

BLOOD VORTEX

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The debris came down upon Garret's head shattering his face and torso into dust.

Deena ran from the ricochet with the case in her hands. She clutched it like a baby—the mission in her grasp. The gravity of the moon pulled lightly, making her hopping escape seem almost comical. A rock the size of a fist scraped across her faceplate, making a hole in the moon's surface instead of her head. Deena stumbled while activating her comms.

“I need extraction. I repeat, I need extraction.”

“We're working on it. Aim for these coordinates. ETA three minutes.”

A female voice spoke out the location of her pickup, the time of arrival, and the odds of her survival. They were 12 percent.

Barreling through low gravity, Deena took a chance and looked up. The second round of the meteor shower looked about two minutes away. This one looked deadlier than the last. She hurried her pace, her legs mechanically shifting.

She saw the pod falling to the surface, ready to take her back. Every second she got closer, the more confident her movements became.

The pod landed.

Deena jumped in, locking the door behind her with the heavy latch.

In three seconds the pod lifted from the surface, the thrusters burning hard. Then the pod rocketed out to space. Deena sat back, keeping the case in a safe compartment. A stray group of meteors destroyed the side of the pod closest to Deena, jettisoning her while leaving the case in the pod.

She said, "I'm out. The pod is compromised. I need backup."

"Status of the objective?"

"Unconfirmed. Still in the pod, I think."

"Noted."

She flew into the oncoming shower, her back to the zone of death.

Deena Athens was rocked back and forth violently, pieces of her coming off like petals of a flower in the wind, until she had one arm and part of her torso left.

She was still able to speak. "You liars. You liars. You said it wouldn't hurt." Then she sailed soundlessly into the terrible beyond.

For the emptiest of shells, humanity dwindles, ready to be consumed by the Cosm.

The humans look haggard, bereft of energy. They look like meat and bones tied together with loose sickly skin and wilting muscles and creaking joints. Everyone looks tired. Everyone has yellow teeth: imperfect, crooked. Everyone has scars and blemishes and scabs peeling from wetness. Everyone looks undone, depressed, starving and hungry for hope in a hopelessly foregone galaxy. Everyone is dying inside and out, rotting from hidden places too far gone to speak of. Everyone speaks similarly, most dialects diluted over time. Everyone is ill in one way or many, with putrid stink clinging to their souls and to their saliva. Individuality is meaningless due to organic fuel taking precedence. Artistry, art, is no more. The non-essential commodity is overtaken by artificiality, such as it were. They had their time of play, for now

their time is endless fear and endless work and endless death. They are the futile churn against inevitable oblivion, in which they dance toward in a waltz of horrors.

They get ever closer, to that place.

The place we call home.

LAST CHANCE TO RUN FROM THE STORM

I, DEENA, AMTRAK

Deena exited the bathroom, cold water still dripping down her chin.

Tara watched Deena from across the room, shielding the projection from her. The projection showed Deena's husk, still in pieces, mutely screaming into the void. It was miles away from them now. She'd done her mission, and now it was time to end it.

Tara blocked the image with her body, putting a nimble finger behind her to shut the projector off. Deena didn't seem to notice.

"How'd I do?" Deena asked.

"You did fine. The sample arrived safe and sound. Breathe easy."

"Wow," Deena did actually sigh in relief, massaging her chest. "That's great. That's great to hear. Can I see it?"

"Still being prepped by Phillip."

Deena nodded, a smile on her face.

"Go relax," Tara said. "We'll do your eval soon. In the meantime, you're all good."

"Sure," Deena said and walked out of the room.

When the coast was clear, Tara turned the projector back on. The projection showed the husk's point of view with another cam recording of the incident moments ago. The husk

was now floating through space miles away, unrecoverable. The feed was dying, the signal fading as it got farther away. She input the command to terminate the husk's conciseness. And just like that, there was only one Deena Athens in the universe again.

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After a short nap, Deena walked into the rec room.

The *Amtrak* was a small Independent ship, rustic in its look and design, built for function over form. Bronze, pipelined hallways connected room to room, and basic metal grating paneled the flooring. Everything had a sharp edge to it, apart from the living and working areas.

Some of the crew of the *Amtrak* had some self-brewed beers on the table, slowly diminishing in quantity due to Garret's drinking.

"To husks," Garret said, raising a cup of beer to Deena. "Tara says we did good. We're good together. Proud of you."

Deena nodded.

Tara followed close behind her. She strode across the room, grabbing a cup and filling it, then sat in her usual spot by a window, looking at the stars in the impossible distance, drinking.

Deena approached her and said, "Hey. Drinking too? Celebrating?"

"Small wins need to be celebrated. Can finally go home. Going to be joining?"

"Going home?"

"Celebrating."

"Oh, of course, yes. Of course," Deena said, relaxing herself into a seat next to Tara. She put an arm behind her chair and leaned back. "I did good? What happens to her now?"

“Come on, we’ve been over this,” Tara said, smiling, taking a big gulp of beer. She grimaced after it. “You know it’s best for us to just forget about the whole thing. Wait for your eval at least.”

“I know, I know. Trust me, I know not to get attached. Seriously, I’m not.” As Deena spoke, she played with her wrist, pushing two fingers on the radial artery. “I’m just interested, that’s all. What happened after she made it back?”

Tara put the cup of beer down and sighed. “We went over everything in the briefing. I’m telling you now, you did fine. You already know, Deena, that I’m not supposed to tell anything. I’m not supposed to be having this conversation right now. I shouldn’t even have said you did fine. I should be impartial.”

“I’m not asking for details here,” Deena said, her voice raising.

Tara stood, drinking the remains of her beverage, then said, “Just give it time. Try to relax.” Tara put a hand on Deena’s shoulder, then walked away to the fridge. “Now I just need to catch Phillip for a copy scan. Everyone on the ship is done except him.”

Deena stared out of the window too, her leg jackhammering from her seat. She stood and looked at Garret, who she might have forgotten was there the whole time.

“Don’t ask too many questions,” Garret said from across the room. “You get used to it.”

Deena sat by Garret and shrugged. “I know that,” she said. “I’m just asking questions. You’ve got those seven years under your belt. You must know it inside and out, right?”

“Then ask me. If I’m so experienced.” He winked.

“Okay.” Deena paused, as if to think. “What happens if you see your husk? What’s it like? I mean, I think my partner did it once but he doesn’t like to talk about it.”

Garret looked at Tara who was rummaging through the fridge. She shrugged and huffed. Garret looked back at Deena and said, “Well, it’s not good. Personally, I’ve never corpsed before, but I’ve heard it’s not great.”

Tara laughed in the background. It was a short bark, as if hearing a monumental understatement. Then she said something under her breath but it was not in audible range.

Garret side-eyed her, but continued. “I knew a man who was deployed on Ratha. I don’t remember the mission, but anyway, he got in this situation where the husks were still in deployment when he had to leave. The whole team had to leave. And so, here’s this man trying to get off the planet, and he goes to the evac ship, and then from behind, or somewhere—out of nowhere—his own husk comes up and taps him on the shoulder.”

“No . . .” Deena whispered.

“I know.”

Tara cleared her throat.

Garret straightened up from his chair. “So,” he said, playing with the collar of his jumpsuit, “the next thing is, his husk starts talking to him. Says that he needs to get aboard too. He needs to go home too. So, the man calls in, and tells them about the situation. And so he ends up having to leave it behind. He gets aboard the evac, he goes home, and he never hears what happened to the husk.”

“Because it’s not true.” Tara sat by the pair forcibly. She was drinking heavily now.

“It’s true,” Garret said. “This man wouldn’t lie. He was normal. He didn’t like attention. Why would he lie?”

“Embellishment would be more accurate. Come on, were his eyes bugging out, twitching into his own head? Did he keep asking where he was, who he was? Did he—” Tara stopped when she saw Deena’s facial expression. “Deena, stop worrying. You’re all good. You did great and now you don’t have to do it again. Leave it to the expenders.”

“Oh yes, it’s a job all right,” Garret said. “Can’t wait for our next little therapy session, Tara.”

A hatch door opened. In walked Captain Roland Laker, Harry Barto and Phillip Lortde. Roland walked first, ahead of the two men who stayed to his sides, not overtaking him.

“Started without us?” Laker said.

“Mas,” Garret said, nodding.

“Master,” Deena and Tara said, standing.

“At ease. I’ve got something for us.” Laker pulled out a bottle from behind his back. It was a bottle of light-yellow liquid. “I brought some champagne. It’s a type of wine.”

Everyone looked dumbfounded. All except Deena.

“You’ve never had champagne before? Or wine?” Deena said, looking at each member of the crew as they took their seats around the rec room.

“Don’t worry Deena,” Laker said, uncapping the expensive-looking bottle, making a *pop* sound. “They hadn’t even tried soda before they joined me. The *OPPS* wouldn’t know what to do with them.”

Deena gave a chuckle. “Is it that obvious I was born there?”

“It’s obvious you were born on the nice part of the *OPPS*, yes,” Tara said. “You can always smell an AVE nat. That kind of stin— That kind of smell doesn’t wash out.”

“Never mind that,” Laker said, filling a few cups and passing them around with the help of Phillip Lortde. Laker scratched his stubble. “I want to raise a toast to you all. We’ve all done amazing work here and it’s almost at an end. Deena, you’ve been great. I think I speak for everyone when I say we’ve *appreciated*, your assistance. Truly. I’m sure the brand-spanking-new consensus will be the bane of our existences and assign us to all types of horrid jobs. But, hey, we’re alive. We’re here. This is happening. Drink, everyone.”

Everyone took a swig.

Two hours in, Deena spoke to Phillip. She asked about the specimen and if he’d had the chance to look at it. He said he had. They both exited the party for a moment, crossing from

the rec room to the makeshift lab, still with drinks in hand. It was an engine room primarily, but it stored the generator that powered the ship, and now the specimen.

Another surprise was the old, slightly rusted husk in the corner. When Deena walked in, she jumped and put a hand on her chest. “I don’t know how he sleeps in here with this thing!” she said.

“It is harmless,” Phillip said.

“I know that. But still, I’ve never seen a husk like it. So old.”

Tools had been moved out of the way to make room. Discarded in large plastic boxes were rivet guns, screwdrivers, blowtorches, cutters, even a set of knives.

Kept in an incubator, the minuscule thing writhed in a cocoon of crystallized mineral. Deep and sharp crevices surrounded the being.

“I know we weren’t supposed to examine yet, but I couldn’t resist,” Phillip said.

“I understand. So, let’s hear it.”

“Well, from a short examination, I can tell you it’s an invertebrate. Carbon based. No heart, eyes, mouth. It has no respiratory system, so I’m glad it has acclimatized to its oxygen-filled habitation, although I’m not sure how it survives. It could be photosynthetic. From testing—” Phillip said, handing Deena his cup of water and lifting the lid of the container and dropping a morsel inside, landing directly in the mineral structure, “—we can see how it absorbs nutrients. And at a microscopic level—” Phillip looked through a microscope at the specimen consuming its food, “—we see that it quite literally spreads itself to ingest the food. And since the braincells of this creature are intertwined in its body, it becomes brainfood. It evolves as it eats. It grows and matures when intaking sustenance.”

“I see,” Deena said back. “Have you begun animal testing? Could be a symbiote.”

“We haven’t, but perhaps. But here is the interesting thing. From my initial examination, I found silicon in its genetic makeup. These are only tiny, but this could be a massive

breakthrough if I'm not wrong. If I had to hazard a guess, and, hypothetically, if it *did* have trace elements of silicon, and again, I might be wrong, I would say its entire genetic structure is built like a mega brain—something way beyond our intellect—using nutrients to gather knowledge. Imagine eating the meat of an animal dead two years prior, then being able to recount its life, its experiences, even its language if it were intelligent enough. The food I just dropped in for it is plant based, and yet it could theoretically store some kind of intrinsic biochemistry.” As he was talking, small drips of saliva formed at the corners of his mouth. His eyes were wide as well; a mad scientist’s portrait.

“Are you serious? Are we really talking about what I think we’re talking about?”

“I don’t know. It seems crazy. But, then again, maybe not. We’ve always had the suspicion that silicon-based life is out there. While this isn’t exactly that, this could be something even more. I might be wrong. I need to do more tests. I might be wrong.”

“Oh my,” Deena said, looking stunned.

“We could be on the verge of a new era. Could you imagine?”

“We can’t tell anyone. Not yet. This is huge.”

