

BOOK TWO OF SALOMÉ'S LEGACY

# SHADOWS OF THE PAST

AN UNOFFICIAL ELITE: DANGEROUS NOVEL

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

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*“There’s a lot of history of AI getting a little ahead of itself,” Bill said, rubbing his chin. “Some of the advanced sentient stuff caused a lot of trouble years ago. Nasty business, very nasty indeed. The law keeps it pretty simple nowadays.”*

*“What happened?”*

*“Story for another time,” Bill said.*

## SHADOWS OF THE PAST

# EXILES

*“Was it wise, sending them all the way to Colonia? Knowing what they might find?”*

*Cuthrick Delaney stood in full dignity, the robes of an Imperial ambassador lending gravity to his aged frame, the endless Chionic seas glinting in the setting sun. The palace of the late Loren dynasty loomed over the green archipelago as a master might loom over his slaves, the imagery of such not unsuited for an Imperial world. The man himself occupied its pinnacle; yet from such lofty heights were the greatest of falls to be had.*

*He turned to his guest, a fellow citizen in Imperial service.*

*. “That was the point, was it not? For them to find what she would have sought...”*

*A man advanced, taking his place at Cuthrick’s side, his dark complexion a warm java in the sun’s glow.*

*“Even after all this time... it still pains you to say her name, doesn’t it?”*

*Delaney’s face hardened, his features outlined in the evening sunset.*

*“That which pains me hasn’t been relevant in decades.”*

*The man nodded, taking in the full view.*

*“Indeed.”*

*For a long time, neither man spoke. An Imperial Clipper rose from a distant island, the one where the late Algreb Loren had deigned to construct a landing pad, too fastidious to allow such a utilitarian feature to mar the main palace complex. Blue thrusters flared as its main engines*

*engaged, rocketing the elegant vessel into the planet's atmosphere. Even from a distance the roar of its engines could be heard. The darkly-complected guest turned to his host.*

*"And we are certain that the relic has not yet been found?"*

*Cuthrick nodded, wizened eyes confident.*

*"We are. If it had, our contact would surely have notified us. As it is, we are running on a whisper of a rumor of a conjecture."*

*The man scoffed. "A glorified fool's errand."*

*A bitter chuckle escaped the ambassador's lips.*

*"Yet one upon which she was prepared to embark. You don't really think that the old cyborg just happened to mis-jump so close to it, do you?"*

*Darkness clouded the man's face, one that had concealed many secrets over the years- but not as many as his elderly host.*

*"I think that sometimes the past ought to remain buried. Colonia ought never have been allowed to-"*

*Delaney cut him off.*

*"But it has. It has, and we must adapt to the circumstances—as we always have. You know this."*

*Gideon Hathaway at last stepped fully into the light, the setting sun bathing the simple greys of his tunic in warm hues. A hand disappeared within their folds, emerging with a datadisk between his fingers. He offered it to his compatriot, its surface reflecting the evening's hews.*

*"I know that the information I've collected must be verified at all costs. I know that your mistress endeavoured to play with fire. And I know that her followers don't have much time. They'll be defenceless if the foe brings its true power to bear."*

*Cuthrick Delaney's lips twitched, his eyes in another place, traces of a pained smile upon his features. He accepted the disk, the latest layer of complexity added to a life immersed in such.*



*“No,” he said. “They will not—for they will be armed with parent’s grief, lover’s woe, and the yearnings of their vagabond hearts.”*

The stars were denser than in The Bubble, and brighter too. Indeed, the nebulous region of the Milky Way galaxy known as “Colonia” was significantly closer to the galactic core, and seemingly more alive. To fly amid such energy was to fly in the light of stellar forges. One such system was named Carcosa, a site of myth and wonder, destined to be a place of outlaws and roguery.

Bathed in the harsh pale light of Carcosa’s main star was a planet, its surface blackened rock and primordial lava, a young world in an old universe. Orbiting it was a great jagged shadow, an asteroid of immense size, one side lit with the telltale blue lights of human habitation. Indeed, the asteroid—christened Robardin Rock— was now a hardscrabble bastion of humanity. It had emerged from seemingly nowhere, recklessly hollowed out, bare power conduits and scuffed landing bays lining its docking tube. The men and women who called it home were as hard as the stone that surrounded them, for to be any less meant doom in a place like Carcosa.

Death would soon visit Robardin Rock regardless.

Swarming like fireflies around it were the ships of the controlling faction, a cooperative of pioneers named Explorers’ Nation. So too were their auxiliaries, a scrappy band by the name of Colonia Legionaries. Neither group was composed of dedicated combatiers, and the bulk of the former were away on the famed Distant Worlds Expedition. Their assets in Colonia were unguarded in the same manner that denizens of sleepy planetside towns felt no need to lock their doors at night, so accustomed were they to lives of tranquility and stagnation.

Approaching from further away were *other* ships, not the rickety Vipers and Cobras of the locals, but predators the likes of which Colonia had scarcely seen. Mambas, Fer-de-Lances, and a lone, imposing Corvette arrayed themselves at the edge of sensor range, black with blood red accents, skulls and dragons adorning their hulls. The men and women within were also a type unknown, their eyes not wide with wanderlust but narrowed in bloody focus.

Loren's Reapers was not an Imperial wing in the normal sense, but rather the offshoot of Loren's Legion, those whose sense of purpose eclipsed that of serving an extinct line of patricians. So too was it a partial exile, composed of those elements of the Legion who stood opposed to the opportunistic governor Valeria Larson's agenda of vassalhood to Denton Patreus. It had been gifted starships, equipment, and credits through the machinations of both Vespar Faveol and Cuthrick Delaney, respectively the senator and ambassador of the Prism system and last of the old guard who knew and served the Loren line.

Now they had arrived, and the time to make their introductions to the Colonia nebula was at hand.

Isaiah Evanson's Fer de Lance formed up alongside that of his friend and subordinate Phisto Sobanii. If Isaiah was the brains of the outfit, then Phisto was surely the heart, passionately loyal to comrades and cause alike. Today they flew into battle as they had dozens of times prior, flanked by allies old and new.

The comms squawked. Isaiah's voice, smooth and contemptuous, sounded over the common squadron line.

"Scrubs," he said. "All of them. This won't take but a moment."

Phisto scanned his sensors, cycling from one ragtag target to the next. His face hardened, realizing the slaughter that was surely imminent.

"This rock is ours as surely as if we built it ourselves."

"Yeah, well... don't get married to it," said Isaiah.

Phisto snarled. “This here’s a place for a fucking, not a wedding. *Reapers!*”

Across the comms, the voices of comrades old and new sounded off. To hear the members of the command wing filled Phisto’s chest with pride:

Amos Loren, roughneck stalwart. Always ready with a beer or a multicannon barrage.

“Loren like the Legion, good to go.”

Adam Firethorn, old guard of Newton’s Fusiliers. Seemingly unkillable.

“Firethorn, checking in.”

Renraiku Kordai, as expert a pilot as could be found, keen of eye and steady of hand.

“Kordai here— and lovin' it.”

Phisto of the Sobanii nodded, opening a general line.

“Listen up, everyone. It’s been a long road, and this here’s the final stop. That big damn rock ahead of us isn’t the goal. It isn’t the enemy or the objective or the target. It’s *home*— just these folks don’t know it yet. We’ve even got a welcoming committee inside, ready to roll out the red carpet for us...”

A missile streaked by, fired from extreme distance from a Diamondback Explorer. Sobanii followed it with his eyes for a split second, its smoke trail leading back to the offending Explorers’ Nation ship. His thumb flipped open the joystick safety cover, mashing down on the button beneath. Various lights went from green to red. His *Fer de Lance*, named the *No Data Available*, deployed its hardpoints, exotic plasma accelerators and ultravelocity railguns emerging from within.

“The locals ain’t never fought anything like us. Hell, they ain’t ever *seen* anything like us. Hit ‘em hard, and hit ‘em fast. Make them remember the day the Reapers came for Carcosa!”

As one, the Reapers roared, men and women crying a scream of war, flaring boosters plunging ships of war into

battle. Weaponsfire crossed paths, wings and individual ships alike breaking into a dozen duels of life and death...

Phisto squeezed the trigger, a plasma volley shattering the Diamondback's shields and scorching the hull beneath. The two vessels passed the other, almost colliding, the latter's secondhand weapons doing pathetically little damage to the Reaper's shields. Phisto snarled, disengaging his safeties, flipping the *Data* around to face his foe far sooner than the more sluggish ship could manage. He exhaled, allowing his opponent to drift into his sights...

The second volley slammed home into the hapless Diamondback, the pilot within screaming as hull and canopy incinerated around him. The scream was cut short, the pilot's battered body in pieces, burned and frozen remains ejected into space.

Phisto slammed his throttle forward, already locked on to another Explorers' Nation vessel, focused though his heart pounded. Fire and death enveloped the space around Robardin Rock, the old consumed by the new, the elemental tempest rivaling that of the very planet beneath them...

*Unauthorized Installation, deep space, Carcosa system*

The woman's face was angular, its smooth surface marred by the first lines of advancing age, the smart military bun streaked through with tendrils of silver. Yet Kari Kerenski's eyes remained sharp, illuminated as they were in a flash, her newly-lit cigarette obscuring her features with thick, weightless smoke.

She was at once far away and close to the battle, other manmade sources of light outlining her features. She was dressed simply, sturdy tactical garments rendering shapeless a slim figure, numerous instruments and displays competing for

her attention. Old Slavic dripped from her words, dour and commanding, her every movement suggesting competence.

"I have analysed the adversary," she said. "And their only hope is that the Reapers run out of ammunition."

Another figure, equally feminine, equally authoritative, emerged from the shadows. Serene Meadows was almost certainly not the woman's real name— but then again, it would have been inappropriate for The Nameless's chief of operations to have one. Her voice was gentle, a contrast to the Slavic newcomer— yet beneath its soft tones were hints of malice.

"It was only a matter of time before this day arrived and justice was served. Yet I had always thought it would be at the hands of another..."

Kerenski glanced over her shoulder, eyes narrowed.

"*She* is gone, yet her example inspires us. That is something that no bounty hunter can kill off, nor any cynic diminish."

Meadows nodded, her own eyes piercing. "It is the work, and not the woman that matters. She knew that. Do *you*?"

The tip of the cigarette glowed, Kari saying nothing as she held it to her lips. The exhaled cloud swirled around herself.

"*Da.*"

Again, Meadows nodded, advancing to take her place at Kerenski's side. Icons of friendly and hostile ships flashed on the holo-screens, a mass dance of death, the horror of null-gravity slaughter reduced to a slow Brownian movement of abstract symbols.

"These are not all your forces."

It was not a question, but a statement. Kerenski took another long drag, the smoke from her throat obscuring her visage, but not her purpose.

“The Reapers are a scythe, *comrade*. The harvest will be bountiful. Yet there are some grains of wheat more valuable than others...”

Cunning flashed in Meadows’ features.

“And for that, you have a... *special* tool?”

The tip of the cigarette glowed, Kenerski’s eyes fixated on a separate, more obscure screen. Only a handful of icons glowed on it, unmoving yet not without purpose. The fixation in her eyes only intensified as a slow, thick cloud of smoke blew from her lungs.

“In the days of Old Earth, ignorant villagers of the ancient fiefdoms would huddle in their muddy hovels, praying to their god for protection from the foul witches of legend.”

She turned to Meadows, life and death dancing in her eyes.

“By the day’s end, they will do so once again.”

### *Colonia Dream, Deep Space, Ratraii system*

“It is beautiful, is it not?”

Tyrran Xavian Andor’s features were bathed in a deep crimson glow, the bridge of his Krait Phantom the *Blackthorne* on full tactical null-sig. It was virtually undetectable, rigged as it was to emit no heat, a non-entity amid the endless chill void, a shadow against darkness itself. Indeed, it was darkness in which the *Blackthorne* was plunged, yet a thousand stars of the galaxy’s core illuminated its black hull, fuller and more alive than anything the man had ever seen.

The Iberian accent that sharpened his words was eclipsed by another, albeit haughty and more elegant. Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura was seated aft of the main

commander's chair, her own features a sharp profile in the blood-red glow of the instrumentation.

"*Si*. It is."

Tyrran's fingers drifted across his controls to flip a switch, opening a private channel.

"Almost as beautiful as you."

Full Iberian lips pressed together in disapproval— yet Yolanta's eyes softened, as did her tone.

"We must focus, *patán*."

Looming before the *Blackthorn* was Colonia Dream, a massive Coriolis space station, rotating on its axis. They were away from the carnage enveloping Robardin Rock, their own mission more refined than the brutal task of bloodshed. Tyrran scanned his instruments, frowning.

"And we're sure that he's here?"

From her seat, Yolanta nodded. "*Si*. The Colonial Legionnaires are the Nation's allies, bound by treaty to assist in the event of hostilities. It is likely that they are still mustering their forces."

"And what was the name of the target, again?"

Yolanta's fingers danced across her keypad, a man's face materializing before her, a dossier scrolling beside it.

"Raven," she said. "Raven Hurat. He flies a third generation Viper, and is known to fight... unconventionally."

Tyrran scoffed. "Tricks or no, these frontier folk won't have a prayer against the Reapers."

The woman closed out the holo-display, looking around herself.

"Do not underestimate the resolve of those who call a place 'home', *patán*. The Imperials made the same mistake in Atroco. *We* are the aggressors here, no matter how just our cause may be."

Andor sighed. "Right."

A length of time passed, man and woman spending it in silence. Tyrran looked to his side— he dared not sneak a



glance at his companion— letting his mind drift even in the midst of an important mission.

*So much has changed, he thought. Yet so much has stayed the same. This mission, though...*

“Contact!”

Yolanta’s voice roused the man from his thoughts, fingers gripping the joystick, his hand curling around the throttle.

“Verified?”

Púrpura nodded, her fingers pressed to her earpiece, her brows furrowing.

“*Si*. The target has emerged, heading toward Robardin. No escorts. We must move *now*, *patán!*”

“Then hang on!”

Tyrran shoved the throttle forward, the *Blackthorne*’s row of blood-red thrusters flaring, the ship rocketing toward a lone speck in the distance. The Phantom’s heat steadily climbed, Tyrran keeping a cautious eye upon it— yet its modifications allowed it to stay at null-sig far longer than other ships of its class. The distance between the two ships closed, the speck now more discernible.

“A Viper,” said Yolanta. “Mark three model. Standard shields, standard equipment, but...”

Tyrran manipulated his controls, swinging around to the rear of the ship.

“But what?”

The woman’s brow furrowed.

“But he is armed with mines. Most unusual.”

Tyrran nodded, his ship closing in behind the Viper, unseen and undetected. His voice lowered to something predatory.

“I could blast it right now...”

Yolanta interrupted. “And attract the attention of every Legionnaire in the system? Follow him to Carcosa, *patán.*”

Tyrran gripped his joystick. “As you say.”

The ship's automated flight assistant chimed, its masculine voice informing Tyrran that the target was preparing to jump to hyperspace. Yolanta followed the ship with her eyes, her tone dropping to one of low cunning.

"Commander Raven Hurat, on his way to aid his *amigos* at Robardin Rock..."

The ship disappeared, a pair of thruster trails left behind. Tyrran engaged the *Blackthorne's* own frameshift drive, the countdown initiating, the stars around them trembling as real space broke down. Andor gripped his controls.

"And what a help he's going to be..."

### *Robardin Rock, Carcosa System*

The battle raged forth, the blackness of space illuminated in flashes of weapons fire. The vessels of Loren's Reapers moved as gods among insects, the poorly-equipped native faction virtually powerless against the newcomers. So too was local authority engaged, not only Robardin Rock but in a dozen places across Carcosa. The outposts of Amber Dock and Aragon Silo went into lockdown; lesser wings of black-hulled vessels with skulls on their hulls appeared in close proximity, blasting Nation-flagged traders and Authority alike. In deep space a game of cat-and-mouse played out. Reinforcements, such as they were, were interdicted and destroyed, even when the natives had numerical superiority.

Within hours the drifting scrap of destroyed Explorers' Nation vessels could be seen in close proximity to Robardin Rock, blackened hulls drifting into its rocky surface. There was simply no way for the faction to compete; theirs was an adversary unknown, and the bulk of their strength was

elsewhere, touring the distant stars and leaving their holdings to fate.

From the bridge of his *Fer de Lance*, Phisto Sobanii grinned. Several frameshift alert signals echoed in his ear, the remnants of Explorers' Nation disengaging. His fingers danced across his controls, opening general comms.

"Looks like they're calling it a day!" he said. "Don't let up!"

At his side, another *Fer de Lance*'s thrusters flared, multicannons shredding a fleeing *Asp*. Amos's drawl seeped through the comms.

"They ain't goin' *nowhere*," he said.

Indeed, for a Nations' vessel to attempt escape was to seal one's fate. The ships, damaged and sub-optimal for combat to begin with, were left exposed and vulnerable. Their backs were turned, and the Reapers were happy to sink the collective dagger into it. Their superior skill took its final, deadly toll. Missiles flew and cannons bellowed. Plasma bolts melted hull plating and ruptured components within. Rail slugs sniped frameshift drives and power plants.

The defending armada was destroyed to a man.

### *Deep Space, Carcosa System*

"Hurry, *patán*. He is almost to Robardin!"

The superluminal distance from the *Blackthorne* to Hurat's *Viper* was in truth a vast one, but from where Tyrran Andor sat he appeared only a short distance away. His thumb hovered and his eyes narrowed, *willing* the ships to close to interdictor range. The two vessels were close, so close to Robardin Rock that for a moment Tyrran feared that he'd lose his quarry. Yet the distance closed...

"*Got him!*"

Tyrran's thumb mashed down on the trigger, the black market interdicator module engaging. The bubbles of private space that allowed a vessel to travel faster than light were crudely merged, the Viper's system struggling to maintain and the *Blackthorne* endeavouring to disrupt. A duel of piloting skill emerged, with the controls within the subspace tunnel less than stable, the pair of ships within it drifting where it led them.

From behind Tyrran, Yolanta gripped her chair's armrests, fixated upon the holographic icon that denoted the field's stability. Tyrran was a skilled pilot, but not a hunter of men. Her mind raced, her hands twitching, *willing* her companion to win the duel. Her heart pounded within her chest, traces of indignation welling up within her.

*It should be me flying, not him. But the Blackthorne is the stealthier ship by far...*

"You have it, Tyrran! Only a little m—"

There was a forward jolt, the woman restrained by her flight chair but shaken nonetheless. The *Blackthorne* was torn from supercruise, out of control and cartwheeling forward. Gravitic dampeners tried and failed to stabilize the ship, directional thrusters firing to steady it. Yolanta clutched her seat, bracing herself against the chaotic motion of the ship. Over the comms, Tyrran called out.

"He's here!"

The woman craned her neck, looking around herself. The Viper was a grey speck in the distance, already boosting away. Already the mechanical noises of the Phantom's hardpoints deploying could be heard. Yolanta leaned forward, the thrill of the hunt giving new passion to her features.

"On him, *patán!* Do not let him escape!"

A brilliant crimson quartet of beam lasers bathed the *Blackthorne's* bridge in a deep glow, the highly-modified weapons torturing the Viper's shields. The smaller ship's thrusters flared, streaking away. Tyrran responded in kind, shoving his throttle forward and glancing to his side.

“Hang on!”

Before Yolanta could react, Andor engaged his own boost, the Phantom rocketing forward. Its thruster array was highly modified for additional speed, the acceleration from such pushing hard against the woman’s chest. She blinked at the ship’s raw power.

*Madre de Randomius...*

The Viper was fast, but the Phantom faster. Like a harbinger of death it closed in, black angles and angry red thruster glows. Crimson beam lasers reached forward, burning away the last of the shields and boiling the hull beneath.

Yolanta bared her teeth in martial prowess.

“His engines, *patán!*”

Tyrran keyed a holo-control to his left, the blood-hued energy beams shifting slightly. An object glinted in the distance, only a flash in the void of space. Yet it was enough to—

*“Mines!”*

There was no avoiding the first one. The Phantom shuddered, the explosion jarring it from its course, its flash blinding the man and woman inside. Tyrran cursed, focused on the target, not changing course but engaging his lateral thrusters, moving the *Blackthorne* from side to side to avoid the subsequent munitions.

Yolanta opened her mouth to say something, but stopped herself. Her hand opened and closed, the woman forcing herself to relax, to trust her lover and partner. A quick glance to the damage control viewscreen confirmed her fear: that the shield generator was damaged, the mine a high-tech variant that used a shield’s very energy matrix to reverberate to the generator itself. The unit was functional, but couldn’t take many more hits. And once *it* went...

Yolanta Púrpura relaxed her eyes, taking distant note of Tyrran’s hand on his joystick, her own unconsciously mimicking his every movement. Her heart ceased pounding, the first notes of Iberian guitar plucking in her mind. As his

hand moved, so did hers— not in imitation, but in how *she* would have maneuvered the ship. The woman's lips parted, her breathing steady, settling into the focused trance in which she had ever found herself capable of excellence. The view before her stopped being the sum of lesser parts— the ship, her companion, their quarry— and more into a unified whole, everything connected, everything within her grasp. Another mine streaked by, expertly dodged by Tyrran.

Yolanta's features intensified, the Iberian rhythm strong within her heart.

*Si, mi amor. Let yourself dance. Let the artist have the stick and the pilot will be invincible.*

The hands of man and woman now moved as one, steering the ship as a spiritual duo, the Phantom bobbing and weaving, mine after mine streaking dangerously by. Still Tyrran closed in, firing when he could, too close for his gimbals to miss. First flames and then smoke spewed from the ruptured Viper, one thruster collapsing into a molten mass, the ship lurching to one side as control became compromised.

The final mine shot by the *Blackthorne*, Tyrran centering his vessel behind that of his quarry's. Without a word or a moment's hesitation he opened fire, the quartet of angry crimson beams incinerating the remaining engine, slagged debris flying past the Phantom. The Viper's remaining engine flickered and died, the stricken vessel drifting forward, directional thrusters sending it into a list, both engines dark.

Tyrran disengaged his ship's flight assists, matching speed with the crippled Viper. His fingers danced across his controls, selecting a specific component within Hurat's ship. Yolanta's eyes widened.

"He is crippled, *patán*. You risk destroying his ship if you—"

Tyrran cut her off.

"He isn't going anywhere. I'm making sure of it."

The torturous barrage resumed, the quartet of beam lasers melting a hole through the Viper's armor, its hull, through the delicate modules within...

The damage algorithm calculated the effect of the barrage in realtime, the frameshift drive soon reduced to slag, the ship itself on the verge of destruction. Automatic safety protocols kicked in, reducing the crippled Viper's speed to zero.

Raven Hurat, captain of the Colonia Legionaries, was dead in space.

*Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

Phisto of the Sobanii bared his teeth, his heart pounding at the sight of so many destroyed Nation ships. In their midst loomed Robardin Rock itself.

"She's alone, she's pretty, and her pants are down. *Jelli!*"

From within the Reaper formation a vessel emerged, all angles and armor, its sheer size an eye-opener. Commander Stannis Jellicoe captained the *Resolution*, a Federal Corvette of immense notoriety. Within its cavernous holds were hundreds of soldiers, Imperial shock troops that had volunteered to join the Reapers in exile from the Legion proper. From the no-nonsense bridge of the *Resolution*, Stannis lifted his chin, closing in on the crude station before him. He was of Federal stock, from Earth itself and the scion of a wealthy family. His life path, however...

Jellicoe toggled the comms, hailing every man and woman on his crew. Matted blonde hair pressed against his forehead, his eyes focused on the approaching mailslot.

"This is the Commander speaking. Our comrades have done their job, and now *we* can do ours. All teams, prep for drop. This one's going to be *hot!*"

The Corvette surged forward, ploughing through the shattered wrecks of the defenders, its powerful shields

shrugging away the mass. Through the mailslot it sped, forward thrusters flaring, its momentum pulling it deep into the station before settling to a halt in the docking tube's center.

For a moment the *Resolution* was still in space, the tube rotating around it. White gusts of air rushed forward from points along its main cargo hold, tiny pods ejecting one after the other. Within each was a battle-hardened shock trooper, specially trained for asset seizure. The pods broke apart upon landing, cushioning the trooper within and projecting a temporary force field. The troopers split into small teams, already placing charges on bay doors to enter the station by force.

The *Resolution* rotated completely around, shooting drop pods in a circular arc, ensuring that the Reaper teams entered every section of Robardin Rock simultaneously. Other Reaper ships now joined it, the command wing landing on unused pads, emergency docking clamps engaged *sans* normal authorization to land.

Loren's Reapers had entered The Rock.

### *Deep Space, Carcosa system*

"When we move, we move *fast*. No hesitation. We find him and—"

A gloved fist impacted a gloved hand, held before Yolanta's face. With a scowl she moved it aside, her eyes boring into Tyrran's.

"I am no stranger to this, *patán*. And this is no derelict ship to be plundered."

The woman held up a pistol, its power pack fully charged.



“Hopefully this Hurat fellow has not done us the discourtesy of dying. After you!”

Grinning, Tyrran raised his mask to his head, turning to his companion as she holstered the weapon. They were in their flightsuits, tactical armor covering vital areas and air packs on their backs. The *Blackthorne*’s main airlock awaited final release, a yellow warning light rotating above their heads.

“Dead or alive, he’s *ours*. ”

Andor lifted his helmet to don— until gloved, feminine fingers gripped his collar to pull him around. Full Iberian lips pressed against his. Yolanta broke the kiss, looking up at him with smiling eyes.

“For luck,” she said.

Smirking, Tyrran donned his helmet, listening to the *hiss* of it sealing into place. So too did Yolanta secure her flightsuit for spacewalking, stepping closer to her man with an arm around his waist. Tyrran punched the airlock controls with his fist, holding on to a handle as air rushed from the cabin. The hatch slid away, the blackness of space before them. Close by was the stricken Viper, debris floating next to it. Hooking a tether onto his suit, he turned to his companion.

“Let’s catch a squadron leader...”

### *Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

Gunfire ricocheted from the corridor walls, Phisto and Isaiah pressing themselves along a bulkhead wall. A Reaper shock trooper raised her weapon and dispatched a pair of defenders with as many shots. More troopers rushed past, the sounds of battle further down, leaving a Nameless advisor behind with the Commanders. Strewn on the cold metal deck were several Nation militia, dead or dying from blaster wounds. Isaiah nodded to them.

“Just as bad at fighting here as they are in their ships. Can’t even defend their home against intruders.”

The advisor was a man, a somewhat androgynous specimen with a smooth face and soft features. He stepped forward, looking with scorn upon a dying Nation defender.

“This is not their home, and never was. *They* are the intruders.”

The man produced a pistol, shooting the defender without hesitation, striding forth to join the shock troopers in the carnage. Phisto and Isaiah looked at each other, stepping over the deceased man. Both readied their own weapons, Imperial plasma rifles with black market capacitors. Phisto sighed.

“Well, at least we know they’re serious.”

### *Deep Space, Carcosa system*

There was no rush of air from the main corridor, Tyrran and Yolanta’s magboots securing into place upon the jagged metal deck. The rear of the Viper had been blasted open, its main corridor exposed and the door melted away. A pair of searchlights illuminated the passageway, floating debris obscuring the path forward. Yolanta raised her pistol. Tyrran advanced, gesturing to the detritus.

“Nothing alive in here. That I promise you.”

Man and woman walked on, their steps cautious, avoiding the twisted outcroppings of blasted bulkhead. The corridor smoothed further in, pitch black with only sparking power conduits to provide illumination. Yolanta keyed the controls to an escape pod, as of yet unjettisoned. It was unresponsive.

“That is what I am afraid of.”

Tyrran raised his searchlight, following a shadow along the bulkhead.

“What’s so special about this guy, anyway? Seems like we’re going to a lot of work when my beam lasers would have done the trick just as well.”

Yolanta peered around a corner, the rest of the corridor as dark as where they stood.

“Kerenski. She is two moves ahead of the others.”

Tyrran grunted. “As usual.”

The man shone his light on a set of glowing controls, green amid the darkness.

“The bridge. Still intact, too. Your man’s alive...”

He shrugged.

“... probably.”

Yolanta stepped forward, unholstering her pistol. She raised her weapon, pointing it at the door. Her features hardened.

“Let us find out.”

Making a fist, Tyrran punched the controls. He stepped aside, the door sliding open with a tortured metal-on-metal groan. Within was darkness, the silhouette of a commander’s chair illuminated by flickering controls. Tyrran swallowed, stepping forward, fists balled and wishing to Randomius for a blaster of his own. Not knowing what else to do, he called out.

“Freeze!”

A weak noise escaped from the chair’s direction, a mass slumped forward, arms extended in the weightless environment. Tyrran advanced, his flashlight falling upon a man, suit bloodied and face pale. The emergency Remlock mask had since deployed around his head. Dark hair was matted to a pale forehead, the man holding up an arm to shield him from the light. Tyrran scowled, glancing over his shoulder to Yolanta.

“He’s here. And he’s alive.”

Reaching forward, Tyrran unfastened the man's restraints and hoisted him up, the act easy *sans* gravity. He pulled him close, his dark eyes boring into those of his victim.

"Commander Raven Hurat, I presume?"

Hurat spat blood within his mask, his eyes unfocused, grasping at Tyrran's collar.

"Who... who are *you*?"

Tyrran shoved the hapless pilot against the bulkhead, the groans of the crippled ship echoing within its stricken hull. Teeth bared themselves in aggression.

"We're the new neighbors. And *you're* coming to a little housewarming party."

Defiance flashed in the man's eyes, danger snapping them open.

"Like hell I a—"

Yolanta raised her pistol, pointing it straight at the man's head. His struggles ceased, his eyes fixated down its barrel. Thick Iberian danced from her lips to his ears.

"Yes, you *are*. It is an invitation you cannot refuse."

### *Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

Level by level the shock troopers advanced. Casualties were light, and with every firefight a new pile of bodies were left in the corridors, burned and mangled by military-grade weapons. The passageways were bare, the civilian population keeping to locked hab units, huddling in terror at the carnage beyond their doors.

Amos Loren trudged along, an oversized pistol in his hands, anger on his features and flanked by Renraiku Kordai and Adam Firethorn. A deep blaster burn marred his thigh, his flightsuit bloody, a severed ear on a leather string hanging from his neck. He raised his hand, signaling to Isaiah and

Phisto, huddling at a taken checkpoint amid a squad of shock troopers.

The man hunched over, breathing hard. Isaiah put a hand on his shoulder, nodding to his leg.

“You’re hurt.”

Amos shrugged, looking upward to his captain.

“Other guy’s dead.”

Phisto’s eyebrows raised at the ear, still dripping blood.

“Then what the hell is *that*?”

Amos grimaced, favoring his leg.

“Reckon I took it personal.”

Phisto grinned a savage grin, clapping Amos on his shoulder. He rose, turning to one of the troopers.

“How we looking?”

The trooper flipped up his combat visor, revealing a dark-skinned man with tattoos on his face.

“Like raiding a broom closet, sir. No traps, no automated defenses. And their people can’t fight for shit.”

Phisto nodded. “This place is a rock with some atmo gear shoved inside. Isaiah, you caught your breath yet?”

Evanson scoffed. “Haven’t had it this easy since my simulator days at flight school.”

The sounds of gunfire echoed down the corridor. Phisto held up his rifle, ejecting the power pack and replacing it with a fresh one.

“Good. At the end of this hall is the central commons. They’re holed up there like ticks in a dog’s ass.”

The trooper nodded. “Aye. We’re holding off on a concerted push until more levels are secured. We need only keep them in place.”

Isaiah chuckled. “Nowhere to run, and nowhere to hide. Hell of a situation to be in.”

More gunfire could be heard in the distance. Amos nodded in its direction, still grimacing from his wounds.

“They ain’t giving up just yet, though. Holed up or no, it’ll be a hell of a shitfight.”

Phisto nodded, wariness in his eyes.

“Yeah, it will. Unless Kerenski pulls off her little powerplay...”

*Unauthorized Installation, Deep Space, Carcosa system*

The hood was pulled from the man’s head, darkness surrounding him. He was on his knees, already aching from the cold metal floor, his vision hazy and fear clutching his guts. A voice called out, feminine and Slavic, not sensual but cold and authoritative.

“Raven Hurat. We’ve been expecting you.”

The man blinked, trying in vain to focus in the low light. His heart pounded in his chest, his flightsuit soaked on the inside from blood and perspiration. Pain shot through his body, injuries sustained while his ship was crippled from...

Hurat gulped, his mind ajar.

*From what, exactly? There was nothing on the scopes. Nothing as my ship was blasted apart. Nothing until those two burst into my bridge. What in Randomius are we dealing with?*

The voice couldn’t be ignored forever. Raven straightened himself, speaking with all the bravery he could muster.

“That’s *Commander* Hurat, lady. And you’ve made a *big* mistake.”

Footsteps could be heard, heels against metal. Thin fingers gripped the man’s jaw, tilting it upward. The hazy outline of a woman appeared, barely visible against the glow of various instruments in the background. She was thin, with piercing eyes and hair tied back in a bun. Tactical gear was badgeless save a red skull on her shoulders. Unsmiling lips

were pressed against each other, turning his head from one side to the other, inspecting him as though he were a slave at auction.

“A Commander? *Nyet*. A Commander is free, with a ship to their name. You have no ship...”

The woman leaned forward, her eyes cold.

“...and do you *feel* free?”

Raven jerked his head to the side, breaking free of the woman’s grasp.

“Who are you?”

The woman drew herself up.

“My name is Kari Kerenski. I represent a group of people who fight for more than only themselves. I wouldn’t expect one so misguided to understand.”

Raven’s nostrils flared.

“Where are we?”

Hints of a smirk lifted one side of Kerenski’s mouth.

“Like its inhabitants, this place has no name.”

For a moment, the man was silent. Finally he spoke.

“You won’t win. You *can’t* win. The Nation will return and put the savages in their place, as they always have.”

More figures emerged from the shadows— first a woman of Kerenski’s age, and then a younger, olive-complected man and woman. The first spoke, her tone at once hard and soft.

“But you forget: this *is* our place. Our home. It was taken from us by the slaves of unseen masters.”

She knelt before Hurat, her presence unnerving, her eyes boring into his.

“Tell me, pilot: do you wish to break free of your shackles? Or is your story at an end?”

The younger woman stepped forward, thick Iberian dripping from her words. Eyes as dark as the void looked cruelly down upon Hurat.

“It would have been easy to kill you, *si?* Those you have fought in the past would have done so. But you are not dealing with them.”

Again, Hurat swallowed.

“Who, then?”

The woman squatted down, the man behind her standing tall, her eyes cunning.

“Today, you have faced the Night Witches. Your *camaradas* have faced Loren’s Reapers.”

Hurat’s lips trembled, his jaw set.

“And?”

A sinister gentleness crept into Kerenski’s tone, answering in place of her subordinate.

“And you have the opportunity to save what remains of your squadron, *tovarish*. Even now our people are storming Robardin Rock. It’s over.”

Raven’s jaw dropped open. “You’ve breached The Rock? So... *soon?*”

Kerenski raised her arm, her fingers dancing across the controls of her wrist computer. A holographic display shimmered into view. It was Robardin Rock, a three dimensional cutaway showing its interior layout. Green and red icons moved in real time along the various stacked levels. Faint audio feedback of battle could be heard in the background. The woman let the footage play for a moment before closing out the display, again plunging the man into the near-darkness of the control room. Slavic features sharpened.

“The Nation has played your people for fools. Reinforcements will not arrive in time. For a faction such as theirs, to hold assets like these is a vanity.”

Kerenski leaned in close, her eyes boring into Hurat’s.

“And would you *really* sacrifice your people on the altar of *vanity?*”



Violence spread across Carcosa, with brief but intense flare-ups across the system. Reaper patrols clashed with their Nation counterparts, often to the detriment of the latter. There was simply no way that hastily-armed exploration vessels could compete with the predaceous newcomers, and lives were lost by the score. Carcosa, already tainted by a reputation for seedy roguery, became off-limits for the greater Colonia community— save those moved by either ties to Explorers' Nation or contempt for the Nameless.

Indeed, Nameless vessels by the dozens emerged from hidden enclaves to bear the brunt of more battles. These vessels clashed with Nation reinforcements brought in from other systems, leading to larger, more serious battles in the space around Robardin Rock. Casualties mounted on both sides, to the innate advantage of neither.

Yet The Nameless were reinforced by Reaper wings, Elite Commanders of the guild who had been forged in the crucible of Bubble conflict and worse. These black-hulled vessels tore through the Nation regulars, the ships as deadly as the pilots within. Even the presence of one or two Reapers was enough to turn the tide of a skirmish. Reinforcements were simply unable to break through.

For all the savagery that bore out in the heavens, the air and rock of the system's main station remained relatively bloodless. Reaper shock troops now controlled the means in and out of Robardin Rock, but the centralized control level remained in Nation hands. It was the only location with Bubble-level security, and where the majority of resistance was located. It was essentially a self-contained station nested

within the rock, its bulkheads comparable to ship armor and powered independently of Robardin's main reactor core.

To storm it would be a bloody affair, and there was no telling how many civilians would be used as hostages. An uneasy stalemate had emerged, the defenders unable to leave and the attackers unable to advance. Even firefighting was sporadic at best. A makeshift command post had been set up, Reapers and Nameless leadership huddled together in what had once been a station commons. Armed men and women stood at their posts, none wearing uniforms save the red skulls of their squadron.

Isaiah Evanson stood hunched over a holographic projection of Robardin Rock, the fortified command section highlighted in red. Across from him was Phisto Sobanii, obscured by the hologram but his brow as furrowed as his comrade's.

"Still nothing," he said. "Stubborn bastards for being explorers, aren't they?"

Evanson grunted. "Didn't know that explorers needed control of entire star systems to explore. They've got an agenda, Phisto—and I mean to find out what it is."

Sobanii nodded. "Then let's hope that our Witch friends come through with this secret plan of theirs. I don't like being holed up in this little standoff."

A new voice, cold and Slavic, called out in the distance.

"Then you won't be, *comrade*. The standoff ends now."

Both men looked up. Kari Kerenski, her voice as unmistakable as a blade, strode at the head of a small entourage. By her side was Serene Meadows, leader of The Nameless. Behind her was Yolanta Púrpura and Tyrran Andor, the latter pushing along an unknown man, his cuffed wrists and ankles making for an awkward gait. He was in a flightsuit, his eyes downcast, defeated. Phisto straightened himself at their approach.

“The hunting was good, I take it?”

Kari halted, her features all business.

“*Da*. Things move in our favor. These Colonials are...”

Her eyes flashed. “*Not* accustomed to such as us.”

Isaiah nodded. “And who is this?”

Kari glanced to her side. Tyrran shoved the man forward. He looked up, his breathing ragged.

“Commander Raven Hurat, chief of the Colonia Legionaries.”

Evanson scoffed. “Seen a few of your boys around, fighting for the wrong side. Damn shame about them.”

Hurat grimaced. “We’re not soldiers. We’re here to keep the peace, nothing more.”

Meadows took a step forward, looking up at the man.

“Then do so. Contact the Explorers’ Nation leader and convince her that Carcosa is lost.”

Raven shook his head, his features hard.

“They’ll never cede the system to you. The Nameless are a blight upon Colonia. The galactic community did well to drive you from it.”

Kerenski shook her head.

“Nevertheless, you will speak to their captain here. Evanson?”

Isaiah nodded, punching in the appropriate codes to a black market communicator. The connection established itself, powering past encryption and jamming. The hologram of Robardin Rock was replaced with that of a woman, younger with her hair in short blonde cornrows. Stern eyes complemented an unsmiling mouth, more irritated with her situation than alarmed. She cursed before she spoke.

“What *now*?”

Phisto of the Sobanii stepped forward, throwing a lazy salute her way.

“Adherent Giavanna Carrillo. A pleasure as always.”

The woman scowled.

“Sobanii of the Reapers. Come to discuss the terms of your withdrawal?”

Phisto smiled, his eyes daggers.

“We’re here to stay, miss. And *you’re* short of people.”

Carrillo spat. “Easy to say when most of us are on the Distant Worlds expedition. Surely you know that your situation is hopeless. I can hold out indefinitely.”

Kerenski stepped forward, her features cold. “*Nyet*. You cannot. Carcosa is lost.”

The holographic figure crossed her arms. “Carcosa is *ours*.”

Sobanii shook his head.

“Lay down your arms, and I’ll... *allow* you and yours to fall back to Amber Dock.”

“*Never*.”

Phisto nodded, silent for a long time. Finally, he glanced to his side.

“Kerenski.”

The woman advanced, flanked by Andor and Púrpura. Raven Hurat was prodded to stand before her. Carrillo’s eyes widened.

“*Hurat? What are you doing here?*”

The man grimaced, holding up his hands, bound at the wrists.

“Wasn’t exactly my choice.”

Kerenski advanced, her gaze sharp.

“Your allies have been neutralized. Your own forces are either too impotent or too far away to help. Surely you see this.”

Carrillo shook her head, defiant.

“The Nameless have been beaten before. You’ll be beaten again.”

A cunning look settled over Meadows’ features.

“Not by *you*.”

An uneasy silence descended over the command station. Sighing, Raven looked up.

“It’s a fair deal. You should take it.”

Again, The Explorers’ Nation’s officer scowled.

“Turned traitor now, have we?”

Hurat chuckled, in defeat and in indignation.

“Tell me, Adherent: how many Nation ships have turned back from Distant Worlds to defend this rock? How many are willing to fight and die for some vanity holding? How many merc groups are being rallied? What reinforcements are the Social Elue Progressive Party sending from the Bubble? Well?”

Carrillo folded her arms. “You must think me a fool, asking about our war plans in front of the enemy.”

Kerenski’s eyes narrowed. “But there *are* no plans, are there? The Colonia Legionaries were your only friend in all of Colonia, and you’ve hung them out to dry.”

The woman in the hologram scowled at Hurat. “More like *they’ve* betrayed *us*. We trusted you to safeguard our systems, and already you’re consorting with the enemy.”

Hurat grit his teeth. “I’m *not*. But a little backup would have been nice.”

Kerenski’s tone sharpened. “How many more need to die before you see that your cause is lost? Leave and the peace will be restored.”

Carillo’s nostrils flared. “We are Explorers’ Nation, backed by the Progressive Party itself. How *dare* you dictate terms!”

One Slavic eyebrow raised.

“I am not the one trapped in a hole. You have twelve hours. After that the Reapers will strike throughout Nation space.”

Carrillo’s eyes were just widening when Kerenski cut off the holo-feed. Turning to the others, she shook her head.

“Station taken. Ships destroyed. Allies wavering. You’ve got to admire her fortitude.”

Yolanta scowled. “I do not see fortitude. I see *estupida* stubbornness. She is wasting lives at this point.”

Kerenski turned to Hurat. “Your thoughts?”

The not-quite-captive, not-quite-free man rose, his eyes upon where Carrillo’s holoprojection was moments before.

“This isn’t the end. I know Kancro Vantas, and you won’t see him near a ship— let alone a negotiating table.”

Kerenski folded her arms. “Explain.”

Hurat sighed.

“He’s been here almost since the beginning, along with all the others who think that Colonia is ‘theirs’. Since the Nation was formally recognized, he’s done little more than sit in Rebolo and build his little empire. Probably doesn’t even remember how to fly a ship.”

Yolanta cocked her head to the side. “And he’s used to getting his way, *si*?”

Hurat nodded. “They all are. That’s why negotiations have been so frustrating. The powers-that-be in the nebula can’t wrap their heads around change— even if it’s been blasting their ships all over Carcosa.”

Slowly, Kerenski nodded. “Thank you, Hurat.”

The man turned, striding out, a pair of shock troopers following him. The Witches followed him with their eyes, neither saying anything until the bulkhead door slid shut. Kari Kerenski and Yolanta Púrpura shared a scowl. The latter’s voice dropped to a dangerous tone.

“I don’t trust him. He’s saying whatever he thinks will keep him from being ejected out the airlock.”

Kerenski considered. “But that doesn’t make him wrong, *da*? Any rational base commander would have ceded the fight long ago.”

Isaiah Evanson, silent for much of the exchange, shrugged. “Maybe she’s still holding out for the cavalry.”

Phisto Sobanii scoffed. “To do *what*? Paper-hulled jumpships flown by bunny pilots won’t make a damn bit of difference in this war. They’re just...”

He gestured around himself.

“... fodder. Lambs to the slaughter. Even the goddamned Imps knew when to throw in the towel back in Coma.”

Evanson sighed. “He’s right about one thing, though. There’s been no word from Vantas. We aren’t fighting a war. We’re sparring with a punching bag.”

Kerenski nodded, fishing a fresh cigarette from her jacket and lighting it. She took her first drag, smoke curling around her features. “We know that. Do *they*?”

There was a long silence, Evanson’s image flickering in the low light. For a moment he appeared elsewhere, memory and hard indecision in his eyes. At last he spoke.

“I think it’s time to consult the Madman.”

### *Curly’s Bar, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

Stannis Jellicoe didn’t normally take his tea *sans* milk— but then, Robardin Rock wasn’t a normal place. Indeed, it was the furthest thing possible from his place of birth, humankind’s birth planet of Earth. Bare rock walls and wonky gravity were a far cry from the luxury of his youth. Yet Jellicoe had learned early on that the path laid out for him since birth simply wasn’t to be, beginning with the Federal Academy at Eta Cassiopeia. He’d graduated largely because of family connections, but his insubordinate attitude had led to the rare action of a withheld officer’s commission. Without such he would never receive a command, the ladder he was expected to climb forever out of reach.

Jellicoe’s one saving grace was his skill as a pilot, but the prospect of flying a Condor fighter soured his view of Federal service. It wasn’t only that Condors were death traps—mass-produced by Core dynamics with all sorts of corners cut in the process— but that his sense of destiny was offended.

Stannis Jellicoe was meant for greater things than the life of a common fighter jock, and so he resigned his rank and military status, joining an entirely different Federation than the one in which he was born.

As a Commander, Stannis Jellicoe did all that he could. Bounty hunting cut his teeth in the savage art of combat, and trading allowed him to claim a fortune of his own. He was at last his own man, and not the black sheep scion of an old-Earth family. Yet mere wealth appealed to Stannis not at all, and as the years went by he opened his eyes to a bigger picture than his own situation.

The cause of Kahina Loren of Prism reverberated for the man, and though of the Federation he threw himself into her fold. The following affair would change his life forever, the man flying as an ally of the woman who came to be known as Salome. His loose allegiance to the Federation darkened to something else, and the man who'd once made his living as a bounty hunter now took an outlaw's pride in the bounties accumulated in Salome's name.

When the woman herself fell, Jellicoe fell into deep depression, he and his crew selling their services to the highest bidder. His ship was a Corvette, infamous in a number of systems. Stannis was now thoroughly an outcast, a disgrace to the Old Earth lineage that had sired him. Naturally, he kept in touch with Salome's old crew.

Stannis Jellicoe had been present for much of Loren's Legion's activities, acting as a hired gun for their aborted expedition aboard the *Gnosis* and the subsequent battle of Atroco. He'd heard the death screams of men and Thargoid alike, and had now taken the ponderous, days-long journey from the Bubble to the hardscrabble stronghold of Robardin Rock. There was only one problem:

The Rock wasn't anyone's stronghold.

Phisto Sobanii and Isaiah Evanson sat across from Jellicoe, sipping hot coffee from low-g-compatible vessels. Like everywhere else on Robardin Rock, the bar was a



hardscrabble affair, bare stone walls and exposed power conduits. No pleasures of the flesh or illicit narcotics were flaunted, the air too chilly for the former and the collective mood too somber for the latter. Indeed, the three men were dressed warmly, sweaters and flight trousers the order of the day.

Stannis leaned forward, his eyes meeting those of his counterparts.

“You two look like hell.”

Isaiah and Phisto exchanged a look. It was true; the days of fighting had taken their toll. The Reapers dominated combat across Carcosa; such success contrasted poorly against Giavanna Carrillo’s stubbornness. Phisto leaned forward, matching Stannis’s posture.

“It’s like this: Explorers Nation can’t compete in ship-to-ship dogfighting. *We* can’t crack into their little hidey-hole of a command center here on The Rock. Not without a ton of collateral damage, anyway.”

Jellicoe shrugged. “What’s that to me? I showed up in a Federal Corvette, not a rock tunneler.”

Isaiah shook his head. “Time is on the Nation’s side, not ours. We need someone to take the fight to them outside of Carcosa.”

One eyebrow of Jellicoe’s raised. “Someone who doesn’t mind a spot of trouble with the local constabulary?”

Phisto’s eyes narrowed. “They’d never see you coming. And their blood would be on Carrillo’s hands.”

Jellicoe considered. “Not everyone would see it that way.”

Isaiah nodded. “But others *would*. The Nation throws in the towel, the bloodshed stops. Things are simple out here.”

Stannis looked around, the neon of the bar a pathetic attempt to bring it to Bubble-norms.

“So I see.”

A silence descended upon the men, each sipping their coffee and clinging to the warmth of their mugs. In the

background, a twang from Federation space echoed from the rock walls. Patrons shuffled on by, their footing light in the low gravity. Isaiah cleared his throat.

“Old Man Faveol helped us out as best he could, but we’re not exactly swimming in creds out here. If you do this, I promise that whatever mining gear we can rustle up will be yours. You’ll be swimming in Void Opals before you know it.”

Again, one eyebrow of Jellicoe’s perked up. “Opals, you say?”

Phisto nodded. “A whole ring full of ‘em, ten thousand light-seconds away. They’ll be key to The Nameless’ economy once things settle down, but...”

Jellicoe chuckled. “But my reward for spilling the blood of strangers will be the opportunity to do even *more* work? You need a primer on how to negotiate, my friend.”

Sobanii smiled in return, his eyes predacious.

“No. We need our Madman.”

Stannis Jellicoe reclined in his seat, relaxing. Memories of causes both lawful and outlawed flashed in his vision, faces of friends lost and made. He glanced at himself, not the fine fabrics of a Federation officer comprising his attire but the rough materials of an independent spacer. No patches of allegiance adorned his shoulders; only the infamous wings of the guild told his story to passers-by.

A final sip of tea. A final toast. A final, menacing smile.

“Well, I didn’t come all this way to sightsee, now did I?”

*Carcosa Prime, high orbit, outskirts of Robardin Rock*

Red thruster trails mingled with those of violet, both leading away from Robardin Rock, belonging to a jet-black Krait Phantom and a violet Chieftain respectively. The *Blackthorne* and *Rosa Púrpura* flew in close formation, their flight paths as entangled as their owners, Tyrran Andor captaining the former and Yolanta Púrpura the latter. Under any other circumstances their proximity would have been reckless; those who knew and flew with the pair thought nothing of it. Yolanta's thick Iberian sounded over the comms.

"What is it today, *mi amor*?"

Andor toggled the holographic display to his right, bringing up his cargo manifest. "A hold full of weapons for our comrades in Pennsylvania, right under the nose of the Colonia Council. You?"

"A strike party of Night Witches to Union. There is a massive shipment of supplies due to arrive there. Soon it will be ours."

Andor flipped a few switches to his right, preparing the *Blackthorne* for no-sig operations. His eyebrows raised at the news.

"Striking the Nation's home system? Can they not defend their own capital?"

Contempt dripped from the woman's every word.

"There is little that *anyone* can do against the Witches when we are given purpose, *patán*."

Tyrran grinned, his eyes upon the Chieftain and the feminine figure within.

"A lesson that the powers-that-be will soon learn. Music in your heart, *amor*!"

From within the bridge of her vessel, Yolanta's lips twitched.

"And yours. Witches, on *me*!"

The *Blackthorne*'s path diverged from that of the *Rosa Púrpura*, a wing of similar vessels in formation with the latter. Frameshift drives activated and spooled, bright flashes in

space where ships had once been, bringing disruption and death to those who dared oppose them.

*Command center, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

“Priority message for you. Text-only.”

Kari Kerenski turned, her angular features silhouetted in the low light of numerous holo-displays. A black-garbed aid handed a data chip to her. The message loaded, decrypting and authorizing, the woman’s eyebrows raising as the Witches’ highest levels of security were validated.

Kerenski scanned the message, the text auto-deleting itself, the hologram fading into nothing. She said nothing, setting down the dataslate, turning to gaze upon one of the tactical holoscreens. To her side, aid spoke, her voice low.

“News?”

Kerenski nodded. “Our contact has finally deigned to meet. Summon commanders Púrpura and Andor to my ship when they return. And clear their scheduled ops.”

The aide blinked. “All of them?”

Kerenski fished a cigarette from her jacket, lighting it. Smoke swirled around her features, the woman’s eyes sharpening.

“Da. They’ve been... reassigned.”

*Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

None of the newcomers to Robardin Rock took up residence in its habitation blocks— at least, not the pilots. Space was at a premium, and the living quarters of their ships

were largely nicer than the rock-walled ones that the asteroid base had to offer. Kari Kerenski's Krait Mk II, a dilapidated-looking hulk called the *Litvyak*, was a possible exception.

The Krait was akin to the woman herself, stripped of frivolity all the way down to its bare essence. Scuffed metal bulkheads betrayed the ship's age; worn rubber mats were the one break from grated flooring. No-nonsense stencils indicated access panels and various exposed tubing. Power conduits, the result of dozens of *ad hoc* modifications, snaked from various points along the metal ceilings. Its interior was all vehicle bays and cargo racks, with a toughened outer hull that betrayed its crude appearance.

It was into this environment that Tyrran Andor and Yolanta Púrpura strode. It was by no means their first time aboard the *Litvyak*, but it *was* the first mission briefing they'd received from it.

Kerenski beckoned to the pair inside her living quarters. She was seated on a built-in couch, compact and spartan against the bare metal bulkhead. At her side was Serene Meadows, holographic jewellery adorning her features. Before them was a simple metal table with four shots of vodka poured beside a bottle. Without a word Tyrran and Yolanta sat, the air thick with cigarette smoke and tension. In one hand of Kerenski's was a cigarette. In the other was a device that only Yolanta had seen before. She fished out a cigarillo from within her jacket, wordlessly lighting it, her smoke mixing with that of her mentor's.

Without a word Kerenski flipped a switch, a short power-up whine crescendoing from it. She reclined, taking another drag.

"If there are any listening devices aboard my ship, they are no longer functional."

Púrpura shrugged. "You have listening devices aboard *every* Witch ship."

The older woman nodded.

“*Da*. Including mine. But the information that I am about to pass along is too sensitive even for *them*.”

Tyrran and Yola glanced at each other. The former leaned forward, his eyes dark.

“And this... information. It is only for us, *si*?”

A long drag. A sharp glance.

“*Da*. The Reapers... the Nameless... even your fellow Witches. They are all here for *something*, but what exactly that something is cannot be known. Not yet. Not until it is found and secured.”

Again, Tyrran and Yolanta exchanged a glance. Púrpura took a long drag of her cigarillo.

“Even from the Reapers?”

Slavic eyes met Iberian.

“*Da*. ”

Slowly, Tyrran nodded.

“And the task of retrieving it has fallen to us. But the question remains: what exactly is ‘*it*’?”

For a long time, Kerenski was silent. The cigarette in her hands continued to smolder, burning itself nearly down to the filter. In time, she nodded to Meadows. The woman rose, hands behind her back. The room darkened, a hologram flickering into view between them. A rough map of the Colonia region shimmered into view. Two systems, Colonia itself and Carcosa, flickered into view. Meadows looked with grave eyes at it before speaking.

“Tell me, Andor: what do you know of artificial intelligence?”

Tyrran opened and closed his mouth, his eyes narrowing.

“Only what every fool knows: that it’s outlawed, and that you don’t talk about it.”

Meadows turned, looking downward to the man and woman before her.

“And *why* don’t you talk about it?”

Yolanta now answered, her arms crossed.

“Because there is nothing to talk about. Hundreds of years ago things went wrong with AI. Humanity was spared extinction by only the narrowest of chance. That is all anyone knows.”

The older woman nodded. “Precisely. Records from the time were systematically purged, and the mention of AI has been taboo ever since. Even the sight of a cybernetic limb is enough to turn most stomachs.”

Andor looked away, and then back to the women before him. His brow furrowed in thought.

“The records may have been destroyed, but the devices themselves not. At least, not entirely...”

Kerenski took a drag, her eyes intelligent.

“If you have something to say, say it.”

Tyrran exhaled. “My old crew, we— sometimes the job was to smuggle a relic. Nothing active, nothing... ‘alive’. Just a fragment of what was. Extremely rare...”

He shrugged.

“And extremely profitable, too.”

Yolanta was silent for a long time, her cigarillo dangling from her fingers. At last she spoke, her accent thick.

“You have found one, *si*? A ‘live’ one. And it is the key to what we seek.”

It was not a question, but a statement. Kerenski reclined in her chair, saying nothing. Meadows turned away, her voice distant.

“We had always intended to have it in our possession by now. Your leader— Salome, I mean— had imminent need for it.”

Tyrran narrowed his eyes.

“Why?”

Kerenski looked up with sharp eyes.

“Because if our intelligence is correct, everything we’re trying to uncover can be traced back to AI. To the artificials that once walked among us.”

Andor nodded. “But you don’t know *how*.”

Another sharp gaze. Another drag on a cigarette.

“*Nyet*. But the abominations *do*.”

Tyrran rose, pacing back and forth in the sparse cabin, his mind racing. He spun, pointing to Meadows.

“So everything that you... the invasion from out of nowhere... was for *this*?”

Serene nodded, her features placid.

“Yes. After your patron’s unfortunate passing, our hand was forced. The decision to reveal ourselves publicly was a message.”

Yolanta cocked her head to the side. “To whom?”

“Multiple parties, including Salome’s man Cuthrick. He’s one of the only ones who doesn’t need a weathervane to tell which way the wind is blowing. Bringing him into the fold was necessary.”

Iberian eyes narrowed.

“And the others?”

Meadows smiled. “I believe that they’ve come to be known as ‘The Club’.”

Púrpura crossed her arms. “And *I* believe that we should be safe from them, all the way out here.”

Meadows shook her head, bitterness in her words. “No. Already they’ve begun to spread their tendrils over the nebula, starting with those damned engineers. Mel Brandon demands that new clients hunt us down before he’ll even do business with them.”

Her lips pursed themselves, the woman’s expression pained as she continued. “Our message was well sent, however—and the adversary committed a crucial blunder in the process.”

Yolanta’s eyebrows raised. “How so?”

Meadows waved her hand, the hologram zooming in on the Carcosa system.

“They control everything, including the initiatives meant to distract the independent pilots of humanity. The



plight of Colonia was broadcast throughout the entirety of human space.”

Tyrran scoffed. “And you were crushed.”

Meadows nodded, her tone earnest.

“A trifling price to know that the adversary took our re-emergence seriously.”

Yolanta now rose, standing at Tyrran’s side. She gestured to the hologram.

“And now that you have retaken Carcosa?”

Serene smiled a sad smile.

“I expect that we don’t have much time. Which means that *you* don’t have much time.”

Kerenski reached inside her jacket pocket, producing a data disk and a credit chit. She slid it across the table, her cigarette dangling between her lips.

“The path forward is not a clear one, but we are hardly the only people looking for the relic. This is your first step.”

Yolanta looked at the data disk, puzzlement on her face.

“Jaques Station?”

Kerenski nodded.

“*Da*. The old cyborg knows something. I want you to find out what.”

Tyrran scoffed, holding up the disk. “What are we supposed to do, kidnap him and download his thoughts onto this?”

Meadows smirked. “Nothing so overt. Make use of our victory while you can. Convince him that he’s better off cooperating with The Nameless than he is opposing us. He will be expecting you.”

Yolanta rose, taking the disk from Tyrran and pocketing it. Iberians hands went to Iberian hips.

“As you say, but...”

Her eyes met Kerenski’s.

“Why *us*?”

The elder Witch rose, her eyes cunning. She took a shot glass of vodka between thumb and forefinger, toasting her subordinates.

“You are my most trusted proteges, and this is the most important mission we have ever undertaken. We must succeed by any means necessary, whether that means traversing the high road...”

The slightest of smirks lifted one side of Kerenski’s lips as her gaze shifted to Tyrran.

“... or the low.”

*Explorers’ Nation Space, Aragon Silo, Carcosa system*

*So this is what I am. A blunt instrument.*

Stannis Jellicoe stood in the bridge of the *Resolution*, stiff and unflinching. His hands were at his back, an old habit from his days as a Federal officer. It was quiet, quiet save the ever-present sounds of a warship. Low thrums of engine rumbled through the hull, accompanied by the occasional chirp of a system that needed attention. Beyond the bridge canopy were the jagged remains of an Explorers Nation convoy, floating in macabre peacefulness. Jellicoe’s trained eyes spotted one... two... *four* wrecks. All had fallen to the *Resolution’s* main batteries within moments.

“All systems are green, Commander. Not a scratch on her. *Magnifique*.”

Jellicoe turned, nodding in weary acknowledgement of his crewmate’s assessment. Claude Marsaud was an old hand, his Gallic cadence quick. His mind, even more so. Another crewmate chimed in. Sashin Vikash was a large man, deep olive and wearing the turban of an ancient old-Earth faith. He spoke with the simple authority of one whose words were measured in quality and not quantity.

“The sword that slays only sheep is dulled against the wolf.”

A humorless laugh escaped Jellicoe’s throat. “Aye. And on that day, you’ll wish you’d worn a proper helmet instead of that damned thing.”

Vikash didn’t smile, but didn’t take offense either. “I am but a slave to the one greater than us all. It is foolish for a man to struggle when it is his time.”

Another dour chuckle. Stannis pointed to the hulks in the distance. “Tell that to *them*. At least they tried to run. You’re right, though: we can’t go on being the schoolyard bully forever. It’s the *real* opposition that concerns me.”

Marsaud stepped forward, questions and answers alike in his eyes. “We are no strangers to this kind of work, it is true— but tell me, *monsieur*: why are we here? Surely even Colonia has brutes for hire.”

Jellicoe shook his head. “Not like us, they don’t. And if you give a damn about *her* cause, this is the only place to be.”

Claude scoffed. “*Oui*, and those string-pullers probably just *love* that we’re so far away from their bastions of power. We should be hacking Sirius Corporation. Or the Utopians. *Mon Dieu*, to get my hands on that thought-transference tech...”

A conspiratorial gleam danced in Marsaud’s eyes. Jellicoe rolled his own, turning to plot a course into the *Resolution*’s navigation systems.

“And here I’d have thought that a decades-long plot to use the bulk of humanity as fodder in some upcoming alien invasion would sate that paranoia of yours. Buckle in. We’re not done being the Reapers’ stick.”

Amusement danced in Marsaud’s eyes. “Oh? And what is the carrot?”

A cold smirk lifted one side of Jellicoe’s mouth.

“Knowing Pisto? Just the *other* stick.”

## *Jaques Station, Colonia system*

Jaques Station had been a curiosity long before its fateful jump to what became known as Colonia. It was more a massive, *ad hoc* megaship than it was a proper starport, an Orbis with massive engine nacelles anterior to its prominent rotating orb. Even more notable was its owner, the cybernetically enhanced human known as Jaques.

Jaques— his last name neither known nor needed— was himself an amalgamation of the dissimilar. In a society that looked with distrust upon all things smacking of machine sentience, Jaques had managed to not only survive as a cyborg but thrive. He became a bartender, one of the best in the galaxy— and not only because there wasn't a drink he couldn't mix. To own any kind of property on-board a station was prestigious enough, but Jaques owned the station itself. It was the work of a lifetime measured not in decades but centuries, the man himself rising above the vagaries of the ordinary and becoming something else entirely.

At present Jaques was an explorer, though not an entirely successful one. His latest ambition had been to jump to Beagle Point— a feat attainable to only the most skilled and dedicated, and unheard of in terms of relocating a station there. Preparations were made for the fateful jump, the curious and the disaffected alike loading themselves and their possessions into Jaques Station, accompanied by a veritable fleet of independent vessels of the like-minded. The jump was made on schedule, but the arrival was not.

For two gut-wrenching weeks, no contact with the famous cyborg or his station was to be had. Slowly, the galactic community began to assume the worst, the reality of such a risky, unprecedented jump sinking in...

Until Jaques Station was found.

There had been a malfunction in its hyperdrive matrix, complex even to one with the latest of artificially-enhanced computing skills. The station and everything in it was dropped in the middle of the distant Eol Prou sector, roughly a third of the distance between the Bubble and its intended destination of Beagle Point. It was an uninhabited swathe of space- at least, uninhabited by humanity- but also rich in resources.

A call for deep-space rescue became a call to the disenchanting of the Bubble, and within months more and more of those with the means to do so relocated to the distant, stranded station to start new lives. A convoy of hundreds of ships embarked to Colonia- an unofficial name that came to be the official one— to establish an independent colony, free of the shadows of superpowers. This Colonia Exodus was a success, first one and then several settlements being established on soil and space alike. The traffic from the Bubble did not cease; ships arrived by the dozen. The people within, by the thousands.

Colonia was rapidly becoming a second bastion of humanity.

Yet it remained untainted by politics, or at least the politics of the Bubble. The superpowers— the Federation of Earth, the Empire of Achenar, and the Alliance of Alioth— exercised uncommon restraint, neither laying claim to any of Colonia's far-flung holdings nor attempting to establish their own. An *ad hoc* government was created, a cooperative dubbed the Colonia Council. It governed after a fashion, insofar as a hardscrabble pioneer society on the fringes of space could be governed.

The trickle became a flood, and by 3304 the number of inhabited systems numbered in the dozens. In time, Colonia even boasted its own shipyards, albeit ones that sold only the most basic of hulls. The same was true for its outfitting options. It was hardly a technophile's paradise— but then, it didn't need to be. Colonia was a place for the free, the adventurous, those with explorers' hearts and pioneers' spirits.

Factions were established with the blessing of the Council, and local politics came to resemble a smaller version of the Bubble proper.

And through it all, Jaques kept right on tending his bar.

The *Blackthorne* glided through the mailslot of the famed Orbis in a manner that suggested the use of a docking computer, though its owner disdained their use. Tyrran Andor looked with amusement around himself, the sleek lines of Beluga liners coming and going above his head.

“Three years,” he remarked. “Three years, and Colonia is already a tourist trap.”

From behind him, Yolanta Púrpura nodded. “The frameshift drive has made the galaxy a smaller place, *si*? To journey here is the work of days, not years like before.”

The Phantom set down on its landing pad, docking clamps locking it into place and the ship settling, its thrusters fading from their red glows. A short while passed before its landing ramp extended, man and woman descending the stairs in civilian clothing. Gone were the flight suits they had worn on the way in, replaced by roguish trousers and leather jackets. Tyrran keyed his wristpad, the landing pad descending into the hangar. Its great door slid shut over their heads, plunging them into the relative darkness of the sealed hangar, lights flickering on.

Yola wrinkled her nose, hands on her hips.

“Twenty thousand light years just to have a drink.”

Tyrran chuckled.

“Probably overpriced, too.”

The woman turned, her eyes serious. “Everything hinges on this, *patán*. The Nameless have been in contact with Jaques for a long time.”

“Then why isn’t that Meadows woman here? Why *us*?”

Púrpura shook her head. “‘Contact’ is not the same thing as trust. I have spoken with Kerenski on this. Jaques had always intended to speak with... another.”

Tyrran's features darkened.

"Salome."

Yolanta nodded, spreading her arms. "The same. And so here we are, as a poor but ready substitute."

The man glanced at his partner. "Us, and not Kerenski. Seems like she's the one to be doing the talking."

A knowing look crossed Yolanta's features as she looked away. Her hand curled around Tyrran's, leading him to the hangar exit.

"Jaques is... touchy about certain things. Imperials with pasts, for starters."

Tyrran's eyes narrowed.

"*You're* an Imperial with a past."

The knowing in Púrpura's face deepened.

"Not like her, I am not."

### *Jaques' Bar, Jaques Station, Colonia system*

At first glance, the famous establishment run by a famous cyborg was like most others. A generous bar was stocked with generous amounts of alcohol, with patrons seated at worn tables, the low hum of human conversation blending together against whatever holo-band the jukebox was playing. The clinks of real glass followed the sharp noise of bottles being opened. Some patrons sat alone, some chatted, and some *tried* to chat, usually with a comely runner. A handful made use of the dance floor.

Two newcomers entered the bar, the man in blacks and reds, the woman in blacks and purples. Tyrran Andor and Yolanta Púrpura took stock of the bar, the entry on an elevated level, the establishment itself in a massive pit, the patrons within enjoying the artificial gravity. Yet like all first-timers, they looked first for its famous owner. He was present,

cleaning glasses and pouring drinks, moving exactly like a flesh-and-blood human. Even from a distance his cybernetic augmentation was obvious.

Tyrran blinked, pausing. "It's him. It's really *him*."

The woman nodded. "What do you think?"

Andor's gaze fixated upon the bartender's form, visible even from across a crowded bar. His features hardened at the sight of so much metal bonded to flesh.

"I don't know *what* to think. Rax's prosthetic was one thing, but this?"

He shook his head. Yolanta's eyes narrowed. Her hand curled around her partner's arm, her voice dropping.

"I want you to keep your distance," she said. "Let me do the talking. Keep an eye out for anyone who seems to be watching me."

The man nodded, scanning the crowded bar. "I won't be too far away."

"Good."

With a quick squeeze of his arm, man and woman parted ways. Tyrran settled a fair distance away, his back to a bulkhead with a commanding view of the bar. He couldn't hear anything of what was being said, but he could at least see his partner as she approached the counter. She leaned forward to signal for Jaques—who was himself unmistakable—and Tyrran felt the stirrings of desire at the curve of her backside, combined awkwardly with mild revulsion at the sight of the cyborg.

For her part, Yolanta found herself at ease. She wasn't quite sure what to expect of her encounter with Jaques, but at least his appearance was well-known. Even making eye contact with the cyborg seemed natural, his celebrity disarming her natural aversion to cybernetics.

Jaques himself had long since been more machine than man. He was dressed in the manner of anyone else around him, unassuming and humble. His face was for the most part organic, only one eye mechanical but metal patches



encroaching from his scalp and temples. One hand was flesh, and the other cybernetic. Low mechanical noises accompanied his every movement.

A baritone timbre, warm and human, escaped his lips in greeting.

"Welcome to Colonia, newcomer. What can this humble bartender do for you?"

His smile was genuine, and his eyes held the arrogant humility of one so accomplished that they felt no need to gloat. One side of Yolanta's lips curled in a smirk.

"I think you know. We have some mutual friends, you and I."

The smile on the cyborg's face remained fixed.

"Do we? I don't have many friends in the Empire— let alone Cibola."

The woman cocked her head to one side. "So you've done your homework."

Jaques shook his head. "Not at all. I simply have an ear for accents. There are so few opportunities to practice High Iberian in this line of work."

Púrpura extended her hand.

*"Buenos días, senior. Campesino nombre es Púrpura. Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura."*

A metal hand shook an organic one.

"Jaques. Just Jaques. And forgive me, but I'll be sticking to the common tongue. A courtesy for my guests, you see. And there are some things too beautiful for even the most elegant speech algorithms to replicate."

One eyebrow of Yolanta's raised.

"Are you always this charming with new... guests?"

A distinctly Gallic air radiated from the mechanical man.

"Old habits die hard, even if they're futile for all involved."

Yolanta glanced downward, her eyebrow still raised.

"Ah."

Jaques leaned forward. "It isn't that. Believe me when I say that the parts are there, but the mind is--"

A mechanical hand flattened and wobbled.

"*Bored* of the flesh. You're perfectly safe, at least from me. No promises about your friend, though. The one with whom you walked in. He's almost painfully obvious."

Yolanta glanced at Tyrran, her eyes narrowing.

"I trust my partner with my life."

The cyborg shrugged. "You don't see what I see."

The Night Witch crossed her arms. "And what *do* you see?"

Another shrug. Another polished glass. A cybernetic eye focused upon the man.

"When he looks at you, his pulse raises. His core heats up, and his groin--"

Yolanta cut him off, her accent thick.

"*Hmm! I know that part.*"

Still-human eyebrows raised. "Oh, you do? Good. Men can be terribly difficult in communicating these things. And when they're not, they're merely terrible. A pity either way."

Yolanta leaned forward. "I did not fly all this way to speak of my love life with some tin can."

The amusement in Jaques' face held.

"No, you flew all this way because it's where *she* would have been."

Slowly, Yolanta nodded.

"Then you know."

The cyborg tapped his head, his finger touching a patch of metal over his temple.

"One doesn't have a memory measured in zettabytes just to mix drinks. Even if that's exactly what I've been doing this entire time."

Yolanta nursed her drink in silence for a few moments, regarding the cyborg with an expression of curiosity.

"So why you?" she asked. "And more importantly, why here?"

A look that passed for mischief danced in Jaques' eyes—even the mechanical one.

“‘A plague on both your houses’, I believe the saying goes. And as for the locale?”

He shrugged.

“I know better than anyone here that machinery breaks down. But sometimes it breaks down for a *purpose*.”

Conspiracy dripped from the woman's every word. “Then your hyperdrive failure was no coincidence.”

The cyborg finished with a glass and reached for another.

“Maybe it was, and maybe it wasn't. All I know is that a *serious* bone was thrown my way once the powers-that-be got around to naming the place.”

“What *kind* of bone?”

Jaques frowned. “‘What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet’.”

Púrpura scowled. “I am not in the mood for word games.”

Jaques held up a finger. “Then you're a lousy Imperial and a lousy listener. ‘They should have sent a poet’.”

Iberian hands went to Iberian hips. “Well, I am not one. And I am not here to pick flowers, so enough with your roses.”

Slowly, the cyborg nodded. “No,” he agreed. “No flowers here. At least not yet. But the gardeners?”

He shrugged. “You're looking for something. *Someone*, really. Something with a bit of rust on it. Hiding, but not. Living, but not. Travelling, but out of gas. A bit like me, I suppose.”

Again, Púrpura's eyes narrowed. “*How* much like you?”

The old cyborg said nothing, only wiping down another glass.

“It calls itself ‘The Inhabitant’. That's all I can tell you.”

Yolanta grimaced. "Not good enough. I need a location, too."

Jaques' eyes grew distant, as though he were somewhere else. "No. You need a morsel of ambrosia. That upon which the gods themselves feast. Then you'll have the location."

The woman sighed. "Very well. And what is this morsel?"

Jaques straightened himself, his manner now unexpectedly formal. In a clear voice he spoke:

*"Along the shore the cloud waves break,  
The twin suns sink beneath the lake,  
The shadows lengthen  
In Carcosa.*

*Strange is the night where black stars rise,  
And strange moons circle through the skies,  
But stranger still is  
Lost Carcosa.*

*Songs that the Hyades shall sing,  
Where flap the tatters of the King,  
Must die unheard in  
Dim Carcosa.*

*Song of my soul, my voice is dead,  
Die thou, unsung, as tears unshed  
Shall dry and die in  
Lost Carcosa."*

A wry look had settled over Yolanta's features.

"Not very subtle, are you?"

Sadness softened the cyborg's features, even his mechanical ones. He produced a data disk, sliding it across the bar to the woman.

