to it than that, bud. The Legion'll come riding in to save the day, alright— but it won't be for you to share the glory."

Phisto halted, looking his commander dead in the eye.

"Spill."

Isaiah drew himself up.

"You were the captain of Newton's Fusiliers during the Coma War. The treaty might be signed, but you're on Patreus's shit list. Always will be."

Phisto opened his mouth, almost said something, and then started over.

"What are you saying?"

Hard sympathy settled over Evanson's features.

“I’m saying that Larson expects you to die before she’ll sent reinforcements. Underconsul Durant is holding her leash, and Patty is holding *hers*. It’s the ultimate revenge: the former rebel, dying in his service.”

For a long time, Phisto said nothing. Finally he spoke, his voice quiet and dangerous.

“You know, I almost *admire* him.”

Evanson advanced, his eyes serious.

“You have to sit this one out. I won’t risk—”

Phisto *laughed*. Isaiah blinked.

“No need. I know what I have to do.”

Isaiah took a step back, taken aback.

“What, exactly?”

Phisto Sobanii’s old cockiness returned to his features. He strode to his ship, accessing his wrist computer, a holographic image of the *Saint* shimmering into view.

“You said it yourself, bud: I have to *die*. Now give me a hand with this access panel.”

The vessels of Loren’s Legion, newly equipped with the weaponry of an extinct race, tore into the waves of Thargoid vessels that continually emerged from Witchspace. Side by side they and the Witches fought, cyan fire incinerating their insectoid opponents *en mass*, the battle now on terms favorable for the better-armed humans.

Tyrran Andor weaved through the carnage in his Trident fighter, Yolanta Púrpura never far away in her Chieftain. The vessels locked on to a wounded Medusa interceptor, pouring the firepower of a bygone era into it. The insectoid ship turned to engage, firing stray shots and screaming as its living hull boiled away into space. Man and woman focused on vulnerable hearts simultaneously, plasma fire and Gauss rails tearing through the biomechanical organs. The vessel's scream of mortal pain was cut short by its final, cataclysmic explosion.

Andor bared his teeth, whipping away from the caustic green cloud spreading from the blackened husk. Already more witchspace rifts were opening in the distance.

“They just keep *coming!*”

The *Rosa* formed alongside him, the feminine figure within throwing a salute.

“Then we shall keep slaying. It is the only way, *patán.*”

The greater bulk of surviving human plots regrouped into something akin to formations. There were almost no indy pilots left, the majority of whom were either destroyed or too damaged to continue. Aegis and the Legion had also taken fearful losses, yet there could be no rest. For many kilometers the space around Lasswitz Port was a mess of debris, both alien and human, that stretched as far as the eye could see. So prevalent was the caustic aftermath of dead Thargoid vessels that a dull green hue colored everything, the blackness of space now a sickly olive. To fight for Atroco was to fight in a graveyard.

Yet signs were encouraging; Aegis's deep-space sensors confirmed that the final wave of attackers was the only one heading toward Lasswitz; after nearly a week of nonstop carnage, the defenders at last saw victory on the horizon. Isaiah Evanson was among those still in the fight. The *Bloodfeather* was scorched and pockmarked from so many impacts, but she was flyable. The man within was exhausted and overdrawn, mechanically giving orders to his squadron to reform by wing. It was only a matter of time before the attack would resume.

“Legionnaires, form up! Synth ammunition and stand by to engage!”

Kari Kerenski’s vessel had also undergone the torturous ordeal that was fighting Thargoids, and it was a charred mess. Yet it too was still in fighting shape, the woman’s iron will seemingly driving it on to endure.

“On me, Witches! The foe is foolish enough to challenge us yet again!”

So too did Aegis and the surviving indies assemble, the human forces dividing themselves into three distinct battlegroups amid the floating debris of battle. There was naught to do but wait, wait until the final attack came.

At last the dreaded portals of alien technology formed in the distance, the final adversaries as simple as they were deadly. A trio of Hydras emerged from their native witchspace, bellowing their challenge to the surviving defenders. Dread grew within the hearts of the weary.

Tyrran squeezed shut his eyes, seeing not blackness but his wingmate in her violet Chieftain, now marred with scorched hull plating.

One more fight. One more fight and it’s all over.

Kari Kerenski’s neo-Slavic rang clear over the comms, thick with weariness and purpose alike.

“I have new intelligence from Aegis. The monsters before you represent the very last of the adversary’s strength. We are battered, *comrades*— but not beaten! Look around and see the carnage wrought upon the inhuman foe. One last strike, Witches of the Night! From the shadows we will emerge, and to the greater shadow we will send the beast! Show no mercy, for if we fail none will be shown to the thousands taking shelter in the station! As one, *comrades*— *strike!*”

The engine glows of the surviving Witches flared as one, the first of the human battlegroups rocketing toward its foes. So too did the Aegis contingent engage the Hydra across from it. Isaiah Evanson noted the charges, gritting his teeth and opening Legion comms.

“And so here we are, we few who have fought to the last. Atroco isn’t an Imperial system, but this is about more than borders on starmaps. When we fight the alien invaders, we fight for all of humanity. We fight for *her*. You represent the best of us, the Empire of humankind, and not merely the Empire of Achenar. Let the eagle pluck the eyes from the beast that threatens the nest. Legionnaires: *engage!*”

The final group of defenders now rocketed toward their adjacent Hydra, weapons deployed and vengeance in their hearts. As one they opened fire upon the challenger, raking its shields and committing to the deadly engagement. The Hydra bellowed its challenge and opened fire on the nearest Legion ship, a Courier caught in the swarm of Thargons. Normally strong shields were overwhelmed by dozens of impacts, the ship’s speed not quite fast enough to dodge the barrage of energy bolts that tortured its hull. Its pilot screamed as her ship disintegrated around her.

Aegis and its indy auxiliaries turned their own engagement into a bar-room brawl, ships dancing around their Hydra at point-blank range, none but the more professional Aegis vessels equipped with the advanced equipment to stave off caustic damage and the disruption field. As before, casualties were higher as ships were caught by the Hydra’s menagerie of weapons.

The Night Witches, molded in the style of their leader's cold, analytical approach to their craft, engaged their Hydra at distance. Their vessels were more specialized than those of their Legion partners, with some fitted mainly for blasting Thargons from a safe distance and others dedicated to inflicting the maximum damage possible on the Interceptor itself. Though fewer in number, their systematic approach to combat had proven a force multiplier; ship for ship they were the deadliest killers on the battlefield.

Yet all three groups of human pilots were spent, flying damaged ships with trembling hands. The Thargoid champions were fresh, eager to complete the task of annihilating the final few obstacles to achieve their inscrutable goals. Firepower was exchanged, human ships succumbing to weapons fire or systems failure, the insectoid flowers sustaining a non-stop beating. They were the elite of their race, and their living hulls regenerated before their astonished opponents' eyes. Numerical superiority ceased to be superiority at all.

It was the Witches that had the most initial success, Kari Kerenski leading her forces through the rote, systematic slog of picking off their opponent's biomechanical hearts one by one. Tyrran flew his tiny Trident without fear, daring the Hydra to swat at him and expose itself to withering snipes from the Witches lurking in the shadows. Precision fire pierced even its armored hide, the last of its organs rupturing within. Only a handful of Witches' ships were left in fighting condition.

The vessels of Loren's Legion were skilled pilots who were trained for war, and with a warrior's mentality they engaged. Evanson led his wing in charge after charge, great concentrated barrages torturing the Hydra in repeated cycles of damage and regeneration. Still the mighty vessel kept fighting, picking off the eagle-crested challengers one by one until only a handful of them remained. By then it was itself in dire condition; jagged petals were severed or bleeding, its glowing hearts exposed and suffering at the hands of so much Guardian weaponry. With a battle scream Isaiah Evanson led his command wing in a final, do-or-die charge. The Fer de Lances of Renraiku, Amos Loren, Adam Firethorn, and the commander himself blasted away the last of the Hydra's core. With a scream of deep anguish the Hydra listed and drifted, a massive explosion leaving naught but another blackened, drifting hulk among many.

It was the Aegis organization, so vaunted and well-funded, that failed. There were too few of the highly-trained pilots who had volunteered to defend Atroco, and too many of the amateur auxiliaries on whom they depended to bolster their ranks. The final Hydra, though rent in ugly damage to its hull, unleashed a new swarm of Thargons, overwhelming its adversaries. The human defenders broke before them, retreating for Lasswitz or engaging their frameshift drives. With a bestial war scream the alien champion advanced, bearing down upon the Coriolis.