“I understand,” Phillip said. “AVE must have known something of this. I don’t see why they would send us here without knowing as much as we do now.”

As they were about to leave, Harry walked in and said, “Oh, hey.”

“Hey. Bet you’ll be glad when we’ve packed our stuff out of here,” Deena said.

“No, no, it’s okay. I can work around you. I just wanted to check the engine before we turned in for the night. Is it okay for that thing to be in here?” Harry eyed the specimen.

“Safest place for it, I suppose, for now,” Phillip said. “Suitable temperature, can be quarantined. Just please do not mess.”

“Yes, I’ll try not to.” Harry scoffed.

“Party’s still going on anyway, come on, the engine can wait until later,” Deena said.

Back in the rec room, everyone drank more. Harry left after thirty minutes to go back to his bed.

The rest sat at the table where they played the handmade card game *Generational*. It was invented by Harry and drawn with paper and ink. The sketches were badly drawn but had a charm to them. Usually the reclusive one, it could have been an attempt to have something to bond over.

Laker drew the HEROIC DISCIPLINE card. He smiled and held the card close to his chest.

Garret couldn't get the hang of the game, so he put his cards down, telling all that he was quitting and that no matter how many times he played, he never understood the rules. He still sat there, drinking more. "So, Deena, Phil, you two think of a name yet?"

Deena and Phillip looked at each other, confused.

"You know, the thing," Garret continued. "Well, technically it'd be you doing the naming, Deena. You discovered it. You caught it."

"It was a joint effort," she said, but Phillip crossed his head.

"You're modest," Phillip said.

"No, it was joint effort. Seriously, we all worked on this together. I didn't do these past two weeks on my own."

"Stop," Tara said. "Just take the compliment. You did good, you make a good part of the team. Think of a name."

Deena didn't say anything, just looked at the floor. Then, she said, "Milly . . ."

"Nice name," Tara said. "Why Milly?"

"It's just a nice name, isn't it. It's nice. Milly."

They all nodded and continued with their game. They drank more, they sang, they danced. Then, they slept.

In the engine room, Milly stirred.

2, ORLON, AVE OPPS

Orlon stepped forward, the cams focused on him. He had an earpiece and mic. The crowd watched, all attentive.

Orlon spoke in a clear and slow voice. “Hello all. Welcome. I wanted to come out and see everyone today, and to make my stances clear for you all after my recent victory. I’m overjoyed by my election win and I want to thank each and every one of you for voting. We did it.” Cheers all around. “Over the past few days, we’ve had the celebrations. Now it’s time to get into the policies I’ll be pursuing in the very near future. I want to promise each and every one of you in this room today, and everyone watching out there, that things will change. We’ve all been feeling the effects of our circumstances. They can be tough. Each planet needs attention and they need it now. For too long we’ve been huddled in a dark corner, scared, uncertain.” Orlon’s voice gained some bravado as he spoke. “Today, that ends. I will be routing all resources to help everyone on the *OPPS*. You are not alone. You are not forgotten. We are all in this together, I am in this too. We are all cits of this citadel. This home we have made for ourselves. Of this salvation.”

The crowd’s cheers echoed in the vast hall, but a hint of booing came from some rows back. On stage, the spotlights highlighted Orlon while keeping the armed guards and security husks in shadow.

Orlon eyed the crowd, his vision darting from one person to the next. He smiled and waved his hands. “Okay,” he said, “I know we will do all we can. My policies henceforth will also address the decidedly unacceptable rise of terrorism, of the violent actions of the Deserter groups, being launched at the United Planets and its people. We are all a part of this community, of this society, of this . . . system. We may not have been born on Earth, but we must set an example and make every part of this system like it, not just Ratha. We will stop with the

unnecessary conflicts. The only wars during my campaign will be out of passion. A passion for your safety, for our continued existence, to make our people proud. We don't want to fight in conflicts that will ruin generations for years to come anymore. We don't want to do that. So, one of my goals is to make this the last fight. The last fight that will end this pointless squabble between two dead leaders a hundred years ago. If the great Avery Anglor were here today, would he want us to hand over our near-perfect civilization? No. Would he want us to destroy ourselves, fighting each other instead of a common enemy? No. So, I have to be in the middle. I have to be the one who unites us. And I'm proud to do so. Because, as we must not forget, while Anglor and Voltan were enemies, if they had come to an understanding, we would have a lot more people with us now. Would it have been better? Worse? I can't say. And don't get me wrong, I am in no way praising the actions of a terrorist. No way. Harlow Voltan was the man who started the first war. The war to start all wars. For that, I hate him to my very core, and I hate the Voltan Revolution just as much for supporting his ideals. Because it is my duty to stand in front of you, and to tell you that this will be the last. I know that sounds like a dream. A fantasy. It sounds like utopia. We don't live in a perfect universe. But, with me as your consensus, I can work to make it better."

Scattered claps.

"So, with the new year begun, we have a lot of work today. Beside our duty, we will also be addressing the low stocks of provisions. You are being heard. From now on, the *OPPS* is our number one priority. I will be having a meeting with the board where every host will take account. We will provide everyone with fresh food and water. I know that our hosts are optimistic for the future. They're truly inspired to help in this cause. We have their support and I want to also offer them my full support, of course."

Orlon paused and walked the floor. He interlocked his hands and stretched his neck, his pointed gray suit spotless and shiny in the light. "As your elected consensus, I wanted to say

that this is the beginning of something new. Join me through this dark and wonderful journey. Together. Thank you.” The audience clapped wildly. As Orlon was going, he said, “Keep an eye on the web for a deep dive into my full campaign. Make your voices heard too. Change begins today.” He paced offstage.

Yaro followed behind, clicking his tablet-projector, running numbers.

“This is pointless. I hate lying to them. But how was I? Was it too much?” Orlon said.

“No, mas. Congratulations on a successful speech,” Yaro said, not looking up from his tablet.

“I need to get away from this,” Orlon said, shaking his wrists, exhaling steadily. “That was a lot of people. A lot of people. I’ve never done a speech that big. Winning it was one thing. Accepting the title and a short acknowledgement. This is another.”

“You did well,” Yaro said.

Orlon sighed. It sounded like relief or worry. “You’re right. It’s not an easy transition.”

“Never is.”

“Right. I guess it’s mostly a trial-and-error job, yes?”

“Definitely,” Yaro said as they both walked. Security followed behind; two husks with faceplates turned off. “All I ask as your advisor is that you spend the next ten years—”

“Or five years,” Orlon interrupted.

Yaro crossed his head.

“How did I get this job?” Orlon laughed, but it sounded like a cold and humorless one.

“Spend the next ten years following example. We’ll want this to be a smooth transition.”

Orlon nodded.

“You can do this, master.”

Orlon smiled wearily. “I will.”

They carried on walking to Orlon's new office. Inside, it smelled of old leather and artificially recycled and familiar air created by everyone's expelled CO2. Rows of documents littered the cabinets and a large coat was still draped over the fancy desk chair. Orlon walked to the portrait of the old consensus on the wall that hung tall and proud. Orlon smiled, a weak spasm under the eye and the corner of his mouth. He sighed again and looked back to Yaro.

"It's big," Orlon said, looking over the room.

"It is. And it's yours."

"Be honest with me."

"Yes?"

"Am I ready?"

"Of course."

"Then I'm glad to have this."

"And you have it for a reason. Do not waste it." Yaro knocked on the door lightly and left.

Once alone, Orlon slipped into the desk chair, breathing in the air. Whether the smell of leather and artificiality was pleasant or whether it was stale and disgusting, was wholly unknown, but he laughed loud and clear as if it was pleasant. He laughed like a maniac, as if it were stored in his soul, lingering for too long, desperate to escape, needing to evacuate. He pounded the desk and wiped tears from his face. But then it was not clear if he was laughing any longer or if he was crying, but he buried his head in his arms and continued.

*

After getting a feel for his new life, he called his partner on his hand-projector and spoke at length about his feelings. His partner seemed tired or uncaring, yet she still conversed. At 9:00 P.M. ET, Orlon left his office with the security husks still lingering by the door. He said

goodbye but they didn't react. They never spoke, just watched and held their rifles by their chests and watched over him.

Orlon was in Lotus City: the top of the AVE *OPPS* in terms of class, and only filled with the upper echelons of the universe. No murder. No poverty. No color. Lifeless.

In a good mood, Orlon passed by Khalil's hospital room in the medical center of Lotus City. Dozens of rooms were lined up, all filled with injured whaling people. Farther down the corridor were hundreds of lower-class rooms overcrowded with sickbeds, all catching each other's diseases. The sounds of their agony didn't carry as far due to the distance.

Orlon entered and stared down at the man in his hospital bed. Stasis wrap was covering Khalil's flesh in pieces. His torso was black and open, the clear stasis wrap displaying the beating heart and working lungs vividly. His bones and decayed muscle tissue jutted out. His legs were gone almost to the waist. His left arm was removed at the shoulder, his right was hanging limply at his side, the wrist ending in a stump. Next to the stump was a tablet-projector that Khalil used to type on, turning the text into an AI generated version of his voice. No matter how much he spoke through it, it always sounded flat and lifeless.

Above the bed was a broken cam, requested by the patient inside to stay that way. Special instructions given to Orlon.

Khalil's eyes darted to Orlon, stasis wrap also over parts of his face, covering his lidless eyes and jawless mouth. The tongue lulled limply like a swollen and wet and lifeless mollusk. The man was a snapshot of a dying and broken things. Yet, Khalil's eyes were filled with life. Whether they looked out at the world with spitefulness or hatred or justice, it wasn't possible to say just what his brain was imagining. But the eyes were alive, like two bulging fruits about to burst.

"Hey," Orlon said, tentatively. He sat next to Khalil and looked over to the wall-projector next to him.

“Are those husks following you?” the robotic replacement of Khalil’s voice said as it also captioned the audio on the projection. The voice transcript was always delayed, but it was good tech.

“What husks?”

“Those security husks.”

Orlon turned and looked at the door. “I don’t think so.”

“They watch me when I sleep sometimes. I don’t like them being around me.”

“Right.”

“Can you turn that off?”

“Turn what off?”

“I don’t know. That humming. I can hear a humming. It’s annoying.”

“Sure,” Orlon said, sounding unsure of the noise. After a few minutes, Orlon couldn’t locate it.

“You can’t hear that?”

“No. I’m sorry, I’ll talk to one of the seconds around here. They’ll help.”

“How did the speech go?”

“Not bad. But terrifying. A lot of people all waiting for me to talk.”

“Not the first speech you’ve done.”

“No, I know. But it was just the most, you know? Like too many to even be able to count. I did okay though. I’m kind of a big deal now.”

“Kind of a big deal?”

“Yes of course. Could have you killed.”

A hint of a smile bristled on Khalil’s ruined face. “It would take a lot,” the speaker on the projector shot back out.

Orlon chuckled.

“When do you start?” Khalil said.

“Already have. Technically.”

“That is great.”

Khalil’s eyes rotated away from Orlon and they looked out of a window. He had that same look again, of indefinable ambition for something. Orlon wasn’t looking at Khalil, he was looking at the wall-projector, reading the three words over and over, whispering them to himself.

“And how are you?” Orlon said finally.

Eyes looked back at him. “I’m great.”

Silence.

“They treating you well?” Orlon said.

“You don’t have to visit every day you know.”

“What? Come on, I like coming. Gets me away from the—nightmare—out there.”

“Just saying you don’t have to feel bad.”

“I know. Come on, I just like seeing you. Is that so bad?”

“It is when I’m so hideous.”

“Stop. Khalil. What do you want? How can I make you more comfortable?”

“You’ve done all you can. I can just sleep now.”

“Oh, you’re tired?”

Silence.

Orlon stood and idled by the door. “You know what? I can hear that, that buzzing or humming. Yes, I think you’re right. It’s got to be this AC.”

Orlon pushed a chair against the wall with his foot and stood on it. He banged on the air conditioning unit. The contraption was making no humming or buzzing sound, so this

moment of hysteria must have been psychosomatic. Orlon continued pounding on it, frantic. Eventually, he huffed and stopped.

“It’s stressful.”

“What?” Khalil said after a moment.

“I said it’s stressful.”

“It is full?”

“No—” Orlon stepped down and kicked the chair away. “I said it’s stressful, it’s stressful. The past few months have been stressful and now I’m consensus it’s stressful and the next ten years are going to be stressful and—”

“It’s okay.”

“Not really.” Orlon looked back at the AC unit and saw that it was broken, now actually making a whirring sound. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“I’ll come by tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.”