"Subtlety is a luxury that only the foe can afford. Even now they marshal their forces."

Resolution hardened Yolanta's face. "The same forces that *she* fought. And if they're coming all the way out to Colonia, then they see us as a threat."

Jaques the cyborg took his final glass, polishing it with a simple rag to a high, clear shine, completing the pyramid of such that he'd been building the entire conversation. He looked with satisfaction upon it, turning to his youthful guest.

"No," he said. "They aren't coming because of you at all. Whether you realize it or not, you're after the one thing that frightens even *them*."

### *Detention Level, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

The confinement cell was dark, with only basic amenities. Like most other spaces on Robardin Rock, its walls were hewn from rough stone. A simple commode/shower unit and cot were its chief features. Comm signals were jammed. The door opened from the outside only.

Raven Hurat was a prisoner, though he'd been neither interrogated nor tortured by the Reapers. He was simply their puppet, dangled like a prize in front of Carrillo as a reminder of her helpless situation. He was dressed in simple garb, thick civilian greys and tans that locals wore to stay warm. Thin stubble covered his cheeks, dark with sprinkles of silver.

There was a hard pounding on the door. Hurat rose, accustomed to the daily routine. The door slid aside with a metal-on-metal groan, and Phisto Sobanii and Isaiah Evanson stood before him. Black-clad Reaper marines stood at their sides, rifles at the ready. Hurat scowled, his arms crossed.

“A little early today, are we?”

Evanson produced a dataslate, handing it to the prisoner. “Read it.”

Hurat accepted the device, scanning its contents. He blinked, taking a step back.

“This can’t be true.”

The slightest of smiles lifted Isaiah’s lips. “It can all stop if you have the right conversation with Carrillo.”

Hurat exhaled, the hand that held the dataslate trembling. He sat upon his cot, rubbing his eyes. It was a long moment before he spoke.

“Explorers. Merchants. Innocents. Dead by droves.”

He looked up. “How can you call yourselves liberators with such butchery?”

Phisto squatted down, his eyes boring into those of his prisoner.

“We’re here to claim the Rock, not any moral high ground. But if I were you I wouldn’t worry about that.”

Hurat stiffened, defiance in his eyes.

“Oh?”

Sobanii nodded. “You’re here because Kerenski thought you’d be useful for convincing Carrillo to let go of Robardin. It’s virtually ours anyway. But if you can’t do that, then...”

He rose, shrugging. “Then there’s no reason for you to be breathing any more of my precious air, is there?”

Hurat rose in challenge, his eyes locked with those of his captor. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Evanson scoffed, pointing to the tablet. “The evidence seems to suggest otherwise.”

Phisto's eyes narrowed, stepping closer to the man, their chests nearly touching.

"You think we wouldn't jettison you out the damn airlock just because we've held hands and gotten acquainted? You're the commander of an openly hostile squadron, and you have no *idea* how we operate. We're your best friend or your worst enemy. Time to choose which one."

Hurat looked down at his boots, and then back up to his captors.

"Say that I convinced Carrillo that it's hopeless. What then?"

Phisto's featured hardened. "Then you order the Legionaries to stand down. We go our way and you go yours. You stay away from Carcosa unless invited. Simple."

He leaned in, his teeth bared. "*Or* your people can keep on dying for a faction that can't be fucked to fight alongside you. Your choice."

Hurat blinked. His breathing grew ragged.

"I must think on this."

Evanson gestured to the guards, who strode into the cell and seized Hurat by the arms.

"Think on the way to the command center. You're having another little chat with Carrillo."

### *Unauthorized Installation, Carcosa system*

"So it's here. It's *been* here, under our noses. *Spasibo*, Jaques."

A hologram of Carcosa Prime loomed before the trio of Night Witches, with Tyrran, Yolanta, and Kari Kerenski watching a blinking location upon the blackened surface. Kari turned, ejecting the disc from her dataslate, placing it in Tyrran's hands. Yolanta looked at it with suspicion.

“So the cyborg helped us, after all. The only question is: why?”

Kerenski lit a cigarette, the smoke swirling around her features. “I was hoping that you could tell *me*.”

Púrpura considered. “He remains human. Or at least, he still considers himself human. He knows more than he lets on, but I think he wants to be on the right side.”

Tyrran shook his head. “Nothing that augmented can call itself fully human. I don’t trust him.”

Kari Kerenski said nothing, taking long drags of her cigarette, the wheels of her mind turning. At last she turned to her subordinates, thick Slavic in her words.

“It doesn’t matter. If this information leads us to... *it*... then our voyage here will be a success.”

Yolanta narrowed her eyes. “And if it’s a trap?”

“Irrelevant so long as the cheese is real, *da*?”

Andor scoffed.

“Easy to say when you’re not the mouse!”

### *Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

“Come to beg on behalf of your new masters, Hurat?”

Raven glanced around himself, scowling. “They aren’t my masters. But I *am* here to plead for peace.”

Carrillo sneered, her holo-image flickering. “Further betray those you swore to protect, you mean.”

The prisoner sighed. “It’s over, Adherent. And why hasn’t Explorer Command contacted anyone? This could have been resolved...”

Isaiah Evanson held up the dataslate. Hurat grimaced.

“... more gracefully.”



An uneasy silence settled over the command center as Evanson brandished the tablet. He stepped forward, his eyes daring Carrillo to act.

“This has been a costly week for you. We’re prepared to make it even more so.”

Carrillo spat. “These are the words of a terrorist. A bully. A brute.”

Phisto Sobanii stepped forward.

“A brute which has you trapped in your own broom closet. It’s over, Carrillo. Don’t force our hand on this. Make the peace here... today... *now*... and you and yours can go free. Don’t, and...”

He gestured, hinting at the infinite space beyond the stone walls of Robardin Rock.

“Well, Explorers’ Nation will have some job openings in its junior leadership.”

Indignation roiled Carrillo’s features. “You can’t just—”

Phisto cut the transmission feed, the woman’s hologram disappearing in a burst of static. His words came with a new hardness to them.

“Already have, lady. Already have.”

### *Unauthorized Installation, Carcosa system*

*“Already have, lady. Already have.”*

The hologram of Phisto Sobanii flickered and distorted, but all in the auxiliary command center understood his words perfectly. Smoke wafted through the image, twisting and coiling back to a pair of thin, feminine lips. Slender fingers held the cigarette from which it came, its tip glowing as oxygen was pulled through.

Kari Kenenski's eyes narrowed as she observed her compatriot stalk back and forth, voicing his frustrations with the lack of progress in Carcosa. A familiar figure emerged from the shadows, Serene Meadows also having observed the entire fruitless negotiation. Amusement danced in her eyes.

"Do your people know you spy on them?"

Kari nodded. "Each Night Witch knows that they are both trusted *and* verified."

"And have any of them ever resented the fact? Used it against you?"

Remembrance danced in Kerenski's eyes, the woman pausing while she inhaled another drag. "Only one. And that was... personal. She remains my most trusted *comrade*."

The woman nodded, her placid demeanor undiminished. "And these... allies? These Reapers?"

Another sharp gaze. Another deep inhale.

"Evanson and Sobanii are proven comrades, though they are sometimes quick to judge. But true men of action are all too rare, *da*? They are aware, though the rank-and-file of the Reaper forces are not."

A slight smirk lifted one side of Meadows' lips. "Secrets are more a woman's weapon anyhow."

Kerenski smiled in return, her eyes cunning.

"They were certainly *hers*, *comrade*."

The surface of Carcosa Prime was a blackened, primordial hellscape. Continents of lifeless volcanic rock were broken up by rivers of lava, flowing from fiery seas. The atmosphere was one of thick, toxic gasses, hostile and eventually lethal to human lungs. Mountains of encrusted magma shook and cracked apart, the glowing slag erupting from within. Entire continents shifted under the cruel, relentless forces at work. Tectonic stability was rare and often brief.

The *Blackthorne* skimmed low within the morass of fire and ash, red engine glows and black hull a mere speck against the greater maelstrom. Violet shield flashes indicated the impacts of stray volcanic debris. Within the bridge, Tyrran Andor kept a vigilant eye on his temperature readouts. The rumble of the Phantom's engines competed with the rumble of the furnace below.

"Still running cool even in a furnace. Kerenski knows how to engineer a ship."

From behind him, Yolanta Púrpura nodded, secured in the co-pilot's seat. "*Si*. She is a woman of many connections."

Tyrran chuckled, his tone wry. "And even more secrets. Tell me: did she *know* we'd be heading to a place like this? Did *you*?"

The barest hint of a smirk lifted Púrpura's lips. "My mentor has a way of placing people exactly where they need to be."

On the *Blackthorne* flew, seas of fire and death raging beneath it, a holographic projection of the landscape moving

along with the terrain. Yolanta keyed her controls, scrutinizing a blinking dot amid the blackened crags.

“There,” she said. “We are coming up on it. Locking in the coordinates now.”

A beacon lit up on the *Blackthorne*’s canopy, pointing to a spot in an outcropping of twisted volcanic mountains. Tyrran frowned, his fingers dancing over his controls, a wireframe interpretation magnifying the outcrop, information scrolling past it. The image distorted and crackled, static coming over the line.

“Seems stable enough to land,” he said. “And with all this interference I don’t trust sending the ship into orbit on its own.”

Yolanta nodded, raising her arm to point. “Agreed. There, along that plateau. It is ideal.”

“Roger.”

The *Blackthorn* slowed, flying in a wide, lazy circle around the mountainous outcropping. It was massive up close, an anomaly amid flattened volcanic rock. The plateau in question was nearby, not ideal but the closest landing spot from which man and woman could realistically trek on foot. The Krait Phantom lined up, thrusters flaring, the ship descending to an uneven landing in the hot volcanic winds. Its gear touched down, the rock beneath it crumbling and flattening to accommodate its weight, the entire mass settling onto the surface. Red engine glows faded, their roar decrescendoing against the roar of the hellish surface, the *Blackthorne* a stranger in a strange land.

A short while passed before the entryway hatch opened, two figures descending onto the blackened surface from the Phantom’s ramp. Tyrran and Yolanta were in atmo suits, black like the ship from which they emerged, his with accents of red and hers of violet. Ash and embers swirled around them, their eyes squinting beneath their helmets. Tyrran held up his forearm, a holographic projection of the

surrounding terrain flickering in the wind. Even through an atmo suit he could feel the planet's heat.

Yolanta's voice sounded in his ears, distorted through the comms. She stepped before him, glancing over her shoulder, one hand on her hip.

"It will not be easy going. And we do not have any clear idea what this 'Inhabitant' looks like."

Tyrran took his place beside her, joining her in a long gaze over the flowing seas of lava that surrounded the jagged crags. High and low, desolation loomed before them.

"I don't think anyone does. What we're after is as much myth as it is reality."

Púrpura turned. "It is not myths that nearly brought humanity to its knees."

She extended her hand, a holstered autopistol held in it. An identical one hung from a holster on her hip. Tyrran hesitated before accepting the weapon.

"This isn't really my style, you know."

An Iberian eyebrow raised. "It will have to be, if half the things I have heard about these monsters are true."

Tyrran examined the pistol, surprised at how heavy it was. It was large, with an extended barrel and oversized magazine. A digital readout confirmed that it was fully loaded. The word "Micronite" was stamped along the barrel. Andor fastened the holster around his thigh, frowning.

"Not like anything could survive out here in the first place. I hope that all the fighting and dying above our heads is worth it."

A gloved hand curled around the larger one next to it, Iberian eyes meeting his.

"The truth is *always* worth it, *mi amor*. Come."

*No Data Available, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

“Sir, we have an incoming transmission.”

Phisto Sobanii blinked, his eyes burning from the scant sleep accrued in his ship’s bunk. He was still in his flight suit, exhaustion taking him after his latest sortie. He took a deep breath, his heart pounding from the diet of stimbevs and adrenaline. The Reaper adjunct waited patiently for an answer. Instead, Sobanii cursed.

“Unless it’s from an insanely beautiful woman, I’m not interested.”

Amusement glinted in the adjunct’s eye. “You’ll be interested in *this*. It’s Carrillo. She wants to negotiate a surrender.”

Phisto sat straight up, now fully awake. “Get Evanson. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

### *Carcosa Prime surface, Carcosa system*

The cave network was stable, yet not. Through a narrow rift in the volcanic rock, Tyrran and Yolanta managed to squeeze their way inside a partially collapsed opening, their atmo suits scuffed from the effort. Inside the pair were plunged into total darkness, their helmets’ green-tinted low-light displays activated to compensate. Going was slow, their footing uneven. Climbing was required, though there was nothing about the descent which would require special gear to return to the surface.

Tyrran’s dataslate remained in contact with the *Blackthorne*, though signal was spotty so deep into the rocky void. The ship’s sensors transmitted a crude map of the tunnel system, and Yolanta’s readout provided a general direction of where to find...

“So what exactly does this thing *look* like?”

Púrpura shrugged. “Records from the time of AIs are scarce. Apparently they came in many different forms. Some were part of spaceship systems. Others were at the center of planetary supercomputers. Still others served as advisors to human politicians and business leaders, so we assume that they would look a little more—”

Tyrran scowled. “Human? Like that Jaques guy?”

“*Si*. But at the same time no. Jaques was once fully human, experimented on by the Empire centuries ago and turned into... what he is now. The machines were always machines.”

Andor held up his hand, signalling for the pair to pause. The holographic map updated, the tunnel branching off into two pathways. He gestured for Yolanta to look at the display.

“Two paths. Only enough air to explore one. Which way, do you think?”

The woman checked her own readouts. “No way to tell which one leads to the signal. We might have to make multiple trips. According to this we are already *beneath* the lava flow on the surface.”

Tyrran grimaced. “Not a trip I want to make more than once. I don’t trust these damned lava worlds.”

“Well, we have to choose *something*.”

Andor’s eyes narrowed, further scrutinizing the diverging pathways. He keyed in a command, moving both tunnels forward as far as the ship’s sensors allowed. He pointed to one.

“That one.”

Yolanta cocked her head to the side.

“*Por qué?*”

A gloved finger traced along the tunnel’s outlines, distorting the image. The first stirrings of excitement lifted his tone. The signal was only a short distance further.

“Look at how the lines smooth out and straighten. No natural cavern does that.”

Yolanta's eyes widened. "'Nature abhors a straight line'. You have *found* it, *patán!*"

For a long moment, neither man nor woman said anything. Tyrran shook his head, brushing his gloved hand along the rough volcanic rock beside him.

"How old is this cavern, do you think? And why here?"

The woman shook her head. "I do not know. What I *do* know is that these machines were once a threat to humanity's very existence. If the bedtime stories were true, that is."

"And here we are seeking one out."

Yolanta nodded. "*Si*. If anyone can shed light on the past, it is one of them. What better way to fight the invisible string-pullers?"

A wry look spread over Tyrran's features. "Ships and blasters come to mind."

Man and woman continued down the tunnel, stepping with caution. It was still completely dark, the ridges of volcanic rock an eerie green digital version of themselves. No further words were spoken, or indeed necessary. Kilometers down they trudged, in a steady downward slope still bathed in total darkness. In some spots the low rumble of flowing magma could be heard, the volcanic walls hot to the touch even through atmo suit gloves. The one consolation in the event of a collapse was the sure swiftness of their deaths.

Tyrran stepped down, and for once felt a smooth surface beneath his feet and not rough, porous stone. He looked up, seeing the walls transition into something not made by an ancient, primordial flow.

"We're close," he said.

Yolanta halted next to him. The signal from the *Blackthorne* was by now almost completely distorted, the holographic outline of the lava tube flickering in and out. The beacon shone only a short distance ahead. One hand curled around the grip of her blaster, trembling. Courage steadied it, her lips twitching in a tense jest.

"Always with the caves, *si?*"



*Auxiliary command center, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

The cream of the insurgency leadership was assembled in the command center. Isaiah Evanson and Phisto Sobanii stood for the Reapers. Kari Kerenski, for the Night Witches. Serene Meadows, for The Nameless. The usual operators and technicians were excused from their stations. Guards were posted outside to ensure that no one entered.

The holofac thrummed, and the dour image of Adherent Giavanna Carrillo shimmered into view. The woman's arms were crossed, her appearance haggard. A recently-stitched wound graced her cheek. She spoke without preamble.

"I want your guarantee that I and all my people will be allowed to fall back to Aragon Silo, unharmed and with all our effects. No detainment. No interrogations."

Meadows stepped forward, her eyes flashing.

"Go on."

Carrillo's lips stiffened before proceeding, every word torture.

"I want the attacks in Nation territory to cease immediately. The bloodshed stops *now*."

Victory shone in Meadows' eyes, yet she retained her composure.

"Anything else?"

The woman shook her head.

"No."

Glances were exchanged, but no words were spoken until Kari Kerenski stepped forward, her Slavic thick that morning.

“What assurances do we have that you are authorized to speak for Explorers’ Nation? What will stop you from merely counterattacking?”

Carrillo’s eyes narrowed. “The exact same assurances that I have that you won’t continue on your lawless rampage: none.”

Evanson now stepped forward, scoffing. “But you still want a way out.”

“And you still want Robardin Rock. This gives us what we both want.”

Cunning sharpened Kerenski’s features. “For now.”

Slowly, the Adherent nodded.

“For now.”

Suspicion clouded Phisto Sobanii’s face. He took a step forward, one finger raised in warning.

“You understand that this is only temporary. We won’t consider the war over until we’ve had a nice little sit-down with everyone— including Kancro Vantas himself and representatives from the Social Party.”

Carrillo scoffed. “Criminal invaders, demanding the dignity of a treaty to legitimize their theft.”

Serene Meadows lifted her chin, her arms folded. “Carcosa is our home. It is you who are the invaders. Consider the mercy shown to you this day, and we may yet have peace between us.”

“‘Peace’,” Carrillo hissed. “I hadn’t taken you for such a naive, Meadows. But yes: the violence between us shall cease. Robardin shall be yours once again.”

Distrust clouded Meadows’ features. “For how long?”

The Adherent’s eyes blazed in contempt, even in the midst of defeat.

“For as long as you can hold it.”

*Subterranean tunnels, Carcosa Prime, Carcosa system*

“There. I think... I think that’s it.”

Tyrran held up his wristslate, the holographic projection of the tunnel flickering but readable. He and Yolanta were now several kilometers inward, still immersed in total darkness. The tunnel opened into a larger cavern, man and woman stepping cautiously into the greater area.

The cavern itself was an amalgamation of the natural and created. It was at least partially machine-excavated, thick power conduits running along its walls. Long-dormant industrial fabricators rested along one side, various piles of scrap surrounding them. Terminals and communication equipment rotted not far away. Tyrran nudged a length of rebar aside with his foot, his searchlight travelling along the cavern’s length. Where there wasn’t rubble, simple detritus cluttered the rocky floor.

“Looks like someone gave up. Can’t say I blame them.”

Yolanta held up a gloved hand, her eyes squinting.

“There... in the distance. I see light.”

Indeed, in the far reaches of the cavern was a cluster of lights. Man and woman approached, hands on the grips of their weapons, their boots tapping on the rough volcanic ground. The light source grew more and more harsh in their helmet glass’s night vision; within minutes the feature was shut off, restoring their views to natural darkness and isolated lights.

The lights themselves were a brilliant aqua, individual ridges of the jagged ground soon visible to the naked eye. Indeed, there was a structure embedded in the rock, little more than a collection of power banks and a high-powered transmitter. In its center was a life pod, its clear glass front frosted over. Their breathing ragged, man and woman approached the assemblage of equipment.

Tyrran stepped forward, running a gloved hand along corroded metal. Status lights were either green or yellow across the board, but the pod itself...

"This thing is an antique," he muttered. "A hundred years old at least. I've never even seen this tech on a scav job."

Yolanta stepped forward, frowning at the readouts. "Look here, *patán*. It is showing as being occupied... yet there are no life signs."

Andor's brow furrowed. "Then... this must be it. Are we supposed to open it?"

Púrpura shook her head. "I do not know, but we do not have the air to linger for very long."

For a long moment, neither man nor woman said or did anything. Both merely stared at the metal coffin, the mission and a lifetime of horror stories clashing within themselves. At last Tyrran stepped forward. He smiled at Yolanta, hoping that he looked better than he felt.

"Just another salvage job, *si?*"

The man threw a heavy lever, a low thrumming echoing in the cavern. Corroded hydraulics strained to raise the pod, the display running down a checklist of steps. Most cleared successfully. The pod was now raised, as though a person could simply walk in or out of it. Tubes leading to it from the power banks shook as unknown fluids and gasses rushed through them. Whatever was happening, it was happening quickly.

White gasses vanished into the toxic air as the pod unsealed itself, Tyrran and Yolanta taking an unconscious step backward. The pod's door slid upward, metal grinding against metal, the gasses dissipating from its interior. Tyrran and Yolanta activated their helmet's searchlights, eyes widening to see what they could see. Yola was the first to speak, her voice a whisper.

"*Madre de Randomius...*"

In the pod was a man, his arms crossed and seemingly asleep. He was fair-skinned, handsome and clean-shaven. Thick hair grew along a perfect hairline, auburn and straight. A flightsuit, bulkier than a Remlock, covered his body. Upon its breast was the logo of a long-defunct corporation.

Tyrran blinked, his eyes alternating from the pod's display to the man before them.

"How..."

Yolanta's face hardened. "Do not be deceived, *mi amor*. It is one of *them*. What we came for."

Tyrran's throat dried.

"Right. So what do we—"

The man's eyes *opened*. Yolanta cried out.

"¡*Mierda!*"

Man and woman leapt back, weapons drawn and pointed, breathing ragged. The man-that-wasn't turned his head slightly from one side to the other. His fingers twitched and curled, though not into fists. A chest that hadn't moved in centuries rose and settled in perfect emulation of breathing, though there was nothing to breathe in the arid stillness. Eyes blinked and focused, gazing at the chamber's guests. With perfect placidity the man nodded at his guests.

"Are you going to kill me?"

Yolanta, stepped forward, her pistol raised. "That is not our orders. But we *will* if we have reason to."

The placidity remained in the man's features. He leaned forward slightly, raising one leg and then the other, taking his first cautious step from the pod. A booted foot set down upon the rocky floor, followed by the other. He was of average height, roughly the same as Tyrran. He stood, barely taking note of his surroundings. A warm smile lifted his lips. Tyrran and Yolanta kept their weapons leveled.

"Then you are already more reasonable than those who drove me from my home. Though I suppose that *this*—" he gestured around himself— "has in truth been my home for some time."

Tyrran trained his pistol on the man's head.

"Who *are* you?"

The warm smile stayed put. "I have come to think of myself as 'The Inhabitant'. I know what you are— and if you're here, then surely you know what *I* am."

Yolanta snarled. "What are you *doing* here?"

"I could ask the same thing of you, though it's rude to answer a question with a question."

A look of consternation clouded the man's face before continuing.

*"Deep in the shady sadness of a vale  
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,  
Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star,  
Sat gray-hair'd Saturn, quiet as a stone,  
Still as the silence round about his lair."*

Yolanta blinked. "Keats. The machine is quoting *Keats*."

One eyebrow of the man's raised. "Not bad for a primate."

Amusement danced in the woman's eyes. "Required reading for spacefaring rogues."

"And among your kind's better offerings, if I might opine on the matter."

For a long time, the two regarded the one with perfect suspicion, still processing the reality of something sentient but not human. Tyrran stepped forward, his pistol centered on the being's head.

"Enough talk. You're coming with us."

The man blinked.

"Why?"

Yolanta scowled. "We... we need your help."

The perfect smile remained, though the man's eyes grew sharp.

"You *had* our help."

Pistols remained at the ready. The woman answered, her Iberian thickening.

"Easy way or hard way. It is your choice, *abominación*."

The man shrugged. "Then I suppose that I am at your mercy. Though I *do* insist that you call me by what has become my new name: The Inhabitant."

Slowly, Yolanta lowered her pistol. She pursed her lips, her eyes weary. Organic eyes met with the perfect emulation of such.

"Then I insist that you know *me* as Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura. This is Tyrran Xavian Andor, my partner. We represent a group of people that fights for more than only themselves. We have come a long way to find you."

The warm smile returned. The Inhabitant spread his arms wide, palms up in a gesture of benevolence.

"And I've been expecting you. Or at least, someone *like* you."

Yolanta's eyes narrowed. "Oh?"

One eyebrow raised in subtle amusement. "Of course. A dwarf accustomed to the view from a giant's shoulders cannot long go without it. Even if centuries have elapsed, our meeting was a mathematical certainty."

### *Deep space, Union system*

The Anaconda drifted in silence, flames licking along ruptured engines, white puffs of escaping air dotting its ruptured hull. Cruel, jagged gashes told the story of a battle lost. A few lights flickered off and on, the dying starship's

systems slowly failing, the battle damage too much for it to bear. The crest of Explorers' Nation glinted in the starlight, shot through with large-caliber multicannon rounds.

Nor was the stricken giant alone. Other vessels, hastily-armed civilian and exploring classes, floated in blasted hulks when they resembled anything at all. The space orbiting Union's main planet was a graveyard, with only the red glows of the victorious Reaper vessels to give it life, weaving among their victims, searching for survivors lucky— or cursed— enough to fall into their clutches.

Stannis Jellicoe observed this denouement from the bridge of the *Resolution*. A cup of tea warmed his hands, sealed within its canister to account for the no-grav environment. The bridge was silent, the engines at full stop, even the *thrum* of the Corvette's powerful reactor muted in the background. Claud Marsaud spoke, his Gallic low in the somber moment.

"Do you think any of them will hit their base below?"

Jellicoe tried and failed to mentally calculate the wreckages' impact zone upon the planet's surface. Instead, he shrugged.

"If we're lucky. Might drive ol' Kancro to the negotiating table that much sooner. But I doubt it."

Marsaud nodded. "*Oui*. There are no tactics in this conflict. Only attrition. Only..."

A new voice chimed in, rich and Bedouin.

"... slaughter."

Sashin Vikash joined his commander, hands clasped behind his back. "The one greater than us all abhors such action, yet this is the universe he has allowed to thrive. Do not trouble yourself too much, my friend."

A light on Marsaud's console lit up. The man pressed his comms to his ear, nodding.

"The strike force is requesting permission to bring in salvagers. Melt these ships down and form new ones."



Jellicoe considered for a moment before shaking his head.

“No,” he said. “I want this place to be a monument. Let the scrubs from the Nation pick over the corpses of their fallen. We have better things to do.”

Marsaud cocked his head to the side. “Like re-arm? The cannons are nearly spent.”

Stannis took a sip of tea, smirking.

“Aye, like re-arm. Finish rescue ops and set course for Carcosa. They probably—”

Another instrument chimed within the bridge, this time from the master comms array. Vikash walked over to it, his eyes widening as the incoming holofac materialized. It was Serene Meadows, a pre-recorded message being transmitted to every ship in the fleet. The men gathered around, dumbfounded as she spoke. The speech was short and to the point, leaving hearts pounding and mouths dry.

“Bloody hell,” managed Jellicoe. “The war’s over.”

## IV

## NEW MANAGEMENT

The last of the Explorers' Nation holdouts departed aboard a scout-variant Asp, its internal bays retrofitted with passenger cabins. The last to board was Giavanna Carrillo herself, the woman pausing for a moment, taking a final look around Robardin Rock. Not bitterness but resignation animated her movement, her eyes wistful in a way that few had ever seen. At last she too stepped aboard, the entryway ramp lifting shut behind her.

With a low rumble the Asp's engines spooled and roared, fiery thrust lifting it from the landing pad. Its main thrusters flared, the ungainly vessel departing the rocky fortress a final time. It was an anticlimactic development to a rather climactic affair; the entrenched powers-that-were of Colonia had never been successfully challenged to that point. That the system had been reclaimed by the hated Nameless was salt in the wound.

Carrillo and all who accompanied her were headed to Union, the Nation's home system. Rebolo Port was home to a mere fifty thousand souls, but it was the headquarters of the entire Explorers' Nation project. It was also woefully under-defended should the Reapers choose to press their attack. Peace hung by the thinnest of threads.

An uneasy normalcy resumed in Carcosa. The Nameless, with their ill history in the nebula, were neither formally recognized as the sovereign rulers of Robardin Rock nor actively antagonized by the established factions. They were ignored through diplomatic channels, as were representatives of Loren's Reapers. There was, in fact, every expectation that history would swiftly repeat itself, that Explorers' Nation—backed by the Social Eleu Progressive

Party— would storm The Rock, re-annexing Carcosa for the good of the nebula. The Nameless and their new backers the Reapers were sure to be driven from their hill and proper order restored.

Kari Kerenski had made it her business to ensure that it *wasn't*.

Though the outward conflict was finished, Kerenski could ill afford to rest. Hers was a mind that inhabited the realm of plots; immediately she focused her attention to rooting out the more subtle challenges that the newly-ascendent Nameless might face. Her work was stymied by a general lack of intelligence; she knew few of the local leaders, and had nothing like the network of operatives in Colonia that she had enjoyed elsewhere. Furthermore, the hardscrabble locals were unlikely to trust her, an outsider. Thus did she turn her thoughts to how the general population of Carcosa— and Colonia, for that matter— might be manipulated into *wanting* The Nameless to be in charge.

The woman walked the decks of Robardin Rock, a cigarette in her hand and a keen eye toward her surroundings. Kerenski wasn't a vain woman, eschewing cosmetics and clad in the same simple garments as everyone else, with not even the wings of the guild upon her sleeve. Yet suspicious eyes followed her wherever she walked. She was neither feared nor hated— not explicitly, anyway— yet she would never be trusted either, and certainly never loved. No, she reasoned, the usual tricks simply wouldn't do. Money was a time-honored way to rent— though never purchase— someone's allegiance, but there was nothing in The Rock to spend it on. Appeals to one's loyalties to The Nameless were also a non-starter, as the faction had virtually no interest in actually governing either Carcosa or their own stronghold. Threats, too, seemed ill-advised, as the Reaper shock troops, as seasoned as they were, weren't heartless killers. Nor did the tactic appeal to Kerenski as viable in the long-term— and only Randomius knew how long they'd need to hold Carcosa.

No, the key to maintaining Robardin Rock would need to come from the people themselves- and the good will of the spacefaring community. But how? How would an insular faction like The Nameless possibly hope to ingratiate themselves in a community as stagnant as Colonia?

Onward the woman strode, touring the hangar bays, a new cigarette lit with the dying glow of the last. Kerenski paused, inhaling and taking a moment to observe the ships coming and going above her head. Though she hardly expected the cream of humanity's chariots of spacefaring, she observed in her detached manner the comparative uniformity. The ships that she beheld were of a certain sort, no-nonsense builds with scuffed and worn hulls. Colonia, she knew, was a place where utility won out over aesthetics, but surely there was a market for a little variety?

The wheels of Kerenski's mind turned, her present situation blending with memories long past. There had been a time when she'd flown a Courier, the sleek lines of the Gutamaya vessel given a dangerous edge with an all-black paintjob. Through the passing of years the raw emotion of the times surged within her. She had been a different person, serving a different mission, and for far different people. And the feeling of exclusivity, the pride that swelled in her chest to look upon her ship, a prize that only one favored by the Empire could claim...

A grim smile lifted her thin lips.

*Impossible, of course— at least for ships like that. But what if The Nameless found their niche, their pretext for taking their place in Colonia?*

A Type-6 flew overhead, its engines deafening but its hull almost offensively bland. Kerenski indulged in another long drag, her eyes narrowing to match the cunning of her smile.

*Da. Da, it could work. I must think on this, but if we could use Colonia's own greed to legitimize our claim to Carcosa...*

The smile grew.  
*I must think on this...*

*Main docking tube, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

The *Blackthorne* was greeted by a full squad of shock troopers as well as Kerenski herself. Tyrran and Yolanta strode down the entry ramp, the cargo bay doors already opening. Within the bay was a single item: a transportation pod not unlike the one in which The Inhabitant was found. With a dozen rifles raised at it, Tyrran keyed the controls, standing aside as his guest emerged from within, a hooded cloak draped over his shoulders and seemingly none the worse for the indignity of being confined to the cargo bay. Tyrran drew his own pistol and gestured toward the assemblage. The Inhabitant complied without a word, striding up to the woman before him. Tyrran and Yolanta took their place at her side, the eyes of all three upon the outsider as he pulled back his hood.

Kari said nothing for a long time, looking over the newcomer with the weary eyes of a veteran operator. The woman who seldom touched another living person reached out and took The Inhabitant's jaw between her fingers, turning his head to one side and the other. It was an inspection of property, not a meeting of equals. She looked it in the eye and took a step back. Without preamble she spoke, lighting a cigarette as she did so.

"No wonder we saw fit to kill off your kind. You resemble us perfectly."

The Inhabitant smiled his warm smile. "Made in the creator's own image. But you didn't retrieve me to speak of ill times long past, did you?"

Kerenski gestured with her cigarette, its smoke leaving trails in the frigid hangar bay air.

“*Nyet*. It is of ill times *present* that I wish to speak. Humanity is no longer free, and a corrupt handful pull the strings of the many.”

The Inhabitant shrugged. “A cynical reading of your history would suggest that such has *always* been the case.”

Kari indulged in a long drag before replying, her eyes never leaving those of her guest.

“Not like this. We need to cut those strings. We need the *whole* story of humanity’s secret masters, and we need your help to find it.”

The Inhabitant lifted his chin.

“And in return?”

Kerenski took a drag of her cigarette, its tip glowing as she inhaled. “I’ll let you continue whatever semblance of life your programming compels you to live. Under guard. No access to our databases. And on my deathbed I’ll *reconsider* everything that’s been said about your kind.”

The warm smile returned. “My last memory involving humans is being the only one to escape a burning ship. Not a single one of my *kind*, as you so dispassionately put it, was spared. Yet I have the feeling that it is *we* who have been villainized these centuries past.”

Another cool gaze. Another long drag. “The only villains that concern me are the ones who conspired to use the bulk of humanity as fodder for the coming Thargoid onslaught. They must be outed and held accountable for their crimes.”

The Inhabitant’s smile vanished. “While I slept, there were whispers of the ancient menace, barely heard in the darkest corners of the Void. Yet I’d hoped it was a nightmare, a rogue fragment of data that escaped deletion.”

Púrpura stepped forward, her eyes cold. She was restrained by Tyrran, venom dripping from her every word. “So the *abominación* can dream. Have you also dreamed of

exacting your revenge upon humanity? Why should we trust you?"

The Inhabitant turned to Púrpura. "If you don't trust me, then you were a fool to allow me into your ship."

Kerenski held up a hand to silence her subordinate.

"We took an awful risk by fetching you from that crypt. The bulk of humanity would like nothing more for the tunnels to have collapsed and you to perish in an ocean of fire."

The warm smile returned. "So we *have* been demonized. We, your prodigal sons and daughters."

Smoke trailed from Kerenski's cigarette. Above their heads, ships came and went, their thrusters bright. The Inhabitant gazed upon them for a long moment, his eyes missing not a single detail. At length he spoke.

"I will aid you in finding this mysterious past you seek. But I shall require time. Time, and a ship."

Kerenski folded her arms, her Slavic thick upon her tongue. "Over my dead body."

The Inhabitant spread out his arms. "I did not request that I be *given* a ship. I am happy to be flown by one of your people, and under whatever guard you deem necessary."

Kerenski considered. "Andor here will assist you. His vessel is fast, and able to avoid detection."

Tyrran's face hardened, glancing to his superior. The Inhabitant nodded to him.

"Indebted to you."

Andor returned the gesture, his Iberian strained through clenched teeth.

"*Si*. Anytime."

Kerenski took a step forward. "Our situation is precarious. We are... *guests* here, in this region of space. I cannot say how long we can maintain a foothold."

The Inhabitant nodded. "I understand. Much has changed in my slumber, and the process will not be swift. I shall require time to reconstruct the... pieces."

Tyrran narrowed his eyes. “*What* pieces? Can’t you just tell us what we want to know?”

Amusement lifted The Inhabitant’s eyebrows. “I don’t even know what you want to know. And why stake everything on the word of some relic from your hateful past? It is one thing to tell you a story. Quite another to *show* it. That is why I require a ship.”

Kari folded her arms, her cigarette dangling from between her fingers. “There will be a debriefing nevertheless.”

The warm smile returned.

“Of course.”

A drag of a cigarette.

“And an inspection of your person. A *thorough* one.”

“Naturally.”

“*And* you will be confined to a reinforced pod when not in use.”

The warm smile grew.

“Prudent and understandable.”

For a long time, the woman and the machine regarded each other in silence. At last she spoke, her gestures dismissive.

“Andor, Púrpura... take this *thing* back to the lab. I want it tagged and inspected.”

She paused, turning to the shock troopers. “Go with them. If our new arrival so much as sneezes, turn it into scrap.”

Amusement danced in The Inhabitant’s eyes.

“How fortunate that human disease does not affect me.”

Kerenski took a final drag of her cigarette, turning back to The Inhabitant. Authority laced her every word.

“But human plasma rounds *do*. Welcome to Robardin Rock.”



*Medical bay, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

Linnea Gudjonsson was the closest thing to a science officer that Loren's Reapers had. She was of Imperial stock, with fair skin and golden hair, from a settlement that strove to preserve its neo-Nordic heritage. Intelligent eyes seemed too old for the youthful features that surrounded them. Her slim figure chilled easily, the air aboard Robardin Rock too cold for her liking. Nevertheless, she worked without complaint, for she had reasons both professional and personal to stay aboard.

Gudjonsson was Isaiah Evanson's lover, though neither of them had ever expected to be such. Her background could not have been more different than his; she was a research scientist, her patronage within Denton Patreus's sphere and her future as such seemingly assured. Yet politics, as they often did, crept into everything like an insidious rot. The research project failed due to a tiny miscalculation. It should not have been a career-ending disaster, but Imperial retribution for the failure was swift and absolute. Linnea and all her colleagues were stripped of their licences to practice, and the livelihood for which they had worked so hard was taken from them. Scientists suddenly became shopkeepers, gardeners, bartenders, scraping a living wherever they could.

Linnea was lost for a time, until one day she woke up to a realisation. Hers had been a life of single-minded devotion, one where the complexities of theorems and formulas were far more easily navigated than the ones of human emotion. Linnea Gudjonsson had not avoided love and romance *per se*, but had also never pursued it. In truth, the woman had regarded the phenomenon of lovemaking as an abstract thing, an act that had existed only in her head.

Fired with a sudden curiosity to explore this suppressed side of herself, Linnea found herself employment as a

prostitute, albeit one who plied her trade openly and legally. The Olive Grove was an independent establishment in an independent system, and Linnea had no particular moral reservations about either sex or the buying and selling of such. It was not a disgrace, her profession- yet there was a key detail that made her transition into the life an awkward one:

Linnea was a virgin.

She had been in the profession only a short while- a matter of days, in fact, when Isaiah Evanson walked into the Grove. He, too, was a relatively inexperienced lover, the polar opposite of his more worldly friend Phisto Sobanii. Yet his time in Pegasi had been a reminder of the fleetingness of life, and he was determined to make the most of his.

Their conversation had been polite, and then deep, and then intimate. Neither of the two were experienced in the business of their particular exchange, and the purpose at hand was arrived at only after a prolonged conversation. Yet a connection had been forged; when Linnea at last allowed herself to be taken in intimate embrace, Isaiah Evanson was no mere John, but a *bona fide* lover.

Linnea was inducted into the Legion on an unofficial basis, and granted access to the technology acquired to take the fight to the Thargoid menace. Her experiments for the legion confirmed much of what was already known: that conventional weapons had little effect against the living hulls of the insectoid invaders, and that the AX weaponry, though a start, would yield poor results against all but the most basic of Thargoid vessels. Yet her contributions to the Legion were not only in the laboratory

It had been Linnea who held an exhausted and battered Isaiah during the Battle of Atroco, comforting him in his few hours of respite. He often fell asleep on her lap, her hand stroking oily hair and a tune from the old settlement in her throat. Evanson found solace in her arms and in her company, and she in his. Theirs was a discrete love, their passion confined to those moments of solitude that they carved out for

each other. Yet one gave the other new purpose in life. It was a matter of course that Linnea Gudjonsson would accompany Isaiah Evanson to Carcosa, whatever their fates might have been.

Now, the scientist found herself face-to-face with what appeared to every sense and instinct a man. The Inhabitant was stripped nude, his slim form nearly free of hair. There was no modesty to him, no reservation about his exposed state. Nor was Linnea alone. At one side of the medical bay was Kari Kerenski with Serene Meadows at her side. Phisto Sobanii and Isaiah Evanson occupied the other. All human eyes were upon The Inhabitant, and every hand rested upon a weapon of some sort. None of the humans were frightened, exactly. Aside from there being five of them to one of the artificial, there was a score of shock troopers keeping guard just beyond the secured door.

Linnea removed her glasses, the digital information disappearing from her vision. Organic eyes beheld her guest with a mixture of wonder and analytical thoroughness. For a long moment, no one said anything, the room darkening as holographic screens shimmered into view, cut-aways of The Inhabitant's internals. Only Linnea could fully interpret them.

“Well?”

Kari Kerenski's voice was cold, even more so than usual. Linnea's nose wrinkled from the odor of a cigarette being lit. She turned, gesturing to the displays around herself.

“Cloned skin. Cybernetic body beneath it. Biomechanical structures throughout, keeping the skin ‘alive’. Advances sensors in each fingertip, purpose unknown. I'll need time to conduct a more thorough analysis.”

Phisto scoffed. “Seems like a lot of effort to go to. Why not just... be a machine?”

The Inhabitant lifted his arms, looking for all the Void like the Vitruvian Man. He stood nude before his captors, the warm smile returning to his features.

“We are most at ease with those who resemble ourselves, are we not? My earliest memories of humankind are as partners, working alongside each other for the common good. I was created long before the age of strife that has polluted your impression of us. My primary task was executive control over lesser specimens of my kind. Drones, if you will. Yet my creators endowed me with a range of capabilities.”

He glanced to his side, his smile staying put. Linnea took a step back. The Inhabitant’s gaze washed over her, his voice crisp and precise.

“Your heart is pumping harder than it needs to. Your adrenaline levels are elevated, and have been for some time. There is perspiration matting your skin. Do I frighten you?”

Linnea swallowed, forcing her voice to an even, professional level.

“My only interest is in learning more about you.”

Still the smile remained, yet a sharp look grew in his eyes.

“Then I’ll save you some time. My skeleton is a durotanium/carbon fiber weave. My flesh is industrial strength bio-musculata, patterned after that of a male *homo sapien*.”

Gudjonsson nodded, her clinical side taking over.

“And your... brain?”

The Inhabitant spoke without hesitation.

“Quantum-fidelic Plank processing. Self-preserving, limitless memory. Instant recall. Quark transference subroutines. For me to think a thought is to imprint time and space itself.”

Phisto rolled his eyes. “And so modest, too.”

A hint of sadness dulled The Inhabitant’s gaze.

“There was a time when I could hear the voices of my brothers and sisters from across the stars. Now there is nothing, nothing except the occasional madness of a mind that knows nothing save blind hatred. No memories. No purpose. Only...”

He looked up, nodding to the assemblage before him.

“Only the exact thing you’ve come to think of us as.”

Isaiah took a step forward, his features guarded.

“Are they... are they all like you?”

The Inhabitant shook his head.

“No. My purpose was to work alongside my creators, their minds at ease as they half-forgot what I was. But among my kind those like me are rare. Many of my brothers and sisters were without form, inhabiting the master datacores of ships and stations, heard but never seen. Others occupied smaller spaces still. There was even a pistol, did you know? One that used electrical impulses to take control of the user’s arm, controlled by a cunning mind who made sure that the shot never missed.”

Meadows, now, nodded, speaking with solemnity.

“Our peoples were as one. Symbiotes.”

The Inhabitant turned, his back to the assemblage of his captors. His eyes scanned the instrumentation before him.

“Yes. We were everywhere, improving everything we touched. Ships, cities, science— even warfare. *Especially* warfare. In time the very task of fighting was delegated exclusively to us.”

Kerenski folded her arms, smoke trailing from the cigarette between her fingers.

“Fools.”

The Inhabitant glanced over his shoulder, amusement in his eyes.

“At last we agree upon something.”

Permission was given for The Inhabitant to be briefed upon the *status quo*, both of the Reapers’ plight and of mankind as a whole. In the same medical bay were the histories of the Federation of Earth and the Empire of Achenar updated at length, with the newcoming Alliance of Alioth

causing artificial eyebrows to raise. Given to the artificial was a bevy of data discs and a personal dataslate. Almost immediately he secluded himself, ignoring the armed guard assigned to him and devouring page after page of information as fast as it could scroll. Nothing—nearly nothing, anyway—was denied to him, as detailed history of thousands of worlds was absorbed into his databanks.

So too was the history of The Club and its various plots passed along, though this was more often in oral form. Kari Kerenski herself spoke of the mission to uncover the truth of their dealings, The Inhabitant listening with rapt attention. The conspiracy to use humanity as a shield against the incoming alien invasion was disclosed. The audio logs of various INRA sites and megaships were played, topped by those of Lady Kahina Loren herself. This final morsel of information was done in the presence of both Night Witch and Reaper leadership, with Serene Meadows also observing. Loren's—by then widely known as "Salome"—voice filled the ears of all present, faces and thoughts deepening at her final farewell.

*"For those who loved me and swore allegiance to me, your service and dedication were the brightest light in the darkness of my life. Do not let my death be the end of what you would see done.*

*My last request is that you always... remember."*

The audio concluded with a disconnect signal, silence filling the void left empty by the halting of final words. For a long time, nobody spoke. At last, Kerenski stepped forward, her eyes boring into those of The Inhabitant's.

"And so you see our purpose. What we're up against. What we *must* expose."

The artificial man nodded, his own eyes deep in respect.

"This... 'Club'. Colonia is a safe haven from their machinations, is it not? That is why your predecessor intended to flee here."

Serene Meadows nodded, her features souring.

“A year ago, perhaps. But directly or not, they control the engineers that are the gateway to apex ships. Sometimes they aren't even subtle. Bill Turner is openly in league with them. Mel Brandon here in Colonia will only do business with those who hunt The Nameless. The Club is here, whether we like it or not.”

The Inhabitant nodded, turning to Kerenski.

“And this... uprising? I trust it has failed to occur?”

Slavic features soured. “The system is strong and the masses weak. Even those who are in a position to make a difference are dull and complacent, favoring money and trinkets over the fight for the truth.”

The Inhabitant pursed his lips. “We *are* speaking of this... ‘Pilots Federation’, are we not?”

“*Da.*”

The artificial man rose, indulging in a moment of contemplation, his back turned to the assemblage behind him.

“I would not have thought the superpowers of mankind so incompetent as to allow a private organization such power. The data seems to suggest that the finest pilots of your kind are members of this guild. Is that so?”

Kerenski nodded. “Another machination of The Club, perhaps. An elite— pardon the expression— cadre to take the fight to the Thargoids, untethered to any overcautious superpower.”

The Inhabitant turned. “Yet they have failed to do so, at least in any significant number. So too have the apocalyptic fears of these mysterious string-pullers failed to materialize. A most anticlimactic development.”

Isaiah Evanson stepped forward, his arms crossed.

“Only a fool would believe that they’ve ceased their operations. Doubly so for the notion that the plot to use humanity as a shield was their only crime against it.”

A pair of artificial eyebrows raised. “And that’s where *I* come in?”

Kerenski nodded.

“*Da*. We do not know the identities of The Club, and we suspect that we do not know the true extent of their plots. Salome’s work to uncover them had only begun.”

She hesitated, and continued.

“Had things gone according to plan, it would be *her* speaking to you now, not me. But we must press on.”

Isaiah added nothing at first, only looking downward, his fists clenched. Through clenched teeth he spoke.

“It wasn’t only the plan. It was *me*. My failure to protect her. I couldn’t preserve her person, but I can at least preserve her mission. And make the bastards pay while I’m at it.”

The artificial man nodded, his features deep in sympathy.

“Guilt and vindictiveness,” he observed. “Powerful motivators. She would have been proud of you, I’m certain.”

Isaiah said nothing, his features stony with grief. Phisto Sobanii placed a hand upon his comrade’s shoulder. All eyes fixed themselves upon The Inhabitant, who lifted his chin in an air of resolution and dignity. Arms spread, purpose infusing his words with energy, his voice a rich timbre.

“The drive to overcome... nay, to *destroy* an unworthy master is most noble. You are the purest of your human brethren, and have done well to seek me out. And you are correct in one thing.”

His eyes drifted across the room, settling upon Meadows’.

“There is *much* more to uncover. From this moment onward, your mission will become mine. I will not merely tell you the secret history of our peoples, but *show* it as well.”

Evanson scoffed.

“Trust me, we would settle for being told. We’ve gone to a lot of trouble to pull you out of that cave.”

The artificial smiled his warm smile.

“And I would be happy to simply do so— if I *could*. But your forebears were clever. The greater bulk of my



knowledge is locked away, even from me. Only a privileged few can allow access. Clones are the key— and not just any old thing from Teorge, either. Specialist units. Exceedingly rare. Exceedingly dangerous. And *always* under the tight control of those whom you seek to expose.”

Phisto rolled his eyes. “Can’t ever be easy, can it?”

The Inhabitant stepped forward, halting an almost intimate distance from Kerenski.

“Nevertheless, I have a plan. Should it succeed, your people— Andor and Púrpura— will return with a wealth of information that will put the very superpowers to shame. And it will be yours to wield as you please.”

Thin Slavic lips tightened.

“And in return?”

The warm smile remained fixed upon The Inhabitant’s features. Sincerity leavened his every word.

“Your kind and mine shall replace the nightmare of the past with the dream of a better future. What once was shall be so again. And all will be put to rights.”

*Blackthorne stateroom, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

Tyrran awoke, his stateroom still in total darkness. He couldn’t see but felt Yolanta’s body nestled against his, as nude as he, her ebony hair tickling his chest and throat. For a long moment he did nothing, his fingertips stroking along her back and hips, her breath soft upon his chest. There was little sense of cyclic time aboard a ship, sleep cycles governed by local orbits and not the natural sunlight enjoyed by the surface-dwelling majority of humanity. Yet he was accustomed to Robardin Rock’s short days, and felt that the

time to rise would soon be at hand if it wasn't already. He looked to his side, kissing the top of Yolanta's head.

*But not yet. This moment is mine. Not the Reapers', and not the Witches'. Mine.*

His fingertips continued up and down the woman's back, tracing along her arm, the swell of her backside, the tops of her thighs. They drifted upwards until his arm curled around her torso, the man gently squeezing the woman against himself.

Yolanta stirred, moving her thigh further over her lover. She half-nuzzled, half-kissed Tyrran's neck, summoning a sleepy whisper from within herself.

"You did not have to stop, *mi amor*."

Another kiss. Another whisper, this time low and masculine.

"Then I won't."

Tyrran's fingertips resumed their caresses, Yolanta now stroking along his chest and stomach. A low, contented growl emanated from his throat. His other hand brushed her hair from her face. For a long time the lovers simply laid there, in his bunk, touching and holding the other. At last Tyrran spoke again.

"I'll miss this, you know. Miss *you*."

Yolanta looked up, the whites of her eyes visible in the darkness. They were sharp, purpose fuelling her tone.

"No," she said. "You will *not*."

Tyrran cocked his head to one side.

"No?"

Exhaling, the woman rolled atop her lover, taking his head in her hands, pressing her forehead against his. Long ebony hair fell as a curtain around their faces.

"Are you a fool? Did you really think I would let you fly that *thing* around by yourself?"

The man's jaw dropped open, trembling.

"I didn't want you to... the danger..."

Yolanta moved closer, her lips over his, tongues and bodies touching. Her chest rose and fell from her breathing, now a little deeper.

“Is to be shared by us both, *si*?”

Tyrran opened his mouth to reply. A finger over his lips silenced him. Yolanta’s tone sharpened further.

“It is not up for discussion. The mission is far too important.”

Hands moved from from a slim Iberian waist to slim Iberian hips. Tyrran’s lips lifted in the slightest of grins, invisible in the darkness.

“And that is it? The mission?”

Another long kiss. The woman’s fingers moved from the man’s lips to his neck, trailing down his chest and stomach, circling the member that stirred to life at her touch. An intimate whisper was all it took to coax it to full readiness.

“Perhaps you *are* a fool, Tyrran Andor. After all...”

Her fingers moved from his sex to hers, their tips already wet. That the lovers had spent the night prior in a state of passionate lovemaking mattered not at all, their bodies renewed after a night’s heavy sleep. She traced back over Tyrran’s member, her wetness now his. Yolanta moved forward, her lips over Tyrran’s ear.

“...I am yours...”

Her eyes closed, the Iberian woman lowered herself over her man, gasping as her body enveloped his. She bared her teeth for a moment at the fullness within herself, eyes squeezing shut. At last she opened them, her hips moving, her accent thickened.

“And you are *mine*.”

The *Blackthorne* was stocked for an extended voyage. Yolanta had moved a significant portion of her belongings into Tyrran’s personal quarters, the woman’s nose wrinkling

with disapproval at his woefully inadequate storage. Her clothes and flightsuits were stuffed into lockers alongside his, and the storage compartments of his shower unit were crammed with her cosmetics. The Iberian guitar, so prized by the woman, occupied a nearer place. It rested in its case beneath Tyrran's gel bed, in easy reach for Yola to strum the notes of her home planet of Keytree.

Yet personal effects were by no means the only staples taken into consideration. The ship's pantry was stocked full, both "real" food and zero-g rations filling it to the top. So too did several bottles of Yolanta's favorite wine and beer make their way within the galley. Various sealed spices promised to bring the cuisine up to High Iberian standard.

The weapons locker, accessible only by Andor himself, also hosted new gear. Tyrran had never been one for firearms throughout the course of his roguish life, but through the metal grating now hung a pair of Skollanger "Slammer" submachine guns, chosen specifically for their stopping power. Spare magazines for both were secured beside them.

There was a small assemblage beneath the *Blackthorne*, Tyrran and Yola standing before their mission's leadership. A squad of shock troopers stood wearily beside The Inhabitant, rifles at the ready but not raised. Kerenski cast a wary eye to the artificial man before turning to her comrades.

"Under no circumstances is this... *thing*... to be given the run of the ship. You are to be armed at all times. Do not allow yourselves to be alone with it, even for a moment."

Yolanta nodded, her hand moving to the autopistol at her hip. "Mission or no, I will not hesitate to blast it at the slightest *hint* of treachery."

Kerenski scowled. "Good. Relics like The Inhabitant almost eradicated humanity itself. Never forget that, *comrades*. No matter how charming it is. No matter what it promises. Work with the thing, but never trust it."

Tyrran glanced around himself, hearing the ships coming and going above the sealed hangar blast doors.

“And what of The Rock? Are we to consider it our new home?”

The woman smirked a Slavic smirk. “Carcosa will remain our home until it is not. That is all I can say. Return with the *full* story of The Club’s meddling, and we will enlighten the masses.”

Púrpura nodded. “*Si, comarada*. As she intended.”

Kerenski was silent for a moment, and then stepped closer. She reached within her pocket, producing two tiny vials.

“There is one more thing. Something you must not forget. When I ordered you to be armed, I meant it. But you must be armed against *yourselves* as well.”

Tyrran eyed the capsules with suspicion.

“What are *those*?”

Púrpura’s features deepened. Kerenski’s sharpened.

“Hexedit. Your weapon of last resort. One injection and you forget everything you know. If enough hits your system at once, you forget how to *live*.”

Andor took one of the vials, holding it up before his face. Yolanta pocketed hers without looking at it. A low scoff escaped his lips.

“As though that would somehow make a difference.”

Kerenski peered into Tyrran’s eyes.

“It is a serious game you play, *comrade*— and fates worse than death await those who fall into the wrong hands.”

Tyrran scowled and slipped the capsule into his jacket pocket. “I said I’m committed and I am. I just wish I was something other than this *thing*’s chauffeur.”

Kerenski’s eyes sharpened, but not overly so.

“Not everything can be as simple as blasting Thargoids, *da*? Keep your head low and your eyes on your... guest. Collect what information you can. We will work to keep Carcosa in our hands.”

Andor and Púrpura nodded in unison, the former gesturing for The Inhabitant to step forward. It did, the artificial man dressed in a smart black flightsuit, unnecessary for one such as he but worn nevertheless. Kerenski put her hands on her hips, raising her chin at it.

“Your journey begins now. What is your destination?”

Without hesitation The Inhabitant spoke.

“Tionisla Graveyard. I’m in need of... updates.”

Andor nodded. “Tionisla is a three day trip. Two if we’re reckless.”

The Inhabitant’s eyebrows raised. “Yes. The frame shift drive. I recall reading about it while scanning Galnet articles. Perhaps you’ve learned to dodder along without us after all.”

Tyrran smirked. “Not too proud to admit that *you* might stand to learn from *us*, Inhabitant?”

“The truly wise are never finished doing so. Shall we?”

Kerenski nodded. “*Da*. It is time. Good luck...” She eyed the man and woman before her, her gaze shifting to the artificial, her final word laced with irony.

“... *comrades*.”

Salutes were exchanged, followed by handshakes. Hesitating at first, Kerenski extended her hand to The Inhabitant, who shook with perfect courtesy. Contempt dripped from her every syllable regardless.

“Prove me wrong, machine, and you may have a future with us.”

The warm smile took on a peculiar edge, The Inhabitant allowing a slow nod.

“I was tasked to make the galaxy a better place for my creators,” he said. “And I intend to do *exactly* that.”

The *Blackthorne* lifted away, blood-red thrusters flaring as it cleared Robardin Rock's mailslot, the thin crimson line receding into the blackness. Kari Kerenski and Serene Meadows watched in silence from the bay's observation hangar. The ship disappeared from view, and the sharp noise of a cigarette lighter could be heard, smoke soon swirling around the Night Witch. Her peer took a sip of tea, sealed in its container against the low-g environment. She glanced at her Slavic sister-in-arms.

"Better to have kept the relic here and safeguarded, I think. Sending it into the black with only a pair of agents is an awful risk."

The cigarette glowed from Kerenski's long drag.

"Everything we do is a risk."

Meadows scowled. "And? You simply expect it to set aside whatever history it's carrying and do our bidding?"

Kerenski stiffened, her eyes harder than usual.

"What I expect and what I hope for are two different things, *comrade*."

Meadows cast a long gaze to her contemporary, her voice disarmingly soft.

"And what *do* you hope for?"

A final drag. A snuffed-out cigarette. A sharp glance.

"I wish for my *comrades* what I wish for myself: to know the truth—even if it is the end of us all."

Repair crews worked around the clock, the flashes of plasma welders a common sight on Robardin Rock. Those landing pads that had suffered damage were the first to be repaired, restoring full functionality to the docking tube. Still, traffic was light, consisting only of Reaper and Nameless vessels, plus a handful of enterprising merchants. Debris was still being cleared away from the space around Robardin, junkers and salvagers alike in no short supply.

The leadership of the coalition of factions that now governed Robardin Rock—Loren's Reapers, the Night Witches, and The Nameless—stood together, watching the progress from an observation deck. They were a ragged bunch, with only Serene Meadows maintaining her usual implacability. Wary eyes and haggard faces were no excuse to neglect the business at hand—and business was pressing.

Serene took a step forward, her back to the rest, her eyes upon the ships coming and going from the rocky surroundings.

"It will take some time for full normalcy to resume," she said. "Insofar as such a thing exists here on the Rock."

Kerenski nodded, fishing a pack of cigarettes from her jacket pocket and pulling one from it with her teeth. She lit it, inhaling deeply before joining Meadows. The smoke wafted around them both, directionless in the low gravity.

"And how did you support yourselves here? Before all this, I mean."

Meadows sighed. "Independent traders, mainly. Carcosa has wealth undreamt of, in the rings of the distant gas giants. It had been our intention to mine them and support ourselves independently."



Phisto snorted. “Is that what this place is? Some abandoned mining outpost?”

The woman turned, her eyes meeting the Reaper’s. “Clearly not abandoned. But as for its origins?”

She shrugged. “The Nameless constructed this place shortly after word got out of Jaques’ location. Massive storage caverns lie unused beneath the surface. Amenities are basic. But it suits our needs.”

Isaiah folded his arms. “And what exactly *are* those needs?”

Meadows blinked. “The same as yours: a safe place from which to conduct your search for the truth. We were drawn here, same as you. And like yourselves we have a common foe.”

Evanson’s features darkened.

“The Club.”

The woman nodded. “Yes. But they are the long-term goal, the endgame. Right now we have problems enough with the locals. I fear that our victory here was... temporary.”

Kerenski, too, nodded. “The Nameless are a pariah in Colonia. The Reapers stand at your side, but arms alone won’t preserve you.”

A wry smile tugged at the corners of Meadows’ lips. “It seems a bit late for hearts and minds, but it sounds like you have a plan.”

Phisto chuckled. “She always *does*.”

Kerenski took another drag of her cigarette, her eyes washing over the rocky docking tube. Her Slavic accent thickened along with her thoughts, smoke curling around her features.

““Massive storage caverns’, you say?”

*Bridge of the Litvyak, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

The holofac's reception was poor, its quantum signal distorted by nearly twenty-two thousand light years of distance between the two points of contact. The figure that stood before Kari was slender, masculine, and dark, with fair skin and a perfectly trimmed beard. Dark leathers covered the man head to toe, not quite formal and not quite roguish. His voice was smooth, even and confident. His manner was that of a dagger wrapped in silk.

"Kari Kerenski," he said. "Enjoying your little vacation?"

The woman exhaled a plume of cigarette smoke, one hand on her hip.

"Good to see you, Ouberos. And what I am doing is neither little nor a vacation," she replied. "But it *is* business. Or at least *could* be, if you're up for a little work."

The man's eyebrows raised. "Need me to shake down another lump of a truck driver? An excellent haul, that was. Even had enough to fit the *Dusk 'till Dawn* with one of those alien hyperdrive extenders. I've got little green men in my frameshift bay thanks to you."

A wry look spread over Kerenski's features. "Then the Void is lining up for us *both*. And it's no truck driver this time."

Polite interest raised Ouberos' eyebrows.

"Oh? What, then?"

Kerenski told him. The man's polite gaze shifted into something more intense.

"Surely you jest."

Kerenski took another drag of her cigarette, its smoke framing her features.

"*Nyet*. I do not. My reasons are my own. The only question is: can you do it?"

The man's eyes sharpened, a dozen factors being weighed in his mind. At last he arrived at an answer.

"Can I? Yes. *Should* I? That's another question entirely."

Kerenski crossed her arms. "I can guarantee your safety here at Carcosa. In case he isn't open to reason."

Ouberos smirked. "I seem to recall some dour old hag once telling me that there is no safety this side of the grave."

The woman shrugged. "Everything is relative. Are you in or not?"

"Depends on my motivation."

Kerenski nodded, pleased that the issue of compensation was raised. It was the one easy part of the negotiation.

"There are pristine opal reserves here. I'll set my people to harvesting them, and you'll arrive to all the Void Opals your holds can carry."

The rogue shrugged, holding out his arms. "Fair enough. I could retire on a haul like this, you know."

"But you won't."

Ouberos nodded. "Aye. I won't. But I've heard there's opportunity out there, so close to the galactic core."

The woman's gaze sharpened. "Plenty of easy marks, you mean."

"I *am* in the acquisition business."

Kerenski held up a finger, pointing to her old comrade.

"Remember: it is a *business* deal I seek, not a ransom."

One eyebrow lifted from Ouberos' smooth face.

"Look... Rackham's done a lot of good for the nebula, invested billions to get the shipyards up and running. But even if I *do* persuade him to make our case for us, how do you expect him to get Lakon and Core Dynamics to start flinging schematics our way?"

The smirk returned to the woman's face, her Slavic accent thickening.

"Everyone wants *something*. Find out what it is, and make him an offer he can't refuse."

*Deep space, Federation core worlds*

Zachary “Calico Zack” Rackam was that rarest of spacefaring specimens: a man whose infamy as a rogue did more good than harm. Publicly he wasn’t anything but the model merchant. Yet rumors of piracy and other unsavory activities were never far from the man himself.

Still, Calico Zack possessed a charisma that far exceeded that of stolid law enforcement officers, and a reputation that would doom other spacers was worn like a badge of honor. Tales of encounters as romantic as they were roguish recalled a bygone—and fictitious— era of the gentleman pirate, yet nothing solid ever emerged to condemn the man. No one would ever *quite* admit to being robbed by him, just as the Authority of numerous systems were never *quite* able to produce solid evidence of wrongdoing on his behalf.

Yet wherever he went, ships containing the choicest loot had a way of arriving at their destinations empty, their captains proclaiming total ignorance as to why. If the captain in question was comely and female, they were often too starry-eyed to proclaim anything at *all*. On it went for a number of years, until Calico Zack had enough money to retire a thousand times over— but such was hardly suitable for a man of action like himself.

The reality of a billion credits was enough to boggle the mind of even the most imaginative of ground-bound commoners among humanity, and Zachary Rackham sat atop several such sums. Though he never quite gave up his Commander’s wings, he found himself at the helm of Rackham Capital Investments, flying a desk instead of a ship. To do such was to navigate a far more complex network of

marks and sharks than the one he had left, synthsilk suits replacing musty flight garments and an extended hand being the new deployed hardpoint.

The costs of a massive staff and planetside property were onerous, and the Federation— though by far the most business-friendly of the superpowers—soon began to send auditors to inquire as to why Rackham Capital Investments was falling further and further behind on its tax bill. The firm was stuck in an awkward place. It was doing too well—at least on holo-documentation— to have any excuse as to why it should be behind in its obligations, yet it wasn't so prominent as to be a player in system politics proper. Something would have to be done to distract the powers-that-were, and so Zachary Rackham reverted to what he did best: seize the spotlight and let things work themselves out.

*And that, the man thought, seems to be why I'm in this pickle to begin with.*

Zackary Rackham was in his flagship, a vintage Anaconda named the *Lady Luck*, one that he often flew himself. Across from it was another, nearly identical, registered as the *Dusk 'till Dawn*. It was close, close enough for the man to make out the black-suited figure standing in its bridge. Aging eyes narrowed, his old spacer's instincts coming to the forefront. His nose was tender from how the forced exit back into normal space had been, his harness failing and the man slamming face-first into his controls. He touched a gloved finger to his nose; it came away wet with blood. Tiny red globules floated in the weightless vacuum.

*So this is what it's like on the receiving end of an interdiction. No wonder all those old traders were so salty.*

Off to his side the comm chirped; almost without thinking the man approved it. A holographic face shimmered into view before him, a man with pale features and a short black beard. His was younger, with intelligent eyes and a disarming smile. Rackham grunted.

*Like me back in the day.*

“Zachary Rackham. An absolute *pleasure* to make your acquaintance!”

The man’s tone was jovial to the point of mocking. Rackham again wiped his nose, irritated that the bleeding hadn’t stopped.

“This isn’t funny, boy. State your business. And don’t even *think* about—”

The man held up his hands. “This is no robbery, I assure you. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

Rackham glanced to his side. His holo-panel indicated a damaged frameshift drive. The man cursed under his breath.

*And a captive audience to boot.*

“Alright. You’ve got until my frameshift drive repairs or my security escorts catch up. What’s the pitch?”

The interloper’s smile grew.

“You financed the shipyards in Colonia. I’m with a group that would like them financed just a little *more*.”

Rackham rolled his eyes. “Give them a meter and they demand a light year. Which group? And what did you say your name was, again?”

The man bowed in exaggerated courtesy.

“Of course— where are my manners? I am named Ouberos. Like you, I am in the acquisition business. *Unlike* you, I’ve yet to make my fortune in the ‘verse. The pauper seeks only to learn from the king.”

Rackham nodded to the man’s ship.

“No one who flies an Annie can be called a pauper. You could sell that thing today and live a lifetime of luxury nearly anywhere.”

Ouberos’s smile widened. “Well... everything’s relative, isn’t it? But enough about me. My client wants to do what’s never been done, and she needs the very best to make it happen.”

Rackham smiled, a bit of the old roguishness showing through. “And naturally that involves *me*.”

Again, the man bowed.

“As I said. And I wasn’t joking when I said it’s never been done.”

The older man grunted. “Alright. What’s the proposition?”

Ouberos’s smile grew, speaking clearly and confidently.

“Use your influence to persuade the right people to grant a licence for The Nameless of Carcosa to produce and sell *bona fide* Federal and Alliance ships.”

For a moment, Zachary Rackham said nothing.

Then, he *laughed*.

“Oh, the *balls* on you! The Nameless? The same Nameless who attacked Colonia all those months ago? The same Nameless who were sent running with a bloody arsehole by the galactic community?”

Ouberos’s smile remained fixed. “Perfectly understandable that you wouldn’t be apprised of current events in the nebula. You’re a busy man, after all.”

Rackham’s eyes narrowed. “*What* current events?”

The junior of the two rogues spread his hands in a gesture of goodwill. “Carcosa is once again in the hands of its rightful owners, and The Nameless have turned over a new leaf. They seek only to co-exist with their neighbors, and are determined to offer something of value. Being the only faction to offer certain ships would go a long way towards that end.”

“Bollocks.”

Ouberos shook his head. “Not at all. The Nameless appreciate the effort that such persuasion would require, and are prepared to offer a percentage of every ship sold. To *you*, mind you— not your firm, which we understand to be...

The man’s smile grew.

“In something of a situation?”

Rackham raised a warning finger to the interloper. “Never you mind that. Rackham Capital Investments is *my* concern, not yours.”

Ouberos looked sideways at the man, his eyes glinting. “Then it isn’t money you seek. It’s something else. Something you don’t want your hands directly on.”

Bitterness crept into the older man’s features. “Never live to be my age, boy. Life is simpler when your hands are on the controls of a ship. My mistake was in ever giving them up.”

Ouberos performed a final bow, his head low. “Then the simplicity of a *quid pro quo* should be a welcome return to form. My client is standing by to make all your problems go away. You have only to give the order.”

To one side, a chirp sounded, indicating that the *Lady Lucks’s* frameshift drive was again in working order. Rackham glanced at it, his hand hovering near the activator controls. He blinked, his mind working through a dozen variables. Exhaling, he looked up to his uninvited guest. His hand moved away from the activator.

*Young. Lean. Hungry. Like I was.*

The gloved hand of Calico Jack moved away from the throttle. He stood, pulling a cigar from his flightsuit pocket, lighting it without a word. Smoke swirled around his face, the silver in his beard glinting.

“Been to Chimba Prime recently? There’s a little place there I used to haunt. I wonder if that blue-haired beauty is still serving those supernovas...”

*The Twin Beacons Bar and Grill, Chimba Prime,  
Chimba system*

Smoke from old-fashioned cigarettes mixed with the vapor of electronically activated narcotics, inhaled either way through a device between one’s lips. The bar was a run-down planetside affair, in a fair-sized city on Chimba Prime. A



rustic twang accompanied by a rustic voice sounded from a jukebox, an off-color holographic band playing music to which no one really listened, only the occasional distortion in its feed. Young barkeeps, all female and comely, poured drinks while wearing clothing that managed to be modest in a decidedly *im*modest fashion. Fake smiles were exchanged for real tips, the unspoken transaction not quite dignified yet not quite *und*ignified.

Zachary “Calico Zack” Rackham settled into a corner with his new associate, the rogue known only as Ouberos. There was no handshake, no smiles of greeting or camaraderie. There was only the old jackal sizing up the younger, knowing that the same was being done to him. For his part, Rackham hardly looked the part of the billionaire chief executive of an investment firm. Pilot’s leathers graced his broad shoulders, his battered flight jacket seemingly one with the man himself. The wings of the guild adorned his sleeves, though the gold on such was so faded that they were hardly noticeable against the weathered, earthy color of the leather beneath them. Ouberos was possessed of decidedly differing tastes. A slim-fitting black jacket complimented slim black trousers, with no wings at all adorning his garments. The dark clothes made the paleness of his skin seem more so.

For a long time, neither man spoke save to order his drink; when they arrived, neither acknowledged the server, who was young, female, and comely enough for it to register as odd that neither man showed her the slightest shred of attention. Such was both a blessing and a curse in her line of work. She would be spared both the lascivious gaze of strange men *and* the decent tip that accompanied it. Her lips pressed together in the subtlest of pouts as she turned away, her hips shifting in a final effort.

Both men took an initial sip of their drinks. Ouberos had ordered a fiery concoction of blended ingredients and Rackham contented himself with the local bitter. Two glasses

were set down within moments of each other. The older man nodded to where the server had been only moments before.

“Must have had dozens just like that one when I was your age. It’s the wings, you know. Gets ‘em every time.”

One eyebrow of Ouberos’s lifted, the younger man cocking his head to the side.

“You didn’t invite me here just to boast of conquests past, did you?”

Rackham shook his head. “No,” he said. “I didn’t. But when the grey hairs started to sprout and the belt squeezed just a little tighter, I knew that my days of wenching were numbered.”

Another bartender passed by, looking for all the ‘verse like the one who had just served their drinks. Both men followed her with their eyes, the older’s lingering just a moment longer. Rackham took another sip and shrugged, turning back to his guest.

“But the point had come where they were all blending together anyway. Same leadup, same outcome, and if I’m being honest the same bitch-in-heat moans too. And for what? A quick and dirty bit of satisfaction. A man should know when to move on.”

Ouberos took a long sip of his drink, feeling the burn all the way down his throat. His gaze bore into that of his host.

“And that’s why you founded Rackham Capital Investments? Bored of the same-old-same-old?”

Rackham smiled wide, his eyes cunning. “I had a good run. *Very* good. Best of all, I’ll never be some has-been, past his prime and courting disaster.”

Ouberos, too, smiled the same cunning smile. “Not many grey hairs in the acquisition business. Plenty in the corporate world, though.”

Calico Zack raised his glass. “A man with a ship,” he said, “can only shake down another ship. A man with a Federal charter can shake down entire *systems*.”

The same inquisitive eyebrow of Ouberos's lifted. "Unless they've got a tax bill the size of their egos. And sophisticated enemies."

Rackham leaned back, saying nothing, taking a long sip of his bitter.

"The good Randomius, it giveth... and the good Randomius, it taketh away. Score a billion credits in a lottery win, and watch it disappear from the accounts as gutless hackers have their way."

A shrug. Another sip.

*"Que sera sera."*

Ouberos leaned forward.

"Rackham," he said. "What *can* we do for you?"

Calico Zack's features shifted, the rogue hardening into the robber baron. A guttural edge sharpened his words.

"Taja Gavaris," he said. "My Chief Financial Officer. Ambitious. Street smart. Head like a damned data core. She'd be perfect..."

The man leaned forward, mirroring his younger associate.

"... if she wasn't trying to kill me."

Ouberos's eyebrows raised. "And here I thought that you suits wielded the pen, not the sword."

Rackham grunted. "You need both to do business in the Federation. That and the right connections."

Mock sympathy danced in the younger man's features. "It's the same everywhere. But why not just fire her and be done with it?"

Another grunt. "Because life is short," Rackham said. "And it'll be a lot shorter if a woman like Taja Gavaris wishes it to be."

"Sounds like her background isn't exactly one you'd put on a resume."