A battered Krait streaked alongside a battered Fer de Lance. Through static and interference Kari Karenski opened comms to her counterpart. Urgency dripped from her Slavic tone.

"It is down to us. I have my command wing, but few others."

Within the bridge of the *Bloodfeather*, Isaiah Evanson cursed, checking his ammunition counts.

“Same here. She’s barely holding together. I don’t know about this one.”

A new voice, haughty and Iberian, came through.

“I know that we are all who stand between Lasswitz and its destruction. I have *seen* the desperate masses huddled inside, depending on our every action. I will not abandon them.”

A similar accent joined in, determination in his voice. A tiny Trident fighter, exotic and deadly, streaked by.

“Nor I,” said Andor.

Evanson half chuckled, half scoffed.

“Well, if the *swindler* is willing to commit, then so am I. What do you say, boys?”

“Yep,” said Amos Loren.

“I like it,” said Renraiku Kordai.

“Let’s do this,” said Adam Firethorn.

The vessels of Loren’s Legion and the Night Witches formed a single, unified formation. Engine glows flared, plunging headlong against the remaining foe. From her commander’s chair, Kerenski scanned the surviving ships. One in particular was missing.

“Evanson... where is Sobanii?”

The man’s voice was strained.

“He... didn’t make it.”

Kerenski stiffened.

“I see.”

There was a silence over the comms.

“Can we win?”

The woman’s eyes narrowed, her old focus restoring itself.

“We *must*.”

The modest assemblage of survivors barrelled on towards their fate. The Trident rocketed forth ahead of the rest, Tyrran gripping its controls from within.

“Just like the others,” he said. “I distract, you engage.”

Kerenski nodded. “*Da.*”

Evanson, too, concurred. “We’ll light him up.”

Already the menacing points of the Hydra’s several petals could be seen. It was seemingly ignoring the human vessels closing in on it. The angles of Lasswitz Port were nearly within firing range of its most deadly weaponry...

A white-blue stream of plasma fire rippled across the ship’s rear, prompting the organic hues of the vessel to glow an angry red. It spun around just in time for the offending Trident to go zipping past it, Tyrran baring his teeth within.

“We’re not *finished* with you!”

The Thargoid spun again to track the miniscule challenger, Thargon drones swarming around it strike— yet it hesitated.

Tyrran’s hand gripped his throttle anew, the Trident’s temperature rising. Its heat vents were shut, the Thargoid before it doing nothing.

The man grinned.

You can’t see me, can you? All that technology and evolution, and at the end of the day you depend on heat sig too.

Mere seconds passed, a moment in any other circumstance yet an eternity when locked in combat with such an inhuman foe. The Hydra halted in place, its hues fading to dark amber, its drones still on a leash. From within the Trident’s cockpit, Tyrran smiled a bloodthirsty smile, ignoring the klaxons of heat warnings sounding around him.

Stay blind, you alien filth. For just a few... more...

All the terrible energy of resurrected Guardian weaponry slammed into the Hydra’s rear, shattering its shields and boiling its hull. A moan of pain echoed through the void, its petals again crimson and its attention focused to the several ships approaching from its rear. One of its hearts was already smashed, cauterized in the brutal opening volley. Caustic fluid flowed from the wound, the gash regenerated and sealed only with difficulty.

The ships and pilots of the Legion engaged at punching distance, lacerating the beast in a thousand places with their shard cannons and incinerating the living hull with plasma chargers. The Witches kept their distance to pierce strategic points with Gauss weaponry, an equal number of whom filled the area with flack, eliminating scores of the swarming Thargons. It was a winning combination, one that had worked on its monstrous brothers. Another heart was pierced, a Gauss rail from the *Rosa* ending its usefulness as a biomechanical organ. More of the ship lost access to its regenerative fluids, and more of its petals were blasted away by the encircled human ships. Another deep scream of pain echoed through space.

Amos Loren was the first to squeeze his trigger without effect, his eyes widening at his readouts.

“Uh, command? I’m dry.”

Indeed, the non-stop flow of destructive energy upon which the Legion depended to prevail was slowing. From within the bridge of his *Fe de Lance*, Adam Firethorn squeezed off a final volley of charged, cyan plasma. The ancient energy slammed home, incinerating another heart, but—

“Me too.”

“And I.”

“Same here.”

Kari Kerenski discharged strike after strike of her Gauss rails, her own ammunition spent. Quick mental estimates yielded an undesirable result.

“My rails are expended. There will not be time to reload at the station.”

One by one, the ships of the Legion and their Night Witch allies ceased fire, not from desire but from impossibility. The Hydra, petals amputated and tortured from its ordeal, continued to fight and maneuver. Only a few errant plasma shots impacted against its surface. It was alive, barely sustaining itself with its remaining heart. But such was the terrible marvel of Thargoid technology that a single heart was all it needed.

The *Bloodfeather* boosted to the side, narrowly avoiding a barrage of blaster fire. From within, Isaiah cursed.

“Isn’t *anybody* packing? I’m still good, but I can’t do this alone.”

The white-hot thruster glow of a Trident fighter settled close by, the pilot within saluting. Tyrran’s crisp accent sounded over the comms.

“I’ve spent most of my time dodging and not a lot of it fighting. Things are different when you’re only a few hits away from certain death.”

Evanson shook his head, out of options.

“Leave it to *you* to be the one.”

The ships boosted away from the Hydra, their pilots dodging blaster fire and Thargons. Isaiah’s features hardened.

“The thing’s almost dead, and I’ve got enough juice for one more run. It’s now or never, Andor.”

“Then let’s make it *now!*”

Tyrran Andor bore down upon the wounded champion, his mind focused, his chest and core strangely relaxed. The man closed his eyes for a moment, seeing not the organic contours of the Hydra but a woman’s face, one with whom he’d grown intimately familiar. In his head he heard not the curses and screams of battle, but something else. Something that felt like home, though he had none.

The notes of Yolanta’s Iberian guitar sounded in his mind, and in his hands were not a joystick and throttle but her own. The man exhaled, and inches from his ear the full lips of his partner whispered to him.

Don’t think, she said. Feel.

Thargon drones swarmed *en mass* at the pair of ships, energy bolts reaching out to them yet few hitting. Tyrran saw them, but in what seemed like slow motion. His touch was light, and he evaded their fire. The same was true for the barrage of blaster bolts that shot forth from the Hydra's core. A few impacted upon the *Bloodfeather* but did no critical damage. The Trident at its side bobbed and weaved, emerging unscathed.

The Thargoid ship, its volleys spent, loomed before them. Tyrran gripped his controls, his core still relaxed, seeing nothing but the glowing, exposed heart. The Iberian notes in his mind crescendoed to a climax, his ship an extension of his will, neither seeing nor planning but *knowing* that he would prevail. The man exhaled, the moment his.

I've done it, Yolanta. I've learned to dance.

Fer de Lance and Trident opened fire simultaneously, energy bolts reaching out across space. It was indeed a dance, a dance of the warhammer and the rapier, the former smashing into an outlying petal and the latter incinerating a biomechanical heart, neatly cauterizing the last of the Hydra's vital organs. The champion shuddered, trying and failing to regenerate itself, toxic resin leaking from a thousand punctures into the vastness of space. The human vessels parted and streaked by, the Hydra unable to even turn to engage them.

From the bridge of the *Litvyak*, Kerenski's eyes shot open.

"You have *done* it, *comrades*! The beast is in its death throes!"

Thargons veered away on their own, each now *sans* direction. A dozen human eyes watched with savage glee as the Hydra listed and creaked, its long, haunting death moan music to their ears. Tyrran craned his neck for a better look, *willing* the beast to perish.

Die, you son of a—

The explosion was vast, blackened debris hurled in all directions, Legionaries and Witches erupting in raised fists and cries of victory. The caustic cloud spread and spread, a monument to their triumph, the realization that it was over finally sinking in.

Tyrran gulped air, at last allowing himself to breathe, reality reasserting itself in his vision and mind. A familiar violet Chieftain formed up on one side. A woman's voice, confident and Iberian, sounded through the comms.

"Not bad, *patán*. Not bad at all."