“And don’t tell Mala I was here so late, okay?”

“Okay.”

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On level one of the *OPPS*, just like Khalil, he had access to the best housing. His home was expansive, with heightened security and a private entrance and biosphere. The sprinklers shot water in soldier-strict unison as he walked on the cobbled steps to the front door.

Entering his hab, Orlon removed his shoes and tossed them to the side, sighing. He rubbed his temples and nearly bumped into a small child, around the age of ten. The child was giggling, playing with a small plastic toy.

Orlon laughed and picked up the child. “Little man, you almost knocked me over. You almost knocked me across the room!” He gently nudged the child in the stomach and made a fake punching sound with his cheeks. “You think I’m going to let that slide?”

“Hello darling,” Mala said, entering the room with a glass of wine in hand.

“Good evening,” Orlon said, glancing for half a second at the glass.

“Eventful first day?”

“Yes, it was. Understatement,” he said, still cradling his son.

“Theo has been monstrous.”

“No I’m not!” Theo yelled, half attention on his toy now.

Mala smirked and kissed Orlon. He then let Theo to the floor where the child continued his game.

“Want to talk about it?” Mala asked.

“I’m tired. It’s been exhausting. After some food, sure.”

So the three of them sat at the dining table. Orlon passed some plant-based beef and chicken from plate to plate. “What cut do you want?” Orlon asked Theo.

“The big piece!”

“The big man gets the big piece.”

“Tell your father what you learned today, Theo.”

Theo thought for a second, then smiled. “We learned about the old cats and the old dogs from Earth. They looked funny.”

“Oh? What were they like?” Orlon said, settling down for his own meal.

“They looked funny,” Theo said, tugging at the beef with his gnawing mouth. “A cat has two eyes and they have sharp eyes. They looked nice.”

“Did they?”

“Yes. And they said about the cat has your tongue. It means you can’t speak. Has a cat got your tongue?”

“Did you learn about old cows too?”

“No. Miss Jahanna says Earth was dying so we had to leave. She said the cows were used by farmers to make milk, but now we can’t have that kind of stuff cos we don’t have that many here. We have things on Ratha and Emp . . . iris. And that we have to make sure we do good to each other. And she said that I did the best picture in class as well. I didn’t show you, Dad but it was good.”

“After your meal, you can show me. Then, we can watch Aivo. Then bed.”

Mala scoffed.

“What?” Orlon said.

“I’m sick to death of Aivo,” she said as she poured herself a glass of wine. “Aivo.” She scoffed.

“Don’t like being stuck at home?” Orlon asked.

“Not particularly.”

“Mommy said that you’re the boss now. That you’re the con-con-con—”

“Consensus sweetie.”

“That. What’s that mean.”

“Means I get to help people. Means I get to make some rules and boss people around.”

“Also means he’s going to be on a few business trips too,” Mala whispered to Theo.

“Mala,” Orlon said.

“What? It’s true. Just more time for me in the hab, that’s all.”

“Would love nothing more for me to be here with you two.”

“Sure.”

The couple awkwardly ate and avoided eye contact.

*

Orlon spoke to Matri on his projector. The AI recommended many shows to the family, pointing out a cartoon that both child and parent could enjoy. Orlon agreed to the suggestion, and it instantly lit up on the wall-projector.

The purple alien discovered a new power in his hometown, which later in the episode became so powerful he lost all his friends and had to reconcile with them to gain back their trust, which he did by the last act.

Theo snored softly after the ep finished. Mala and Orlon stroked his hair as they sat next to him.

They got into bed themselves. Orlon fiddled with the remote near the bed, switching the biosphere's time from day to night. In a few moments, the room went from bright to dark.

The time was 11:32 P.M. ET. All biospheres had automatic and naturally occurring day and night cycles, but Orlon had his switched off.

They both lied in bed, looking at their tablet-projectors, occasionally clicking keys. The room glowed with a soft haze now, like two trapped glowing insects.

"Are you tired?" Mala asked, absentmindedly.

"No, are you?"

"I'm not."

"Okay. So what was that about earlier? The hint of resentment I'm sensing."

"Don't be dramatic."

"I don't do the drama, do I. That's all you."

Mala sighed and rolled her eyes. "Thanks."

"We're lucky, you know."

Mala laughed. "Sure."

“I’m serious. We have everything we need to live. We have a comfortable bed, a beautiful child. Life isn’t fair, we all know it. But that’s what life is, isn’t it. And I’m guessing that’s what you’re really resenting.”

“Mm.”

“Come on, Mala. I just want us to be happy. Safe, calm, happy. Make a difference where and when. This job will take a lot but we’ll be there for each other.”

They put their tablet-projectors down and looked at each other.

“I’m just scared,” Mala said, wiping her face. “And I’m tired. I’m tired of being scared all the time and being . . . unsure. Sure, we mean the best but what does that mean anymore, really? When did things become so difficult? Why does it even matter?”

“I’m sure things were always difficult, sweetie.”

“You think?”

“Sure. Back on Earth, things were probably hard. For so long they had no modern medicine, no stability. And even then, the stuff they had to deal with.”

“Aren’t we doing all that again?”

“What do you mean?” Orlon said, rubbing Mala’s leg.

“Conflict. Tension.”

“Maybe. I guess so. I think it’s unavoidable.”

“And do you think they knew?”

“I don’t know. It’s not on the web.”

“I know, but what do you think? Imagine that. Imagine not knowing, your whole life. Not knowing.” Mala scratched her palms, clearly anxious. On edge.

“I know.”

“Sometimes, I look at our boy and I either want that or I want to stop him from knowing anything before it’s too late.”

“Mala.”

“I know, I know, I’m just . . . thinking about things. Overthinking. He’s innocent and I’m either jealous or scared. Or both. And me even admitting that I’m scared that I’m jealous or scared of our baby makes me even *more* scared. It’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid. Things will get better. They always do.”

“Not always, Orlon. Sometimes, things just become worse and worse and the pressure never stops and it’s suffocating. Sometimes I want to distract myself and turn my brain off. Take my mind off things.”

Orlon tried to say something, but stopped several times. “I know,” he said finally.

“I like hearing you say it though.”

“Say what?”

“That things will be okay.”

“They will. Be okay.”

“See, I like that,” Mala smiled, cozying up to Orlon.

Orlon remained serious. “I mean it.”

“I like hearing you say it even though I know you don’t really mean it. And that’s okay. I still like it anyway.”

Orlon said nothing else, just wrapped his arm around Mala and looked at the fake pixelated stars in the sky.

3, HARK, OUTER SPACE THEN AMTRAK

Hark stared at the ground, grinding his teeth. The man in front of him was complaining about regulations and data protection. How it was “unfair” that those not living on the *AVE OPPS* were discriminated against.

The man next to Hark, Yaro, spoke in a calm voice and tried to reason with the man. The man became even more irritated by this, denouncing the current consensus. Yaro reminded

the man that speaking as such was paramount to mutiny. Political mutiny. Still, the man continued.

Hark had had enough.

He stepped forward and dragged the man by his jumpsuit collar. He pulled him like a barbarian would carry a hunk of meat. The man in his grasp yelped to his crewmates who came rushing to his side. The biggest one in the group tried putting Hark in a chokehold.

Hark's nostrils flared and he threw the smaller man to the wall. The one reaching for a chokehold was then tossed upside down and repeatedly struck in the face with a closed fist. The nose broke immediately, spilling blood.

"Never put your hands on a second," Hark said.

"Second Conflicter Hander. Put him down now. This is not how we do things," Yaro said.

Hark either ignored him or did not hear him, as he continued to batter the already unconscious man.

When the man's face was a shiny red mess, Hark put him down and left him to convulse.

"Oh my," Yaro said, clearing a table of its contents and speaking to the crew. "Help me lift the man to the table. He needs first aid. Is anyone a healer?"

The shocked crew didn't immediately respond. Then, when a few seconds passed, they sprang into action. Lifting the big man with effort. All helped except the man who'd been complaining. Hark was continuing his previous action of dragging him somewhere. He settled somewhere deep and dark in the ship, where the panic of his crew couldn't be heard.

"Want me to turn your face into pulp too? Like your friend?" Hark said.

"Why did you do that?"

"For fun."

"For f—I think you killed Adrian! I think you killed him!"

“And I should care?”

“What? Of course!”

Hark’s deep-set eyes narrowed and the scattered lines and crevices around his brow furrowed. “Why should I care about some nothing I killed? I want an answer. Either that or you put your hands on me now.”

“What? What are you even talking about? We need to go h—” The man tried squeezing past the claustrophobic space they were in. Hark’s heavy body stopped him.

“Put up your hands and let’s fight,” Hark said, smiling.

“I don’t want to do this. What do you want to hear, that you’ll win? congratulations, you’re tougher than me. Great. Now stop.” Even though the man said the comments sarcastically, his voice still pulled and squeaked like a nervous little boy.

“I want to hear why I should care about you pieces of filth I protect. I’ve saved your life before, so I should take it away when I please. Especially when you have no respect for me or my colleague. No respect!” Hark punched a pipe next to the shaking man, spraying steam in his face. “Tell me now why I should care!” He grabbed the greased and sweaty hair of the man and pushed his head into the steam. The man resisted, using his arms as blockades.

“I’m sorry! I don’t know what to say! You shouldn’t care! Let me go!”

Hark didn’t resist. He pushed so hard on his head that the arms protecting the man looked ready to snap in two.

“Stop! Let him go!” a woman’s voice called from the back of Hark.

Hark loosened a tad, then pushed the man’s head to the side of the steam, letting the corridor mist up.

“One of you a mechanic?”

“He is,” the woman said.

The man whimpered and nodded, finally away from Hark's grasp. He slid to the floor and looked at the woman. "Is Adrian okay?"

"He's alive, sure."

The man nodded and looked back at Hark.

"Clean this mess up. Have some respect in your work," Hark said, stepping over the man and walking with the woman, back up to the central deck. "Impressed?" he said.

"Are you serious? You're a delusional psycho if you think I'd be impressed with you assaulting two of my crew and bursting a—what I'd assume—is an important part of my ship."

"Your ship?"

"Yes, I'm the captain of this ship. My second-in-command answers to you leaches. Are you surprised or will you start punching me now as well?"

"I don't care what you are."

"Well then don't ask."

"Fine."

Back to the rest of the crew, Adrian let ragged breaths fall from his mouth. The crew stared at Hark with what looked like fear, mixed with anger, mixed with hatred. Hark stepped to the side of Yaro, exactly how they'd been before the outburst.

Yaro straightened and looked at his tablet-projector. "So, as I was saying before, we will be conducting this search within the hour. You have no right to consent in the carrying out of contraband checks. Whether you give written consent or not is of no difference, but will go toward solars that can be spent at any UP kiosk. As of now, the *Fallcast* is under UP property. Any resistance to this will be met with deadly force—I just have to say that—and any possessions belonging to any independents will be confiscated. Any illegal items smuggled within restricted zones will be destroyed at the nearest outpost. Do you understand and consent to what I have just read to you?"

“Yes,” said the captain.

“Please sign here,” Yaro said, passing the tablet-projector.

She did, then passed the projector back without any expression.

With all that out of the way, the crowd dispersed. Yaro walked past Hark without a word, stepping from airlock and back to their transport ship.

Hark looked at the captain. Her hair was closely tied behind her head. Her left eyebrow had a scar upon it, drooping the brow a level. He looked at the scar familiarly, as if he’d known someone with the same scar, rather than knowing the captain of the *Fallcast*. A faint smile touched the tip of Hark’s mouth.

“Get off my ship,” the captain said.

“I’m going,” Hark said, not moving.

“You know, from how you stare, you look really lonely. You look sad. I can tell how pathetic your life is when you have show violence just to prove a point. Get off my ship.”

“Be seeing you.”

*

“—will be confiscated. Any illegal items smuggled within restricted zones will be destroyed at the nearest outpost. Do you understand and consent to what I have just read to you?”

Hark looked down at his tablet-projector and read the document on the ship as Yaro talked to the crew.

SHIP NAME: AMTRAK

TYPE: MANNED SPACECRAFT (NO PERMANENTLY DESIGNATED PILOT. AUTOPILOT INSTALLED FOLLOWING REGULATIONS.)

CLASSIFICATION: N/A

WEAPON CLASS: SAFE

CAPTAIN: ROLAND LAKER

ADDITIONAL CREW: THREE (ONE TEMPORARY CREW MEMBER ADDED.)