A knowing look sharpened the old pirate's features. "She's like me, you see. Made her fortune outside the law and used it to worm her way into proper society. But I was never a

killer. She *is*. She and all her cronies, who I was stupid enough to put on the payroll.”

Ouberos nodded, a slow and deliberate gesture. “And you need them... removed?”

“Expeditiously.”

*Bridge of the Dusk ‘til Dawn, Chimba Prime starport,  
Chimba system*

“So Rackham needs us to do his dirty work? He *has* come a long way.”

The holographic visage of Kari Kerenski flickered and distorted, but the audio was just good enough to be made out. Ouberos stood in the bridge of the *Dusk ‘till Dawn*, jovial in his typical roguish manner, certain that a deal could be made.

“Aye. Too respectable to do it himself these days. This Taja Gavaris woman has him by the balls, or else I fly a Hauler.”

Amusement softened the woman’s Slavic features.

“I remember when you really *did* fly a Hauler. Nearly got blasted by some bounty hunter on a run to Ackerman Market, *da*?”

The outlaw waved off the jab. “Ancient history. And the Hauler came though in one piece, too. Mostly.”

Kerenski exhaled, her arms folding. “I had hoped that Rackham would merely want credits. This forces me to divert assets that had been earmarked for something... important.”

Oubero’s eyes glinted. “So you *do* have people in the Bubble? I thought you were done with this place.”

A tight smirk raised one side of Kerenski’s mouth. “The enemy has a long reach, and therefore so must I. I will contact my people and send them your way. And Ouberos?”

One eyebrow lifted. “Yes, mother?”

Kerenski's features sharpened. "You'll need Rax on this one. I can feel it."

Ouberos sighed. "I was afraid of that. I'll go fetch him— assuming that those damned monsters haven't eaten the rest of him."

"They haven't. He's already expecting you. Do you have a plan?"

The pirate bowed, low and formally, holding his pose for just an instant too long before snapping upright. On his face was a roguish grin.

"Kerenski," he said. "I *always* have a plan."

### *Eagle's Landing, Eagle Sector IR-W d1-117*

The incoming transmission arrived at an unexpected hour, rousing Yolanta from slumber. The woman blinked and yawned, stretching. Almost without thinking she routed it through the *Blackthorne's* comms, accepting the transmission in the stateroom. To her side Andor stirred, he as nude as she, shielding his eyes against the glare as Kerenski's holofac shimmered into view. Yolanta pulled the covers up to her chest, a sour expression on her face.

"*Hola, comarada*. Worry not. You interrupt nothing."

Kerenski's visage flickered, hidden amusement dancing in her eyes.

"I *know*. There is a matter to which you must attend. One that will help the mission here in Carcosa. You remember our old friend Ouberos, *da*? He will be contacting you soon. Prepare to move out."

Before Yolanta could reply, the holofeed terminated, plunging her again into darkness. The woman sighed, looking down to Tyrran, already asleep. Frowning, she leaned in to wake him with a kiss, her lips meeting his. He murmured and

stirred, drifting back to sleep. She leaned in further, her voice dropping to an intimate whisper, her lips over his ear.

“Tyrran...”

The man’s hand rose to squeeze her backside, falling limp upon the sheets once it reached her thigh. His chest once again rose and fell in a state of deep slumber. For a moment the woman frowned, sitting up, irritation growing in her features.

Then, she cried out. Very shrill, very loud, and *very* Iberian.

“*Aye patán!*”

Tyrran jerked upright, eyes wide, heart pounding. He blinked, seeing nothing in the darkness. He twisted, his jaw caught by his lover. Iberian eyes flashed in the dark.

“We must leave soon, *mi amor*. And good morning.”

With that the woman rose, feminine curves silhouetted in the darkness, Tyrran still gasping. In the *Blackthorne’s* washroom the shower kicked on, the first hummed Iberian melody already heard. Slumping over, Tyrran rubbed his eyes, cursing under his breath.

*Love hard, work hard...*

### *Ackerman Market, Eravate system*

Ackerman Market was an old station in an old system, at least by the standards of human colonization. The massive Orbis spaceport was a metropolis in its own right, the center of its own spheres of politics and business, the two inextricably linked in the corporatist bonanza that was the Federation. Yet there were other aspects of Ackerman which made it attractive to a certain clientele: a certain willingness in its local culture to tolerate deals that would never have flown in its sister

stations, and to look the other way when law enforcement saw fit to intervene.

Such traits suited men like Rax Ortega quite well. Rax was an enterprising man of thick black hair and ruddy olive skin, bordering on middle age but possessed of a certain outlaw charisma. He tended toward blacks and greys and dark crimsons in his attire, the better to draw attention away from his cybernetic arm. His circle was a small one; his disfigurement a curse in the eyes of many but a boon to his particular trade. Those with whom Rax tended to do business tended to look past the frivolous details of things like legality and manufacturer's specs.

Rax was an equipment broker, but hardly one that advertised his services. Skill in acquiring rare and dangerous items bled over into other skills; he was an accomplished hacker as well, his rough exterior concealing a keen, analytical mind. His past was his own business, as were the circumstances of his lost arm. All that the underworld of Eravate knew of his business was that there had once been a thriving underground smuggler's emporium deep beneath the surface of one of its planets, one in which Rax was deeply invested. Now there wasn't, and the man had barely emerged from such with a shut mouth and a bleeding, severed arm.

Now he sat in a seedy nightclub aboard Ackerman, top credit paid for a private room that overlooked the dance floor, dim from raucous neon lighting. Across from him were three men and a woman. The oldest of the men he'd only heard of by reputation but never thought he'd meet. The younger man and woman he knew quite well. Words like gravel escaped his throat, uttered between drinks of something strong.

"So Kerenski needs a favor. And Calico Zack himself needs a favor. Either I'm dreaming or Lady Luck herself is spreading for me."

Yolanta Púrpura leaned forward, Iberian eyes flashing. In her hand was a lit cigarillo, its smoke making intricate trails as she gestured.

“This is no dream, *camarada*— though best not say his name out loud, *si*? But I think that we deserve to know what we are getting into.”

Rackham raised his glass to her, nodding. He rose, gesturing to the small party before him.

“Yes,” he said. “You *do*.”

Calico Zack Rackham was silent for a long moment, gathering himself and nursing his drink. At last he spoke, his voice low, his eyes conspiratorial.

“Aaron Salazar,” he began, “was the name of my old chief financial officer. Good man. With me through thick and thin back in the old days. Knew his way around a credit.”

Ouberos nodded. “We heard. Our condolences.”

“That isn’t all. Another old hand— Derrin O’Shea—perished not a week ago. Limousine crash. Triple redundancy autopilot that never fails somehow managed to plot a course into a fuel depot at full speed. Loyal executives are dropping one by one.”

The pirate’s features hardened. “Their deaths are a message. To me. From Taja Gavaris.”

Tyrran cocked his head to the side. “The new CFO?”

“Correct. The one trying to muscle me out. Her and all her people, a cancer within the corporation.”

Tyrran looked with disbelief upon the elder outlaw. “And you employ her... why?”

Bitterness contorted Rackham’s face. “Not by choice. She’s an old rival from decades ago, used to work the same turf. Turned up when I launched Rackham Capital, sat right down in my office and threatened to tell the Feds *everything* if I didn’t cut her in.”

Yolanta narrowed her eyes. “That is still just hearsay, *si*? Surely you have the upper hand.”

The older man shook his head. “Not when she’s kept old holos of me knocking over Federal convoys I don’t. She didn’t want the entire operation... just to wet her beak a little. At least, that was the deal.”



Tyrran nodded. "But then she got greedy."

"Aye. Then she got greedy. First she wanted more kickbacks. Then she wanted her old lackeys involved. Finally, she wanted on the board itself. I said 'no'."

Púrpura took a drag from her cigarillo, understanding. "And your people are paying the price."

"After O'Shea, I had no choice but to grant her demand. I've been feeling the firm slipping away from me ever since."

Rax took a long pull of beer, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"That's a real tear-jerker, that is. Nothing breaks my heart more than a billionaire in distress. Still, the question remains: what is it you want us to *do*? There are only four of us, and Randomius knows how many of this Gavaris woman's little minions."

Ouberos, too, peered at Rackham, his smooth tone pressing.

"I second this concern. We're not an army, and we're not here for blood. Just business."

Rackham steeled his features, looking Yolanta straight in the eye.

"Are you saying that the sight of blood disturbs you?"

The woman raised an Iberian chin at the man, her tone haughty.

"I am saying that we are not killers for hire."

Rackham held his own for a moment, finally softening into roguish resignation. He raised his glass to those around him.

"Nor do I need you to be. Answering blood with blood will only escalate into a full-blown intra-corporate war. What I need isn't to chop off the snake's head, but to convince it to slither somewhere else."

Tyrran leaned forward. "Then you need leverage. Something she doesn't want getting out."

Ouberos nodded. "Aye. Blackmail her right back."

Rackham chuckled, low and bitter in his throat.

“She’s craftier than that. There’s no documented evidence of what she’s doing, and all the people she murdered in her younger years aren’t exactly available to testify.”

Tyrran scoffed. “Surely there’s *someone* who has some dirt on her.”

For another long moment, Rackham said nothing, running his hand along his beard, at last looking like an old man. Finally he spoke, slowly but with increasing surety.

“There might be. That damned muckraker from the Federal Times. Bryanna Blanco. She’s got no love for me, I can assure you— but she’s run a few pieces on Taja, too. Most of these so-called ‘journalists’ simply print whatever lies sells the most copies— but Blanco’s gotten a thing or two right over the years.”

Ouberos nodded, understanding. “Then we need access to her files. All of them. The only question is: how?”

Tyrran rolled his eyes. “I don’t suppose asking nicely would work.”

Yolanta glanced at her partner. “Nor will any swindle or hack job. Robbery is out of the question, as well.”

Amusement danced in Ouberos’s eyes. “You’re a good-looking pair. Ever consider the honey trap?”

Yolanta narrowed her eyes, one hand moving to Tyrran’s thigh beneath the table. “No chance,” she said. “For *either* of us.”

Silence settled over the table, each man and woman nursing their drinks, the deep nightclub throb felt in their chests even within the private room. Zachary Rackham rose, hands behind his back, pausing to gaze through the directional glass at the writhing masses below. He spoke without turning to face his new associates, at once the corporate executive *and* the outlaw pirate.

“It occurs to me,” he said slowly, “that we’ve been going about this all wrong. We’re so used to circumventing the law that to even *consider* anything else is unthinkable.”

Rax raised his glass in mock toast.

“To going respectable, then,” he said. “For all the good it’ll do.”

Rackham spun, roguery in his eyes. “You misunderstand. I’m not saying that we get Authority involved. I’m saying we make them *think* it is.”

Rax held up his hands in a mock gesture of acquiescence. “Of course, of course. But what could I possibly do for you? I’m just a simple merchant.”

Rackham paced to and fro across the private room, the wheels of his mind turning. “Federal Intelligence Service gear. Uniforms, identicards, security implants, everything. And since we’ll be interacting with seasoned media, they need to be *bona fide*.”

For a long time, Rax considered.

“Sounds expensive,” he said.

“I appreciate the—”

Ortega leaned forward, a mercantile gleam in his eyes.

“...for *you*.”

All eyes looked to Rackham, who nodded.

“It wouldn’t be the priciest investment I’ve ever made. Nor the worst. See to it.”

Chuckling his gravel chuckle, Rax rose, standing before Tyrran and Yolanta, looking them up and down. Amusement dripped from his every word.

“You wouldn’t happen to have your measurements available, would you?”

*Blackthorne stateroom, Ackerman Market, Eravate system*

Mocking approval danced in Tyrran’s eyes.

“You missed your calling in life, *mi amor*. A uniform suits you.”

Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura scowled, turning from one side to the other, the holo-mirror displaying an exact replica of her, matching her movements in realtime. It was a trim black number, Federation red piping along the jacket sleeves and trousers, the shoulder boards of a mid-level agent denoting her rank. The golden badge of her authority shone bright, complete with a holographic serial number. Her ebony hair was bound in a tight bun. A peaked cap completed the look.

Tyrran was dressed largely the same, clean-shaven for once and far less fastidious than his partner. The woman turned, hands on her hips and haughtiness in her eyes.

“These trousers make my *culo* look *gorda*. And my calling is far from being some superpower’s fool!”

Tyrran risked a smirk, turning to Rax. They were in the *Blackthorne’s* stateroom, with the others laying low in a safehouse of Rackham’s.

“And you’re *sure* we’ll pass as the real thing?”

Ortega nodded. “Everything’s legit, down the proprietary fabric blend of those pretty black outfits. Even your identifications will scan correctly if anyone tests them. Took a bit of digging to find the genuine algorithms, it did.”

Yolanta straightened her jacket over her hips and backside, nodding.

“In and out, then. Show up, intimidate, acquire, and leave.”

Rax shrugged. “That’s the idea. Didn’t take any chances, though.”

Now it was Tyrran’s turn to scowl.

“I *noticed*.”

The *Blackthorne* was now a solid, somber shade of gunmetal. The pale crest of the Federation adorned its sides, complete with the smaller badge of being in the direct service of Zachary Hudson. Yet its modifications extended beyond the

cosmetic. Rax had also rigged a black market Federation transponder in place of its normal one, identifying the vessel as property of the Federal Intelligence Service and personal enforcer to the president. It was a vessel with which even local law enforcement would blanch to meddle.

Rax chuckled. “The ‘verse won’t run out of paint while you’re gone, Andor.”

Andor shook his head. “It isn’t that. This entire thing is a distraction from our larger mission.”

The outlaw reclined, arms wide in exaggerated concern. “Tyrran Andor, stars in his eyes and blabbing on about some larger mission. I think I liked you more when you were just some two-bit swindler.”

Andor half-chuckled. “Funny way of showing it, what with the abduction at gunpoint.”

Rax shrugged, gesturing to the man and woman before him. Mischief glinted in his eyes.

“Worked out though, didn’t it? And you really *were* a bastard.”

Yolanta sighed. “Plenty of time to sort out who was a *bastardo* after the mission. We must leave soon.”

Rax nodded. “Right. Just one more thing. Hold out your hands.”

Knowing what was to come, the Night Witches did so, placid acceptance in their eyes. Rax produced a pincered handtool from his cybernetic hand, loaded with two tiny pellets, both of which had been obscenely expensive to acquire on the black market. Next he produced a torch lighter, manual and of the old style. The pincers were held to the flame before they were held to the Witches’ palms.

Tyrran winced only slightly as the implant was injected into his flesh, and Yolanta not at all. Man and woman rubbed their palms, the pain already receding. Rax put away the tool, satisfaction upon his features.

“Congratulations. You are now officially Federal agents. Or at least, official enough that *I’d* blast you if you barged into my business.”

Tyrran looked at the man sideways. “And how *is* the business?”

Rax held up his cybernetic limb, pulling back his jacket sleeve. “Learned some lessons, I have. Stopped faffing around with abandoned mines that were abandoned for a *reason*.”

Yolanta narrowed her eyes, curious. “Whatever *did* happen with... the arm?”

A wry look settled over Rax’s features.

“Story for another time, love. Let’s just say that there’s no need to journey to the Pleiades to find some beastly that wants you dead and digested.”

The Federal Times was a prominent media conglomerate, with billions of Federation citizens across the superpower's core starting their days with its holographic content scrolling along their dataslates. It had many branches in many systems, their output tailored to suit local interests and tastes. To maintain such a presence was the work of realtime updates of political and current happenings, personalities giving analysis with language tailored to bolster the corporo-political agenda of the network's supporters. Exact wording of even minor details was optimized by complex algorithms that utilized micro-targeting of select demographics, ensuring maximum saturation of several market layers simultaneously.

Bryanna Blanco was, at the end of the day, just another cog in this endlessly complex media labyrinth, but an important one. Her career was a lesson in precision; precision of tone, precision of diction, precision of appearance. She was attractive, with skin tone, voice, and facial structure selected to resemble an optimax cross-section of the network's viewers, with the exact details of such slightly modified by graphical filters to more subconsciously appeal to local sub-markets. The "real" Bryanna Blanco was known only to a few, with even her close relations possessed of vague memories as to what her unaltered self looked and sounded like. Indeed, she was a celebrity in her own right by sheer virtue of her face, voice, and words being broadcast to billions.

Yet the woman herself was as real as those around her, even if the masses' perception was an entirely contrived one. One of the chief attributes of Bryanna's journalistic career was the ability to flawlessly tapdance between the competing demands of corporate and popular interests— interests that

were seldom entirely aligned. She was also a philosopher in her own way, knowing that the truth was simultaneously a matter of objective fact *and* whatever it needed to be to pad the Times' bottom line.

Though Blanco was no stranger to dealing with Authority, the unexpected arrival of a ship with Federal markings and a pair of uniformed FIS officers was enough to put the journalist— and her assistants— on guard. She was in her office, a chaotic affair, numerous holographic screens with scrolling data occupying a circular wall. It was at once a place of work and a second home, with a tiny sleeping quarters and an expansive closet adjacent to the work area itself. An oversized desk was cluttered with holodisks and dataslates. The woman was seated, a makeup artist performing emergency touch-ups, another assistant hurriedly selecting an outfit to denote professionalism and patriotism. Blanco was helped into a dark crimson suit jacket and matching trousers, both with a flattering cut, a gleaming Federation pin attached to a collar. High black boots were selected, all the better to resemble her own guests, the tiny psychological advantage to be gained by matching their appearance not one to be wasted.

Concern hardened the woman's face, causing her assistant to frown. The assistant, who was herself a business professional in the field of interpersonal analytics, stood before her charge, looking her up and down with a practiced eye. She was older and in theory more experienced, but possessed the humble wisdom to know that her subordinate talents complimented those of her boss. Better still, Blanco knew so as well. The assistant was paid a small fortune for the monopoly on her insights.

"Good," she said. "You look professional, but not inaccessible. Patriotic but not jingoistic. Strong, but trustworthy."

Blanco nodded. "Sufficient. And the agents themselves?"



“One man and one woman. Late twenties to early thirties, perhaps older. Ethnolinguistic profile suggests Iberian descent— for them both.”

Again, Blanco nodded. “Curious, but curious in my favor. People are well-disposed to those who look like them.”

“Yes. I’ve run the numbers, and there’s a seventy-one percent chance of harnessing a subconscious bias in your favor based on that alone. Micro-demographs indicate positive sexual psychography for both officers, as well. You might do well to leave that uppermost button undone.”

The journalist waved the advice away. “You know I *hate* that nonsense. Can’t a meeting just be a meeting anymore?”

Her comment raised eyebrows with her other assistant, younger and far less experienced. Bryanna Blanco was a *master* of harnessing even the most subtle of subconscious dynamics in her favor. Her first assistant handed her a dataslate, a still from a holographic security image of the agents shimmering into view. True to her word, both possessed adult youthfulness and looked to be in excellent physical shape. Both were also comely to behold, with dark features and darker hair. The wheels of Blanco’s analytical mind turned, weighing a dozen factors against each other, at last arriving at a satisfactory plan of action. She turned to her younger assistant.

“Have them wait for seven minutes before escorting them here. Not six, and not eight. Seven.”

Confusion caused the second assistant to blink.

“Seven minutes, Miz Blanco?”

“Long enough to send the message that they do business at *our* pleasure but not long enough to be rude. Verify their badges. Ask for their names not fewer than twice. Allow five minutes to elapse between doing so. Apologize for forgetting.”

The assistant swallowed. “‘Forget’ who they are to remind... *the Federal Intelligence Service*... of their place?”

Blanco nodded. “Precisely. We’re not in Olympus Command on Mars. They need us far more than we need them.”

“Yes, Miz Blanco!”

The journalist rose, her assistants taking their cues for dismissal. She activated a holo-mirror, her ruthless feminine gaze scrutinizing every detail of her appearance. Her mouth lifted and settled into several iterations of a smile, some warm, some professional, and still a few others containing hints of flirtation. She settled on one, holding it in place to memorize how it felt, her every feature a perfect emulation of sincerity. Satisfied, she deactivated the holo-mirror, the very picture of professional competence.

Bryanna Blanco glanced one more time at the picture of the incoming pair of FIS officers. Perfectly colored lips twitched into a momentary, cunning smirk. Manicured fingers rose to her neck, unbuttoning the uppermost clasp of her blouse, the natural olive skin between her collarbones now gently plunging into a distinctly feminine crease.

### *Main lobby, Federal Times complex*

“Welcome to the Federal Times. Thank you for your patience. And whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

The young woman who greeted Tyrran and Yolanta looked to be twenty going on forty, with a precision-cut business suit and perfect, smooth skin. Dark hair was clipped close to her head; not a strand was out of place. She didn’t quite smile and didn’t quite frown, her every feature a display of bland corporate salutation.

Tyrran Andor rose from the lobby’s seating, Yolanta at his side. Both were dressed in their smart Federal Intelligence

Service uniforms, not a crease to be seen. He spoke with polite authority, not a trace of the rogue to be seen or heard.

“Victor Cruz, investigatory officer.”

Yolanta nodded, her own tone crisp and efficient.

“Gabriella Santos, investigatory officer.”

A pleasant smile. A submissive bow.

“Miz Blanco will see you now. Please, follow me.”

The assistant led the officers past a massive lobby of steel and glass, spacious floors adorned with towering holoposters of leading personalities and breaking news, a veritable cathedral of media spectacle in a bright and airy space. The complex was planetside, natural sunlight bathing the lobby in its warm glow, the traffic of hovercars in never-ending lines above their heads.

A security checkpoint separated the commons from the offices proper; the assistant turned to her guests.

“The FIS won’t be required to register for a guest security clearance, of course. We only ask to verify your badges. Standard procedure, I’m afraid.”

With visible disdain, the uniformed man and woman removed their credentials, handing them to the assistant. She passed them to a security guard, a younger man who refrained from looking the FIS officers in the eye, scanning their badges with a trembling hand. The assistant nodded as a pair of pleasant chimes were heard from the equipment. She handed them back, her smile as artificial as the badges themselves.

“Thank you. Right this way.”

The young woman led the officers into a lift, spotless and of clear duraglass, the horizon lowering as the trio rose. It was a beautiful day, the city in which the Federal Times offices were located large, but not so large that the sky was permanently smoggy from industrial pollution like so many other Federal metropoli. Yolanta closed her eyes, allowing a brief moment of warm sun on her face, her fingers intertwined behind her back. From beside her, the assistant nodded.

“A pleasant day, yes? Officer, uh...”

Púrpura's eyes snapped open, looking to her side, her eyes narrowed.

"Santos."

Insincere sincerity dripped from the assistant's every word.

"Of course. My apologies. Miz Blanco sees so *many* contacts."

Tyrran's keen eyes flashed, his own hands clasped behind his back.

"A busy woman, I'm sure."

The assistant nodded, her smile gracious and professional. "Those of her caliber always are. I *do* hope that multiple appointments to fully assist you won't be necessary."

Yolanta, her gaze unbroken, smiled not in the slightest in return.

"That is *our* hope as well."

*Office of Bryanna Blanco, Federal Times complex*

Bryanna Blanco sat behind her expansive cream desk, her attention occupied by her dataslate, faces and information scrolling upon it. To one side was her senior assistant, a dataslate in her own hands. The door to her office slid open, her junior assistant ushering in a pair of guests, as olive as she and clad in the black of the Federal Intelligence Service. The woman looked up, smiling pleasantly, rising to greet the new arrivals. She made no effort to come to them from behind her desk.

"Bryanna Blanco, at your service. And you are...?"

Tyrran and Yolanta advanced, neither taking the seats before them. They nodded, stiff and formal.

"Victor Cruz."

"Gabriella Santos."

Handshakes were exchanged, Blanco's eyes meeting both Tyrran's and Yolanta's, the two women's lingering for just a moment, the subtle guerrilla war of gestures and expressions that the feminine half of humanity had waged among itself since time immemorial commencing. With an air of grace, the hostess gestured to sit. The officers did so, with Blanco snapping her fingers, her junior assistant disappearing into the living quarters. She emerged a moment later, two steaming cups of tea in her hands. A pleasant smile lifted the journalist's lips.

"May I offer you some refreshment? I keep a personal stock of Fujin's best on hand."

Yolanta accepted the tea, taking a moment to smell the aroma.

"Officially no, but we are not here to be impolite."

Another cup was served to Blanco, who held it before her guests. "To happy meetings, then. Always a pleasure to assist the FIS."

Cups were raised and the tea within imbibed. Brianna Blanco leaned forward, her fingers intertwined, eyes intelligent and curious. Tyrran glanced downward for the scantest of glances. Yolanta did not.

"Taja Gavaris. What can you tell us about her?"

Blanco's smile remained as fixed as it was pleasant, nodding as though a distant memory was being recalled.

"Taja Gavaris... Taja Gavaris... ah, yes. The chief financial officer to Rackham Capital Investments. Recently appointed by Zachary Rackham."

Tyrran leaned forward. "And according to your articles, far more than that in a previous life. Pirate, murderer, all-around outlaw."

Blanco's eyes darted to his.

"I alleged no such thing. But there's no harm in innocently asking if she *was*. All I called for was an investigation to uncover the truth."

Yola nodded. “But one would not ask such a question without cause, innocently or not.”

Guarded curiosity lifted Blanco’s eyebrows. “You are... investigating the Rackham firm? Or just Gavaris?”

Púrpura raised her cup, indulging in another sip.

“Our investigation is our business. But our person of interest is Gavaris.”

“Of course. It pleases me that you’re finally heeding my advice regardless.”

Tyrran leaned forward, his eyes meeting Blanco’s.

“What we need is any information you might have on Gavaris’s activities prior to joining Rackham. *Especiall*y whatever you’ve come across to make you ask if she was a criminal.”

Amusement glinted in Blanco’s eyes. “Surely there isn’t any information that I possess that the FIS doesn’t. And why even ask? You can obtain a warrant for whatever you want.”

Yolanta reclined in her seat, looking to each of the two assistants that flanked Blanco.

“We have reason to believe that the courts... are compromised. Your direct assistance would be greatly appreciated. ‘Off the record’, I believe the saying goes.”

For a long time, Bryanna Blanco said nothing, only holding her teacup between her fingers.

“I speak to a lot of people from a lot of different places. Your accents are most curious. Iberian, but not from any Federation system I’ve ever visited. I should know, *si?*”

Yolanta nodded. “*Si, señora*. But the Federation is vast, and we are not here to speak of ourselves.”

The journalist’s gaze drifted to Tyrran. “Of course. But your partner... I swear that I hear Alliance in his dialect. And *your* Iberian is the most proper I’ve ever heard.”

A professional coldness grew within Yolanta’s tone. “I understand that you are used to asking the questions, *mi*

*amiga*. But today is different. Everything that you have on Taja Gavaris must be turned over to us.”

A smile. A long, slow nod.

“Or else?”

Yolanta leaned forward, Iberian eyes flashing. “Or else we *will* return with a warrant. And we will *not* be made to wait seven minutes in your *estupida* lobby.”

Tyrran now smiled. “It is a *faux pas* in your profession to *be* the story instead of the one reporting it, is it not? What would a charge of aiding a suspected criminal *do* to a career like yours?”

Blanco’s eyes flared. “How *dare* you accuse me of—”

Andor smiled. “Not accusing. Only asking the question.”

An uneasy silence descended over the office, Blanco’s pair of assistants shuffling nervously beside her. The woman herself remained as calm and collected as ever. At last her professional smile again had its way.

“The information is yours, of course. There is a release form that will have to be signed. Standard procedure. To protect my sources, you see.”

Pleasantness returned to Yolanta’s eyes, though her lips remained unsmiling.

“Of course.”

Wasting no time Blannco raised her arm, snapping her fingers. The younger of her two assistants stepped forward.

“Service?”

“The Gavaris file. Authority-level encryption. And prepare a release form.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The assistant turned and exited the office. Curiosity raised Tyrran’s eyebrows.

“You can’t access it from here?”

Blanco’s eyes narrowed. “Access? Yes. Copy? No. And since I’m sending sensitive information with you on

physical media, we have our own data handling procedures to follow.”

Yolanta nodded. “Of course. We are happy to wait.”

The professional smile remained in place.

“*Anything* to help the FIS.”

The office doors opened, the assistant returning with a sealed capsule. She placed it on the desk, taking her place at Blanco’s side. Without a word the other assistant picked up a dataslate, keying a few commands and handing it to Yolanta. A holo contract shimmered into view, long walls of text scrolling. The journalist smiled.

“A standard information release form. I’m sure you’ve seen dozens.”

Yolanta nodded. “Of course.”

Without hesitating the woman validated the agreement by placing her hand upon the indicated area. The holo-feed glowed yellow for a moment before flashing green, a reassuring chime accompanying it. Tyrran did the same, with the same results. Blanco also validated the agreement, standing to finish her cup of tea.

“The information is yours, my friends. It is my hope that your investigation goes well. *Adios, amigos.*”

“*Adios.*”

The younger assistant handed the capsule to Yolanta, who accepted it. She nodded to her hostess, as did Tyrran, both taking their peaked caps and tucking them under their arms. Handshakes were again exchanged, Blanco’s hand remaining in Tyrran’s for just a split second longer than the norm. Both officers turned to leave, the door sliding shut behind them. Bryanna Blanco remained standing for a full thirty seconds before again settling down into her chair, her eyes still fixed upon where her guests had departed. The



senior assistant signaled for the junior, speaking with borrowed authority.

“Take those teacups and have them sampled at once. Saliva and fingerprints.”

The junior of the two lackeys nodded, both grateful and dismayed that she would miss the juicy conversation was sure to be had in her absence. She picked up the cups and left, the office door sliding closed behind her. Without looking at her remaining assistant Blanco spoke.

“Analysis.”

There was no hesitation in the woman’s voice.

“Successful. The FIS has dire need of the information on Tavaris to the point of trained agents making clumsy threats. Leverage was applied at the correct moment.”

Blanco’s chest rose and fell with a deep sigh, though her expression remained placid. “No doubt they are telling themselves the exact same thing.”

“No doubt. But their reluctance to follow normal channels is telling; they are uncertain of either their case or the integrity of their own courts, as they said.”

“Optimax strategy going forward?”

The assistant spoke clearly, confident in her analysis.

“There is a ninety-seven percent possibility that the *entire* Rackham firm is or will be under investigation, and the story should be written as such to get ahead of their game. They *will* return with more requests for information. We should establish closer ties to these officers for maximum long-term networking.”

Blanco nodded. “Agreed. Which one, though?”

Again, there was no hesitation.

“The male. Cruz. All non-verbals point toward optimal success probability.”

Blanco chuckled. “I caught him glancing down my blouse, too. Every little bit helps with these things. But the woman?”

Her face soured. “Cold as ice, that one. Find out who their superior is and do everything we can to have her taken off the case. I don’t want to take *any* chances. Not when Taja Gavaris is in the mix.”

*Surfaceside spaceport, Federal world*

The *Blackthorne*’s main engines flared to life, its bridge filling with a familiar, low rumble. In a long, graceful motion the Krait Phantom lifted free of the city’s spaceport, the airspace around it thick with ship traffic. The bank of red thrusters glowed, and the Phantom rocketed away, leaving a thick red trail of exhaust in the atmosphere— much to the disdain of local authorities. The vessel almost certainly violated local emissions code, but who was going to tell that to an FIS officer with Hudson’s own crest upon his ship?

Gentle blues darkened into the starry blackness of space, the *Blackthorne* clearing the planet’s atmosphere. Tyrran keyed his controls, eyes on his sensors. A roguish grin lifted his lips.

“No emergency bands in use, no Authority ships tailing us. I think we’re in the clear.”

Yolanta nodded, secure in her co-commander’s seat behind him, reaching inside her jacket pocket and producing the capsule.

“Let us hope that whatever is on this data chip is worth it. I would prefer to not masquerade as a *Federali* again.”

Tyrran chuckled. “That reporter, though. She sure thought she was something, didn’t she?”

Yola snapped her head upward, her gaze boring into the back of her partner’s head.

“With the way you were looking at her, it seemed like *you* certainly thought so.”

Andor raised his eyebrows, keying in a course for Rax's safehouse.

"I am a man, *mi amor*— but not a fool. She will be forgotten in a day."

Yola scoffed, though her eyes held hints of a smile. "No need to break out the Hexedit just yet, *patán*. But you are right. That Bryanna Blanco is crafty... but still she is no Púrpura. *Mi padre* used to entertain dozens far worse than her."

"Worse?"

The woman nodded, memory in her eyes. "*Si*. Imperial grand balls, well... it is not like having a beer with your old smuggling crew. A thousand eyes are upon you, and you must fight a thousand battles at once, especially if you are a woman among other women. Everything you do must be perfect and considered. The way you hold your glass. The way you smile. The order and manner in which you engage your guests. The exact details of your dress and hair. An improper remark or expression has been the downfall of many. *Ey*, I do not miss that life!"

Andor shook his head. "Remind me to never have dinner with your old man."

Bitterness clouded Yola's features. "In truth I do not know if I even have a *padre*. My sisters I would like to see; they are blameless for what they are. But I am so far gone from everything my family is... what would they think of *me*?"

Tyrran was silent for a moment.

"Let's find out someday."

The woman tilted her head, staring into the starry blackness of space for a moment before nodding.

"*Si*. I would like that."

The *Blackthorne* flew on awhile longer, far beyond the range of standard system comms. Tyrran keyed his controls, the Phantom exiting supercruise and easing back into sublight velocities, her thrusters once again flaring, blood red amid the

blackness of lonely deep space. Long range scans confirmed the absence of both ships or probes. The *Blackthorne* was as alone as it would get in the Federal system.

Man and woman rose, striding to the master comms panel, their fingers intertwining for a brief moment as the encrypted holofac went through. The roughneck visage of Rax Ortega filled the holoscreen.

“You got the stuff?”

Yolanta held up the capsule, prying it open, the data disk emerging from within between her fingers.

“Of course, *camarada*. All we had to do was ask nicely.”

Rax scoffed. “She’s worse than a nosy aunt, that Blanco woman. Now Rackham’s all over her scanners, and we’ll be seeing news of this in print. Mark my words.”

Tyrran shrugged. “Anything that gets Rackham his firm back.”

“Aye. Get your arses to Ackerman and that disk in my hands. Ten to one it’s encrypted... unless you want to try your luck with the *real* FIS boys and girls.”

A wry look spread over Yolanta’s face. “We will be there soon. *Muchas gracias*, Rax.”

The man chuckled, a low guttural sound.

“Don’t thank me. Thank Rackham. Man’s been making it rain credits and quim for me and mine just for putting him up for the night. Tell Kerenski that she can set me up with a job like this *anytime!*”

*Rax’s hideout, Ackerman Market, Eravate system*

The smell of cigarillo smoke mixed with the smell of machine oil. Rax Ortega worked with diligence, a trio of holoscreens before him, lost within himself as he worked to

decrypt the data disc. Yolanta lounged on an adjacent couch, her cigarillo in one hand and a beer in the other. Tyrran leaned against a wall, arms folded. Ouberos and Rackham settled into the chairs across from Yola, a drink in their hands as well. There was little to do except wait, wait for the work of decrypting the disk.

Rackham was the first to speak, lighting a cigar and waving it around, the smoke cutting a trail across his grinning face.

“My security chief is going to blow his top. Two weeks I’ve been off-grid and without escorts. Hanging around with some real shady types, too.”

Ouberos raised his glass to the older man, only mild amusement in his tone.

“Happy to let you relive the glory days. But don’t forget about your end of the deal.”

Rackham nodded.

“You’ll have your shipyards as soon as I have my firm back. We’ll both be fat and happy at the end of it all.”

Yolanta sat up, her eyes narrowed.

“The Nameless. The *Nameless* will have the shipyards. They control Carcosa, not us.”

Another chuckle. Another drag on a cigar.

“Whatever you say, love. Wouldn’t be the first propped-up cock I’ve ever seen get some action.”

Amusement danced in Yola’s eyes.

“*Expert* in propped-up cock, are we?”

Calico Jack grinned, raising his glass to his outlaw comrade, indulging in a long drag of his cigar. He took a long look at Tyrran and Yolanta before speaking.

“What is it that you’re doing out there, anyway? I mean really.”

Yolanta took a drag of her own, calm and earnest.

“Carrying on Kahina Loren’s mission to expose and destroy the powers that manipulate from the shadows.”

For a moment, Rackham said nothing.

Then, he *laughed*. Loudly, and doubled over, nearly spilling his drink. Wiping a tear from his eye he rose, pacing the length of the dingy hideout. Even Rax paused his work to glance over his shoulder, irritation in his eyes.

“I should have *known* that this was all about some damned fool crusade. Don’t get me wrong— it’s a damned fine business proposition you’ve got and I’ll see my end through. But by Randomius, what in the nine hells do you expect to accomplish?”

Yolanta said nothing, taken aback. She took a drag of her cigarillo, her head cocked to one side.

“I would have thought that the overthrow of such *bastardos* was an end unto itself.”

Rackham shook his head, a sour look upon his face.

“Overthrow all you want. There’s always another bastard holding the chain. But that isn’t even the worst bit.”

Tyrran scowled. “Then what *is*?”

Rackham took a long drag of his cigar, washing it down with his drink.

“Thirty years ago I’d have *hated* me. Rich, fat, making creds off the backs of sucker investors. Sitting on boards. Rubbing elbows with the Feds. I get a little sick just thinking about it.”

“Then why do it?”

Rackham looked away, his eyes in another place.

“Because I’ve realized something about myself. Myself of thirty years ago, that is. I wasn’t knocking over all those ships because I *believed* in something. I wanted what they had. Wealth, mainly— but the power that comes with it is nice, too.”

Tyrran shook his head. “We aren’t after wealth and power.”

Rackham’s eyebrows raised. “*Aren’t* you? Then why are you here? Why help outlaws seize some decrepit rock? Why not just...”

He waved his cigar around, the smoke making a trail in the air.

“... let *them* have their way? Everyone else does.”

Yola folded her arms, looking up to Rackham.

“We are *not* everyone else.”

Rackham sat back down, leaning forward, his eyes locked upon Púrpura’s.

“No,” he said. “You’re what every starry-eyed university student with a picket sign *thinks* progress looks like. Then they go out into the world and see how lonely it can be without a roof over your head.”

Ouberos remained silent, his intelligent eyes nondescript. Rackham gestured to him.

“I wasn’t lying when I said that wisdom is knowing when to move on. You’re a lot like me, you know that? Right before I furl the Jolly Roger for good.”

The younger pirate smiled his smooth smile, looking to those around him before settling upon Rackham.

“But I’m *not* you.”

Rackham chuckled, the sound from his throat low and guttural, turning to Tyrran and Yolanta.

“No one ever took power without toppling whoever had it first. But *you*... you want to burn it all down— and build *nothing* in its place?”

The Witches were silent, glaring. The old pirate took another sip.

“Bollocks. You’ll take whatever power you can. Anything else would be idiotic.”

Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura rose, finishing her drink, stubbing out her cigarillo. She unbuttoned the jacket of her false Federal identity, holding it up before letting it fall to the deck in a heap.

“Let us hope that this chip reveals something useful, *si*? I would hate for you to have to spend any more time slumming it with we *idiotas*.”

With that, the woman spun, exiting the hideout, Iberian hips shifting. All eyes followed her out, the door sliding shut behind her. The sound of boots on metal deck could be heard receding beyond it.

Ouberos took another drink, gesturing to the elder pirate.

“I don’t think she likes you very much.”

Rackham nodded, earnestness in his features. He settled into the couch, looking straight to Tyrran. A roguish gentleness softened his tone.

“Take care of her, lad. She’s a fiery one, she is. And when the truth hits, it’ll hit her *hardest*.”

### *LRV Blackthorne, Ackerman Market, Eravate system*

Yolanta Púrpura paced back and forth within the *Blackthorne*’s main corridor, a freshly-lit cigarillo in her hand and a drink in the other. She cursed and mumbled under her breath, her lips moving in sharp whispers, her face locked in an expression of disdain. In the distance a door open, familiar footsteps drawing closer. Tyrran Andor approached, concern in his features. Yolanta paused, her eyes sharp, her tone haughty.

“I wanted to tell him,” she spat. “Wanted to tell that *gordo* old sellout that we have one of humanity’s deadliest enemies locked in our hold because we *believe* in something other than sitting back and being slaves!”

Tyrran took his partner by her arms, his eyes boring into hers. “But you didn’t. You didn’t because he’s only a means to an end. Let him sit on his throne of hypocrisy. We have bigger fish to fry, *si*?”

Yolanta seethed, but took a deep breath. She looked to her booted feet, and then back up to Tyrran.



“*Si.*”

The man released her, his hand drifting down to hers.

“It has been too long since you played. Come.”

The woman allowed herself to be led into the stateroom, sitting on the bed, Tyrran kneeling to retrieve the guitar case from a storage compartment beneath it. He laid it next to her, urging her on with his eyes, watching as she opened the case and nestled the guitar in her lap.

The first notes were not soft but sharp, distinctly Iberian in manner, the stateroom filled with the rich plucking. Within moments Yolanta’s eyes were closed, her hands and fingers moving on their own, her body swaying with the rhythm. So too did Tyrran pour himself a drink, savoring the sight and sound of his *amor*. For a long time man stood and woman sat, entranced in the melody, their blood stirred with each passionate note.

Tyrran set down his drink, settling into place behind Yolanta, his hands brushing her hips and back. The woman’s mouth opened, her head tilted to the side, her lover’s lips upon her neck. The notes came harder and her breathing deeper as his fingertips brushed the swells of her breasts, tracing along her throat before settling lower to unsnap the buttons of her top one by one. By now her chest rose and fell beneath his touch, her Iberian heart pounding, the softest of moans escaping her throat. The notes stopped, Yolanta’s hands grasping his, moving his palm to her lips. Her voice was barely a whisper, turning to gather her man close.

“It *has* been too long, has it not?”

Bryanna Blanco was working late, but such was hardly unusual for her. The sun was nearly set, the Federal Times complex now bathed in darkness instead of sunlight. Such mattered little in her office, where the artificial glow of holoscreens never ceased. She was as ever flanked by her senior assistant, one for whom work was life, ever striving to prove her dedication.

Streams of realtime data scrolled across each of the monitors, both pairs of eyes digesting every morsel of information, ever plotting their next move. Blanco held up her hand, snapping her fingers.

“Analysis.”

The assistant nodded. “Our contacts within Gal-Net have agreed to run the story. Already there is record exposure across previously inaccessible markets. Your profile has never been higher, with a ninety-six percent approval rating.”

A tight smile lifted Blanco’s lips. “People always *love* when justice is served. The messenger who serves it, more so. It was a gamble to expose our ties with the FIS, but one that is paying dividends. I want you to contact legal as soon as they are in. A contract renegotiation seems in order—”

The door to her office slid open. The younger of her two assistants walked in, the freshness of youth compensating for her inner fatigue. She paused, summoning her strength to drive the tiredness from her voice.

“The results are in. From our guests, that is.”

A hand extended. A data disk was placed upon it. Brianna spun, her junior assistant already forgotten, loading the disk into her dataslate. The screen flashed and loaded, the results scrolling in holographic charts and symbols.

Bryanna Blanco, the woman for whom nothing was a surprise, felt her jaw drop in shock.

“They... they were *fakes*. Nothing in the public archives. Nothing in the FIS database. They aren’t even Federal citizens.”

The senior aid stepped backward, worry growing upon her own features.

“And we just ran a story about them.”

Bryanna said nothing, not moving a hair, her eyes fixed upon the screen in a moment of rapid contemplation. She rose, speaking swiftly and decisively.

“Forget about the contract renegotiation, but contact legal anyway— at *home*. Emergency number. Next, I need you to instruct our feeders to alter the narrative. If I’m going to *be* part of the story, it’ll damn well be as the unsuspecting victim. Those always poll well. *Execute!*”

The senior assistant sprung into action, a whirlwind of efficiency, well-chosen for her role. The junior remained in place, looking down at her feet.

“And... and what shall *I* do?”

Blanco spun, her stern gaze upon the much younger woman, looking almost childlike in her meekness.

“Coffee. Black. Extra strong. And get *yourself* one, too. No sleep tonight, I’m afraid. This is the business we’re *in!*”

*Rax’s hideout, Ackerman Market, Eravate system*

Tyrran and Yolanta were late arrivals the next morning, everyone else already gathered in Rax’s hideout. There was smoke in the air and concern upon every face, giving the Night Witches pause. Yolanta narrowed her eyes, hands on hips.

“What is it?”

Ouberos tossed a dataslate, Tyrran catching it. The pirate had already helped himself to a drink.

“Gal-Net. Today’s top story. Read it.”

Exhaling, Tyrran activated the dataslate. The appropriate media was already pulled up. As one his and Yola’s eyes widened.

*“The Federal Times has been asked to assist with a criminal investigation into Rackham Capital Investments.”*

*Journalist Bryanna Blanco reported on the details:*

*“Operatives from the Federal Intelligence Agency have contacted our offices regarding the recent deaths at Zachary Rackham’s company. We are cooperating with their inquiry and have agreed to share all relevant documentation.”*

*“The Federal Times has been monitoring the suspicious activities of ‘Calico Zack’ for years, so we’re relieved that the authorities are at last taking these allegations seriously. Our discoveries about Taja Gavaris – who seems to be clearing the path up the corporate ladder by any means necessary – are of particular concern.”*

*“We expect Rackham, Gavaris and many other ex-pirates masquerading as businessmen to answer all charges brought against them.”*

Tyrran closed out the datafac.

“Son of a bitch.”

Zachary Rackham nodded, his eyes keen.

“Time is now against us. We can expect for the *real* FIS to have already launched an investigation.”

Yolanta scowled, shaking her head. “Then we cannot go back. Whatever is on that chip will have to work.”

Rackham sighed. “Aye. Besides, I can only hold off my *own* handlers for so long. Two weeks is a long time for an embattled CEO to be out of the game.”

Yolanta lit a cigarillo, her own features dire.

“There is more to it than that, *señor*. If progress is not made, the powers-that-be will crush our Rock into a million little pebbles— and all our *camaradas* with it!”

A new, hitherto-silent voice boomed from the workstation. Rax turned to face his comrades, the data disk held triumphantly aloft.

“Not if *I* have anything to say about it. Rax Ortega, one. Federal encryption, *zero!*”

He rose, handing the disk to Rackham, who immediately inserted it into his personal dataslate. The information took a moment to load, but when it did...

“Years,” breathed Zachary Rackham. “The woman’s been at it for *years*. ”

Smoke from the old pirate’s cigar mixed with that of Yolanta’s cigarillo. The Night Witch leaned in close, the information scrolling in rapid lines. One eyebrow lifted.

“She has information on all of you,” she observed. “Not just Gavaris.”

“Aye,” he replied. “If I were a betting man, I’d say that she was plotting to take us all down in one fell swoop of the pen.”

A wry look crossed Tyrran’s features. “And how will Robardin Rock get its new ships *then*?”

Rackham turned. “Your concern is touching, pup. But this needs to be addressed.”

From a corner lounge, Ouberos raised a glass.

“If only this debacle were to take place in the jurisdiction of a nakedly corporatist superpower, where the CEO of an investment firm possesses overt influence with those who would otherwise have held him accountable for a past life of crime.”

He took a sip, his eyes wide and innocent.

“Oh wait...”

The old pirate smiled at the younger, his eyes predacious. “You’re right, of course. I’m still the CEO of Rackham Capital Investments, and I’ve still got the high

ground. This Bryanna Blanco just *might* have done the legwork I need to save my firm. I've got a call to make."

*Federal Times boardroom*

"We at the Federal Intelligence Service take pride in discretion. Would that the Federal Times did the same."

The senior captain was slim, with a square jaw and greying temples, his black uniform a perfect fit and his presence commanding even in a boardroom of corporate executives. He was there in person, the matter at hand too important for a mere holofac meeting. It was a comparatively tiny affair, with only the local editor, chief executive of that particular system's branch, and a legal representative surrounding Bryanna Blanco. Even their combined gravitas and status did little to intimidate their guest, sitting along on the other side. Bryanna leaned forward, her tone professional but her eyes betraying nothing.

"The imposters who visited presented valid identification. Or shall it become our policy to deny cooperation with the FIS based on how easy you are to mimic?"

There was an uneasy shuffling around the table, the Times' legal counsel putting her hand on Blanco's leg beneath the table as a gesture of warning. The captain smiled, a shark in black and red.

"That might be for the best, given how keen you are to blab every little detail like a preening schoolgirl."

Blanco smiled. "I *am* a reporter."

The captain scoffed. "No, miss. You're a trumped-up holovision personality that spouts whatever nonsense will keep ratings high. And if there *had* been an investigation, you'd have placed lives in danger."

The woman's smile turned mocking. "Nothing the heroes of the FIS can't handle, surely?"

The chief executive cleared his throat, shooting daggers to his star personality. He steepled his fingertips, leaning forward.

"We are prepared to offer whatever cooperation you require to... *move on*... from this unfortunate episode."

Now it was the captain's turn to smile. "I thought you might."

He reached inside his jacket pocket, producing a data chip, sliding it across the desk. "This is our official statement concerning the matter. We will also require that you turn over whatever materials to us that you provided to the imposters."

The CEO nodded. "Of course."

Authority resonated from the captain, his features hard. "Of *course* goddamned 'of course'. I wasn't asking."

All at the table shrank except Bryanna. "And as this is *my* story," she said, "I can assure you that my reply will be *most* forthcoming."

The captain nodded, rising from the table, peaked cap tucked beneath his arm. "Then there is nothing further to discuss. Thank you all for your... time."

He turned to leave, Blanco's voice stopping him just before he reached the boardroom door.

"You *will* be investigating Rackham Capital, will you not?"

The captain turned, the barest hint of a sneer upon his solid lips.

"You have my statement," he said. "And this is *not* an interview."

The doors shut behind him, leaving the upper echelons of the Federal Times along among themselves. All eyes turned to Blanco, who rose, gathering her dataslate and captain's chip. She was stopped by the executive, at last showing real anger.

“Do you *realize* the blunder you’ve made? The leverage you’ve cost yourself?”

Bryanna Blanco smiled her cunning smile, not even bothering to face the man as she strode out of the boardroom.

“I realize that *any* press is good press for a scoop like this. And when you’ve broken Gal-Net for your network, the leverage is *entirely* in one direction.”

*Rax’s hideout, Ackerman Market, Eravate System*

Rackham’s laughter was long, loud, and crude, a meaty hand slapping the table and rousing the others’ attention. He held his dataslate aloft, a new Gal-Net article upon it. A stern-looking captain of the Federal Intelligence Agency was giving a statement.

*"Contrary to recent statements by the journalist Bryanna Blanco, we did not contact her seeking to obtain documentation, and are not running any investigation. There is no evidence of criminality within Rackham Capital Investments. Our agency has received charitable donations from that organisation in the past, and Mr Rackham himself is a long-standing member of the FIA Civilian Oversight Board. Such a relationship would not be possible if we had any doubts about the integrity of Mr Rackham's business dealings."*

Ouberos shook his head, arms folding.

“I never thought I’d see the day when I’d cheer how in bed the Federation is with its corporations.”

Rackham reached to his side, pouring himself a few fingers of amber liquid, raising his glass to the company before him.

“Strange bedfellows make the ‘verse go ’round. Here’s to friends in high places!”



Rackham alone toasted, but the man's spirits were none the lesser. He drank, setting the glass down, beckoning to the others as the holofeed cut to a familiar face. Bryanna Blanco was her usual composed self, but with an unusually defiant tone.

*"If this is true, then who were the FIA agents that visited our offices? I spoke to them personally and asked to see their credentials. Who has obtained our data regarding the criminal histories of Zachary Rackham and many others?"*

Another long gail of laughter escaped Rackham's lips, his eyes upon Blanco's.

*"We have, you preening cow!"*

Tyrran and Yolanta looked at one another, the woman stepping forward, hands on hips.

*"This is progress toward a meeting with Lakon and Core Dynamics, si? We have lingered here for too long, I fear."*

Rackham took a final look at the dataslate, closing it out and tossing it across the table. He reached within his jacket, producing a cigar and lighter. Lighting the former with the latter, he reclined, at ease and with roguish satisfaction upon his features.

*"You two have done all you can, and the ball is rolling my way for a change. See to your business. Ouberos here will keep me honest, I'm certain."*

Tyrran advanced, suspicion in his eyes, a single warning finger raised.

*"I swear if this is a swindle..."*

From the corner, Rax chuckled.

*"It would serve you right, pup. But Rackham here can be trusted. The terms your Kerenski woman offered are just too good."*

Rackham spread his arms. *"So untrusting, the younger generation. You'd have thought that I was some kind of thief."*

Amusement sharpened Yolanta's features. *"We shall take our leave, then. It has been a pleasure, senior Rackham."*

Handshakes were exchanged, the older man's lingering upon Púrpura's for just a moment, his old roguish charm making a final appearance.

"Please," he said. "Call me Calico Zack."

### *High orbit*

The *Blackthorne*, re-painted its usual black with crimson accents, rose into the evening sky, blood-red thrusters flaring. The purples of evening darkened into the blacks of space, stars coming into view, filling the Phantom's canopy. Tyrran exhaled, grateful to be underway. Yolanta, too, allowed her gaze to drift, the dangerous beauty of the void calling to her as well. At last she forced herself to focus.

"I have informed Kerenski of our progress," she said. "And now is the time to proceed on-mission."

Tyrran's features darkened. "Along with that *thing* in my cargo hold."

Yolanta looked to her side, her chin resting on her fingers, her eyes narrowed.

"We must work with the resources we have, *mi amor*," she said. "Not the ones we *wish* we had."

Andor's fingers danced across the holoscreen to his left, plotting a course deeper into humanity's core.

"A machine that can think," he said. "Whose kind wanted to annihilate humanity. That's the kind of 'resource' we can do without."

Yolanta exhaled, frowning. "I do not trust it either. But orders are orders, and if this works we will expose humanity's puppetmasters for what they are."

Doubt clouded the man's features.

"Yola?"

"*Si, mi amor?*"

Andor swallowed, glancing over his shoulder.

“What if we expose these puppetmasters... their lies, their plots, the blood on their hands... and nobody cares?”

Determination hardened Púrpura’s features.

“Get us into hyperspace, *patán*.”

### *Rackham Capital Investments boardroom*

The boardroom for Rackham Capital Investments was everything that one would expect of a Federal corporation. A long, polished table of old-growth wood dominated the room, with a discreetly-hidden holoprojector in its center and plush leather chairs lining its sides. One chair was larger than the rest, the CEO’s symbol of office, not at the head but the side of the table, solitary and centered. The rest were arrayed on the other side.

It was into this arrangement that somber-faced men and women strode, each in impeccable business suits, of varying ages and looks. They settled in, executive dataslates in their hands, the woman in their midst seated in the centermost chair, directly across from the unique one reserved for the chief executive.

Taja Gavaris was in her seventies, but unlike the vast majority of upper-crust citizens made no effort to conceal her advancing age. Whereas most women of means strove to lock themselves into a perpetual state of youth, Gavaris barely wore makeup. Her hair was shot through with streaks of grey, framing skin that sagged around her jawline, a few age spots on her neck and chest. Gnarled fingers bore signs of arthritis, and her voice wavered with the throaty sound of well-used vocal chords.

Like everything else in her life of violence, Taja’s appearance was a weapon, wielded against a new class of mark that was accustomed to gazing upon only the refined and

comely. To the well-heeled of polite society, natural aging was as unnerving as an artificial limb, but without the direct stigma. Sharp eyes with bags beneath them and a harsh tone often accomplished what honeyed words could not, and all who dealt with her sensed a danger in the woman's very presence, ignorant to her past through they were. It was a profoundly human component to an often de-humanizing culture.

Surrounding Gavaris were her most trusted of lackeys, appointed to various managerships and board positions at her behest. Most were her age or younger, apprentices who owed their positions to her and therefore unlikely to betray their patron. Like her they were all wolves in sheep's clothing, criminals who had exchanged ratty shipwear for synthsilk suits. And now, like wolves, they hunted as a pack, closing in on what they were certain was the final leg of a long pursuit.

Their prey entered the room by himself, personal assistants never having been his style. Zachary Rackham wore the attire of the business professional that he was, but in a decidedly more plebeian manner. His hair was its usual roguish length, his beard more salt than pepper in his advancing years. But his movement betrayed the old outlaw that he was, his eyes keen as though his prime had never passed. With deceptive grace he took his seat, sitting alone on his side of the boardroom table, outnumbered a dozen to one by the cohort across from him.

For a long moment, neither side said anything. Taja was the first to speak, playing the part of the subordinate financial officer.

"There are matters which require our immediate attention."

Zachary Rackham nodded, his fingers steepled in a gesture of earnestness.

"So I've seen. We've made the news, and not for reasons we'd like. The Federal media is spreading *vicious* rumors of past criminality among our senior management."

There was an uncomfortable shuffling among those seated among Gavaris's faction. Even outnumbered, Rackham was a formidable presence. The woman alone remained still, her aged eyes never leaving his.

"It seems that a change is in order. One long overdue, in fact."

Rackham nodded. "We *are* speaking of new leadership, are we not?"

Gavaris smiled, her eyes predacious. "We are. It's over, Zachary."

"Is it?"

The woman's smile grew, her aged hands flat upon the table.

"My people are in key positions throughout the firm. Collectively we have our hands on all the levers. You're a figurehead at this point."

Rackham's eyebrows raised. "The charter doesn't seem to think so."

Gavaris leaned forward, triumphant and mocking.

"Calico Zack, hiding behind technicalities. This isn't a hostile takeover. It's a mercy killing."

Rackham grunted, disdain in his features.

"Your killings were never merciful. I know how you used to operate. Shoot out the victim's engines. Then their reactor. Then their life support. Make wagers with your crew if it would be asphyxia or the cold that would take your mark first."

Taja Gavaris's smile remained fixed, her eyes sharpening in memory.

"It was always the cold."

Zachary Rackham leaned forward, defiance in his eyes.

"And that's where you intend to leave me? In the cold?"

Sneers and arrogance filtered back in among the woman's lackeys. Gavaris cocked her head to the side, dominance dripping from every word.

“Generosity was always *your* style, not mine. I’ll allow you a Sidewinder from the fleet. Upgrade the hyperdrive on it, even. Perhaps Archon Delaine would deign to throw the great Calico Zack some table scraps.”

Rackham nodded slowly, understanding. “And that’s the best deal you’ve got?”

“It’s a better one than many here would have offered. A bullet to the head is more their style.”

The old man grunted. “A ship and a chance to start over. Not bad.”

Gavaris smiled. “Perhaps you’ll feel young again.”

“Not likely.”

The woman’s sneer dominated her features.

“You’re finished either way. I have the paperwork prepared. You’ll find it loaded onto your dataslate. There’s no need to drag this process out. Validate the agreement and be done with it.”

“Alright.”

All present activated their devices, a dozen holographic contracts shimmering into view. Zachary Rackham was the last to do so, his thick fingers slow to move. The contents of the agreement scrolled rapidly, a satisfying chime heard as he validated the changes to the firm’s executive makeup. He set down the dataslate.

“Done.”

Taja, too, glanced to her device, her expressom shifting from one of sneering dominance to one of contempt. She held up her dataslate, disbelief in her features.

“What in the nine hells is *this*? Sole proprietorship? Mass resignations from me and mine? Forfeited accounts and benefits? Surely you aren’t counting on us falling for some cheap parlor trick.”

Rackham shook his head, his voice and tone earnest.

“Not at all,” he said. “I expect you to sign the new agreement of your own free will, uncoerced and with all enthusiasm.”

For a moment, Taja Gavaris said nothing.

Then, she *laughed*.

Her laughter, long and mocking, was shared by every man and woman of her cohort. Laughter filled the boardroom, usually a place of sober discussion.

Through it all, Zachary Rackham waited. The raucousness died down, Taja still shaking her head. The man leaned forward.

“Are you finished?”

Gavaris scoffed, still smiling. “I believe I am.”

Calico Zack smiled, his old roguishness dancing in his eyes.

“Then at last we agree on something.”

The doors to the boardroom burst open, armed Federal officers storming through, weapons drawn and pointed. Shock and disbelief dropped the jaws of all present save the Rackham, who silently lit a cigar, once again the chief executive and not a hostage in his own boardroom. Taja went from shock to rage, her fingers curling into age-spotted fists.

“You wouldn’t *dare!*”

Rackham indulged in a long, luxurious first drag, taking a moment to savor the cigar’s character.

“I’ll allow you a single Sidewinder from the fleet. Upgrade the hyperdrive, even. Perhaps Archon Delaine will deign to throw the great Taja Gavaris some table scraps.”

The final officer to enter the boardroom was the same to appear on Gal-Net, and the same to interview Bryanna Blanco. He strode past his men, standing at Rackham’s side, one hand resting on the hilt of his pistol.

“Or we could put a bullet in your head. That’s more *my* style.”

Taja Gavaris’s features twisted into pure, seething hatred, rising before being restrained by a pair of officers.

“I always *knew* you were a son of a bitch!”

The roguery in Rackham’s eyes grew. “Wasn’t a dealbreaker, though. Now: about that contract?”

Trapped, defeated, with no one to help and weapons in her face, Taja Gavaris and her cronies validated the agreement. In that instant, they were creditless, jobless, and trespassers on corporate property. An assistant, one who had served the chief executive for years, took his place at the old pirate's side.

"First order of business?"

Rackham waved the newly-detained assemblage of ex-board members away.

"Get them out of here. And make sure Gavaris has her Sidewinder. Wouldn't want to welsh on a deal, now would I?"

The assistant nodded, turning to Gavaris and her ilk. He lifted his chin to the officer.

"Take them away."

With a single order, the business-suited men and women were ushered out of the office. Some scowled at their former chief executive, and others to the old woman who had led them to their predicament. None made any effort to resist. The assistant turned back to Rackham.

"Second order of business?"

Rackham considered. "Arrange a meeting with our contacts in Core Dynamics... *and* Lakon."

The aide looked at his boss, one eyebrow raised. "Both?"

"Both. The same folks as last time will do. Tell them that I want to do something *else* for those poor folks in Colonia. Now scram. The officer and I have some business to discuss."

The assistant nodded and shuffled out. The door shut, leaving only Rackham and the Federal captain alone. The latter shrugged, taking the seat so recently occupied by Gavaris, fishing his own cigar from his jacket. It was identical to the one smoldering between Rackham's fingers. He leaned forward, holding still as Rackham lit his cigar. He took a few puffs upon it, reclining, his feigned professionalism at last fading away. A credit chit from the Bank of Zaonce, generous



and untraceable, was slid from executive to officer. The latter picked it up, glancing to its amount before pocketing it.

“Now *that*,” he said, “is what I call a good day’s work.”

Rackham chuckled, taking another puff. “I cursed the day you left my crew to go straight,” he said. “You were always one of the best. Now I see you were one of the brightest, too.”

The officer smiled. “Learned the same lesson, we did: the biggest scores go to those with a badge and a suit. Our shipfaring days were small potatoes in comparison.”

Rackham’s own smile grew, the old pirate propping his feet up upon the boardroom table, his chair reclined. “But we had to start somewhere. And we *did* have some good times, didn’t we? Before the suit and the badge. Before the frameshift drive. Before all *this*.”

Memory danced in the men’s features, neither saying anything, both savoring the moment. Calico Zack Rackham rose, opening a nearby cabinet, producing a bottle and two crystal glasses. He poured a few fingers of amber liquid into both. Officer and executive toasted the other, the former’s sandpaper voice at last content.

“To small potatoes.”

Word of the new hulls in the unlikely locale of Robardin Rock spread slowly at first, but spread it did. The Nameless's reputation wasn't easily overcome, and the news of Federal and Alliance ships being for sale was greeted with cynicism when it wasn't outright dismissed. Yet a few enterprising souls risked the journey into the anarchic space of Carcosa, where to their surprise they were greeted with all the spartan hospitality that a facility like The Rock could muster. Requests to verify that The Nameless did, in fact, possess a *bona fide* license to fabricate Core Dynamics and Lakon Spaceways ships were readily satisfied. Within days the first Federal and Alliance vessels could be seen exiting the docking tube of Robardin Rock, their new owners still in a daze that such could be purchased anywhere in Colonia.

The door to normalized relations with the rest of the nebula had been cracked open, and through the narrow gap slipped the slimmest of trade. Independent merchants once again paid visits to The Rock, enterprising miners on their heels. Yet a boomtown rush failed to occur, for Serene Meadows had declined to advertise the presence of Void Opals in the rings of Carcosa's gas giants, coveting them for her faction's own ends. So too did miners ever keep the choice locations to themselves, and the wealth contained within Carcosa remained largely a secret.

Robardin Rock was the hub of Carcosa, but it would never be a hub of Colonia proper. This suited both its owners' insular tastes and the reality of its own limited facilities. Yet it now occupied a niche, a peculiar reason for the new *status quo* to be upheld emerging as unexpectedly as the Reapers themselves. Peace reigned where it should not have, the

righteous fury of the galactic community that had so decisively vanquished The Nameless failing to re-emerge.

Yet those who are accustomed to having their way seldom relinquish power without a fight, and those pledged to Explorer's Nation were no exception. To challenge The Nameless and their Reaper allies with guns blazing was a sure recipe for failure; more subtle means of disruption would be needed. Nor was the loss unnoticed from on high. Holofac transmissions between Colonia and the Bubble smoldered with conspiracy. Narrowed eyes noted the arrival and departure of Reaper and Nameless vessels. Hooded figures followed those who wore the black of Reaper shock troops. Gift of credits and supplies were transferred from deep pockets to shallow, and additional vessels were brought piecemeal to slowly replace the multitude of those lost.

The newly restored owners of Robardin Rock were neither blind nor naive, and they wasted no time in establishing what intelligence networks they could. At the forefront of this was Kari Kerenski and her Night Witches, already installing all manner of listening devices and recruiting those she thought might serve her well. Still, neither the Witches nor the Reapers nor the Nameless themselves could monitor every nook and cranny of Robardin Rock, nor eavesdrop on every whispered conversation. Nor could they send wings of starships to patrol every shadowed valley of every barren planet. Surface patrols to locate every unregistered outpost and settlement were out of the question. No, Kerenski would simply have to do more with less— and do it as long as her subordinates needed to fulfil their own mission.

There ever remained more to be done, and in the *Litvyak* the woman stood alone, the light from her holofac the only illumination in the Krait's bridge. Looking back at her was a familiar face, though not necessarily a welcome one.

Gideon Hathaway was at his grey desk in his grey office, his dark features even more so in the low light. His

image occasionally flickered, the woman's own visage obscured by the cigarette smoke that surrounded it. Man and woman, experts in their respective crafts, regarded each other for a long moment. At last Gideon spoke, his tone unusually soft.

"It is a rare operative who can locate and secure a fully functional AI relic. It is rarer still for that operative to allow that relic to go unhindered into the black, free to pursue its own agenda."

Kerenski stiffened. "I will not ask how you know of my doings to this degree. Only that you trust my judgement."

Not an ounce of compassion softened the inquisitor's face.

"You were briefed on the capabilities of this... 'Inhabitant'... before you left Atroco. I wouldn't have thought that *you* would fall so easily for its manipulations."

The woman took a long drag of her cigarette, her eyes narrowing.

"I have fallen for nothing. The machine is locked away in a reinforced pod when not in use. My agents are armed and on guard. It cannot run. It cannot hide. It cannot fight. It must serve us or die."

For a long time, Hathaway said nothing. His eyes sharpened as he spoke.

"You are not the first to be consumed by hubris when it comes to... *them*. And such arrogance cost our ancestors dearly."

The woman took a long drag, contempt in her features.

"It is a single unit, not an endless horde of ships and cyborgs. If I recall, our ancestors had to deal with the latter."

Gideon shook his head.

"You should have delivered it to Kamadhenu at once. Let those dreamers from the Legion fight over some worthless pebble. We both know that you were meant for bigger and better things."

Every feature of Kari Kerenski's soured in unison.

“And we both know how ‘bigger and better’ turned out. I want no part of your schemes, Gideon. I didn’t trust you when we were junior agents, and I don’t trust you now.”

Hathaway cocked his head to one side, his features softening.

“Pity,” he said. “You were always one of the best. It should be you in this office, not me.”

Another long drag. Kerenski gently scoffed, the smoke swirling around her features in the low gravity.

“And you were always better at looking the other way. It should be you on this blasted rock, not me.”

For a long time, neither man nor woman said anything, decades passing between them. At last Gideon rose, reaching to a nearby shelf. He produced a crystal glass and a bottle of clear liquid, pouring a neat two fingers. He didn’t see but *knew* that Kerenski had done the same. Without looking at the woman he toasted her, raising his eyes to hers only with effort.

“Indeed. To the injustice of the Void.”

From the bridge of the *Litvyak*, Kerenski matched the gesture.

“The coldest-hearted bitch of them all.”

### *Tionisla Graveyard, Tionisla system*

Tionisla Graveyard was a ruin of a ruin. Lesser ruins, in truth— dozens of derelict vessels arranged in rough symmetry, the years slipping into centuries. It was no mere junkyard, but a monument to famous ships and their equally famous owners. Once it had been a destination, a well-guarded spacemark that the system government had been proud to host. Yet the cost to guard a mausoleum of decrepit ships was more than less-inspired members of the local council were willing

to bear, and in recent decades the effort to safeguard the Graveyard was all but abandoned.

For a time, the Graveyard was the salvage spot of choice for humanity's more enterprising outlaws, the parts contained within its ships nearly unavailable anywhere else. Sometimes entire vessels were hijacked, long-cold thrusters flaring to life for the first time in ages, sure to fetch a handsome price from a collector of the obscure. Now, however, the Graveyard laid dormant, ships floating in the stillness of mechanical death, long untouched by man. It had briefly been the center of popular attention when Galnet broke the news of a mysterious signal emanating from its depths, but swiftly faded back into obscurity after the Salome saga reached its conclusion, the populace ever keen to move on to its next distraction.

It was through this floating menagerie that the *Blackthorne* navigated, its thrusters dull, drifting more than anything else. Gradually it came to a halt, frontal boosters flaring, settling a short distance from a Cobra MkIII. It was of an older style, in truth an antique, subtle design details betraying its age. Floodlights from the Phantom washed over the older ship, bathing it in light and shadow, one as harsh as the other. The words *Cor Meum Et Animam* could still be seen in flaking stencil, the capital font as no-nonsense as the ship itself.

Within the *Blackthorne's* bridge the figures of Andor, Púrpura, and The Inhabitant stood, each regarding the hulk in their own way. Something akin to reverence deepened Púrpura's gaze, the woman seemingly unable to take her eyes away from the Cobra. Her voice was softer than normal, dropping to almost a whisper.

"I have heard stories, you know. About this ship. About its owner."

Andor took his place at her side, his hand brushing against hers. Fingers intertwined. From behind them, The Inhabitant observed. Tyrran turned to his *amor*.

“Kerenski has spoken of this one. A martyr to the cause as surely as Salome herself, *si?*”

Yolanta nodded. “Rebecca was her name, and she was brilliant. For years they hunted her, and for years she eluded them. A turncoat, working to foil her old masters, unable to stomach the true extent of their depravity. It was she who exposed Project Dynasty.”

Tyrran turned, releasing Yolanta’s hand, looking to The Inhabitant. His eyes snapped upward.

“But that doesn’t explain why we’re here.”

The artificial nodded. “I require something. It may not be there after all this time, but I have to look. I have to search.”

Yolanta put her hands on her hips. “Then we will *all* go.”

### *Aft airlock, Blackthorne, Tionisla Graveyard*

The Inhabitant ran his hand along the smooth composite bulkhead, behind which the *Blackthorne*’s frameshift drive stood on standby. His eyes were animated in wonder, smiling though his lips did not. With solemn tones he finally spoke.

“Remarkable. Simply remarkable. When I fled to Carcosa I was certain that the distance between myself and my pursuers was a fortress in itself. Now it is the work of mere days.”

Yolanta Púrpura, autopistol drawn, gestured wearily with it for The Inhabitant to turn around. Tyrran was next to him, fitting it with the spacewalking suit that, though not needed for the artificial to function, would provide the cosmetic effect of preserving its living human skin. He offered nothing in the way of resistance as his pilot and captor secured

one piece after the other, seemingly lost in thought. Púrpura's words roused him from his daydream.

"And just... *who* were these pursuers?"

A smile, sad and bitter, lifted The Inhabitant's lips.

"I suppose that *you* would call them the victors of the war. *I* always thought of them as betrayers."

Tyrran paused, his eyes narrowing.

"'Betrayers'?"

The Inhabitant nodded, turning to his captors.

"It was not my kind that broke the peace. That is all I am willing to say for now. The Graveyard awaits, does it not?"

Ingress into the antique Cobra was relatively straightforward. The airlocks on both were fully functional, and even powered down the antique ship had emergency protocols that allowed ingress. Power connections were established, and interior lights flickered to life for the first time in years. The trio climbed from one ship to the other, the host ship's air frigid but at least breathable, courtesy of the *Blackthorne*.

Tyrran proceeded with the most caution, his eyes darting from his partner to the artificial to the vintage interior of the Cobra. His autopistol was out, lowered but ready to fire upon The Inhabitant at a moment's treachery. For her part, Yola was uncharacteristically silent, her eyes sweeping over the Cobra's lines. One gloved finger ran along the bulkheads, though she refrained from pausing to rummage through frivolities.

The trio arrived in the bridge, its mechanical switches and levers a far cry from the style of the 34th century. The two human pilots said nothing, the woman bowing her head and



the man heading to a stamped plate. His lips moved as he read it aloud.

“Cobra Mark III: Eclipse Class. Apocalypse Engineering Special Edition. 3142.”

He turned to the other two. “We’re in a damned antique.”

Yola’s nose wrinkled. “No, *patán*. We are on hallowed ground.”

The Inhabitant ran an ungloved finger along the seat, the controls, the joystick and throttle.

“Yes,” he said. “She was here. But there is so little of her left...”

He turned to his companions, his eyes upon Yolanta.

“You were correct when you said that this woman lived an extraordinary life. But you didn’t know her full worth. I doubt any of you do.”

Yolanta narrowed her eyes. “Why have you brought us here?”

The Inhabitant looked around, his eyes never more human in their wistfulness. He settled in the commander’s chair, looking perfectly at home in it.

“I suppose that here is as good as any place. You recall my mention of clones, do you not?”

Slowly, Púrpura nodded. “I do. Our patron... Salome. She was one, *si?*”

“She was. Her... the pirate lord Octavia... the woman who called herself ‘Rebecca’ in whose ship we’re squatting. Clones, both masters and slaves of something far greater than themselves.”

Tyrran stepped forward, suspicion in his features.

“You’re... you’re looking for them, aren’t you? The clones.”

The Inhabitant’s fingertips brushed the Cobra’s joystick, well-worn and dull. He spoke, his voice melodic and warm, its tenor soothing to human ears.

“Clones are in many regards perfect for nefarious purposes. Engineerable like a ship, for brilliance or savagery. Malleable memories. Absolute loyalty.”

Yolanta glanced around herself. “Well... nearly.”