There were tens of thousands waiting in the docking levels, cheering throngs that greeted the returning ships of the Legion and their mysterious allies. Even the odd Imperial banner had been raised, the populace doing what it could to express their gratitude to the pilots of Loren's Legion. The final ship to land was Isaiah Evanson's *Fer de Lance*, the *Bloodfeather* setting down with grace despite its grievous damage.

Even before the entry ramp to the ship could be lowered the pilots of the Legion surrounded it, cheering as one the safe return of their commander. Behind the black and green uniforms of the Imperials were the scrappier-looking Night Witches, cooler and more collected than their Imperial allies. Beyond *them* were all sorts, dock crew and security guards and refugees, cheering the saviors of Atroco. The same scene repeated itself on every pad in the docking tube, a circular mass of humanity united in common celebration.

The door to Evanson's landing pad opened, and a familiar trio emerged. Kari Kerenski, Yolanta Púrpura, and Tyrran Andor strode out, buoyed by adrenaline and victory, embracing comrades feared lost. Already bottles were being opened, held aloft in triumph and mourning alike, jubilation and grief competing for the feelings of all.

Isaiah approached the trio, flanked by his wingmates. Evanson and Kerenski locked eyes, smiling but with strain upon their features. The respective leaders approached one another. Evanson nodded.

“The Legion owes you its gratitude. Those Guardian weapons made the difference.”

Kerenski reached inside her flight vest, fishing out a pack of cigarettes. Pulling one out with her lips she produced a torch lighter, its flame a wild thing in the low gravity. She took a long drag before answering.

“It was more than the hardware, *tovarish*. It was everything: the men, the women, the ships— and the sacrifice.”

Isaiah nodded, sober amid the raucous celebration.

“Indeed.”

The crowd parted ways, armed security— thugs, really— making way for the woman in their midst. Milagro Hardy stepped forward, her clothing deceptively plain, her weathered eyes appraising the heroes before her. Those who recognized her quieted, the crowd backing away on its own. Kerenski stiffened at the sight of the chief of the Atroco Raiders.

“Hardy.”

The woman had a cigarette of her own dangling from her fingers, its smoke coarser than the other’s. With her usual rough casualness she responded.

“Kerenski.”

Kari stepped forward, unflinching before the most powerful figure in the system.

“It’s over. Atroco is safe.”

Amused approval spread over Hardy’s features. She raised her voice, shouting for all to hear.

“You hear that? Atroco is *safe*!”

A renewed cheer sounded around them, as much from fear as from gratitude. Hardy took another long drag, locking eyes with Kerenski as she did the same.

“And to whom do we owe our eternal gratitude?”

Isaiah and Kerenski exchanged a glance. He stepped forward.

“All those who flew— and all those who perished.”

The amusement on Hardy’s face remained put, the ruler stepping closer to the pilots.

“That real sweet of you to say, honey— but I need a hero, not a whole pile of martyrs. Now who landed the killing shot on that last beasty?”

Kari and Isaiah exchanged glances, the latter looking to his flight boots.

“I can’t say. Those plasma chargers, well— they blind you pretty good for a second or two.”

Kerenski turned to her assemblage of pilots.

“Andor.”

From the crowd stepped Tyrran Andor, Yolanta Púrpura at his side. Both approached with weariness, the man looking around at the multitudes that had turned out to see the heroes in the flesh. He stopped, the gazes of hundreds upon them.

Milargro Hardy put her hands on her hips.

“Seems that there’s some debate over who brought that big bastard down. Wanna shed some light for us?”

Tyrran Andor exhaled, seeing not the woman before him or even his comrades. Even the cheering throng and cavernous docking tube of the Coriolis were barely noted. Instead he saw himself, ten years old and clutching the stolen credit chit in his hands. A lifetime of drifting and solitude passed before his eyes.

You’ve come far, Tyrran. Too far to stumble now.

The man looked around him, to the dozens of Legionnaires who had followed their leader into battle. They looked upon the pair of men with imploring eyes, waiting for the rogue’s answer. Tyrran turned to Isaiah, his patchwork flightsuit a poor showing next to the dashing lines of the Imperial’s.

Tyrran nodded to his counterpart of the Legion.

“It was Evanson. My shot went wide and struck the petal. His was the one that annihilated the heart. The kill is his.”

As one the multitude erupted in cheer, deafening and raucous, the assembled legionnaires swarming their commander and raising him up onto their shoulders. New life brightened Isaiah’s features, raising his fist in victory, bathing in the adulation of his pilots and those they saved. Milagro Hardy laughed, clapping Tyrran on the shoulder, departing the hangar with the rest of the jubilant mob. Only the three Witches remained, their eyes following the mob as the hangar door shut behind them. Relative quiet settled over the hangar, the *Bloodfeather* looming over them.

A long moment passed. Tyrran turned to the pair of women before him.

“So what n—”

The slap was hard, the man spun clean around by Yolanta’s open palm. For a long moment he was too stunned to react, his vision reds and yellows. Finally he turned back to his partner, her fists clenched and her features trembling. With quivering lips she spoke.

“To give that preening Imperial credit for what *you* did. You may lie but my eyes do *not*. You are a *fool*, Tyrran Andor!”

The man could bring himself to say nothing, only rubbing the spot where Yolanta had struck. From behind her, Kari Kerenski looked upon the man with new eyes.

“No,” she said, her Slavic thick. “He is *not*.”

Yolanta spun, her own Iberian intensifying. “But now it is *Evanson* that is the hero. Andor—”

Kerenski interrupted, her tone harsh and her eyes boring into those of her subordinate’s.

“Andor knew that Evanson needs to be a hero in the eyes of the Legion far more than *he* does. There are dire times ahead, and we will *need* such heroes to lead us into the future. Tyrran has helped him more than he knows, and the mission along with it.”

Yolanta scowled, pointing to where the Imperial had been carried away by his cheering pilots.

“Even if it is all a lie?”

Kari nodded, taking a deep drag of her cigarette.

“Lies,” she said, “are merely one tool among many. Andor has at last learned to wield them with skill.”

The Fer de Lance was blackened, charred and corroded beyond all recognition, drifting amid countless wrecks of human and alien debris. Yet its transponder was intact, serving to identify the unrecognizable corpse within. It was enough to officially confirm the death of Commander Phisto Sobanii, second-in-command of Loren's Legion, perished in the defence of Lasswitz Port. An empty coffin was set aside, jettisoned into space with full Legion honors. There was no family or next of kin to receive Imperial survivor benefits, and the man's file was closed, cold as the void of space itself.

Valeria Larsen was as good as her word. Upon confirmation of Sobanii's demise Legion battlegroups appeared all over Atroco, single-handedly mopping up all traces of Thargoid presence. The invasion was reduced to a rout, the victorious armada seen over every station and settlement. Isaiah Evanson refused to rest on his laurels, personally leading many of the sorties to rid Atroco of the Thargoid menace. Within days the system was purged entirely, Evanson and the Legion riding a wave of goodwill. Milagro Hardy was only too happy to shoo them from her space.

The Night Witches withdrew to the shadows, the remnants of such repairing their ships and resting their wounded. It was a time of relief and mourning, for with the immediate danger passed the time was finally had to reflect on those lost. Yet the Witches were not overlooked in the recovery process, with Evanson discretely transferring hundreds of millions of credits in secure physical chits, delivered via courier to Lasswitz Port. Damaged ships that couldn't be repaired were stripped of all salvageable modules, replaced by new hulls from local markets. The Night Witches emerged from their ordeal far fewer in number than the force that had aided Milagro Hardy and her Raiders seize Atroco, but those who were left formed an elite corps that feared no adversary.

An uneasy peace settled over all of Atroco. Refugees in their millions remained without homes, the massive humanitarian crisis only one of several faced by those disaffected by the conflict. The Raiders continued to solicit aid, their usual practice of hoarding the choice deliveries enriching themselves at the cost of those who suffered beneath their yoke. Yet not all news was of a dire nature.

Tyrran Andor was summoned to the hangar level of Lasswitz, Yolanta Púrpura accompanying him down the still-crowded corridors. Her hair was its natural ebony, pulled back into a ponytail, its simplicity a private sign of mourning. The door to the appropriate bay slid open, and—

The man halted, his eyes narrowing. Before him was an assemblage of familiar faces, some welcome and others less so. Kari Kerenski stood alongside Rax Ortega, a new-model Krait Phantom above their heads. On her other side was Isaiah Evanson. Tyrran advanced, his gaze never leaving that of his old partner's. He and Yolanta halted, the men and women regarding each other in silence.