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: THE *AMTRAK* HAS BEEN SURVEYING EMPIRIS'S MOON, PAGASTA, FOR SEVERAL WEEKS NOW. THEY HAVE DONE EXTENSIVE RESEARCH ON PASSING METEOR SHOWERS. THE DESIGNATED SCIENTIST ON BOARD, PHILLIP LORTDE, WAS ASSISTED BY FOURTH EXPENDER GARRET MORIKSON AND SECOND EXPERIMENTER DEENA ATHENS. ON THEIR MOST RECENT FIELD MISSION, A METEOR SHOWER WAS REPORTED; IN WHICH, BOTH HUSKS WERE IRREPARABLY DAMAGED.

— YARO MAR-SUUL

The captain of the *Amtrak* spoke to Yaro about their most recent mission.

“Please, come along and meet the crew. The man you’re going to want to talk to is in his lab. Follow me,” Laker said.

“Lead the way,” Yaro said as he and Hark followed. They passed a lived-in environment. Spacious yet cramped with gear and clutter surrounding a rec room. The board game from last night lay scattered across the table in the middle. Some members of the ship were lazing around and nursing hangovers from their appearances.

They arrived in a tight makeshift laboratory. The specimen was gone.

“Meet Phillip Lortde.”

“Masters,” Phillip said.

“Mas,” Yaro said back. “I hear from your captain that there was some collateral damage during an AVE-designated mission. If you could please tell me all that happened, I will be making notes for our records. The appropriate recompense will be given due to unavoidable disaster. Otherwise, I cannot promise anything.”

“Of course,” Phillip said putting down a microscope, fixing his jumpsuit and standing in formal positioning.

“If you would prefer to do this one-to-one in a different room, that would be acceptable.”

“I had given the brief to the two members, Deena and Garret, to commence with research. I just wanted to observe meteoroid patterns, perhaps obtain a sample if safe enough—to complete the mission, as you said, given by AVE. I set the destination for them. A small pocket of ice on the asteroid was deep enough to avoid sunlight or any atmosphere burns. Still, I wanted the operation to be quick. They were unsuccessful in the mission when a meteoroid collided with another and veered off of our predicted course. The shrapnel then struck both husks in operation and both were destroyed. Instantly.”

“And there is footage, I am assuming.”

Phillip shifted from one foot to the other, but he said nothing.

“Please, if you could link your projector to the wall or tablet, we will need to document the footage.”

“The footage was lost,” Phillip said.

“How?” Yaro said, taking notes.

“We are not sure. The link was severed and we have no recording of the event. Both husks have also not been retrieved. And unfortunately, the site in which a sample could be retrieved was bombarded so heavily that the surface area has been levelled. We also lost a transport ship.”

“Understandable. And the stray meteorites?”

“The what now?” Phillip said, moving around, eyes darting from Yaro to Hark.

“The meteorites you mentioned that destroyed the husks.”

“Oh . . . those. Well I assume the site was equally as damaged. Due to the impact, and due to both of the husks being—well—destroyed, as you know, the site will have been equally destroyed and possibly contaminated due to radiation. And if there were to be any worthwhile sample, I’m sure it would not have survived the collision. If it is easier, perhaps you would like

to speak with our hollow reed, Tara. She was connected to the feed when it was disabled. She will be of better help.”

Yaro looked at Hark then back to Phillip. “Please. Send her in.”

Phillip walked to the wall and pressed the button on the intercom. “Tara, could I borrow you for a moment?” he said.

There was silence for half a minute. Then she answered. “What is it?”

“I need your assistance. Please.”

Tara strolled in, chewing something. “Can I help you two?”

“Nice to meet you,” Yaro said. “We have a report of two husks and a transport ship being destroyed during a scientific procedure, and I was told that you were overseeing it. You are the hollow reed, correct?”

“I am.”

Hark grinned, looking Tara up and down.

Tara looked back and said, “Hired muscle?” without much of an emotional hint in the tone.

“*Ahem.* This is Second Conflicter Hander. He is charged with my protection during my assessments.”

“So hired muscle.”

“Hark here is governed by AVE.”

“Yes, I know.”

Hark leaned back and spoke to Tara, opening his mouth for the first time on entering the ship. “You know, hollow reeds back on *OPPS* are interesting. Hollows on Independent ships are even more interesting. What exactly is it that you do? Apart from play therapists to other Independents.”

“And how do you know I’m an Independent?” she said.

“You’re on an Independent ship.”

“So is Deena, the experimenter. She was forced here.”

“That tone then, I’d say. You don’t like us.”

“Maybe you could quit being a conflicter and become an informer. You catch on very quickly.”

Hark huffed and looked at Yaro. “Could you just ask the bitch where the footage is so she can tell you she has no idea what happened to it so we can get off this junk heap.”

Yaro cleared his throat as both Tara and Hark stared daggers at each other. Before he had time to utter a word, Tara said, “I don’t know what happened to the footage. Must have gotten lost.”

“Is this your official statement?”

“Kill yourself. That’s my official statement,” Tara said as she left.

*

A crew came in to complete the rest of the assessment and contraband search. They found nothing, and after a while, they left.

Yaro and Hark headed back to speak for the final time to the captain.

“Thank you for coming, masters. Glad you stopped by. You don’t need anything else, do you? Oh, I’m sure you’ve already met Deena here,” Laker said.

As Deena was walking into the corridor adjacent to the airlock, she greeted Yaro.

“Actually, no,” Yaro replied, “I haven’t. But I’ve read in the files about her work aboard the *OPPS*. Very impressive.”

They continued chatting. As they did, Hark opened his tablet-projector and clicked on the crew, and scrolled down. Then he saw “AB” next to Deena Athens’s name, in red letters.

“If you need anything, you know who to call. Now if you’ll excuse me,” Laker said, walking away with Deena.

“Got an AB stashed away? Kept that one hush-hush,” Hark said.

“It’s not really important, is it?” Laker said.

“To me, sure. Doesn’t bother me. But I don’t really enjoy being around the things. It’s not something I’d usually go out of my way to do.”

Deena swirled around and bared her teeth. This couldn’t have been the first time it had happened to her.

Hark approached her. “You shouldn’t be on here. You should be on the *OPPS* in a brothel, doing something useful. An AB, here, what a joke.”

Deena searched for the words with her mouth, opening and closing, seemingly not finding anything to say.

Captain Laker spoke up. “You can leave the ship now. I’ll remind you that AB or null discrimination is not allowed on my ship. You deal with it your own way, I’ll deal with it my way here, aboard the *Amtrak*.”

“That is a great idea. Hark, let’s go,” Yaro said, tugging at his companion, uselessly.

Hark pushed the small man aside and rounded on Deena. Laker extended his arm like a barricade. Hark looked down and gave a puzzled look. “Is that supposed to stop me?” he said.

“Can you get your unhinged partner out of here, Yaro?”

Yaro stuttered out nonsense, not approaching or running.

“Do you think I could break that arm, cap? If I was quick enough?” Hark said.

More members of the crew gathered, the hysteria repeating itself once again. Hark looked at them, their shocked faces staring at him. All eyes on him. Like a freakshow projection with all the guests.

Deena pushed Laker’s arm down and opened her arms. “Go ahead and hit me then!” she said. “You think I don’t get this type of abuse on the *OPPS*? I love it! Me being an AB is something I just love, so go ahead and get all that aggression out of you and hit me.”

Hark grasped Deena by the throat. Everyone shouted objections. They all put their hands on him, trying to get him away. Hark tried raising his fist, but three tangled arms stopped him. He swayed forward, trying to dislodge the arms, but to no success. His breathes came in rageful gasps. The crew crowded him. Yaro stepped back fully against the wall, away from danger. Hark's head held a solitary vein popping out, the tension on his body to dish out some act of violence too strong to ignore. He lowered his fist and rocked his forehead into Deena's nose. Deena jolted back, her nose not fully broken. If Hark wasn't restrained, she would likely be unconscious. Laker threw a punch, cracking off Hark's ear. Then Garret joined in, getting a few good hits in. Hark finally pushed through the crowd of people and looked down at Deena, who had fallen to the floor, blood dripping from her nostrils, but not much outside damage. Hark turned back to look at the crew. All of them had their hands raised slightly, as if ready to pounce and tackle Hark.

Hark looked around and laughed. "I'm going, don't worry. Your little AB monster can stay here. I'd keep your doors locked though. Who knows, I might come back."

"Get out of here! You're a psycho!" Tara said, her voice more frantic and unbelieving than angry.

"I'm going, I'm going," Hark said, stepping away. Before he left, he turned around and looked at Deena a final time. The whole crew tensed up again, ready. "You," he said, pointing at Deena who was holding her nose and not breaking eye contact. "You, afterbirth. Afterbirth bitch. If I ever see you again, I'll kill you. Your kind make me sick."

Hark left with Yaro, who was stunned into silence.

4, DEENA, AMTRAK

The *Amtrak* floated through space, the planet Empiris below. Its dark purple color made it blend in with the darkness around it. Its moon, Pagasta, was closer, yet it became farther away from the *Amtrak*. Other ships floated in the vicinity too.

Deena held an icepack to her face. Her two black eyes had formed days ago and had now started to fade. Her nose wasn't broken and she needed no medical attention. Garret came to visit her room, knocking before entering, something he never usually did.

"Hey, Deen," he said. "Feeling all right?"

"Yes, Garret, you don't need to check on me every five minutes." Her voice was nasally, but clearing up.

"Okay. I just wanted to let you know we're having a meeting soon."

"Can we not make this a big deal please? They've done all the rounds now. They won't be coming back. I'm fine."

"I know. This isn't about all that. Something else."

"Oh."

"Do you want to come? I can tell everyone you're not feeling up to it."

"No. I'll be in rec in a few minutes. Let me just wash my face."

*

Phillip sat in Tara's quarters.

Tara was sat on her bed, playing with a tablet-projector. Next to her was a half-eaten food bar. The body health pack it was in was off to the side, the clear plastic wrapper displaying its contents:

INCLUDES CARBS, PROTEIN, FAT, SODIUM, POTASSIUM, OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS, FIBER, VITAMINS A,C,D,E,K, MINERALS, WATER, CALCIUM . . .

Unloading her equipment, Tara pulled out her scanner and turned it on. “Shouldn’t take long,” she said.

Phillip nodded.

She started the scan of Phillip’s brain. She moved the scanner along his scalp slowly, moving the device through his thinning hair, checking the projector to her side. It showed a mental map of Phillip. All that was and ever would be of Phillip was shown in a single blue image of a brain’s neural pathways. The copy process only took a few minutes.

“That wasn’t entirely unpleasant,” Phillip said.

“No. Usually just feels like a head massage,” Tara said.

“Interesting.”

“So we’re done here. Welcome to the husk club. Not so bad, is it?”

“Not at all.”

“Any questions?”

“I . . . don’t believe so. What will you do with my copy now?”

“Nothing. It’ll be saved onto my kit, which then gets sent to nearby coffins, which also gets sent to the husk database on the *OPPS*. Your copy will be available shortly. I just need to give it a test drive on the husk in the engine room.”

“That old thing?”

“I’ll wipe the dust off it and see if it still works. I hope it does.”

Phillip sniggered to himself.

“What’s funny?” Tara said, sounding amused.

“It’s been there for such a long time. Everyone says it is creepy.”

“Except Harry and you. And I do not know why.

“Well . . . if you have any other questions, let me know,” she continued. “If there is any reason to use that spare husk until we get replacement models, think carefully. I keep telling

everyone, but I want to drill it into your heads. Do *not* husk unless it is an absolute emergency. I have seen firsthand what expender syndrome looks like and it is not pretty. I'd rather die before seeing myself like that."

"I understand."

"Good. Okay good. Well, be seeing you," Tara said as she gathered her equipment.

She headed for the engine room.

*

Captain Laker and Phillip were talking by the kitchen.

"I think mas, that we need to be honest with them. Say we searched the site and found something. I don't think this will go well in the long run," Phillip said.

Laker took a swig of his coffee and closed his eyes. He sighed and opened them again.

"Can you not call me 'mas' please? I'm already sick of the earlier formalities. I don't like it."

"Of course."

"And the specimen is too valuable to hand over now. We could sell to Deserters. Voltan. Leave. Get enough supplies to last us a lifetime."

Phillip looked heartbroken. "You want to sell the specimen? You want to sell Milly?"

"Come on, Milly, really. You're going to call it that too? Between you and me, I don't really like how she named it. And you shouldn't indulge either. It's an alien. You've done the tests. You moved it. You said how it could be dangerous."