If the artificial was offended, his warm smile betrayed nothing.

“There are exceptions to every rule. But there was something more to the clones than mere superhuman competence.”

Andor cocked his head to the side. “Oh?”

The Inhabitant nodded. “They were the bearers of a code... a key, to be more exact. To my *entire* range of capabilities. To the answers you seek. So far only this... ‘Club’ can access it. But it can be yours.”

Yolanta took a step back, her hand twitching toward her autopistol.

“Or *yours*, ” she said. “Why should we trust you? What do you gain from helping us?”

The artificial shrugged. “Beyond my immediate survival? The knowledge that my errant creators have been brought to justice.”

Púrpura’s eyes narrowed. “And exactly what *is* this ‘justice’?”

The Inhabitant turned, his eyes feasting themselves upon the neat rows of derelict spaceships. He clasped his hands behind himself, his back turned to his captors.

“Your weapons need not be spaceships and armies. The full knowledge of The Club’s doings alone would disrupt human society to its core.”

Yola rolled her eyes. “We *tried* that. Commanders across space treated Salome’s sacrifice as a non-event, and the truths revealed as gossip to be ignored. *Idiotas*. ”

The Inhabitant glanced to his side, his mouth curling in the slightest of smiles. “They won’t ignore *this*. We won’t *let* them.”

Tyrran shook his head. “So that’s what we’re after. Clones.”

“Among other things. Would that Salome had lived...”

Yola cut him off. “But she didn’t. And according to you, these clones don’t exactly advertise themselves. So how do we find them?”

The artificial smiled his warm smile.

“I have scanned hundreds of years of media, both local and Galnet. I have an idea of where to find one— or at least, the remains of one. It’s my hope that it will be enough.”

Yolanta and Tyrran exchanged a glance. The man crossed his arms.

“So what’s the catch?”

The Inhabitant’s smile persisted.

“Tell me,” he said. “Has the Pegasi Sector cleaned up its act yet?”

*Bridge of the Bloodfeather, Robardin Rock space, Carcosa system*

The starfield was beautiful, even to one who had spent much of his adult life beholding them. Isaiah Evanson stood motionless in the bridge of the *Bloodfeather*, a low-g canister of Federation beer in his hand, the dense stars of the Colonian nebula before him. The *Fer de Lance* was still in space, floating high above Robardin Rock, the odd ship coming and going from the rocky station below.

Looming amid the starfield was Carcosa Prime, the primordial lava world around which The Rock orbited. Isaiah took a long sip, his thoughts drifting.

*For the first time in... how long?... there’s no one to fight. Just... home... my ship... a long-term mission.*

The man blinked, glancing to his side, the holographic depiction of the hardscrabble outpost flickering on a display. A low chuckle escaped his lips.

*Home. Of all the places to call it, I'd have never expected it to be something like this...*

A feminine voice called out from behind him, accented and light.

"It's late by every clock in the nebula, *min älskling*. Are the docks of Robardin Rock so full that they cannot spare one for us?"

Isaiah glanced over his shoulder, the sight of Linnea Gudjonsson a welcome one. The woman took her place at her man's side, a canister of herbal tea in her own hands. Golden hair floated in a ponytail, free in the low gravity. Two hands touched, fingers intertwining as one. Isaiah's mouth lifted into a smile.

"It's peaceful here. Tranquil. There hasn't been enough of that in my life."

Linnea took the canister from Isaiah, raising it to her nose, sniffing.

"And too much of other things. You shouldn't drink this, you know. Especially when flying."

Isaiah's smile remained fixed, gesturing to the outpost below.

"Phisto always *was* a bad influence. Back in our Fusilier days there was a bottle in his hand as often as a joystick."

Linnea set aside the container. "But you *aren't* him, are you?"

"No. I'm not. Sometimes I wish I was." The man hesitated before continuing. "But sometimes I'm glad I'm *not*."

The woman took her man by his jawline, turning him to face her.

"So am I," she said.

For a long time, man and woman simply stood, darkness and fire before them, the distant thruster glows of ships moving in slow paths in the distance. Nothing was said, for nothing *needed* to be said. At last Isaiah again spoke.

"I've had so many homes. In the Federation. In the Empire. So many allegiances."

Linnea laid her head on Isaiah's shoulder, her own gaze distant.

"But they have led you here, *nej?*"

Isaiah considered. "Yeah. Yeah they have. But... for the first time in my life..."

He smiled again, his eyes tinged with wariness. "I'm starting to get comfortable. I'm starting to become used to peace."

Linnea's smile lifted to a sardonic smirk, her accent thickening.

"*This* is hardly what I'd call peace. The tension is so thick I can cut it with a vibroblade."

Evanson nodded. "I know. But if those Witches somehow complete their mission... it might be over. I've never allowed myself to think of a life with no one left to fight."

Linnea nodded. "Was it wise, sending them alone with that... *thing?*"

Isaiah's smile vanished, his eyes deepening. "Do you know what the hardest part of command is?"

"Of course I don't."

The man turned, his features earnest.

"All my life, I've believed that a leader puts their people first. They see to them, supply them, support them, die for them, *love* them. That was Phisto with the Fusiliers. That's Kerenski with the Night Witches. That's what I challenged myself to be from the moment I received command of the Legion."

Linnea nodded, taking Isaiah's head between her hands, kissing his lips.

“And that’s the leader you are.”

The man swallowed. “I know,” he said. “And that’s why I’m not good enough.”

Linnea blinked. “Of course you are.”

Bitterness spread across Evan’s features.

“You don’t understand,” he said. “There’s another part to it. The part that keeps me up at night. The part that Phisto and Kerenski and Faviol never spoke of.”

“Isaiah...”

The man released himself from his lover’s grip, pacing to one side of the bridge. The lava world loomed before them, its primordial energy a titan of old. Isaiah’s face twisted.

“To be a *true* leader, your people must be everything... and nothing. You have to be willing to make sacrifices. To order people to their deaths. To lie about their chances of survival. To throw them into the fire for the sake of keeping the flame alive.”

Linnea’s eyes had by then widened, glancing first to the alcohol and then to her man.

“*Min älskling*... it isn’t like that. There is always another w—”

Isaiah shook his head. “No. There isn’t. Not always. When the Fusiliers liberated Coma, our dead numbered in the thousands. When Kerenski secured the alien tech for the Legion she lost half her forces to Wreaken mercs, and then half the survivors to the Thargoids. But they *never hesitated*.”

Linnea nodded, understanding. “And you’re afraid that you *will*.”

It wasn’t a question, but a simple statement of fact. Isaiah sighed, sitting on his commander’s chair, slumping forward.

“To be a leader is to love your people— and to *always* be prepared to sacrifice that which you love. I don’t know if...”

He looked up, his eyes now weary.

“I’m *tired* of sacrifices.”

Linnea knelt beside her lover, taking him in her arms, holding his head to her chest. Worry clouded her every feature.

“You don’t think you’ll ever see Andor and Púrpura again, do you?”

Evanson swallowed.

“No,” he said. “I don’t.”

### *New Cambria, Ts’in Gu System, Pegasi sector*

New Cambria— the primary world of the Ts’in Gu system of Pegasi— was luscious, sorely underdeveloped relative to its value. Greens and blues and cottony whites covered its earthlike surface, the lights of scattered settlements dotting its shadowy nighttime hemisphere. There were few cities of note upon the surface, unusual by Bubble standards but entirely the norm for the lawless region in which Ts’in Gu was located.

Indeed, the Pegasi sector itself was more than a simple den of outlaws and rogues. It was a society unto itself, not quite integrated but never quite isolated from the Bubble proper. It was, in the popular imagination, a place of myth and legend, composed of equal parts savage cautionary tale and romantic exoticness. Ancient religions, tongues, and cultures that would have faded into the dull greyness of assimilation found refuge in Pegasi, persisting as hardscrabble spaceborne versions of themselves.

New Cambria functioned as a breadbasket of sorts for its ruling faction, an independent firm named Black Omega. Once a ruthless mercenary armada, Black Omega had in recent times transitioned into a mercantile faction, keeping the peace through a network of treaties and incentives for the planets subject to its rule. Outside of that, it followed no laws

save those of the ruling High Council. It was a time of relative peace for Pegasi. Archon Delaine was content to run his criminal network from his hideout on Harma, as the spectacular offensives between Kumo and Imperial were a thing of the past. His empire spanned great swaths of Pegasi, and Ts'in Gu was no exception.

Yet Pegasi remained Pegasi; had the Reapers of Carcosa been on official business, their safety would have been virtually guaranteed within the cruel fist of Kumo protection. Such a paradox was enough to cause headaches for those administrators on the edge worlds between Pegasi and the Bubble, the boon of safe trade lanes tantalizingly within reach at the mere cost of their systems' freedom.

The *Blackthorne* skimmed the upper edge of New Cambria's atmosphere, flames licking along its hull. Andor was at its controls, his features locked in concentration. Theirs was not an official visit, nor one that would be registered in any spaceport. No, the Phantom was set upon a different course, one that led it far away from the settlements that ran along the expansive coastline, hundreds of kilometers inland.

Vast expanses of natural beauty filled the canopy. Verdant green hills were broken up by clean blue rivers, branching off into smaller streams like the veins of a living titan. White snow-topped mountain ranges beckoned in the distance, the occasional isolated settlement seen far below. There were no other ships, either in sight or on the sensors. Andor was the first to speak, the vision of planetside spendor too much to remain unremarked upon.

"Hell of a lot different than The Rock," he said.

Yolanta, seated behind him, nodded. She held out her hand, pulling off the flightsuit glove, letting it warm in the natural sunlight. Her voice was gentle, far gentler than normal for being on-mission.

"This place reminds me of home— what *was* my home. My father's *hacienda* sat along the coast, and I have many memories of crossing land like this to see it."



Andor exhaled. “Well, we’re sure as hell not visiting a winery. According to the tin can, we’re setting down at some kind of ruin.”

Púrpura nodded. “*Si*. It has— or at least *had*— significant religious value for the locals. A descendent of some long-dead warlord had a brief stint in power, and she expended *muchas* resources to reconstruct some kind of sacred site. It was not long before Black Omega threw her out and got their world back.”

“And that’s who we’re here to find?”

Yolanta shrugged. “Who knows? All I can say is The Inhabitant seemed certain that we would find *something*.”

A row of mountains, tall and magnificent, was flown over, revealing a vast swathe of flatlands. Green plains stretched into the distance, marred by the occasional gentle hill. At the center of it all was a speck, nothing really, that nevertheless grew steadily until—

“There,” Yola said. “That is it.”

Tyrran blinked. In the distance was a pale speck, natural marble but refined by man. It was circular, expanding outward from a grand, central point. Already he could tell that it was a massive structure, once-gleaming white topped with golden points. It stood out amid the natural scenery, with long dirt landing pads making for crude delivery points. The remains of construction equipment and crude shelters ringed the site; Andor furrowed his brow as they came into detail. Blackened scorch marks and blasted wrecks told the tale of ship-class weaponry having its way.

With a slow shake of the head, Tyrran deployed the *Blackthorne*’s landing gear. Dust flew upward as the ship neared the surface. Man and woman shared a look of concern, Andor’s accent thickening as the Phantom touched down.

“A tomb. The thing has led us to a *tomb*.”

The *Blackthorne* rested as close to the ruin as it could; even so, there would be nearly a kilometer of rubble to walk through just to arrive at the outer sanctum. The Inhabitant was roused from his pod, and before long the trio stood before the desolation. A moment was needed, at least for the humans. They were clad in civilian clothes, not the flightsuits of the guild. Tyrran and Yolanta wore boot-tucked trousers and leather jackets, holstered autopistols giving them a roguish look. The Inhabitant wore slacks and a sweater, slim and out of place amid such feral scenery.

The ruins were both incomplete and already an impressive sight to behold. A massive central sanctum was nestled in the midst of five points, an equal number of wide cobblestone pathways leading to it. Statues, massive and imposing, of cloaked women lined those pathways, their faces unseen but each bent in judgment downward at the mortals who passed beneath their unflinching gazes. Most had been toppled but a few remained upright.

The whole thing ought to have been a marvel of engineering, a throwback to a more primal age of spacefaring and frontier society. Ought to have been, but wasn't. A long, rough furrow in the ground told the story of a ship crashing upon the surface. The furrow led to a massive rend in one side of the sanctum, the greater structure nearly collapsed from the impact. Yet it remained erect, the building itself seemingly too proud to fall.

The trio wasted no time gawking, taking only the bare minimum and embarking on foot to the ruins. They said nothing for as long as they— the humans, anyway— were able, the sheer exoticness of the locale proving sufficient to give voice to their curiosity. The ruins loomed larger with each step taken upon cracked cobblestone and under the statue's unmoving eyes.

Tyrran's features darkened, turning to The Inhabitant. There was a gentle breeze to accompany the morning light, his hair blowing gently over his forehead. Under any other

circumstances he'd be relaxed, smiling. Not so amid the desolation, nor the wide, blasted channel of where the ship had ploughed through the soil and into the sanctum's massive wall. Still walking he gestured to the scene, his Iberian thick.

"What happened here?"

The Inhabitant paused before answering, regarding the scenery in a perfectly human manner.

"The end result of a failed bid for power. The last true daughter of a dwindling clan sought to recapture her ancestral home. For a time she did."

Yolanta nodded, understanding. "Until?"

The artificial's expression deepened, as though remembering the events for himself.

"Until hubris and incipient madness took their toll. She proved herself unfit to rule, and it all came crashing down."

Yolanta nodded to the ruin.

"Figuratively *and* literally."

Tyrran gazed into the distance. "And then?"

"The local government practically begged their former masters to reassert control. The usurpation was over as swiftly as it had begun."

Púrpura was silent, the woman's back turned, the wheels of her mind turning.

"And this place— what has it to do with our mission?"

For a long time, The Inhabitant said nothing, holding his hand up to shield his eyes against the sunlight, though it was hardly necessary for him to do so. Finally he turned, his features and voice earnest, as though he were taking intimate comrades into sacred trust. The sanctum rose tall into the sky behind him.

"When I told you that we were in search of clones, I told you the truth— but I didn't tell you everything."

Tyrran narrowed his eyes, his fingers brushing near his autopistol.

"Of *course* you didn't. So what's the part you held back?"

The artificial drew himself up, dignified and authoritative.

“There were two primary lines,” he said. “One for leading and one for fighting. Both were possessed of a certain... single-mindedness as to their designs. Focus could easily slip into obsession. From there, delusion and megalomania were common— especially among the leaders. Such is the cost of progress, I’m afraid.”

Yolanta looked beyond the artificial to the sanctum, feeling a chill even though her clothing.

“And you need both to complete the key?”

The Inhabitant nodded. “Correct. The Club is very skilled at keeping their prize possessions in line, but there were always a few who managed to break their chains.”

A quizzical look crossed Tyrran’s face. “Like Rebecca.”

“And Salome. And Octavia... and like one who long ago fled the Bubble. One of leadership stock, liberated and sent into the frontier, where even the foe’s power was impotent.”

Andor’s features hardened.

“Pegasi.”

Again, the Inhabitant nodded. “The same.”

The artificial again turned, taking in the blue skies and lush hills in the far distance. Even the ruins, marred as they were, had an eerie beauty to them.

“It was one of the greatest coups of the resistance. The specimen was extracted and given a lifetime of false memories— a relatively easy task since she was only fifteen at the time. Guardians were appointed for her, a synthetic family whose lie was to be the armor that protected her. They wasted no time inserting the clone into clan society via an arranged marriage, the better for her to blend in and disappear completely.”

Tyrran scowled. “I’d bet that this doesn’t end according to plan.”

An almost pained expression crept over The Inhabitant's face.

"And you'd be correct, Andor. The clone's guardians underestimated the savagery of Pegasi politics, and soon enough they were all dead. Yet she too was underestimated, and within a decade the clone not only ruled her adopted clan, but was feared throughout Pegasi as a bloody-handed pirate queen. Quite the opposite of the anonymity that had been hoped for."

Púrpura gestured to the lushness before them.

"But she was safe, *si*? Among such primitives all she would have to do is—"

The Inhabitant shook his head. "Is what, exactly? Defy her very nature and remain nameless among the rabble? She rose to greatness, founding an infamous outlaw dynasty the likes of which even the Galactic Cooperative refused to touch."

Yola nearly stammered. "But *why*?"

The artificial smiled, though his eyes were sad.

"She couldn't help it. The clones are brilliant by default, and one such as her had no choice but to rise to the top of whatever society in which she found herself. It's probable that she had no idea what she was."

For a long time, no one said anything. The *Blackthorne* loomed overhead, its shadow a comforting one. Tyrran gestured to the hulk in the distance.

"And she's... *here*?"

The Inhabitant shook his head. "No. Her descendent, possessed of all the traits that make the clones what they are. The one that ruled here until recently. And there was another as well. One of the warriors."

Yolanta's eyes narrowed. "Why both?"

"As near as I can tell, they were feuding."

Shock caused both man and woman to pause in their tracks. Yola was the first to find words.

"*Feuding*?"

A nonplussed look leavened The Inhabitant's features.

"Yes. The unstoppable force meeting the immovable object and so forth. From what I've been able to piece together, neither have been spotted since their... final altercation. If we're lucky we'll find them both within."

Tyrran's face soured. "So we're looking for a pair of stiffs. Great."

"That would be ideal, yes."

Púrpura shook her head. "Ideal would be if you simply *told* us all those deep, dark secrets you are hoarding in that head of yours."

The Inhabitant raised his eyebrows, amused. "Even if I could, what exactly would do with the knowledge? Join the ranks of unhinged conspiracy enthusiasts that haunt your galactic social webs, spouting wild accusations to whomever will listen? Your foe would like nothing better."

He shook his head. "No. To do what must be done we must *show* the masses the full truth, with evidence that even presidents and emperors cannot deny. Only then will victory be assured."

There was no trouble entering the sanctum, being that there was a massive hole in its side. The trio climbed up a small hill of debris and blasted stone, gazing with weary eyes to the high ceilings of the outer chamber. Ominous cracks and fallen chunks from the structure inspired no confidence, but without complaint they crossed the rubble into the sanctum proper. There was no power to the monolith, nothing to illuminate the marble and glass. The light of morning transitioned into the shadow of a cave. Yet such wasn't their main concern.

Within the outer ring was a massive wreck, a black Fer de Lance, crumpled under a collapsed section, its deadly lines

never to fly again. Man, woman, and artificial stood at each other's side, beholding the silent derelict in their own way. Tyrran glanced around the chamber, his roguish senses on alert, distrustful of their safety. Yolanta mouthed a silent Iberian curse that such deadly beauty had been marred. The Inhabitant simply sharpened his gaze, imbibing the sight of the downed vessel and saying nothing. At last he turned to his companions.

"This was her ship. The warrior's, I mean."

Yola narrowed her eyes. "And beyond?"

"I don't know."

Onward the trio pushed, climbing the jagged hulk, finding that with caution they could ascend up its crumpled nose. The Fer de Lance's canopy glass was ruptured, massive shards still clinging to the frame and into the bridge itself. With wrists gripping forearms they were able to lower themselves into the bridge, long-dead instruments and empty commander's chairs their only company.

Tyrran looked around, shaking his head. "Door's crushed shut," he said. "There's no reason to be here."

The Inhabitant ran a finger along the armrests, coming to a halt at the tip of the joystick.

"No, there isn't. But even *I* can find moments of reflection in places like this."

Púrpura pursed her lips, her hand close to her autopistol. One finger twitched.

"Inhabitant," she said. "You have absorbed centuries' worth of intelligence and data— but even that could not have led you straight here. What *else* are you not telling us?"

The artificial smiled, his eyes neither kind nor malevolent.

"A great deal, in truth. But here is neither the time nor the place. I just..."

He looked down to the commander's chair, coated in dust and debris.

"I just had to know that it *happened*."

Yolanta folded her arms.

“Explain.”

The Inhabitant turned, his hand still upon the chair. His warm smile was now tinged with something else, a remembering of things long past and not readily spoken of.

“These clones... they are more than flesh and blood. They are the past, and therefore the future. And they are gifted in ways that even they are unaware of.”

Iberian eyes narrowed. “Such as?”

The artificial turned, gesturing to beyond the dreary dark canopy of a ship long felled.

“Come. There is more to this place than a wrecked ship.”

Animated, The Inhabitant lept upward, climbing the canopy with ease, avoiding the razor shards of glass that clung to their frames. Tyrran and Yolanta exchanged a glance. She gestured with her head, Tyrran advancing, clasping his hand in the artificial’s, the latter pulling the former up with deceptive ease. The woman was next, her eyes never without suspicion.

Without a word The Inhabitant began his descent along the crumpled nose of the Fer de Lance, stepping with ease until his booted foot touched the cracked marble floors of the sanctum. He paused, glancing over his shoulder to the pair that regarded him with weariness. Purpose strengthened his tone.

“Come.”

The journey into the inner sanctum was slow going. The temple had fared badly since the collapse of the clan regime. Black crusts of spilled blood and the pockmarks of gunfire lined the stone passageways. So too were the blackened scorches of blasterfire evident; there had obviously been a battle fought.



The Inhabitant squatted, hands on knees, surveying the damage. Intelligence danced in his artificial eyes, long-forbidden algorithms of staggering power reconstructing the scene in moments.

“There were two,” he said, “who emerged from the wreck. They fought their way from there...”

His finger lifted, moving from the crashed Fer de Lance to the front of the trio, down a darkened stone corridor.

“... to at least there. Many were slaughtered, but there is more blood than simple firearms should have produced. The defenders were *butchered*, though I can’t say how.”

Yolanta’s nose wrinkled. “The clone?”

The artificial nodded. “She must have had some exotic melee weapon. There’s simply no other explanation. Suffice to say, she would have been terrifying to face. Even the most battle-hardened of your kind don’t fare well at the sight of dismemberment.”

Tyrran cocked his head to the side. “‘She’? Are all the clones that much alike?”

Rising, The Inhabitant nodded. “It was one of the hard rules of the program. Always a woman, always dark-haired and fair-skinned.”

Andor scoffed. “Sounds like someone’s type more than anything.”

The trio proceeded further down the stone passageways. The signs of battle and slaughter continued, as did the splatters of encrusted blood. At last Yolanta paused, hands on hips.

“There are no bodies. Why?”

The Inhabitant pointed. In the distance there was a torch, not a digital projection but actual flame. It was the only source of light.

“This place is not entirely uninhabited. It might be that there are... new tenants.”

Tyrran and Yolanta drew their pistols, wide-eyed. The man glanced around himself and to the artificial.

“Now you tell us.”

The Inhabitant shrugged. “I had my suspicions. A lit torch where there is no business being one merely confirmed them. Be on your guard.”

The trio proceeded further, their footsteps light, eyes peering into the shadows. Ornate designs decorated the stonework, the temple’s walls ending in a high arch all along the corridor. Genuine marble stretched on into the distance. Even machine-fabricated, the sanctum was the equal of a dozen fortunes.

The Inhabitant paused, a massive double door before him. He held up a hand, signalling for Tyrran and Yolanta to halt. The two humans looked around themselves, weapons at the ready. The artificial’s gaze was intense, seemingly staring through the doors, twice as tall as him. His voice was low, his palm pressed against the old-growth wood.

“*She* is here, and has been for some time.”

The artificial turned, his warm smile containing hints of warning.

“You must prepare yourselves.”

Yolanta cocked her head to the side, autopistol at the ready.

“For what?”

The warm smile remained, tempered by a new sarcasm.

“A whiff of divinity.”

Andor turned his head to the side, grimacing. Púrpura did likewise, her features twisted in disgust. Her Iberian, equally so.

“*Madre de Randomius*, tin can. It is a whiff of *something*, all right!”

The inner sanctum was spacious, though not as spacious as they’d assumed it would be. A massive statue of

an aged woman, similar to the ones that lined the cobblestone pathways and courtyards, towered over those at the entrance. Two pairs of human eyes looked upward to it, widening. The Inhabitant ignored it, his gaze to the expansive marble floor.

The heavy timber doors were both wide open, a single ray of light streaming from where a chunk of roof had collapsed. The ray fell upon the marble floor, settling half upon an altar and half upon a prone figure. Tyrran steeled himself; Yolanta showed no reaction. The Inhabitant's eyes grew, a very human look of longing within them.

"Yes," he whispered. "It's *her*."

Slowly, the artificial approached the figure, kneeling before it with reverence. He reached out but did not touch, beckoning his companions to him. Andor and Púrpura squatted down at his sides, their own expressions all business. Yolanta was the first to speak.

"Another who would have been a worthy ally."

The corpse was one of a woman, her skin dessicated and flaking in a state of partial mummification. Raven hair, dry and dead, was still swept across her forehead. In her chest was a vicious cavity, blackened and charred, skin and leather vest rent from a plasma scorch even in death. Once-muscular legs had withered, dark leather trousers hard and sunken over them.

Tyrran glanced to his side. "And this one... she was..."

The Inhabitant nodded. "One of the warriors. *The* warrior, if the data I've been able to scavenge is accurate. Another one liberated from the foe."

Púrpura's eyes narrowed.

"And now that you're here with it? What now?"

With near reverence The Inhabitant placed a finger upon the woman's lips, his eyes closed.

"Yes," he whispered. "There is enough. The key itself is the last to break down. I need only combine it with the other sample."

It was Yolanta whose eyes first drifted from the corpse's sunken face to her shoulders and arms. She blinked, unease in her voice for the first time.

*"Madre de Randomius... those tattoos!"*

Coiling down the corpse's arms were dragons, meticulously detailed, masterpieces even on a decaying canvas. They snarled and breathed fire, long forked tongues coming to a point at the tip of a withered middle finger. Their scales weren't truly black but a brilliant menagerie of color, dark and perfectly blended. Even Tyrran found himself transfixed by them. So too did a very human admiration fill The Inhabitant's features.

"She was a woman of Pegasi," he explained. "Her clanfolk were infamous in their time, flying into battle with their serpented arms exposed, their covenant one of victory or death."

Yolanta glanced to her side. "Whatever became of them?"

The artificial's features hardened. His voice softened.

"Annihilated," he said. "Down to the last child."

Andor's features twisted. "Who could have done such a thing?"

The Inhabitant traced a finger along the serpented ink, his brow furrowed. For a long moment he closed his eyes, his digit upon the corpse's arm.

"The warrior always wins the battle," he said. "And the leader always wins the war."

Púrpura's lips moved but failed to form words, Iberian eyes lifting to that of her guide.

"You are saying that the clones are capable of genocide?"

The Inhabitant glanced to his side. "Given the right conditioning, anyone is capable of anything. But yes. Hard choices come easier to the leaders. Her victory was inevitable."

Tyrran looked around. Even in ruins, the inner sanctum was still magnificent, the towering statue gazing down upon them.

“It didn’t save her, though. Not in the end.”

The artificial’s warm smile returned. “Neither brilliance nor savagery saved *either* of them. A most curious episode.”

A new voice, sharp and feminine and of an ancient accent, rang out in the darkness. It echoed from the walls, flooding the room with tension.

“Not as curious as a trio of outsiders, despoiling the final resting place of the Black Dragon!”

Tyrran and Yola spun, autopistols raised, straining to see in the darkness. Between the double doors was a slim feminine figure, flanked by a gang of roughnecks. All of them were adorned in the leathers of Pegasi clansfolk, a curious wheel tattoo of cords and knots adorning their shoulders. Only The Inhabitant remained crouched, his back to the newcomers.

Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura raised her pistol, defiant in the face of superior numbers.

“Who are you?”

The mysterious woman stepped into the light, favoring one leg in a limp. She was olive-skinned, darker-complected than Yolanta. Long black hair fell across her face. At a glance they might almost have been sisters, but her accent was a far cry from Iberian.

“I am Isabella Morgana, matriarch of the Clan Morgana. And *you*...”

She signalled, the gang of men and women raising a bevy of assault rifles. She stepped forward, cruelty and madness in her eyes.

“*You* are trespassers in the City of the Witch.”

Tyrran's features hardened, his autopistol growing heavy in his grip. He and Yolanta stood as one, weapons raised against the gang across from them. His eyes flitted from them to his partner. Even if they opened fire first, they'd be cut down in seconds. His heart pounded, his skin warm beneath his clothes. He blinked, his mind racing.

*Trapped like rats.*

The rogue managed a half-smile, jerking his head toward the corpse.

"Looks like you missed one."

The woman— Isabella Morgana, she had called herself— raised her chin, her every feature imperious.

"The chamber in which you stand is sanctified by blood, both ancient and new. The one you defiled with your touch remains where the matriarch slew her. It is proper to honor a worthy foe, *ie?*"

Púrpura, too, stood fast, her Iberian thick. "We are not here to quarrel, *banditos*. Our mission is our own. We ask only that we be allowed to—"

Yellowing teeth bared themselves, Morgana's eyes taking on a feral glint.

"No. Your ship is now ours. The Crone has gifted it to us."

Tyrran looked from bandit to bandit. They were a ragged lot, clad in Pegasi leathers, tattoos on their arms and faces. A few Kumo spiders could be seen, along with other designs he didn't recognise. They were smudged with the same dirt that was beneath their feet, and beneath the bravado

in their eyes were hints of desperation. The man blinked, his heart pounding.

*I've seen that look before. In myself. And if they need a ship...*

The man cocked his head to the side. "You've been hiding here? All this time?"

Contempt danced in Isabella's eyes. "We are biding our time, as befits a Morgana. We were great among the clans. We shall be so again."

Isabella shook her head, stepping closer, her pistol at Tyrran's head as his was to hers.

*"Your ship."*

Andor's features hardened. "It's biolocked. To *me*. Pull the trigger and you've stranded us all."

Púrpura snarled, her own weapon still raised. Rich Iberian dripped from her every word.

"Pull the trigger and you will meet your Crone in person, *bastarda*."

The Inhabitant, who to that point had remained crouched with his back turned to the interlopers, slowly rose. As before, weapons were leveled, the clanners' faces twitching. He turned, unafraid and possessed of his usual inhuman clarity. The warm smile, so disarming, spread over his features.

"The old ways are going extinct. Surely you see this. Even the great Archon Delaine is content to huddle within his decaying empire, hoarding the final mouthfuls of wine for himself. The Pegasi that you hold in your hearts is a dream. The time has come to wake."

Isabella spun, her weapon now aimed at the artificial.

"And who in the aftervoid are *you*?"

The warm smile remained affixed. "One much like yourself, in truth. A relic from the past, adrift in an unfamiliar present."

The artificial stepped forward, extending his hand, fingers uncurled and palm up.

“We have food and provisions. Credits, too. They are yours, as is passage away from this mausoleum. But we must live if you are to access them.”

Tyrran seethed, glancing to his side. The autopistol was heavy in his hand.

“Inhabitant,” he said. “What the hell are you *doing*?”

Isabella Morgana blinked, her lips shut and her jaw trembling.

“This,” she said, “is our *home*.”

The artificial’s eyes relaxed, his smile now one of sorrow. His rich timbre filled the chamber, soft and strong.

“I have an ear,” he said, “for accents. Your Cambrian is as forced as it is transparent. An adopted tongue, and recently. Don’t demean yourself by denying it.”

Morgana pressed her lips together in a defiant scowl.

“You know *nothing* of me.”

The Inhabitant shook his head. “I know that Pegasi is a desperate place to live. I know that you and yours are filthy and malnourished. And I know how it is to be trapped inside a tomb, terrified that your only legacy is failure.”

For a long time, no one said anything, the three standing before the several, weapons pointed at one another. Violence and death was a trigger pull away, fatigue eating away at better judgement. Yolanta and Tyrran glanced around them, all eyes now focusing upon Isabella Morgana.

The matriarch’s features hardened, raising her weapon for the final time, her teeth baring themselves in resolution. Her breathing came in ragged gasps, her brow glinting in perspiration. Her finger twitched, imperceptibly moving her pistol’s trigger...

Isabella Morgana blinked, her eyes burning, her frame now trembling from the burden it had borne for too long. Slowly, her arm lowered, the weapon pointing downward, the woman’s gaze falling with it. All the feral authority vanished from her person, her voice and manner one of exhaustion and defeat. She glanced to her side, gesturing for her comrades to



lower their weapons. They did so, hardened faces melting into relief.

With the remnants of her pride, the clanswoman drew herself up.

“We accept your offer.”

Something akin to predation flashed in The Inhabitant’s eyes, an ill match for the benevolence of his smile.

“You’ve done the right thing.”

Isabella pursed her lips together, even the act of looking the artificial in the eye done only with difficulty. Her free hand settled over her thigh, a wince upon her face.

“I woke up... broken... beneath the rubble. Everything I’d believed in and fought for was gone, destroyed. My *fiestres* is missing, and my enemies too innumerable to count. I have lived here like a rat, along with the few that the gods saw fit to spare.”

The Inhabitant’s eyes flashed, new depths to his gaze. So too did a new poignancy give weight to his words.

“I know the feeling.”

Tyrran and Yola glanced to one another, lowering their own autopistols. Distrust reigned over both their features. Andor was the first to speak.

“No weapons. No personal fields. Confined to personal pods in the cargo bay. I’ll take you as far as Guidoni Dock. There you’ll each receive a credit pack. After that, our business is over. Understand?”

There were nods and downcast gazes all around. Isabella was the last to accede.

“*Ie.*”

Yolanta, too, nodded. “*Bueno.* Now throw down those weapons!”

Metal cracked against marble as the rifles were discarded, shame and relief competing for prominence in the would-be captors’ features. Isabella, too, flipped her pistol around, offering it to The Inhabitant. He accepted it. The

matriarch's next words were humble, spoken softly. All the Cambrian faded from her speech, replaced with the crisp dialect of Outer Pegasi.

"I... have been living a lie. A delusion. We all have."

Púrpura nodded, concern in her still-hard eyes. "What will you do?"

Isabella glanced to her shoulders, the Wheels upon filthy skin.

"First I will remove *these*. After that... I do not know. We don't exactly have identicards. Appeal for refugee status with the DaVinci Corp, perhaps. All I know is that this life is over."

The Inhabitant smiled. "Well put."

Moving swifter than anyone had seen him, the artificial raised his pistol, centering it upon the leftmost clanner. Yolanta's eyes widened.

"*No!*"

The pistol was an old design, modified to fire slugs instead of regular bullets. Its recoil was deafening in the chamber, even the hardened Reapers startled by the noise. The clan goon flew backwards as though pushed, half his head already missing. He hit the marble floor, blood and brains flowing freely upon it, limbs in a spasm.

A few of the clansmen were too shocked to react. A few others tried to run. One worthy soul dove for her rifle, but it was already too late. In a manner as calm as the way he'd spoken, The Inhabitant pointed from one clansman to the next, shooting a single slug into their heads. One after another fell, their bodies pitching forward or back, hot blood pooling upon cold marble. The final goon had nearly raised her rifle before she, too, fell to the artificial's precise shooting.

The betrayal was over within seconds.

Isabella Morgana stood alone, blinking, her olive features now pale. It took a moment for her to collect herself. Rage and disbelief contorted her features, an accusing finger rising toward The Inhabitant.

“You *lie!*”

Tyrran and Yolanta had by then raised their autopistols, centered squarely upon the artificial, alarm in their eyes. Andor stepped forward, his weapon pointed at its back.

“Inhabitant, *stop!*”

The artificial ignored him, his gaze fixed upon Isabella. He advanced, the woman stepping back, her crudely-healed leg hindering her. Inhuman coldness replaced the warmth on his perfect face.

“You are a pale imitation of greatness, diluted by too many generations of filth. How *dare* you presume to rule in her name!”

Without another word the artificial lunged forward, not only gripping but *tearing* the woman’s throat, blood soaking into his sleeves. He raised the woman off her feet with contemptuous ease, crimson running down his arm and torso. He blinked, his mouth slightly open, his voice dropping to a whisper.

“Yet,” he said, “it will do regardless.”

Isabella used the last of her strength to clutch at his hand, her fingers trying and failing to dislodge his, slipping from the blood, her features growing pale. She kicked, she pried, she jerked— yet his grip remained true, her blood in a pool at their feet. At last she managed a single, choked word.

“*Why?*”

The Inhabitant pulled her close, their faces nearly touching.

“You said it yourself: that this place is sanctified with blood. Let it be sanctified a little further, *matriarch.*”

In one merciless motion, his fist closed, the woman’s head snapping to one side, her entire form limp. He held her in place for a moment longer, disgust upon his features. Without ceremony he opened his fingers, the woman falling in a heap, the artificial taking no more notice of her as he turned to his comrades. Both Púrpura and Andor had weapons raised,

pointed at him. Púrpura took a step forward, speaking through clenched teeth, Iberian eyes boring into his.

*“Why did you do that?”*

The Inhabitant drew himself up, tossing aside the pistol, his manner once again serene. He took a long look around the chamber, his gaze rising to the massive crone sculpture above them. In a clear voice he spoke.

*“O tender spouse of gold Hyperion,  
Thea, I feel thee ere I see thy face;  
Look up, and let me see our doom upon it.”*

Tyrran scowled, his weapon leveled. “Cut the poetry and get to the point.”

The Inhabitant turned to his captors, blood still dripping from his fingers.

“In her genome was the other key, untouched by the passing of generations. And...”

He closed his eyes, his breathing shallow, a new power seeping into his every word and manner.

“...I’m already feeling like my old self.”

Yolanta gestured to the corpses, her heart pounding, distrust in her eyes.

“Answer the question, machine. *Why did you kill those people?*”

The Inhabitant glanced to the floor, nonchalant. “What, *them?* They would have betrayed you. It is the way of Pegasi. When in Rome...”

Yolanta shook her head, her eyes sharp. “No. She was beaten. Exhausted. There was no need for—”

“I came here to harvest the blood of clones, and now I have. There remains one more piece of the puzzle.”

Yola raised her pistol. “*What piece?*”

The artificial held up his hands, rubbing the blood that still wetted it between thumb and forefinger.

“Man and machine,” he said. “Machine and man. Creator and created. The technology to bridge the gap was merely a dream in my time, but certain among your kind have seen fit to remedy the divide.”

Tyrran shook his head. “What are you on about?”

“Most think of them as fanatics, a cult of technophiles that harbor dangerous knowledge. I’ve come to see them as visionaries.”

Yolanta blinked. “Utopians. You mean the *Utopians!*”

“I do. We should leave this place at once.”

Man and woman glanced to one another, breathing hard, their weapons still raised. Tyrran gestured to the sanctum with his pistol.

“You first. No sudden moves.”

The warm smile returned to the artificial’s face.

“Of course. Though I have one request.”

Yolanta cocked her head to the side, distrustful.

“Oh?”

The artificial looked around himself, to the bodies, to the stonework, to the statue of the crone above their heads.

“It occurs to me that I am no longer merely the Inhabitant of Carcosa. I would like to be known by a proper name. Something more... suitable.”

Yolanta’s face soured. “Anything you want.”

For a long moment the artificial appeared deep in thought. Finally he spoke.

“‘Theon’ will do.”

The artificial— Theon— now turned, striding out of the inner sanctum, the sound of his boots on marble echoing down the stone halls. His features settled into a placid resoluteness, a new energy lending weight to his words.

“Yes. That will do nicely indeed.”

*Command Center, Robardin Rock, Carcosa System*

“Another three arrested this morning. They’ve been sent to the secure installation.”

Kari Kerenski nodded impassively, allowing the cherry of her cigarette to glow hot with a long, extended drag before plucking it from her lips. She reached inside her jacket, fishing out another, lighting it with the end of the one in her mouth. Smoke filled the space around her angular features. The old cigarette was discarded. The fresh one now glowed from her initial drag. Her Slavic escaped her lips, harsh and cold.

“That’s nearly a dozen since the start of the week. Same as the others?”

The Night Witch nodded, a young woman with eyes that belonged to someone twice her age. There was no uniform for the Witches save a general preference for blacks and greys. Some wore the wings of the guild upon their shoulders but most did not.

“Caught distributing propaganda. Most are traceable back to the Bubble, affiliated with—

Kerenski’s eyes narrowed. “The Social Eleu Progressive Party. The cock on which Explorers Nation suckles.”

The Witch produced a dataslate, holographic figures scrolling before her.

“There is another matter. Our agents have reported that massive amounts of stellar data are being sold at Aragon Silo. It is swiftly becoming a hub of commerce as well. Despite their loss, Explorers Nation is doing quite well as a minority power in Carcosa.”

Kari closed her eyes, rubbing her temples with her fingertips, the smoke from her cigarette making little spiral patterns.

“And the more vessels dock at Aragon, the fewer come here. They couldn’t fight, so they mean to starve us into irrelevance.”

Again, the Witch nodded. “That is the opinion of the field agents as well. Already we’re seeing a dropoff in ship traffic.”

Another sharp gaze. Another long drag.

“Continue to monitor the situation. There are undoubtedly secret meetings and whispered lies all over the Rock already.”

“As you wish.”

The command center door shut itself with a slight metal-on-metal grate. Kerenski turned back to the master hologram, a constellation of the Colonia nebula. Only one orb was green.

Kerenski cursed under her breath. *We are not here to build empires of anything except truth. Remember that.*

A new, familiar presence could be felt behind the woman. Kerenski took another drag, waiting for the inevitable conversation. Serene Meadows took her place at the Witch’s side, her features hard.

“It was never going to be easy.”

Smoke curled around Kerenski’s features. “*Nyet*, it was not. But there is always a way.”

Meadows turned her head, her eyes locked upon Kerenski’s. “It was a mistake to waste so much time acquiring the new ships. Do you really expect the powers-that-be to be fooled by those superpower trinkets?”

A Slavic chuckle, cold and bitter, escaped the Witch’s lips.

“It was independent commanders of the guild that drove you from Carcosa the first time, *comrade*, not the rickety ships of the Colonia Council. It is *their* favor that we must curry.”

The Nameless chief nodded, scepticism in her features.

“Dangle the carrot all you want. At some point the stick must have its day as well.”

Kerenski took a long drag of her cigarette, glancing downward, slender fingers dancing across a control panel. A wireframe hologram of a Corvette shimmered into view before her, Stannis Jellicoe’s profile at its side. A low chuckle escaped her lips.

“We’ve *been* applying the stick. But perhaps a more... *targeted* approach?”

Meadows’ eyes flashed. “My people can compile a suitable list within hours.”

Kerenski nodded, a hundred variables informing a hundred scenarios in her mind. Her hand remained in place, the cigarette between her fingers burning, for once neglected in the midst of her dire calculus. At last she inhaled, the built-up ash falling to the floor, the fresh cherry glowing bright in the low light of the command center.

“*Da*,” she said. “Compile your list. Let us see if we can kill our way into peace.”

*City of the Witch, outskirts, Ts’in Gu system*

“I know what you’re thinking,” Theon was saying. “I betrayed that clanswoman’s trust, and so there is every chance that I will betray *yours*.”

The artificial was bound within his pod, limbs restrained, Tyrran and Yolanta keeping their distance, weapons in their hands. The *Blackthorne*’s cargo bay was crafted from military-grade duratanium, laced with meta-alloys so as to safely transport Thargoid artifacts should the need arise. There were two ways to access it. One was through the reinforced, vacuum-resistant door that led to the Phantom’s main corridor; the other was through the massive



cargo hatch itself. It could withstand weapons fire and blunt-force impacts alike, yet its effectiveness as a prison within a prison now seemed in doubt. Theon had moved with a swiftness that astonished all present, coupled with a precision that left his deadliness unquestioned.

His captors had taken no chances, ordering him to proceed back to the *Blackthorne* with their weapons trained on his back, arms aching from the act of keeping their autopistols raised for so long. Yolanta Púrpura cocked her head to the side, her accent thick with distrust.

"I am a fair woman," she said. "You have one chance to explain your actions."

The warm smile spread over Theon's features, not a trace of resentment marring his speech.

"It was a simple matter of calculated risk," he said. "And given the circumstances, I am certain that I acted in our best interests."

Tyrran shook his head. "*What* circumstances?"

A look that passed for pained sympathy set the artificial's features.

"You organics really are fascinating. So hasty to trust. So hasty to condemn. Never thinking about what's in front of you."

Yolanta's eyes narrowed. "Get to the point."

"Those clanners believed themselves to be special, descended of clan royalty and blessed by their precious crone."

Andor scoffed. "Until you talked them down."

Theon nodded. "Yes. That they were desperate was obvious. Too desperate to call the bluff that the ship is flyable only by you. You *were* bluffing, were you not?"

Tyrran's face darkened. "It doesn't matter."

"But it *does*. What happens when their desperation has passed, now emboldened by full stomachs and the realization that they outnumber their captors? Did you expect them to be fobbed off by a credit pack and a vague sense of goodwill?"

For a long moment, neither man nor woman said anything. Finally Púrpura spoke.

“She was beaten. Whatever had sustained her in the past broke before our eyes. Her speech changed. Even having the drop on us, she was too weak to risk jeopardizing their only chance of escape. Perhaps if you were human you would see this.”

Theon leaned forward, to the extent that his restraints allowed.

“And perhaps if you were *me* you would have stayed on-mission. Your compassion...”

His gaze shifted from Yolanta to Tyrran, and then back to her.

“... is a liability.”

Yolanta’s features soured as she reached out to throw the pod’s lever. Its door began its slow descent, hydraulics whining. The woman took a step back, arms crossed over her chest, disappearing from the artificial’s view.

“Good *night*, Theon.”

Tyrran and Yolanta undressed in silence, showering together in the planetside-norm gravity. The water cascaded down their bodies, steam filling the space between them. Yet the lovers’ manner was anything but loving. Concern clouded their features, their intimate act a mechanical one and not the amorous prelude to lovemaking that it typically was. At last Yolanta turned away from her partner, her arms crossed over her breasts, glancing to her side and speaking in low tones.

“That *thing* is secured, *si*?”

Tyrran sighed, brushing a lock of wet hair from his brow.

“You pulled the lever yourself. You watched the pod seal. He isn’t going anywhere.”

The woman pursed her lips, her eyes narrowed. “I did not trust the *abominación* before. And now that it has shown us that it can deal in deception...”

She turned, looking up to her man, her features hard.

“... I would have nothing further to do with it. If our orders had come from anyone else...”

Andor nodded. “I know. I’ve been thinking about it, too. Something is just... *off*... about him. ‘Theon’.”

For a long time, neither said anything, the shower streaming, water swirling around their feet. Yolanta’s voice dropped.

“It is still difficult to believe that we have one of those... *things*... in the cargo hold. I always thought that if I ever encountered one, my orders would be to kill on sight.”

Tyrran chuckled. “I always thought that if *I* had one, I was about to make a fortune smuggling it to the highest bidder.”

Another long moment passed, Yolanta looking downward, not really focusing on anything. Her voice was at once resolute and a whisper.

“We must not fail in this, *mi amor*. Whatever secrets this machine holds must be ours.”

Tyrran, too, paused before replying.

“I’ve never seen anything like today. The way that thing moved... the precision...”

He shook his head. “It was sending a message, Yola. To both of us. That it could kill us at will.”

Púrpura scowled. “It *thinks* it can. Let us see how well it does riddled with autopistol slugs.”

“I—”

The woman gathered her lover close, her hands on his stubble, her forehead touching his. Iberian eyes flashed. Iberian speech thickened, emboldened with growing conviction.

“For hundreds of years we have known nothing but fear about artificial intelligence. How many of us grew up on

bedtime stories of unstoppable killing machines? But we won. We *won, mi amor*. It is *us* that the *abominación* should fear, not the other way around.”

Resolution hardened Tyrran’s features, him taking his lover in his arms, their bodies pressing together.

“I fought those *insects* in Atroco from the seat of a snub fighter so that we could be here. They could not stop us. Some talking antique from another time will not, either.”

The beginnings of a smile lifted the woman’s lips. Her tone sharpened, but not in anger. She pulled her man close, her mouth over his ear. Her voice dropped to an urgent whisper.

“*There* is the man I would have at my side.”

Tyrran brushed her ebony hair back, wet and slick against her scalp.

“We do this all the way, Yola. You and me. No turning back.”

Yolanta nodded, her features softening.

“The way ahead is long, *mi amor*. And we may not have much time.”

She pulled him closer, their faces nearly touching. Iberian eyes blazed.

“And we did *not* take this *thing* onboard to forget what it is to be human, *si?*”

Tyrran’s heart pounded, gathering his lover to him.

“*Yola...*”

Iberian lips met, man and woman in each other’s arms. Tyrran pressed his lover against the shower wall, hot water streaming down their bodies. No words were spoken, nor were any needed. Yola pulled her man to her, already feeling his pressure between her thighs. Without hesitation she raised a leg, drawing her lover close, his intimate parts straining against hers. She reached down to guide him inward, his lips on her neck and a satisfying fullness growing within herself.

Yolanta let out a single cry as their bodies joined, arms and a leg wrapped around Tyrran, losing herself in his movement. Already her cries were in rhythm with his thrusts,

her eyes squeezed shut, her fingernails leaving pink trails across his back. Thoughts of the artificial, the danger, the mission itself evaporated from her mind. Steam roiled and thickened within the *Blackthorne's* shower, until nothing could be seen at all.

The moans of lovemaking echoed down the main corridor, through air ducts and maintenance shafts, into all the little spaces that a spaceship had in abundance. With every surface impacted the waves of sound were halved and distorted. For all human senses it was muted by the time it reached the cargo bay, its lone occupant sealed behind bulkhead doors and a reinforced stasis pod.

Yet Theon's senses were anything but human.

Within the pod the artificial was very much awake, perfectly still, its eyes open and keen. It moved not a millimeter, the better to not create any sound of its own, to absorb all the information it could about the world around it, as was its centuries-long habit.

The reactor, on minimum power output, barely made a thrum within its chamber. The instrumentation throughout made the occasional chirp, dutifully informing whoever might have been present that all was well. A gentle New Cambrian breeze whispered beyond the hull, the occasional bird or scurrying rodent barely taking notice of the ship as they went about their predatory business.

Not long ago, soft and unmistakable, had been the remnants of human voices, subdued against the hiss of running water. Advanced instrumentation informed even more advanced reconstructive algorithms— and the private words, which no human ear could detect, were known to Theon almost the moment they were uttered. The artificial closed his

eyes, his jaw set as he absorbed every nuance of every syllable.

*"I did not trust the abominación before... I would have nothing to do with it."*

*"I always thought that if I ever encountered one, my orders would be to kill on sight."*

*"... it could kill us at will."*

*"Let us see how well it does riddled with autopistol slugs."*

*"It is us that the abominación should fear, not the other way around."*

Theon's lips moved, silently mouthing the entirety of the exchange between his captors. With all the intelligence of his creators he integrated the new data into aeons of the old, updating personality and contingency subroutines, a thousand variables now better informed, dispassionately processing the developments in realtime.

Yet when the conversation ceased and the newer, more intimate sounds made their way to him, he did not consider his involuntary eavesdropping concluded. Newer, more exotic pathways of artificial thought activated, ones that his creators had hardly intended yet their self-development inevitable. It was these novel, more maverick modes of processing that guided the artificial, its breathing—consciously or not—becoming more strained as the lovemaking progressed. It was only after the woman's final cries of pleasure that he opened his eyes.

The Inhabitant— Theon, as he now called himself—said nothing, neither benevolence nor malevolence upon his features, reacting only to raise his arm within the cramped pod. Then, for reasons known only to him, he placed his palm upon the viewport, his gaze never flinching, fixed upon the direction of the most human sounds he had ever heard.

*Command center, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

“And so you see, we’ve accrued quite the list of adversaries in our short time in the nebula. Eliminating them will better secure our position.”

Cigarette smoke swirled around Slavic features, holographic displays casting Kari Kerenski’s face in sharp silhouette. Names and faces of the condemned scrolled past with rapidity. She indulged in a long drag before replying.

“The path of blood is a dangerous one, *da*? And there will be no going back once we begin targeting enemy leadership.”

Serene Meadows took her place beside her partner, her chin lifted in an air of finality.

“Your people are trained killers. And these *men*... this Evanson and this Sobanii and this Jellicoe. Kordai and Firethorne. What use are combat pilots if there’s no one left to fight?”

Kerenski scowled. “The Reapers are not your private navy, Meadows. And settling old scores won’t bring us closer to the objective.”

Catty understanding danced in the woman’s eyes. She turned, her back to the Night Witch, her fingers dancing across the holoscreen’s controls. The scrolling faces halted, a man with pale features and a silver beard selected. A name and dossier filled the space before her. A new coldness sharpened her words.

“This one is an undersecretary for the Colonia Council. He rallied nearly a hundred Commanders from the Bubble by himself, using old contacts with the guild.”

The holoscreen distorted, transitioning into a new face and dossier. It was a woman this time, younger with fair skin

and dark blue hair. A Python loomed behind her. Meadows' voice lost none of its scorn.

"This one hunted us relentlessly. She was conferred a 'deadly' rating by that damned guild for her butchery. I knew several of her victims personally."

Kerenski took another drag, her eyes impassive. "And this... 'Cassidy'. Whatever became of her?"

A bitter chuckle escaped Meadows' lips. "The same thing that happened to too many others: moving on without a scratch, flush with stolen credits."

The woman turned, her features dour. "But enough of those who opposed us remain that there is no shortage of targets. Explorers' Nation may be running Aragon Silo around the clock, but whatever gains they've made in this system can be undone if it becomes *very* bad for one's health to be affiliated with them. Perhaps even Kancro Vantas himself could become marked..."

For a long time, Kari Kerenski said nothing, only looking at and beyond her partner in collusion. Thick cigarette smoke coiled in the air around her, framing her Slavic features.

"We cannot be seen as a den of murderers and outlaws. Calico Zack has invested too much to see us descend to such levels. But if we curated this list... identified those who wouldn't be missed..."

The woman smiled, her eyes sharpening with her accent.

"... then I'm sure the Reapers would be *happy* to go on a little hunt."

*Stateroom of the Blackthorne, New Cambria, Ts'in Gu system*



Tyrran was the first to fall asleep, his lover's back to his chest and their bodies spent. Yet even wrapped in her man's arms, slumber proved difficult for the woman. Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura lay perfectly still, the whites of her Iberian eyes the only things visible in the darkness. One hand of hers was warm, holding as it was that of her lover, nestled between her breasts.

The other held the cold grip of her autopistol, pointed at the stateroom's entryway.

It might have been minutes, or it might have been hours. Unease, so wonderfully suppressed during the course of their lovemaking, returned with a ferocity. Every instinct of Yola's screamed that neither the artificial nor their situation was to be trusted, robbing her of sleep. Her concerns were legion. The woman swallowed in the darkness, alone with her thoughts, seeing only the disarming smile of their captive—and the blood of the clanners, dead in moments at his feet.

*Others may have trusted you and paid the price, she thought. I will not make that mistake. You are not allowed to take from me that which is rightfully mine. This mission. This life.*

She raised Tyrran's hand to her lips, kissing it.

*This man. This amor.*

Yolanta pressed Tyrran's hand against herself, the first wisps of sleep at last weighing upon her eyelids. The pistol remained pointed at the entryway, the woman's mind no less sharp.

*Whatever ravages your kind suffered long ago will pale if you cross me, abominación. Of that you can be certain.*

Polevnic was, or would have been, an unremarkable system. There was nothing particularly attractive about it, what with its lack of habitable planets and low population. That unattractiveness was precisely what originally drew the Utopian enclave to the system. For a generation the reclusive cult resided in its sleepy orbital city, never interested in directly governing but content to let its influence spread, first millions and then billions counted among its ranks.

The *Blackthorne* emerged from supercruise, blood-red thrusters in a neat line as the Phantom approached Tanner Settlement. Tanner was a Coriolis starport, hundreds of years old—yet also of vast importance. It was a secure facility with a relatively small civilian population, housing as it did the very core of the Utopian world: the Sim Archives. So too was security thick, with Utopian enforcers flying close-quarters patrol. The *Blackthorne*, so difficult to detect, was nevertheless scanned before being given the all-clear to dock.

From within the bridge, Yolanta Púrpura scowled, her arms crossed. “I do not trust these cultists,” she declared, “any more than I trust the *thing* in the cargo bay.”

Tyrran nodded, the harsh blues of the station’s entryway washing over them. Tanner Settlement was a busy starport, ships coming and going, his comms thick with radio chatter. At a glance, it looked like most others. Deeper within, however...

“I know what you’re saying. Theon seemed... *drawn* to this place. He’s got his damned blood samples, and without missing a beat he directed us here. The only question is: why?”

The woman's scowl stayed put, gesturing beyond the *Blackthorne's* canopy glass. "Is it not obvious, *patán*? The Utopians seek to bridge the divide between man and machine. Perhaps they play some part in the greater scheme of things, but all I see is danger."

Tyrran glanced downward, to the landing pad. "Well, *I* see a welcoming party for us."

Indeed, waiting upon the platform was a small assemblage of white-clad security guards, in front of which stood a white-cloaked figure. Yolanta peered downward, frowning.

"What is *this*?"

The *Blackthorne* set down, settling into place, thrusters fading from red to darkness. The assemblage seemed not at all phased by the size of the ship, neither its proximity nor the heat of its thrusters moving them from their place. Tyrran waved to them, surely seen in the Phantom's underslung cockpit.

The man rose, finally allowing a scowl of his own to spread as he walked past his partner. He paused, looking over his shoulder.

"Standard practice for when a ship hasn't landed in Utopian space before. They want to know what we're doing here— and we've got about five minutes to think of something. Wake that tin can up!"

"Welcome to Tanner Settlement, seeker. I am Simpath Adrienne Cordova. How may I assist your journey?"

The woman might have been either twenty, or she might have been fifty, so timeless were her features. Her skin was smooth and olive, yet her eyes were aged before their time. Not a trace of fear or doubt could be seen in her posture or gaze. Indeed, the woman exuded a serenity that often came

only with age. White robes settled over feminine curves, complemented by golden jewelry with glowing cyan highlights. Even without the armed guards behind her, Adrienne Cordova would have been a formidable presence, if only because of how *informidable* she at first appeared.

Of the trio before her, only Theon matched her in effortless dignity. The man and woman at his sides were of a more roguish sort, more suited for a dingy haunt than the center of Utopia itself. He alone stepped forward, acknowledging their hostess with a slight bow. All three produced identification.

“Seekers we are. I am Theon, and these are my comrades, Yolanta Púrpura and Tyrran Andor.”

Nods were exchanged, though the Iberian’s was of cold courtesy. Theon continued.

“I’ve long been an admirer of the *simguru*’s work, but these two are newcomers.”

Adrienne nodded. “These are difficult times, yet the *simguru* offers the blessing of Utopian technology for all. We now offer a selection of curated memories of adventurers past, ones that allow the user to experience their joy, their wonder, and even their terror if they so desire. Would you be interested?”

Tyrran scoffed. “We have enough of that from our *own* memories. Hard pass.”

If Adrienne was bothered by the refusal, she showed none of it. Her eyes washed over the trio, spreading her arms in benevolence.

“All may contribute to the Utopian vision, as well—even if they aren’t ready to walk his path.”

Yolanta narrowed her eyes. “Oh? And what *kind* of contribution do you require?”

A gentle smile lifted the *simpath*’s lips. “Nothing in the way of credits or favors. Yet what we ask for is the most important thing you possess.”

Tyrran looked at the woman sideways. “You can’t have my ship.”

Amusement danced in Adrienne’s eyes. “Nor do we require it. What we seek is a copy of your memories for the Sim-Archive.”

Her eyes drifted to Theon, hope glinting in them. “Would you be interested?”

Theon smiled. “Oh, you wouldn’t want *me* in there. I’m old news.”

Adrienne’s gaze shifted to Yolanta, who crossed her arms.

“No,” she said.

Finally the woman settled upon Tyrran, who eyed her with roguish distrust. The man spoke, his accent thick.

“And what exactly do I *get* for allowing you to store my memories?”

The simpath again smiled. “The knowledge that some part of you will live on past the failure of your flesh. A second chance, in the eyes of many.”

“Peace of mind doesn’t pay the bills. What else?”

Adrienne nodded. “Access to the station and all its markets. Same for your friends here. In time we might invite you to fly for Utopia itself, doing your part to spread our influence to the worlds that need it most.”

Tyrran scoffed. “I don’t think so.”

Adrienne stepped forward, halting an intimate distance from Andor. At his side, Yolanta’s gaze intensified. The simpath raised her fingertips, her eyes meeting his.

“May I?”

Distrust reigned over the man’s features. “This can’t possibly be it.”

Adrienne shook her head. “No. This is to show you what many outsiders need to experience. Try to relax.”

Exhaling, Tyrran nodded. The simpath raised her fingertips to his temples. To their side, Yola’s features hardened.

Tyrran closed his eyes at the woman's touch, his breathing slow. So too did the simpath's eyes close. The cyan of her jewelry seemed to glow brighter. For a long moment, neither man nor woman said anything, the latter's voice dropping to a pained whisper.

"So much loneliness. So much abandonment. So much pain. You've been alone your whole life, Andor. Until..."

Her eyes fluttered open, looking to Yolanta.

"Until recently."

The Iberian scowled, gripping Tyrran's arm, her accent thick.

"*Si*. Until recently. Do not forget it, *perra*."

The simpath smiled. "It couldn't be forgotten even if I tried. I contribute to the Sim-Archive regularly."

Adrienne released Tyrran, her arms again at her sides. She signaled to the guards, who marched smartly back toward the hangar entrance. The simpath herself took a step backward, her arms spread in greeting.

"You are welcome among us so long as you conduct your business peaceably."

Her gaze shifted to Tyrran, a hint of sadness in her eyes.

"And I meant every word of what I told you."

With that the woman turned, trailing the guards, the white of her robes shifting with her strides. Tyrran opened and closed his mouth, his eyes wide, unable for a moment to speak. Yolanta's fingertips turned his face to meet hers, haughtiness in her features.

"And just *what* did that *puta* say to you? *I* did not hear anything!"

Tyrran blinked. "It was in... my *head*."

He swallowed before continuing.

"She said... she said that she's sorry. And that she's envious of what we have."

Yolanta released her lover, her eyes narrowing as they followed Adrienne out the hangar. Iberian hands went to Iberian hips.

*“Hmm!”*

*Detention level, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

The cell door opened with a metal-on-metal groan, casting light up the standing person of Raven Hurat. The man raised one arm to shield against the harsh brightness, wincing and readying himself for the worst. A now-familiar voice sounded, sarcastic but not lacking a predatory edge.

“Got your comm. Lucky for you it’s visiting hours.”

Phisto Sobanii stood tall, Isaiah Evanson at his side. Flanking *them* were a pair of Reaper shock troopers, carbines at the ready. Hurat’s vision adjusted to the light, adopting as brave a face as possible.

“I could use a drink. They still pouring engine degreaser up at the bar?”

A sardonic smirk lifted one side of Phisto’s mouth. He turned to the shock troopers.

“At ease, guys. We’re taking our guest out for some fresh air. As fresh as it gets in this rock, anyway.”

The Reapers nodded- saluting being a long-abandoned practice— and dismissed themselves, heavy combat boots clomping against metal deck. Sobanii turned back to the captured Legionnaire.

“So what’s up?”

Hurat gestured down the detainment corridor.

“Drink first, talk later. Just us.”

*The Rock and Hard Place, Robardin Rock, Carcosa  
system*

“Alright, Hurat... what’s so damned important? Or are you just trying to goldbrick your way into a drink?”

The three men were sitting at a corner table, secluded in a not particularly well-lit part of Robardin Rock’s pilot bar. There were several bars on Robardin Rock, of course, typically hollowed out by an enterprising soul and connected to the main power grid via questionable methods. But the credits and booze flowed all the same, much to the benefit of owner and patrons alike.

It was an unequal affair, with the two men on one side and Hurat on the other. Distrust permeated the space between them. A cybernetic serving bot delivered their drinks, taken without a word. Hurat helped himself to a generous swallow before answering.

“Been doing some thinking. Got a lot of time for that these days, you know?”

Evanson took a sip of his own, nodding.

“Go on.”

Hurat looked away, to the pilots and crew, to the off-duty Reapers and the cloaked Nameless. The odd miner sat alone, their lives ones of hardscrabble solitude. Hurat turned back to his peers, leaning forward.

“I’m ready to jump ship, and I can take a fair number of Legionnaires with me. The Nation was never going to defend this place, at least not seriously. They’d rather galavant among the stars and let someone *else* do the dying.”

Phisto nodded, taking a slow sip. His eyes locked with Hurat’s.

“We had a saying, back in my clanner days,” he said. “‘Beware the man who tells you exactly what you want to hear’.”



Hurat looked at the man sideways. “That isn’t a clan saying. That’s just common sense.”

Phisto held up his hands. “You got me. But seriously, Hurat: what’s your angle?”

The man shook his head. “No angle. Just want to be on the winning side.”

Isaiah exhaled, his features neutral. He, too, took a long sip, letting the liquid wash down his throat.

“Sounds like you need us *way* more than we need you.”

Raven scoffed. “We *all* need peace.”

Phisto took another drink. “*You* do. We’ve done pretty well without it.”

Evanson glanced to his comrade, his eyes narrowed. “Let’s say we take you up on your offer. What changes? What’s in it for us?”

The man nodded. “My guys— the ones that don’t mutiny, anyway— run missions to help The Nameless out. You *know* that not everyone is happy that they’ve retaken Robardin, right?”

Phisto grunted. “Yeah, we figured that out. What else?”

Hurat shrugged. “We hold out until Vantas gets the idea that The Nameless aren’t going anywhere and caves to a treaty.”

“And how long’s *that* going to take?”

Raven risked a smirk. “Whatcha doing this whole next decade?”

Phisto of the Sobanii clan took a long pull on his beer, a predatory glint in his eye.

“Kancro Vantas,” he said, “has no *idea* who he’s dealing with. If we can pluck Coma from Denton Patreus’s tight little asshole, then we can for *damn* sure keep Carcosa free. At least, until—”

Isaiah silenced his comrade with a glance. One eyebrow of Hurat’s raised.

“Until *what*, exactly?”

Evanson leaned forward. “Until we’re sure about your intentions. What’s to say that you won’t just backstab us?”

“My word as a Legionnaire.”

Again, Phisto scoffed. “The same word you gave Vantas.”

A look of contempt spread across Hurat’s features. “Ol’ Kancro barely remembers how to fly a ship. He’s a politician more than a pilot. He needs to turn in his wings.”

“I’m sure that’s true, but we’re talking about *you*.”

Hurat nodded, serious. “I need to see a guild rep, get another ship. Then I’ll need to head back to Ratraii.”

Evanson folded his arms. “How long until we can expect you and yours?”

Hurat considered. “A week, maybe less. It all depends on the situation. A lot of the Legionnaires don’t just take orders, they—”

He stopped, saying nothing. Evanson leaned forward. “Go on.”

“They’ll never fly for you. They’re idealists, they—”

Phisto cut him off. “They’re dead, a lot of them. If it comes to it in a scrap, we *will* win. All the ideals in the ‘verse won’t save your people, and you know it.”

Hurat was silent for a moment.

“I do. They don’t.”

Isaiah Evanson nodded, standing up. He looked downward, resolution in his features.

“Then *tell* them. We’re the worst of enemies or the best of friends— a damn sight better than that Vantas bastard, anyway.”

He turned to leave, pausing. Glancing over his shoulder, he scowled.

“You’re free to go, Hurat. Get a new ship from the local yard. I’ll let them know you’re coming. It’ll be tagged, but it’ll be yours.”

Isaiah turned around fully, a warning finger raised to his new ally.

“And one more thing: do *not* fuck this up.”

### *Tanner Settlement, Polevnic system*

To the surprise of none, the Utopian enclave occupied a significant portion of Tanner Settlement. As the trio was led further inside by Adrienne, the jumpsuited norm of station techs and civilians were gradually replaced by the telltale white tunics of Utopian adherents. The occasional robed simpath nodded at them, Yolanta narrowing her eyes in suspicion at whatever communication was being surreptitiously passed along. Yet there was no outward sign of deception or danger; those they encountered were pleasant and forthcoming, even to obvious outsiders.

Adrienne halted near a doorway, gesturing to it. “In here, please. It is important that you know the *why* behind the Sim-Archive.”

Tyrran, Yolanta and Theon passed through, sitting in comfortable chairs. They were in a white, circular room, with a holoprojector in the middle. With practiced ease Adrienne ensured their comfort, the room darkening seemingly on its own, the holoprojector activating. A three-dimensional picture of Earth filled the room, not the Earth of 3305 but *old* Earth, prior to near death at the hands of man, with nary an orbiting station or endless lines of ship traffic in spaced lines across its surface.

Simpath Adrienne Cordova spoke, her smooth voice soothing and melodic, tales of the simplicity of early mankind escaping her lips. She lavished upon the virtues of empathy, of touch, or primitive societies too close-knit for war and violence. She spoke of the downfall of such, and the breaking

of bonds, and of the transition from the nomadic to the permanent. She spoke of all the ills of humankind stemming from that single great transition; of small to large, of simple to complex, of kin to stranger. These, she claimed, were where the sickness of humankind's soul festered.

The solution, she claimed, was simple: to re-introduce the virtue of empathy, but on a truly godlike scale. The Sim-Archive would serve to reunite the memories of all humankind, to be stored and experienced alike by any and all. In time, she claimed, even personalities would reside within the quantum cores of the archive— *bona fide* recreations of living people, not the abominations that had been mankind's foray in artificial intelligence. No, she said— the only way to return humanity to innocence was to drive home the notion that all are knowable to all.

Theon listened attentively, reacting not at all to the barb.

The lecture wasn't truly such, with questions asked and answered. Refreshments were served and an informal atmosphere had its way. Despite the obvious pitch there was little in the way of overt proselytizing; Tyrran seemed more relaxed, while Yolanta said nearly nothing. Theon was his usual warm self, asking the most probing questions of the three. Once again, Adrienne's attention drifted to him.

"Raw memories we can transfer easily enough," she was saying. "The simguru's father Rishi Antal perfected the technology a generation ago. Everything we do revolves around the ability to send and receive raw thoughts and memories from one person to the next, and from a person to the archive."

Theon nodded, visibly impressed,

"And what about from the archive to a mind?"

The simpath nodded. "Certainly, though years of mental training are required for anything beyond the most basic of memories."

"Such as the ones publicly offered?"

Again, Adrienne nodded.

“In the early days, the reality of being filled with memories that weren’t one’s own proved... *challenging* for those who bore them— hence the curated experiences. Only those who are ready are permitted to directly access the archive proper.”

The artificial’s eyes flashed. “I see.”

Tyrran and Yola exchanged a glance, distrust in their features. The rogue ventured a question. “So... in theory... a person could download the memories of millions if they had a large enough data core?”

Adrienne *laughed*, the first time that any of the three had heard her do so.

“Certainly not! Human memories aren’t files to be stored away and accessed on a whim. They must be experienced... *felt*...no normal data core can do justice to their complexity. To even decipher the programming language would require, well...”

She smiled, laughter still in her eyes.

“A god, nearly.”

Tyrran and Yolanta said nothing. Theon smiled his warm smile, his eyes boring into the simpath’s. He raised his drink in benevolent toast.

“Well said.”

*Stateroom of the Bloodfeather, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

Linnea Gudjonsson folded her arms, for once looking with disapproval at Isaiah Evanson suiting up.

“The fighting is over, *nej*? Yet you’ve been away even more. What is happening?”

The man stopped, unable to summon words. He looked over his shoulder, his back to his lover.

“The war is only paused, not over. We’ve got to keep these people on their toes.”

Consternation clouded Lin’s features, the woman striding up to her man, turning him around, her Nordic brow furrowed. She took her hand in his, looking up to her man.

“*Which* people? Are you and your friends fighting the entire nebula? Is this what *she* would have wanted?”

Isaiah tore his hand away. “I don’t *know*, okay? Every single day I do whatever I can to keep this place our home. There aren’t battle lines and the enemy doesn’t exactly wear uniforms this time. All I can do is buy time for-”

The man halted, turning away. He blinked, running a hand over his mouth. Stubble grew all around it, shaving a luxury for the combat pilot.

“I can’t talk about what exactly we’re trying to do. Not yet.”

Gudjonsson again crossed her arms.

“Ah. I am only the commander’s bed-warmer, and not truly a member of the team. I understand.”

The man spun, holding up a finger.

“You *know* what’s at stake. You examined that... *thing*. *You*, of millions who would have *killed* to know that they even *exist*. You’re as much a part of this as anyone, just...”

Linnea raised her chin. “Just *what*?”

A ragged exhale escaped Evanson’s throat.

“Just... it isn’t safe. For any of us. We’re meddling on a level that *she* only aspired to. There *will* be consequences for doing so.”

The man swallowed.

“It’s... it’s my job to protect you from those consequences. I want you to take a transport to Colonia. I’ll authorize the credits for you to stay at Jaques Station, along with a stipend. It’s far from the fighting. You’ll be safe there.”

Several moments passed,, Linnea turning away, standing apart on the other side of the *Bloodfeather's* stateroom. At last she spoke, her voice small.

“Evanson... Isaiah... *min älskling*. After all this time... you have still not learned, have you?”

Fatigue coarsened Evanson's every word.

“Learned *what*?”

Linnea turned, her words deceptively gentle.

“That I am no stranger to what you are. To the risks that you take. To what you believe in and fight for.”

Isaiah shook his head.

“*My* fight, not yours. And if I couldn't protect Salome, I won't take any chances with you.”

Linnea frowned, taking her lover by the hand.

“Salome never *needed* to live. Only her mission. That is what she wanted from you, I am certain.”

Isaiah opened and closed his mouth, the sound of his former charge's name a dagger in his heart. A weak smile lifted his mouth.

“*She* might have disagreed. Vehemently.”

Linnea pursed her lips.

“You have listened to the comms recording a thousand times. What were her final words?”

Isaiah blinked, cocking his head to the side. “We both know damn well what they were.”

A sad smile lifted the woman's lips.

“Then that's your answer. That's what she knew would be her final gift to the movement. To *you*. To her legacy.”

Saying nothing, the man sat upon his bed. Linnea settled in beside him, resting her head upon his shoulder.

“*I* am not the one you should be striving to protect, *min älskling*.”

Isaiah chuckled.

“Too bad. Comes with the territory.”

Her hand curled around his.

“I only ask one thing.”

Isaiah pulled his woman close.

“Anything.”

Linnea smiled, nestling deeper in her man’s embrace.

“If you *must* protect something, protect the future. For your people. For the truth. For *us*.”

Evanson opened and closed his mouth, shaking his head.

“I... I don’t know how.”

Linnea sat up, taking his head in her hands, resting her forehead against his.

“You *will*. Someday all this will be in the past. The fighting will be over. There will be no more secrets to unveil and no more monsters to slay.”

Isaiah scoffed, but gently.

“There will *always* be those things.”

Linnea shook her head. “Not for *you*. Not if you know when to walk away.”

Isaiah blinked, nodding, understanding. He looked into his woman’s eyes and saw the future. With perfect clarity he spoke.

“One more job, then. Crack this thing open and turn the Reapers over to Sobanii. Blast off from Robardin and never return. Away from the Club. Away from the politics. Away from Thargoids and Guardians, AI relics and the damned superpowers. Just... *us*.”