Rax nodded to Kerenski. "So he's done good, has he?"

The woman glanced to Tyrran, her eyes betraying nothing. "He has been... an asset."

Tyrran scoffed, but not too loudly.

“You missed the party, Rax.”

The older man shrugged. “Not when I was the one delivering the goods, I didn’t. Took a bit of persuading by your man Oberon, mind.”

Kerenski shook her head. “That’s Ouberos. And you’ll be lucky if I even buy a case of Lavian Brandy from you after how long we had to wait.”

Again, Rax shrugged. “You know how these things work. It isn’t often I’m outfitting an entire squadron. It’s even *less* often that I’m outfitting them with black market alien weapons that take an act of Randomius to acquire anyway.”

Yolanta narrowed her eyes. “*Two* squadrons, *compañero*.”

The tech dealer chuckled. “One and some change at best, *senorita*. Took some real ‘eavy losses, you lot have. Most would have packed it in long ago.”

Kerenski straightened herself, hands on slim hips.

“Most are not the Night Witches.”

Ortega grunted, gesturing to Tyrran. “And that’s what you are, eh? A *witch*?”

The mocking wasn’t lost in the man’s tone. Kerenski stepped forward, her tone sharp.

“*Da*. He *is*. And you’re stalling.”

Andor’s eyes narrowed, glancing to the woman.

“Stalling? How?”

Rax turned to the younger man.

“What exactly did you fly during this alien shitfight, anyway?”

Andor straightened himself. “An XG-7 Trident.”

Rax nodded in mock-impressedness.

“Ah. Very nice. Top of the line, state-of-the-art. And if you catch any fire at all there’s so little of you left your mum’s spared the cost of a funeral.”

Yolanta stepped forward, her eyes flashing. “Tyrran flew like an artist.”

Rax shrugged, pointing upward to the Phantom. “Well, now he can fly like a *commander*. She’s yours. Kerenski’s orders, though only Randomius knows why she’s wasting it on *you*.”

The older man tossed a master access card with the Faulcon-Delacy logo on it, caught by the younger. Tyrran blinked, glancing at it before lifting his gaze upward. The Phantom was a thing of sleek beauty, black and angular. He turned to his superior.

“Is this true?”

Kari Kerenski folded her arms across her chest, her features sharp.

“*Da*. The entire ship is fitted with top-of-the line modules, all engineered for low or no sig. It is fast, agile, and its shields recharge swiftly while providing ample protection. It can be a thief in the night or a blade in the darkness.”

Tyrran gazed with admiration at the vessel. Isaiah sneered.

“The ship of a coward. Fitting.”

Andor shot the Imperial a look before turning back to Kerenski.

“And... if I choose to leave? Am I still...”

The woman looked sideways at her subordinate.

“Every Night Witch is their own agent. We are *comrades*, not conscripts. The ship is yours regardless of your path.”

Andor swallowed, spreading his arms, looking to both Kerenski and Ortega.

“Thank you.”

Rax chuckled, taking one last look at the ship he’d delivered.

“Come pay me a visit sometime— might ‘ave some proper work lined up for you.”

The man turned to leave, halted by Tyrran's voice.

"One question."

Rax looked over his shoulder.

"Yeah?"

Andor stalked around his old employer, his eyes wary.

"Whatever happened to Cecil?"

Rax regarded him for a moment before answering.

"Dead before he could even get off-world. Found with a belly full of liquor, a still-wetted cock- and a blasted cavity where his heart used to be. Tried to stiff some sweet young working thing of her credits. Took it personal, she did. That's the rumor, anyway."

Tyrran spat. "He always *was* a bastard."

Rax nodded, a twinkle in his eye.

"Aye— and didn't have any further use for those millions he pocketed from the sale of your ship, did he? They went a long way toward greasing the right engineering palms for this new toy. That's all I'm willing to say."

Tyrran shook his head, glancing to his new ship. Sighing, he extended a hand to his old employer.

"Good luck, Rax."

The gesture was reciprocated, Rax's metal prosthetic cold in Tyrran's natural hand. "And you, pup. Gods know you'll need it with this lot."

The man strode away, leaving Andor standing beneath the Phantom's canopy. He was joined by Yolanta, her hand brushing his.

"The ship *is* yours," she said. "Though due to the nature of the... *modifications*... its name is hard-coded, I am afraid. Hard-coded, and deliberately selected."

Tyrran turned, his eyebrows raising. "Oh?"

A mischievous look settled over Yolanta's unsmiling face, her eyes smiling but her lips not.

"*Si*. Tyrran Andor, meet your new ship: the *Blackthorne*."

Isaiah Evanson sat at the foot of the *Bloodfeather's* entry ramp, a bottle of Lavian Brandy in his hand, and a blissfully vacant look in his eye. It was the final day he would be in Atroco, and after extensive patrolling Aegis had officially declared that the system was saved from the Thargoid menace. The *Vanguard* had already departed, its command presence needed elsewhere. The same theater would play out in other systems, Thargoids and humans ending each other's lives, the wreckage of metal and organic hulls drifting in the blackness of deep space.

The hangar door opened, the heavy steps of magboots unmistakable in his ears. A figure sat down beside him, a low growl escaping its lips as it settled. Without glancing to his side Isaiah passed the bottle. It was accepted and quaffed from, a satisfied *ahh* heard.

Phisto Sobanii exhaled, looking content. Isaiah at last glanced to his side, chuckling.

"How's death?"

Sobanii helped himself to another pull.

"Boring. It didn't sit right with me, boss. Sitting out the battle like that. Didn't sit right at *all*."

Evanson shrugged. "We got our reinforcements and Larsen is none the wiser. Dying was the best thing you ever did for the cause."

The other man scoffed, handing the bottle back to his friend.

"They'll find out. They always do."

Evanson looked at his partner. He was back in his old clothing, simple blacks and greys instead of the Legion's uniform. Isaiah became acutely aware of the eagle on his own shoulder.

"Doesn't matter. I don't think I'm long for the uniform myself."

Phisto rolled his eyes. "You're the hero of Atroco, slayer of Hydras. They're going to *bury* you in that damn thing."

Again, Isaiah shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. I've been summoned to Chione. Cuthrick wants a word."

"About?"

"Wouldn't say. He sounded smug, though. Even more than usual."

Sobanii sighed. "Better you than me. You always *were* the respectable one."

For a long time, neither man said anything, contenting themselves with the presence of a good friend and a good bottle. Ships came and went above their heads, their noise muffled within the sealed hangar but reminding the men that rest would be fleeting. At last Isaiah spoke.

"Your idea— about 'dying', I mean. Where did you get it?"

Phisto took a pull of the Lavian Brandy, his eyes growing distant with memory.

"Just a trick I picked up in Pegasi. Goes great with a thrown shoe."

Evanson nodded, accepting the bottle as it was passed back to him. A bitter chuckle escaped his lips.

"What a shit job *that* was. At least now we're making it on our own."

Sobanii grunted his agreement. "So what's next?"

Isaiah shrugged. "For me? Lots of paperwork. Reports. Debriefings. Cuthrick. Wondering where the *hell* she would have gone from here. You?"

Sobanii rose, gesturing to the *Bloodfeather*.

“Hitting the markets to see about a few new toys. And then...” His features hardened. “Then I’m paying a little visit. Sending a little message.”

Isaiah’s eyes narrowed in concern.

“To?”

Sobanii straightened his jacket.

“You heard Durant. Patty thinks he can play us, make us dance like puppets just because we’re Legion.”

Isaiah now rose, caution in his tone.

“And?”

Phisto of the Sobanii smirked, his eyes glinting with his old roguish cockiness.

“And it’s time to cut one of the strings.”

“Do you like it?”

The inside of the *Blackthorne* was an operator’s dream. The Phantom sported a red-on-black motif, stylish but not overly so. Yolanta had accompanied Tyrran inside, the latter wide-eyed at his new possession. Its controls glowed blood red, its modules a mixture of human and Guardian technology. A cursory scan of its logs confirmed that it ran ice-cold. It was the perfect ship for a Night Witch.