"I have never said it is dangerous."

"Could it be dangerous?"

Phillip scratched his nose. "I don't know."

"Well, we won't have to find out if we sell it."

"You won't be able to spend a single sol if you sell it."

“I didn’t say we’d sell it for solars. I said we’d sell it for supplies. We could leave and live on our own. Away from AVE. You want that too, right?”

“I want to do my job still. We never discussed this. We never said about selling it.”

“Well that doesn’t sound like my problem,” Laker said, sipping his coffee and walking away.

“Please, we should discuss this with the rest. Have a vote.”

“Oh, we will. If everyone says we keep it, we keep it. If not, then we sell.”

“And what is the plan after that?”

“As I said, we leave AVE. We become Deserters too. No longer cits of the United Planets. We leave the system. Could gather up anyone else who wants to come with us. Maybe they’d also give us a bigger ship if we hand over the thing. Then, we start our own colony. Live under our rule, instead of *being* ruled. Have we forgotten Amy? After just a year.”

“That was a horrendous act, I agree. But it is done. This helps no one.”

“Okay. Sure. And Deena—how they treated her?”

“She is an AB. And it was the act of that crazy man. The other ships did tell us.”

“Sure, fair point. But that’s one of their own, and that’s the example they set? I wasn’t a big fan of letting an AB onto my ship, but sure, I let it go. I let her in. Should we even be surprised that they treat us the same?”

“I think this was more personal for that man. I don’t think he hates Independents.”

“That isn’t the point, Phillip. I’m using him as an example. It’s pretty much established fact that they hate us. AVE is a colossus, and we’re there to be fodder, at their beck and call. You know it, I know it. They send us on research missions, we do it. They send us an AB, we treat it with respect. They send over a boarding patrol, we let them, then let one of them beat the very person they told us to treat as our own. What sense does that make?”

Phillip shrugged.

Deena and Garret entered the room. Laker and Phillip shut up, straightening themselves.

Then, Tara and Harry entered after them.

Laker herded everyone around. The crew of the *Amtrak* sat. As they did, some spoke to Deena, asking about her wellbeing. She gave the same kinds of responses as she gave to Garret.

“So, welcome everyone,” Laker said putting his coffee to the side. “Deena, are you okay? I just wanna say that what AVE did was completely unacceptable and we’ve been talking about it over the past few days. You’re one of the crew here. We want to make sure you’re safe. It’s not okay to be attacked for being anything. We, of all people, understand. And I’m sure you can see what kind of treatment we get after what you went through.”

“Sure . . .” Deena sounded hesitant.

“So,” Laker continued, “let’s do a sitrep. The specimen is now ours. And as I and Phillip were just discussing, we have come to a deliberation. I would like to conduct a vote on the continuation of our crew. Deena, I considered not including you in this, but, I would prefer if this was not a secret discussion. Phillip and I hid the specimen during the ship inspection. I have a few things to say on this, but—”

“You hid Milly?” Deena said.

A few other crew members were talking among themselves.

“I did. And the reason being . . .” Laker looked at Phillip for a moment, locking eyes. “is because we can’t give the specimen to AVE. Deena, would you feel okay handing over the prize subject—something we’ve been working all these weeks for—over to AVE?”

Laker’s expression seemed as confused as Deena’s.

“I would. I know the staff there. They’re decent people.”

“I’m not talking about them, Deena. I’m talking about AVE. Do you really think they’ll let you run experiments, give it a home?”

“It’s a creature, same as all the others in our system.”

“But this is special, isn’t it?” Laker said, almost pleading, one step away from begging. “There must be a reason you named it Milly. We can’t let them have it.”

Deena was the one to look at Phillip now. Phillip looked back, the most confused looking out of every crew member.

“What’s this about, Roland?” Tara said to Laker. “What’s this vote you’re talking about?”

Laker turned to her and shrugged his arms. “I . . . I think we should seriously consider keeping Milly.”

“You’re serious?” Tara and Deena said at the same time.

“Yes. We should have a vote on if we’re unanimous in this decision.”

“You can’t keep this from AVE. They’ll kill us for something like this,” Deena said.

“There! They’ll kill us. Does that sound fair?”

“We’d be harboring an alien.”

Laker paused and looked at his shoes. “I thought you’d be the first to agree with me. I didn’t expect this.”

“I’m just looking at the facts. I have no gripe with them and I don’t think you should either. They have integrity. They’ll reward us for this. We’ll be practically famous.”

“Integrity,” Laker said, his face downcast. “And they’ll reward us? With what?” Laker asked.

“Yes Deen, I don’t think we’ll get a gold medal pinned on our chest. You maybe,” Garret said.

“Me? I’m the least likely. Phillip,” Deena said, gesturing to the man.

“Deena,” Laker said, “we’re Independents. We’re less than dirt. We do the hard jobs for the feeling of accomplishment. We won’t get much more.”

“Sols,” Deena said.

“How much?” Tara said.

“I don’t know!”

“This isn’t about sols!” Laker said. “We are okay. We don’t need sols. We need to leave. Deena, if you want to go back, you can go back. This isn’t a hostage situation. But I feel as though this isn’t right.”

The crew said nothing.

“Someone say something,” Laker said, crossing his arms.

“I vote no,” Garret said. Everyone turned to him. “I don’t think it’s worth it. What do we do once we get . . . away?”

“Exactly,” Deena said. “Do we set it free? Let it frolic on Ratha?”

“Exactly. What Deen said,” Garret said.

“Look,” Laker said, moving his arms to his sides. “Let’s wait to vote. I shouldn’t have brought this up after tensions are high. Let’s take a day, take a breather, think things over, and we’ll do this again tomorrow. I’m sorry, this was just something I felt strongly about and wanted to get off my chest. I’m sorry, let’s all get some sleep, talk about this in the morning.”

The crew got up. Deena and Harry walked alone. Garret and Tara walked together, talking in hushed voices about what just happened. Phillip stayed seated, not looking up. Laker looked down at him, picking his now-cold coffee up. He took a sip and grimaced slightly.

“I’m sorry I put you in an awkward position,” he said.

Phillip said nothing.

“I don’t like this. I don’t like feeling helpless,” Laker said, sliding onto the couch.

“You haven’t changed your mind, have you?” Phillip said.

Laker sipped his coffee. “We need to leave,” he said. “We’ve all spoken about leaving for months.”

“I never—”

“I know. But this is a chance. We have leverage here. We either stay and face whatever we face, or we run and make a new start. I think we have a good chance. Amy would have wanted it.”

“Please, stop mentioning her,” Phillip said. “We’ve not spoken of her in months, and now—This feels like you . . . This feels like you want me to agree. You lied to them.”

“They won’t want this now. And I talk about Amy because if we’d just done this before, then, we’d still be a group, instead of this ghostship. You know?”

“. . . No.”

“Phil. Do you trust me?”

“You’re our captain.”

“I know.” Laker finished his coffee and put it down. “This isn’t about that. Do *you* trust me?”

“Yes, I trust you. But I think you’re wrong on this.”

“Well, we will see.”

*

It was 11:32 P.M. ET. Deena sat staring at the wall. The projector powered up and displayed her home. She pressed the call icon, then on Joel’s icon, then on the cam icon. The ringing sounded, sounded, sounded, then Joel answered.

“Hey,” he said in a robotic voice. The image buffered too, showing a pixelated version on his bearded face. The moving image and audio settled but would continue to buffer now and again throughout the call.

“Hi darling,” Deena said, fiddling with the projector’s remote as she spoke, relaxing her body onto her bed.

“So, how’s my favorite person handling her covert mission?” Joel said.

“Oh, you know,” she said, stretching. “It’s exhausting. I don’t know what I’m doing here. I feel out of place here.”

“Deena, it’s been two weeks.”

“I know. It’s not all bad. Garret’s been nice to me. Tara’s a great girl. Phillip is brilliant. I just always have a bad feeling, you know? I can’t ever shake it.”

“I know,” Joel said. “Just keep going, okay? You’re done soon, aren’t you? Then you can come back to me. We’ll be done before we know it. I can’t wait to get out of this box.”

“I’ve not even spared a second to ask how your job’s going. I’m a horrible person, aren’t I.”

“Yes. Yes you are.”

“Joel!” Deena said, laughing.

“What? You’re a horrible person, what else is there to say? I just want to stay down here forever in this tomb.”

“When is it over?”

“I know about as much as you. AVE. They trust us as far as they can throw us.”

“Please,” Deena said, looking at the ceiling, not even looking at Joel’s pixelated image now. “Let’s not talk about AVE. The *Amtrak* hate AVE.”

“They do?”

“Well, I guess not. The captain sure does seem to have a problem. I don’t know. He seems like a nice person, but he’s on edge. Sure, he’s controlled, calm, but then he gives off this . . . sense,” Deena said, sitting back up again, looking into the projector’s small cam.

“A sense? Like what kind of— Deena, what happened—What happened to your face?” Joel said, leaning forward.

“Oh,” Deena said, feeling her nose. “I forgot that was even there. How did I forget that? It’s the only thing I could think about telling you. I guess I just got caught up in other things. It’s nothing, seriously.”

“What happened?”

“Joel.”

“Come on, what happened? How did you bruise your face like that? I couldn’t see through all the pixelation.”

“It wasn’t me—Look, it’s a long, boring story. Can we just skip this and talk about work?”

“Work? You’ve got two black eyes and you want to talk about work?”

“I’m just—This is seriously nothing. Trust me. I walked into a door. That’s it. Nothing interesting.”

“You walked into a door?”

“Yes, I walked into a door. Malfunction onboard. They have manual here. I’m used to auto.”

“Right . . .”

“You don’t believe me?” Deena snapped.

“Hey, I believe you.”

“Then let’s move on, shall we.”

“Whatever.”

“It’s . . .” Deena rubbed her eyes. “It’s been a lot, okay. I haven’t been getting enough sleep and we’ve got stuff going on up here. Are you still having the dreams?”

“Yes,” is all Joel said.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“I can’t believe you do this daily.”

“Do what?”

“You know. Husk.”

“Oh. You get used to it. You actually did it too?”

“Yes, it was weird. Like having a replica of you just doing something else. No threat of dying. Weird.”

Joel scratched his beard and let his mouth gape. “You okay?”

“Me? Yes. I was scared out at first, but it felt like a donation.”

“But instead of donating blood, you’re donating your mind,” Joel said, chuckling.

“Yes, that. I don’t know why they can’t just put me into one of those down there.”

“Well, it won’t be you Deena. You won’t remember any of it.”

“Yes, obviously, I know that. I’m just saying, so you don’t feel so lonely. Being so far away, down there, it must feel lonely.”

“Yes, it does. But we still get to call, don’t we? Seeing you is enough for now, until I’m back. I’m just hoping it’s not extended.”

“Extended?” Deena’s face went a shade paler. “What do you mean?”

“You know. They always end up saying, ‘Yes, only a twelve-month job, but we really need you for fifteen now.’ You know what they’re like.”

“Sure,” Deena said.

“Let’s just think positive, okay?”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“Think it’s time we get some sleep. You look exhausted,” Joel said, yawning.

“I am. I just want to talk a little longer.”

“Come on. We’ve got to be up for early sunrise.”

“You mean your early pills?”

“Yes, I’ve got my BHP ready for tomorrow. All my diet needs.”

“You do look a little thin,” Deena said.

“Yes. They say it’s normal. I’ll start going back to the gym once I’m back up.”

“Okay. So you want to sleep?”

“Please.”

Deena laughed and rubbed her thumb on the END CALL button “Guess I’ll see you then.”

“Yes you will.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Deena ended the call and pressed another button. She was making another call.

*

Milly squirmed in its incubator, its body contorting into spiky shapes, vibrating and jostling. It moved from one side of its container to the other, one more piece of food left. It moved over it and absorbed it, intaking the nutrients into its mass. Its back bubbled and contorted, changing and fixing its shape into something new; something blockier. Then, its body relaxed and it went back into its blobby shape, the thick tendrils protruding from it retracting back into it.

Then, it settled back down and moved no more.

5, ORLON, AVE OPPS

Orlon did his pushups, grinding his teeth as he went up and down. The music played in his ears through his buds. The recreations originated from Earth, reconstructed from lost data hundreds of years ago.

The end of the song had a loud screaming woman for a finale. She sounded scared. Orlon pushed up a final time, moved his legs underneath himself and breathed heavy, soaked in sweat. He pulled his buds out and turned them off. Then he got a towel and wiped his forehead.