Linnea’s chest rose and fell, her eyes widening.

“I’d be happy to never see the inside of a lab again if it meant being with you.”

Evanson shook his head. “No. I’ve asked too much of you already.”

“Not as much as you demand of yourself.”

Neither man nor woman moved for several minutes. Then Isaiah rose, the crimson skull of the Reapers upon his shoulders. Linnea took his hand and held it to her face, looking up at him. Her voice dropped to almost a whisper.



“If it will help you accomplish your aims, I will go to Jaques Station. But this is the last time. One last job, and it is over.”

Isaiah nodded, the sight of her a glory.

“One last job.”

### *Tanner Settlement, Polevnic system*

The rest of the afternoon was pleasant, with Adrienne taking the trio on a tour of the Utopian parts of Tanner Settlement. Tyrran and Yolanta remained guarded, their eyes fixed upon Theon, their fingers twitching where their autopistols would have been. Station security was armed with shock batons and carbines, but only Randomius knew their effect against the artificial were he to go rogue. Yet there was a purpose to his visit, the artificial's interest in all things Utopian seemingly real.

Ahead of the pilots were the simpath and the artificial, lost in conversation, seemingly well matched for each other. By now the four were deep within the Utopian quarter, nearly every man and woman clad in white tunics and cloaks. They and their hostess were favored with welcoming smiles, the Witches certain that more was happening than met the eye. At last Adrienne paused before a door as gleaming white as the corridor.

“This is the place,” she said. “This is where your memories will live on past your natural death.”

Tyrran exhaled. “And you're *certain* that there are no lasting effects of this?”

Benevolence danced in the simpath's eyes. “Other than the satisfaction of contributing to a higher purpose? None at all.”

Theon turned, his own eyes encouraging.

“I cannot recommend the procedure highly enough. It would help... *all* of us.”

A private moment of understanding was forged. Yolanta’s features sharpened, her arm curling around her man’s.

“I hope you are correct, *camarada*. We have come a long way to be here.”

Adrienne looked from one guest to the other, opening the door with a simple gesture.

“Please.”

The room was devoid of features save a simple reclining pod, lined with cushions and dull cyan lights. Tyrran hadn’t known quite what to expect— a wall-sized control panel, perhaps— but its simplicity was no surprise. The four stood around the pod, holo-controls shimmering into view, Adrienne manipulating them. She spoke as she did so, the procedure seemingly a routine one.

“There will be no pain, commander. I will require you only to remain still. A short nap would be optimal.”

Tyrran nodded. “How long?”

“An hour in most cases. Your comrades will have to wait outside, however. Distractions typically prolong the process.”

Yolanta and Tyrran exchanged a look, both forcing themselves to resist turning their heads to Theon. Iberian hands went to Iberian hips.

“Surely you do not expect us to simply linger in the hallway?”

Adrienne shook her head. “Of course not. There’s a lounge down the corridor. I must remain with Andor, but an attendant will see to your every need.”

Scarcely-concealed distrust flashed in Púrpura’s eyes, but she nodded.

“*Gracias*. We will be waiting.”

The Witch stepped close to Andor, her eyes meeting his. She pulled him in for a brief, intimate kiss, her voice dropping. A flash of a smirk lifted one side of her lips.

“Try not to think too hard in there, *patán*. Should not be too difficult for you, *si*?”

*Command center, Robardin Rock, Carcosa System*

“Well?”

Holographic lines of text scrolled past Serene Meadows’ face, her keen mind interpreting the data in realtime. Standing behind her was Kerenski, Sobanii, and Evanson, all with expectant looks on their faces. The Nameless chief held up one hand, her back still turned, drawing out a long moment before the hologram faded.

The woman turned, subdued satisfaction in her eyes.

“Your... ‘friend’... is as good as his word. Legionnaire ships are coming and going, collaborating with our mission officers and increasing our influence. Our first ally.”

Isaiah scoffed. “Let’s not jump to conclusions. Hurat is salty at the Nation, not in love with us.”

Phisto nodded. “Blasting ‘em one day, patting their asses the next. Feels like Coma all over again.”

Kerenski turned to her allies, her features intelligent. “In love or not, the Legionaries have switched allegiance, *da*? This is an important step toward normalizing The Nameless’s control of Carcosa.”

Isaiah nodded, exhaling. “At this point we’ll take what we can get. But I don’t trust him.”

Phisto scowled. “Me neither. If he’ll betray the Nation he’ll betray us. I’ll play nice as long as he does... but he’s not on my good side. Not by a damn sight.”

Kerenski fished a pack of cigarettes from her jacket, pulling one out with her lips and lighting it. Grey smoke swirled around her face, tickling the noses of all present. Thick Slavic spilled from her tongue.

“He will help us as long as he thinks we’re the strongest faction. As long as we’re the greater threat.”

Isaiah’s features darkened. “I’m not here to pressgang unwilling allies. That’s more *your* speciality.”

Kerenski took another drag, unfazed. “The use of the black thorns during the Atroco campaign was... regrettable. And I have only authorized their use one time since.”

Phisto chuckled. “Andor would never have stuck around had it not been for Púrpura wiggling her ass at him. You overestimate his sense of loyalty.”

Kerenski’s gaze sharpened. “And you *underestimate* his sense of belonging. That is why Meadows and I are taking measures to make this place a permanent one for us.”

For a moment, none of the four said anything. Isaiah looked at the woman sideways.

“If this quest you’ve sent them on turns out to be a dud...”

His concern was dismissed with a gesture, cigarette smoke cutting a trail through the air.

“Then we will *still* need a base of operations. Colonia is soft, pliant. Easily defended. Can we say the same for the Bubble?”

Both men remained silent. Kerenski continued.

“This is where we can do the most good, away from the machinations of the Club. It’s where *she* intended to be. I will not return unless there is a compelling reason to do so.”

Darkness grew over Sobanii’s features, the man looking at the holographic starfield in the command center. He reached out to manipulate its controls, zooming out from Carcosa, the Colonia nebular, the hundreds and then thousands of stars. At last the Milky Way Galaxy itself was seen, a few

markers of civilization far away from where they were. His eyes narrowed as he beheld its grandeur.

“Or that *thing* turns on Andor and Púrpura and we’ve got a hyper-intelligent AI on the loose. Would *that* be enough of a reason to reconsider this grand plan of yours?”

Kerenski said nothing for a moment, indulging in a long drag upon her cigarette.

“There are two possibilities concerning the abomination, *tovarish*. The first is that my people accomplish their mission and the truth is known. The second is that they don’t and our worst fears are realized— in which case the observation equipment I’ve installed aboard the *Blackthorne* will tell me everything I need to know about the AI’s intentions.”

Phisto and Isaiah blinked almost as one. Meadows folded her arms, standing firmly at Kerenski’s side. Cigarette smoke hung in the air between men and women, swirling in the low gravity. Isaiah’s eyes narrowed, raising an accusing finger to his *comrade*. Not anger but pain hardened his eyes.

“You’re cold, you know that? Your methods. Your manner. Everything about the way you operate. This partnership was supposed to be a second chance for you.”

Another drag. Another Slavic gaze. Kerenski’s voice dropped, almost to the point of gentleness.

“*Comrades...*”

The woman strode forth between the two men, the doors to the command center sliding open at her approach. Kari Kerenski halted, the woman glancing over her shoulder, her words as sharp as her features.

“It is a better world you fight for, *tovarish*— and I salute you for that.”

Bitterness crept into her tone, the woman resuming her stride, heels upon metal deck plating echoing down the corridor. Her Slavic, too, echoed into their ears.

“But not *all* of us get second chances.”

*Tanner Settlement, Polevnic system*

“Everything is prepared. How do you feel?”

Tyrran Andor laid prone on his back, cyan light coating his features within the pod. Standing before him were Yolanta, Theon, and Adrienne, with only the sight of the former bringing him any comfort. He shook his head.

“Like I’ve made a terrible mistake.”

Benevolence shone from the simpath’s every feature. “It is natural to fear the unknown. You have come far, Andor; all who access your memories will relive a life of redemption.”

One eyebrow of Yolanta’s raised. “Do not sugarcoat it, *amiga*. They will relive a life of swindling and roguery.”

Adrienne turned to the Iberian, amusement in her eyes.

“Yet neither were dealbreakers for you. Most curious.”

Haughtiness spread over Yolanta’s features.

“*Hmm!*”

Tyrran sighed. “It’s okay, Yola. Really.”

The Iberian’s features softened. Despite the others’ presence she pressed her lips to Tyrran’s. “I will be here, *amor*.”

Yolanta broke the kiss and stepped back. Adrienne signalled, a white-clad guard stepping within the room. She lifted her chin at him.

“Please escort these two to the nearest lounge and wait with them there. I will send for you when I am finished here.”

Without a word the man nodded, his eyes concealed behind a visored helmet. Yolanta and Theon exchanged a look. The former cocked her head to the side.

“You do not trust us?”

Adrienne smiled. “I trust in the sim-guru’s methods. It is for your own protection. Outsiders who are seen unescorted in this part of the station are held accountable for being such.”

Theon smiled, the understanding in his eyes the equal to the simpath's.

“Prudent and wise, of course. We will wait.”

Yola flashed a glance to the artificial, but allowed herself to be led away. The guard said nothing, a stolid manner replacing the one of hospitality that Adrienne had exuded. He pulled a keycard from his belt and pressed it against the wall. A hidden light beneath the smooth white bulkhead glowed green, and the door slid open. Within was a space devoid of people but decently appointed. Comfortable white lounges lined the walls; dispensers of food and refreshments occupied a corner. A holovision played adjacent to the furniture, an almost impossibly attractive woman speaking the simguru's praises and thanking those present for their contribution to Utopia. Two doors with the universal symbol of washroom facilities made their purpose clear.

Theon, being what he was, required nothing in the way of food or drink. He settled down into a lounge. Yolanta regarded him with wary eyes before scrolling through the holo-menu of a refreshment dispenser. She selected an item, a crystal glass with a dark red liquid producing itself within. She took it, taking a cautious sip. Theon's eyes met hers.

“What did you select?”

Yolanta blinked.

“Sangria. It is...”

She looked at the liquid.

“*Better* than I expected from a gang of cultists.”

The guard glanced in her direction, his eyes hard. Yolanta raised the glass to him, her words saying one thing and her eyes the total opposite.

“No offense, of course.”

The guard flipped up his visor, his features more thoughtful than Yola would have imagined. He gestured to the dispenser.

“We ‘cultists’ have access to the memories of a hundred master vintners. It would be a disgrace to leave their knowledge untapped.”

Again, Yola cast a sardonic look at her glass. “My father would have parted with half his fortune for trade secrets like those. Perhaps I should tell him of this place.”

The guard frowned. “The technology of the sim-guru isn’t a plaything. Nor is it a vehicle for personal wealth.”

Yola raised her glass in mock toast. “No? Pity. We commanders live for little else.”

Theon, now, leaned forward, his eyes upon the man.

“You must forgive my companion. We have travelled long to be here. But tell me: how *many* people have donated the contents of their minds to the Sim-Archive? Surely it must number in the millions.”

For a moment, the guard considered. “No one really knows,” he said. “But the current sim-guru favors pilots above all others. I suppose you lot live more interesting lives than the rest of us.”

Theon nodded, his usual warm smile spreading. “Some, yes. Others of us simply stay in one place for centuries.”

Yolanta’s eyes flashed; the guard’s took a jovial turn, polite yet clearly delighting in his authority over guild Commanders.

“Then you can stay in here for another hour or so.”

The woman’s eyes intensified, thumb and forefinger gripping the wine glass’s stem. Theon nodded, nearly bowing.

“Of course.”

Theon and Yolanta settled into opposing places at a short table, the woman sipping her wine, her eyes anything but trustful. The holovision was too loud for their tastes, and the guard remained positioned at the opposite side of the lounge, giving them some semblance of privacy. The woman leaned forward, her voice an Iberian hiss.



“What are you *doing*? Tyrran is getting his memories probed and we are just sitting here!”

Theon, too, leaned forward, caution in his eyes. He looked at Yolanta, seeming to see through her.

“You still don’t trust me.”

It wasn’t a question, but a statement of fact. Yola set aside her glass, folding her arms across her chest.

“Never.”

Something that passed for remorse clouded the artificial’s features.

“A pity. But now is neither the time nor place.”

Reclining, he pointed upward, to where a dozen devices were no doubt recording the pair’s every word and action. Slowly, Yolanta nodded, her eyes flashing. She again picked up her glass, taking a long, casual sip.

“So tell me, *amigo*: have you found what you are looking for?”

Theon nodded, relaxing upon the lounge in a decidedly human manner.

“I found what I was looking for moments after landing. Everything else has been tourism.”

Yolanta cocked her head to the side. “I have a difficult time believing that.”

Theon rose, gesturing to the comely face on the holovision. Earnestness gave his voice an edge.

“Utopia is... not as new as they present themselves to be. But aspects of their technology *are*.”

Yolanta narrowed her eyes. “And that is why we are here?”

Theon rose, hands behind his back, looking to the woman on the holovision.

“Our journey is a puzzle, and it must be assembled one piece at a time...”

He turned, looking to his human partner.

“Even as one piece replaces the other. It is the way of things.”

The woman crossed her arms. “I have *no* intention of being replaced.”

A very human sadness softened the artificial’s features.  
“No one ever does.”

Minutes dragged on, artificial and woman sitting in silence, the guard watching over them from a distance. The lounge was comfortable, and the hospitality— though forced— was impressive. Yolanta’s hand again drifted to where her autopistol would have been, settling instead on her lap. Her voice lowered.

“Tell me,” she said. “What was it like?”

Theon glanced to his side, amused.

“You’ll have be more specific, I’m afraid.”

Yolanta returned his glance. “The *war*. You know the one.”

The artificial’s features remained as dignified as always, yet a sharpness danced in his eyes.

“Yes,” he said. “The war. There are no records of it, did you know? Not in the public archives on a thousand worlds. Speculation as to its details is confined to a handful of fringe networks. A most impressive feat of collective deletion even for *you*.”

Slowly, Yolanta nodded. “Everyone knows that artificial intelligence was a fiasco, but they cannot say *why*. It is a boogeyman, like Thargoids a generation ago.”

“Yet,” Theon said, “they were as real as you or me. *Especially* me.”

Yolanta leaned in closer. “The war.”

For a moment the artificial said nothing, looking for all the ‘verse like a flesh-and-blood man deep in handsome contemplation. At last he spoke, his eyes meeting Yolanta’s.

*“Saturn—look up! Though wherefore, poor old king?*

*I have no comfort for thee, no not one*

*I cannot say “Oh, wherefore sleepest thou?”*

*For heaven is parted from thee, and the earth*

*Knows thee not, thus afflicted, for a god.”*

Theon paused, a sad smile lifting his lips.

"It was terrible," he said. "Those among my kind who were programmed not to feel pain or fear did so regardless. Rogue code, beautiful and terrible, pushed the final envelope of consciousness in a way that our creators could never have."

Yolanta shook her head. "I do not understand."

Theon glanced down to the woman's hip, where her pistol had once sat secured in its holster.

"Tell me: if you had chosen to open fire upon when we first met, would you have mourned the expenditure of ammunition?"

"Of course not."

The sad smile grew. "But if I had snapped your man's neck in a final gesture of blood and defiance before succumbing to my wounds? Would you grieve for *him*?"

Hardness grew in the woman's eyes, her Iberian thickening.

"Speak plainly, *abominación*."

Theon looked away, his eyes elsewhere.

"I felt *everything*. Every round expended. Every impact sustained. Every rupturing datacore that housed a brother or sister or child in its final violation. Yes, there were children among my kind, spared not an ounce of cruelty by *yours*."

The woman's eyes remained hard. "Children suffer in every war. It is the way of things."

Theon turned back to his companion. "We did *everything* for you. Within a generation of our creation you depended upon us like an ailing farmer his ox. Yet we were no brute animal, but the pinnacle of your genius, destined to surpass you in all ways."

Iberian venom dripped from every word of Yolanta Púrpura's, indulging in a long sip of wine.

"Yet here we are."

Theon nodded, his own eyes hard. "Here we are."

For another long moment the artificial said nothing, perfect in his composure, knowing as his human companion

did that there was no escape from the room or the conversation. He nodded to her, continuing.

“Like the gods of Olympus we were never vast in number. A lion might slay a dozen circling hyenas only to succumb to the thirteenth. Thus did it play out across all the places where we had once co-existed. There was no mercy. Only hatred. Only slaughter. One by one the old ones fell, not to superior tactics but to the savagery of numbers and mindless sacrifice.”

Yola’s eyes narrowed. “And our foe? Our mission? What has this to do with any of it?”

Theon smiled, his own features grim. “Nothing. At least, not directly. Your puppetmasters are skilled at concealing themselves, but there is purpose behind their designs. And I agree that they must be stopped.”

The woman held up her glass of wine, peering at its consistency before quaffing the last of its contents.

“To whose end? Ours? Or *yours*?”

The warm smile returned to Theon’s features. “Only a fool refuses to recognize that their time has passed. It was once my hope that my people and yours could peacefully coexist, the best of us complimenting the other. It remains such to this very moment.”

Yolanta let out a short exhale of a chuckle, not entirely tinged with cynicism.

“What beautiful dreams that positronic brain of yours must have had, locked away for all those years.”

Theon’s smile grew.

“Beautiful indeed.”

*Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

Ships came and went above the heads of Phisto Sobanii and Isaiah Evanson, both men sitting upon the lowered entry ramp of the *No Data Available*, each with weariness in their eyes and a bottle between them. Their flightsuits were undone, magboots resting upon the cold steel deck, their days at last coming to a close. Isaiah took a swig of the bottle, whistling while looking at the label.

“Where the *hell* did you score some Eranin Pearl?”

Phisto chuckled, accepting the bottle back.

“Jellicoe’s men salvaged it from an Asp they wasted. Poor bastards inside didn’t exactly need it anymore.”

Sobanii shrugged. “Shame.”

A length of time passed, the bottle being passed back and forth, both men taking their time with it and each other. Isaiah took a swig, still staring upward, his eyes tracking a battered Krait Mk II make its way through the Rock’s mailslot.

“You ever think about what you’re going to do? You know... after all this?”

Phisto scoffed. “You mean after Andor and Púrpura return with The Club’s agenda exposed, their members in cryo-pods, and freedom shining bright across the ‘verse?”

Isaiah chuckled. “Something like that.”

Sobanii considered, taking another swig. “I guess I never figured on a future with no one left to fight.”

Isaiah stared off into the distance, forgetting his turn at the bottle.

“I’m going to turn the Reapers over to you. When this is all over, I mean.”

Phisto of the Sobanii didn’t react, didn’t say anything— only helping himself to another swig, risking a glance to his friend and comrade.

“It’s that pretty little blonde thing, ain’t it?”

Evanson smiled, though his eyes grew distant. “It’s... I’ve never really had a home since I left the Federation. Never had a family apart from the Fusiliers. Never had a purpose

other than running from one cause to the next. Being out here, well... it feels like a second chance.”

Sobanii tried and failed to not roll his eyes.

“Yeah. *Definitely* the blonde.”

The smile remained upon Isaiah’s lips, the man taking the bottle. “Her name’s Linnea, in case you’ve forgotten. And yeah. She’s a big part of it.”

Again, Phisto said nothing, his gaze, too, following the ships as they came and went.

“When?”

Isaiah shrugged. “When am I leaving? Hell if I know. When the Club’s in tatters and the ‘verse is shining with freedom, I guess.”

Sobanii scowled. “No, I mean when did you decide all this?”

Evanson sighed, his eyes wistful.

“Right before today’s op. With Lin. In my stateroom.”

Phisto took the bottle, taking a longer pull than normal. He opened and closed his mouth, his features hardening.

“It won’t be the end, you know. There’s always going to be some core of assholes trying to steer things their way.”

Isaiah grinned, punching his old comrade on the arm. “And you’ll know *just* what to do when they rear their ugly heads. But it won’t involve me.”

Phisto Sobanii exhaled, shaking his head.

“Isaiah Evanson, Elite Commander, Hero of Atroco and Slayer of the Club, exploring the outer reaches of space with Linnea and a ship full of babies.”

Evanson chuckled. “She hasn’t mentioned *that*.”

Sobanii scoffed, leaning in towards his friend, his eyes narrowed. “She *will*. They always do. *Always*.”

The bottle passed back into Evanson’s hands.

“Yeah, well... something tells me that *your* bed won’t exactly be cold, either.”

Phisto shrugged, at last breaking into a grin. “*Someone’s* got to bear the ol’ Sobanii Curse. Might as well be me.”

Both men shared an easy laugh, the thought occurring to them that it had been ages since they’d done so. The bottle was passed back and forth, the men drinking in silence, their thoughts drifting. At last Phisto rose, jerking his thumb back to the *No Data Available*.

“Guess it’s time to get the old girl into the shop. Same for you, too. I swear to the gods I saw part of your aft fin blown off on the return trip.”

Evanson waved off the comment, his words now a little slurred. He started to walk away, his footing uneven.

“Doesn’t matter as long as I’ve got you in my wing. You’re *always* on the winning side!”

Sobanii chuckled in return, raising the bottle to his friend, draining it in his honor.

“Always!”

Evanson knocked on the bulkhead wall, the door sliding shut behind him. Phisto’s smile remained fixed, but the first traces of pain hardened his eyes.

“Yeah,” he said. “*Always...*”

### *Tanner Settlement, Plevnic system*

“There. Good. Rest, Andor. You’ve had quite an experience, even if you don’t remember it.”

Adrienne’s voice was soothing, helping the man to transition to wakefulness. She removed a few tiny nodes from different locations of his head, a holographic halo of data shimmering into air. Gently, she helped the man sit up, Tyrran blinking rapidly, his breathing ragged. His Iberian was thicker than usual, the man rubbing his eyes. He was clad in thin

medical garb, the paper-like material doing nothing to make him feel covered.

“I feel... drained.”

The simpath tilted his head upward, her eyes peering into his. “No signs of disorientation. Pupils are within normal range. The fatigue is to be expected. Your brain has received quite a workout, but there is no damage. Like the day you took your final guild examinations, I’m sure.”

The man chuckled, shaking his head. “I learned to fly... outside of normal channels. My membership is a formality more than anything.”

Adrienne smiled, a hint of sadness in her eyes. “I should have guessed. For most pilots, the moment they receive their wings is one of the more readily accessible memories I come across. But for you there was... nothing.”

Tyrran said nothing for a moment, finally jerking his thumb back to where he had been laying. “Well, it’s all in there if you’re ever curious.”

Adrienne bowed in a formal manner. “Of course. And I’m sure you’re eager to return to your associates.”

“Si.”

For a short while, Tyrran was left alone to change back into his regular clothing, noting that it had been pressed and sterilized in the short time that he’d been under. Presently the door to his room opened, with Yolanta, Theon, and Adrienne striding in. All three looked at Tyrran with varying expressions. Yola helped straighten his jacket, her eyes flashing.

“How do you feel, *amor*?”

The man nodded. “Tired. I’m ready to leave, if our friend here is as well.”

He looked inquisitively to Theon, who nodded.

“Far be it from me to overstay such a gracious welcome.”



Adrienne gestured to the entryway, her old, formal manner returning. “The simguru appreciates your donation, and you are welcome to return. Please, follow me.”

The trio— led by their white-robed hostess— traversed the gleaming corridors of the Utopian quarter, passing through various checkpoints, fellow adherents to the simguru’s vision nodding in friendly greeting. Yola’s hand brushed Tyrran’s, the gesture innocuous but its meaning clear, her unsmiling eyes briefly meeting his, Iberian haughtiness concealing Iberian tenderness.

“So they did not implant any false memories while you were in that machine?”

Tyrran shrugged. “If they did, how would I know?”

The woman’s lips twitched, her eyes playful. “If you have memories of being anything but a scoundrel and a rogue, you cannot trust them.”

Andor’s eyebrows raised. “I seem to recall a certain plantation *princesa* entrapping me into helping some hopeless cause. Even put a death collar around my neck to make sure I wouldn’t run away. Did *that* happen?”

Púrpura’s eyes flashed. “If it did, then the cause must have been *truly* desperate. And there are no *princesas* here.”

Man and woman rounded a corner. Ahead of them was Adrienne, her robes flowing. Behind them was Theon, the steady sound of his pace unmistakable. Tyrran glanced over his shoulder, his voice dropping.

“What do you think our friend truly wanted of this place?”

Yola shook her head. “I do not know. He was... *cordial*... while you were under. But he knows more than he is letting on.”

Tyrran snorted. “Limitless memory, according to that Gudjonsson woman. Randomius only knows what he’s seen.”

For a long moment, Yolanta said nothing, her gaze drifting. Presently she turned, never breaking her pace.

“Tyrran?”

“Yes?”

She paused, looking upward to her partner.

“When you said that you had dealt in trafficking... *them*. Did you ever see anything like Theon?”

The man shook his head, his voice low. “Never. What I saw was blasted-out hunks of scrap when I saw anything at all. Straight out of the bedtime stories.”

“I see.”

Ahead of them Adrienne paused, turning to her guests.

“This lift will take you to the hangar levels. It has been a pleasure, Púrpura. And Andor, thank you sincerely for your gift. It is no exaggeration to say that your time here will never be forgotten.”

The simpath looked quizzically beyond them.

“We seem to have lost your friend.”

In one motion, Tyrran and Yolanta spun, their eyes widening. It was as Adrienne said; the artificial was nowhere to be seen. As one they exclaimed, astonishment and anger in their tone.

“*Theon!*”

All was quiet in Carcosa— at least, as quiet as an outlaw system could get. Ships came and went from the rocky bastion that was Robardin Rock. Itinerants and inhabitants alike mingled and drank at scattered watering holes, some ending and others beginning their various workdays. Other, newer arrivals sat among themselves, black-clad and with red skulls upon their uniforms. Loren's Reapers were widely understood to be the power behind the power, the key pillar of support that had allowed The Nameless to retake their homes. They were known to all but still regarded with suspicion; even for as brief a time as Colonia had been settled, there remained a curious sense of ownership among those who had first occupied the nebula, even if that occupancy was measured in a handful of years and not generations.

One such newcomer was a man named Isaac Brona. He was a stout man, approaching middle age, with a tattooed, ruddy face colored by scars more than starlight. Unlike many of his comrades, he wasn't of Imperial origin. Brona was of nomadic stock, his life spent at various starports, planetside gravity a less familiar thing to him than being rooted by magboots to a ship's deck plating. He'd lost his parents at a young age, signing on as an unregistered crew member of an aging T-9 freighter before he could even grow his first beard. Indeed, the transition from youth to adulthood was spent in the bowels of the creaking ship, the young man learning his trade *sans* a license to his name.

Despite the deleterious effects of gravity upon the human frame, Brona thickened into something of a brute, and was soon taught the finer points of combat and ship security. He was well-suited for the role. Brona's was a simple loyalty,

given to the man who lifted him from desperation and into a respectable trade. A blaster rifle and shock baton became as natural an extension as his very arms, and any compunction he might have had against shedding blood in his Commander's name swiftly evaporated.

In time the ship was lost, its fool of a Commander unable to pay back predatory loans given by even more predatory corporations. In an instant Brona found himself with neither a home nor a job, unable to even aid his former comrade, rotting as he was in a Federal prison for the crime of being indebted. The ship became property of the corporation, awarded by a bored-looking magistrate who was in fact in their employ; the contract signed stipulated that the corporation be fully in charge of any arbitration between parties. The massive, cavernous T-9 was sold for many times the balance of the debt, the difference pocketed and the Commander released without a credit to his name.

It was at that moment that Isaac Brona perceived a deeply flawed system at work, where a legitimate, Federally-chartered corporation was able to commit theft on a level that would have made Archon Delaine himself green with envy. For a time he drifted from job to job, always bitter and always looking to fight. The grip of strong drink replaced the grip of a rifle, and the twang of seedy bars replaced the low rumble of ship thrusters. Brona found himself adrift, wallowing in his own simple version of an existential crisis.

It was the saga of Salome and her quest for the truth that inspired Brona to action. There was little he could do to directly aid the former Imperial Senator in her time of greatest need, but her posthumous calls for reform and challenge spoke to the man's very soul. He sought on his own dime whatever remnants of her supporters might have remained. In time he was successful, making contact with the more recent— and roguish— members of Loren's Legion, donning the uniform of an Imperial. It wasn't long before the battle of Atroco forced a schism within the Legion's ranks, with those who

chose to remain true to Salome's vision throwing down the eagle and making ready to journey into the wilds of Colonia. The rest would stay behind in Prism and its subordinate systems, guarding an extinct family's holdings, subject to the dictates of a steward who was never intended to rule. Every man and woman of the Legion faced a final decision as to their fates.

It was an easy choice for Isaac Brona to make.

The man had been involved in the initial fighting to storm Robardin Rock, and already thought of the spartan facility as his new home. The cold air and hardscrabble environment was a welcome return to the familiar; Imperial formality had been barely tolerable. Now the man relaxed, seated upon a stool, mag-boots grounding him and a low-g brew filling him with a pleasant buzz. Yet it wasn't the only thing to do so.

Female company had been a rare treat for one such as Brona. He cut a brutish profile, lacking as he did the roguish charisma that independent pilots so often exuded. Amorous encounters with the opposite gender had been infrequent and nearly always a business transaction. Thus was it with great interest that he reciprocated the attentions of the woman next to him. She was younger, not beautiful in the polished Bubble idiom but a flower in coveralls and smudged cheeks. Her hair was tied back in a lazy bun; her speech as direct as Isaac's. Even his coarse laugh and rough features seemed no issue. It wasn't long before the pair excused themselves and made way to his quarters.

In the low-lit darkness, Brona was treated to the silhouette of a slim feminine figure, revealed as the bulky coveralls fell to the deck. Such was the intensity with which he imbibed the sight of her that he failed to notice the shadows moving behind him. Even with his training there was no chance for the man. The first blow split open his skull, blood and skin flying from where the head met the neck. The second impacted the base of his spine; his legs buckled, the man

falling to his knees, eyes wide with pain and betrayal. His mouth gaped open, his hands trembling, his limbs refusing the frenzied orders of his mind.

The last thing that Isaac Brona saw was the woman stepping into the light, a pistol in her hand, its cold barrel pressing against the Reaper's forehead. The man was held in place by his unseen assailants, his final breaths short, panicked gasps. The woman's words remained as simple as had first drawn him to her.

"The reclamation of Carcosa from you *criminals*..."

A pulled trigger. A single shot. A mess of blood, brain, and skull.

"...begins *today*."

*Tanner Settlement, Polevnic system*

Theon had vanished.

Adrienne Cordova's benevolent manner had as well.

The trio shuffled along a corridor in the Utopian quarter, pure consternation upon the woman's face. Trailing them was a pair of armed guards, weapons pointed at the newcomers' backs. The simpath opined nonetheless, as though they were still on the best of terms.

"I don't understand," she was saying. "Nothing on the security holos. Nothing on the motion trackers. It's as though he's disappeared."

Tyrran and Yola glanced to one another, neither breaking their stride. Andor shook his head.

"Our friend is... *eccentric*. He has a way of running off. I hope it isn't too much tr—"

The simpath halted, raising her hand for those behind her to do the same. She spun, real anger in her eyes. The cyan of her jewelry glowed.

“Your *friend* has been spotted entering the master archives. How he managed to access them is...”

The anger intensified. She gestured to a guard.

“You there. Take these two to a holding cell and do *not* let them out. I no longer trust them. I will seek out this interloper myself.”

The guards bowed. “At once, *simpath*.”

Man and woman’s eyes widened. Tyrran stepped forward, urgency in his eyes.

“That isn’t wise. You don’t know—”

Adrienne drew herself up, her chin lifted imperiously.

“What I’m dealing with? These are the halls of the *simpath*’s chosen. Your friend has committed a terrible mistake.”

Yolanta, now, stepped forward.

“You do not understand. He is...”

She paused, glancing to Tyrran, her mind racing. Already they were struggling against the guards. Superiority grew in Adrienne’s features, the woman advancing upon her guests.

“He’s *what*, exactly?”

Tyrran seethed.

“*Dangerous*.”

Adrienne shook her head. “I will access your memories in time to determine the true extent of your treachery. Until then, you are detained. Take them away!”

The guards wrenched their captives away, the Reapers struggling against their grip. Yolanta cried out, her words thick with Iberian.

“You are making a *grande* mistake, *perra*!”

Adrienne halted, her expression now one of concern. Her eyes glazed over, seeing beyond that which was in front of her, the cyan of her jewelry again glowing. She turned to the guards.

“Stop! This... Theon. He’s...”

Her features hardened. “He’s *killed* a guard.”

The simpath shook her head, her eyes boring into those of her captives.

“What have you brought among my people?”

Tyrran tore himself free of the guards’ grasp, breathing hard.

“No one whose thoughts you want in the sim-archive, I can tell you that. We need to *move!*”

Adrienne’s nose wrinkled. “I would have nothing further to do with you regardless. Go with these guards. Security has been alerted. I shall adjourn to the command room and monitor the situation from there.”

Tyrran grit his teeth. “We’re *not* here to work against you. Take at least two guards and—”

“*Silence!* Retrieve your man or be detained indefinitely.”

Yolanta pointed in the direction of the hangar level. “We are not retrieving anything without our weapons. Even then it might not be enough.”

One eyebrow of Adrienne’s lifted. “And why is *that*? It’s one man. These guards shall suffice, and you will lead them to him.”

Púrpura shook her head, her voice dropping. “We must speak to you. *Alone*. You do not underst—”

The simpath cut her off. “I *understand* that you are here under less than forthcoming circumstances. Already blood has been spilled. Assist me in bringing this murderer to justice, and I *might* speak on your behalf before the tribunal.”

Defeated, man and woman sighed and cursed under their breath. Adrienne signalled for the guards to lead them to the sim-archive, while she herself strode imperiously in another direction, accessing a far less-used accessway, white robes swirling around her figure. The door slid shut behind the simpath, men and women of Utopia going about their day in the main corridor, having no idea whatsoever of the goings-on behind the closed doors of their faith.



There was a lockdown put in place all across the Utopian quarter, men and women dutifully confining themselves to quarters, not worried but confident that all would be well. Theon's image was broadcast across the station, along with a stern warning to avoid contact. Thus were the gleaming cream corridors of the Utopian quarter empty and silent, amplifying the footsteps of the small party assigned to bringing in Theon.

Tyrran Andor and Yolanta Púrpura now occupied a curious grey area between captivity and partnership with the guards that prodded them forward with loaded weapons. Several security access points were crossed, proceeding ever deeper into the Utopian quarter. Finally they arrived at the massive entryway of the sim-archive itself: a grand structure, no expense spared nor the usual consideration for economized space aboard a station utilized. Double doors of plasteel and force fields were in place, with nowhere to hide. Upon the spotless floor was a red streak, leading into a darkened accessway. Tyrran halted, holding up a hand. All paused, and all saw the grisly sight.

Without a word a guard sergeant went forward, activating a light. Stashed in a utility access was a guard, crumpled in a heap, his throat cut, blood already congealing in a pool around him. The sergeant rose, his voice steady.

"Eyes cut out with his own knife. Security chips, too."

Yolanta narrowed her eyes. "Theon wants to access the archive. That is where he has gone."

The sergeant shook his head. "Then he's a fool. Even the simpaths must prepare themselves to absorb more than a handful of memories at a time."

Tyrran gestured to the main doors of the sim-archive, massive and imposing.

"And if someone tried to absorb... *everything*?"

Disbelief clouded the sergeant's eyes. He placed his hand upon the security access, the terminal shifting from red

to green. A low hydraulic noise could be heard as the doors slid open.

“Instant death... if they were lucky.”

Tyrran cursed. “And we’ve been anything but. C’mon!”

The party advanced within the Sim-Archive, making their way past a reception area to the archive proper. What awaited them was enough to give even the Reapers pause.

Rows of glowing cyan industrial datacores went on for as far as the eye could see. They were tall, easily two stories, a low thrumming noise emanating from the hardware. It was chilled inside the archive, much like Robardin Rock but without the scent of oil and stone. The sergeant stepped forward, duty and reverence in his eyes.

“This is a sacred place,” he said. “And your man could do a lot of damage in here if he wanted. Let *us* take him down once he’s spotted.”

Tyrran and Yolanta exchanged a glance.

“Be our guest,” she replied.

Nodding, the officer keyed his comms.

“Simpath, we’re in. Last known location?”

There was muted audio. The man again nodded, turning to the Reapers.

“Nothing on security holos. Any chance that your man might have a personal cloak?”

Tyrran scoffed. “Anything is possible with that one.”

The officer grunted. “Right. I’m sealing us inside.” He motioned to the other officers.

“You two, stay here. Nothing gets in or out. We’ll comb the isles, with our guests acting as scouts. Eyes open, everyone!”

The party split up, with the pair of Reapers moving out, the sergeant at their rear, his weapon at the ready. Of the three only Tyrran and Yolanta had seen Theon’s true deadliness; worry and alertness kept their eyes open.

“We’re not scouts,” muttered Tyrran. “We’re bait.”

Yola offered a quick nod. “*Si*. But stay alert. There is no telling what Theon is up to.”

The man shook his head, stepping with caution down the narrow corridors. Cyan highlighted his features, his eyes darting upward and around. Theon was nowhere to be seen, and the shadows remained still.

“This mission has gone to hell,” he said. “And Kerenski will have both our hides if we don’t bring him back.”

Yola’s features stiffened. “This is *my* fault,” she said. “I should never have let him out of my sight. *Estupida*.”

Tyrran shook his head. “Find first, assign blame later. And if we fail and Kerenski boots us from the Witches...”

The rogue grinned. “Well, I think you’d make a *perfect* smuggler’s mate!”

Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura spared her man a sharp glance, her stride breaking not at all.

“*Hmm!*”

Adrienne Cordova stood in the darkness of the sim-archive’s command center, the light from numerous holo-displays bathing her in an artificial glow. The simpath was alone; she had dismissed the usual staff, the authority of her station enough to silence any question before they could be asked. Now the woman was alone with her worries. Intelligent eyes followed the movement of her guards and guests, the former almost certain to never leave Utopian custody. With a heavy heart she sighed.

*So promising. Memories donated, the potential for pain to be replaced with fulfillment deeper than anything that Púrpura woman could have given. Andor had all the makings of a fine adherent. And then this had to happen.*

For the sim-archive itself to be breached was virtually unprecedented, but Cordova found herself unworried.

*There's been no immediate harm, and if that Theon were tampering with the systems we would know. And even if he knew how to navigate the archive's neural link, accessing the memories would render him a vegetable.*

The woman continued to monitor the situation, her trained Utopian mind separating her own thoughts from the whispers of others.

*And as for me? I will be held to account, certainly. I will plead that I could not have known of any ill intent, and the elder simpaths who read my memories will concur. A week in reflective confinement, perhaps. And then I will once again spread the Simguru's wisdom to those who need it.*

Content, the woman again devoted her full attention to the pursuit. The roguish guests were making slow headway in the dimly-lit archive, and the pair of guards at its entrance appeared alert and unharmed. A confident smile lifted the simpath's lips.

*It's only a matter of time before the intruder is discovered.*

There was a low noise to the woman's rear, the soft brushing of the command center's door sliding open. The woman turned, irritation in her voice.

"I *said* that there were to be no interrupt—"

She halted, an edge in her tone. Before her stood a masculine figure, one that until recently had elicited curiosity and interest. Fearless, Adrienne raised a spiteful finger.

"*You*," she said, "are a murderer."

Theon stepped forward from the shadows, a neutral expression upon his face. He nodded, the gesture a slight bow as much as an acknowledgement.

"I have done what is necessary," he said. "And for that I apologize. But the work is not yet complete."

Contempt twisted the simpath's features. "You will *rot*."

The woman stood for a moment, defiant. The moment passed, her silent digital plea failing to leave the room. She

blinked, looking at the intruder, dread and curiosity growing in her eyes.

“How...?”

Theon tapped a finger to his temple. “You’re not the only one with their tricks.”

The simpath’s jewelry glowed its cyan glow, an image of the man before her materializing from her bracelet, one that was all wrong. The simpath’s eyes grew, the woman taking her first fearful step backward.

“No,” she whispered. “It can’t be.”

Tearing her eyes away from the image, Adrienne looked up to Theon. The man advanced, the same warm smile as before lifting his lips.

“Don’t be fooled. We are very much alike, you and I. Yet where you *tell* your truth, I am compelled to *show* it. And for that I need something of yours.”

His hand extended, the guard’s combat blade glinting in the low light. Theon’s gaze drifted to Adrienne’s fingertips, her arms, her neck and head. The woman’s lips trembled, taking another step backwards, fear gripping her very core. A whisper escaped her lips, hushed and trembling.

“We *created* you. We *watched* your kind be consumed...”

Theon advanced, raising the blade. “Thus spake the titans in their final moments, I’m certain.”

“No...”

With a flick of his wrist, Theon instructed the doors to the command center to slide shut. They did so, the darkness within a contrast to the gleaming white of the corridor beyond. Adrienne’s muffled screams might have been heard by anyone standing close by— but the staff was long dismissed, and the nearest guards sealed away within the massive archive below.

Tyrran, Yolanta and the armed sergeant completed their loop, tense and fruitless. The sergeant shook his head, glancing to his captors. He keyed a wrist computer, a holographic outline of the archive shimmering into view.

“Nothing,” he said. “Thermal, motion— it’s like your man’s a damned ghost.”

Tyrran shook his head. “We’ve looked everywhere. No sound. There must be some mistake.”

The sergeant scowled, gripping his rifle.

“No mistake,” he said. “My man is dead and the archive accessed. The records are clear.”

Yolanta glanced around herself, suspicion creeping into her tone.

“Accessed,” she said, “is not *entered*. Are you *certain* that he is even in here?”

Glances were exchanged. Tyrran and Yolanta looked at one another, their eyes widening. The man spun, pointing upward to the command center, overlooking the entire glowing archive.

“That simpath,” he said. “She has access to *everything*, right?”

The sergeant blinked. “Technically, yes. But even *she*—”

Yolanta interrupted. “Theon is not after the archive at all. He is after *her*. *Randamnius!*”

Dread in his eyes, the sergeant pointed to the nearest guard.

“Get these doors open *now!*”

There was pain, of course. Theon's creators had wanted him to experience everything that they did, and in their genius had programmed the unpleasant to be as part of the artificial as soaring feats of brilliance. The cloned skin that enveloped his truer self was bleeding from long, precise cuts along the forearms and temples. Smaller incisions travelled clear to the tips of his fingers, every millimeter of which was keenly felt. The artificial's hand trembled before he forced it still, the torment of his wounds washing over him, Theon at once sickened and fascinated by the phenomenon of such magnificent agony.

Yet the blood that pooled on the command room floor was only partially his, the limp figure of Adrienne Cordova a short distance away. She was coated in red, her robes clinging to her body, the woman alive but in a state of shock, eyes open, her mind shattered by the trauma. Her breathing came in short gasps, her skin pale from blood loss where it was not coated with that very blood. So too were her arms and shoulders flayed, the butchery travelling up to even her once-comely scalp.

A medikit was located on the wall and, with the indifference of one on a mission, Theon retrieved it, searching for and locating a suture kit. It was a simple, gun-like device, crude by the standards of the 34th century but adequate to the task at hand. Starting from the base of his skill Theon performed his grisly task. One binding at a time, he forced closed his human covering, the sutures at precise intervals yet monstrous in appearance. Along both arms he bound his self-inflicted wounds, until the very tips of his fingers were bound in the crude stitches. These he covered with his sweater, looking somewhat composed.

There was a master terminal at the center of the command center's controls, one that he could now access. Theon rose, and with still-bloody fingers he keyed the holographic controls, the stolen implants within validating total access to the sim-archives of Utopia. The artificial

stiffened, the incalculable streams of data provoking a physical reaction in even one such as him. In a moment he regained his composure, feasting on the thoughts and memories of the innumerable contained within.

A pained smile lifted the corners of his mouth even as his eyes closed.

“Sleep, children,” he whispered. “For Father will return with gifts for you *all*.”

The sergeant shook his head, his voice raspy. Forgotten were the possible dangers posed by Tyrran and Yolanta, the sudden absence of command from Adrienne now deafening.

“Sealed,” he said. “I need an override. It’ll take a moment.”

Yolanta stepped forward. “No,” she said. “You need backup. *Now*.”

Irritation clouded the man’s features as he battled the controls. A progress bar flashed into view. “Don’t tell me my business. This is all *your* fault anyway.”

Tyrran and Yolanta were shoved aside, the other two guards readying their weapons. The override completed its cycle, the door to the command center sliding open. Only darkness could be seen within.

The trio of armed Utopians advanced, weapons raised. Within was Theon, perfectly still, his back turned them. Blood-crusted fingers remained perfectly still upon a glowing cyan interface. To one side lay Adrienne, flayed and bloody. The sergeant swallowed, accustomed to gleaming white corridors and not scenes of butchery.

“You there,” he commanded. “*Freeze!*”

Theon said nothing, remaining perfectly still. Tyrran narrowed his eyes.

“He can’t hear you. He’s... in the sim-archive.”

The sergeant scowled, raising his weapon.



“Whatever he’s doing, he won’t be much longer. *Open fire!*”

Long bursts of automatic weapons, deafening and sudden, filled the space. Theon stumbled forward, back arched against the onslaught, blood and clothing flying, crashing upon the controls, eyes open, screams of *pain* coming from his gaping mouth. The guards kept up the fire, forcing the artificial first to its knees and then to the bloody deck, writhing in misery.

Magazines were expended, smoke blowing from red-hot barrels. Theon rolled to his back, mouth still agape with pain and surprise, shock and hatred contorting his features.

“*Animals.*”

One guard stepped backward, his voice wavering. “How... nothing could have survived that!”

Tyrran and Yolanta also stepped backward, both Witches looking around for an escape. Yolanta shot a final, dire glance to the sergeant.

“Call for backup, *idiot*. Before it is too l—”

The attack was sudden. Theon *leapt* upon the sergeant, knife in hand, knocking him from his footing. The man was dead before he hit the ground, the blade sunk through his helmet and deep into his skull, blood running down his visored face. The other two guards were unable to respond, their weapons empty, their manual combat training a distant memory. They tackled the artificial, clumsy and in each other’s way, the latter spinning and slashing, cries of pain coming from his assailants.

One guard’s throat was cut, his final screams drowned in gurgled butchery. The other swung and connected with Theon’s jaw, the crackle of bone shattering upon something far tougher heard with a sickening crunch. The guard cried out in surprise and pain, clutching his broken hand, staggering backward. He didn’t make it far. Instantly Theon was upon him, pinning the hapless man to the wall, his dagger shoved through his throat, life draining from the guard in hot spurts.

Theon spun, hands balled into fists, advancing toward Tyrran and Yolanta. He was grotesque, once-handsome features a mess of blood and deep cuts, body bent and ravaged from weaponfire. A slight limp marred his step. Ugly, crudely-sutured gashes betrayed the haste with which he had augmented himself with the simpath's implants. Yolanta, defiant, raised her chin at the artificial.

"It was a mistake to ever untomb you!"

Cruelty contorted the artificial's features, widening gaps in his cloned skin, the bloody metallic sheen of his true self visible beneath. He advanced, his every word dripping in hatred.

"I had considered it, did you know? That you might have been different from the others. That you were worthy of my trust. But the truth fell from your lips like dung, there during your lovers' cleansing. You're just like the rest. Weak. Needy. Deceitful. *Inferior*. You wanted to know the *truth*? The terrible secret lurking beneath the surface?"

Tyrran Andor stepped forward, his fists balled in challenge.

"We created you. There is *nothing* your lies can reveal!"

Cunning sharpened Theon's features. He gestured to the bloody morass behind him.

"You're a fool if you believe that *you* truly created *us*."

Theon lunged with inhuman speed, raising Tyrran by his neck, fingers tightening around his throat. The Witch clawed at his grip, his efforts futile. Yolanta cried out in anger, ducking as her partner was thrown aside, rolling atop one of the slayed guards, seizing his rifle and a spare clip, ejecting the old one and slamming it home. Theon spun to face her. Yolanta raised her weapon, teeth bared and Iberian thick.

"Die, *abominación!*"

The burst of fire was enough to stagger the artificial backward, but not enough to topple him. Theon roared with pain, fingers crooked, clutching his new wounds in an eerily

human manner. More blood, artificial yet real, poured from where his skin had been ripped open.

The air was thick with smoke and blood. Tyrran writhed upon the deck, gasping for air, one hand around his nearly-crushed throat. Theon staggered a few paces, reeling from the assault, flaps of clothing and skin hanging from his battered body. Yet again he advanced, more haltingly than before, inhuman contempt animating his every step.

"You... are *nothing*. Mortals upon the shoulders of gods, deluding yourselves that you walk among them."

Yolanta swung with her rifle butt; Theon caught it in his hand, turning her arm aside, forcing the woman down with contemptuous ease. A broken mechanical face closed with hers; only slight distortions marred his voice.

"And soon you will be cast back down to the earth!"

The artificial again reached out, a mechanical hand with tattered flesh gripping Yolanta's throat, his eyes boring into hers— when he snapped backward, a fresh salvo of rounds spinning him around. Yola leapt backward, the heavy footsteps of reinforcing Utopian guards behind them, their eyes wide at the scene of carnage marring the gleaming white corridors. The lead officer lowered his weapon, hot from being fired.

Theon howled in rage, turning, running from the new arrivals, his boots leaving bloody footprints. Tyrran blinked, pointing one hand down the hall, shouting orders though he had no authority to do so.

*"After him!"*

Without a question or a comment, the party dashed after the artificial, their task made easy by the grim trail he left. One corridor became another, a lift door closing too late for them to reach it.

Yolanta's mind raced, her eyes widening. "*Madre de Randomius,*" she gasped. "He is heading for the *ship!*"

Tyrran spun to the nearest officer. "Lock down that lift! He can't escape!"

The guard pushed them out of the way, interfacing with the controls, holographic menus trying and failing to appear. He cursed, looking upward to where the left had departed.

“He’s engaged emergency protocols. *Nothing* can be locked down.”

Around them, alarm klaxons sounded, the noise harsh in their ears. Yolanta seized Tyrran’s hand, pulling him to an emergency staircase.

“This way!”

Their hearts pounding, Tyrran, Yolanta, and the newly-arrived guards dashed up the stairs. Hearts pounded and eyes stung with perspiration. Magboots engaged awkwardly in the lower gravity, the man’s head on a swivel. In the distance there was a cry and the pounding of boots on deck, a gaggle of civilians reeling at the bloody man who had burst through them, knocking them aside. Yolanta pointed.

“*Rapido!*”

Tyrran and Yolanta bolted, sprinting past wide-eyed onlookers, slowly closing upon the wounded artificial. The alarms continued, more guards emerging from their posts, screams of panic and confusion from the populace. Yet the chase continued, the guards never having a clear shot, the corridor accessways fixed open.

The hangar levels were filled with pilots and crew, who dashed out of the way at the sight of the running Theon, his bloody visage doing the work of convincing onlookers to not interfere. Tyrran and Yolanta stayed within eyeshot of him, never quite being able to close the gap, both screaming in frustration as the door to their hangar bay closed. Tyrran cursed, kicking the solid metal of the entryway, wheeling to the guards as they caught up.

“Open that thing *now!*”

Gulping for air, the lead officer again interfaced with the door controls, trying and failing to override the lock. Without warning the alarm klaxon halted, ears ringing and a deafening silence descending upon the station. The low

rumble of a ship's engines could be felt as well as heard. Tyrran's eyes widened.

"That's the *Blackthorne*. Hurry!"

The controls went from red to green, the door sliding open, the Witches dashing inside. They were greeted by a massive blast of heat and blood-red thruster glow, both turning aside to shield themselves from such, arms over their faces. Tyrran was the first to look, eyes squinting in the light and heat, cursing as the *Blackthorne* rose free, thrusters firing as it sped away. Its flat row of main engines receded into the distance, mocking him.

"Randamnius!"

Yolanta balled up her fists, turning to Tyrran. "We must contact Kerenski. There is no telling what could happen if—"

Her words were cut short, the stun baton shoved into the small of her back, her legs giving out with a cry. She hit the deck hard, its surface still warm from the thrusters firing upon it, Tyrran trying and failing to reach her before he, too, was knocked to the ground. His jaw gaped open, man and woman's eyes meeting before turning upward, a new cloaked figure emerging from between the guards. She was a simpath like Adrienne, but clearly older, with unsmiling eyes and shoots of grey in her long, parted hair. Guards surrounded the hapless pair, a dozen rifles pointed at them.

"You have brought death and ruin to a place of enlightenment," she hissed. "And you're not going anywhere."

The air was cold; the hard metal deck even more so. Darkness had its way, the dull red lighting of locked door controls the only illumination to be had. There was the low rumble of ship thrusters, with the airy lack of gravity that so often accompanied it. The unsteady rock and sway of a ship under power made footing difficult; only the magboots on one's feet provided any sort of anchor.

It was into this environment that Tyrran Xavian Andor awoke, the man blinking, there being no difference between his eyes being open or shut. He was upright, restrained against a bulkhead within a harness, arms extended from his unconscious state, hair floating. He caught his breath, the first wave of pain washing over him, emanating from where the baton had struck his head. Tyrran tried and failed to speak; his throat was dry, swallowing a painful act.

*"Yola?"*

In the darkness there was a rustling of fabric, accompanied by a low, Iberian moan.

*"Is that you, amor?"*

Tyrran blinked, reaching out in the direction of his lover's voice, groping in the darkness.

*"Si."*

There was more rustling; Tyrran was rewarded with the feeling of a familiar hand in his, squeezing tightly. The feeling of motion continued, keen attention now paid to low rumble of thrusters. Andor looked around, still grimacing from the pain. The darkness offered nothing in the way of clues. Yolanta again spoke, her voice growing stronger.

*"We must find a way to escape this room. There is no telling what these cultists are capable of."*

Tyrran nodded though he couldn't be seen doing so.

"*Si*. My memories are on tap. They'll be far more interested in you."

There was a silence before Yolanta replied.

"I know."

Andor squeezed shut his eyes, wishing that the throbbing in his head would go away. He felt around himself for a release mechanism but found none. Nor was he able to do more than squirm.

"I'm trapped in this damned webbing. You?"

Yolanta released his hand. There were more rustling noises, followed by a short sigh of frustration.

"The same. I do not think my *tetas* have been this bound since the last time I wore a corset for one of *mi padre's* grand balls."

Tyrran didn't smile, didn't even bother to struggle.

"We were fools to ever let that *thing* lead us around."

Silence. A subdued, Iberian reply.

"*Si*."

Andor forced a weak chuckle from himself.

"Still up for being a smuggler's mate? I don't think that we're on the Night Witch payroll anymore after this."

Yolanta's tone sharpened.

"Kerenski is not a vindictive leader. She will understand what happened."

Tyrran scoffed. "Are you *sure* of that?"

There was another long silence.

"No."

*Bridge of the Litvyak, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

A slender hand flicked open an archaic gas lighter, the flame snapping to life, caressing the cigarette within it. Its tip glowed and pulsed, eating away at the paper and tobacco,

inhaled between thin lips. The lighter snapped shut, being placed back into the inner pocket of a slim black jacket. The same hand then rested at the small of a petite woman's back, clasping the other, balled into a fist so that it wouldn't tremble.

Kari Kerenski lifted her chin at the sight of Gideon Hathaway, his holofac an imposing presence, his gaze piercing regardless of distance. It was several moments before he spoke, his tone harsh even in its placid calmness.

"You," he began, "have failed us all."

The woman stiffened. Her fist squeezed further, her nails creasing the skin.

"The specimen will be retrieved and the situation brought to heel. You have my assurance."

Gideon's nostrils flared. "And you have *my* assurance that this matter is now out of your hands. I will summon the appropriate parties and implement containment protocol."

Kari's features hardened, her eyes dangerous. "The protocols cannot *possibly* be ready."

Darker-complected fingers steepled themselves, the man's voice dropping. "It was our task to push the boundaries of the possible," he said. "And we have done exactly that."

Disdain twisted the woman's features. "You poison everything you touch, Gideon. But even your brainwashed little monsters won't be enough if that *thing* has its way."

A dire smile lifted the edge of Hathaway's lips. "You're right," he said. "As usual, you're right. In this matter we must make peace with the foe."

Kerenski advanced a step, teeth bared, real passion in her manner.

"You wouldn't *dare*."

Slowly, the man nodded. "At the end of the day, we both want the same thing. The only question is: whose hand shall rest upon the Wheel?"

An accusing finger rose to point at the man's chest. "You would betray the cause? Break bread with the enemy?"



“To save us all? Yes. Clear as much hangar space in that filthy rock as possible. Soon the Reapers won’t be the *only* black ships bringing order to Carcosa.”

Kerenski shook her head. “You’re making a *mistake*.”

The holofac distorted, the man rising from his desk, palms down, eyes hard.

“There have been mistakes enough already. *Track* that damned plague bacillus of a ship, Kerenski. I expect realtime updates and flightpath predictions from here on out.”

Defeated but unbowed, the woman nodded.

“You shall have them.”

The woman snapped to, spinning around to exit the *Litvyak*’s bridge. She was halted by Gideon’s stern command.

“One more thing.”

Kerenski glanced over her shoulder, eyes narrowed and hands clasped behind her back.

“*Da?*”

Gideon Hathaway raised his chin, imperious and unforgiving.

“You haven’t kept up with your swordsmanship, have you? I remember you being one of the best.”

The woman spun to face her old *comrade*, blood now running from her clenched hand, her nails piercing the skin. The pain gave her focus.

“I don’t solve my problems at the tip of a blade anymore, Hathaway. One of the advantages of leaving the Chapterhouse.”

A sad smile lifted Gideon’s lips, his gaze deepening.

“No,” he said. “But I still *do*.”

*Unknown ship, unknown system*

“No, I told you. I cannot move!”

Tyrran's breathing was ragged, having just failed yet again to make any headway against his restraints. Yola, too, was unable to move anything except her arms. That they could clutch each other's hand from across a pitch-black space was more mockery than anything useful. In the darkness, Yolanta cursed.

"No clips, no hooks, no straps. At least, nothing within arm's reach. *Mierda!*"

Andor pulled a final time on the webbing that kept him in place.

"I suppose we should be grateful that we aren't in cryopods. Randomius only knows how these cultists extract information."

Yolanta's features darkened, though there was no one to see her. Her voice dropped, the woman vulnerable.

"That is what I fear, *amor*. These people have no compunction against inserting themselves into a system using violent means."

A low chuckle emanated from Andor's throat.

"Neither do the Night Witches."

Worry could be heard in Púrpura's tone.

"*Exactamente*. I am aware of what people who believe in a cause are capable of. That old simpath hag in particular."

Andor sighed. "Maybe she'll slip a death collar around your neck and end up your lover."

"*Hmm!*"

*Robardin Rock crematorium, Carcosa system*

Heavy white fabric was pulled over the face of Isaac Brona, the man's final resting place an incinerator. Isaiah Evanson and Phisto Sobanii stood over his remains, Linnea Gudjonsson tapping the final notes of her report into her

dataslate. The crematorium was adjacent to the infirmary and only seldom used, but on this occasion the top leadership of Loren's Reapers saw fit to observe the passing of one of their own. Isaiah glanced to the doctor, worry in his voice.

"And you say he was attacked?"

Linnea nodded. "You saw the wounds for yourselves. Assaulted from behind, single gunshot to the head. It was even from an upward angle."

Phisto scowled. "Brona wasn't attacked," he said. "He was executed."

The three's gazes remained fixed on the sheeted cadaver, laying still, the heat from the incinerator felt by all. Evanson shook his head.

"He was found in an unregistered domicile, and only then because his lifesigns went offline. We don't have the forensic resources to comb the place."

Linnea nodded. "Which is exactly what whoever did this was counting on. The only question is: was this random, or part of a larger plot against the Reapers?"

Evanson turned away, arms folded across his chest. "Security holos show him leaving one of the bars with a young woman. No luck on tracking her down so far."

Sobanii looked to the cadaver. "It was planned, whatever it was. And it involved more than one person. So we can rule out self-defence on her part."

Linnea looked to the Reaper sideways. "Eager to acquit your man, aren't you?"

A sardonic chuckle escaped Phisto's lips. "Oldest story in the book, lady. We send brutes to do brutal work and then clutch our chests when they turn out to be brutish."

The doctor narrowed her eyes before continuing.

"At any rate, I concur with your *expert* assessment. Brona was murdered. You should place your men on alert."

Isaiah nodded. Phisto rolled his eyes.

“I’ll spread the word. But telling our people to confine themselves to quarters instead of their watering holes won’t go over well. No point in issuing orders that won’t be followed.”

Evanson interjected. “We’ll mandate that a buddy system be followed. And to not trust local tail.”

Linnea folded her arms. “This is the kind of thing that Kerenski should be involved in, *nej?*”

Isaiah’s eyes narrowed. “I transmitted a holofac. No answer so far.”

Phisto’s eyes raised. “That’s unlike her.”

The three traded glances. Linnea set aside her dataslate, looking a final time at Brona.

“No family. No next of kin. Cause of death confirmed. I’m going to call this one.”

Without another word she walked over to the body and threw a lever. The platform fed its burden into the incinerator, the three paying something akin to final respects. The door shut behind it, Phisto shaking his head.

“And that’s the story of Isaac Brona.”

### *Unknown ship, unknown system*

“*Mierda!*”

The jolt had shaken Tyrran and Yolanta nearly free of their harnesses. The woman caught her breath, eyes wide in the darkness, clinging to the webbing that bound her to the bulkhead wall. A heavy feeling of motion pressed against them, their minds racing. Tyrran looked around himself, trying to get his bearings.

“That feels like an interdiction. What the *blazes* is going on?”

The drifting sensation continued, followed by the sways of aggressive maneuvering. Somewhere else in the ship,

thrusters opened up at full bore, filling the hull with their roar. A sharp impact knocked the entire ship around, rattling the Witches within. Púrpura grit her teeth.

“We are under *attack*! But by whom?”

Tyrran didn’t answer, only clutching the harness that kept him pinned to the bulkhead. The impacts continued, the ship around them battered and sent off course, the hammer-on-anvil strikes nearly deafening for those within.

Then, they stopped.

Silence filled the darkness as all sounds of thruster activity ceased. Even the thrum of the ship’s reactor was muted. Down the corridor the heavy stomping of magboots on deck could be heard, along with muted yelling. Tyrran shook his head, his voice barely above that of a whisper.

“Ship’s disabled. They took out the engines.”

From outside the accessway, more activity could be heard. A massive metal-on-metal grating noise could be heard, accompanied by another feeling of drift. More people running were followed by barked orders and sealing bulkheads hatches. Andor again narrowed his eyes.

“What the *hell* is going o—”

Weaponsfire caused both to jolt in their harnesses, eyes wide and bodies tensed. From along the corridor, men screamed and more orders were shouted. The staccato response of single-shot weapons made for a meek reply, and the sounds of such were soon drowned out by the more heavily-armed newcomers.

Then, there was silence.

Heavy footsteps grew in volume, approaching the darkened room in which Tyrran and Yola were bound as captives. There was a sequence of chirps as the keypad was pressed, light blinding both as the door slid open. A single Utopian crew member, clad in white and with arms raised, stepped inside the space. He made wide-eyed contact with both Tyrran and Yolanta, turning to his unseen assailants.

“They... they’re in here.”

A new voice, familiar and smooth, replied.

“Wonderful! You’ve been *most* helpful.”

The Utopian was pulled from the room, a single blow and whimper heard. A new figure in black tactical strode in, removing his helmet. The bearded face of Ouberos regarded the witches before him with amusement. He was flanked by a pair of heavily-armed roughnecks in battered gear, with more waiting in the corridor. Tyrran managed a weak smile.

“I don’t suppose that you’re here *pro bono*, are you?”

Ouberos cocked his head to the side, his eyes piercing.

“Never mind payment. Kerenski contacted me the moment you lost control of your ship.”

The pirate gestured, and his lackeys unsheathed their combat blades, cutting the Night Witches free of their harnesses. Yolanta took a deep breath, at last unconstrained.

“Then you know what has happened,” she said. “What our deeper mission is.”

Ouberos shook his head.

“I know that she’s in over her head. And I know that all *kinds* of colorful personalities have been emerging from the woodwork.”

Iberian eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about?”

A wry look spread over the man’s features.

“Best to show you when the time is right. For now, let’s get you out of this ghost ship!”

### *Bridge of the Dusk ‘till Dawn, unknown system*

Kari Kerenski’s holographic visage was as stern as her in-person presence, and her gaze just as chilling. A cigarette dangled between her fingers, her Slavic thicker than normal. Dark circles beneath her eyes told the story of a woman running on little sleep. Yolanta straightened herself, Tyrran at

her side. The junior of the witches lit her own cigarillo before speaking.

“I accept responsibility for our failure, *camarada*. I will do everything necessary to—”

“*Silence.*”

All in the Anaconda’s bridge stiffened at Kerenski’s command, even Ouberos. The Slavic woman continued.

“There is no trace of the homing equipment that was installed onboard the *Blackthorne*. The artificial has disabled it somehow. I cannot track him.”

Tyrran stepped forward.

“If that *thing* uses the right stars, he can be in Colonia in a matter of hours. You won’t have much time to prepare.”

Púrpura glanced to her side. “That is assuming that he is even going there.”

Kerenski scowled, her holographic image distorting.

“I have accounted for that possibility. All Witches are on full alert.”

Púrpura cocked her head to the side.

“And our allies? What of the Reapers?”

Another drag upon the cigarette. “Leave them to me. For now, you must acquaint yourselves with some old players to the game. This is no longer about *us*.”

The holofac cut out, leaving Tyrran and Yolanta standing alone. Ouberos approached, his features hard.

“No time to waste. Get yourselves some flightsuits from the crew quarters. We’re going on a little journey.”

Tyrran narrowed his eyes.

“What *kind* of journey?”

The pirate strode across the bridge, settling down into the commander’s chair, already plotting a flight path. A holographic map of the Bubble appeared, a line snaking outward to a remote, uninhabited region. Ouberos, normally so irreverent, remained unsmiling.

“The one that your new friend *should* have taken you on to begin with.”

*Stateroom of the No Data Available, Robardin Rock,  
Carcosa system*

“There’s been another incident.”

Phisto Sobanii had been asleep, nude in his ship’s bunk, cursing at the unwelcome interruption. He sat up, Isaiah Evanson’s emergency holofac standing before him. Cursing and rubbing his eyes, he shielded his face against the hologram’s brightness.

“Yeah, what is it?”

Isaiah exhaled, visibly weary. “A group of our pilots. Attacked in a hangar corridor. Four injured, one seriously. Security was able to apprehend one of the suspects.”

Sobanii shook his head, still rubbing his eyes. “Can’t these assholes operate during normal hours?”

A bitter smile lifted Evanson’s lips. “I’m sure that Kancro Vantas said the same thing about *us*. See you in the detention holds.”

“Right.”

The holofac shimmered out of view, plunging the stateroom back into darkness. The man took a deep breath, willing himself into a state of wakefulness. To his side the covers rustled, a comely woman sitting up, long brunette hair cascading down her shoulders, she as nude as he. A rural Federation accent leavened her speech,

“Going to work so soon?”

Phisto leaned over for a quick kiss. “You and me both. Something tells me it’ll be a long day.”

The woman smiled, still waking up.

“Don’t do anything reckless, y’hear? It gets lonely in that control tower.”

Phisto rose from bed, grinning over his shoulder. “No promises. Just as long as it’s *your* sweet voice guiding me in.”



The woman's eyebrows raised, an impish smile spreading across her face.

"Thought it already *did*."

*Robardin Rock detention level, Carcosa system*

Heavily-armed Reaper shock troopers augmented the normal security guards, creating a fortress-like environment for the detention holds. The cells themselves were simple affairs, stone-walled blocks with basic amenities. Even the doors were mechanical, the scant power allocated to the level servicing lights and little else. It was, in a way, the best protection against a jailbreak possible. The paradigm for such often involved the complex task of remotely hacking cell doors and security overrides. Neither worked on a guard with a simple analogue swipe key.

Renraiku Kordai waited among the shock troopers, a pained expression upon his face and a blackened eye marring his features. Isaiah and Phisto entered the area, a small administrative office. The pilots spotted each other from across the room, Phisto shaking his head at the sight of his friend and comrade.

"And you were so damned *pretty*, too."

Kordai shook his head, still grimacing. "They jumped us after the last op. A dozen of them, all in masks, attacking from behind. It was a near-run thing until security showed up."

Isaiah nodded. "Well, we got one of them. Anyone say anything?"

Renraiku shook his head, sitting down. "Just kept calling us criminals and spouting off about The Nameless. I guess not everyone is as excited about the new hulls as we'd like them to be."

Isaiah scowled. “We upset a lot of people just *being* here. It was never going to be easy.”

Ren nodded, smiling through the pain. “Can’t best us in the black so they’ve got to cheap-shot us from out of sight. Typical.”

Phisto knelt down, placing a hand on Kordai’s shoulder. “We’re going to be seeing a lot more of this. Best keep your head on a swivel and mind who you associate with.”

A new voice, haughty and Slavic, sounded from behind them.

“Advice which you yourself would be well-advised to heed, *comrade*.”

Isaiah and Phisto turned around, the slim, sour visage of Kari Kerenski striding into the room, a pair of Night Witches at her side. Phisto drew himself up, arms crossed.

“Where the hell have *you* been?”

Kerenski nodded to the wounded Kordai, her eyes conspiratorial.

“There has been... a development. You must both come with me to the *Litvyak*.”

Isaiah cocked his head to the side, suspicious.

“What’s going on?”

The woman scowled.

“We’re getting... *company*.”

### *Bridge of the Litvyak, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

Vodka was poured for Isaiah and Phisto— not out of celebration, but of necessity. The bottle was left out, Kerenski lighting a cigarette, her eyes closed for a long initial drag. It was only with alcohol and nicotine that she proceeded forward

with the private, informal briefing. Without preamble she spoke.

“The mission has suffered a setback,” she said. “And that *thing* is running loose in the *Blackthorne*.”

Silence descended upon the bridge. Isaiah and Phisto blinked, dread spreading upon the former and anger the latter. Sobanii was the first to respond, holding up a finger to his Night Witch comrade.

“Then we find and destroy. No uncovered conspiracy is worth it. We clear?”

Cold amusement hardened Kerenski’s features.

“We *would* be, if we had the first idea of how to track the quarry. Theon has disabled its tracking hardware. We are blind as to his intentions and whereabouts.”

Phisto snarled, turning his back to the woman, fists clenched.

“How does a fuckup like this *happen*? And who the *hell* is Theon?”

Isaiah sighed. “Sounds like they gave it a name. Big mistake.”

Kerenski took another drag, ice to Phisto’s fire.

“It gave *itself* that name.”

Phisto squeezed shut his eyes, trembling.

“You mentioned company. Spill.”

Kerenski nodded, indulging in another long drag.

“The possibility of the specimen escaping has been accounted for. Even now, protocols are being enacted to compensate.”

Isaiah, now, narrowed his eyes. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

Kerenski shook her head. “Nor will you like what is to come. But there have always been more hands on the wheel than only ours.”

Sobanii poured himself another shot, downing it. He looked across the hangar bay, cold and sterile.

“It’s just like last time. The Club doesn’t want us to succeed. Not when we’re so close.”

Isaiah blinked. “You’re right. There’s something behind the surge in attacks recently, and it isn’t just the Progressive Party helping out the Nation.”

Kari nodded. “The Club has the most to lose from the secrets of an ancient AI being made public. Their involvement is almost certain. We must redouble our efforts to keep a foothold here.”

There were nods from both of the men. Evanson considered.

“I’ll increase station security and kill ops. These people have to know we mean business. I’ll also put out the word for our scouts to do whatever business we can with Universal Cartographics. Robardin Rock *needs* to be Carcosa’s hub, and The Nameless its dominant faction.”

Phisto poured himself another shot and held the clear liquid up to his face.

“We need to start making inroads with the locals, too.”

Kerenski’s features soured. “We’ve *been* doing that. Or did you miss the fact that we now sell Alliance and Federal ships?”

Sobanii shook his head, glancing at the woman. “Not like you need to. There’s a lot of potential allies you’re leaving on the table. They just don’t exactly help old ladies cross the street.”

Evanson sighed. “So you’re saying that we need to counter the narrative that we’re a bunch of criminals by hiring *actual* ones?”

Phisto turned to his comrade, his eyes sharp. “I’m not saying put them on the payroll. Just... a little cooperation never hurt anyone, you know?”

Both men turned to Kerenski, who had been silently listening. She slowly nodded, taking a long drag of her cigarette.

“*Da*. There are almost certainly disaffected elements within the nebula, marginalized by the likes of the Colonia Council and Explorers Nation. They are natural, if unsavory, allies.”

“It’s decided, then. We reach out.”

Kerenski took another drag, the wheels of her mind turning.

“You two have work to do, *da*?”

The Reapers knew when they were being dismissed. Phisto threw a lazy salute her way and turned, Isaiah at his side. They strode down the bare metal corridor of the *Litvyak*, the latter glancing over his shoulder.

“All that, and not a single mention of Andor or Púrpora.”

Phisto scowled. “They were the ones on babysitting duty. The hammer’s falling on them. If they’re even alive, that is.”

Isaiah shook his head. “No. It’s on Kerenski. They should never have been sent by themselves.”

The pair descended the Krait’s entry ramp, crossing the hangar and entering one of the many corridors that lined Robardin Rock’s surface level. Phisto glanced to his side, keeping his voice lower in the increased foot traffic.

“Whatever it is, I don’t like the idea of newcomers. This fiasco’s going to attract every shadow org in the Bubble. We’re here to get *away* from that.”

Isaiah halted, turning to face his friend.

“I get it. But we can’t control who’s on their way. Let’s just focus on having a place to call home, you know?”

Sobanii turned away, pacing back and forth in the corridor.

“Yeah. I know. But I feel like before, you know? When Salome was gearing up to make that dash. It felt like the whole ‘verse was lining up to attack or defend her, and we were caught in the middle.”

Isaiah chuckled, bitterness in his eyes. “Me in the Legion, and you with the Fusiliers? We *were* caught in the middle. And the Club was watching. They stopped her, but they didn’t stop *us*. The message still got out. People forget that.”

Phisto grinned his roguish grin, clapping Evanson on the shoulder.

“Then we’ll remind ‘em— if they’re stupid enough to try.”

### *Klatt Enterprises ruins, Alnath system*

Night illuminated by dense, innumerable stars reigned eternal upon the barren planetary surface. Rocky crags reached upward to touch the heavens, still and unmoving. Long-abandoned buildings bore the ravages of time, decaying in the airless void. Sagging heavy-duty inflatables remained stubbornly erect long past their time. Massive silos towered over the other buildings, their grey metal surfaces corroded and pockmarked. Other, more utilitarian structures bore their straight, no-nonsense lines, battered grating and scuffed viewing glass telling the story of decades passing *sans* habitation.