Tyrran could scarcely summon words. Hand in hand with his partner he stepped into the room that would be his new quarters. The commander’s suite had a certain tactical charm to it, spartan but not bare. Lockers lined one bulkhead wall, empty and ready for him to move in. A metal weapons cage was next to it. A gel bunk— double-sized, he noted, occupied a recessed area. A combination shower and head unit opened with the touch of a button. The man turned to his partner, words coming only with difficulty.

“I don’t know what to say.”

Yolanta took her place at his side, reaching out to turn his face toward her. Iberian eyes flashed upward at the man.

“Say that you will stay.”

Tyrran exhaled, his breath ragged.

“Yola, I—”

The woman now pulled the man to his, her forehead touching his.

“I have *seen* what you have become. Loyal. Dedicated. Even selfless. You are not the man who fell from that cryopod all those weeks ago.”

Andor opened and closed his mouth, trying and failing to find the words.

“So much is happening. So much more than I ever—”

Yolanta cut him off. “*Si*. The *Gnosis*. The mysterious Wreken fleet. The black ships. The caches of alien technology. The Guardians and Thargoids and thrice-damned Club. We have many questions, but few answers.”

Tyrran pulled the woman to him, shaking his head. It was a moment before he could speak.

“No,” he said. “I mean with *you*. I’ve never had a home before. Not a real one. And I’ve never felt that my life could have a purpose beyond my next score. But when you’re with me, like *this*...”

Púrpura’s jaw trembled, yet her eyes retained their Iberian sharpness.

“Then you have a decision before you, *patán*. One that only a free man can make.”

Her fingers drifted from his to his jaw to his throat, tracing along the Black Thorn that had adorned it for so long. Yolanta’s gaze intensified, the deadly collar at last unlocked. Her eyes bore into Tyrran’s.

“It is time. You can take it off.”

Her hands pulled away, taking his in them. She brought them to the top of her blouse, resting them over her chest. Again, she pulled the man closer. He exhaled, his eyes boring into hers.

“Yola, I—”

Her voice grew sharp, urgency rising in her words.

“You can take it off.”

Tyrran said nothing further, unsnapping the woman’s blouse button by button. He spread open the fabric, the full breasts beneath rising to touch his fingertips with every breath that the woman took. Yolanta shrugged the garment off, moving his hands lower to her trousers.

“You can take it off.”

The belt was unbuckled, the tighter cargo pants unfastened next, the man’s thumbs hooking into its sides. Yolanta’s lips pressed against his, her tongue and his caressing along the other as she worked her hips from one side to the next, assisting Tyrran in the task of slipping her trousers downward. He broke the kiss, his eyes boring into hers, still saying nothing.

Now Yolanta’s hands traced along *his* trousers, fingertips squeezing a promising bulge that had grown beneath them. She tilted her head back, eyes closed as he kissed down her neck. Softer words than he’d ever heard escaped her lips, her hands still moving along his manhood.

“You can take it off.”

Tyrran’s mouth moved lower, over her collarbones and chest, over the swell of her breasts, an earthy tip hardening between his lips. Yolanta pursed her lips together, one hand moving from the man’s bulge to push him downward. She gripped his shirt as he moved lower, stripping it away from his torso. His fingers moved to unfasten her trousers, pulling them down from one hip to the other. Her breathing intensified as he kissed her ribs and the softness of her belly, tracing along her feminine mound as it was revealed by her falling trousers.

Out of instinct Yolanta parted one thigh to the side, crying out as Tyrran's tongue found her feminine center. The woman sucked air from between clenched teeth, Iberian moans in her throat as her lover worked. The dagger around her thigh was unstrapped, the blade falling to the deck. Her trousers were worked all the way downward, one foot and then the other stepping free of them. On her thigh was a tattoo, of an ornate purple rose. Its petals began just beneath her hips, large enough for exquisite detail but small enough to be concealed by shorts. For a moment Tyrran marveled at it, kissing the ink and letting his lips rest upon it for a moment.

The man looked upward, his eyes hungry.

"Yola," he whispered. "Is there anything about you that *isn't* a work of art?"

Yolanta's breathing was now coming in deeper breaths.

"I await your answer, *patán*."

The man rose, taking his lover in his arms.

"I've decided to take it off."

Slowly, the woman nodded, still breathing a little hard.

"And everything *else*?"

Tyrran Andor didn't answer straight away, only pulling the collar from his throat and holding the Black Thorn before her. His fingers parted. It dropped to the deck between their feet.

"I'm committing. To you. To the mission. To *everything*."

Yolanta stepped forward, pushing the Black Thorn aside with one foot. Her eyes flashed as she traced along her man's jawline.

"For once, I am *not* thinking about the mission."

Man and woman's lips met, hungry and intense, her fingers working rapidly to rid the man of his trousers. Like his, Yolanta's lips moved lower and lower, arriving at his member and coaxing it to full readiness with her mouth and hands. Tyrran's eyes squeezed shut, his hands gripping the woman's head at his groin.

Yolanta rose, laying back upon the bunk, pulling Tyrran down over her. Olive thighs raised, a satisfying hardness felt between them. The woman nibbled and sucked on her man's ear, her chest rising against his with her breathing. Words came as a whisper.

“You were right, you know.”

His lips met hers, moving across her cheek and over her ear.

“Oh?”

Yolanta's lips parted, her eyes closing as her sex enveloped his. A sensual moan escaped her throat, crooked fingers raking trails down the man's back. Her Iberian accent thickened.

“Better to be inside something *human*... “

The woman cried out as their bodies joined, a delicious fullness within her. Her hips lifted and her legs wrapped around her man, encouraging him to move the way that he— *they*—needed. Rhythmic moans intensified with each thrust, the woman pulling her lover close. Her voice was not a whisper but one of urgency, teeth bared and moving in tandem with her lover.

Passion swelled within Yolanta. It was warm, and had its way as though it were a guitar in her hands. The results, however...

“*Tyrran!*”

The woman convulsed, her intimate areas gripping his, her entire body tensing. A moan that sounded more like pain than pleasure echoed through the *Blackthorne*, followed by deep breathing and Iberian murmuring. Tyrran slowed his pace, kissing his lover deeply, relishing in her climax as much as she had.

“That was—”

Yolanta’s eyes shot open, new passion in her features.

“We are *not* finished, *patán!*”

In one movement the woman pulled her lover around, straddling him upon his back, their bodies never unjoining. Still in the midst of her pleasure the woman moved, hips thrusting, her moans again crescendoing. Yolanta arched forward, her hands on Tyrran’s chest, teeth bared and eyes squeezed shut.

Tyrran matched movement for movement, breathing deeply, thrusting upward, his hands gripping her hips and backside. There was no pacing to their lovemaking, nothing saved for an uncertain future. Man and woman plunged headlong into their fates, bound as one and sealing an unspoken promise.

A familiar pressure built within the woman’s intimate areas, wilder than before and threatening to overwhelm. Yolanta threw her head back and braced herself, yet the expected blossoming failed to occur. Instead the warmth inside built and built, the carnal edge rising higher and higher. Breathing became shallow. Her hands scrambled to find his, guiding them to squeeze the erect tips of her breasts. Still the heat inside built. Her voice was an urgent whisper.

“*Madre de Randomius...*”

The woman’s thighs quivered and tensed, clamping down upon her lover, locking him all the way in. The wild, feral feeling within herself escalated. Her chest throbbed, the heart within alive and pounding. An urgent, final heat flared in her intimate core.

“Tyrran, I—”

The woman cried out, long and free, doubling over to press her lips to her man's, trying and failing to suppress a scream within his mouth. Her torso heaved, her face burying itself into his neck, her moans now more like weeping. Indeed, tears ran from her eyes as the woman lost herself, unable to form even the words of her native tongue. Tyrran held her, his skin and hers slick with perspiration.

Yolanta's body released, the woman all but collapsing onto her lover. Yet the act felt unfinished. Tyrran, driven to the brink by her pleasure, was still thrusting with purpose. Her hands gripped his face, kissing him and nodding, her whispers urgent.

"I want it. I want it *now*."

Andor's climax was intense, and Yolanta greedy to accommodate his pleasure within herself. Her lips again met his, void-black hair falling as a curtain around their faces. Like Yolanta he cried out, gifting himself deep within her, his hands raking across her scalp. For a perfect moment there was nothing in Andor's universe except him and his lover, sealed as one.