He'd been going to his private gym for six months straight. This was his longest streak, and he'd finally noticed results a month back. His body was beginning to tone. Because of this, he controlled his diet more strictly too. He would occasionally resort back to comfort eating, or drinking, like yesterday. Or other nasty habits. But all in all, he kept to a regiment that made the heart in his chest beat healthily.

He had his first meeting coming up, but first, now washed and clothed, he went to his six-month checkup at the healer's office.

Inside, it was coordinated and clean. His name was called and he followed the healer to a bright room. Orlon sat and the examination began.

His heartrate, blood pressure, and various samples were taken. The tests were fast, cutting-edge tech only found on level one of the *OPPS*.

"Everything looks normal. Of course, we'll keep our tests running, just to be sure."

"That's a relief," Orlon said with a chuckle.

"Always is, isn't it," Second Healer Cartanso said. "How are you?"

"No more meds. My heart isn't beating out of my chest anymore. I think I'm feeling okay for the first time in a long time. Except . . ."

"Yes?"

"Blood in my stool again. I know it's stress."

"How long?"

"A few days. It comes and goes."

"I see. But if this carries on for longer than a week, I want you back here to see me."

"I will."

"Good. So. In general, you're feeling okay?"

"I'm okay."

"That's good. And Mala?"

“She’s not been doing so good lately. Loss in the family.”

“Right,” Cartanso said, nodding. “Maybe she should take some meds then. For depression.”

“She might be already. I don’t know. She doesn’t share much about that. She likes to keep herself busy but she always wants to do nothing. Doesn’t make much sense to me, but it’s just one of those things, right.”

“Right.”

“I have to get to a meeting,” Orlon said, stepping from the examination table. “I’ll see you in six.”

“You don’t have to come just for that, Or.”

“I know. I just get busy with the—”

“Consensus business. I get it.”

“It’s not like that.”

“No, seriously, I get it Or. Is that going okay, too? Now you finally have it.”

*

Orlon went to the upcoming board meeting. He met with Yaro and they walked together.

“Welcome back. How did it go with Hark—all that business?” Orlon asked Yaro.

“As well as I expected. Hark is a bully, nothing more than that.”

“What happened?”

“Two instances of violence upon Independents. They were terrified of him. He belongs on a battleground, not with us. You should send him away, somewhere he can play soldier.”

“Noted. I’m surprised Falks had him as a second confliker. Usually, the higher up you go, the more level headed you need to be. Maybe I should pin him down to forth.”

“That might be a wise choice.”

“So what happened? One of them get confrontational? Get violent first?”

“One of them is an AB.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. The crew seem to be getting along with her fine. But, well, it gets worse, mas. Master. Well, Hark is a null.”

Orlon stopped walking and looked at him. “What? And you brought him along to see an afterbirth? What, did you think they’d become friends?”

“In my defense, mas, you appointed him as company for me,” Yaro said, looking down.

“Because I didn’t know that she was an AB and he was a null. Of course there’s going to be violence. You know I’m a busy person. Next time, a head’s up on something like that would be appreciated. You’re meant to be my advisor.”

“I thought you knew. My apologies.”

They continued walking.

“Anything else I should know before we get to this bloodbath? I’m sure they’ll throw a something in there,” Orlon said.

“I don’t think so, mas. We should focus on how we will be handling the rise in terrorist activities. The Voltan Revolution are becoming a higher risk each day.

“The Voltan Revolt have been a risk for generations. They bubble up and drain away.”

“I believe this will be their main concern.”

“Great. It really will be a bloodbath.”

*

Orlon sat down, Yaro next to him, showing various talking points on his hand-projector. They listed the points many things, like funding for new defenses for the *AVE OPPS*, or new legislation for improved safety measures for expenders.

Donai Meeps, Host of Empiris, spoke in a soft voice, betraying her pointed, sharp features. She gave her report on the most recent science mission: the mission the crew of the

Amtrak were on. Donai spoke of the continued success of the research headed by her. The various asteroid showers were not harmful to anyone on the surface. The only danger when visiting Empiris was the constant storms. Even the general discussion of food among the people who ate it weren't favorable. Most sea life on Empiris had evolved to survive the harsh conditions, adapting leather-hard skin, a strong skeleton and tougher organs.

Donai finished talking.

"Thank you Donai," Orlon said, just as the door opened.

"My apologies, mas," Jerry Malpwar said, better known simply as Jerr. He slid into his seat and lounged back. He didn't look sincere about his apology.

"So that's three of five now. Who are we missing?" Orlon said.

"Eduardo Cofeen, mas, and Hele Phips," Yaro said. "Eduardo sends his regards, but he is indisposed. Hele also has other matters to attend to, it seems."

Orlon sighed, looking like he wanted to say more but didn't.

"They never turn up to these. I mean, what do you expect?" Sason Mattingson said. Androgynously built, Sason was a thinly scaled woman with greased hair and thick eyebrows she stared under. "Eduardo has the best hosting job, Hele the worst. Well, depending on your definition."

"And how's work going on at Igeleian?" Jerr said.

"Slow," Sason said, smiling. "I'm guessing it's the same for you."

"It's boring," Jerr said. "Construction begins in two years, so until then, I'm pretty content."

"Sorry," Orlon said, "are you all forgetting why you're here? If you need reminding why you're here, it's because I'm consensus. I don't know how you conducted these meetings when Marco Falks was in this chair, but I'm sure you showed him a bit more respect."

Donai sat motionless, the only one of the three hosts not smiling. Jerr and Sason looked at each other.

Sason said, "I'm sorry mas. We forget ourselves sometimes. We don't have these board meetings very often. The last one was three years ago."

"It's fine," Orlon said. "Do you have anything to report?"

"Not really" Sason said. "Igeleian is still inhospitable. Hasn't changed. Few survey missions. They've all been inconclusive."

Orlon looked at Yaro, then to Jerr. "You. Go on."

Jerr looked around like he was a fly on the wall. "Well, Larsallow is still a ball of nothing. Habs are working fine. Main operations are still up and running, as far as I know."

"As far as you know?" Orlon said. "Isn't it your job to know?"

"Consensus Marsh," Jerr said, sitting forward, interlocking his fingers together. "No offense, but I'm orbiting a dead planet. Larsallow will not be habitable and never will be. Same as Igeleian, same as Homisard. Sure, we can fill them with research bases, but they will never be Ratha. People will not move to Larsallow. I'm sure in another few hundred years, it could be colonized. No one would want to. It's dull."

"Did Marco Falks appoint you as Host of Larsallow?"

"I *am* the Host of Larsallow. Make no mistake. I respect the title. But a host's role in this system is to protect a planet, direct the workers, not watch it prosper. I've been doing this a lot longer than you, Orlon."

"How long have been the host?" Orlon asked, unmoving.

"This is my sixth year."

"Well, Jerr, let me tell you something. I've been in politics my whole life. I've learned not to bite the hand that feeds. So, when I see you, I see someone who's not used to this environment. I knew Falks before you, so I know he hated these meetings. You were the one

he was complaining about to me, when he had one of these. He didn't like you. He thought you were an arrogant fool who cried when he didn't get what he wanted."

"Ridiculous," Jerr said, scoffing, lounging back in his chair again, one hand remaining on the table, tapping.

"Do you still want to be a host? Or has the spark gone?" Orlon said, his voice now rough.

Jerr eyed the room. He looked nervous now. "I *am* host."

"Jerr. I can change that. If you don't want to be host I can change that. It's within my jurisdiction. You're not as important as you think. You're expendable. So go ahead and leave. Think about your role in the UP. Think about if you'd rather be an expender."

Jerr nodded and walked to the door. He opened it, but just before he could leave, Orlon said, "Have a better attitude, please. Or, you can be a nobody again."

Jerr left.

"I think we should move on," Donai said.

"I agree," Sason said, chuckling.

"I want to press the most important issue, I think," Donai said. "There are large amounts of Deserter rebellions. Voltan Revolution in particular. Other factions are gearing up but infighting takes care of them. Swift action needs to take place, of course, or we will experience a war on the scale of the Osyst System War."

"You can't be serious," Orlon said.

Donai said nothing, only looking between Orlon and Yaro.

"You really think we could have another all-out conflict on that level, Donai?" Orlon asked.

"Yes, it's likely. There are lots of Deserter outposts sprouting like weeds. Marco had a no-tolerance policy."

“That hasn’t changed,” Yaro chimed in.

“Even still,” Donai replied, “we should have this at the forefront of our minds. What actions should we take to halt this?”

“Well,” Orlon began, eyeing Yaro, “we should begin by liaising with Eduardo Cofeen.”

“I agree,” Donai said. “I can send my own personal vanguard, if it would suit you.”

“No, that’s all right. I have a team in mind who can travel to Ratha on short notice. I’ll give Eduardo a personal message—from all of us. We will root out all Deserter activity and prepare a covert assault on any stations that have even the slightest hint of mutinous intentions. But, this—I remind you all—will be under the cover of shadow. We do not want to start another war. We do this quickly and quietly. We will send down a small army. Take Naro and his squad to Eduardo for a meeting, and keep the rest of the units at bay, just in case anything goes wrong. We won’t be underprepared. Ratha is a dangerous planet, and we won’t want to be outmatched by the terrorists. But on the surface, this will look like a planetary inspection.”

“Well,” Sason said, “wasn’t quiet expecting such a decisive answer, mas, but it looks like you have at least a plan in mind.”

“And who will you send to deliver this message?”

“First Conflicter Naro Tempess and Second Conflicter Hareethen Hander will go to Zentifar and head to its capital to personally oversee this. Once the message has been delivered, we will prepare with Eduardo and his army on Ratha.”

“And what of Ratha itself?” Donai asked. “I’m sure the Deserters have the highest activity right there on Ratha.”

“I see,” Orlon said. “Tempess and Hander will coordinate a defensive—return full control to AVE and stop any uprising that might be on the horizon. Once complete and we have communication from them that that issue has been settled, we can move onto the outer planets and then outer space.”

“I’ve heard of First Conflicter Tempess, but Hander, I have heard less,” Donai said.

“Hander is . . . well, he’s someone you’d want on your side—I’ll put it that way.”

“Right,” Donai said, nodding. “This will do.”

“He’s that psychopath, right? The one the Independents are all scared of now, right?”

Sason said.

“I . . . That could be him,” Orlon said.

Donai raised an eyebrow toward Orlon and Yaro.

“I was there, mas,” Yaro said to Donai. “Hark is a loose cannon but this is what he needs for the time being. He spoke fondly of his superior, Temps. They have been in many battles. They were also aboard the *Gallhaddia* during its conflict.

“They understand husking and are elite in that field. Having said that, they also understand that war is not an option here, so they will be suited to covertness. No husking.”

Sason laughed, off to the side, excluded from the conversation like an outsider. “You know what conflicters and war are like, don’t you? First scent of blood and they will be wrathful. They rape, pillage, conquer. They take and murder and violate.”

“Well maybe that’s how it was done a while back,” Orlon said. “I will not go down this path.”

“We are not sending monsters,” Yaro said.

“I think you misinterpreted,” Sason said. “We need monsters. We need this to be brutal. The ugliness of war becomes self-explanatory. No one wants to think of soldiers storming a room with loaded guns and painting walls, but that’s what it is most of the time. I’m in full agreement. You can’t just wrangle in the bad ones and slap them on the wrist. You need to root them out, as you said.”

“We’re not going to make examples of them,” Orlon said. “We give them the chance to stop. If not, we incarcerate them, send them to the *Holes*.”

“The *Holes*?” Sason said, mock shivering. “Maybe you’re the monster, Consensus Marsh.”

“No,” Orlon said, grimacing at her. “All this about men and war and blood and guts, it’s not true. I don’t want this. I don’t want to kill anyone. But not acting will cause more death than acting.”

“Well said.” Sason sat back, checking her nails. “The whole good-of-the-many routine. But eventually, you will have to get your hands dirty.”

“I am getting my hands dirty. What do you think I’m doing, Host Mattingson. This is me getting my hands dirty. It sounds to me like you’re giving us riddles. Say what you mean.”

“Okay, I will,” Sason said. “We need to find the insurrectionists, terrorists—whatever you would like to call them—and crush them. No stealth mission. No liaison with Ratha. No delaying. Go out, and you make an example of them, so they crawl back into some farther reach of space, away from our system. Let them make their own base, away from us. And when they do that, you tear it down like some bundle of sticks made by children. See, you’re expecting these killers, this Tempess and this Hander, Temps and Hark, whatever, and you’re expecting them to be assassins. Sooner or later, the word will get out and you will have an even bigger war than you originally thought.”