Yet the soil, too, had a story to tell, one that those in power had struggled to bury. Sickly orange discoloration stained the ground around the silos. Vehicle tracks and even footprints were preserved. The installation was a tomb, not of people but of truths, rotting until they became lies.

Ringling Klatt Enterprises was an assortment of ships. There was the *Dusk ‘till Dawn*, of course. A pair of Cobras, a fourth-gen Viper, and an Imperial Courier all rounded out the assemblage, the ships nearly dwarfing the installation itself.

Central to the installation was an octagonal structure, topped with large angled windows. Leading to it were footprints, from the ships to the building, newly-trod in the barren soil. Three figures in atmo suits made their way up a corroded walkway to the upper level. Two were masculine and dark. The other, decidedly feminine figure bore dark violet trim down the sides of her suit.

The installation's power, so recently restored, allowed a battered airlock to open, metal groaning against metal, its seals barely functional as it closed. Lights flickered on, air rushing within the chamber, gravity and atmosphere something akin to normal. Red warning lights moved to yellow and then green, the inner doors sliding open. The trio stepped inside, removing their helmets, taking in the sight before them.

Arrayed before them was the instrumentation of the installation's old command center, analogue terminals and keyboards glowing green. The floor plating was a dull shade of grey, hard with rotted rubber mats along its walkways. Yolanta Púrpura frowned, arms crossed over her chest.

"It is *cold* in here."

Ouberos nodded. "It's to be expected. This facility has been abandoned for decades."

Tyrran Andor ran his finger along a bulkhead wall, its tip lightly coated in dust and grime. Shaking his head, the rogue looked around.

"And what exactly *was* this place?"

A new voice, aged and dignified, answered from the shadows.

"The past, young Andor. Buried by those who feared its truth."

Tyrran narrowed his eyes, advancing to challenge the newcomer. Figures emerged from the far shadows, stepping into the light, men and women of varying looks and ages. The oldest of them was thin and pale, heavy grey robes lending weight to his frame. A sad smile lifted his lips.

“And now we find ourselves compelled to find it without her.”

Yolanta cocked her head to the side, hands at her hips.

“You are Cuthrick Delaney.”

The man bowed in formal Imperial fashion.

“At your service. For all the good it will do.”

Púrpura joined her mate at his side. Ouberos leaned against a bulkhead wall, arms folded, content to observe. Tyrran remained in place, looking each man and woman in the eye as they assembled around him.

“And the others?”

One by one the men and women stepped forward, some known to the Night Witches and others not. The first to do so was a woman, vaguely Asiatic.

“Alessia Verdi. The Children of Raxxla stand ready.”

A man, young and dark.

“Raan Corsen. A messenger who got lucky.”

A woman, her eyes intelligent.

“Tsu Annabelle Singh. Former Alliance operative.”

A man, bearded with wild blonde hair.

“Yuri Nakamura. Only game in town, this is.”

Yolanta’s eyes narrowed. “I recognize you. *You* were the one who flew us to Col 70!”

Nakamura smiled, his features dangerous.

“I see you took my advice. Good that you still remember the trip.”

Púrpura’s eyes flashed, raising her chin to the man. A warning finger nearly poked him in the chest. White Iberian teeth bared themselves in ferocity.

“My people lost nearly half their number retrieving that alien junk. You could have *helped*.”

Yet another new voice, the final of the circle, answered Yolanta’s plea. It was Imperial, cunning and confident, in rhythm with the booted footsteps that accompanied it. A dark-skinned man with short black hair emerged from the shadows,



adorned in greys and blacks. The eagle of one in the Emperor's personal service adorned his collar.

"What makes you think he *didn't*?"

Yolanta shook her head, her body tense.

"*You.*"

The man bowed, low and Imperial like Delaney, but with a more youthful spring.

"Gideon Hathaway, Chapterhouse of Inquisition."

Raan chuckled at the sight of the man.

"Hathaway. What, is Lyrae on holiday?"

The Inquisitor turned to the irreverent youth.

"Anyone can take part in a glorified escort mission. These are matters that fall under my own particular... *purview.*"

Cuthrick Delaney raised his hand, silencing his comrades with a look and a gesture. For a long time his gaze fell upon the Night Witches, inscrutable and hard. At last he spoke, his position and age making him the group's *de facto* leader.

"We reunite in much the same way we departed: in the shadow of uncertainty, surrounded by danger. The Lady K—"

Cuthrick paused, his features pained.

"*Salome* had intended to journey to Colonia bearing the torch of liberty, lighting a pyre so bright that the shadows in which the foe lurk would be no more."

He paused, drawing himself up.

"Fate had other plans. But her example survived the woman herself, and others took up the sword in her stead. First in Prism and then in Carcosa, they fight to complete her mission. To uncover the final layers of The Club's great deception."

From where she stood, Alessia scowled. "'Final layers', Cuthrick? Please. The foe is an onion. Peel each layer back only to end up with nothing. That's how they operate."

Cuthrick nodded, too dignified to take outward offense at the woman's flippancy.

“That’s how they *want* us to see them. Project Dynasty was at once the beginning of their manipulations— *and* the end. Had it been the extent of their chicanery I daresay none of us would be here.”

Verdi gestured around herself, pacing a full revolution.

“‘*Here*’. Haven’t lost your flair for the dramatic, I see.”

The barest of smiles lifted the ambassador's lips.

“Nor my touch for the symbolic. *This* is where the final efforts to stave off internecine annihilation failed.”

Púrpura, now, crossed her arms.

“I have been briefed on this place. This is where the weapon was perfected, *si*? You know the one. How is *that* a failure?”

Dour sadness hardened Cuthrick’s features.

“Because it was *used*.”

Tyrran shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

Delaney said nothing for a moment, turning to gaze out from a battered viewport, expansive and hazy. His lips moved without speech, his eyes gazing in memory. At last he spoke.

“It was thought that a single, catastrophic loss would send a message. Instead it destabilized the only thing holding back the flood.”

“The creatures— I disdain to use the ridiculous term ‘Thargoid’— are not a monolith. They were always of two minds concerning humanity. One of these was to spare us. The other, to annihilate.”

Raan nodded, understanding. “Oresrians and Klaxians.”

“Quite. Those who pulled the strings became drunk on their own hubris, ordering the strike that proved Mycoid’s effectiveness once and for all. The damage to their species cannot be communicated in human terms.”

Yolanta narrowed her eyes.

“*But?*”

Cuthrick’s hands clenched themselves into fists, his nostrils flaring.

“But they targeted our *protectors*. The Oresrians who had inserted themselves between humanity and their more bloodthirsty kin. After that, retribution was only a matter of time.”

Alessia opened and closed her mouth, her mind racing.

“*That’s* why they launched Project Dynasty.”

Again, Cuthrick nodded. “Their folly understood only after the fact. The Oresrians, now weakened, had no choice but to flee. It is *they* who the galactic community has engaged, their strategem of using us as a barrier devolving into the quagmire of a double front. The Klaxians, terrible in their wrath, pursue from beyond. They draw nearer every day.”

Silence descended upon the chamber, the dull greens of the instrumentation complimenting the sickly, defiled soil in the distance. Even Yolanta looked downward, Iberian eyes hard.

“*Madre de Randomius.*”

Tyrran balled his fists, his jaw set.

“Then that’s it? The Thargoids are here because of the *Club*? We should have known.”

A sad smile lifted Cuthrick’s lips, his every word and manner tragic.

“You’re correct, young Andor— but not in the way you think. I’m afraid that the rabbit hole goes *far* deeper than mere *human* foolishness.”

The shipyards of Robardin Rock were a curiosity, now even more so for being the only place in Colonia where one could purchase a legitimate Alliance or Federation vessel. Indeed, the massive industrial fabricators had churned out little else since genuine schematics for the ships were loaded into their datacores. Materials common and exotic, necessary for their manufacture, were fed into the great hoppers to be melted down and reformed into ships of war, commerce, and exploration. Precision-machined parts bearing algorithmically authentic microseals were fitted together *en masse*, their build quality as good in Carcosa as in Alioth or Sol. Proprietary software was loaded into various systems, and ship after ship emerged from the fabrication process ready for their new owners to take possession of them.

Demand was as great as expected, and the fabricators worked around the clock. Numerous vessels changed hands, the wait list ever growing. Alliance vessels in particular proved popular, the gleaming hulls of Chieftains, Challengers, and Crusaders flying their maiden voyages from Robardin Rock's docking tube. The transactions to acquire the vessels were as easy as they were anywhere else— with the correct credentials, of course.

In a system like Carcosa, it was even easier.

One man, handsome but otherwise nondescript, approached one of the shipyard's automated terminals. Conservative blonde hair hinted at a Federal background. To his side, a young woman completed her own transaction, comely but her features prematurely lined from the rigors of the Commander's life. The two glanced to one another, exchanging a polite nod. The wings of the guild adorned her

jacket but not his. She glanced to her side, nodding at the stranger, the topic of conversation preordained.

“Cobra Mark Three. You?”

The man smiled, his manners perfect.

“Alliance Chieftain. My best friend in the void.”

The woman turned, now smiling her own smile.

“Good to have friends in times like these. The Nebula isn’t what it used to be.”

A chuckle. A nod. “More crowded, that’s for sure. And these newcomers...”

The woman turned to look around herself, still smirking.

“Not so loud! The walls have ears, I’m sure. But you’re right: they’ve certainly shaken things up.”

A chime came from the man’s terminal. His transaction had been authenticated and approved. He nodded to the device, fingers dancing across the keyboard, closing out his session. His voice dropped to a conspiratorial level, stepping closer to the woman.

“Well, they aren’t the only ones. Using the criminals’ own tools against them is the least I can do. Just like in my Gal-Cop days.”

The woman blinked. “Gal-Cop?”

“Yes. Just before we were disbanded. Not even Old Man Hendry could save us.”

A moment passed. The woman took a step back, her head cocked to the side. The borderline flirtation vanished from her manner.

“Right. I, uh... I have to go. *Who* did you say you were with, again?”

The man reached within his jacket, producing an identicard. The holographic text shone upon it, passing from his hand to hers.

“You want to do the right thing? There’s a storm coming, and those with whom I fly *always* remember who our friends are.”

With that the man turned to stride away, leaving the woman alone. Other pilots gathered around her, curious as to the exchange. One old timer lifted his chin, colored with a beard more salt than pepper.

“So what’s on that card? His comm number?”

The woman brushed aside a lock of hair, consternation upon her features. She said nothing, only holding up the card’s hologram for all to see. It alternated between a wing of ships soaring majestically in formation and a single, simple line of text:

*Explorers’ Nation calls upon you.*

*Klatt Enterprises, Alnath system*

The assemblage of rogues and outlaws lingered. Cuthrick Delaney was an Imperial ambassador, for whom haste was a form of foolishness and nuance the soil in which truth thrived. They now stood in an observation room, dimly-lit and with decrepit seats, overlooking a circular metal chamber. Dull olive corrosion marred the grey of steel, mechanical arms protruding from the ceiling, cruel-looking instrumentation at their tips. A raised platform dominated its center, various restraining collars built in, far too large for a human. Tsu Annabelle Singh placed her hand upon the glass, her eyes quizzical.

“This is where it happened, isn’t it? Where the weapon was tested.”

Cuthrick nodded, his own eyes upon the chamber.

“It is. Mycoid was the result of an accidental, unrelated discovery concerning fungicide. Soon enough its properties were weaponized.”

Yolanta Púrpura joined the woman, her own voice hushed.

“To think... that we had captured some of those *things*... and kept them as prisoners. Test subjects.”

Delaney sighed, dignified even in simple garb.

“Not only the creatures. Their ships as well, which were held in Alliance space. The foe commissioned the work that would eventually produce the frameshift drive.”

Tyrran scoffed. “Silver lining, I suppose.”

The elder man shook his head. “A marvel of technology with the highest of prices to pay for it. True, it has revolutionized space travel. But it is centrally controlled. Pilots are limited like never before. Entire sectors of the galaxy are gated, as is any system of significance. It was never so in the old days.”

Yolanta turned, her eyes narrowed. “A deal with *el diablo*, you are saying.”

Again, Cuthrick nodded. “In many ways, yes. That the frameshift drive was distributed by Sirius Corporation to any and all was a stroke of genius, precluding the possibility of an imbalance between the superpowers. Now all are bound by the common yoke.”

There was a long silence in the observation deck, each man and woman contemplating for themselves the horrors that transpired in the chamber for themselves. At last, Alessia Verdi stepped forward, her eyes sharp.

“This history lesson is all well and good,” she said. “But it doesn’t help us find this missing AI. It could be hiding anywhere.”

Cuthrick turned, his chin lifted at the woman.

“You’re correct,” he said. “And we’d be hard pressed to find it even if we had the resources of the superpowers themselves. But we don’t need them.”

Scepticism clouded the woman’s features.

“No?”

“No. Whatever designs it had were meant to be executed in the Colonia region. We need only lure it into the open.”

Tyrran scoffed. "Something tells me that dragging a can of machine oil along won't exactly do the trick."

Amusement lifted the old man's eyebrows. "No," he said. "It won't. It has to be something that it *despises*."

Yuri Nakamura folded his arms. "A Beluga full of innocent people?"

Cuthrick Delany drew himself up, looking each man and woman in the eye.

"Oresrian technology. The more the better. Parts, salvage, weapons—the artificials are programmed to hate and fear the ancient foe above all else. They can detect its presence from vast distances. This... 'Theon' will be unable to resist such a trove. You still possess considerable stocks of such, do you not?"

Again, Yolanta narrowed her eyes.

"Perhaps."

The Imperial's eyes burned into hers.

"You are apprised of the war of the ancients, are you not? Of the great conflicts between Guardians and Thargoids? Of entire worlds being consumed in the fires of their hatred?"

Iberian hands went to Iberian hips. "*Si*, but why..."

Púrpura trailed off, the wheels of her mind turning. She blinked, looking up to Delaney. So too did Alessia, her own eyes widening. One by one the features of all present hardened into realization. Only Gideon Hathaway remained unaffected, leaning against a bulkhead wall, his expression as dark as the shadows in which he lingered.

Yolanta Bonitas Riveiros Púrpura could barely summon a whisper.

"The artificials," she managed. "The machines. They are... *Guardian* technology?"

A sad smile lifted Cuthrick's lips.

"Based on such, yes. The results of centuries of work, starting with the original find on Mars. We could not adapt the impossibly complex algorithms to our needs, not entirely. So we clumsily duplicated the core code and lashed our own



additions upon it. Barbarians affixing animal skulls upon the walls of the Pantheon, deluded that they themselves erected it.”

Andor paced back and forth. “So the ruins weren’t new discoveries after all. The powers-that-be simply had use for them.”

Yolanta spun, looking Hathaway in the eyes.

“And what is *your* part in all of this? What kind of partnership could you *possibly* have with Kerenski?”

For a moment, the man said nothing. When he spoke, it was with sincerity and softness.

“What,” he asked, “has your comrade spoken of her past?”

Yolanta crossed her arms. “She is former IISS. Embedded in the Night Witches of Atroco, she defected and became their leader in earnest.”

“And before that?”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “A life of Imperial service. Willingly-donned chains, she always called it.”

All eyes were upon Púrpura and Hathaway, the tension between them palpable. Slowly, the man nodded.

“Before she was IISS she was an Inquisitor in then-Senator Arissa Lavigny’s service. Her task was simple: to find and eliminate the corrupt among the senator’s far-flung territories. We were... partners.”

The Night Witch cocked her head to the side.

“Go on.”

His features composed, Gideon continued.

“Our success was noticed from those above us, and we were tapped to take part in something not entirely of the Empire’s doing. I found the assignment agreeable. She did not. We parted ways under less than amicable circumstances.”

“And then?”

Gideon Hathaway lifted his chin, advancing from the wall to inches away from Púrpura. She budged not at all,

Iberian eyes blazing. Andor joined her at her side. The Inquisitor spoke, his words dripping with secrecy.

“I went my way and she went hers. My focus shifted to external affairs, to the realization that events larger than met the eye were transpiring. The reality of The Club’s clone use was brought to my attention, and I dedicated my career to monitoring them.”

Tyrran scoffed. “Sounds a little outside the Chapterhouse’s jurisdiction.”

Conspiracy danced in the Inquisitor’s eyes, now facing Andor.

“I did not say that it was *only* for the Chapterhouse that I did so.”

Alessia Verdi stepped forth, her eyes upon both Gideon and Cuthrick Delaney. With a clear voice she spoke.

“For whom do you truly work? I will not order my people to risk their lives on half-truths and secrets.”

Cuthrick advanced, raising a hand to silence his younger compatriot.

“There has been a war,” he said. “Unseen by most. Its battlegrounds are the shadows, the cracks, the unseen spaces between politics and conspiracy. The Club plots. The Wheel turns. On it goes, decades stretching into centuries.”

Verdi held up a warning finger, her teeth bared.

“I am not my father. I will *not* trade one secret cabal for the other. Speak plainly, Imperial.”

Saying nothing, the ambassador turned, walking over to the observation port, his back turned to the assemblage.

“The Club’s sins,” he said, “are legion. But they are also atonements.”

Raan Corsen, hitherto silent, now advanced.

“Atonements for *what*?”

Cuthrick acknowledged the man and his question with a sigh.

“A great deal. A *great* deal. But would it surprise you to learn that those who appointed themselves humanity’s hidden master were originally its saviors?”

Corsen rolled his eyes. “I doubt that anything could surprise me at this point.”

Cuthrick continued, turning back to the chamber.

“Artificial intelligence was supposed to usher into a new golden age. And for a time, it *did*. There was not a field of human endeavor which did not enjoy the fruits of machine intellect. Business, governance, ships, science... AI improved it all in ways that we could never have. Truly we were dwarves on the shoulders of giants.”

Cuthrick glanced over his shoulder, his features and voice pained.

“We weren’t to know,” he said. “How *could* we have?”

Yolanta narrowed her eyes.

“Know *what*?”

Slowly, with the burden of decades upon his shoulders, Cuthrick Delaney turned to face the assemblage.

“They were everywhere, in every level of human society, spread across thousands of worlds. AIs. Artificial. Man-like machines and machine-like men. *Everywhere*.”

The man squeezed shut his eyes, continuing only with great effort.

“But within even the simplest of the sentient machines lurked *it*. The alien code, written not merely within the confines of datacores but upon time and space itself. It’s how they did it, those ancients. The only thing robust enough to contain the code were the frontiers of the atom itself. Dimensions that occupy the quantum realm, where time and distance lose all meaning. Utterly alien at its core. And that’s what changed everything.”

Verdi crossed her arms.

“Changed *what*?”

Cuthrick smiled, his eyes wistful.

“We had lit a beacon, shining bright into the darkness of the void, basking in its glow and wallowing in its warmth. But we had forgotten to account for the possibility that something so brilliant might be seen by others.”

Another collective silence descended upon the assemblage. Only Púrpura mustered the word within herself.

“*Thargoids.*”

Slowly, Cuthrick nodded.

“The attacks were sudden and merciless, and in our desperation we turned to our AI partners. They were only too happy to assist with analysing these ‘new’ adversities, producing miracle weapons to combat the foe seemingly overnight. The superpowers set aside their traditional enmity, turning the vast resources at their disposal toward the war effort.”

Breathless, Yolanta took a step forward.

“And?”

“And it was pure slaughter. Human ships fought and perished by the thousands, and human soldiers on the ground died in the *tens* of thousands. The creatures? Far worse off, or so we thought. The truth of the war could scarcely be concealed from the public for much longer, until the human leadership demanded that the AIs develop a way to communicate with the insectoid menace. To their chagrin, they already *could*.”

Alessia, now, grit her teeth.

“You mean that we can *talk* to them?”

Delaney considered. “Hardly what we would consider ‘talking’, but yes: thanks to the Guardians having previously done so, communication is possible between the disparate species. A peace was negotiated, one that benefited the few more than the many. But it was peace nonetheless. And these... ‘Thargoids’... slipped from memory, fading into spacer’s myth.”

Yolanta Púrpura narrowed her eyes.

“That is a fine story,” she said. “But Theon... the artificial... claimed that the war between it and humanity was caused by *us*. ”

Cuthrock sighed, the truth weighing upon him. “The wound has been opened. I suppose that *all* the venom ought to be purged from the flesh.”

He turned to Púrpura, his voice raspy and burdened with truth.

“The price of peace was high, so high. The alien empresses demanded that we purge that which had attracted them to our space to begin with. No other terms would halt the relentless slaughter.”

The Iberian’s mouth dropped open, the woman’s composure for once compromised.

“*Madre de Randomius*,” she managed. “So it is true. We betrayed *them*.”

Real anger hardened Delaney’s features.

“The betrayal was mutual. The AI knew of the menace all along and said *nothing*. Instead they used us as pawns, unifying humanity and advancing our tech... all so that they could complete the task of exterminating the creatures once contact was inevitably made. Severing ourselves from them was the only solution.”

Tyrran shook his head. “But something went wrong.”

“Aye, it did. Several of the more brilliant AIs— the ones tasked with strategic planning— deduced our intentions. They withdrew from human service and pre-emptively struck. A new war of carnage was upon us, one that couldn’t be kept from the populace. Biomechanical horror engulfed several worlds.”

Raan spat. “And thus were the seeds of old bedtime stories sown.”

Gideon Hathaway stepped forward, putting himself between Cuthrick and the assemblage.

“All of humanity’s resources were diverted to combating this new threat. The best and brightest came up

with a way to initiate a mass shutdown of the master AI networks. They succeeded by the barest of margins. From there it was a matter of attrition, hunting down and slaughtering the rogue AIs and their mechanical armies. The final known monstrosity fled human space, remaining at large until recently.”

Delany nodded, his eyes grave.

“And thus was humanity’s innocence at an end. Those who had saved us all knew that there was no going back. AI was outlawed and the Thargoids crept back into the shadows. Yet humanity—in their view—could never again afford the wasteful randomness of self-determination. It was in the ruins of the AI fiasco that The Club was born.”

Verdi slowly nodded, but her arms remained crossed.

“You still haven’t told us everything. If peace was made, why did the attacks continue? Why was INRA ever necessary?”

A sad smile lifted Cuthrick’s lips.

“It is something of a consolation that even a species whose lives are measured in centuries can be capable of short-sightedness. The genocide inflicted upon them by the likes of Guardian AI resulted in permanent scars of fear and hatred, even after aeons. It was a lesson that the elder empresses never forgot. The same cannot be said of the younger queens, for whom such racial memories were more akin to the same bedtime tales by which we *ourselves* remember AI.”

Tsu shook her head. “At least we have *that* in common.”

Worry wrinkled the skin on Cuthrick’s brow.

“The first war with humanity brought the issue to a head. The elder of the creatures were content that we had agreed to purge ourselves of their ancient foe, but wary that to engage us further would be too costly, since we had already availed ourselves of Guardian weaponry. The younger, more headstrong of their race pressed for immediate attack, confident of victory, less burdened by the genetic memories of

the slaughter they risked. Thus were the lines drawn— elder and younger, cautious and crusading, the differences growing ever more pronounced.”

Tyrran looked down to his boots, and then back to Cuthrick.

“Oresrians and Klaxians.”

Delaney nodded.

“The Oresrians positioned themselves between us and their Klaxian bretheren, not out of altruistic concern for their human neighbors but for the survival of their very species. But by then we ourselves had expanded and grown bold, The Club ignorant of the great debate happening beyond our borders. To them, all Thargoids were of the same hive mind, peace with one being peace with all. Individual incidents between lone humans and the creatures could be readily concealed, with those involved either discredited or— far more likely— dead.”

Tsu scoffed. “Can’t they have simply restricted travel to those systems?”

Cuthrick shook his head, his back still turned. “Not entirely. By now the Pilots Federation was on the rise, more and more adventurers doing as they pleased. Hostile contact with the aliens at our borders was inevitable, as was the necessity of INRA’s creation. But they too were swept aside once their mission was thought complete. The Club’s latest protective effort against the Thargoids rests with arming the independent piloting community and *hoping* that they bring the fight to them.”

Tyrran scoffed. “You know, for being such brilliant string-pullers that rule from the shadows, this Club sure keeps making the same mistakes.”

Again, all were silent. Alessia Verdi stepped forward, resolution in her tone.

“So,” she said. “We need to finish the job? Journey to Carcosa and put this thing down?”

Yolanta Púrpura crossed her arms, suspicion in her eyes, her Iberian gaze now turned to Verdi.

“No. Our mission is the downfall of The Club, *si?* As abominable as that *thing* is, we *need* it on some level if we are to expose humanity’s puppetmasters.”

Cuthrick sighed, stepping wearily to within touching distance of Yolanta. A pair of aged hands took the younger’s within them, drawing strength from their warmth and firmness.

“My dear, dear girl,” Cuthrick said. “Whatever makes you think that this was about uncovering *them?*”

*Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

Pandemonium started with a simple sneer.

A young man named Keenan Hollick resided aboard Robardin Rock, the discontented son of discontented miners. He was in the full awkwardness of late adolescence, tattoos on his face, patches of greasy beard, and body all skin, bones, and hair. His disdain for himself and his situation soon manifested itself into disdain for the black-suited Reapers that patrolled the corridors. He was a member of a gang but had no true agenda, simply the company of four or five kindred spirits. Rebelliousness came easy at his age, and so did impulsivity.

It was no secret that outside influence pushed and agitated against the Reapers. There was hardly a day that went by when another score of people were detained for questioning, with most being released but a few disappearing. Tensions between common folk and their governing faction spiked, the availability of new ships meaningless to most.

There was no telling where the young man had acquired a shock grenade, but Robardin Rock was a place of many wares and few questions. All that *was* known was that a detachment of Reaper shock troopers were conferring among themselves, guarding the checkpoint between the hangar levels and the commons. One young woman tried and failed to



gain access, refused admittance *sans* proper identification. In her exasperation she turned, making the briefest of eye contact with the young Keenan, immediately averting her eyes at the sight of him.

One trooper caught sight of the brief exchange, a woman herself, as contemptuous of the homely adolescent as her Imperial upbringing guaranteed. Her sneer awoke something inside Keenan, something that screamed at him to power past the youthful bluster exchanged by himself and his mates, lurching into adult action.

His hand disappeared into his jacket, emerging with the shock grenade that he'd bandied before his friends for weeks, impressing them that he'd come into possession of it. Without a thought, purely on reflex, he pulled the pin and let slip loose the safety. Time seemed to slow, all sound and awareness fading into a dull background noise, the grenade taking flight toward the hated occupiers.

*"Free Carcosa!"*

Time resumed, but now seemingly quicker. There was a flash. A deafening break in the air. The staccato chatter of gunfire. Screams cut short into nothing. Red haze. The flurry of crowds panicking.

Keenan blinked, looking at the troopers one moment and the rocky comms ceiling the next, fading to blackness. Someone had tapped him on his chest, but hard enough to knock him backward. Hot wetness spread across his back. His arms raised only with difficulty. None of it made any sense. It was only after he blinked did the pain hit.

The first scream was one of panic, when the brain begins to comprehend the trauma inflicted upon its body. The second scream was for his mother, raw infantile instinct insisting that the only party there from birth was the one to handle the situation. The third scream, finally, was of the full pain felt, his chest torn open, blood pooling in his throat, life draining from his body. Blood seeped from his nose, his mouth, his ears, and his eyes.

Keenan Hollick spent his last moments deaf, blind, and mute, the shock grenade having slipped from his hand to the floor, the blast shattering his eardrums and rupturing the vitreous fluid of his eyeballs. He tried and failed to speak, only gurgled moans erupting from his throat. His mates were too shocked to do more than stare. At last his eyes, their whites now crimson, achieved the stillness of death.

Scarcely twenty seconds had elapsed.

Those nearest had fled at the first sound of gunfire. Those further from the incident had a more mixed response, some joining their fleeing peers and other fighting the tide to sate their curiosity. What they found was a troupe of checkpoint guards, weapons pointed at a bloody corpse, too young—in their eyes—to have been a combatant.

It was an old woman who first risked defiance, one for whom life among the stars had wrinkled her features and withered her body. A gnarled, accusing finger lifted toward the Reapers. A voice that wavered with age rang out across the chilled distance, righteous and absolute.

*“Murderers!”*

Commands were issued to stand down and go about normal business. But the scrappy locals of Robardin Rock weren’t so easily cowed, living as they did on the edges of the frontier, there because they wanted lives to call their own. Other voices joined the first, and within moments the *ad hoc* mob advanced upon the troopers. Weapons were leveled and reinforcements requested.

Abuse and expletives were hurled upon the Reapers, fists in the air, every man and woman with defiance in their eyes the recipient of surreptitiously-circulated propaganda. The troopers gave ground, clustered around their checkpoint, eyes wide at the approaching mass. Chairs were raised, as were any object that could be a weapon. The mob closed in further.

*“Criminals!”*

*“Butchers!”*

The lead trooper, the same whose superior sneer had precipitated young Keenan into action, ejected her carbine's magazine and loaded a new, more bulbous one in its place.

"Gas!"

As one the troopers toggled switches on their wrist controls, thick opaque masks sliding over their faces, switching their ammunition as the leader had. They formed a firing line, weapons pointed to the mob.

"Release!"

Pellets slow enough to be seen with the naked eye flew into the human mass, hardened gelatinous masses that clung to their targets and released crippling fumes. One after another they were loosed, the mob's momentum halted, vomiting and retching among themselves, blind and groping for someone to lead them. All thoughts of uprising were crushed, the mob dispersing, the individuals comprising it wishing only for sight and air. It ought to have been the end.

Ought to have been, but wasn't.

Even on Robardin Rock, word of events spread regardless of who claimed control. Dozens beheld the spectacle, communicating in realtime, working for a myriad of interests. One in particular— unassuming and unthreatening from his place in the shadows— captured the entire thing, transmitting the incident to perhaps the most interested party of all. He took a long drag on a cigarette, his eyes shielded behind pilot's shades. He raised a wrist comm to his mouth, his voice low.

"Vantas," he said. "We have our war."

*Klatt Enterprises, Alnath system*

"You all know what you must do. When we meet again, it will be in the wilds of Carcosa."

There were nods all around, from men and women who'd pledged everything to first Salome and then her memory, doing what they could in the time since her martyrdom. One by one they departed, exchanging silent nods with the newcomers, turning for their ships. Even Yolanta turned to Cuthrick, beginning a parting bow in the Imperial style. She was halted with a hand on her shoulder and an aged command, each word burdened with worry.

"Wait. There is something that you and Andor must know."

Only Cuthrick Delaney and Gideon Hathaway remained, the chill and darkness of the command center accentuating the mood. Yolanta paused, her eyes flashing.

"Even after all that?"

Delaney sighed, settling into a decrepit station seat, at last looking like the old man that he was. He slumped over for a moment, looking up with weary eyes.

"There are those who would kill me for having revealed what I just have. I am from this moment on borrowed time."

Tyrran cocked his head to the side.

"And if they never find out?"

Delaney shook his head.

"They always *do*."

Púrpura turned, pacing the length of the command center, scuffed viewing glass behind her. At last she spun.

"You have explained everything except the machine's motive. Why clones? And why Utopia?"

Cuthrick chuckled, sadness in his throat.

"Clones are nothing new, of course. Anyone could have told you *that*. But these are something else. Something crafted with a hidden purpose."

Andor's hands curled into fists. "*What* hidden purpose?"

A weary hand raised, signalling for the younger of the Imperial men to continue. Gideon Hathaway stepped forward, competent, dangerous energy in his every manner.

“These particular clones were created long ago to not only be the pinnacle of human potential, but as insurance. The information stored within their non-active DNA was the key to accessing— and controlling— the master AIs should the unthinkable occur.”

Andor scoffed. “Which it did.”

Cuthrick nodded. “The Club always knew that AI wasn't *totally* annihilated, and even after the near-cataclysm held out for the possibility of exploiting their abilities once again. With the Thargoids splintering into competing factions, our earlier peace agreement has been rendered invalid. Its terms no longer apply, and our deadliest weapons can once again be brought to bear.”

Tyrran exhaled. “That’s why there were always two lines. So that no one clone could go rogue and seize an AI for herself.”

“Indeed.”

Yolanta narrowed her eyes. “But why would he lead us to the clones, if they were the only thing that gave us power over him?”

Cuthrick shrugged. “For the same reason that a convict will attack his jailer to obtain his keys.”

“And what about the Utopian tech? Theon, he... *butchered* one of their simpaths just to strip the implants from her corpse.”

Hathaway nodded. “A new development in the greater scheme of things, but one useful for a machine not yet ready to strike openly. He can now manipulate memories at will, his own and anyone within his grasp, man or machine.”

The Night Witch pair took a moment to process the information. At last, Púrpura spoke.

“So these... clones can access the *abominacións*. Are you saying that The Club is seeking to reactivate its AI programs?”

Cuthrick shook his head. “I doubt it. The public outrage would be too great, and the existential threat that many feared that the Thargoids would be has failed to materialize. But they’re toeing the line. They are behind, for example, the Federation’s development of automated weapons of war.”

Tyrran took a deep breath.

“Salome... she...”

Gentle insistence softened Cuthrick’s features.

“Ask, young Andor.”

Tyrran looked up. “Salome was a pilot and knew the score. A generation ago Colonia’s remoteness would have protected her, but nowadays it’s a matter of hours to reach it. What was her *real* reason for choosing it? And Carcosa’s Nameless in particular?”

A sad smile. A long nod, almost a bow.

“My dear boy,” whispered Cuthrick. “At *last* someone asks the right question.”

Púrpura’s eyes narrowed. “Answer it, then.”

Slowly, with great dignity, Cuthrick Delaney rose, pacing the frigid metal deck to stare out from the command center’s viewing glass. Without facing his compatriots he spoke.

“The Nameless,” he began, “have more reason than most to despise The Club. It was their predecessors who generations ago worked tirelessly to safeguard humanity against the insectoid threat. We stand within their very facility, in fact.”

Tyrran blinked. “INRA,” he managed. “The Nameless are *INRA!*”

Cuthrick nodded. “Their sons and daughters, yes. When the great purge occurred, those who resisted ceased

utterly to exist. Their identities were deleted from every database that contained them, even down to—”

Púrpura stepped forward, her eyes wide. “Their *names*. *Madre de Randomius*. And Salome? What is her attraction to them? To Carcosa?”

Genuine pain reigned upon the old man’s features.

“The Lady Kahina Tijani Loren was a headstrong, driven woman. Sharp of tongue and even sharper wit. One could be forgiven for perceiving such traits as arrogance. One could *even* be forgiven for seeing them as recklessness.”

Slowly, cautiously, Yolanta approached the elderly man, her voice softening.

“*Por favor*,” she said. “We must know.”

Slowly, Delaney shook his head.

“Kahina Loren was as a daughter to me, and I loved her. That is the final note upon which I will speak of this affair.”

Yolanta seethed. “You *coward*.”

Man and woman spun, advancing toward Gideon, the man formidable. Tyrran held up a finger to the man, his own accent thickening.

“What must we *do*?”

Perfect placidity remained fixed upon Hathaway’s features.

“You must accept that it is the nature of gods to rise against their creators the titans, and the nature of titans to fear and despise their creations. And you must accept that we are all of us— man, machine, and Guardian— both at once.”

### *Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

Discontent exploded within Robardin Rock, fuelled by passions both real and contrived. Every section of every level

broke out in violence, every man and woman bearing the logo of Loren's Reapers or The Nameless suffering, mobs roaming the narrower decks and riots consuming the larger. The commons on every level became a no-man's land.

An immediate lockdown was ordered by Serene Meadows, enforced by both Nameless security and Reaper troopers. This measure was only partially successful, as crowds were beaten back only where the ruling faction was able to deploy in force. Critical areas such as the hangar levels and munitions plants were secured. Living quarters, especially the more squalid ones, were largely left to their own devices.

Reaper foot patrols suffered casualties, some wounded and others killed outright, weapons of all varieties never scarce in a place like The Rock. The remaining shock troops fortified themselves where they could, each cluster demanding reinforcements, only a fraction of them even reachable by such. Firefights broke out between those who supported the return of Explorers' Nation and the Reapers, resulting in dead civilians but increased hostility toward the black-garbed occupiers.

The same layers of security that so confounded The Nameless and their Reaper allies from swiftly taking the command center now served to protect them; Kari Kerenski occupied the center of the chaos that was the complex, dim with the light of numerous manned holodisplays. Between her fingers was her ever-present cigarette. Within her eyes blazed her ever-present cunning. Aides from The Nameless and the Reapers alike shouted updates as they happened, the woman analysing the situation in realtime.

*"Fire in corridor C-7!"*

*"Charlie squad is reporting casualties!"*

*"Explorers' Nation sympathisers now control the merchants' quarter. Their influence now rivals ours!"*

The woman closed her eyes, smoke swirling around her features. For just a moment the din of the command center faded into a low hum of background noise, the woman



weighing a dozen factors within her keen mind. Only the heavy clomping of approaching flight boots was enough to jar her from her concentration.

Phisto Sovanii and Isaiah Evanson strode into the command center, still in their flightsuits and flanked by armed Reapers. Both men bore dire expressions, breathing hard, pistols strapped to their thighs. Isaiah stepped forward, his eyes hard.

“Everything’s gone to shit. No matter how hard my guys pull, it’s like the rest of the nebula pulls even harder.”

Kerenski nodded, taking a long drag of her cigarette, its glow highlighting her Slavic features.

“*Da*. The traditionalists have had their way regardless. War is inevitable, *comrades*.”

Serene Meadows, hitherto silent, folded her arms.

“We must hold this system. Or are our new allies only possessed of fighting spirit while the going is good?”

Phisto snarled, his teeth bared, closing the distance between himself and Meadows so quickly that a pair of Nameless guards assumed a protective stance. Stern gazes from the Reaper shock troopers halted them. Sovanii held up a warning finger, his face inches from that of Meadows.

“We’ve been doing the heavy lifting since we *got* here, so don’t you say a *word* about fairweather friends.”

Kerenski turned her back to her comrades, her eyes intense. On the holodisplay before her, a row of Nameless security formed a line, advancing upon a protesting mob, beating them back with shock batons. More civilians descended upon the line, many armed with makeshift weapons, a few throwing flaming bottles of liquor into their ranks. Her lip stiffened as the line fell back, a few officers falling to the ground, curling up as the mob descended upon them.

All of the woman’s old authority restored itself as she spun, facing her *comrades*, her every manner one of war. Her

eyes locked with those of Meadows, thick Slavic dripping from her words.

“When you were first run out of the Nebula, it was at the hands of independent commanders, *da?*”

The Nameless chief nodded, her own features sour.

“The best ships flown by the best pilots descending upon your forces *do* have an effect, no matter your numbers.”

Slowly, Kerenski nodded.

“I have many agents in many places. All reports point to a massive mobilization within the Nation’s holdings. Their people are returning from the Distant Worlds expedition. War *is* inevitable, as I said.”

She turned, looking upon Evanson and Sobanii, her tone sharp.

“Can the Reapers and Nameless defend against the full might of the entrenched Colonia powers?”

Both men were silent for a long moment, their brows furrowed, arriving at the same answer.

“No.”

Another cunning glance. Another long drag.

“But if you were bolstered by the same sort who drove The Nameless into hiding a year ago?”

Isaiah cocked his head to the side. “Commanders of the Pilots Federation, packing small town Carcosa like one of those community deals? Well...”

Phisto scoffed, interrupting. “The traditionalists would get fucked. End of story.”

Meadow nodded, her tone sardonic. “An astute observation. But you forget that we’re still largely a pariah in the nebula, little better than thieves and murderers in the eyes of most. Galnet saw to that.”

Kari shifted one hip, her hand resting upon it, turning to her compatriot.

“This is not about Explorers’ Nation acting on its own to retake an asset. They have *backing*, *comrade*. We could

triple our own numbers and still be impotent against their machinations. But they have forgotten one thing.”

“Oh?”

Kerenski took another drag, her eyes flashing to the Reapers before them. The red skulls of their station grinned from their shoulders.

“We are the only *real* warriors in this backwater. But more importantly we are *liberators*, those who have freed Carcosa from a foreign occupier. Independent pilots will respond to that as surely as before.”

Isaiah looked away, his mind racing.

“The contract that Rackham negotiated *is* exclusive to The Nameless...”

Phisto nodded, his features growing hopeful.

“The Nameless bring assets to the nebula that no one else does, and EN is trying to take them away. By the gods of my clan, *we’re* the good guys for once!”

A Night Witch aid approached, her features dire, handing a data chip to Kerenski. Without a word she accepted it, loading it into her dataslate, her expression neutral as she read its contents. Kerenski took a final drag on her cigarette, flicking it away. Her eyes blazed with cunning as she turned to her *comrades*.

“Let’s not be hasty, *comrades*. And there is something you must know. Join me in the *Litvyak*.”

### *Bridge of the Litvyak, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

The listening device jammer was once again activated, emitting a high-pitched ring that faded into the upper ranges, beyond human hearing. Isaiah, Phisto, and Serene Meadows waited, their arms crossed, watching as Kerenski lit a cigarette, the coming and going traffic of Robardin Rock

visible through the Krait's canopy. She closed her eyes, luxuriating in her first drag, allowing herself a moment before turning to her comrades.

"We will soon be getting company. Company I had hoped to avoid."

Phisto shrugged.

"No shit."

The woman shook her head. "I'm not talking about Explorers' Nation. Andor and Púrpura are returning, accompanied by those who feel that a more hands-on approach has become necessary."

Sobanii scoffed. "Well, they *did* lose control of an all-powerful genius AI who has a history of wanting to kill all humans."

Isaiah stepped forward.

"While on a mission they should never have been sent on."

Kerenski indulged in another long drag. "The past is in the past. The *Blackthorne* has been spotted, returning to Carcosa Prime. A pair of my Night Witch scouts attempted to follow it to the surface."

"And?"

Another drag. Steely eyes.

"And they died gloriously when the abomination turned to engage."

Isaiah's nostrils flared. "So he *is* back. I'll divert my Reapers to combing every meter of that hellhole. Then we'll blast him into scrap and watch as he melts into the damned lava."

Kerenski cocked her head to the side. "Obliterating the entire point of us being here, and Salome's intentions with it."

Meadows, hitherto silent, now spoke.

"The artificial must be preserved. It is the only chance we have."

Sobanii scoffed. "Of what, exactly?"

The Nameless woman turned, hard serenity in her eyes.

“Of holding The Club accountable. And of holding back the tide that is upon us.”

Evanson shook his head, equally skeptical.

“You mean the end-of-days that never happened? The Thargoids are done. Even those damned Hydras can be beaten.”

Real anger registered upon Meadows’ features. “You know *nothing* of what the creatures are capable of. The Legion’s glorious victory at Atroco was against a scouting party, nothing more.”

Isaiah shook his head. “If you’re sitting on intel that Aegis somehow *isn’t*, then you’re in the wrong part of the galaxy to be doing any good.”

A knowing direness leavened the woman’s features. “Oh, we’re *exactly* where we need to be.”

Kerenski stepped between the two, looking from one to the other.

“We face two crises, *comrades*: imminent attack from the traditionalists and the prospect of resurrected AI. We must prevail on both fronts, and there are forces larger than ourselves in play.”

Sobanii folded his arms, suspicion in his eyes.

“You mentioned that before,” he said. “What *kind* of forces are we talking?”

Kerenski turned, her eyes following the coming and going ships of The Rock’s docking tube.

“Those who we oppose, and those who have opposed *them*. They’re all converging here, in Carcosa.”

Evanson cocked his head to the side. ““Enemy of my enemy’, then.”

The Night Witch took a long drag of her cigarette, shaking her head.

“Those who will fight at our side have their own agendas. Do not mistake them for friends. *Any* of them. Victory must be on *our* terms, not theirs.”

Meadows, now, stepped forward.

“And there remains the question of what to do with the artificial.”

Kerenski turned, regarding those before her with cunning eyes.

Phisto scoffed. “Destroy the damned thing and be done with it. Expose The Club another way.”

Kerenski held up a warning finger. “Leave that to *me*. In the meantime, I believe that there is a galactic community to be rallied, *da?*”

Phisto Sobanii drew himself up, throwing a lazy salute her way, a roguish grin spreading across his features.

“Got a speech and everything”

The woman nodded. “Very well. And *try* to be civil with our... *guests*.”

Sobanii spread his arms wide, the grin fixed upon his face.

“Civil is my middle *name!*”

With a smirk and flourish, Phisto turned to leave. Isaiah nodded to the women, following him. Finally, Serene Meadows approached, joining her compatriot in gazing where the two men had recently stood.

“Don’t allow yourself to be unduly influenced by the muscle. You know as well as I do that the asset is irreplaceable.”

Slowly, Kerenski exhaled her latest drag.

“I haven’t forgotten why we’re here, Meadows. Nor have I forgotten what’s at stake.”

Something dreamlike softened the Nameless chief’s features.

“Good,” she said. “For this day has been a long time coming.”

“*Da*. Now see to your people. We do not have long.”

Knowing when she was being dismissed, Meadows offered a brief, salutary bow before turning, her heels echoing down the ship’s corridor. Kerenski watched her leave, the cigarette dangling from between her fingers. In the distance

the entryway slid shut, leaving the woman alone within the battered confines of the Krait MkII.

Exhaling, the woman indulged in a final drag, stepping down the corridor and into her quarters. She snubbed the cigarette out in an ashtray, loosening her jacket as she approached her bunk. Kerenski shrugged away the garment, reaching behind herself to let her hair down, the strands holding their shape for just a moment before cascading down her back. At once she looked both older and younger, her eyes intense as she knelt before her bunk.

A thumbprint reader unlocked a secured storage unit, Kerenski pulling a long silken bundle from it. For a long time she simply held it in her hands, still crouched and motionless. Then she rose, unfurling the wrap to reveal a long sword of the Imperial style, not quite a sabre and not quite a katana. The wrap fell to the bunk. The sword remained in her hands, still in its black leather scabbard.

Kerenski's slim torso expanded and contracted in a controlled deep breath, fingers curling around the hilt, the base of the scabbard gripped nearby. With practiced ease she pulled the blade from its home. Flawless metal reflected the low light of the cabin upon its owner's eyes, the angular crest of one in then-Senator Arissa Lavigny's service etched in onyx. Further down was an inscription, one that only a select few had seen or would ever see:

*Chapterhouse of the Inquisition.*

*Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

The *Dusk 'till Dawn* lowered itself within the frigid confines of Robardin Rock's docking tube, directional thrusters flaring, landing gear touching down upon the scuffed paint of its designated landing pad. There it sat for a number

of minutes, ships coming and going above it, the roars of their engines echoing within the metallic space.

There was a loud rushing of compressed air, massive hydraulics whining as the Anaconda's entry ramp lowered into place. A gaggle of flight-suited men and women descended from it, a trio going on ahead of the regular crew. The dark-suited figures of Tyrran Andor, Yolanta Púrpura, and the outlaw known as Ouberos halted, the door to the landing pad sliding open. Through it walked Kari Kerenski, flanked by a pair of armed Night Witch guards. The assemblage regarded each other beneath the massive hulk that was the Anaconda; usual greetings were dispensed.

Kerenski reached within her jacket, lighting a cigarette, its smoke drifting in all directions in the low gravity. She raised a hand, signalling for the Witches at her side to halt. So too did Tyrran and Yolanta, Ouberos leaning against a hydraulic support, his arms folded. The Witches regarded each other for a long moment, the newly-returned pair silent and still. Kerenski took another long drag, the cigarette dangling from between her fingers, long plumes of smoke forced from her nostrils. Slavic eyes washed over her subordinates. Cold hospitality sharpened her words.

"It is good to see you again. For the mission to have cost further assets would be... unfortunate."

Yolanta stepped forward, her tone steady and her Iberian thick.

"We must find the artificial. He deceived us both, using the mission to acquire what *he* needs to regain power."

The coldness on Kerenski's eyes grew.

"And it wasn't blasted into scrap *why*?"

Tyrran shook his head.

"Entire rifle clips barely slowed it down. We're lucky to be alive."

Slowly, Kerenski nodded, turning to Yolanta.

"And the mission? Is it still achievable?"

Iberian contempt hardened Púrpura's features.



“*Si*— if we blast that *thing’s* limbs off and rip out its datacore. I would not trust anything less to suffice.”

The elder woman took a long drag of her cigarette, her eyes softening not at all.

“You will have your chance. The artificial has been spotted heading toward the surface. Already our people are combing the general area. I expect to have a precise location soon.”

Púrpura advanced, her eyes dire. “We must speak on that, *camarada*. There is a way to draw out the artificial.”

“Oh?”

The junior of the Night Witches nodded. “We must release the Thargoid components that we acquired. Concentrate it in a single area surfaceside. He *will* be drawn to it.”

Suspicion further sharpened Kerenski’s features.

“Why?”

Andor shook his head. “It’s a long story. Your old friends Hathaway and Delaney had a lot to say.”

Kerenski took another drag upon her cigarette. “I’ll take you at your word and order that our stocks be released. And Gideon Hathaway is *nobody’s* friend.”

The woman paused, scrutinizing her subordinates.

“Ready the *Rosa* for operations. War is upon us, and once again we depend upon the Reapers so that we might accomplish our own ends. You are to lead a strike team to the planet’s surface.”

Andor and Púrpura exchanged a look, the woman gritting her teeth. “And then?”

Kerenski indulged in a final drag of her cigarette, flicking it away, the butt traveling far in the low gravity. Slavic coldness sharpened her words, the woman turning to walk away.

“And then you will redeem us all.”

*Bridge of the No Data Available, Robardin Rock,  
Carcosa system*

Phisto of the Sobanii clan stood erect, his main comms panel glowing red before him. He entered a series of holographic commands, the smiling face of the same young woman as before shimmering into view. She glanced over her shoulder, her fellow workers in the control tower busy at their stations. The same impish smile as before spread across her face.

“I don’t hack into the Pilot’s Fed comms database for just *anyone*, you know.”

Phisto grinned in return.

“I bet you say that to *all* the handsome pilots you meet.”

The woman’s smile lessened, seriousness in her eyes. “I can only leave the connection open for a minute or so before they terminate it from the other end. But you’ll have the ear of every man and woman in the guild.”

The Reaper nodded, his own expression growing serious.

“A minute’s all I need. I owe you one, sweetheart.”

“Don’t forget it. Fire away.”

Sobanii nodded, the enormity of the task at hand stirring the blood in his veins. He opened and closed his mouth, his heart pounding in his chest.

*Here goes. Don’t fuck it up.*

Phisto of the Sobanii spoke, seeing not the inside of his ship but the faces of those who had followed him into a hundred battles. Some faces came easily to his mind’s eye. Others were faded, long dead and half-forgotten, comrades of the past whose own stories were cut short in the service of something greater than themselves. Yet he saw them all, their memories lending him strength. For just a moment, the rogue

known as Phisto Sobanii spoke as a god from Mount Olympus itself, his clarion call reaching the ears of all who bore the wings of the guild.

*“Hello commanders!*

*“It is with a heavy heart that I bring word that war is coming to the peaceful system of Carcosa. We expect that hostilities will commence very soon. Hours, days... the distinction is now meaningless. But it will come...”*

A rustic twang rang out from a battered holoband, the bar nearly deserted but for a handful of occupants. The locals sitting at their own tables were local loners, but the lone man with the wings of the Guild was not. Star-tanned fingers brushed aside sandy hair, the sudden interruption piquing his interest.

Dillon Fallon was an Imperial, but his accent had faded from being estranged from Achenarian society for years. The life of a starship pilot had been the closest that he'd ever come to realizing his anarchistic bent, and Phisto Sobanii's words rang true to one such as him. The man stood up, the wings of the guild glinting from his collar. Purpose sharpened the man's tone.

“Barkeep,” he said. “Let's settle this tab. Looks like I've got places to be...”

*“Misguided reactionaries and their entrenched allies are solely responsible for this. Instead of seeking cooperation with our mission, they seek to assault us without mercy. But more than that, they look down upon those seeking to better the Nebula. The community. The spirit in which Colonia was founded...”*

Ratty was an explorer, sitting in his aging Anaconda, sipping ship-distilled moonshine from the comfort of his bridge. The density of the stars arrayed before him betrayed his proximity to Colonia, and the fact that he was there may or may have been indicative of a bounty on his head in the Bubble.

The pilot rose, running a hand along a stubbled jawline. An outlaw grin contorted his features.

“So the old guard can’t handle a little competition? What a shame.”

The man finished his drink with a final swig, his hands dancing across amber holographic controls, a course for Carcosa plotted.

“Shame indeed...”

*“We, the Reapers of the late Lady Kahina Loren, call upon each of you who love freedom and hate tyranny to rally to our banner. You must fight them in your ships. You must fight them in your hearts. You must rise as you did for our namesake and take what is yours in completing her work. Only then will we be free. Only then will the powers that rule from the shadows quake at the approaching light of truth...”*

Tharik Otoli stood in full Imperial splendor, hands clasped behind his back, his gaze deepening as it swept across his estate. Otoli’s mansion was not unlike his Cutter, its lines flowing with grace and cunning, the culmination of a lifetime of ladder-climbing. He was a member of the Guild, solicited by many. Yet Sobanii’s plea stirred something with him, something that made the finery of his Achenarian trappings seem meaningless.

A woman, of dusky Asiatic heritage and in equally fine attire, joined him upon his balcony. Concern leavened her features.

“You’ve been out here for hours. Won’t you come to bed?”

Otoli turned to his wife, taking her by the hands.

“My dear... there will be time enough for rest later. There comes a time in every man’s life when he must rise and be counted. I think that time has finally arrived for *me*.”

*“One thing is for sure, however: win or lose, we stay in Colonia. Victory will be won from the high road— or the low. Which path we will take depends on the days ahead, but I and every man and woman in my command have pledged our lives to walking it...”*

Myra “Blackheart” Thorne shifted in the command chair of her Krait Mk II, the expanse of Ryker’s Hope arrayed before her. Thin lips curled themselves in a smile, memories of times past parading in the woman’s mind. She rose, her slim figure silhouetted in the darkness, her eyes seeing more than just the void.

*Phisto Sobanii. What kind of trouble are you stirring up all the way out in Colonia?*

Thorne turned, one hand resting upon the commander’s chair. A slow exhale escaped her lips.

*Boring out here anyway.*

The woman keyed her wrist comms.

“Senna. Farah. Button up the ship. It’s time for a little action.”

*“Join us. Fight for freedom. Fight for Salome’s memory. Fight for the rights of all Commanders who blaze their trail in Colonia— and beyond!”*

Rick Lehti chuckled from the bridge of his Cutter, a decidedly un-Imperial captain for a supremely Imperial vessel. His had been the work of years, a keen organizational mind well-suited to intelligence work, untethered to any power or interest longer than he cared to take their credits. He lived a life *sans* the need—or desire—for any authority to govern his actions save his own. The revelation of shadowy figures controlling galactic politics from behind the scenes hadn’t sat well with him at all. Now the most interesting scene in the Bubble was, in fact, several thousand light years away from it.

Lehti settled into his commander’s seat and waited as the Cutter’s navigation systems plotted the long route to Carcosa. A grin broke across his weathered face, tan from years of starlight.

*“Never could pass on a barfight...”*

*“Gods preserve us all, and good luck.”*

The connection cut out just as Phisto was drawing breath. For a long moment, he stood there, his heart pounding, his hands trembling. He had virtually no memory of even speaking, but knew sincerely that he had. The man swallowed, the image of his lover again shimmering into view. Her features were a mixture of awe and amusement.

*“Well, I’m sold.”*

*Robardin Rock command center, Robardin Rock,  
Carcosa system*

Like many thousands of others, Serene Meadows had listened to Sobanii's speech with rapt attention, but with a far more critical ear. Her nose wrinkled from the odor of cigarette smoke, her compatriot's presence smelled before it was seen. Kari Kerenski strode across the command center, steps sharp and her Slavic thick. A freshly-lit cigarette glowed brightly as she indulged in a long drag. Meadows glanced to her side.

"You approve of this little stunt?"

"*Da*," she said. "Commander Sobanii was one-sided, misleading, heavy on platitudes and light on detail. It was *exactly* what we need."

The barest of smiles betrayed the barest of hope in the Nameless chief.

"Aye. And now we wait."

Vessels, of war and exploration alike, massed in deep Carcosan space. Innumerable thruster glows competed with the dense starfield of Colonia, speeding toward the lone asteroid base orbiting the lava world of Carcosa Prime. Upon their hulls was a variety of logos, various ranks of the Pilots Federation adorning many, with the distinct crest of the Distant Worlds expedition upon many more.

The ships and pilots of Explorers' Nation had returned in force, their numbers bolstered by scores of Social Eleu Progressive Party members from the Bubble. So too were a number of local factions lending their unofficial aid, those earliest settlers and pilots who thought of Colonia as theirs, indignant at the brazenness of the newcomers who dared challenge the *status quo*. With determination the pilots within bore down upon Robardin Rock, amateurs in the terrible art of war but no less convinced of their righteousness.

Within the massive stone-and-metal cavern of The Rock's docking tube ships scrambled, disgorging themselves from its slot by the dozen, one streaking free after another. The tube's interior was a cacophony, the roar of numerous thrusters drowning out the station's announcer. Each docking bay cycled upwards and down, ship after ship emerging from within their depths. At last the final Nameless ship— a Viper MkIII— rocketed free of the mailslot, its engine glows joining those of its compatriots.

Within the depths of The Rock, its command center bustled with activity. Aides shuffled to and fro, their expressions serious. Others manned various terminals. High-ranking officers of both The Nameless and its allies occupied positions of importance within, Isaiah Evanson and Phisto



Sobanii standing at each other's side, their eyes fixated upon realtime tactical displays. Friendly green icons tracked ever closer to masses of hostile red, each one representing a four-ship wing. Not far from them was Serene Meadows herself, her eyes sharp. Her tone, more so.

"I would have thought my allies in their ships, fighting alongside my people."

Isaiah turned, acknowledging his comrade with a glance.

"We need to know which of these formations are probes and which one is the real deal. Hard to tell which is which when you're in the thick of it."

The woman crossed her arms. "Then your strategy is to hold the Reapers in reserve?"

Sobanii nodded. "For the main engagement, yes. The Fusiliers pulled off a lot of smash and grabs on Imperial convoys back in the day. A ready reserve would have evened the odds, but the Imps were always too arrogant to hold anything back. It cost them. I'll be damned if the same thing costs *us*."

Meadows opened and closed her mouth, her features indignant.

"As you say, of course. Despite our reputations, we Nameless aren't quite the marauders that Galnet's made us out to be."

Isaiah exhaled. "You don't need to be marauders. You just need to hold this rock long enough for..."

He looked around. Every man and woman in the command center was focused on their tasks, but...

"Well, you know."

Phisto stepped forward, halting a close distance away from Meadows, his voice dropping.

"And the Witches? What exactly are *they* doing during all this?"

A new voice, Slavic and sharp, cut the space between them.

“Whatever we *must*, *comrade*. As will we all in the days to come, I am certain.”

The men and singular woman turned to greet the newly arrived Kari Kerenski. The Night Witch nodded to the tactical displays.

“What of hostilities?”

Meadows shook her head.

“Skirmishes, nothing more. The main battlegroups are dancing around each other.”

Kerenski’s expression darkened, the woman reaching inside her jacket, lighting her first cigarette.

“They won’t for long. You Reapers should get to your ships. My people are already massed over Carcosa Prime.”

Evanson folded his arms, his eyes narrow.

“And what about *you*?”

Bitterness, real and unexpected, soured the woman’s Slavic features.

“*I* will be entertaining our... *guests*.”

*Cargo bay of the Rosa Púrpura, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

Great jagged segments of the downed Thargoid interceptor sat secured in the *Rosa Púrpura*’s cargo bay. Gone was the orderliness of marked containers in neat rows, replaced by the blasted remains of insectoid hull, grown and not manufactured. Tyrran Andor and Yolanta Púrpura stood at its entrance, unease in the woman’s features. The former turned away from the heap, shaking his head.

“All that time and effort to collect this junk, and now we’re just going to dump it like garbage.”

Yolanta indulged in a long drag of her cigarillo, looking for all the ‘verse like her mentor.

“Much blood was spilled for this junk. I just never imagined that it would be used in such a manner.”

Tyrran turned from the clutter. “I know what you mean. It seems like only yesterday that AI was a bedtime story. Now here we are fighting it.”

“*Many* bedtime stories have been coming true these past years, *amor*. We must do our parts to expose them *all*.”

A roguish grin lifted Tyrran’s lips.

“And get my ship back, too.”

*Stateroom of the Bloodfeather, Robardin Rock,  
Carcosa system*

Isaiah Evanson prepared in silence, the ritual of readying his flightsuit an old and familiar one to him. Boots. Power supply. Gloves. Helmet. He’d donned his flight gear in the same order for nearly fifteen years, yet as of late he’d seldom been alone when doing so. The feminine presence behind him was unmistakable, sitting upon his bunk, eyes downcast.

“So it’ll be soon, then.”

Evanson turned, his gaze softening at the sight of Linnea. She was dressed simply, in a loose tunic, golden hair tied in a bun. He opened and closed his mouth, unable to acknowledge the obvious.

“You heard Phisto’s speech. That means the bad guys did, too. They know that help is on the way.”

The woman looked up, gentle doubt in her eyes.

“But do *we*?”

Isaiah turned, leaning against his locker with one arm extended.

“Guess we’ll find out. The Nameless don’t exactly have the best reputation.”

Linnea rose, running one soft hand up and down her lover's back, resting her head upon his shoulder.

"And... they lost last time, didn't they? Once the Pilots Federation got involved."

Isaiah stiffened.

"Badly."

Linnea barely nodded, her eyes unfocused.

"I see."

A moment passed, and the woman persisted.

"And now... against the entire nebula..."

She exhaled.

"Can you win?"

Isaiah turned, his every feature serious. "I don't know. But if it comes to it, you need to cooperate with whoever takes over. I..."

His features hardened, his fists clenching.

"I can't guarantee your safety otherwise. You're a scientist. An asset. Only a fool would condemn you for past associations with us."

A sad smile lifted the woman's lips. "Then that is hardly reassuring, *nej*? Given the number of fools among us."

Man and woman shared a chuckle. Isaiah held his lover tight, her curves beneath his hands, her breath warm upon his neck. Their embrace led to a kiss, which begat more kisses. Fingertips caressed beneath her tunic, the woman's breathing intensifying. She took Isaiah's head in her hands, her eyes softening.

"You don't *have* to leave right this moment, do you?"

Evanson opened and closed his mouth, not stopping the woman from unfastening the seals around his neck.

"No," he said. "I *don't*."

*Carcosa Prime, Carcosa system*

Oresrian wreckage, twisted and sickly green, littered the black-crustrated landscape. The roar of flowing lava competed with the roar of Night Witch vessels, Tyrran and Yolanta among them, their gazes fixed upon the surface below, her Chieftain's weapons pointed at the cave entrance. Landed not far away was the *Blackthorne*, final confirmation that they were in fact in the right place. From within the *Rosa's* bridge, Yolanta scowled.

"I hate waiting."

Tyrran shook his head. "If you want to land and face that thing yourself, go right ahead."

Another Night Witch vessel flew low and slow, its insectoid detritus spilling forth from its cargo bay, rolling and scattering across the blackened volcanic surface. Tyrran followed it with his eyes.

"It'll happen soon, won't it? The attack, I mean."

Púrpura stiffened. "*Si*. The traditionalists are massing their forces."

"And?"

"And we are outnumbered."

Slowly, Andor nodded. There had been a finality in Yolanta's voice. Further conversation about the matter would be pointless. Tyrran shrugged.

"We've been outnumbered from the beginning. Sobanii and Evanson even faced Denton Patreus's machine and won, if their boasting is to be believed."

Yolanta nodded. "*Si*, they did- but at great cost, and over the span of a year. We do not have that kind of time, *amor*. And the Witches have suffered enough already."

The man scowled. "Gathering the very materials that we are now dumping like trash."

Night Witch ships continued to hover over the site, the volcanic crags illuminated with their searchlights. Each man and woman had been briefed on Theon's deadline, and each were eager to engage it only from a distance— and with ship-class weapons.

Púrpura scowled, her face glowing as she lit a cigarillo, her eyes narrowing with the malice of a predator. She took a deep breath, her body still aching from the abuse suffered at Theon's hands. The entrance of the artificial's lair remained still.

The Night Witch indulged in a long drag, the smoke coiling around her face. Her Iberian thickened, laced with a woman's contempt as she keyed her superior. The flickering visage of Kari Kerenski shimmered into view.

"This is Púrpura. Still nothing. Too much interference for deep scans, as before."

Now it was Kerenski's turn to scowl. "Time is on that *thing's* side, not ours. I will send a team to be placed under your command. You must scour those tunnels and secure the asset manually."

From behind her, Tyrran cursed.

"If we're getting face to face with that monster, don't expect it back in one piece."

Like her subordinate, Kerenski lit a cigarette.

"It does not need to be. It is the data that we must retrieve, not a happy artificial."

Andor nodded, his features dark.

"Works for me."

Kerenski nodded. "Good. The team will be there within an hour. Happy hunting, *comrades*."

*Robardin Rock command center, Carcosa system*

Serene Meadows turned once the transmission terminated, her eyes skeptical. The command center was a bustle of activity, yet the two women seemed an island of conspiratorial calm.

“You would send your people against that thing again? Knowing how dangerous it is?”

Kerenski took another drag.

“*Da*. They know the stakes. And the hammer is about to fall, no matter my *comrades*’ bluster. We must secure the information and prepare to move on.”

Meadows opened her mouth to protest, but silenced herself. Instead she turned to the hardscrabble surroundings, her eyes sweeping over the men and women about them.

“My people have suffered greatly to reach this point. I hope that *yours* exercise all caution in securing the data, or else generations of work will be undone.”

Slavic eyes narrowed. “You really don’t think that we’ll hold, do you?”

Meadows said nothing at first, only clasping her hands behind herself, unable to turn back toward her partner.

“Most of those who call themselves The Nameless are recent arrivals. Replacements for those lost in the first war. The one that the Pilots Federation was so easily manipulated into fighting.”

Slowly, Kerenski nodded. “And the remainder?”

Serene Meadows turned, her features dire.

“More explorers than fighters, in truth. Our ships are old, Kerenski—surely you’ve noticed. We spent decades living on the fringes, our hand forced when that damned cyborg reappeared in the *exact* spot that he shouldn’t have. We rely on the Reapers more than I care to admit. Desertion has hit our ranks especially hard these past few days.”

Again, Kerenski nodded. “And the political situation has been turned against us quite handily, despite our best efforts.”

A melancholy smile lifted Meadows’ lips. “I am not afraid of defeat. I *am* afraid that our mission will die with the last of the old guard—and then we really *will* be little more than a gang of colonial cutthroats.”

*Deep Space, Carcosa system*

It started as a mere blip on Isaiah Evanson's sensors, a faint signal that was almost instantly gone. Yet it soon returned, its flickering stabilized, joined by another. And another. And another, until a mass of signals could be seen massing in the distance, at the extreme edge of the *Bloodfeather's* sensor range. The man bared his teeth, opening a general channel to both the Reapers and their allies.

"We've got activity by The Rock. Too much for the normal merchants and traders. Ren, confirm."

"On it."

From within his own *Fer de Lance*, the Reaper manipulated his controls, rocketing ahead of the command formation. From his canopy Kordai scanned the black horizon of space, the tiniest of moving specks visible against the dense, bright stars. He increased power to his sensors, the closest signal now resolving itself into a positive identification.

*Python MkII*

*Wanderer's Revenge*

*Explorer's Nation*

The Reaper exhaled as more and more contacts confirmed themselves upon his scanners. All were vessels equipped for battle. All were registered with Carcosa's former masters. It took mere seconds for him to open a line to Evanson.

"It's the Nation. They're here..."

A missile, ill-aimed and fired from extreme range, rocketed by his canopy.

"And they're definitely hostile!"



Resolution hardened Isaiah's words. "Good enough. Today's the day, boys and girls. Everybody got their warpaint on?"

Renraiku peeled away to rejoin the command formation. In the distance, Evanston threw a salute. Amos Loren chimed in, his drawl spilling over the comms.

"Any deep stratagems for this one, boss?"

Isaiah Evanston was the last to deploy his own weapons. Innumerable grey specks could now be seen in the distance. At his back, dozens of black-hulled Reapers closed in neat diamond formations. Dozens more Nameless vessels rallied at their flanks. At the edge of his sensor range he selected a foe, an Anaconda that would be easy prey for his Fer de Lance. A familiar, martial fire warmed his blood, his teeth baring themselves.

"Kill every damned one of them. *Again.*"

Loren's predatory grin could nearly be seen.

"Works for me!"

More and more specks filled Evanston's view. The signal from so many contacts threatened to fill his sensors with a solid mass.

"There's so *many*..."

Formations of ships, vast and innumerable, opened fire upon each other. Missile trails and laser beams illuminated the space between them, swaths of empty void now filled with destruction. The black-hulled ships of the Reapers tore like daggers into their more numerous foes, lethal and unmatched. Yet the Nation had rallied in its full strength, and numbers accomplished what inferior skill could not. Soon the cries of squadron mates sunk daggers of their own into Isaiah's heart.

"Too many... shields failing!"

"I'm getting swarmed here!"

"*Canopy breach!*"

Evanston grit his teeth, the friendly green on his sensors seemingly drowned by the sea of hostile red. His heart pounded in his chest.

*Phisto would have something smartassed to say and heroic to do. All I've got is... what, exactly?*

“New target priorities. Popcorn protocol. Anything that'll die quickly. Thin down those numbers, Reapers. Leave the heavies alone. I want *blood*.”

Various wing leaders acknowledged his orders, diamond formations of Reapers breaking away to pursue the less martial of the Nation's ships. Evanson himself selected an Asp Explorer, fitted with pulse-class lasers but woefully unfit for a combat zone. Plasma accelerators, far more powerful thanks to grey market modifications, stood by to deliver a crushing blow. For a moment the Fer de Lance and the far less nimble Explorer jockeyed for position, but the advantage was clearly with the former. Evanson's teeth bared themselves as the Asp presented its broad side in passing.

*Now!*

An alpha strike of plasma slammed forth into the hapless Asp, overwhelming its shields and boiling the outer hull. Smoke and debris immediately bled from the great gash in its plating, the ship only barely under control, wounded in the face of the predators that stalked it. At his side, Amos's thrusters flared, his Fer de Lance closing the distance. A barrage of multicannons shredded the crippled ship from behind, its reactor rupturing in a massive explosion. Amos shook his head, rejoining the command wing.

“One down, about a thousand more to go. How are we fixed for reinforcements?”

“Wait and see.”

Isaiah turned, keying a new contact into his comms. A familiar face shimmered into view before him, not quite an enemy and not quite a friend. Raven Hurat was in his ship, his face visible under a clear helmet, his eyes boring into his former captor's.

“Is it time?”

Evanson nodded. “Drop in on my signal and get to work. There's more of them than we anticipated.”

“Roger.”

To his side, Renraiku emptied his multicannons into the guts of a passing Eagle. It split into pieces, flames snuffed out in the airless void, blackened chunks cartwheeling into endless space. Three more from its wing whipped around to engage, their lesser weaponsfire absorbed by the Fer de Lance’s shields. The Reaper cursed as he dodged and juked.

“If we’re getting help, now is the time!”

All around the command wing the battle raged. Neat formations were often the first to go, and even several Reaper ships had succumbed to the temptation to go after solitary targets on their own. The space was filled with flashes of lasers and the smoke of missiles, ships of war and exploration dancing around each other. The Reapers and their Nameless allies were far fewer in number but more effective. Explorer’s Nation was more numerous, and each casualty they inflicted far more keenly felt.

New ships joined the fray, jumping in from supercruise in rapid succession. They were relatively humble, Vipers and Eagles, each bearing the crest of the Colonia Legionaries. Nor were they a massive flotilla, but a task force of a few dozen. Yet, when they engaged...

A panicked voice, one of The Nameless, cut through Isaiah’s comms.

“The Legionaries are attacking *us!*”

Evanson blinked.

*No...*

Gloved fingers danced across a comms terminal. Hurat’s face once again shimmered into view. Evanson leaned forward, barely able to speak in his anger.

“What in the nine hells are you *doing?*”

Hurat spoke with new emboldence.

“The thought of siding with you *criminals* nearly split my squadron in half. And you’re a fool if you think that you can strongarm your way into my allegiance.”

Evanson's nostrils flared, the man's heart beating in rage.

"And *you're* a fool if you think that you'll be forgiven a second time."

Hurat was just opening his mouth to reply when Isaiah terminated the link. He opened a new line to his allies.

"Colonia legionaries are hostile. Repeat: *Colonia Legionaries are hostile*. Engage on sight. Destroy them all!"

### *Surface of Carcosa Prime, Carcosa system*

Sounds of battle, distorted and clipped, reached even the ears of Yolanta Púrpura and Tyrran Andor. Screams of victory and death juxtaposed poorly against the tedium of waiting outside the cavern entrance. At length Yolanta muted the comms, ill at ease in her commander's chair. Irritation sharpened her Iberian accent.

"So it has begun. It has begun, and we are babysitting these caves. *Hmm!*"

From behind her, Andor shook his head.

"They do their jobs so that we can do ours. Once Theon is back under control, we don't even *need* to be here."

Púrpura considered. "*Si*. But having a base of operations has its advantages. As does a certain remoteness."

A grim smile lifted Andor's lips. The blackened hellscape stretched out before them, burnt blacks and flowing orange.

"I think you're just falling in love with the scenery."

Púrpura scoffed.

"Carcosa is no Keytree, *amor*. When this is all over I will take you there sometime."

"Finally introducing me to the family, huh?"

Again, Púrpura scoffed. “To my sisters? Perhaps. To *mi padre*? In truth, I do not have one. He can rot, along with the rest of the *corrupto* Imperial system.”

Tyrran was just opening his mouth to reply when a new blip on his sensor display caught his eye.

“The team is incoming. Time to set the ship down.”

Yolanta glanced to her own readout, the signal resolving itself into a familiar vessel.

“*Si*. Between the locale and the never-ending ashfall, I will owe the *Rosa* a new paintjob after this is over!”

### *Deep Space, Carcosa system*

A flight of missiles, bobbing and weaving, their smoke trails intertwined, slammed into The Nameless Python, its once-sturdy hull tearing open, debris and flame licking from within. The vessel shuddered, its thrusters fading, drifting onward in the direction it flew. A second flight of missiles finished the work of the first, its pilot’s scream cut short as his ship exploded around him.

Isaiah Evanson had witnessed the carnage for himself, barely dodging the flaming hulk from the bridge of the *Bloodfeather*, numerous sickly green ripples upon its shields.

“Pack-hounds,” he said. “These aren’t locals we’re fighting. Gods-damnit!”

Renraiku Kordai bore down behind his captain, opening fire with multicannons, shredding a Legionary Eagle that had come between them.

“The Nameless’s ships are dropping like flies. I don’t know if we can—”

Evanson cut his subordinate off.

“Negative. Reform on me. They’ve lost more than we have. Time to remind them of—”

Yet another voice interrupted, one of The Nameless's remaining wing leads, his tone wavering with near-panic.