Tyrran gulped air, forgetting as he had for a moment to breathe. Then he collapsed, his lover already relaxing into him, fingertips caressing up and down her back. It was a long time before his breathing returned to normal. Neither Tyrran nor Yolanta could bring themselves to unjoin their bodies—and so they didn't. As one the lovers allowed the first wisps of slumber to overtake them. Only the woman found words, whispered into his ear.

"You have won, Andor. I am yours."

Yolanta glanced over her shoulder, to an innocuous, tiny light on the cabin's ceiling. Feminine cunning sharpened her eyes.

"And he is *mine*."

Cigarette smoke wafted in the darkness, with only the dull glow of the dataslate to illuminate Kari Kerenski's features. Before her was the flickering holoimage of two people in a state of spent passion, watched with seeming *dispassion* on the woman's part. The final whispers of her subordinate, so tinged with independence, cut deeper than all the heated lovemaking that had preceded it.

Yet there was nothing to be said, and nothing to be done. Kari Kerenski's analytical mind processed the development in its usual manner, the woman's features betraying nothing. Her faithful lieutenant and rogueish specialist were now lovers, and that was a fact. What was more, her lieutenant did not care to hide that they were such, at least not from Kerenski. The woman took another long drag upon her cigarette.

And so all that Iberian passion has found a new outlet. What does this mean for the Night Witches?

Kerenski closed her eyes, the ash on the tip of her cigarette growing.

It means nothing. Púrpura is a professional, not some cow-eyed schoolgirl. Andor knows the value of discretion. Or at least he does now.

Yet even Kari Kerenski wasn't made of stone, and her mind embarked on a journey inward, one long overdue. Eyes were opened to see fleeting images of the impossible fading into the nether. Iberian words that had only ever been whispered in fantasy were silenced. Thin fingers curled into a thin fist, clenched and trembling.

It was nothing. It was always nothing. Never forget that.

Absent command, the holo-slate dimmed and faded, plunging the woman into the total darkness of her powered-down ship. Kari Kerenski closed her eyes, seeing no difference. Her lips pressed together, the images of the younger woman's lovemaking burning a hole into her vision. Her fist ceased trembling, steadied by sheer force of will. Deep within herself the woman found the lone ember of passion that she had nurtured, secluded and acknowledged only in her most private moments.

With the coldness of the woman she needed to be, Kari reached forth with bony fingers and suffocated the ember within its crib, feeling it die a slow death within herself. Fantasies and repressed hopes cried out, whimpering as they breathed their last. The cruel scalpel of fact was at last allowed to cut, leaving no trace of tumorous foolishness to corrupt the healthy flesh. The woman opened her eyes, only a little moistened from the ordeal.

You are in love, comrade. And I am free.

Kari Kerenski, commander of the Night Witches, freedom fighter and adherent of Salome's vision, had at last triumphed over herself.

Tessia St. Antonius was having a good day.

Night, actually, the woman thought. Or whatever passes for it in this mining camp of a system.

The woman was alone, in a suite in the Imperial palace of Chione. Before her was a massive picture window, the lush beauty of the islands surrounding her. She didn't occupy the uppermost floor like the underconsul did— but then again, felt no need to. Tessia was still young, well-connected and her future virtually guaranteed by advantageous connections within the sprawling apparatus of Denton Patreus's network.

She was beautiful too, having paid top credit to correct any of the minor blemishes that might have held her back. The gaze of Imperial politics was a ruthless one, and her figure—visible beneath a translucent silk nightgown—was as perfect as such required.

Delicate fingers snapped, and almost immediately a glass of wine was placed between them, the slave keeping his eyes properly lowered. Tessia didn't deign to look at him, though his comeliness hadn't gone unnoticed by her. It was rare for slave contracts to expressly grant conjugal rights, though not unheard of—and the woman *was* in the mood to celebrate...

Thargoids defeated, and by Patreus's own hand. His optics are skyrocketing in real-time. And then there was the matter of settling a few old debts...

Indeed, much of Denton Patreus's power rested on exploitation of entire star systems, "rescued" in times of need and subsequently subject to ruinous repayment terms. The vast influx of wealth paid for not only his own personal starfleet, but for his directly-controlled worlds to be exempt from regular Imperial taxation. His popularity in such systems was rock-solid.

Yet the debts on the young woman's mind were of a more personal nature. Tessia took another sip of wine, a sly smile spreading across her face.

Phisto of the Sobanii clan, the fool who dared defy a titan. Coma was nothing. Your victory, nothing. In the end you were a tool of your nemesis's will, broken in his service. I wonder—did you see the greater truth before your final moments? Did you see the futility of your scheming, as your ship was consumed around you?

The smile on the woman's face remained, though her eyes sobered.

I think not. Your type is always happy to die for some lost cause...

A low, haughty chuckle escaped the woman's perfect lips, nasally and Imperial.

And we are happy to hasten said death.

"Enjoying the view?"

Tessia spun, her eyes wide. The wineglass in her fingers trembled, the liquid within nearly spilling. In a trembling voice she called out.

"Slave!"

Phisto of the Sobanii clan made an exaggerated show of looking around, a cocky grin lifting his lips.

"Looks like he's on a break. Gotta love those Slaver's Bureau regulations, huh?"

Tessia St. Antonius stammered and backed up, pressing against the viewing glass, dropping her wine and fumbling for her communicator. It was unresponsive.

Phisto reached from within his jacket pocket and fished out a device, crude and battered. He set it down on a nightstand beside the oversized bed of the suite.

"Don't even try. It's *amazing* what we lowlives can tinker up when we decide that the rules don't apply to us."

Tessia straightened herself, her posture one of dignity.

"At least you accept that you're a lowlife."

The man's face hardened, everything about the woman summoning his contempt.

"Just tell me why."

St. Antonius swallowed, composing herself with skill.

"It was Larsen. She was afraid that Evanson would send the Legion on some foolish errand like he did with the *Gnosis*. It is needed *here*, for Prism's protection and the Fleet Admiral's glory. The Thargoids, they—"

Sobanii advanced, his teeth bared.

"They *what?*"

Defiance hardened the woman's face, raising her chin at the intruder.

“They were *right on time*.”

The man scowled, his fists balling.

“Then you know. You’re in on it. You’re one of *them*. All of you.”

Tessia stood tall, shaking her head in the face of danger.

“No. Not in the way you’re thinking. In the end I’m just another pawn.”

Arrogance lifted her lips into a smile. She took a step toward the man, alluring and as perfect as all the cosmetic technology of the Empire could make a young woman.

“The difference is that I’m on the *winning* side. Don’t you want that, too?”

Sobanii stiffened, his jaw set.

“All I want is the truth. Can you help with that, or not?”

Tessia St. Antonius advanced, confidence lightening her step, halting an intimate distance from her one-off lover. Perfume, subtle and perfect, caressed his senses.

“You’ll never find it. Not while rabble-rousing with a gang of has-beens, anyway. But together, you and me?”

She closed in, her lips almost touching his.

“I think that we could go *far*.”

Phisto’s features softened, his hands dropping. His forehead pressed against hers, one finger tracing along her jawline. His voice lowered to an intimate tone. It was only when he spoke did Tessia feel the tip of his blaster press against her belly, smooth and just visible beneath the layer of silk.

“So that’s a no, then?”

The first blast staggered the woman backward, slamming into the reinforced glass and doubling over. She coughed blood onto a nightgown that was worth an entire week’s wages to the workers toiling surfaceside.

The second blast dropped her to her knees, the smell of burning flesh and ozone filling the air. Tessia tried and failed to scream, her charred lungs unable to perform their task of pushing air upward. With raw, mindless fear the woman looked to her intruder.

The third blast slammed into her forehead, instantly painting the crystal glass with charred blood and brain matter. Her body convulsed, staying upright for a moment before slumping to one side.

Tessia St. Antonius, chief assistant to the underconsul, was dead.

There were protocols in place, of course. Anyone connected to such a web of power was closely monitored in some way, and the underconsul's assistant was no exception. Upon the cessation of life-signs certain implants were triggered, with private security on Eotiensens being the first to know. Priority transmissions were automatically sent without the need for human approval, and within minutes the woman's last-known location was made known. Happily she was within the confines of a senator's estate, where any foul play would be brought under control almost immediately.