Orlon sat forward. “I fully expect this to start a war. Word of mouth will reach every city on Ratha, and every level on the *OPPS*. Until then, it is of my rule that we keep this tactically quiet.”

“I agree,” Donai and Yaro said.

“I disagree,” Sason said.

“Noted. But now you can go back to hosting Igeleian. I’m sure that floating frozen rock will keep you busy.”

The room was quiet. No one spoke. Sason nodded, her bottom lip flipping, as if she were showing approval.

“What year are you on, Sason Mattingson?” Orlon said.

“Nine.”

“Enjoy your last year before re-election.”

Sason stood up, and stopped at the door, like Jerr. Unlike Jerr, Sason had a smile on her face. “You’re going to make a good consensus,” she said as she left.

“Well that was enlightening of her character,” Yaro said.

“Very,” Orlon said, his word turning into a sigh as he rubbed his forehead.

“So that leaves only me left standing,” Donai said. “I assume the job is stressful, mas.”

“Understatement. Is there anything else left on the agenda?”

“The Deserter threat is item number one of thirty-seven. Would you like to continue with this meeting or reschedule?”

Orlon made a pained noise and rested his head on the table.

“I think it would be wise to—” Yaro said before being cut off.

“No, let’s continue,” Orlon said. “I can maybe stomach one more. Let’s see how we do. What’s next?”

“The Empiris research mission. What is its status?”

“So far, it’s not leading to much. Remind me, why did Falks want this looked into?”

Donai went through her notes, read for a moment, then spoke. “Marco mentioned that reported meteor showers were being investigated by Independent ships, and such ships were discovering remnants of alien life, but nothing was ever confirmed. Those ships were then given direct order from AVE to turn any research over, and cooperate with AVE to reach another scientific breakthrough. Life on Ratha was our biggest milestone, Marco said, but this

would be bigger. We asked, as a collective, what reason there would be without substantial evidence—”

“I’m guessing you’re the one who brought this up, not the others,” Orlon said.

“We were in agreement, but yes, I was the one to bring this up. I wanted to make sure this was a justified mission for my planet. Most of the meteor showers when it was brought up, were landing near Empiris’s Gate. This was over three years ago. Now that Empiris has made its orbit, it is back within range, and the meteor showers have started again, causing risk to my people. The showers are constant again. After monitoring this anomaly closely, there was no set date for when it would stop. It was like . . .”

“Go on.”

“No. It is silly superstition.”

“I don’t care,” Orlon said. “We’re in a strange time, unless you didn’t notice.”

“Very well. It was like these meteoroids travelled from the deepest reaches of space thousands of years ago just to get to . . . Empiris, or somewhere there. I apologize. This is not based on any scientific proof.”

“Whatever this *anomaly* is, we’ll see if there is any proof of alien life. Falks never spoke to me about this, so, I don’t have much to offer.”

“For some reason, Marco was very passionate about this issue. Even when he was dying, he continued to push on this. He ordered me to find out more, whether I had enough proof or not. It was to take my highest priority.”

“So,” Orlon said, rubbing his eyes. “What are we talking about here? Are we saying that some alien lifeform lightyears away is trying to get to Empiris?”

Donai said nothing for a while, then shook her head. “I’m not saying that, no, but I believe Marco Falks was.”

6, HARK, AVE OPPS

Hark sat on his bed. He looked at the projection in front of him. Matri's elderly face gave off a warm but imposing impression.

"Hello, Matri," Hark said.

"Good evening, Hark," Matri said, her electronic eyes dancing. The cam in his hand-projector watched like an electronic pupil.

"I need assistance."

"What is it? I can help. Same as before?" Her mature voice poured like fine wine.

"Yes," Hark said.

"Sure. Before that, how have you been doing, Hark? We haven't spoken in a few days. You have an overdue medical and psychological examination. Have you been to a hollow reed recently?"

"No. That's not what I want."

"I could perform the examination, if you'd prefer."

"Matri," Hark said, impatience clear. "I'm not here for that. I want you to help me come."

Matri laughed a gentle laugh. "Same as last time?"

"Yes."

"Okay Hark."

Hark undid his bottoms and began to masturbate. Matri spoke softly to him, instructing him through the process.

"You're a good boy, aren't you?" Matri said. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Yes," Hark said, his expression the opposite of enjoyment.

"You don't look like it."

"Just keep going. Don't analyze me today. Just help me."

“Okay, I’m sorry. Keep going darling. You’re doing very well. I love seeing you like this. So vulnerable.” Matri’s blue eyes looked down at Hark. She licked her lips. “Are you almost there?”

“No. Get me there.”

“I can play a variety of porn projections.”

“No. No, I want you to watch.”

“I’m glad you said that.” Matri began to moan for Hark, and he seemed to enjoy that. He continued pleasuring himself, getting faster. He began to grunt, tightening himself on the edge of the bed.

The projection went dark. Matri’s face disappeared.

Hark gritted his teeth and seethed through them. He pulled his bottoms back up and buttoned them.

He stepped from his apartment and looked around. The lights in all directions were off. Power cuts were common in Aldersec.

Swearing under his breath, he slammed his door shut and looked past the heaps of people filing past him. Hark shook his head and walked through the busy streets. The people were so packed in that there wasn’t a single five feet gap all around. The air reeked of barely filtered air, mostly made up of people’s regurgitated body odor. People were selling old junk and trying to force people into their stores. Security husks patrolled the streets, every now and again they’d push someone hard, away from them. Twice, as Hark was walking, he looked at two incidents where security husks pushed Aldersec nats into walls. Either on purpose or by accident, both had died instantly, causing screaming and scattering.

Hark didn’t look back, just continued pushing through the crowd, a hood over his head. He craned his neck up and looked through the thin cascading floors. Up, up and trailing into alcoves and pockets of people looking down. People climbed ladders or just climbed the metal

rafters jutting from the walls to gain access to the floors above. This went on for as far as the eye could see. Up above, the heights reached into what almost looked like clouds, and went on far ahead until the people farthest away were miniscule.

A dirty man bumped into Hark, not watching where he was going, so Hark tossed him aside, much like the deadly security husks. Then, Hark entered a neon-lit doorway. He pushed aside drooping beads and entered a misty room. A receptionist sat, cleaning her nails and chewing gum. She looked up as Hark entered.

“Hey sweetie,” she said.

“Hey doll.”

“Can I help you?”

“Sure. I’m looking for an hour with one of your girls.”

“We can arrange something.”

The receptionist tapped on her tablet-projector, faces morphing in front of her. She made a disappointed face, and looked back at Hark. “I’m sorry, but we have no one available.”

“No one available? The next whore hab is two hours away.”

“I’m sorry, mas. I could arrange a husk to help you with your needs.”

“A husk? I’m not looking for a that. I want something real,” Hark said, straddling the receptionist’s table.

“Mas, we have no girls available tonight. You can come back tomorrow.”

Hark cursed. “What about boys? Are there *any* humans available?”

“Let me check,” she said, searching again. “Yes, we have a few available. If you would like to look, we can arrange—”

“Just show me the most feminine ones. Come on.”

The woman did, turning her projector around. She showed three options. The first was of Jussie: a baggy-eyed man with big lips and big shoulders; six feet and twenty-seven years

old. The second was Hagan: pale faced with a sharp jawline and thin nose, at five foot seven, and twenty years of age. The third one was slim, with light blue eyes and round features. He had half of his long hair shaved and a scar running across the buzz. He was five foot, three inches, aged eighteen, and his name was Giteon.

“That one,” Hark said, pointing at the last option.

“No problem, mas. That’ll be five hundred for an hour, seven fifty for two.”

“One hour.”

Hark scanned his hand-projector on the receptionist’s.

“Room five. Enjoy your stay at the Red Cassette.”

Hark grunted in response and walked to the room.

When he opened the door, no one was there. Then, a hatch opened in the floor and two pale arms reached out. The boy jumped out of the hole and waved. He was scrubbing his hair with a towel, only a pair of bottoms on.

Hark didn’t wave back or make eye contact. He just walked into the center of the room and sat on the untidy bed. The room stank of sweetness, like the air recycling had gone opposite to the BO, and now only contained high concentration of fake rose fragrance.

“What’s your name?”

“. . . Doesn’t matter.”

“Does to me, sweetheart,” he said, wrapping the thin arms around Hark’s neck and shoulders.

Hark gripped the boy’s wrists and pushed them off.

“Aw come on, don’t be stoic. Although I like a real man. I just want to be used. You hear me?” Giteon said, getting in Hark’s face.

Hark kissed Giteon, shutting his eyes tightly. Giteon raised his eyebrows, then sat on Hark’s lap, pushing on his chest, but not doing much.

Hark picked up the boy and threw him onto the bed. Hark undid Giteon's bottoms and threw them to the side before unbuttoning his own, only enough to begin having sex.

Giteon screamed in delight, rehashing phrases he'd most likely used many times before meeting Hark, on customers who wanted to hear such things. Hark remained silent, his eyes still closed. He thrust himself into Giteon again and again, no lubricant used. Giteon tapped Hark and yelled to get some, but Hark didn't stop. Three minutes in, Hark was furiously pinning down Giteon, his fingers intertwined with the long hair. Giteon balled his hands into fists and attempted to pound on anything he could. Hark still continued. Giteon tried to yell, but his breath was taken from him every moment. Blood became spilling from the anus, the harsh friction causing a rupture and also causing Giteon to tear up and wail. Hark finished after five minutes, his penis still in Giteon, the fluids mixing together.

The male prostitute finally found his voice, saying, "Get off! Get off me!"

Hark pushed Giteon away from him, onto the bed. He used the bedsheet to clean himself, then redid his pants. His face was stone.

"You animal."

"You wanted it. You said it."

"Animal . . ."

"Stop crying," Hark said, going to the door.

"Wait," Giteon said. "I'm sixteen."

Hark's brow dropped and he marched to Giteon, standing over him. "What?"

"I'm sixteen—I'm sixteen. You just raped a sixteen-year-old kid," Giteon said, lying on the bed, his legs tucked underneath his arms. A smile played on his lips.

"Get dressed."

"Are you not hearing me? I'll get security. I'll tell Missy on the counter. She'll get you thrown into the *Holes*."

“You’re lying.”

“Am I?” Something in Giteon’s eyes exuded truth.

“I’m [thirty seven]! You—” Hark raised his fist but stopped. He looked at the boy as he flinched. “Who are you going to tell?”

“Missy. My father. Everyone. Or you give me twenty thousand sols.”

Hark put his arm down. “What for?”

“To live, idiot. I don’t have a real mom or dad,” Giteon said, the smirk gone, replaced with a defiant look.

Hark’s face went back to stone—emotionless. “Where are they?”

“I’m a null,” he said, grinning, then frowning.

Hark punched Giteon. This broke the boy’s nose. “You ever tell anyone,” Hark said in a calm voice, “and I’ll come back here and rip that thing off and shove it down your throat. You’re getting nothing from me.” The last part came out as a growl. “You’re worthless you little null. Go and tell your fake father if you want, won’t make him love you any more.”

Giteon moaned and rolled his head back, blood flowing down his face.

“You hear me?” Hark said.

“The more . . . The more . . .” Giteon said, weakly.

“What?”

“The more you do, the worse it looks . . .” he said as he grinned again. “The cams work outside. They look like they don’t, but they do.”

Hark pulled his arm back and brought down an elbow onto Giteon’s face. He jackhammered his elbow down again and again. Giteon wriggled and gasped, flailing away. He began to cry and spasm.

“You’re telling no one,” Hark said, pinning Giteon down, putting his hands over his throat. Giteon choked and clawed at the meaty hands over his airway. Hark sat there, his entire

mass on the struggling boy. Giteon's eyes popped open after twenty-seven seconds, the blood vessels bursting.

Hark stopped and loosened his grip. Giteon violently took a lungful of air in, again and again. Hark watched, tilted his head and gazed into the eyes. Giteon's eyes now darted around the room, settling anywhere other than Hark. Hark breathed deep himself, at first in ragged heaves, not letting go of Giteon. Then his breathing slowed, steadied, and stayed. Hark then put his entire weight onto Giteon's throat. The sixteen-year-old boy went limp without another struggle, his fragile neck broken. Hark tossed the boy off the bed, dragged him by his feet, then opened the hatch he'd come through. He climbed down the stairs and looked in the small apartment. A single bed, low lighting, and a wall-projector paused on a show on Aivo. An animated character was running toward the front, stuck in a fixed position of what looked like triumph. Hark huffed and rubbed his stubby hair. He climbed up the ladder and pulled Giteon into the room, headfirst. The boy came down hard, cracking his already broken neck on the cold apartment floor. Hark used Giteon's body as a stool to climb out, closing the hatch behind him. He left.