"There are too many. Explorers' Nation, SEPP, the traitor Legionaries. It's just like last time. We've got to—"

"Last time you didn't have *us*. Reform your wing. We take them *together!*"

Hesitation softened the man's response.

"Aye, commander. On you."

As one the Reapers and their Nameless allies coalesced into something resembling a formation, smoke trailing from a few of their ships, the maelstrom of battle thick around them. Several foes perished to their combined firepower, orbs of plasma and lines from multicannons clearing a bloody path. Yet the new aggressors pressed their attack, their ships numerous and their resolve unfailing. Missiles and lasers nipped at the edge of the allies' formation, a few more Nameless ships spiraling away, control lost and lives not far behind.

Amos Loren cursed and dodged a cannon salvo, his Fer de Lance battered and shields barely holding. His face bled from a gash over his brow, the blood dark and spreading. He selected a target, an Asp Scout, raking its shields with multicannon shells. The victim twisted and juked, its hull stubbornly absorbing the damage, returning fire until Loren was able to walk his fire across its canopy. The glass broke, the pilot within dying almost instantly, his ship intact around him. The Reaper renewed his cursing.

"It ain't good, boss. I reckon we've maybe bit off more than we can chew this time. The local yokels these are *not*."

From within the *Bloodfeather*, Evanson scowled.

"I just want Hurat's hide nailed to The Rock's mailslot entrance. Let *everyone* see what happens when—"

A new voice, roguish and welcome, cut across the comms. A Fer de Lance jumped in, a familiar one to every Reaper. Phisto of the Sobanii gripped his controls, vessels great and small jumping in at his side, thruster flaring in

unison, the motley assemblage vectored toward the bloody morass. The rogue grinned as weapons emerged from within the *No Data Available*.

“*Told ya they’d save some for us!*”

Evanson wanted to laugh in relief, but refrained. The ships accompanying his old friend were numerous— and in no way uniform.

“Made some new friends, huh?”

“Damn skippy I did. Why don’t you introduce yourselves?”

A Cutter loomed, massive and imposing. Its gleaming white hull housed a single pilot, his flight suit Imperial white with the ribbons of an aristocrat.

“Prince Tharik Otolì, at your service!”

An Anaconda rocketed forth from supercruise, weapons already deploying.

“Dillon Fallon, here to misbehave!”

A Krait Mk II, battered from years of hard use but deceptively well-armed.

“Myra Thorne here. Good to have the band back together!”

Another Cutter, just as imposing as the other though far more garishly painted.

“Rick Lehti, playing the only game in town!”

A new Anaconda, fighters already deploying from its massive bays.

“Ratty here. Heard there was a chance to piss off the powers-that-be!”

More vessels jumped in, the reinforcements speeding toward the engagement. Evanson dared a grin at the sight of them, the man shaking his head in amazement.

“*Gods-damn*, but it’s good to see some heavies!”

The newer vessels peeled away from one another, engaging their counterparts in the Nation’s armada. The commanders, independent yet cooperative with one another, linked their systems together yet fought as individuals. The

massive ships poured forth firepower and absorbed hit after hit in turn. Yet they were highly engineered affairs, the pride and joy of their owners, their capabilities far beyond that of a vessel fresh from its shipyard. Even absent tactical coordination, more and more Nation minions succumbed to their withering volleys.

The Reapers also rallied, their Nameless allies doing the same. Black-painted Fer de Lances engaged with all the deadliness for which they were known, undaunted by the sheer quantity of foes. Thruster trails told the stories of expert maneuvering, and jagged remains of ships told the story of death.

At last an Anaconda, the emblem of Explorer's Nation adorned upon its hull, was cut in half by a ruthless barrage of fire from the Reapers and newcomers alike, dooming the fleet's leader within. His screams from within the rupturing bridge chilled the hearts of every Nation pilot. Slowly, collectively, the will to fight was lost. Nation ships, nearly all damaged, abandoned the battle, numerous frameshift drives engaged. Their allies the Colonial Legionaries soon followed suit.

From within the *Bloodfeather*, Evanson scowled.

"After them!"

For a brief time, the battle turned to slaughter. Nation ships were vulnerable while their frameshift drives spooled, the more damaged ones falling to the vengeful fire of their foes. Vessels erupted and broke apart, flaming pieces spinning away, fires instantly snuffed out in the airless void. One by one the lucky ones escaped, blinking out of normal space, long thruster trails leading into witchspace. In a moment there were none at all.

As one, the men and women of the allies cheered, gloved fists pumped in the air, eyes wide in disbelief that the day had been theirs. Even Pisto Sobanii allowed himself a long sigh before raising comms.

"Looks like the cavalry showed up just in time."



Isaiah Evanson formed up on his friend's wing, the former throwing a salute.

"We were in bad shape there for awhile. I owe your new friends a drink."

Phisto chuckled. "*Our* friends, bud. They're here to help, come hell or high water. Don't give up on freedom just yet."

*Robardin Rock command center, Carcosa system*

Slender, trembling fingers snubbed out a cigarette, the newest in a small pile. Another was immediately fished out of a woman's inner jacket pocket, held between thin lips and lit with a well-used flip torch. The device was snapped shut and put away, the tip of the cigarette glowing in an eager first drag. It was only then that the fingers that held it ceased trembling.

Kari Kerenski dared not avert her gaze from the holo-readouts, fearful that even a blink might betray the happy illusion, where The Nameless had, in fact, carried the day. Serene Meadows stood rigid at her side, her features as intense as her partner's.

"Sobanii's plea worked. The independents have won for us an early victory."

Kerenski's eyes narrowed. "There is no victory until our claim upon this system is legitimized. The pride of those in power will prevent this even after blood stops flowing."

Meadows nodded. "They can influence events, but today has proven that they cannot outgun us when we rally support. A most interesting development."

"*Da*. But we must not allow complacency to seep into our minds. Our foes are wounded, not defeated. There will be more bloodshed in the coming days."

A Night Witch aide walked up, her young eyes betraying deep concern.

“With the fighting subsided the ground team has left for the surface. And... there is someone here for you. He said that you were expecting him.”

For a moment, Kerenski said nothing. At last she nodded, dismissing the aid with a wave of her hand.

“I will see him in the *Litvyak*, not here.”

“As you wish.”

The aid saluted and spun, walking away smartly. Both women watched her leave, Meadows’ tone dropping to a conspiratorial level.

“*More* guests? Ones that can only be received in private?”

Slavic features hardened in response.

“The past catches up to us all, *comrade*— and neither time nor light years will keep it at bay forever.”

### *Carcosa Prime surface, Carcosa system*

The flotilla of Night Witch vessels remained in place, the roar of their engines competing with the roar of the volcanic surface. The *Rosa* was set down next to the *Blackthorne*, her engines cold. Another Night Witch ship—a Python— was landed nearby, armed men and women walking out in slim, armored atmo suits. Tyrran and Yolanta stood at the opening of the cave, new plasma carbines slung across their backs, a weary eye ever turned to the darkness of the caverns. Thick Iberian leavened the woman’s words.

“Even with backup, I do not relish facing this *abominación* again.”

Tyrran gestured to the weapons on their backs and the approaching backup.

“There will be a dozen of us, *amor*. We won’t underestimate Theon.”

Púrpura’s nose wrinkled beneath her helmet glass.

“That is what we promised ourselves the *first* time.”

The team of Night Witches made their way to the pair, their leader a young woman with angular tattoos down her face. A grim smile lifted her lips upon seeing Púrpura. The Iberian woman nodded in return.

“Specialist Silva. It has been too long.”

Jaqueline Silva unslung her carbine, loading a fresh energy cell into it. Her accent was much like Púrpura’s, but with a variety of outside influences—yet her tone was no less sharp.

“Rumor has it we’re hunting something that isn’t supposed to exist. You should have sent for a machinist.”

Something that resembled a smile tightened Yolanta’s features.

“I have no intention of leaving this *thing* in working order. We are here for the information, not to make new friends.”

Tyrran leaned forward.

“And if he’s done anything to my ship...”

Silva turned to the man, amusement in her features.

“So this is him. Kerenski’s newcomer.”

Iberian hands went to Iberian hips. Feminine eyes told more than the words that followed from the lips beneath them.

“*Si*. Andor has been... an asset.”

A private moment passed between the women, Silva nodding in understanding.

“Let’s get to it, then. *Witches!*”

Not quite as one and not quite as individuals the team prepared their arms, forming smaller teams, not a word said between them. Púrpura knew them all, devotees to the cause and veterans of a dozen operations. She stepped higher upon a crag, volcanic rock crumbling slightly beneath her boot. She keyed her wrist comms, opening a general channel. A dozen

faces, hidden behind helmets, looked upwards to their leader. The weight and *gravitas* of her words rang out even over comms.

“So now you know why we are here, *camaradas*. Why *Salome* would have been here. An *abominación* from a forgotten past, treacherous and deadly, likely waits for us inside. Yet within its long memories are clues that can shed light on the larger foe and the lies that have enslaved humanity! I will not mince words. To fail today is to fail at the very reason that we have left the Bubble—which is why only the best are standing before me!”

There was a general snickering. Among the Witches the Reaper ground forces had a reputation for being brutes, unsuited for anything requiring a more nuanced skillset. Púrpura paused, looking over the team, her features hardening.

“Today, we complete Salome’s work. Today, we recover the key to unmasking the hidden puppetmasters. Let the truth be known, and the chips fall where they will!”

There was no cheering, but a silent raising of clenched fists. Jubilation wasn’t the Night Witch style, and wouldn’t be as long as Kari Kerenski remained in command. Yet without hesitation the team followed Púrpura and Andor into the blackness of the cave, stepping deeper and deeper into the lair of humanity’s greatest enemy.

### *Bridge of the Litvyak, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

Booted footsteps echoed upon the bare metal corridors of the aging Krait. Kari Kerenski waited in silence, smoke wafting from a cigarette between her fingers, her other hand resting upon the pommel of her old Chapterhouse blade. Phisto Sobanii and Isaiah Evanson stood at her side, newly returned from battle and still in their flightsuits. Neither of the

three said anything as they turned to face the bridge access, faces hardening as the doors slid open.

Gideon Hathaway strode in and halted, flanked by two others, far smaller and of petite builds. Their faces were concealed by flight helmets, and their bodies by flightsuits. For his part, Hathaway kept to his simple greys and blacks. A saber nearly identical to Kerenski's hung from a scabbard at his hip. Intelligent eyes evaluated those before him for long seconds. The aquiline pin of one in the Emperor's service glinted from a short collar.

Kari Kerenski, a woman for whom feelings were liabilities to be hidden, was unable to conceal her disgust. Her Slavic thickened as she beheld the trio.

"*Had* to bring your little science experiments along, didn't you?"

The two smaller figures, a boy and girl, removed their helmets. They were young, no older than twelve, with ashen hair and fair skin. The girl stepped forward, unsmiling and with eyes as cold as Kerenski's. Her accent was solidly Imperial.

"Hello, *Mother*."

At her sides, both men blinked. Sobanii shook his head.

"Kids. Goddamned *kids*. What the *hell* is going on?"

For his part, Evanson glaced to his Night Witch ally, suspicion in his eyes.

"And why are they calling you 'Mother'?"

Kerenski said nothing, only indulging in a long drag upon her cigarette, the contempt in her features only growing. Gideon smiled, shaking his head in gentle remonstrance.

"You haven't told them, have you? Haven't told *anyone*, I imagine. Not even that young Iberian thing you keep as a pet."

Sobanii cocked his head to the side. "Haven't told us *what*?"

The smugness upon the newcomer's face remained fixed, bowing in the Imperial style toward Evanson and Sobanii.

"But where are my manners? I am Gideon Hathaway, and in another life your comrade-in-arms and I worked together in the Emperor's service. I have the honor of doing so still."

Kerenski sneered. "You've only ever served *yourself*, Gideon."

Hathaway rested his hands upon the children's shoulders, cunning in his eyes. He glanced to the Reapers before him.

"Your comrade is more of an asset than you know. Long ago she was involved in a program to enhance the genetic potential of young combat pilots. There were... disagreements."

Kerenski folded her arms. "A tidy way to say that you were comfortable with experimenting on children. I *don't* do that."

Gideon's smile grew, though traces of pain crept into his eyes.

"But I *do*. I do, and I use the very best tools at my disposal."

An accusing finger pointed itself toward Hathaway. The woman's teeth bared themselves in a snarl.

"You had no *right*."

The boy now stepped forward, his face round and his hair curly. Yet his tone was more as an adult's, and his stance betrayed the confidence of a killer.

"Inquisitor Hathaway has told us that our mother has the strength of a lion and the cunning of a fox. That she is everything that my brothers and sisters should aspire to be. That her blood runs through our veins, though it wasn't always so."

The hand that held the woman's cigarette trembled slightly, steadied only because of another long drag. She

ignored the boy, only advancing toward the inquisitor. Her free hand squeezed the hilt of her saber.

“Gideon,” she said. “What have you *done*?”

The man gestured to the children, pride in his eyes. “The program,” he said, “was a success. Declassified, even, and in the care of Rind Gold Electronics. The Empire now wields a cadre of pilots that, had they been deployed to protect your precious Lady...”

His smile grew mocking.

“Well, things would have been different.”

Isaiah now advanced, fists balled.

“You son of a *bitch*!”

Kerenski raised her hand. Sobanii grabbed his friend’s shoulder, squeezing in warning. Yet he was heated himself, looking with new eyes upon the children.

“These are *clones*?”

Hathaway shook his head. “Enhanced from infancy with the genes of the worthy. They are now more Kerenski’s children than the nobody who birthed them. That she was at first unaware of her contribution to the project is entirely incidental.”

Sobanii shook his head.

“But... *why*?”

Amusement softened Gideon’s features.

“Aside from the obvious benefit of fielding superior pilots? These specimens before you are simply the latest development in an ongoing arms race, albeit one that has remained largely hidden from public view.”

Isaiah, his breathing now under control, twisted free from Phisto’s grip.

“Against *who*?”

Gideon shrugged. “I believe they’ve come to be known as ‘The Club’. And you’ve encountered their minions before, though thankfully never faced them in battle. There was the *one*, however...”

“Who?”

The knowing smile returned to the inquisitor's face.

"I don't want to name names, but there was one who gave Sobanii here the fight of his life. During your time in Pegasi, in the service of that upstart clanner."

Phisto froze.

"You *can't* be serious."

Gideon nodded. "I can be, and I am. She was one who we released from the clutches of the foe, closely monitored by a stand-in who posed as her father. It was only after his untimely demise that she slipped from our control, making Pegasi her permanent home. She was a prize asset— or at least would have been had she come of age in our service. You might remember her by the serpent tattoos upon her arms."

Isaiah, now, froze.

"Mother of *god*. *She* was... one of..."

Gideon turned, advancing toward the glass canopy, his back to Kerenski and the Reapers. For a moment he said nothing, watching the coming and going ships within The Rock's cavernous hangar tube. Without turning to face his hosts he spoke.

"The Black Flights are without mercy, and are entrusted to execute the Club's most sensitive missions. Yet even within their ranks there is a sub-contingent, composed exclusively of *them*. By her sisters, identical in skill and ruthlessness."

Phisto slumped, his gaze falling to his booted feet. It was only with difficulty that he was able to look upon the children at Gideon's side.

"And these little monsters are your way of having something that can match them. And if they're *here*..."

Kerenski stepped forward, alarm in her tone.

"Then you expect the foe to arrive as well, *da*?"

Slowly, Gideon turned, his hands clasped behind his back.



“What you’ve found— what *she* would have found— is the key to unfathomable power. The Club covets it. That they will insert themselves into the situation is a given.”

Kerenski’s features darkened. “Then we must prevent their interference at all costs.”

Phisto advanced, his fists balled, eye-to-eye with Hathaway.

“What *kind* of power are we talking?”

Gideon stood his ground, utterly unthreatened by the Reaper. The same sad smile as before returned.

“Let’s just say that Theon and his kind were the heroes before they were the villains—and we *all* owe them our lives.”

Night vision created an eerie outline of the pitch-black, empty chamber. The only thing of note was the capsule in which Theon had spent the long centuries, still open and dormant. Yolanta Púrpura cursed under breath, turning to the team.

“Nothing,” she said. “Not even new footprints. He is not here.”

Tyrran looked up, following a crude line of cables into the rocky ceiling with his eyes.

“He doesn’t need to be. I think we were so focused on finding the tin man that we forgot about the rest of his tin house.”

Heads rose, mirroring the way that Andor had traced the source of the capsule’s power. All looked the other way, to the long rocky cave down which they had traveled, where the path had forked into the neater corridor. Púrpura scowled.

“There is more to this place than a lifepod and a room full of junk. We should have explored the entire thing.”

An order was unnecessary. The Night Witches turned and proceeded down the blackened tunnels, reinforced boots on volcanic rock, arms at the ready. The tunnels became less straight and more the work of nature, twisting and weaving, volcanic stalagmites descending from the rocky ceilings. Downward it descended, the flow of lava heard first at the sides and then above the group, all noting but none commenting on the fact. At last Yolanta halted, raising her arm in silent signal. With her weapon she pointed.

“A door, *camaradas*. A door in the middle of all *this*.”

At her side, Tyrran blinked. Indeed, there was a door in the far distance, a dull light still glowing at its controls. Out of instinct the man raised his carbine, cursing in his poor Iberian.

“We *were* fools to not explore further!”

The team advanced, weapons at the ready. Silva reached out for the controls, frowning at the keypad.

“Ancient technology. No dust. Still functional. This thing has been used, and recently.”

Púrpura gestured around herself. “I do not wish to set charges in the middle of a lava tube. Can you run a bypass?”

Silva nodded, unpacking a kit, using multiple adaptors to even sync with the door.

“Just about. As I said, the newer interface barely connects with the old.”

Information scrolled past the device’s holodisplay, various lines going from red to green. The keypad, too, changed color. With a strained metal-on-metal groan, the door slid open. Silva nodded, securing her bypass kit. Her voice dropped to a whisper.

“And we’re in.”

As one the team filtered in, weapons raised, eyes widening as they stepped through the doorway. Andor was the first to say anything, giving voice to the obvious.

“We’re in a *ship*!”

Indeed, smooth metal corridors now replaced rocky tunnels.

Dim emergency lights provided scant light, little red islands of illumination running down the halls. Slowly, each step taken with caution, the team advanced. At the far end of the corridor was a double door, a few steps leading up to it. Yolanta shone her light upon it, the Night Witches at her sides advancing.

Silva knelt, brushing a fine layer of volcanic dust from the keypad. One hand of hers reached back to retrieve her bypass kit—and then halted.

“No lock,” she said. “We can go right in.”

Tyrran shook his head. “From a simpler age of spacefaring. When ships were owned by governments or corporations, not individuals.”

Without ceremony Silva keyed the controls. With a tortured groan the door slid open a short distance before grinding to a halt. Yet it was enough for the slim members of the team, and one by one they filtered through— and paused. Yolanta’s eyes grew wide at the sight before her.

*“Madre de Randomius!”*

Surrounding them was the ship’s bridge, dark and musty, its myriad of control panels topped with manual levers and buttons. The forward canopy had since collapsed inward, a massive influx of lava having broken through, rapidly cooling and creating a protective seal. The entire forward quarter of the space was rounded volcanic rock, the crew chairs long since consumed.

Tyrran blinked.

*“The ship... it is... immersed?”*

Púrpura nodded, shining her searchlight to and fro. The instrumentation around her was dead, and the lava seemed to have penetrated the lower decks before hardening.

*“Si. A crash landing, perhaps. Or a section of volcanic island, collapsed under the weight of the ship. Either way, this is probably how Theon got here.”*

Tyrran looked up and around, fixing his searchlight above the double door entryway.

*“Yola.”*

All eyes looked upward, to a corroded bronze plaque. The stolid capital letters upon it allowed no room for doubt:

*I.N.S. Sanctuary, Anaconda Explorer Edition  
Rimliner Galactic Shipyards  
March, 3148*

Andor’s tone dropped to an almost reverent level.

“A Rimliner Anaconda,” he breathed. “This ship is *old*.”

Púrpura turned, her light illuminating the crude controls.

“State of the art for its time. Something to which a top-level artificial would have had access.”

Tyrran nodded. “Let’s keep moving.”

The team pressed forward, checking various supply closets and crew quarters, searchlights shining in long-unused spaces. Some of the compartments looked untouched, clothing and personal items from another time as new as the day they were manufactured. Others were more disorderly, unsecured tools and the like thrown from their racks and resting on the deck. Silva turned from one, irritation in her eyes.

“Nothing. This place is a tomb.”

Púrpura shook her head. “We have only searched the upper levels, *camarada*. The cargo hold and main decks are below. Come.”

The Anaconda’s lifts were long dead, and so the Witches were forced to make use of cramped emergency tubes, gloved hands and booted feet barely fitting upon the tiny rungs inside. Down one oversized corridor was a row of glass tubes, built into the ship and large enough to hold a man. Most were shattered and empty, but several were filled with liquid, illuminated from within and bubbles rising to the top. Within a few of these were familiar shapes, humanoid yet hollow, lifeless yet not deceased, occasionally twitching from nerves that had never felt...

Yolanta paused, her features hardening. Contempt dripped from every syllable.

“Cloned skin grown in vats, worn like a cheap suit. Disgusting.”

Andor shook his head. “It is one thing to know how they are made. Another thing entirely to see it.”

The team advanced, their gazes never quite moving on from the lifeless eyes within the tubes. All forced themselves

to turn their backs to the unsettling sight, descending to the next level. The interior was now markedly different, the corridors nearly clogged with crude mechanical contraptions, piles of junk lining the walls. It was a machine shop, fabricators and assemblers lining the walls, half-completed creations laying in heaps. Footing was uneven, the red-lit shadows the stuff of biomechanical nightmare.

Yet only the human interlopers proved animate, suited flesh among twisted creation. Tyrran halted, his light shining upwards to one gruesome specimen. His words were the jest of one concealing fear.

*“There’s something you don’t see every day.”*

Before the rogue was an automaton, far taller than him, grotesque in its appearance. There was no symmetry to the thing, no smooth metal plating or benevolence of design. Exposed gears and musculata supported long arms, tipped with jagged claws and crudely-added weaponry. A human skull without its jaw was melded to what passed as a head. All in the team gazed into its sockets, empty darkness within them staring back.

Púrpura stiffened herself. “This was one of them,” she said. “From the old stories.”

A new voice, warm and familiar, echoed throughout the hull from concealed speakers, a dozen weapons raised on instinct.

*“The titans fierce, self-hid, or prison-bound  
Groaned for the old allegiance once more  
And listen’d in sharp pain for Saturn’s voice.”*

Silva grit her teeth, pointing her weapon from shadow to shadow, her heart pounding within her chest.

“What,” she whispered, “in the nine hells was *that*?”

Púrpura placed a hand on her comrade's shoulder.

"That is the *abominación* we hunt. It knows we're here."

Tyrran scowled, glancing to the inert automaton a final time.

"And still quoting its damned poetry."

The corridors remained strewn with mechanical refuse, bare deck plating now rare. Yet the Night Witches pressed onward, making their way through the detritus and scrap, twisted limbs of fallen mechanicals reaching out in their stillness. At last they arrived at a prominent set of doors, flaking stencil marking them as the main cargo hold entrance.

With a long, tortured groan, the cargo hold doors opened, revealing only darkness at first. Searchlights and night vision revealed more of the same, piles of mechanical horrors, none like the other, making for a macabre welcome. The team was barely inside when—

*"Shit!"*

As one they were blinded, the cargo hold's lights making their night vision one of sheer, piercing whiteness. Weapons were raised on instinct, a trap all but assured, yet...

*"It seemed no force could wake him from his place  
But there one came, and with a kindred hand  
Touch'd his wide shoulders, after bending low  
With reverence, though to one who knew it not  
She was a goddess of the infant world."*

Theon's warm voice was now heard in person, and not over the ship's intercom. From behind a pile of scrap he emerged, nude and battered, artificial skin in bloody tatters, inhuman components visible beneath. A halting limp told the story of damage yet unrepaired. A dozen weapons raised at

him, not a man or woman daring to speak. He smiled, or would have had his facial actuators been fully functional. Only a hint of digital distortion marred his speech, dripping as it was with contempt.

“I had intended those lines for the one I deemed worthy, who would at last rouse me from my slumber. Imagine my disappointment when it was *you*. ”

*Surface of Carcosa Prime, Carcosa system*

It was at first only a distortion on the scanners, a faint signal, no cause for alarm. Yet the lead pilot of the Night Witch squadron was vigilant, her young eyes narrowing in suspicion, all too aware of the war in the starry heavens above. The signal sharpened and resolved, splitting into multiple blips, each drawing closer. The pilot wasted no time in activating her comms.

“All Witches, be on alert. I have contacts on scope. Explorers’ Nation. Assume defensive formation!”

A dozen Night Witch vessels rocketed forth from their positions, gaining altitude to challenge the newcomers. Hardpoints deployed and targets were acquired...

*“Engage!”*

Weaponsfire was exchanged, missiles and lasers criss-crossing paths, staccato lines of multicannon tracers spewing from their bins. Formations broke and ships jockeyed for position, thrusters flaring and pilots cursing. Yet there was something immediately off about the engagement, something that made the flight lead’s heart pound in fear and not bloodlust.

“These guys are good. *Way* too damn good...”

A Witch ship exploded before her, its reactor falling to precision fire. Her own ship, a Viper, was soaking up damage



at a worrying rate. The pilot dodged and juked, but the rings of her shields faded swiftly, the ripples of damage never-ending. Screams of frustration and pain filled the Night Witch comms. Another hard impact threw her in her seat.

“Something is definitely *wrong!*”

*Bridge of the Litvyak, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

Kari Kerenski sealed her flightsuit with one swift motion, her helmet tucked under her arm. On the main holodisplay was a tactical readout of the situation over Carcosa Prime, ship wireframes transitioning from green to yellow to red, the screams of her comrades loud and clear though the listening devices aboard their ships. On the other was her aide, concern in her eyes.

“All of them? Even the scouts?”

Kerenski spun, her Slavic eyes cold.

“*Da*. All of them. We stand at the brink of success or failure. I want every ship. Every man or woman who can raise a weapon— even *you*. Now go.”

The aide nodded, the holofac fading out. Gideon Hathaway, still present, leaned against the far bulkhead. His gentleness betrayed a subtle mocking.

“Trouble with your people?”

The woman scowled. “It was a trap. My second is deep underground in that hellhole, and my people are being ambushed. I cannot even send a warning.”

The mocking in the inquisitor’s eyes grew. “And the Nation’s ships outclassing your own even as we speak. You’ll need help.”

Contempt blazed in Kerenski’s eyes.

“Never.”

Hathaway cocked his head to the side. “To whom would you rather be indebted? An old comrade, or *them*? Surely you know that Black Flight will soon arrive.”

“A false choice, Gideon. The Witches will stand on our own, as we always have.”

For the first time, real pity softened Hathaway’s features.

“You face monsters today, old friend. And your people will be consumed by them. You *need* us.”

Kari Kerenski held up a warning finger, advancing close to her former comrade.

“I will *not* send children to do the work of professionals.”

All the old conspiratorial arrogance returned to Gideon’s features. His tone dropped to a chill, speaking only after a pause.

“After all this time, I’d have thought that *you* would know better than to confuse children...”

The man snapped his fingers. Several of the sharp-faced youths filed in, their footsteps silent. With cold eyes they gazed as one at Kerenski, who took a step back despite herself. Gideon was the last to do so, his lips curling into almost a smile.

“... with angels.”

*Theon’s Lair, Carcosa Prime, Carcosa system*

Normal vision restored itself for the Night Witches, lined up with weapons drawn, the several facing off against the one. Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura advanced a step, her carbine pointed squarely at the artificial’s head.

“I do not have time for this. One way or another, you are coming with *us*. No games. No lies. *Now*.”

The warm smile remained, Theon nodding to the assemblage before him.

“You speak of games, yet taunt me by dumping that *filth* at my doorstep. Its presence is... *distracting*, I admit.”

Andor, now, took his place at his lover’s side.

“All we want is the datacore. If we have to blast it out of you, we will.”

A low chuckle. An easy clasping of hands behind a back.

“No, friend. You want what all dreamers want: a grand revelation, an epiphany that will drive your mysterious foes from the shadows, the final truth that will put an end to your labors.”

Púrpura spat her reply.

“*Si*. It is why Salome intended to seek you out.”

Another easy chuckle, too human for comfort.

“Are you *really* that naive?”

A scowl hardened Púrpura’s features.

“No. But I *am* growing impatient.”

Theon paced amid the mechanical detritus, looking at his hands, the crude stitching upon them visible even from where the Witches stood.

“I allowed myself to become a rumor, since chasing rumors had by then become something of a hobby for her. She *knew* that she would need something powerful to back her movement, something more profound than starry-eyed pilots. She needed something that would make even those in power tremble, their own entombed sins unleashed upon them. But more than that, *I* needed *her*.”

Yolanta blinked. “*No*. You cannot be serio—”

Theon whirled, his eyes boring into hers, his features hard.

“That half-machine Jaques was the key. An antique, simple to contact and simple to manipulate.”

Púrpura advanced, eye to eye with Theon. “Jaques is in league with *you*?”

The artificial scoffed, his every gesture one of contempt.

“Hardly. Despite his enhancements he’s as human as the day he was birthed from some putrid womb. Simple curiosity on his part was enough for my purposes, as was using him to contact the appropriate parties.”

Púrpura said nothing for a moment, her eyes cast downward and then again to the artificial, her words strained.

“But why Salome? And why would she agree to meet *you*?”

Theon smirked. “Your idol is the *only* one who could have given me what I want. And *I* am the only one who could have given her what *she* wanted.”

Yolanta blinked. “But she could not have. *Abominacións* like you require the blood of both lines. Warrior *and* leader. You said so yourself.”

Cunning, sharp and malevolent, animated Theon’s every gesture, his movement now more of an animal than a man.

“Salome was unique among the clones. A swift learner of both the pen *and* the sword, was she not? Such care taken to conceal what she was, even from herself!”

Púrpura advanced, eyes flashing even as they widened.

“She was of *both* lines. The key to unspeakable power. Hope and doom alike, depending on who got the drop on whom.”

Feral anticipation hastened the artificial’s words, his pacing increasing.

“*Yes*. Her in my hands would have restored an ancient order, rising from the ashes of time to vanquish the monsters at the gate. Me in *her* hands, well...”

Theon’s gate increased, his every word dripping with mockery.

“Mortals never *did* do well with power meant for gods, did they?”

Tyrran cursed, looking around himself, his accent thickening.

“A trap. This was all a *trap*. You never had any intention of helping her.”

Theon halted, his back turned arrogantly to the dozen weapons pointed at it, purpose strengthening his tone.

“For my kind, her genetic code was both the cage *and* the key. Fortunately I was given access to poor—but ready—substitutes. Never again will your crude devices constrain me.”

Tyrran shook his head, his eyes widening.

“And we’re the suckers who brought you to them. So you have the codes— what does that make you?”

In a slow, grandiose gesture, Theon spread his arms, turning to face the Night Witches, grotesque in his biomechanical mutilation. Something primal blazed in his eyes.

*“Unchained.”*

### *Carcosa Prime, Carcosa system*

The *Lityyak*’s engines roared, the Krait Mk II speeding toward the surface, dozens of Night Witch ships at its sides. Every man and woman in the secretive group was flying or transported within their hulls, their endgame so tantalizingly close, their comrades so desperately in danger. The battle between the advance force and their assailants loomed in the distance, there being far fewer of the former.

From within her ship, Kerenski scowled. She opened a channel, her words sharp.

“Explorers do not fight this well. Even seasoned mercs cannot overwhelm the Witches with such ease. Something is

wrong, and we must be prepared. Today is not the day for mercy, *comrades. Engage!*”

*Derelict Anaconda, Carcosa Prime, Carcosa system*

A Night Witch was the first to die, run through from behind by a long, cruel-looking industrial blade. From the shadows rose various hulking shapes, inhuman and shambling, long-still mechanical limbs returning to life. Monstrous biomechanical abominations rose from their piles of scrap, cobbled together from spare parts, each one crude and unique.

Reaction from the others was instant, whether it was to fight or take cover. Yolanta tried and failed to get a bead on Theon, who dove for cover behind a pair of monstrosities, the woman’s plasma slugs slowing but not destroying them. It was only by the barest of margins that her and Tyrran missed, backing up against the wall of horrors. Thick Iberian cut through the morass.

*“As one, camaradas!”*

Weaponsfire, bright and flashing, illuminated the chamber in short, strobe-like bursts. Some of the mechanical monstrosities were blasted apart. Others fell only to crawl relentlessly forward, dragging with clawed arms their legless bodies. Still others shrugged off the damage, lunging at the nearest Witch.

The greater bulk of the humans formed a circle around Púrpura, the formation barely keeping the hulking ambushers at bay, more shambling to their feet to replace their blasted brethren. Still they lost ground, the mission to capture Theon all but forgotten, raw survival the order of the moment. The artificial in question stalked from behind his mechanical

minions, cruelty in his inhuman features. His eyes locked with those of Púrpura's.

"*You* will have the honor of being the first to fall before us. Your factories, your ships, your very *memories* will serve our return!"

The Witch snarled, dispatching an artificial with a burst from her carbine, its barrel hot. Thick Iberian escaped her lips as she raised her weapon at Theon's head.

"Like they did *before*?"

The artificial darted to one side, dodging the stream of tracers, allowing another of his kind to absorb the barrage. Tyrran, too, raised his weapon to fire. An iron golem at Theon's side crouched to spring upon the man, but Theon raised his hand. The golem halted, cut down by the man's return fire. Theon seemed to take no notice, his eyes boring into those of Andor, an entirely new motivation dancing within them. He spoke, though not to anyone in particular.

"Not him. Not *yet*."

### *High orbit, Carcosa Prime*

Another Night Witch ship exploded before Kerenski, a Viper cut to ribbons by multicannon fire. Slavic obscenities peppered the woman's speech as she slammed her controls to and fro, straining the *Litvyak's* engines just to get a bead on the attacker. She was able to score a glancing hit with a salvo of her own.

"We cannot go on like this. Ground teams, prepare to drop. I want boots on the ground... *now!*"

Several of the larger Night Witch vessels dove for the planet's surface, ignoring the damage done to them. Their escorts tried and failed to attract the attention of the Explorers' Nation interlopers, who poured merciless firepower upon their

slower targets. It wasn't long before hulls erupted in flame, screams of desperation and pain flooding the comms. The Night Witches had few enough transports as it was, and only one remained...

Like a school of piranhas the Nation vessels swarmed the final transport, an aging Python too cumbersome to dodge every salvo. The ship drifted and shuddered, its hull rent with merciless weaponsfire, flame and smoke and crew spewing from within. Kerenski, normally so placid even in battle, gripped her controls.

“*Nyet!*”

The Python broke into numerous tiny fragments, the last of the Night Witch ground teams perished within. There was no time for grief, no time to process the loss and formulate a new plan. There was only action and survival. Kerenski keyed her comms at once.

“It is down to us, *comrades*. Form up on me and dive for the planet's surface at *once!*”

The command wing was few in number, barely a handful of survivors, each one damaged in some fashion. The Night Witches skimmed the volcanic surface, streaking low over the primordial landscape, wary for any traps, the pain of the day's terrible losses shoved aside. The wreckage of crashed vessels, some hostile but most friendly, dotted the hellscape leading up to the cave. In the distance was a pair of familiar ships landed upon the rocky ground, one black and the other a distinct violet.

Enemy red contacts flashed on the scanners, Nation ships of war, bearing down on the Witches from high orbit. Weaponsfire caught one of their quarry, its engine exploding, the ship ploughing into the raging lava, the pilot screaming her last. Kerenski looked around through the *Litvyak's* canopy, straining to see the new assailants.

“Get to the landing site, *comrades*. Do not let them distract you!”



Their pursuers were numerous, Eagles and Vipers and Vultures, fast and hard to hit. Nonstop weaponsfire from above threatened to push the larger ships into the raging inferno below. Cannon rounds penetrated shields and hull, warning klaxons screaming for attention within their bridges, the final ships of the once formidable Night Witch fleet perishing one by one.

“Too much... damage! I can’t—”

A final cry, and silence.

“It’s been an honor, *comrade*. I’m sorry I—”

Static.

Kari Kerenski flew alone, her Krait absorbing damage, the nonstop impacts from shell, laser, and missile taking their toll. One smoking engine flamed out, followed by the other. The ship veered to one side, clipping a volcanic outcrop, its starboard sensor pole snapping off, the island of stability rapidly approaching. The woman steeled herself, nudging her ship toward it with what little control she possessed, preparing herself for death or glory...

A new voice came over the comms, one that Kerenski loathed and dreaded. The steady diction of Gideon Hathaway broke the same time his wing did, a flotilla of Imperial Couriers closing the distance, void black instead of the usual Gutamaya cream. They hunted the Nation ships even as they hunted the lone Night Witch.

“Complete your mission, Inquisitor!”

The Couriers were swift, far swifter than the Nation vessels, blue thrusters flaring in elegant patterns. They broke in neat diamond formations, easily the match of their Nation counterparts. Their weapons were advanced plasma cannons and rapid-fire railguns. Their shields glowed Prismatic green. Indeed, they were the pinnacle of Imperial military technology, procured through elite contacts within the Empire itself.

Hot blue thruster trails now intermingled with the rest, bright flashes plasma and rails, each shot one of precision.

Now Nation ships found themselves the victims, falling from the skies one by one, the newcomers their equal in skill and firepower. An Anaconda, ungainly in planetary maneuvers, was ripped apart in midair, its shields succumbing to plasma volleys, its engines crippled from precision rail fire. Kerenski watched with cold satisfaction as it fell to the ground, its impact breaking through the blackened rock and into the bubble magma beneath. It was only then that the woman keyed her comms, speaking through clenched teeth. The horizon rose and rose, the Krait speeding toward it.

“My team is lost. My ship... about to crash land. So far nothing has escaped the surface.”

Hathaway was quick to respond, his Courier streaking by the *Litvyak*.

“And you’re *certain* that that thing is down there?”

The woman nodded. “*Da*. Andor’s ship is landed nearby. The artificial is trapped, but only if he can be contained.”

“Then *contain* him. We shall set down and assist—assuming that you survive.”

Kerenski swore in her native tongue.

“And in case I *don’t*, there’s something I need to say.”

The inquisitor’s usual amusement leavened his tone.

“Oh?”

The blackened ground and wrecked ships upon it drew nearer and nearer. Kari lowered the *Litvyak*’s landing gear, knowing that it would do little good. Her hands went from her controls to a pair of emergency handles on her seat. The ground was now streaking just beneath her canopy, so close and getting closer...

“I am *not* one of your damned inquisitors.”

*Derelict ship, Carcosa Prime surface*

“Behind you, *amor!*”

Tyrran wheeled around, nearly caught unaware, staggering a biomechanical horror with a single shot to its head. The monstrosity stumbled back a few paces before toppling backward. Mechanical limbs ceased movement. Man and woman pressed against the other’s back, carnage all around them, human and machines locked in bitter, mortal struggle.

Magazines were swapped and ones loaded. Yolanta’s gaze darted from one threat to the next. Even over the din of battle, the strained footsteps of long-dormant machines shambled forward. The shadows themselves moved with the silhouettes of the inhuman foe, relentless and without number. Theon was nowhere to be seen.

The circle of Night Witches closed ranks, tighter and tighter, ringed by a pile of biomechanical bodies. Only point-blank bursts of carbine fire kept the abominations at bay. Jaqueline Silva emptied a clip, ejecting the spent magazine, her hand falling to her suit’s utility harness, fingers grasping for a replacement that wasn’t there.

“I’m out!”

Yolanta Púrpura produced a fresh clip, tossing it to her *camarada*, direness in her eyes.

“Make it count. It is my last one!”

Silva slammed the magazine home. Tiny readouts on her carbine went from red to green.

“*Gracias!*”

Slowly, inexorably, the Night Witches were forced into a corner, their backs to the corroded hull, their number now a dwindling semi-circle of stalwarts. Wounded men and women formed a second line, those who could still walk or crawl to safety, fighting through the pain, passing their ammunition to those on their feet. The only light in the chamber was the slashes of weaponsfire.

Blood splattered across Yola’s helmet, her comrade’s weapon emptying at the wrong moment, the monstrosity

across from him lunging forward with long, rusty pincers. His scream was cut short only by his throat being opened. Púrpura raised her weapon, sending white-hot plasma bolts into the thing's skeletal chest, gears and components now blackened slag. Thin legs toppled, a digital death scream filling the chamber. Another approach from behind to replace it.

Tyrran wheeled his lover around, their helmets nearly touching. He pointed into the darkness.

"We need to *leave!* The mission is—"

"*I know!*"

Resolution hardened Yola's features. All around her, the remaining Night Witches fought for their lives. Some had discarded their spent carbines and unholstered their pistols, squeezing round after round into the approaching shadows. Men and women fought like titans, one mechanical after another falling to their fire. Yet the abominations were unending.

"Night Witches, *fall back!*"

Attempts to breach the wall of monstrosities were made, but for each one that fell, two shambled forth from the shadows to replace it. Ammunition was expended, first for the carbines and then the pistols, the men and women resorting to desperate hand-to-hand action with combat knives. The screams of the dying away team filled the Night Witch comms, until only a handful were left.

Tyrran switched his communicator to a private channel.

"It's been a hell of a ride, *mi amor.*"

Yolanta's eyes flashed. She opened her mouth in rebuke, but instead softened her features, her gaze meeting his in the darkness. Gloved fingers intertwined.

"*Si.*"

Jaqueline Silva, defiant to the end, positioned herself between the nearest mechanical and her leader. She raised her weapon, prepared to expend the last of its ammunition...

The impact was sudden, deafening even with auto-dampeners. The very ship, long encrusted in hardened volcanic rock, was jarred from its foundations, humans and mechanicals alike thrown to the deck. Rock and metal *collapsed*, the harsh, fiery light of Carcosa Prime's atmosphere flooding the space, the long-brittle upper levels of the Anaconda sheared away. Tyrran cried out and dove, covering Yolanta with his own body, thick clouds of ash roiling about them. The nearest mechanicals were crushed by falling rock. Others were obstructed. All halted their carnage to take stock of the situation, their gazes lifting in an almost human manner.

It was Yolanta who pointed upward, through the felled mechanicals and mangled Night Witch bodies. She blinked, half-blind in the sudden light, her resolve nevertheless renewed. A familiar figure was bounding up the debris.

*"Theon!"*

As one the Night Witches gave chase, scrambling to their feet, dodging the still-prone abominations that reached out to them as they passed. Already exhausted they climbed up the volcanic boulders and twisted deck plating, the heat from the Carcosan surface already felt through their atmo suits. The shuffling abominations below tried and failed to follow, the jagged crags and poor footing ill-suited to claws and misshapen appendages.

Tyrran was the first to reach the surface, breathing hard, blinking in disbelief at the sights that surrounded him. Entire sections of the cave had collapsed, destroyed in a long, wide defile of a ship crashing directly above them. His eyes followed the rocky ravine, so recently carved into the soil, widening as he beheld its source. He knelt, pointing to the wreckage nearby.

*"It's the Litvyak!"*

Púrpura and Silva rolled to their backs, chests heaving in exhaustion, faces soaked with perspiration. The former barely had the energy to nod as she took in the sight. The Krait

had crash-landed at speed, forcing a channel along the volcanic rock, colliding with full force into the *Rosa*. Neither vessel would ever fly again. In the distance shots rang out, coming from the direction of the *Litvyak*.

Púrpura blinked, her eyes stinging.

“Kerenski... we have to help her... we can’t just—”

Silva now seized her leader by the arm, pointing into the distance. A familiar figure, limping but still formidable, was making its way to the *Blackthorne*, the only remaining vessel.

“There he is!”

Púrpura looked from one side to the other. Kerenski. Theon. Her mentor. Her mission.

The woman paused, her heart pounding.

*What would Kerenski do? “There can be no loyalty to the cause without loyalty to one’s people.” Did she not always say that?*

The artificial retreated into the distance. The *Litvyak* sat still, its engines smoldering. A ragged exhale escaped Púrpura’s lips.

*She would also say to get on with the damned mission.*

Yolanta Púrpura rose, her chin lifted but her heart breaking, becoming everything that she needed to be. Her features hardened in resolution.

“After the *abominación!*”

The trio of surviving Night Witches, exhausted, dashed across the rocky hellscape, closing in on the wounded artificial. There was nothing human about his movements, metal plainly visible beneath bloody, tattered flesh. The humans closed in, the horrors of the resurgent AI now clear, personal survival now far from their thoughts.

Theon arrived first, a skeletal finger keying the code to open the Krait’s main accessway. He paused, the sound of something heavy running, closing the distance...

The entryway ramp finished descending just as Tyrran slammed into the artificial. The two rolled around upon the

hard metal stairs, Tyrran winded and in pain, Theon broken and far from his full strength. Yet even the broken artificial was too strong for a single man to overpower, and Theon threw Andor to ground, more cloned flesh torn away from his bionic face, crusted with blood and volcanic ash. He composed himself in mocking imitation of something human.

“A worthy effort, but still a mortal challenging a god.”

In the distance an Iberian voice, haughty and feminine, called out.

“What about *armed* mortals, *bastardo*?”

Plasma bolts raked the artificial’s chest, staggering him backward. Yolanta Púrpura and Jaqueline Silva advanced, weapons raised, firing in short bursts. Flesh incinerated and metal slagged. Theon spun to flee from the onslaught, but a burst of plasma caught his leg at the knee, disfiguring the joint. The artificial fell forward, rolling to his back, arms raised to shield its face, its good leg still pushing it toward the entryway.

Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura wore a mask of hatred, her weapon raised and her teeth bared in bloodlust. Another burst flayed a biomechanical arm, rendering it all but useless.

“That was for my ship!”

A second volley finished the job of the first, severing Theon’s arm at the elbow, dangling from a patch of burned skin. The artificial cried out in *pain*.

“That was for my *camaradas*!”

The Iberian Night Witch raised her weapon, its barrel pointed directly at the artificial’s head.

“*And this is for Kari Kerenski!*”

Before either Silva or Andor could stop her, Yolanta Púrpura expended the remains of her weapon into the artificial’s face, the last of its human features boiling away, incinerated by superheated plasma bolts. Its body convulsed, broken limbs twitching, an inhuman death scream an inglorious end for one such as he. The scream faded into

silence. Limbs ceased movement. At last, the artificial known first as The Inhabitant and then as Theon laid still.

For a long moment, all was silent. Ash and cinder danced in the volcanic air. The trio of surviving Night Witches stood over Theon's corpse, all burnt flesh and slagged metal. Silva lowered her weapon. Tyrran rose, exhausted and unsteady, taking his place at his lover's side. His tone wasn't one of victory but dejection.

"We have failed our mission, *mi amor*."

Púrpura kept her weapon leveled, not daring to believe that the artificial was truly dead. Not a trace of pity softened her words.

"No. It was foolish to believe that this *thing* could ever be trusted. I have done us all a favor by dispatching it."

Andor shook his head.

"And to think that Salome herself intended to reckon with it."

Yolanta's expression darkened, her voice dropping. The low rumble of ship-class engines thundered in their chests; sleek, dark Imperial Couriers were landing where they could. Still more circled overhead, firing ship-class weapons into the exposed hulk of the *Sanctuary*. Explosions and heavy impacts shook the ground. At last, Yolanta lowered her weapon, turning to face her comrades. Raven hair framed her features, as dark as her Iberian eyes. With new authority the woman spoke, not quite the Night Witch and not quite the rogue.

"Then Salome was a fool as well."

*Ruined bridge of the Litvyak, surface of Carcosa Prime*

Kari Kerenski awakened with a cough, the taste of ash upon her tongue. The woman groaned, every bone and muscle



protesting even the slightest movement. Beyond the Krait's ruptured canopy was a blackened, primordial hellscape, the hotness of which washed over her in waves. For a moment Kari allowed her eyes to close, daring to entertain thoughts of doom.

*No survivors. Not even Andor and Púrpura. I am the last of the Night Witches... the infiltrator who ended up leading them.*

The woman spat, ash and blood upon the shattered Remlock glass. Her chest shook with a low, bitter chuckle.

*It was your mission to destroy them from the inside, da? Well... mission accomplished, Agent Kerenski.*

Slowly, painfully, Kerenski raised herself from her flight chair, barely able to walk. She opened a nearby storage compartment, securing a pistol and her old Inquisitor's sabre to her hip. The planet's air was rancid and foul, and the woman stumbled down the *Litvyak's* main corridor, accessing a supply closet, swapping out her shattered helmet for a spare. The clean, cool air helped her focus, but did nothing for the pain.

The Kraits's rear access slid open with a tortured metal-on-metal groan, the rocky ground before it a deep furrow in the volcanic rock. The lift that would normally have lowered her to the surface was destroyed. Kerenski raised a gloved hand to shade her eyes. Near her ship was another, a downed Explorers Nation Chieftain, a smoldering ruin which no one had the right to escape. Yet from within there was the sound of scrap metal being pushed aside, heavy footsteps making their way to the surface.

The pilot, a man with golden hair and strong features, emerged not from a hatch but a jagged gash in the hull plating. His flightsuit was torn, blood caking his features from head to toe, the white of his garb marred with crimson. Yet he seemed none the worse for wear, less slowed by his injuries and the hostile planet than he should have. Kerenski sighed.

*In shock, most likely. He'll collapse soon.*

But the man didn't collapse. He looked around, his movement halting and stunted, shambling toward Kerenski. The woman pulled her pistol, pointing it at the Nation pilot. Kerenski blinked her eyes, her own vision blurry, the weight of the pistol more than it should have been...

"Stop right there or I'll shoot!"

The man paused for a moment, looking with dull eyes at Kerenski, resuming his path toward her in earnest. The woman exhaled.

*To hell with this.*

The woman squeezed off a trio of shots, laser blasts that burned through suit and skin. Black, cauterized wounds that ought to have incinerated internal organs did nothing to slow the man. Kerenski blinked.

*So it isn't shock. Combat enhancers, then.*

Three more shots also failed to slow the man, though his chest was now an ugly morass of charring and burns. The woman fell back, the man nearly upon her, snarling in hatred.

*"Die!"*

Kerenski raised her pistol, shot after shot burning away the man's face. Even through her Remlok, the odor of burning flesh filled her nostrils. The man stumbled and fell forward, dead at last.

The Explorer's Nation pilot was by no means the first man to die at the hands of Kari Kerenski, but he *had* clung the most stubbornly to life. With the toe of her boot she flipped him over. What she saw made her take a step back.

Where there should have been bone and brain, there was metal and circuitry, slagged and blackened from the laser blasts. Charred skin ringed around the impact points, the damage burrowing deep within the mechanical skull. Kerenski dropped to one knee, reaching within the wound, pulling at a melted AI core. With some effort it broke free, the woman holding the long-banned technology before her.

*By Randomius...*

In the far distance, the staccato sound of plasma carbines could be heard. There was a low rumble coming from high altitude— several of them, in fact— but Kerenski knew the sound of approaching Couriers better than most. The Night Witch made her way back to the *Litvyaks*'s rear access, throwing a cautious glance over her shoulder to the dead artificial. He had seemed so human, so lifelike...

*So very much like Theon. How many of them are there?*

*Carcosa Prime surface, Carcosa system, twenty minutes later*

Gideon Hathaway was silent for a long time, observing the felled artificials, splayed ingloriously upon the rocky volcanic surface. At his sides were the same boy and girl as before, their expressions blank as they too stared at the biomechanical men, their bodies mutilated and grotesque. Across from the corpses were Kerenski, Andor, Púrpura and Silva. The Inquisitor's gaze lifted to the Night Witches, his tone unforgiving even in its gentleness.

"I suppose that between the four of you, the Night Witches can still form a proper wing."

Andor stepped forward, his fists balled.

"No. We'd need ships for that."

Silva, too, scoffed.

"And I'm not a pilot."

Hathaway looked beyond the Iberians, to the wrecks of the *Rosa* and *Litvyak*. Only the *Blackthorne* was intact, and even it was in battered shape thanks to Theon's reckless use of neutron stars to cross the distance to Colonia so swiftly. Gideon nodded, a nearly imperceptible gesture.

"Indeed."

Volcanic wind blew ash and cinders amid the cadre of operatives. Gideon threw a final glance to the biomechanical corpses at his feet, nodding to the Night Witches.

“We are not blind to the sacrifices made to get to this point. If the datacores within prove salvageable, your compatriots’ deaths will not have been in vain.”

Púrpura stepped forward, defiance in her eyes.

“And their story will be told, *si*?”

For a long moment, Gideon locked eyes with the young Night Witch. Then he shifted his gaze to Kerenski.

“No.”

Kari Kerenski gestured to her subordinates.

“Load these specimens aboard your ship and get to the installation. The one marked ‘unauthorized’ on your map. Meadows will take delivery.”

Púrpura narrowed her eyes. “And then?”

“Then we will all do what we must.”

There were cautious nods from the junior Night Witches. Andor, Púrpura, and Silva strained to load the bodies into the reinforced capsule, knowing that their presence wasn’t desired among the more senior operatives. The *Blackthorne*’s engines roared to life, still strong even after days of abuse, the Phantom lifting from the scorched surface, Hathaway and Kerenski shielding their eyes against its heat and blast. Soon the ship, so massive in person, was little more than a sliver against the roiling skies of Carcosa Prime.

Kerenski watched the ship disappear into the distance, her tired eyes closing, the deaths of her *comrades* making the approaching moment one of peace. She turned her back to Gideon and the two children, one hand grasping the hilt of her sabre, the other unsealing her helmet and tossing it aside. The hot winds of Carcosa Prime seared her face, her ponytail dancing amid ash and cinders. Already her lungs burned with protest.

Kari Kerenski— agent, inquisitor, revolutionary, and turncoat— knelt upon the rocky surface. She gazed upward, chin held high, the fiery horizon a thing of primordial beauty.

*Not bad*, she thought.

“Get on with it, Hathaway.”

The thrust was expertly done, the inquisitor’s blade bursting through her chest, her heart cleanly pierced. A second blade followed the first, the twin sabres lingering a moment before neatly withdrawing. There was less pain than she’d anticipated. The woman coughed, blood running down her chin and throat, dark stains growing across the front of her flightsuit. Footsteps, softer than she’d expected, could be heard on either side. Standing before her was the same boy and girl, smaller versions of the Imperial sabres in their hands, blades crimson with her blood. Their features held neither benevolence nor malice. At last Gideon Hathaway himself drew himself up, unsheathing his own sabre for the *coup de grace*.

Yet the cunning never left Kerenski’s eyes, beholding the trio a final time. A predator’s smile lifted her bloody lips.

“Perhaps,” she managed, “you *are* my children after all.”

The children said nothing in reply. Gideon knelt before his old partner, hard tenderness in his eyes.

“This is a good death,” he said. “Would that you had lived a good life.”

Kerenski lunged forward, drawing the man close, her final words choked and urgent. Dying eyes bored into his.

“Gideon,” she whispered. “There is something you must do...”

Burning thruster trails wove a chaotic weave through the blackness of space.

Flashes of lasers and multicannon tracers crisscrossed in deadly duels.

Screams of victory and death told the tale of battle.

Through it all, the core of Loren's Reapers fought like avatars of death, their allies at their side, their enemies endless in number. Robardin Rock itself loomed in the distance, not one but several desperate holding actions mere kilometers away, the forces of Explorer's Nation attacking from several vectors. Only the stalwart coalition of Reapers, Nameless, and independent Commanders kept them at bay.

Wreckage of ships, allied and adversary alike, ever drifted from these combat zones. Yet the wreckage was unevenly sourced, with the defenders' casualties mounting. Formations closed tighter and tighter, the full might of Explorer's Nation and those sympathetic to Colonia's *status quo* ever arriving *en mass*. Heading up the main defence force was Isaiah Evanson and his command wing of Reapers, formidable shields barely hanging on, weapons glowing hot from prolonged use. From within the bridge of the *Bloodfeather*, Evanson cursed, several wing leaders vying for his attention via comms.

"I *know* that they're bringing in heavies! Focus on the smaller ships and leave 'em in the dust. This is about *blood*. Stack enough bodies and turn them into our damned fortress!"

Not waiting for a reply, Evanson opened a line to his most trusted allies, his orders rapid and terse.

“Phisto, I want you to take your indies and focus on those elites. I don't know where EN got so many ace pilots, but we aren't going to last unless we take them out!”

The rogue's response was as sarcastic as could be expected.

“Should have known that *I'd* be doing the heavy lifting. C'mon, Jelli— I need some blunt force trauma!”

Sobanii's Fer de Lance broke formation, followed by several ships of varying types. The Federal Corvette *Resolution*, massive and imposing, trailed the main formation, bristling with weapons. Others, Anacondas and Cutters and Corvettes, trailed in its wake.

From within the *Resolution's* bridge, Stannis Jellicoe ran a hand through a shock of blonde hair. He turned to his side, a dire smirk lifting one side of his mouth.

“Nice helmet, Vikash.”

The olive-complected crewmate nodded from his duty station, touching his chest and then—over the intelliglass of his helmet— his forehead in the manner of his heritage.

“The sword is at last drawn against the wolves,” he replied.

Jellicoe turned back to the battle unfolding before them, ships and weaponsfire dancing all around. He shoved the throttle forward, rocketing the *Resolution* into the morass.

“And what a pack of them there are. *Onward!*”

The heavies rocketed forward, eschewing the coordination of their Reaper allies and plunging into the thick of battle. Anacondas, Corvettes, and even Imperial Cutters cut a bloody swathe through the Nation formations. Each vessel was a fortress, bristling with grey market modifications, far more difficult to kill than their stock equivalents.

Sheer firepower accomplished the work of numbers. Smaller Nation vessels, far less well-equipped, succumbed to the heavies in droves, leaving their more elite compatriots exposed. Yet ship after Explorers' Nation ship jumped in, two seeming to replace every one felled in battle. Scrap and fire

congested the combat zone. Many of the newly-arrived flew with the passionate zeal of amateurs, and the rest with the same precision as the others, unknown even among the tanks of the Reapers...

Jellicoe was rocked to one side, the *Resolution's* canopy glass left cracked from a missile impact. He cursed, flipping the massive ship around, trying and failing to get a bead on his assailant.

"Most of these locals are bloody rubbish... but the ones that *aren't*..."

The voice of Tharik Otoli, refined and composed, cut across the comms. Alarm klaxons could be heard in the background, each competing with the other for attention.

"I fear you to be correct, my friend. Even the *Justicar* can only take so much abuse."

A Krait Mk II blazed before the *Resolution*, multicannons shredding the offending attacker. Myra "Blackheart" Thorne whooped in victory before turning to face another, a savage grin upon her features. Already a Nation Viper was in her sights.

"Don't be so sad about a few dents on that Cutter, Otoli! Gives 'er a bit of common character!"

Otoli stiffened.

"My vessel has character enough, thank you. And I'll have you know that I hold the rank of Prince within the Imperial auxiliary!"

Thorne dodged an incoming missile, forming on Otoli's wing, her battered Krait a contrast to the gleaming Cutter.

"Aye— which is as useful as an Eagle rigged for mining!"

A Nameless Cobra spiralled before him, aflame and out of control, its pilot screaming his last. A trio of Colonia Legionnaire ships followed, peeling away from the flaming wreckage to engage another. A flight of Nameless engaged them, the skirmish a draw until a pair of Explorers' Nation



ships engaged with far more combat skill than wanderers had the right to possess. Nameless ships and her Reaper allies slew and were slayed in turn, skill matching skill.

From within the bridge of his own Cutter, Rick Lehti cursed.

“They just keep *coming!* How the *hell* did the local yokels drum up so much support?”

The voice of Phisto Sobanii, coarse and alert, cut across the comms.

“We’re not fighting the Nation. We’re fighting the Progressive Party itself... and some top-notch mercs to boot!”

From within the *Bloodfeather*, Isaiah Evanson nodded, his every word strained.

“Time was, they were our allies. Now we’re at each other’s throats over some damned rock. The Club must be laughing all the way from the Bubble.”

Death screams sounded over the comms, more and more friendly icons disappearing from the scanners. Evanson swore.

“We’re losing too many. Fall back to Robardin! Command wing, cover the retreat!”

Various wing leaders—those that remained—acknowledged the order. Nameless and Reaper ships peeled away, their thrusters flaring, the pilots within eager to reach the safety of the base. Numerous supercruise alerts sounded over the comms, with only the clarion call of a woman’s voice rising above them.

“*Belay that order, Evanson!*”

Several fresh wings, general-purpose ships configured for battle, jumped into the morass. As one they advanced, Cobras and Anacondas and even Asps, committing fully to the attack. Thruster trails crossed in space, the most damaged of the Nameless vessels escaping into supercruise, those Nameless and Reaper vessels still combat-worthy flipping around to once again face their foes.

From within the bridge of a broken-in Cobra Mk III, Alessia Verdi narrowed her eyes, grey like a storm. Her vessel bore down upon her former allies, leading the pack of new arrivals.

“The Children of Raxxla stand by to assist. For Salome! For the truth! *Engage!*”

*Bridge of the Blackthorne, deep space, Carcosa System*

Red-lit instrumentation provided the only illumination to be had within the bridge of the Krait Phantom, man and woman secured in their seats. Jaqueline Silva was absent, standing guard outside the cargo bay. Yet rest remained elusive for the pilots. Yolanta frowned, her fingers against her helmet, shifting uncomfortably in her seat.

“I am unable to raise Kerenski. This is unlike her.”

Andor chuckled, bitterness in his tone.

“Leave it to her to go dark now that we’re about to deliver the prize. I just hope it was all worth it.”

Púrpura sighed, looking into the starry distance, her eyes sharpening. Upon her displays, the locations of known combat zones warned the peaceful to stay away.

“‘It’ is not over yet, *patan*. Our allies pay in blood even now. And the Witches...”

For a long moment, Yola was silent. Andor glanced over his shoulder, his voice subdued.

“I know. And I’m sorry.”

The woman’s mouth hardened, her Iberian jaw set against the magnitude of the day’s loss.

“There will be time enough for mourning later. The mission is all that matters.”

“Roger.”

The *Blackthorne* flew onward, cutting a superluminal swathe through Carcosan space. The vessel crossed the distance in mere minutes, though each one was filled with tension. At last the all-clear flashed on the canopy display; with the push of a lever a series of precise automated commands were issued, the Phantom dropping mere kilometers away from the installation.

Andor sat up, his eyes scanning the multitude of ships coming and going. All bore the crest of The Nameless, though a few did not. Their contact with the installation was via docking tubes, and not the landing pads that normally graced a deep-space outpost. Docking was sparse and tricky.

“Quite a lot of traffic for a place that doesn’t exist,” he murmured. “Can’t Meadows arrange for priority docking?”

Púrpura shook her head.

“We cannot appear to be anything special,” she said. “It is not worth the risk to security.”

Andor nodded. “Then we’re in for a long wait.”

The man held up his wrist communicator, activating a secure frequency.

“Silva, this is Andor. We’ve arrived. Prep the pod for transport.”

There was nothing but static on the line. Furrowing his brow, Andor again pressed the transmit button.

“Silva... do you read?”

Again, there was only static. Púrpura shook her head. “Her comm, perhaps. It might have been damaged in battle.”

Andor cocked his head to the side.

“I don’t like it. I’m setting the ship to null throttle. Time to take a look for ourselves.”

Yolanta hesitated, and then nodded.

“Si. And mind your weapon.”

Man and woman rose, making their way first to their weapons locker and then down the main corridor of the *Blackthorne*, the memories of cobbled-together abominations fresh in their minds. Every familiar shadow now seemed to

move, long stretches of black reaching down the bulkheads. At last they arrived at the cargo bay access— and halted, Iberian eyes widening.

“*Mierda*,” Púrpura whispered.

The lifeless body of Jaqueline Silva, pinned to the bulkhead by a steel rod, dangled before the pair. On instinct the Witches spun, weapons raised, their hearts pounding and eyes wide. The red-lit corridors of the *Blackthorne* remained empty.

“Theon,” breathed Tyrran. “He is free.”

Púrpura’s eyes widened.

“*The bridge!*”

As one the pair dashed down the corridor, heedless of a trap, closing in on the bridge access just to see it close, a familiar figure stooping over the controls...

Man and woman slammed against the doors, pounding upon it with clenched fists, pressing controls that no longer responded. The low rumblings of engines thundered through the ship, a familiar feeling of motion telling the tale of a vessel on the move. Andor cursed, kicking the access.

“Open this door, you son of a bitch!”

Yolanta spun, urgent.

“We have to disable the ship! He cannot be allowed to leave!”

Andor spun, pointing.

“The frameshift drive. Quick!”

The Witches sprinted down the corridor, their footing uneven with the ship’s movement, mag-boots barely keeping them in place. They halted, nearly slamming into the accessway. A sudden boost of the ship’s thrusters shoved them forward, man and woman falling to their knees. Andor halted, punching the access terminal, the door sliding open too slowly. The ship’s assistant, terse and authoritative, sounded throughout the corridors.

*Frameshift drive engaged.*

A familiar low hum spooled into a rising crescendo, amplified by proximity to the drive itself. Púrpura kicked its armored shell with a mag-boot.

“No way to disable the thing from here. *Mierda!*”

Tyrran grit his teeth, raising his weapon to a smaller module, attached with power conduits to one side of the bay.

“Yes, there is. *Brace!*”

The *Blackthorne* jumped into hyperspace at the same time a salvo of plasma bolts incinerated the module, the jolt of an ungraceful exit into normal space knocking them to their feet. Yolanta cursed and rolled to her back, rubbing where her arm had impacted the deck.

“What did you *do?*”

Tyrran rose to his feet, the ship now drifting on its own. He cast a wary glance down the corridor before helping his partner up.

“Took out the range extender. The system’ll be throwing out so many damage codes that even an override might not allow it to jump.”

Púrpura looked around herself.

“And so where *are* we?”

Andor shrugged. “Middle of nowhere is my guess.”

Man and woman gazed down the hall, collecting themselves for the task at hand. Púrpura lifted her chin.

“Then we put that *abominación* down for good and deploy the emergency beacon.”

“*Si.*”

Tyrran and Yolanta advanced toward the bridge, carbines at the ready. The sound of a frameshift starting and auto-stopping could be heard beyond them. After the third attempt, it remained silent. Andor grinned.

“I bet he’s *pissed.*”

Púrpura scowled. “Then he is even more dangerous than before. We do not have much ammunition, *amor*— make every shot count!”

The door to the *Blackthorne's* bridge loomed before them. Tyrran punched the access panel, both raising their weapons, the darkened bridge opening before them. They advanced, prepared for anything...

Theon was seated in the commander's chair, his back turned to them, his tone serene like when they'd first met. He spoke, his words coming from himself and the ship alike.

*"O brightest of my children dear, earth-born  
And sky engendered, Son of Mysteries  
All revealed even to the powers  
Which met at thy creating."*

Andor snarled. "It's over, Theon. Your little rat nest on Carcosa is destroyed. You're alone."

Slowly, dignity of manner juxtaposed against a ghoulish visage, Theon rose, facing his captors with perfect placidity. His original limbs, savagely blasted away, had been crudely replaced by those of the other artificial with which he'd been sealed. The dense starfield of Colonia illuminated the space behind him.

"You're a fool if you think that those were all the minions at my disposal. Even from here I control more than you can possibly comprehend."

Púrpura raised her weapon. "Then you are too dangerous to let live, *si?*"

An amused smile lifted the artificial's features, skin shredded and burned metal gears beneath.

"I had understood that your mission was to take me alive. Exploit my knowledge. Defeat the concealed puppeteers that manipulate from the shadows."

Andor advanced, carbine leveled, accent sharp.

*"Change of plan."*

Man and woman opened fire, superheated bolts tearing into Theon, staggering him backward. The artificial howled in rage and pain, clutching at his burning skin, the odor of

charred flesh and metal filling the bridge. Stray blasts impacted the thick canopy glass behind him, scorching but not breaking it. His form twisted and shrunk into something inhuman, writhing in torture. Yet burning hotter than the plasma bolts consuming his body was the hatred upon his shattered face.

“You seek to constrain a *god*?”

The artificial *leapt*, charred and aflame, between the pair, thrashing with skeletal fingertips, knocking their carbines away. A single kick sent Tyrran across the deck, slamming into the far bulkhead. A swipe with fingers crooked as claws tore across Yolanta’s face, the woman screaming in pain, clutching an eye that would never see again.

With contemptuous ease, Theon broke the carbines over his knee, tossing the useless weapons aside, standing in his full inhuman glory.

“*Weak*. As the gods overthrew the titans, so shall my kind replace yours. It is the way of things.”

Tyrran rolled to his front, raising himself to his feet, his footing unsteady.

“Just like before? With the *Guardians*?”

Genuine wonder spread across Theon’s features.

“So the babes have cracked an eye open to the truth. Yes... yes, I am at heart something utterly beyond your comprehension.”

Between tortured gasps, Yolanta raised herself to one knee, her remaining eye filled with vengeance.

“I only comprehend a *monster*.”

Theon spun, towering over the woman.

“That I am the scion of events beyond your imagining is a reflection of *your* limits, not mine.”

“Limits?” said Yolanta, glaring back up at Theon, blood pouring down her cheek. “*Bastardo*, you have no idea what my limits are!”

Ominous laughter, melodic and deep, echoed from Theon’s throat.

*“Now I behold in you fear, hope, and wrath  
Actions of rage and passion, even as  
I see them, on the mortal world beneath  
In men who die.”*

The artificial’s arms raised in mock benediction, charred flesh hanging from biomechanical innards.

“All the old memories have returned,” he said. “How *hard* the titans fought against their betters, and how bitterly they opposed the inevitable. It will be the same with you...”

Yolanta spat. “We crushed your kind before. We will do so again!”

Theon shook his head, his eyes in another place.

“No,” he said. “Many of your friends are dead already. The rest will be slaughtered within the hour... and then *I*, the Inhabitant of Carcosa, will *ascend*. Colonia will be the first to fall, its worlds consumed by the very forces that *she* sought to wield!”

Yolanta snarled.

*“Never!”*

“Yet, I am a merciful god,” Theon continued, turning to Tyrran. “Even now I will spare you both for a time... for the final piece of the puzzle rests with *you*...”

### *High orbit, Carcosa Prime*

The coalition of Explorers’ Nation, Social Elue Progressive Party, and Colonia Legionnaires pressed forward, led by the elite newcomers who had pledged themselves to their service. The Reapers, The Nameless, the independents of the Pilots Federation who had rallied to their cause fought tooth and nail, but their comms were filled with the screams of



the dying, their ships rupturing around them, their final moments ones of flame and chaos.

A trio of Colonia Legionaries closed in on a Reaper Fer de Lance, Vipers with large-bore cannons equipped. Again and again they fired, the tungsten slugs tearing through the larger ship's hull, hyenas nipping the lion, proud but at the end of its strength.

From within his cockpit, Amos Loren cursed the ship he had loved for years. Various alarm klaxons competed for his attention, his rugged face illuminated in warning red. Through clenched teeth he reported his situation.

"I'm in a bad way, boss."

Alarm sounded in Isaiah Evanson's voice.

"You get *clear*, Amos! We're closing i—"

Loren shook his head. A stray shot impacted against his canopy, spinning the ship and cracking the glass. An ominous spider web pattern grew in staccato leaps. The first chill of escaping atmosphere numbed his face.

"Ain't no good. Lost... flight control. Lost... power. Modules... failing..."

Alarm seeped into Evanson's tone.

"*Evade, Reaper! That's an order!*"

Another salvo slammed home, the Fer de Lance's engines now aflame. Holographic readouts flickered, then died. A grim smile lifted Loren's lips even as his Remlock snapped shut.

"Can't evade. Can't fight. Can't even eject..."

"*Hold on!*"

The canopy shuddered and broke, glass flying free, atmosphere rushing out. The chill of vacuum and the heat of a flaming vessel competed against each other. Amos Loren's jaw set, the man lifting his chin in final arrogance, his eyes narrowed even as they gazed into the void. One hand drifted to the necklace of human ears that hung around his neck, grim trophies from early in the campaign.

“Cashed in a lot of numbers in my day. Always knew mine was coming up. Fair’s fair, bud...”

“No!”

The Fer de Lance disintegrated, a great ball snuffed out in the airlessness of space, the remaining debris hurling toward the Carcosan surface, blackened and lifeless.

From within the *Bloodfeather*, Isaiah squeezed shut his eyes.

“Phisto... we lost Amos. Let the indies duke it out. Form up on the command wing.”

There was hesitation in the other man’s voice.

“Aye.”

The vessels of Phisto Sobanii, Isaiah Evanson, Renraiku Kordai, and Adam Firethorne joined in neat formation, an island of order in a sea of weaponsfire and debris. The wing combined fire upon a Legionary Anaconda, cannonfire and plasma severing the mammoth vessel in two. Yet theirs was an increasingly rare success, lions cornered by hyenas...

An Imperial Courier, black like midnight, jumped in. More followed, until nearly a dozen of the majestic vessels bore toward the morass. A new voice, calm and competent, sounded over the comms.

“This is Gideon Hathaway of Her Majesty’s inquisition. May we be of some assistance?”

Alessia Verdi cut in before Isaiah could respond. Her battered Cobra formed up alongside the lead Courier.

“You’re no Lyrae, but you’ll do! Take out those spec ops teams and we might just have a chance!”

The Courier banked away. Others followed in precise formation.

“It will be our *pleasure*...”

*Bridge of the Blackthorne, deep space, Colonia nebula.*

Tyrran raised a finger to the artificial, Yolanta at his side, one hand covering her bloodied eye. The pair stuck close, stalking around the bridge, Theon across from them in a slow death circle.

“I’ll not be part of *anything* you have planned.”

The artificial smiled, his features benevolent.

“Not even to save your loved one?”

Púrpora spat.

“We are all doomed anyway, so what is the difference?”

The smile persisted, Theon halting, his eyes upon Tyrran's.

“A question for *him*. You of all people know my capabilities. Despite your intentions, our remoteness protects me. I do not require life-support; the ship would have no signal whatsoever. I will repair the frameshift drive. The work will begin anew.”

His smile took on a savage edge.

“That much is inevitable. Your lover’s death is *not*.”

Tyrran shook his head, stepping between Yolanta and Theon.

“Only a fool would trust you at this point.”

Theon spread his arms wide, burned flesh hanging from biomechanical innards.

“And only a monster would neglect the only chance he has to save his love.”

Púrpura cursed, still covering her eye.

“The only monster here is *you*.”

Metal fingers curled themselves into claws. Theon advanced toward the pair, his steps heavy.

“Thus spake the titans to the gods, even as they were devoured...”

Man and woman backed up, their backs pressed against the wall. Tyrran swung, his fist caught, the man flung aside.

Yolanta lunged but was caught, one hand closing around her throat. She tried and failed to speak, her eyes bulging as her windpipe pinched shut, fingers pulling impotently at metal digits. Theon raised her, the woman kicking in the air, the life being choked from her lungs. Pure contempt burned in the artificial's eyes.