Unfortunately for local security, said signal wasn't received until far later, for the simple reason that it wasn't transmitted until long after the woman's death. The body of Tessia St. Antonius was discovered the next morning, after repeated knocks on her suite's door. Security had finally been given the go-ahead to override the lock. What they found was a young woman's corpse missing the top half of its head, the breathtaking view behind it marred with dark red crust, and its chest a charred and blackened mess. A crude device that no one had ever seen had been tossed beside her.

A security officer picked it up and found the power switch. Within minutes they received priority notification that the underconsul's assistant was registering null life signs. The officers visibly deflated, for the murder of such a connected figure was sure to attract the attention of the Imperial Internal Security Service—and possibly even the Inquisition.

Data matrices were immediately combed through, with the security holos of her suite's corridor mysteriously deleted from the system. So too were ship traffic logs put under a microscope, yielding nothing. The only outlying scrap of data was that a *Fer de Lance* was registered as having left the palace's landing pad that, curiously enough, hadn't been recorded as landing on it. Even the ship's guild registration proved baffling, its very name a mockery of their efforts:

No Data Available.

The garden was sweet, too sweet for the man's mood. He wore the crisp uniform of Loren's Legion, dark seafoam green complimenting the stark black. It was difficult for him to reconcile the carefully manicured beauty with the carnage of the last week, yet here he was—unharméd when so many others had lost their lives.

Isaiah Evanson shielded his eyes, the crisp morning light harsh after gazing upon naught but stars for so long. In the distance was a familiar figure, dressed in the formally informal robes of an Imperial Ambassador. He said nothing as Isaiah approached, gazing upon him with wary eyes.

Cuthrick Delaney had a glass of wine in his hand, unusually so for the early hour. He nodded to the uniformed man before him, taking a sip and letting his free hand brush the leaves of an exotic, carnivorous plant. Soft green jaws that were lethal to insects yet harmless to humans snapped shut around his longest finger.

“Remarkable, isn’t it? This specimen. It could never hope to digest something like me in ten lifetimes, yet it tries. Me, who could end its life without a second thought and even less effort.”

Isaiah looked to the plant, and then to the mentor.

“When were you planning on telling me?”

An innocent look softened Delaney’s features.

“About?”

Evanson shook his head. “Don’t play games. I want to know everything— about *everyone*. You. Larsen. Even Faveol, if he’s in on it. I want to know how long you’ve all been in Patreus’s pocket.”

The Ambassador drew himself up. Without even looking he pressed his thumb and forefinger around the stem of the plant, cutting off the flow of nutrients. He gestured to it.

“And now it is *I* who have it in *my* grip. The plant— so deadly to those insects it encounters— will choke and die because it lacks any concept of what it’s dealing with. Yet it persists, because that’s all it knows how to do.”

Evanson stepped forward, his eyes hard.

“Answers. *Now*.”

Delaney shrugged.

“He was a proud man, Algreb Loren. Too proud to scale back plans for this monstrosity of a palace. Too proud to field a more modest battlefleet. Too proud to admit that he’d pushed his slaves too hard.”

Evanson grit his teeth.

“And so he made a deal with the devil.”

Delaney’s voice dropped. His thumb and forefinger closed around the plant’s stem, gently squeezing it.

“‘Better the devil you know’, I believe the saying goes. Yet he was always a shrewd negotiator. Tantalum was worth its weight in, well, itself— and Patreus coveted any share of the boom he could get his hands on. Before long Algreb Loren was *swimming* in credits.”

Evanson spat. “Algreb Loren,” he said, “annihilated an entire colony to carve out his new little fiefdom.”

The Ambassador nodded. “Making *his* scruples an exact match for those of his new benefactor.”

“But *why*?”

Cuthrick looked downward. The plant still held firm upon his digit.

“‘The more one eats, the hungrier one gets’. Surely you don’t need the ambitions of the patrician class explained?”

Isaiah shook his head, turning away.

“No. But there’s got to be more to it than that.”

Delaney leaned in.

“To pursue power is the most fundamental truth that men like Loren and Patreus know. But even *they* are nothing compared to those who *truly* pull the strings.”

The commander glanced over his shoulder.

“The Club.”

Cuthrick sighed.

“Such a mundane term for the most ruthless powerbrokers in history.”

Isaiah turned back to his mentor, his eyes sharp. “They have to be stopped.”

“*Why*?”

Evanson blinked. “Because of what they’ve done. What they’ll do. Because humanity can do better than being controlled by—”

Delaney smiled, his eyes gentle.

“*Other* humans? Not all races have had such luxury. We ourselves almost didn’t.”

The commander raised a warning finger. “That doesn’t excuse what they’re doing. If what Púrpura and Andor say is true, there are spies everywhere—”

“No doubt.”

“And fleets. Secret battlefleets in the Col 70 sector...”

“Interesting.”

Isaiah grit his teeth.

“*And* that most people have no idea that they’re even doing The Club’s bidding.”

Slowly, Delaney nodded.

“Most. Yet there are some who *do*.”

Isaiah advanced, halting to within an inch of the old man’s face. At the edge of the garden, one of the palace slaves spoke into a cunningly concealed device within her robe. Cuthrick drew himself up, the dignified match for the younger man’s passion. Isaiah nearly spat.

“Don’t say it, Cuthrick. Not you. Anyone but *you*.”

The older man’s eyes bored into those of the younger.

“No,” he said. “Not me. But others. Those whom you least expect. That’s how they work. That’s how they get to those who would otherwise be a threat.”

The younger man took a step back, shaking his head.

“No. I won’t live like that.”

Delaney frowned. “Then you’ll live alone, or a failure—or not at all.”

For a long time, Isaiah said nothing. Finally he looked up.

“Faveol was right, wasn’t he? Whatever I die as... it won’t be a Legionnaire.”

Concern deepened Delaney’s gaze. “Vespar Faveol wants the best for you. For the mission. And it isn’t to be found here.”

Evanson held out his hands, gesturing to the space around him.

“Then *where*?”

Cuthrick Delaney reached inside the folds of his robes, a data core between his fingers.

“*She* had no particular attachment to this place, you know. Despite everything she said. Despite everything that happened.”

The older man extended his hand, passing the core into those of the younger. Isaiah held it up.

“What’s this?”

A remorseful look settled over Cuthrick’s features.

“What could have been, and never was. A roadmap, literally and figuratively.”

Isaiah blinked, holding the datacore before his eyes.

“Wait... this was her *plan*? For if she’d have lived?”

Slowly, Delaney nodded. “And now it is yours, should you choose to take up the sword. Even now there those sympathetic to your cause, waiting at the edges of the frontier.”

For a long time the two men simply stood there, the younger struck dumb. In time, he pocketed the device.

“I don’t know what good I’d do so far away.”

Cuthrick Delaney smiled, grim and sad.

“Neither did she—for once. But she saw the necessity of journeying beyond the reach of even *their* tentacles.”

Isaiah opened and closed his mouth. “I... I must think on this.”

Delaney nodded. “Not for too long, I hope. She was a figure of action. So too are her contacts. I can make the introductions, but *you* must sell them on whatever you come up with.”

“It should be the Children heading out there, not me. And what of Verdi? Tsu? Raan? Those who *knew* her?”

Delaney shook his head. “The Children of Raxxla are scattered, leaderless. Those who flew with her on that fateful day are in hiding. It *has* to be you.”

Isaiah turned, taking a handful of steps away. He gazed upon the flawless Chionic sky, the enormity of the charge laid before him sinking in. One hand extended itself, bracing upon a pillar. Evanson exhaled.

“I’d need time to prepare.”

Delaney nodded, understanding.

“Of course. But you aren’t alone, and neither shall you want for resources.”

Evanson shook his head, a ragged gesture.

“What exactly does this entail?”

Cuthrick Delaney put one hand on Isaiah’s shoulder.

“You’d be working with people who understand the *true* meaning of freedom— in all its glory, and all its terror.”

Isaiah looked down, and then back up. His fingers traced along his sash of office. A weak chuckle escaped his lips.

“Something tells me I wouldn’t exactly need a uniform.”

A Cutter, massive and black, approached from the distance. It was flanked by a pair of Imperial Eagles, painted the same dark hue. Both men watched the trio of vessels land upon the distant island starport, their presence ominous. Cuthrick grunted.

“And so the Chapterhouse of Inquisition arrives to investigate this morning’s foul murder.”