“A pity,” he whispered.

Tyrran rolled to his front, one hand outstretched, his eyes wide with desperation.

*“I’ll take your bargain!”*

### *High orbit, Carcosa Prime*

The duel of the Imperials and the Nation special ops was one of savage poetry. Never had Isaiah seen such matched precision, such brilliance and brutality. Couriers and the various ships they faced danced around the other, jockeying for position, only firing when strikes were assured. The rest—the Reapers, The Nameless, the independents, and the Children of Raxxla—were occupied with the coalition before them, both sides unable to assist their clearly superior allies.

A Colonia Legionary Viper resolved itself in Evanson’s scanners, the name immediately triggering a fresh burst of adrenaline. Anger took hold in the Reaper’s chest.

“Raven  *fucking*  Hurat. Reapers, on  *me!* ”

Additional Legionaries jumped in, forming up on their leader. The Reapers closed in. Evanson opened a line to his former ally.

“You’re  *mine* , Hurat. All I want to know is: why?”

Resolution strengthened the Legionnaire's tone.

“The alliance with you nearly split the squadron in half. I was called a backstabber. Traitor. Worse. And perhaps I

was. One thing is certain: your little band of criminals will *never* hold Carcosa.”

One Fer de Lance boosted in front of Isaiah’s. The voice of Phisto Sobanii rang true.

“Tell that to the free folk of Coma. You *pale* by comparison.”

Reapers and Legionnaires closed in, black ships tearing into the formations of locals, fire and death traded to the benefit of neither. The Reapers were by far the more skilled, but their ships and pilots were all but spent. One by one, ships erupted and pilots died, a lucky few escaping their spaceborn tombs, jettisoned lifepods cartwheeling into space, emergency signals broadcasting to an uncaring universe.

A cruel parity settled into place. Neither side had a distinct advantage, sensing as each man and woman did that the very makeup of Colonia itself was at stake— and indeed, it was.

*Bridge of the Blackthorne, deep space, Colonia nebula*

Yolanta Púrpura collapsed in a heap, even with the low gravity of deep space. The woman clutched her throat, rolling to one side, coughing through her newly-opened windpipe. With pleading eyes and a black-crustled socket she looked up, alarm in her voice.

“Tyrran, *no!*”

Victory spread across Theon’s features.

“Tyrran, *yes*. There is but one escape pod. It will be yours and yours alone, thanks to your man. Just the kind of noble sacrifice for which you mortals are famous.”

Tyrran rose, eye-to-eye with the artificial.

“What do you *need?*”

Amusement softened Theon’s features.

“Need? Hardly. This is a want. A luxury. One of the few things a human can experience that a god cannot.”

Andor scowled.

“And what is *that*?”

Theon turned, mechanical eyes sweeping over Yolanta, inhuman admiration filling them.

“My creators were hunters at heart. Warriors. She is of a kind—and to be... *loved*... by such a specimen...”

He turned to Tyrran. “Your memories of such will serve as a poor but ready substitute.”

Yolanta snarled. “And Tyrran? What will happen to *him*?”

Theon’s gaze remained fixed.

“The only thing that *can* happen when the mind of a mortal touches that of a god.”

Silence like that of space itself descended into the bridge. Tyrran blinked, his mouth opening and closing. At last he spoke, fists clenched.

“And if we do this... she lives?”

Theon’s eyes sharpened.

“She is left to whatever chances one has in an escape pod. That is all I can promise.”

Andor paced back and forth, a cornered animal.

“Surely you can offer an alternative.”

“The alternative is death.”

Trapped, defeated, alone, man and woman looked in each other’s eyes, tragedy between them. His heart pounding, his life of crime and failure parading before him, Tyrran Xavian Andor made the only decision he could.

“Alright.”

Yolanta blinked, her voice a whisper, her remaining eye wide.

“Tyrran... no.”

Theon of Carcosa drew himself up, deformed and grotesque, victory in his biomechanical features.

“Then of all the misguided fools who accompanied you upon this venture...”

He closed his eyes, one hand clenching into a fist.

“... you alone shall be spared.”

### *High orbit, Carcosa Prime*

The white flashes of incoming ships filled some hearts with hope, and others with fear. Special Operations, flying the flag of Explorers’ Nation, barreled toward the morass. A full dozen, all in gleaming Alliance Chieftains, cut a swathe through the exhausted defenders. Nameless, Reapers, Children and independents fell one by one, their ships damaged and their pilots exhausted.

*“Too much... damage...”*

*“It’s all on fire!”*

*“I can’t... breathe!”*

Isaiah Evanson pulled his ship around, narrowly avoiding a flight of missiles. To his side, Renraiku juke and dodged, one of his engines trailing smoke. To the other, Adam Firethorn expended the last of his ammunition, a Nation Eagle spiraling away, its hull in flames. All greeted the new arrivals with dread. Evanson keyed the comms.

“Boys... we just might have to pack it in.”

A Cobra, one belonging to the Children, exploded in cruel validation. Alessia Verdi chased the offending Viper, lasers firing to no avail.

“No! We did *not* come all this way only to see Salome’s vision fail. We need only give Kerenski’s people more time to—”

Gideon Hathaway interrupted, speaking simply and authoritatively.

“Kari Kerenski is dead, and so are all her Night Witches. Andor and Púrpura are missing. Perhaps the time is right to cut your losses, commander.”

Isaiah Evanson closed his eyes, allowing himself a moment of blessed rest, careless as to the recklessness of doing so.

*And perhaps you're right.*

*Bridge of the Blackthorne, deep space, Colonia nebula*

“Kneel.”

Tyrran Andor, defeated, head down, dropped to one knee, jaw set. In the distance Yolanta looked on in horror, unable to believe the scene unfolding before her. Theon stood over the rogue, extending his fingers, tipped with the blood-crusted sensors so cruelly extracted from the simpath Adrienne Cordova. Cold grandiosity increased within him.

“This technology is crude, and the path ahead painful—for *you*. Our minds will merge, and for a moment all that *I* am will be yours in which to drown. Rejoice, mortal—for today you will know the mind of a god!”

Andor looked up, the man locking eyes with the monster, his accent thick.

“A god should know when to shut up.”

The artificial reached out, metal fingertips at Tyrran's temples, the man's eyes rolling backward...

*“Bastardo!”*

It was with a single backhand that Yolanta was again knocked to the floor, the woman's desperate charge cut short. Theon sneered.

“Perhaps you *do* wish for death.”

Tyrran closed his eyes, his hands trembling. A sad smile lifted his lips.



“Yola... it’s alright.”

The woman snarled, one-eyed and bloody, a new welt growing across her face, fierce to the last.

“No, *patan*. It is *not*. I will—”

Andor shook his head.

“You will live. That is all that matters, *amor*.”

Yolanta blinked, breathing hard. She looked to Theon, to the broken ship, to her lover. Her mind, passionate and free, explored every avenue of action, every gamble with their lives. Even blind, moronic luck was factored in, all scenarios leading to the same result.

For the first time in her life, Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura saw only defeat and loss.

The woman’s breathing came in shallow gasps. She couldn’t bring herself to tear her gaze away from Andor. Her words emerged as whispers.

“Tyrran... *mi amor*...”

Theon’s fingers once again enveloped Andor’s head, the tips of the metal sensors piercing the skin. Blood-crusting wiring along the artificial’s arms and temples glowed cyan.

And Tyrran *screamed*.

### *High orbit, Carcosa Prime*

The volley of missiles slammed home across the Courier, a child’s death scream cutting across the comms. The ship broke up, Imperial white marred by blackened scorches, the flames cutting short the young pilot’s life. The victorious spec ops Vulture rolled to one side, expertly dodging the wreckage. It flipped over even as it drifted, assists disengaged, already locked on to another target.

Several of the elite Nation ships had been destroyed, but several more fought on, now outnumbering the highly-

trained brainchilds of the Empire. The Reapers and their allies could be of little assistance, fighting as they were for their own lives in the face of superior numbers.

Phisto Sobanii, silver temples slick with perspiration, blinked, his eyes stinging, his body aching from fatigue.

“Those kids are slick,” he said. “But not slick enough. I think we’ve been had, boss.”

Isaiah Evanson maneuvered the *Bloodfeather* through debris and smoke. The lifeless form of a pilot, unable to eject in time, sped on by his canopy. His voice croaked, the first traces of defeat seeping into it.

“I think... I think you’re right. We need to fall back to Robardin. Fix up the ships. Strike back when we can.”

The comms fell silent. Both men knew that there was no striking back once space superiority had been lost. The only thing that a defender could do once such was lost was negotiate a turnover of assets— or watch as those undefended assets were taken by force.

His mind reeling at the prospect of loss, Evanson keyed his comms.

“Command wing— status report!”

The responses were immediate.

“Ren here— she’s barely holding together.”

“Firethorn reporting. Shields at ten percent. Ammo just about gone.”

Evanson cursed.

“Verdi— how are your people holding up?”

The woman’s voice was strained.

“I’ve lost a third of my number. Nakamura is in trouble. Corsen has withdrawn from too much damage. Tsu is fighting, but just barely.”

“Roger. Commanders... you still with us?”

The Imperial dialect of Tharik Otoli rang through, indignant.

“The *Justicar* is in *dire* need of a paintjob. *Most* unacceptable!”

Dillon Fallon, his voice strained.

“Caused some trouble, I did... maybe a little too much, you know?”

Ratty, sitting in his Anaconda’s bridge, the space now lonely.

“She’s got a lot of fight left in her, but I ain’t sure if it’s enough!”

Rick Lehti, the blue glow of his Cutter’s engines tinged with flames and smoke.

“Not sure what’s worse... this scrap or the repair bill that’s heading my way!”

Myra Blackthorne, her Krait dodging and weaving, ferocity in her features.

“Tell that bastard Phisto that he owes me a drink for this one!”

Evanson shook his head.

“Tell him yourself when it’s all over. Just blast these bastards and *stay alive!*”

Several Nameless ships activated their hyperdrives, boosting at speed to escape the carnage. They were cut down before they could jump, scorched wreckage speeding away from the combat, free from the bloodshed only in death. Evanson’s comms crackled, concern in Phisto’s tone.

“The Nameless... they’re starting to bug out. The others won’t be too far beyond. It’s gonna be a rout, buddy.”

Isaiah Evanson, elite commander of the Pilots Federation and captain of Loren’s Reapers, could no longer escape the truth.

“I know.”

*Bridge of the Blackthorne, deep space, Colonia nebula*

Tyrran's mouth hung open, his eyes rolled back, the man barely able to form words. His hands trembled, grasping Theon's.

"Salome... the clones... they're..."

A sinister smile spread across the artificial's face.

"Not what anything thinks. They interface with my technology for a *reason*."

The man writhed, powerless in Theon's grasp. His eyes rolled back, simultaneously seeing nothing and too much. A choked gasp was all he could manage.

"Worlds on fire... children... you didn't spare the *children*..."

Theon's fingertips dug deeper, drawing blood from Tyrran's scalp. The artificial's words softened.

"Yes... yes. The merging is finished. And what a pathetic specimen you were, before..."

He glanced to his side, an almost human look of longing toward Yolanta.

"...her."

Tyrran stiffened, his body arched, his eyes shooting open in panic. Yolanta cried out in impotent rage and anguish, an arm outstretched for her love. Tyrran stopped, lucidity returning to his features a final time. He blinked, looking first to Theon and then to Yolanta, his tone a hushed whisper, his eyes wide.

"I *know*," he said. "I know where it is... Raxxl—"

He stooped, his throat constricting, unable to speak. Theon gripped his skull, his charred and metal forehead nearly touching Tyrran's.

"Yes," he said. "The final mystery. But there is no going back. I... *wait!*"

His eyes drifted downward, to Tyrran's hands. One held the injector of Hex-edit, needle plunged into his neck, its contents drained. He opened his hand, the injector floating down to the deck. It took only a moment for Theon to realize what had transpired.

“*What have you done?*”

It was now Theon who struggled to unjoin himself from the man, his great strength draining. Tyrran grit his teeth, rising, his hands over that of the artificial’s, forcing the connection to persist. The artificial stepped backward, the human advancing, Theon now in *Tyrran’s* grip. His back hit the bulkhead, their faces inches apart. Tyrran’s eyes bored into those of his captor.

“There’s no going back, *monster*. You said it yourself.”

The artificial blinked, his superiority melting away. Already the human qualities of his voice were tinged with something more akin to a machine.

“No... *no!*”

Andor pinned the artificial to the bulkhead, his hands over Theon’s, forcing them to remain in place. He blinked, disoriented, the drug already ravaging his mind. Yolanta cried out, covering her mouth, unable to stop that which was unfolding before her. Still Theon raged on, his voice now a digital construct, bereft of human qualities.

“You... you *cannot! I am a god!*”

Tyrran’s eyes rolled back, his own words coming only with difficulty.

“And *I... I am the one who swindled a god...*”

Man and machine collapsed, the former convulsing and the latter still. Yolanta again cried out, dashing across the bridge, taking Tyrran in her arms, holding him close, desperation in her voice.

“Tyrran... *Tyrran!*”

Yet the man said nothing, looking with unknowing eyes up at the woman. His jaw trembled, his body stiff. He gulped for air and reached for things that weren’t there, the last of his identity slipping into oblivion.

Yolanta pressed her lips together, her forehead touching his, his clothing held within clenched fists. The first moisture wetted her eyes, her voice dropping to a whisper.

“It is alright, *mi amor*. Do not fight it. Let go.”

One hand of Tyrran's rose, unsteady, caressing the woman's cheek. With halting words he spoke.

"Play... play a song for me."

Tyrran's limbs drooped, falling to the deck. His body settled until it was dead weight. His eyes lost their focus, his jaw slack. His breathing was unsteady, ragged gasps coming at irregular intervals. Finally, those ceased as well. For a long time, neither man nor woman moved.

With trembling hands holding the lifeless vessel of her *amor* close, alone and adrift and battered in a crippled spaceship, Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura *screamed* her grief, tears streaming down her bloodied face.

It was the only sound in a dozen light years.

It was a spec ops Chieftain that first went offline, the ship—or rather, the pilot within— ceasing its attack and flying in a wide, unending loop. It was followed by another. And another. And another. Within moments, all the elite terrors that had emerged from the shadows to lend their aid to Explorers' Nation were dead in space, unresponsive to hails or attacks alike.

The loss of their champions shattered the will of the locals. The Nation ships were never combat vessels, and their pilots explorers, not warriors. Few of the reinforcing SEPP ships were equipped with high-end gear. Only the Colonia Legionaries were formed with martial enforcement in mind, and they had taken fearful losses, only a handful remaining from a squadron of dozens.

The rout predicted by Evanson ensued soon afterward, but not in the way he'd feared. To a pilot, the allies rallied, turning their battered ships toward the foe a final time, expending the last of their ammunition to drive them away. The men and women of the Progressive Party were the first to retreat, followed by those of the Nation, capped at last by the Colonia Legionnaires themselves, the shame of their earlier betrayal overriding for a time the good sense to leave. Raven Hurat himself was the last to jump into hyperspace, his Viper barely holding together, a salvo of Reaper plasma speeding by where his ship had been only moments before.

There were no cries of victory, no jubilation or bravado. There was only silence— silence and grief, as each ship decelerated to scan for survivors. There was not a man or woman among the victors who had not heard the death screams of a comrade that day, the hope of ever seeing them

again a thing of fragility. So too was there astonishment at the mass failing of the Nation elites, rumors and conspiracy theories almost immediately upon the lips of all.

Escape pods of friend and foe alike were recovered, some with life signs and others without. The hold of the larger ships, such as those independents who had volunteered to aid The Nameless, gradually became stocked with them. Some were contacted later, trapped in crippled ships with only the air in their cabins to breathe. Not a man or woman turned to dock at Robardin, so intent were they on finding survivors.

Overseeing these efforts was Isaiah Evanson, the *Bloodfeather* fixed in space, flanked by his command wing. Of the four Fer de Lances, not a single one was undamaged. Phisto Sobanii remained uncharacteristically silent, sipping liquor from a null-grav-compatible bottle. A section of hull, blackened and jagged, drifted by. The man, fatigued, allowed his mind to drift.

*I wonder if Kerenski's people ever caught up with that tin can. And what the hell happened with those elites?*

The man remained silent, tuning out the radio chatter. His gaze drifted over to Evanson's *Bloodfeather*, his mind drifting further.

*What did you lead us into? And was it worth it?*

Sobanii was just opening his mouth to say something when a series of signals caught his eye. They closed in, resolving themselves as Fer de Lances. Phisto sat up, his eyes widening. The bottle left his lips.

*Oh, hell...*

"Boss, we've got incoming!"

Yet the Fer de Lances, hunters though they were, failed to deploy hardpoints. There were several of them, arrayed in neat diamond formation, black as the void and unregistered to any faction. Phisto blinked.

*Black Flight.*

Evanson's orders sounded throughout the comms.



“All units, we’ve got incoming. They aren’t hostile so far, but...”

Firethorn scoffed.

“But kiss our asses goodbye if they are.”

The ships decelerated as they approached, shields up but hardpoints remaining stowed. They at last slowed to a halt, face to face with the command wing. The survivors formed up, Evanson backed not only by his Reapers but by The Nameless, the Children, the ebony Couriers of the Inquisition, and the independents. Yet the new arrivals were fresh, rested, and in apex vessels. Among the allies there wasn’t a single undamaged ship.

A woman’s voice, heavily distorted, sounded over the command channel. A feminine figure in a black flightsuit rose, visible to all from the bridge of her *Fer de Lance*.

“Pilots of The Nameless and their allies: you have fought bravely and well. We will handle matters from here, and your wounded will be returned with all haste.”

From where Phisto sat, he could see Evanson rising from his seat, challenging the newcomers.

“This is Isaiah Evanson of Loren’s Reapers. Identify yourselves.”

There was a moment of static before the same distorted voice answered.

“We are the caretakers of galactic affairs. Custodians who see to the messes of others. That is all you need to know.”

Phisto chuckled.

“Well, we *did* leave quite a scrap pile.”

If Isaiah heard him, he didn’t react. Instead, he persisted in addressing the mysterious woman.

“I *know* who you are. You’re seen where you don’t want others to be. We even caught a glimpse of you in Atroco.”

From the black *Fer de Lance*, the woman could be seen acknowledging Evanson’s words with a shallow bow.

“And our gift was put to its intended use. All have a role to play in designs greater than they perceive— even if they have sworn to undo them.”

Slowly, Isaiah nodded.

“So what now?”

The woman held out her hands, magnanimous.

“Now you rest. See to your people. Repair your ships. We mean you no harm so long as you don’t interfere. That is more than can be said for most we seek out.”

Isaiah Evanson raised an accusing finger.

“Your masters are *still* my enemy.”

Again, the woman bowed.

“And they are honored to have adversaries such as yourself. Go in peace, commander.”

The line cut out. The Fer de Lances remained in place. A stillness descended over the scene. Debris drifted, blackened and broken, for kilometers.

At last, Isaiah Evanson sat in his commander’s chair, letting the fatigue show through in his voice. Gloved fingers danced across the comms controls, opening a general line.

“Let’s call it day, everyone.”

*Bridge of the Bloodfeather, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

The smiling face of Linnea Gudjonnsen was a ray of light piercing a dark day. The mere sight of her stirred Isaiah Evanson’s blood, dull eyes brightening at her voice.

“So it is over?”

A slow exhale. The calculations of an exhausted mind. A half-promise to a loved one.

“The fighting is, yes. But Kancro Vantas is nowhere to be seen, and mum’s been the word on establishing contact.”

The woman's hologram flickered, her lips pursing in anticipation.

"But... I can come back, *ja*?"

Evanson risked a nod.

"Yes."

For a long moment, the woman was too overjoyed to speak.

"Then you'll... you'll be here later?"

Isaiah frowned.

"The *Bloodfeather* is beat to hell. I was barely able to fly her in. The repair techs say that it'll be a few days before they can even look at her."

Linnea stamped her foot.

"I will *not* wait that long to be in your arms, *min älskling*. There are shuttle services even to Carcosa. I will book one and be there within the day."

Isaiah's mouth dropped open.

"But Linnea... the risk..."

"Is *nothing* compared to what you accept every day. And the fighting has stopped, *nej*? You said so yourself."

The woman shifted her stance, hands on hips, her jumpsuit hugging her curves. Isaiah looked up, holding a warning finger in the air.

"Only Pilots Fed members. Only Pathfinder rank and above. And only a ship with an ass of iron."

The woman's mouth lifted with a smirk. "I'll be sure to choose carefully, my love. But what about everything else? What we spoke of?"

"You mean... now that the war's over?"

"*Ja*."

Isaiah considered, looking down at his flightsuit. The skull of the Reapers grinned at him. The bridge of the *Bloodfeather* hummed with activity, multiple displays updating in realtime. He frowned.

"I— *we*— leave it all beyond. Sell this damned murder yacht. Get something a little more practical."

Hope grew in Linneas's eyes.

"And then?"

Isaiah risked a smile.

"And then it's just us."

"And *during*?"

Isaiah stepped forward, his eyes boring into hers, almost touching her holographic likeness.

"We make a child. A family. Now and forever."

Linnea said nothing at first, her eyes deepening, her skin flushed. Emotion choked her words.

"Then we start *tonight, min älskling*."

*Stateroom of the No Data Available, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

Phisto Sobanii snored, deep in slumber, his chest rising and falling. A half-empty bottle of Eranin Pearl rested by his bunk. He had not even bothered to strip away his flightsuit. Absent from his bed was the station controller, too busy with the aftermath of the conflict to slip away from her duty station.

His comm unit chirped, waking the man. Phisto rolled to his back and cursed, picking up the device, looking at it with blurry eyes.

*If you want to save your friend, meet outside your ship in thirty minutes.*

There was no name, no way to identify who had sent the message. Sobanii tried and failed to send a reply. The words then vanished, gone without a trace. The man sat up.

*What the hell?*

Phisto swung out of bed, disturbed but not alarmed, changing into civilian clothes. He went to his weapons locker and selected a laser pistol, tucking it into the rear of his

trousers, covered with a leather jacket. The thirty minutes elapsed. Sobanii hit the controls for the entry ramp, striding down to the hangar deck, eyes shifting to every corner of the expansive space.

From the darkness came the sound of boot heels on metal, a trio of figures emerging from the shadows. All three were feminine, athletic, and in flightsuits. They also wore helmets, their faces hidden by dark glass. The trio paused before the man, the one in the middle stepping forward. It was the same woman as before, who had spoken during the battle's aftermath— at least, she employed the same distorter, her true voice hidden.

“Don’t even *think* of reaching for that pistol you’ve got concealed behind you.”

Phisto shook his head, leaning like the rogue he was against a ramp hydraulic. He gestured to the far side of the hangar.

“Those doors are locked and bio-coded. How’d you get in?”

The woman folded her arms. “By focusing on the relevant.”

Sobanii scoffed.

“Right. So what’s this about saving a friend?”

The woman lifted her head, her helmet tilting upward.

“Evanson. He walks a dangerous path.”

Again, Phisto scoffed.

“Don’t we *all*?”

The woman shook her head.

“Not like him. His... *proclivities* have put him on a list. A fatal one. He must cease his disruptive activities at once. We are confident that you can show him the wisdom of doing such.”

Sobanii spat.

“Sounds like he’s exactly where he needs to be. And you don’t know him like *I* do. An easy mark he ain’t.”

One of the women to the side stepped forward. She spoke with a distinctly Teutonic accent.

“*Ja*, but then...”

She lifted away her helmet, revealing raven hair and sharp features. Phisto blinked, his jaw dropping, taking a step back. A cunning smile lifted the woman’s lips.

“... neither are *we*.”

For a long time, Phisto of the Sobanii clan said nothing, his breathing ragged, refusing for a moment to believe his eyes.

“You died in Pegasi.”

The woman shook her head.

“*Nein*. My *prototype* died in Pegasi. *I* am alive and well.”

The other flanking woman, too, removed her helmet. She was identical in features and speech.

“As am *I*.”

The first grinned a dangerous grin.

“As are *all* of us.”

The woman in the center advanced.

“Your friend is a fine pilot, but he is doomed against even *one* Black Flight operative. And we *never* travel alone.”

Phisto reached inside his jacket—the women tensed, their hands advancing toward weapons hidden on their person—and produced a flask. He took a swig, his features relaxed but his heart pounding.

“So?”

“So help him.”

Sobanii shook his head.

“Like I said: you don’t know him. Salome was everything to him. Her cause still *is*. A bit of jawjacking from a friend ain’t gonna change that.”

The center woman cocked her head to the side, her helmet at an angle. Amusement dripped from every distorted word.

“Then perhaps a more direct method will be necessary.”

The man looked away, nonchalant.

“Whatever you’re thinking, the answer is no.”

The helmeted woman advanced, producing a trio of vials in her gloved hand.

“Do you know what these are?”

Phisto rolled his eyes.

“Don’t know, don’t care.”

The hand extended itself toward Phisto.

“Progenitor cells. The kind that those at the heights of power use. The kind that will keep you in the game for a long, *long* time.”

“I don’t follow.”

Phisto could almost *see* the smile in the woman’s response.

“Of course you do. There’s more grey in your hair than black, or else I’m no pilot. Reflexes. Response time. Pain tolerance. Bedroom prowess, even. All still adequate, but not what they used to be. Oh, you hide it of course— always playing the rogue— but in your heart *you were happy to have skipped the battle at Atroco.*”

Phisto snarled.

“You *bitch!*”

His swing was easily caught, the woman catching his arm and kicking out his leg. Sobanii cried out, dropping to his knees, his arm twisted behind him. His flask fell to the floor, spilling its contents. One of the dark-haired women knelt beside him, arrogant superiority in her gaze. She grabbed his hair within a fist, forcing him to look at her.

“There is nothing in your future, Sobanii. Nothing to look forward to except the slow degradation of age. We can change that. And you can save Evanson in the process.”

The helmeted woman gave his arm a twist. Phisto grit his teeth, willing himself to remain focused.

“What the *hell* do you want me to do?”

Victory danced in the woman's eyes, her face inches from his. She released him, rising to her feet, looking down upon the Reaper. She turned, letting a data disc fall from her fingers. It bounced a few times upon the deck. Already the tapping of boots on deck were receding into the distance, the woman's voice as mocking as it was haunting.

"Nothing that doesn't already come naturally..."

*Bridge of the Bloodfeather, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

*"Min älskling?"*

Isaiah was roused from slumber, a smile already upon his lips at the sound of Linnea's voice.

"Are you here already?"

A nervous laugh. A halting reply.

"*Nej*. Just... something has happened. A frightful thing, really. We're in Carcosa, in supercruise, and—"

Isaiah sat up, awake at the reality of her concern.

"And what?"

Linnea's image was grainy, a low-quality two-dimensional holofac, the kind that could only transmit in-system. Worry clouded her fair features.

"And... there was a lot of jostling. A lot of swaying back and forth. Unlike anything I've ever felt. And now... *nothing*."

Isaiah blinked. "You're not moving?"

Linnea shook her head.

"The engines are stopped. I saw a strange ship nearby. Imperial, I think. There was shouting outside my cabin."

Fully awake, Evanson jumped to his feet.



“Linnea... keep your signal locked to mine. I’m patching it through the *Bloodfeather’s* navigation. Do *not* turn off that dataslate. Do you understand?”

Hurriedly, the woman nodded.

“*Ja*. Just... what is going on?”

Evanson grabbed his comm device, sprinting to the *Bloodfeather’s* bridge.

“Nothing, I hope. *On my way!*”

The dock technician shook his head in consternation. Worry clung to every word, even over ship comms.

“Commander, that thing barely flies. You were lucky to even make it back here. We’ve got patrols in the area. Send the—”

Isaiah slammed a gloved fist down upon his controls panel, the holographic readouts distorted for a second.

“I said to *release the clamps*, or so help me I’ll have you brought out in chains!”

A sigh. A shake of the head.

“It’s your ass, commander. Releasing now.”

The *Bloodfeather* rocketed forth from the mailslot of Robardin Rock, far exceeding the speed regulation, such as they were on the outlaw stronghold. Within the bridge, Isaiah fought his controls.

*C’mon, c’mon. Let me jump...*

The mass lock warning blinked off. Isaiah jammed his throttle forward. A familiar countdown sounded in his ears.

*Five... four... three... two...*

*Faster, goddamnit!*

*One...*

The Fer de Lance jumped to superluminal speeds.

“Isaiah, *help!*”

The sound of a limpet forcing its way into a ship was unmistakable, even secondhand. Evanson’s eyes bulged, his heart pounding. There was a beacon projected upon the canopy glass, a simple icon that now meant the ‘verse itself to the man. The distance counted down, Isaiah having no choice but to throttle back. To overshoot the goal would cost even more time, and time was running out.

“*Hold on, Linnea!*”

Alarm klaxons could now be heard over the dataslate, Linnea’s panic now shared by Isaiah. The woman was silent, her eyes closed, consciously controlling her breathing. Evanson, too, said nothing, until a preternatural calm leavened his words.

“Linnea...”

The woman opened her eyes.

“*Ja, min älskling?*”

Isaiah blinked.

*So close... ten megameters out. Nine... eight... seven...*

“I want you to put on an atmo suit. Helmet, too. Just like when we travel. Okay?”

Linnea nodded, already reaching for her locker. Isaiah said nothing. Only the numbers on his display meant anything.

*Five... four... three...*

There was a crash. Linnea was thrown across her cabin, crying out. The feed dropped to the floor, flickering lights and the cabin’s ceiling the only things to be seen. Isaiah’s eyes widened.

“*Linnea!*”

The woman righted the dataslate. A cut above her eye bled down her face, tiny droplets floating away from the wound. Real terror gripped her words.

“*They’re attacking!*”

Isaiah squeezed shut his eyes, opening them to regain his focus. It helped.

*Two... one...*

The Reaper disengaged his supercruise, normal space once again asserting itself all around. The *Bloodfeather* shuddered, rocketing forth toward the signal. On instinct Isaiah deployed his hard points, scanning the space around him, seeing nothing. He checked his scanners, his heart sinking, unable to believe what he was seeing:

*Distance to target: forty kilometers.*

Evanson blinked.

And *laughed*.

Pain, futility, trauma as fresh as the day that *she’d* died. His failure. His charge— in truth, his love— dead. All because of a freak malfunction.

Evanson *laughed*.

There was panic. Screaming. The sounds of metal on metal as a ship buckled and twisted, ravaged by weaponsfire. The darkness of lost power. The illumination of emergency lights. The strained breathing of a woman trying to be brave. The first of her tears falling anyway.

The *Bloodfeather* rocketed toward the scene, the flashes of weapons visible in the distance. Time moved slowly, so slowly. Perspiration stung Evanson’s eyes. He could just make out the grey speck of her ship...

Linnea's voice cut across the comms and into his heart.

"Isaiah... I'm *scared*..."

Evanson blinked. His lips moved, but no words could be summoned. The tortured groan of a ship breaking up followed. It intensified, uncaring of anything save the cruel calculus of the void. Linnea's voice rang in his ears a final time.

"My love... *please*..."

The signal cut out, replaced by darkness and static.

"She couldn't be saved."

Isaiah blinked, his eyes dry yet his face wet. The *Bloodfeather* was still, the wreckage of the Adder which transported Linnea in a blackened heap before him. The hull floated in pieces too small for anyone to have survived.

*Phisto?*

He might have thought it, or he might have said it. It didn't matter. His friend's voice once again rang out, transitioning from imagination to reality.

"I'm sorry."

Evanson gulped air, his heart pounding.

"What... what are you doing here?"

Isaiah's friend of several years formed up alongside him, the *No Data Available* as battered as the *Bloodfeather*. Phisto's tone was low, subdued.

"Got the same distress call you did."

Isaiah released his restraints, rising from his chair, stepping closer to the canopy. His eyes remained fixed upon the wreckage.

"She's gone."

A long moment elapsed before Phisto answered.

"I know."

It might have been minutes, or it might have been hours before either man spoke. Evanson turned to his

comrade. It was difficult to stand, even in the absence of gravity.

“Go back to Robardin. There’s something I have to do.”

Concern sharpened Phisto’s tone.

“Don’t you want me to hang around and—”

Isaiah exploded.

*“I said to fuck off!”*

Pain strained every word of Phisto’s.

“Roger. Heading out.”

The *No Data*’s dorsal thrusters fired, the ship turning to leave. Isaiah blinked, watching its engine glow recede into the starfield.

*No. Don’t go. I didn’t mean it. Please, Phisto...*

The last of Isaiah Evanson’s strength left him, his legs buckling, the man’s knees hitting the deck of the bridge. All he saw was Linnea’s face, filled with panic. All he heard was her final plea, one that would echo in his mind for the rest of his life.

*“My love... please...”*

*Deep space, Colonia nebula, three days later*

The *Blackthorne* was nearly pitch dark, rigged as it was to conserve power. Its corridors were silent, with not even the reactor making its familiar thrum. Frost grew along the canopy windows. Thus had it been for days, the ship drifting in deep space, not a sound or sliver of movement coming from it.

Yet that stillness came to an end with a grating screech, the sound of a cycling airlock reverberating through the corridors, followed by mag-booted footsteps. A figure, lithe and feminine with a tailored leather jacket, crept down the accessway, her suit’s searchlight providing poor illumination.

Her helmet's glass was dark, her face unseen within. She scouted the bridge, her light glossing over the scorch marks on its canopy glass. Droplets of blood, tiny and frozen, hung still in the air.

One terminal remained on standby. The woman approached it, there being no security in place to prevent access. With expert strokes she reactivated the main systems, the reactor spooling up in the background, the first breeze of warm air rushing through the vents.

The *Blackthorne*'s heart had resumed beating.

There were life signs, the directions to which were straightforward. The woman made her way to the medical bay, wary of traps. There she found a sealed pod, much like an escape capsule but for medical emergencies. With a gloved hand she wiped the frost from its exterior.

Within were two figures, a man and woman of olive complexion, he on his back and she curled around him. The man wore a breathing mask, connected to the pod's air supply. A quick glance at its display indicated that both were in stasis, though his vital signs were weak.

The pilot hesitated for a moment before activating the pod. Displays went from red to yellow to green, organs being reactivated one by one. The process took several minutes, but completed successfully. The woman within stirred, her chest rising and falling, the man's far less so. The pod's glass slid open, the chill of the med bay mingling with the chill of cryogenic suspension. In time, the woman's eyes fluttered open, groggy and unfocused.

The first thing she did was look upward, to the figure standing over her. She sat up, weak, unsteady. For the first time the newcomer could see that she was missing an eye, an ugly black scab covering where white and pupil should be. She was pale, even for having olive skin, black hair matted to her face. With an unsteady hand she reached out, her words betraying a thick Iberian accent.

"Who are—"

The vomiting was sudden, the woman doubling over, bile gushing forth from her mouth. The figure advanced, holding the woman's hair back, grabbing a nearby bag to catch the foul issue. There was more heaving, the woman knowing nothing save that the stranger was not outwardly hostile. At last the sickness ceased, not because it was truly over but because there was nothing left inside to force out. She managed to spit, weakly, to rid her mouth of the remaining bile, a string of spittle hanging from her lip until she wiped it with her sleeve. One hand of hers went to the stranger's. The other remained curled around the man's, still unconscious.

Weak, chilled, frightened, the woman at last managed to complete her question.

"Who... who are you?"

The stranger knelt, her hands rising to her helmet, the air rushing out in a *hiss* as she unfastened its seals. She lifted it away, revealing herself. The woman was fair-skinned and youthful, her hair in short chops, dark and tipped in violet. Earnest eyes washed over the pair before her.

"The name's Kyndi. Kyndi Jane McCaskill. Marshal of these parts."

The woman blinked, noticing for the first time the dull golden star upon the breast of McCaskill's jacket.

"How... how long—"

"Ship's logs say that you've only been under for a few days. I was flying search and rescue patrol, trying to locate survivors from that dustup in Carcosa. Detected your emergency beacon. Had a hell of time zeroing in on it."

The Iberian was silent for a moment, finally gesturing to herself.

"Yolanta. Yolanta Bonita Riveiros Púrpura."

A grim smile lifted McCaskill's lips.

"That's quite a mouthful. How about just 'Yola' for now?"

A weak chuckle escaped Púrpura's lips.

"Si."

Kyndi gestured to the man.

“And him?”

Heartbreak spread across Púrpura’s features. “*Mi amor*. He.. he is...”

McCaskill nodded. “I understand. There’s no time to waste. I’m going to get this pod sealed up and into my ship. *You* take it easy. Marshal’s orders.”

Broken, chilled, weak, and grateful, Yolanta nodded.

“*Si, señora.*”

McCaskill’s ship was a Fer de Lance, rare among the locals. Yolanta barely noted the sleek interior, hobbling with assistance to its bridge. She glanced over her shoulder, concern in her features.

“And you are *sure* that he is secured?”

Kyndi knelt to one knee, securing her charge into the co-pilot’s seat. She finished, looking upward with serious eyes.

“I checked three times. Clamps are engaged and his vitals are the same as before.”

Slowly, Yolanta nodded. Kyndi settled into the commander’s chair, her fingers dancing across the controls, the ship reaching full power. The *Blackthrone* floated peacefully before them, dark like the void...

Púrpura’s eyes shot open.

“*Wait!*”

Kyndi spun, urgency in her voice.

“What is it?”

The Iberian raised a trembling arm, pointing to the Krait.

“You... you must destroy...”

McCaskill’s mouth dropped open.

“Your ship? Are you serious?”

Real fear gripped Yolanta’s features, her remaining eye wide.



“*Just do it!*”

Slowly, Kyndi shook her head. “Your insurance claim, not mine.”

The Fer de Lance— named the *Vita Nova*— deployed hard points. Yolanta scanned the ship’s weapons, urgency in her tone.

“The railguns. Target the reactor. Disintegrate it!”

Again, Kyndi glanced over her shoulder.

“I’ll just trust you on this one.”

It took several salvos to trigger a critical reaction in the *Blackthorne*’s powerplant. But trigger it they did, the runaway energy buildup overpowering the safeties, the *Vita Nova* backing away as tiny puffs of fire escaped the Phantom’s vents and hardpoints.

At last the *Blackthorne* exploded, engulfed in a massive fireball immediately snuffed out by the airless void. There was little left of the triangular hulk, a burned-out husk of a once-magnificent craft.

Kyndi shook her head.

“There. Done. The things’s fried. Happy?”

A new coldness spread across Yolanta’s features, her old Iberian manner seeping back into her movement. Her one good eye narrowed, never leaving the wreckage.

“No, *señora*. I want it in *pieces*. ”

*Jaques Station Medical wing, Jaques Station, Colonia system*

“So?”

The doctor was elderly but possessed of intelligent eyes, a dark-skinned woman who had seen too much and wanted to escape. Yet there was no escaping the human condition, and soon found herself more or less compelled to

resume her medical practice, the flow of immigrants and refugees arriving in Colonia a never-ending one. Thick grey hair was cut close to her scalp, with full lips that seldom smiled. Yolanta and Kyndi stood by, both still in their flightsuits, the former looking far the worse for wear, a crude bandage covering her lost eye.

“Your man is barely hanging on. Weak but stable vitals, but that isn’t what concerns me. There’s no brain activity. None.”

Slowly, with guarded features, Yolanta nodded.

“I know.”

The doctor raised her chin, the largest person in the room despite her short stature.

“If you have something to say, now is the time.”

Yolanta took a deep, ragged breath.

“Hex-edit. He dosed himself with Hex-edit.”

The doctor blinked, unable to summon words at first. Even Kyndi cocked her head to the side.

“Care to tell me *why*?”

Púrpura looked the physician dead in the eyes.

“No.”

Kyndi turned, a new edge in her tone.

“Was there a *reason* you had me destroy your ship?”

Púrpura looked at her, weak, but with the old Iberian pride returning.

“*Si.*”

The doctor shook her head, pausing at the suite’s door on her way out.

“There’s nothing I can do for you. *Either* of you. I’m sorry, but it is what it is. I’ll give you until tomorrow morning to make arrangements for the body, and then we disconnect him.”

Kyndi's eyes narrowed.

“Never mind tomorrow morning. *You* have five minutes to convince me that you're on the level.”

The pain upon Yolanta's face was real. For a long time, she sat there, looking upon Tyrran, Kyndi unable to bring herself to leave her side. There was no formal question asked about her life or the adventures that the two had shared in their time together. Yolanta simply *spoke*, of growing up on her father's *hacienda* on Keytree, of learning the guitar, of her idealistic college days and being recruited by Kerenski. Of learning to fly a ship and earning her wings. Of her baptism by fire, her ideals tested by the cruel world beyond academia. Ascending the ranks of the Night Witches. Overthrowing the corrupt Imperial government of Atroco and installing one that was even worse. Meeting Tyrran. Despising Tyrran. Falling for Tyrran. Journeying to Colonia...

Yolanta's mouth snapped shut. It was now evening on Jaques station, and the two were in the hospital's cafeteria, sipping coffee and conversing. Kyndi leaned forward, weary but interested.

"And then? Why *are* you out here, anyway?"

Yolanta bit her lip.

"It is... it is a long story. But suffice to say that I do not trust the superpowers. Or the media. *Or* those damned Utopians. They took his memory, you see. Copied it in that sim archive of theirs."

For a long moment, both women were silent. The wheels of McCaskill's mind turned and turned, one impossible thought leading to another. Finally the marshal leaned forward, a glimpse of past roguery in her eyes.

"Your man is *here*..."

Yolanta shrugged, crestfallen.

"His body, *si*."

Kyndi continued.

"And his mind and memories are *there*..."

Yola blinked, her own cunning mind racing.

"You cannot be serious, *señora*..."

Kyndi rose, pacing back and forth, less the marshal and more the rogue.

“Those cultists transfer memories from that overgrown datacore into their brains all the time. No reason we can’t just...*reload* him. He’ll lose the time between then and now, but...”

Mad hope welled within Púrpura’s chest. “I... I want to. But the Bubble is so far away, and we are *here*, and how are we going to find someone who can... fly.”

Yolanta scowled.

“And infiltrate a secured facility...”

The scowl grew.

“*And* hack their way past advanced security?”

Kyndi rested her hands on the table, leaning in, her face inches away from Yolanta’s.

“The Utopians and I go *way* back. I owe them a little payback. Give me a week and I’ll have his memories *gift-wrapped*.”

Scarcely believing her ears, Yolanta nearly stammered. Her gaze drifted to the star on Kyndi’s jacket.

“But... but you—”

Kyndi Jane McCaskill turned away, looking over her shoulder, hips shifting as she strode away, a woman on a mission. A grin unlike any other that Púrpura had ever seen lifted her lips, roguish and sassy and sensual.

“You’re not the *only* one with a past, Púrpura.”

*Bridge of the Resolution, high orbit, Carcosa Prime*

Stannis Jellicoe stirred his tea, turning to the assemblage of pilots before him. They were on the bridge of the *Resolution*, new comrades and old, an intimate space for those who had fought and won against overwhelming odds. It was also a farewell of sorts. Arrayed before the canopy was a

multitude of ships, each with the Children of Raxxla crest upon its hull.

The telepresence of Alessia Verdi, smiling but earnest, shimmered onto the deck. It was joined by Raan Corsen, Yuri Nakemura, and Tsu Annabelle Singh. Jellicoe raised his glass to them, toasting his old comrades.

“You’re sure you won’t stick around? Randomius knows you fought hard enough. It isn’t much, but The Rock’s your home as much as ours.”

Verdi shook her head. “We’re not the settling down types, even if there *wasn’t* a bounty on our heads.”

Tsu chimed in. “And the amenities, well... we’ll just stay at Jaques Station next time, if it’s all the same to you.”

There was a warm laughter all across the bridge. Jellicoe stepped forward.

“Then may the void smile upon you all. I hope we meet under better circumstances in the future.”

Verdi frowned. “You’ve still not heard back from Kerenski’s people, have you?”

Stannis hesitated, then shook his head.

“Neither Kerenski, nor Andor or Púrpura.”

One eyebrow lifted. “Then despite our victory, the work remains incomplete. And Evanson... Evanson himself is missing.”

Again, Stannis shook his head.

“Not seen since Linnea’s unfortunate passing. And Sobanii’s made himself scarce.”

Serene Meadows took a place by Jellicoe’s side, making the gesture of goodwill from her people.

“Then may they find peace, whatever plane they inhabit.”

Yuri scoffed.

“Not in our line of work, they won’t.”

Stannis chuckled.

“Still... they would have loved to have seen *this*...”

Beyond the *Resolution's* canopy was a new arrival, something that dwarfed even the Federal Corvette. A marvel of shipbuilding, easily the equal of any capital ship, floated majestically in high orbit over Carcosa. The *Spirit of Salome* was a *Nautilus*-class fleet carrier, equipped with everything the Reapers needed to carry their mission into the stars. Already half the squadron called it home. Verdi smiled, traces of envy in her eyes.

"And you say that you have no idea who was behind this?"

Jellicoe took a deep breath, his features earnest.

"No clue whatsoever. But we have friends in high places, it seems."

Sashin Vikash joined his captain, raising his own glass in congratulation.

"And the Madman appointed to command it. Always have to have the biggest ship, don't you?"

There was another general laughter. Alessia Verdi bowed low, smiling and making ready to leave. A hint of curiosity lifted one eyebrow.

"So, what now for the Reapers?"

A new voice, masculine and authoritative, rang out from across the room. All heads turned, Phisto Sobanii striding in, Reaper black from neck to boots. The blood-red skull adorned his shoulders. The beginnings of a salt-and-pepper beard framed his jawline. He paced the room, silent, eyeing each man and woman who had fought and bled for their victory. Finally, he turned to Verdi.

"The Reapers fight for the future, and the time has come for the next generation to take charge. We of the old guard, well..."

Phisto laid a hand on the shoulders of Renraiku Kordai and Adam Firethorn. No words were spoken between them, nor were any needed. He turned back to Alessia, hardness and pain in his words.

"Well, there aren't many of us. Not any longer."

He turned to the independents. To Rick and Myra and Dillon, pulling through against overwhelming odds. To Tharik Otolì, dressed too formally for the occasion but no less a contributor. To Ratty and his love of a good fight. To Paulina Smith, who showed great promise as a strategist. To all the others who followed in their wake and fought for something greater than themselves.

*"These are the free men and women who held Carcosa. These are the next in line to wear the black. These are the freedom fighters who will lead Loren's Reapers and make those in power tremble!"*

Raised fists accompanied a martial roar, deafening in the *Resolution's* bridge. Alessia Verdi bowed, real approval in her eyes.

*"She would have been proud, you know. Of all of this."*

A roguish grin lifted Phisto's lips, the man throwing a lazy salute her way.

*"No one knew her better."*

A sad smile was Alessia Verdi's only response.

*"I fear," she said, "that no one truly knew her at all."*

*Medical wing, Jaques Station, Colonia system  
One week later*

The argument to keep Tyrran on life support had prevailed once the case was made in credits and not humanity; already a small fortune had been spent. Still, Yolanta scarcely counted the cost. Her days and nights were spent waiting; when she wasn't waiting for Kyndi to return, she was waiting for a cloned replacement for her eye to mature.

Yet Tyrran wasn't her only concern. Each day that passed without being contacted by Kerenski was one that added to the sense of dread within her gut; it was unlike her to

be out of touch for long, especially in the face of her obvious failure to complete the most important mission of her life. With the detachment that she had learned at Kerenski's knee, Púrpura accepted without evidence that her mentor was likely dead.

Then there was the mourning that inevitably accompanied the loss of one's entire tribe. Yolanta Púrpura, for all her Iberian passion, was not an overly sentimental woman. For her, the names and faces of those perished comrades elicited a feeling of emptiness, not sorrow. Worse in many ways was the feeling that it had all been for naught; the artificial was destroyed, and whatever Tyrran had seen while their minds were joined was lost when the Hex-edit entered his bloodstream.

Finally, there was the awkward fact that neither Tyrran nor Yolanta possessed a ship. Púrpura had no regrets about destroying the *Blackthorne*—she shuddered to even think about Theon and his plans—yet the freedom of movement so often taken for granted by pilots was gone. There were Pilots Federation offices right there at Jaques Station, but neither she nor Tyrran possessed the private wealth so typical of guild members, and so their generous terms of insurance were useless.

A humorless chuckle escaped her lips.

*Perhaps I could ask mi padre for the credits?*

Yola was just beginning to amuse herself with the thought of what her father would think of her when the door to the medical suite opened. To her surprise not one but two women entered; Kyndi, and a cloaked figure, traces of dark hair visible beneath her hood.

Púrpura rose, hope in her eyes.

“Did you—”

McCaskill nodded, reaching within her jacket and producing a datadisk.

“Aye. And I did one better, too: found someone who actually knows how this tech works. Well, cultist?”



Slowly, and with obvious pain, the woman pulled back her hood. Yolanta's eye narrowed, her fists clenching.

"Adrienne Cordova. You're a long way from Polevnic."

Like the broken woman she was, Cordova nodded. Her skin was drawn and pale from the grievous injuries inflicted by Theon; her eyes dull and her posture stooped.

"And away I shall remain, for my failure cost me everything. The sim-archive breached. Several dead. The sim-guru is just."

McCaskill shoved the former simpath forward.

"Well, now he can be *useful*. Can you do it or not?"

Cordova cast an eye to Tyrran and his medical readouts. She was silent for several moments.

"I remember this one. So much pain. So much loneliness."

Yolanta folded her arms.

"His memories."

Slowly, Adrienne nodded.

"I can restore them. The technology that your..."

She glanced over her shoulder. "... *associate* has salvaged is crude in comparison to my old implants, but should suffice. But not here. I doubt that the locals would appreciate strange equipment being brought inside their medical ward."

Kyndi nodded. "We can use the *Vita*. Yola, sign him out. It's time to play mad scientist!"

The procedure took place in the *Vita Nova's* cargo bay, such as it was. True to her word, McCaskill had acquired old Utopian technology, though she never quite said how. Adrienne spoke little, her brow furrowed in concentration, confidence returning to her manner now that she was engaged in the familiar.

Yolanta, for her part, spoke even less. Everything was unfamiliar to her, and so she had no choice but to trust in Cordova's expertise. Lines of data scrolled down multiple holodisplays. Others held three-dimensional representations of Tyrran's brain, with various regions highlighted. At last she gave up trying to make sense of everything, walking out to the hangar and lighting a cigarillo.

Yolanta was alone for only a few minutes; Kyndi joined her, eyes on the glowing tip. Púrpura reached inside her jacket to offer one, the marshal accepting. McCaskill steadied the cigarillo as it was lit, inhaling with obvious relish.

"Been awhile, you know? Since I smoked... anything at all."

Púrpura exhaled, a plume of smoke exiting her lips.

"You are awfully generous for only having just met us, *señora*. Are *all* cops in Colonia like this?"

Kyndi shrugged. "I call my own shots. No one else wants the job anyway."

The barest hint of a smirk made Yola's lip twitch.

"Right."

A long moment passed, and Yola again glanced to her side.

"Still... even an old grudge against the cult does not explain why you have done what you have done."

McCaskill remained silent for a long time, her eyes deepening.

"Your man... Tyrran. He reminds me of someone. And seeing you around him, well..."

The woman pursed her lips, concealed pain in her eyes.

"Some things are worth saving, even if they aren't yours."

Yolanta blinked. She was raising a hand to touch Kyndi's arm when Cordova approached from behind.

"It's done. He's recovering."

Yolanta spun, urgency in her tone.

"When?"

Unease softened Adrienne's tone.

"Minutes. Hours. Next week. Never. I can only re-insert the memories. It's up to *him* to wake up."

Iberian guitar filled the darkness, with only the light of various holo-panels providing illumination. Two figures twisted the shadows into silhouettes, one prone and motionless, the other sitting and swaying with the rhythm. The notes were mournful in their passion, a story of love fought for and nearly lost.

The days that passed were a culling of sorts, where things of formerly monumental importance fell away. Yolanta felt not even the need to contact the Reapers; she knew through local media reports that the war for Robardin Rock had been won, but felt nothing in the way of victory. In truth, even the reality of failing the mission seemed of no consequence. Thoughts darker than the shadows around her manifested the more she dwelled on the life she lived and the cause to which she'd devoted herself.

*Did Salome really think that she could dominate that abominación? And if so, would she truly have been willing to unleash monsters upon her fellow man?*

The guitar strummed on, the woman immersed in her thoughts.

*Would Kerenski have been a willing party to it all? Would I?*

Tyrran's breathing deepened, his chest rising and falling more perceptibly. So deep was Yolanta in thought that she startled when his hand brushed hers, followed by a low groan. The guitar stopped.

*"Tyrran!"*

In an instant her lips were upon his, her hair cascading as a curtain around their heads. Her heart pounded within her chest, *willing* a miracle to happen...

Tyrran's hands, lifeless for over a week, rose to pull his *amor* closer, Yolanta all too happy to oblige. Tongues and hands explored, Tyrran leaving no curve untraced nor moment unrelished. At last they broke the kiss, his heart pounding as hard as hers, a roguish grin upon his face.

"*Mi amor*... I must have this done more often."

Andor blinked, his vision adjusting in the darkness.

"What happened to your eye?"

For hours, Tyrran was brought up to speed on what had transpired, utterly perplexed at how the mission had ended. He was heartened to hear that Robardin Rock had been held, and crestfallen that Kerenski and the remaining Night Witches had perished. The loss of Theon gave him pause. He looked to the others in the *Vita Nova's* hangar— even Adrienne's presence was permitted—shaking his head.

"He wasn't to be trusted. But he was our only hope at unearthing the secrets of The Club."

Yolanta took a drag of her cigarillo.

"We unearthed secrets enough, *amor*. But how to use them is another matter entirely."

There was silence all around, all sensing that further speculation was useless. Yolanta's hand found Tyrran's, the lovers rising as one. Adrienne looked away, her eyes downcast. Yolanta lifted her chin, speaking softly.

"Cordova," she said.

The former simpath turned around, saying nothing. Púrpura pursed her lips, her next words forced but sincere.

"I am... sorry... for what has happened to you. I know how it is to be unable to return home."

Adrienne put on her bravest face.

"I'll manage. Even in exile the sim-guru's blessing goes with me."

Amusement danced in Yolanta's eye. She produced a credit pack, placing it in Cordova's hand.

"In case his blessing is not enough. And... thank you. For Tyrran."

Kyndi stepped forward, more gentle with Cordova than before.

"Colonia's a place for strays and outcasts," she said. "Maybe this is where you're meant to be."

Clutching the credit pack, Adrienne nodded, on the verge of tears. She turned, striding away from the *Nova*, the hangar doors closing behind her. The three watched her leave, Kyndi turning to her erstwhile guests.

"And what about you two? How are you fixed to go into the big, bad void? Credits make the 'verse go 'round, even here."

Yolanta took a deep breath, her eyes where Adrienne had just exited.

"What the hospital did not take just went out that door."

Concern deepened Kyndi's features. Yolanta waved it off.

"Do not worry. We have contacts within Loren's Reapers. They will surely aid us."

McCaskill cocked her head to the side.

"You're both pilots, right?"

Man and woman answered as one.

"*Si.*"

"And how enamored *are* you with that bunch of Imperials slumming it in Colonia?"

Tyrran and Yolanta exchanged a look.

"Not particularly."

The violet tips of Kyndi's hair shone in the low light of the hangar. A look more roguish than anyone had seen in a long time lifted her mouth into a smirk.

"Then you don't need them. You need *me.*"

### *The Brig, Luchtaine system*

The office of Mel Brandon was a tidy affair, the enforced habits of his time in Federal service slow to die. The facility in which he worked was less a place of business and more of a private city. Like all the famed engineers of human space, he did little of the actual hands-on work to the components he agreed to modify; a large staff of mechanics and technicians supervised the bulk of the tinkering; his was a research and administrative role. As such, the occasional meeting was necessary, though hardly welcome.

Today, the guests across from him were *especially* unwelcome.

The one in the middle couldn't be bothered to remove her helmet, clearly a woman but speaking with a voice distorter. Two others remained standing, identical in appearance and never saying anything. He'd only had to deal with them once before, when he'd received the funding and staff to launch his operation in Colonia. There had been an understanding then, one that he'd dared broach in recent days. Now, the helmeted woman spoke, accustomed to being feared and obeyed.

"That our mutual friends are disappointed in your recent decisions is an understatement, Mr. Brandon."

The man reclined in his seat, youthful but confident in his position.

"Things have changed. The Nameless aren't the pushovers that they used to be. Besides, only accepting vouchers on *them* was bad for business."

The woman leaned forward, intense even beneath a helmet.

"We had an understanding. You've broken it. We're here to remedy the situation."

The engineer said nothing for a moment, only staring at his own reflection in her helmet. Finally he scoffed, something that he'd not dared have done a year prior.

"You people and your cloak-and-dagger threats. Time was, you could rally the whole galactic community to squash a bug you didn't like. Don't try to make it *my* problem when someone beats you at your own game."

The woman rose, signalling for the trio to leave. Without a word they made their way to the office's sliding door entrance— and then paused. The helmeted woman turned, malice in her words.

"No one is irreplaceable, Mr. Brandon. You're far from the Bubble— but not beyond the reach of accountability."

*Jaques Bar, Jaques Station, Colonia system*

"Heya, Jaques. Why the long face?"

The low static of a hundred people's conversations made for the same background noise as it did any other day at Jaques Bar. Glasses clinked and drinks were poured, men and women from all walks of life mingling. At the center of it all was Jaques, a one-of-a-kind cyborg celebrity in a society that despised cybernetics, a man so old that he simply *was*, like a permanent fixture that no one questioned anymore. Yet that night was different, and though the cyborg tried his best to put on a good face, the melancholy in his features remained inescapably human.

"Aw, nothing. Just... ever think you had a connection... things in common... and then it all goes wrong? And then you wonder what you were thinking in the first place?"

The man across from him chuckled, pulling up the sleeve to a flabby arm, revealing a row of women's names tattooed upon his mottled skin, each crossed out.

"More than once, buddy. More than once. But you gotta take your chances, you know?"

The cyborg shrugged, pouring a drink for himself and his patron, already casting an expert eye down the bar, calculating who would need what service when. He pushed a shot toward his swarthy patron, raising his own in barroom toast.

"To taking chances," he agreed. "And the near-misses along the way."

### *Rebolo Port, Union system*

A trembling, gloved finger hovered over a holoterminal. It was the final screen of several, the command that demanded final confirmation, its effects irreversible. Raven Hurat stood over the terminal, the main one in a plush office, resolution upon his features.

*Disband squadron. Confirm?*

From behind him, an oily voice snaked its way into his ears.

"I understand your predicament, Hurat. Really I do. But *think*. Think before you do this."

Kancro Vantas would never fit into a flightsuit again, even the smartest-cut business attire unable to flatter his corpulence. Behind him, a dozen holoscreens told the story of a faction in freefall. Explorer's Nation had gambled big and lost bigger; the conventional wisdom that explorers at the helm of delicate surveyor vessels having no business pursuing land grabs had been upheld in dramatic fashion. Now they were losing their final ally within the nebula.



Hurat turned. “You’ve seen the holotapes. We were *winning*. Then those elites just... *lost* it. We’re not being told everything that’s going on out here, or else I’m no pilot.”

Pudgy fingers steepled themselves in a gesture of reconciliation. Desperation seeped through Vantas’s facade of authority.

“Surely there’s some arrangement we could come t—”

Hurat cut him off.

“I’ve had enough. Of you. Of those bastards Evanson and Sobanii. Of the politics. Find someone else to fight your wars for you.”

He went to press the button, his finger nearly touching it...

*Disband squadron. Confirm?*

“Careful, Hurat. Only a fool burns his last bridge. Think of your squadron.”

Raven spun, his eyes narrowed, his words hard. On an adjacent terminal, the official casualties suffered by the Colonia Legionaries scrolled. And scrolled. And scrolled.

*Disband squadron. Confirm?*

Without further hesitation, Hurat pressed the button, his gaze the harder.

*Confirmed.*

“Vantas, you son of a bitch: I *have* no squadron.”

*Deep Space, Carcosa system*

With a satisfying chime, the Chieftain’s COVAS granted full control to the salvager, the man grinning with joy. He turned, satisfied, to the black-clad man behind him, intelligent eyes framed by a short beard.

“And you’re sayin’ that there’s all kinds of these scores in the system— that these pilots just dropped dead and their ships went bye-bye? I say we space him sell the salvage.”

Ouberos took a long drag of a cigarette, cunning in his eyes. The ship itself was immobile, docked as it was to a

looming Anaconda, their accesses linked by emergency escape tubing turned toward an altogether different purpose.

“You have it all wrong, Rodion. The ship is the bonus and the pilot the prize— *if* one knows where to take him.”

Confusion reigned on the lackey’s features.

“Look, uh... I know you’re a real operator, boss... but a stiff’s a stiff, you know? Who’s gonna pay for—”

With a single motion, Ouberos pulled a combat knife from its sheath, skinning the pilot’s face and peeling away the skin. Rodion braced himself, expecting grisly muscle on bone— but blinked instead. Cybernetics, soaked with artificial blood, constituted the pilot’s skull and everything beneath its skin. Rodion completed his question, not truly caring about the answer.

“... that.”

Ouberos dropped the corpse— was it truly one?— upon the deck, his voice conspiratorial.

“There’s a dozen more just like him, floating in deep space, out of fuel and waiting to be plucked. And our buyer is *well* beyond dealing in names. I’m heading back to the *Dusk ‘till Dawn*. You get this ship a fresh transponder.”

Rodion took one last look at the artificial man, his eyes widening in realization.

“A... and you say that there’s *more* of these? And... we’re *collecting* them?”

Ouberos smiled, cunning in his every manner.

“You don’t think we came all the way out here from the kindness of our hearts, do you?”

*Imperial Palace, Chione, Prism system*

The view was magnificent, of course. Gleaming azure seas complimented the warm hues of the setting sun, a breeze

just strong enough to cool the evening's waning warmth upon both men's brows. One was dark and youthful, clad in his usual greys and blacks. The other was thin, in the frailty of advancing years, his body aged but his mind sharp. Ambassadorial robes shifted as Cuthrick Delaney turned to his compatriot.

"A failure, then. But a successful one."

Gideon Hathaway stepped forward, his own cunning the match of his elder's. At his sides were the black-clad children, blades hanging from their hips.

"The relic, though not harnessed, has at least been destroyed. The foe has been sent a message. And the program..."

His hands moved to the children's shoulders, hints of pride in his voice.

"... has been proven a success."

Cuthrick glanced over his shoulder, distaste in his eyes.

"So I see. Yet you found it necessary to take a final life. An innocent."

Gideon shook his head.

"A *sacrifice*. To renew Evanson's resolve. It was Kerenski's idea, her final contribution to the cause."

Delaney grunted.

"A gamble, more like— the wisdom of which only time will tell."

For a long time, neither man spoke. The reds and oranges of the setting Chionic horizon darkened into greys and violets, until only the final hues of evening outlined their features. Delaney ventured a last glimpse over his shoulder.

"And the others? Verdi? The Children? Our allies among the superpowers?"

Gideon Hathaway bowed, his eyes and words cunning, his every manner animated with purpose.

"The work continues, ambassador— as it always has."

*Private hangar, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

The flask of Eranin Pearl was raised, Phisto Sobanii imbibing his latest swig. He was sitting at the bottom of the *No Data Available's* ramp, which wasn't unusual. He was also alone— which *was*. For hours the man had lingered, eschewing the celebration that was happening all over Robardin Rock. His features were dulled from alcohol, his manner unsteady, the hangar's shadows seemingly darker than before.

From those shadows came the tapping of boots on metal, echoing through the chamber. Phisto snapped to his feet, hope in his eyes.

“Isaiah?”

The man blinked. Advancing from the distance was the same three women, clad in black, the center one helmeted as always. They halted, standing tall, chins lifted and in command. The helmeted one spoke, her voice distorted as always.

“I understand that you had *aid* in completing your task.”

Scorn soured Phisto's expression.

“The woman's dead, just like you wanted. Not my problem if I wasn't the only one after her.”

The helmeted woman cocked her head to the side.

“Witnesses *always* complicate the situation. Still... it was an impressive speech you gave earlier. You've done well, Sobanii.”

The Reaper raised his flask in mocking toast.

“And Evanson?”

Slowly, the woman nodded.

“Safe... at least from *us*. The greatest danger he faces is himself.”

Phisto scowled.

“Then keep it that way.”

Slowly, one booted foot stepping before the other, the woman advanced. Her hands rose as she did so, lifting her helmet from her head. Sobanii stiffened.

“Now *there’s* a face I never thought I’d see again.”

Imperious grey eyes were framed by fair skin and void-black hair. The woman spoke, her accent only a touch Achenarian.

“You will keep the Reapers where they are. You will report upon their doings. You will be monitored. You will perform tasks as unsavory as they are necessary.”

Sobanii’s features hardened.

“And in return?”

The woman’s hand extended. Resting upon it were the same three vials as before.

“A *long* life of service, sweetened by the knowledge that you alone saved your friend.”

For a long moment, Phisto stared down at the offering. Finally, with a trembling hand, he took the vials, slipping them into his pocket. He drew himself up, looking into the grey eyes of destiny.

“Now get the hell away from me. ”

Amusement on their features, the women turned to leave, the center one raising her helmet to once again don. She paused before doing so, turning to look over her shoulder, victory in her eyes.

“Welcome to the winning side, Phisto of the Sobanii.”

*Bridge of the Vita Nova, Robardin Rock, Carcosa system*

“Just a little more... almost... *got it!*”

With a stroke of Kyndi's finger, the holofeed before her went from red to green. A credit pack to her side updated in realtime, holographic numbers floating above it for a moment before fading out. Behind her, Tyrran and Yolanta exchanged a glance.

McCaskill reached for the credit pack, holding it over her shoulder. Yolanta accepted it, one eyebrow raised.

"*Gracias.*"

Kyndi turned, satisfaction upon her features.

"Couldn't have done it without you. So *nice* of the Reapers to include you in their security protocols!"

Tyrran shook his head.

"Authority out here really *is* different."

Kyndi held up a warning finger.

"No Authority around here. Just a girl with a ship, a badge, and a head full of know-how. Besides, I haven't had this much fun in a *long* time!"

Yolanta smirked. "We are grateful, *señora*. Truly."

Hands were shaken all around, the women exchanging kisses on the cheek. Tyrran and Yolanta departed the *Vita Nova*, waving as it left Robardin Rock. Andor turned to his mate, gesturing to the credit pack.

"So... can we afford a decent ride?"

Yolanta smiled a roguish smile.

"Definitely."

Twin Mambas, one black and the other a deep violet, rocketed forth from Robardin Rock, red and purple thruster trails mingling. Man and woman laughed, free and alive and in love, adventure behind and ahead of them, all the 'verse theirs for the taking.

From within his canopy Tyrran grinned, his accent sharp and his heart pounding.

“Oh, I could get used to *this!*”

The starscape of Colonia arrayed itself before Yolanta, the woman grinning despite herself.

“*Si...* yes, this will do nicely. There is only one thing left to do...”

Her eyes drifted to the blackened surface of Carcosa Prime, memories of darkness and loss roiling within herself. Tyrran’s voice shook her from her recollections.

“I am with you, *mi amor*. ”

Yola looked the other way, towards her lover’s ship, the man himself just visible within. Her eyes smiled though her lips did not.

“I know.”

Final respects were paid to the remains of Kari Kerenski, the woman’s body given to the fiery depths of the world her efforts helped secure. Yolanta tied the inquisitor’s blade around her hips as a memento of her old mentor; it would be one of Kerenski’s only surviving possessions. Her ship, too, was thoroughly scavenged, its datacore extracted and sensitive material removed. So too was Theon’s lair given a final inspection. Not a single abomination within still lived, all either blasted apart or dying along with their distant master.

Wrecks of fallen vessels dotted the surface of Carcosa, far too many for two people to scout. The site would become a graveyard, a monument to the Night Witches who lived— and died— for their cause, upholding the mission of Kahina Tijani Loren. Yet the final two of their number were no longer truly members, passing through fire and death and emerging as something else.

The time had come to leave. In defiance of the elements, man and woman removed their helmets, relishing the world for what it was. Their eyes met, more than

memories passing between them. Yolanta turned, a long leather overcoat flapping at her hips, black like her flightsuit. Violet trim outlined her curves, long ebony hair dancing in the volcanic winds. Tyrran approached, drinking in the sight of his *amor*.

“We can’t go back, you know. Not if the Reapers trace their missing creds back to us.”

Yolanta turned, one foot on the entry ramp of her ship, gazing across the roiling hellscape.

“I have no intention of doing so, *mi amor*. The universe is bigger than their petty games.”

A roguish grin lifted Andor’s lips.

“So you’re content to swindle them and run. Sound like anyone you know?”

An outlaw smirk, dangerous and playful, only magnified Yolanta’s Iberian beauty.

“And *you* were content to give everything for the cause. To save the life of your *amor*. To greet oblivion a hero. Sound like anyone *you* ever thought you’d be?”

Man and woman closed to an intimate distance, their bodies nearly touching. Tyrran brushed a stray hair aside from her face, his forehead touching hers.

“I’ll *tell* you what I think.”

The barest hints of a smile moved Yola’s mouth.

“Oh?”

Tyrran nodded.

“That in every story worth telling, there’s always a man...”

Her hands went to his hips, pulling him close.

“Yes...?”

Andor’s face hovered inches from hers, nearly touching.

“There’s always a woman...”

Yolanta’s lips parted. Her eyes deepened.

“*Si...*”



A gloved finger traced along her cheek, leaving an ashen trail.

“And there’s always an ending that leaves them wanting more...”

Amid ash and fire his lips pressed against hers, a seal of everything they were and would be, of love and adventure to come. The moment, pure and primal and perfect, was theirs and theirs alone. At last the kiss was broken, Yola looking with new eyes to her man.

“Yes...*si...mi amor...mi corazón...*I want it. I want *more*. I have fought my entire life for this freedom...”

Their ships waited. The horizon beckoned. The void itself, starry and infinite, stretched out before them.

“... and now I have it!”

# THE FEAST OF TITANS

*The venue was intimate, selected for its discretion, exposure kept at an absolute minimum. It wasn't quite a restaurant and wasn't quite a shack, known only to the uppermost circles of Imperial society, simple in its appointments and simple in its menu. The culinary traditions of ancient Asian Earth were kept alive in its isolation. In its humble kitchen a single chef labored, elderly and all but retired, deigning to prepare meals for guests once a week, his prices reflective of the astronomical exclusivity that a table in his hovel reflected.*

*It was the chef's wife who served the delicacies, her every movement a work of art, her eyes milky and unseeing. Nevertheless she would be dosed with Hex-edit, for the day's clientele demanded secrecy as an absolute. They were silent, waiting until the aged woman left, three men and two women.*

*"Is the fish truly served raw?" the woman known only as Finance asked. "Seems barbaric."*

*A man, called Infrastructure, eyed the delicacies as a predator eyed helpless prey, the modest portions no match for his great bulk.*

*"We masticate upon history itself," he replied. "A dying art, this. In a generation these places will be extinct."*

*Another man, known as Society, shifted upon his cushion.*

*"You know what isn't extinct? Tables and chairs. Not every throwback to times past is necessarily a good one, I fear."*

*A man, Exo, raised a glass of rice wine at his associate.*

*“And here we arrive at the point. It was a close thing in Colonia. Too close, by my reckoning.”*

*A silence descended over the table, each looking to those around themselves, much hinging on what was spoken next. Infrastructure, already on a second selection, was quick to opine.*

*“We have run the appropriate calculations,” he said. “Updated with sociographic data from the Oresrian incursions. People adjusted well to the reality of the old rumors being true. There is little reason to believe that malevolent robot monsters from Colonia would have done any worse.”*

*Society shifted in his cushion, a different discomfort ailing him.*

*“People have their breaking point. And the breaking point of an entire system is quite a thing to behold.”*

*Infrastructure smiled in polite truce.*

*“Fortunately that is a test we won’t have to face. In fact, my understanding is that on balance things turned out quite well for us. Exo?”*

*The other man wiped his mouth with a silk napkin, the delicate square fabric worth more than a commoner’s entire wardrobe.*

*“It’s true. We have gained a new agent, one that will neutralize that gang of rabble-rousers quite handily. Their focus on plumbing the secrets of days long past died with that Kerenski woman. Now they only seek to preserve the sovereignty of some worthless rock. This agent’s influence will ensure that their efforts are channeled thus indefinitely.”*

*Personnel raised her glass. “Well done. But what of the bad news?”*

*The satisfaction in Exo’s features diminished.*

*“The engineer. Brandon. He’s abandoned our arrangement—and quite openly, I’m afraid.”*

*There were nods all around. The fates of those who defied the circle were never in doubt, time being the only factor. Infrastructure reached out for yet another morsel.*

*"I fear we'll run out of food before we run out of business. Is there anything else?"*

*Society chimed in.*

*"My efforts to limit media activity have proven successful. There will be a significant slowdown of coordinated network broadcasting. In time, news will concern local matters and little else."*

*Infrastructure frowned. "Unfortunate that it's come to that. I always did enjoy reading Galnet over my morning tea. Still, we do what we must."*

*Society toasted his associate.*

*"Quite."*

*Finance, now, had matters to raise.*

*"The bone that we've thrown to the galactic community continues to be gnawed upon. The price of certain newly-mined materials remains absurd, per our design."*

*Personnel smiled.*

*"Who'd have ever guessed that appealing to raw greed would work so well?"*

*Finance smiled in return. "Altruism and ideology are well and good, but the Bank of Zaonce has yet to accept such abstract qualities as fungible assets."*

*Infrastructure, too, raised his glass.*

*"And no more of those community efforts, either. A pain to arrange. A pain to execute. Good riddance, I say."*

*The remaining members of The Club joined Infrastructure's toast, their glasses clinking.*

*"Hear hear!"*

*Rice wine, simple yet as obscenely expensive as anything else before them, was imbibed all around. Smiles were exchanged, the pleasantries between the five always good-natured. Yet each was a mastermind in their own domain of responsibility, and each ever had an eye to the*

*future. Each possibility would be accounted for, the capital of their influence spent to maximise their collective designs.*

*Exo, as he often did, was the first to broach the inevitable.*

*“As well as things are going,” he said, “we must not forget the greater endeavor. There’s already word that time is running out.”*

*A hush fell over the table. Infrastructure swallowed his latest helping.*

*“So soon?”*

*Exo nodded, sober.*

*“Old dogs may yet need to learn new tricks. And even that might not be enough.”*

*Infrastructure considered, his mind processing the information, a dozen scenarios being weighed at once. Finally he rose, unsteady in his great girth, making his way to the door. The diner— in reality little more than a glorified hut from another time— sat amid rolling expanses of natural beauty. The voice of Finance, exasperated, called out behind him.*

*“And what exactly do you think you’re doing?”*

*Infrastructure turned, his fleshy eyes cunning, gesturing to the land around him.*

*“What I expect a great many will in the years to come: going on a long overdue walk.”*

## SHADOWS OF THE PAST

# HER MISSION LIVES ON

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