Evanson’s features hardened, his own tone dropping to a conspiratorial level.

“I don’t want any harm to come to Sobanii. It was a message that needed sent.”

Cuthrick nodded.

“That it is Her Majesty’s people conducting the investigation and not Patreus’s is message enough. Your friend is safe.”

Evanson exhaled his relief.

“Thank you.”

Cuthrick turned back to his protege, appraising him with aged eyes.

“You have a squadron to tend to.”

Isaiah shook his head, his decision made. “Not for long, it seems.”

Again, Cuthrick Delaney nodded, his tone grave and understanding.

“Then you’re going.”

It was not a question, but a statement of fact. A long moment passed. An aged hand clasped a younger one, a sense of finality descending over them both.

“I shall make the arrangements. Take care, commander.”

“And you, ambassador.”

With that Isaiah spun on his heels, walking smartly away. Cuthrick watched him leave, the ornate garden gates closing behind him. With an almost absent-minded air he looked down, down to where the carnivorous plant was still attached to his finger, biting down with all the power it could muster.

With no effort at all the man squeezed around its stem, neatly severing the jaws from the rest of the plant. He held up the now-dying specimen, gazing with dispassionate eyes at it. With his other fingertips he pried the jaws open, surprised at how much effort it took. A trickle of blood ran down the finger of the most powerful man in a dozen worlds.

Cuthrick Delaney watched as the red liquid made its way down his finger, his hand, his forearm. The fine fabrics of his ambassadorial robes absorbed the thin line, soiled from having done so. Amusement danced in his eyes as he lifted his gaze to where his client had stood only moments before.

“Isaiah Evanson,” he said. “There may be hope for you yet.”

Tyrran Andor awoke, nude and at peace. He blinked his eyes, long black hair tickling his cheek. There was virtually no light in the *Blackthorne's* cabin, a few crimson displays and door controls providing poor illumination. His breathing was sedate, sated as he was from the previous night's lovemaking. For a long time he simply laid still, relishing the feeling of Yolanta's body in his arms, his mind not entirely adjusted to the reality of his new ship and new lover.

In time he rose, walking barefoot through the corridors of his Phantom. It was dark, yet he felt no need to activate the illumination. Without a word Tyrran opened the door to the bridge, stepping inside to survey the few essential instrument panels that remained active. He walked over to one, the link to Lasswitz Port's automated lift control. He keyed it, feeling a jolt as the *Blackthorn* slid forward on its pad and rose to the surface. Ships came and went above Tyrran's head, their pilots heading to a hundred destination, each living their own lives and dreams.

For a long time, Tyrran Xavian Andor simply admired the view, his mind unburdened. Light footsteps could be heard approaching, and a soft hand curled around his own. Yolanta Púrpura joined her partner, as nude as he, taking in the view. Side by side they stood in the canopy, saying nothing, peace at last in their hearts.

The woman looked up to her man, her eyes dusky.

"I have been watching you, here in the bridge. You seemed somewhere else."

A gentle smile lifted Tyrran's lips. He gathered his woman to him.

"No. I'm home, Yola. For the first time, I'm *home*."

The woman blinked, her lips trembling. She ran a hand down Tyrran's stubble, her eyes intensifying.

"And where is that?"

Andor leaned in close, his forehead touching hers.

“Wherever you are. Wherever the mission takes us. Wherever I feel like *this*.”

Lips and bodies pressed against each other. Memories of a lifetime of drifting paraded through the man’s mind, of raw deals and false starts, of betrayals justified and not, of near-death and half-lived life.

Man and woman broke their kiss, eyes seeing into the other’s soul. Yolanta exhaled, a tear wetting her eyes. Ebony hair framed an Iberian face, her accent thickening.

“*Si. Si...* it is the same for me.”

Tyrran exhaled, nearly laughing. He would never *not* be the man that his past had produced, but he was at last free to be something more...

“It’s over. Everything that I...”

The man shook his head, gathering his love close.

“It’s finally over.”

Yolanta’s hands gripped her lover’s face, pulling him in for long, luxurious kiss. Iberian eyes smiled— and for once, so too did Iberian lips. It was not an expression but a gift, an opening of the unopenable and the promise of everything contained within. Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura *smiled*, with all the passion that she brought to the guitar or dancing or piloting, smiling the smile that only a woman in love could muster.

“No, *patán*— it has only *begun*!”

THE WORK CONTINUES

The office was as dim as it always was, with virtually no decoration or personal touches. It was located in the most secure level of Shajin Market, the Chapterhouse of Inquisition's headquarters on Arissa Duval's home system of Kamadhenu. Kari Kerenski shifted in her seat, gazing impassively as the man poured a splash of vodka into her glass and his. The meeting, she knew, was as certain as death itself. Its outcome, less so.

"You have done well," he said. "Even in the face of shortages and distrust. You should be proud."

The woman hardened her features. It was unlike the man to pay such gracious compliments, and his words only heightened her suspicions.

"Many of my people are dead," she replied. "There is not an hour that elapses where I do not see the faces of my failure."

The man raised his glass, his face obscured in the low light.

"You have purchased life with life itself," he said. "And upheld your side of the deal with honor."

The woman reached in her jacket and produced a pack of cigarettes. The man gestured his permission. Kerenski closed her eyes as she lit the cigarette and took her first drag, the smoke curling around her fingers.

"Then the Legion is safe?"

The figure leaned forward, the face of Gideon Hathaway—High Scribe Inquisitor—coming into the light.

"From the Inquisition? Yes. And so long as the Emperor holds greater sway than Denton Patreus, they have nothing to fear from him as well. Loren's Legion will continue to outlive the Lorens themselves."

Kerenski exhaled, trying and failing to conceal her relief.

“Then we both have what we wanted.”

The first traces of a smile softened the man’s features.

“Which is more than can be said for Patreus. If he had his way, Loren’s Legion would have been disbanded long ago.”

Kerenski shrugged. “Which is why we made the deal that we did.”

Hathaway nodded. “Correct. You help young Evanson give them a new mission, and I ensure that the rain stays off their heads long enough for them to carry it out.”

Bitterness hardened the woman’s features. “He doesn’t know, does he? That it was the Witches that sheltered his precious Legion from the storm.”

Gideon shook his head. “No, and he never will. Leaders must believe that they are in charge of their own destinies. Those who follow them must feel likewise. You know this— and such belief saved millions from certain death.”

Kerenski scowled. “For all the good it did. The holonets are buzzing with how Patreus saved Atroco.”

Gideon waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal. “A consolation prize, nothing more. He cannot kill off the Legion, so he must content himself with appropriating its accomplishments.”

The woman’s eyes flashed, risking a smirk of her own. “Da. She mocks him from beyond the grave.”

“And he knows it. But his supporters will not, and so the political calculus remains in his favor.”

Kerenski rose, finishing her drink and taking a final drag of her cigarette.

“As it ever seems to. Is our business concluded?”

Gideon too rose, raising his glass.

“For now. There is one final thing I would have you know.”

Kari Kerenski’s eyes narrowed.

“Oh?”

Hathaway nodded.

“Salome’s plans did not perish alongside her. I have taken pains to ensure that they were channeled into the right hands. Evanson’s, specifically.”

Slowly, the woman nodded, the wheels of her mind turning.

“And?”

“And your time in Atroco will soon be at an end. Milagro Hardy is... not the partner for which we had hoped.”

Kerenski folded her arms. “I recall trying to warn you. What is the name of my next contact?”

Gideon finished his drink, his voice conspiratorial. His eyes met hers, more than mere words passing between them.

“Where you’re going, people don’t deal in names.”

INTO THE BLACK

TYRRAN ANDOR'S LUCK **HAS RUN OUT**

When a high-stakes swindle goes awry, Tyrran Xavian Andor finds himself flung into an underworld of shadows, compelled to aid a mysterious client. His task is simple: assist a rogue squadron in their mission to acquire alien technology. Yet not all is as it seems, for powers beyond the horizon loom, watching as conspiracies unfold within conspiracies.

Freedom fighters contend with empires, legacies of fallen legends are fought over, and the lines between puppet and puppeteer blur in *Into the Black*, the unofficial sequel to Drew Wagar's *Premonition*.

Based on real in-game events.

INTO THE BLACK

AN UNOFFICIAL ELITE: DANGEROUS NOVEL