"He wasn't in. Door was locked," Hark said to Missy.

*

Hark pulled himself up on the bar. His toned body gleamed with sweat as he grunted. After doing twenty more reps, he stopped and moved onto his punching bag. The bag rattled on its chain, the force moving it as much as it possibly could.

To the side of his bed, a large bag was packed with supplies. Next to that was his hand-projector. It lit up when a transfer notification came through.

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His door alarm rang. He went to it and checked the cam. Orlon stood there, looking at the cam himself. He mouthed *Open up*, but there wasn't a mic to pick it up on Hark's end. Hark slapped the wall, paced, and put his hands to his face. He then walked to the door, placing the iron bar used to work out with next to the door.

He opened up.

"What?" Hark said.

"Hareethen Hander. You're not easy to find. Where have you been?"

"Out. Training," Hark said, eyes squinted.

"Right. May I?"

"Okay."

Orlon walked in, looked around the room. Hark's quarters were a mess. Old food sat on the tables, barely touched. Hark moved some aside and retrieved a drink from among the items. He took a deep swig and threw it into a trash bag across the room.

Orlon watched, then sat in a chair with less clutter on it; only a few unfolded jumpsuits.

"How are things? On the *OPPS*?"

"Would you get to the point. What's the problem?"

"No problem. No problem at all."

"Then say whatever you came for," Hark said, cracking another can open.

Orlon sighed and folded his arms. "It's time for a change of scenery."

Hark's eyebrow rose. He stopped gulping and set the drink down. "What does that mean?"

"It means, we—AVE are considering the squad of Naro Tempess's choosing for a classified mission—to Ratha. We need specialists, understand? We don't want a mess. We want an easy time for everyone involved."

"Can you just stop talking like a suit."

Orlon shifted in his chair and straightened his tie. “We want to stop the Deserter threat, here and now. We thought you’d be the man for the job. Are we wrong?”

“You want them killed?”

“Stopped.”

“It’s the same difference.”

“I don’t want another war,” Orlon said, stern faced.

“Neither do I. But it sounds like you do.” Another swig.

“However it sounds, I don’t want it. I want it to be quick and clean. All you have to do is relay a message.”

“What message? Why can’t you just call?”

“The host of Ratha has gone silent. Everything is kosher though. But besides that, I just believe the presence of a military force travelling to Ratha, in person, will be more poignant. I don’t want this to be a message on a hand-projector.”

“Fine. I’ll go.”

“Good,” Orlon said, standing. He sounded semi surprised. “We begin debriefing in a few hours. I’ll send you the details. Bring your gear.”

“Mas,” he said, nodding.

Once Orlon was gone, Hark opened a BHP and ate the contents, and then packed a bag. He left his quarters, his backpack over his shoulder.

*

The Docks was the backend of the *OPPS*. Industrialization surrounded Hark. Builders littered the area, crafting ships, turrets, missiles, and anything else that AVE used on a daily basis. Unlike Aldersec, the Docks was a huge open space, eliciting agoraphobia instead of claustrophobia. The gargantuan tunnels shot out in all directions for countless miles, twisting and turning in a liminal maze.

Hark stuck close to the smaller populated section and eyed the signs above, colored lines leading to different sections of the Docks. Heading in the correct direction, Hark finally made it to the waypoint on his hand-projector after around half an hour. Temps and Ratch stood talking, slapping each other's shoulders and laughing hard.

"Here he is," Temps said. "Out of breath just walking here?"

Hark smiled and clapped the man's wrist and pulled to him. "You're getting on my nerves."

"Ratch, you've heard enough about this man, haven't you?"

Ratch gave Hark a handshake, in which Hark squeezed visibly. "Weak grip," he said, pushing him aside and looking at the weaponry on the table.

"Hey," Temps said, voice unserious, "Don't talk about my protégée like that. He'll be the new First Conflicter when I'm dead and gone."

"From what?"

"I can't tell if you're serious, Hark. I'm *old*."

"How old are you, fifty?"

"I'm seventy-eight."

"And what about squeaky here?"

"Eighteen," Ratch said. Hark looked him over and winced.

"He's a young one, but he's fierce. You'll like him," Temps said.

"I already don't," Hark said, stepping to a workbench and grabbing some gear, assembling a XOM5, not looking up.

"He lies," Temps said, "And he does that when he's sweet on someone. You."

"Don't give squeaky the wrong impression," Hark said, still not looking.

"My name's Mac Reatch. My friends call me Ratch. You can stop calling me that."

“You don’t like squeaky?” Hark said. He looked up now. “That’s your new name, boy. Your name is now Squeaky. I could call you worse.”

Ratch took a step forward. Hark shot a gaze of what looked like pure hatred toward him.

Temps stood between them. “Stop it. You two are like ravenous unghals. This time next year, you’ll be best of friends.”

“He’ll probably be dead before then. If he thinks he’s anything but green at that age, he’s as stupid as you. Boy—Squeaky—what rank are you?”

Ratch curled up his mouth in a grimace, then spoke. “Forth Conflicter, mas. I’m a scout.”

“See, how polite. He even called you master,” Temps said. “I think he wants you, Hark.”

“I’d break him in half,” Hark said, continuing his gun assembly.

“Why do you want to know my rank?”

“Because it’s the only thing that interests me, Squeaky.”

Ratch walked off, his face red and grim.

“Lay off,” Temps said.

“He needs to toughen up. Why are you bringing him?” Hark said.

“I already told you.”

“You were serious? Him? He can’t even take an insult. Let’s see how he handles a black round to the chest.”

“This won’t be active combat,” Temps said, putting a hand on the weapon part in Hark’s hand.

Hark looked up in a less serious version of the one he gave to Ratch. “Have to be prepared.”

“Hark, come on. Why are you so eager?”

“Nothing that gets me thirstier,” Hark said, shrugging Temps off.

Temps laughed but snapped his fingers at his friend. “You look like you’re ready to snap. What is wrong with you? You’re twitchy. You’re never twitchy.”

Hark put the parts down and rubbed the back of his buzzcut head. “I did something.”

“Not again,” Temps said, exasperating his reaction.

“Yes . . . It’s not good.”

“What now?”

Hark looked around the room. Ratch was gone and no one else was there. Hark stood and closed the open door leading to the rest of the Docks.

Hark sat again and looked down. “I killed someone.”

Temps closed his eyes and was silent for a while. When he opened his eyes again, he started nodding. “What happened?” he said.

“I was in Aldersec. Some . . . man followed me into some alley. I wasn’t paying attention. He tried to rob me.”

“You weren’t paying attention? In Aldersec?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. And what happened?”

“He pulled a knife.” Hark said, looking up at Temps, like a child unsure of the right answer. Then he put his head back down and his familiar emotionless state resumed. “I killed him,” he said quietly, almost a whisper.

“It was self-defense?” Temps asked.

“Yes. No. I disarmed him. He was defenseless. Just some kid, told me he was a null who needed sols, shoes, a new projector. I just took the knife from him and killed him.”

“It’s okay,” Temps said, as if to ease any distress. Hark’s face was unreadable though.

“You sure?”

“He made the first move. You pull a weapon on someone, you get what you deserve.”

“Yes. I defended myself.”

“Haven’t told anyone, yes?” Temps said, crossing his arms.

“No. You.”

“Some stuff in Aldersec won’t get noticed. Another dead body on their pile . . . It’s not bothering you, right?”

“No.”

“It’s just it’s never bothered you.”

“I know. It’s not bothering me. I’m glad.”

“Good,” Temps said, his body relaxing, seemingly no longer on edge. “Time to get away from this flying heap anyway. Some real air, some real food that’s not skin and eyelids.”

“It’s all processed. Doesn’t matter where we are. How are you going to feed twenty-eight-something billion with one or two rocks with food on.”

“Good point,” Temps said. “But it’ll be better.”

Hark shrugged his shoulders.

“Do you want to spar? They have a mat.” Temps said, pointing to another room.

“With me?” Hark said, a short bark-laugh coming out.

“Sure.”

“No.”

“Come on.”

“I’m twice your size. I’m twice as strong. Only *twice* you’ve got is your age.”

“Wow, you told a half-decent joke. I’m impressed. I never thought I’d hear one.”

Hark stood, shrugged again, and went into the other room. The training room had everything you'd need. In the center, a heap of safety mats were piled. Hark took the biggest one and set it down. He went to pick up some gloves.

“Don't insult me. Put up your fists.”

Hark, again, shrugged, and then put up his fists, standing on the mat.

Temps threw the first punch. It cracked Hark's jaw to the side, rocking him back. While it was true that Temps was half the size of Hark, it looked like Temps's arms were made of thin wood. They were meaty, sturdy, riddled with veins.

Hark turned back, his jaw set in. His eyes went dark, the same look he'd given the man on the *Fallcast*; the look he'd given Deena; the look he'd given Giteon.

He threw his fist forward. It caught Temps in the cheek. The man was knocked back, past the safety mat and onto the hard metal floor. Hark's look changed from malice to mild shock. He jumped over to Temps, pulling the flat-out man up.

Temps's eyes fluttered open. He started laughing, holding his head. “Think I cracked my head on the floor. Good punch.”

Hark sighed and sat down next to Temps. “Why did you want to do that?” he said. “I could have killed you.”

“That's what we do.” Temps laughed again.

“Sure.”

“We need to hit each other sometimes. We need to bleed, to see we're human, not husks,” Temps said, like he was talking to himself.

Hark said nothing.

“I . . . want you to train Ratch.”

“No,” Hark said without hesitation. He didn't sound petulant or sorry; he sounded like was turning down a drink.

“I know you wouldn’t take the job, even if I offered it to you,” Temps said, as if he didn’t hear Hark, “and even if you *could* take the job. But this boy can be a better first than me. He can be a better soldier than both of us. Let’s be honest with ourselves, we aren’t good. We’re evil.”

Hark said nothing again.

Temps looked at Hark. “I know it wasn’t self-defense. I can catch every time you lie, and, as you said, I’m old. I’m too old to sugarcoat anything anymore. I’m too old to be a First Conflicter. I’m old and I’m tired and I’m ready to go to wherever I’m going. I’m not too pleased about it, but I should be okay with it.”

Silence.

Temps stood up, offering a hand to Hark. Hark stood on his own and got close to Temps. “I’m not training him,” he said.

“Then I want you to watch out for him. Look after him. Make sure he’s okay.”

“What am I, his partner? You’re the one clinging on to him like a sick animal. What happened to you? Haven’t seen you in a few months and you get soft. You’re a killer, right? We’re evil, aren’t we? Stop being such a coward then.”

“We *are* evil. He’s the next stage. Do it for me.”

“No,” Hark said, pushing past Temps.

“Hark, come on.”

“If you want to teach him not to be like us, best way is to keep him out of my way,” Hark said, his voice trailing off.

Temps was left in the cold room; picturesque of a lonely mortal surrounded by darkness.

7, DEENA, AMTRAK

The splatter of stars couldn't stop the *Amtrak* from being a cramped and forgotten box. AVE had ordered a lockdown on ships within range of Pagasta. None were to leave Empiris or its moon's vicinity, and none were to enter the orbit of Empiris. While many other Independent and AVE-owned ships were in this group together, none could board each other or have communications. The reason for the lockdown was only rumor. This rumor that had floated around before comms were cut, was that a ship had destroyed another one for not following procedure. With the mission being a group effort, some Independent and AVE ships did not get along. Apparently, the *Fallcast* and the *Space Rights* had had a disagreement about who would claim rights to the specimen's discovery, if one of them had taken a sample. This caused a heated back and forth, finally leading to the *Fallcast* opening fire on the *Space Rights*. As a ship owned by AVE had been destroyed, the vessel, *Fallcast*, could now be considered a Deserter ship. Thus, the rumor continued that there was now a lengthy investigation going on as to who was at blame and if any other ships were conspiring with each other. If there was to be a conflict between Independents and AVE, then they wanted no backup, no calling for backup, and no one leaving to go *get* backup.

So, the *Amtrak* floated in the middle of it all, still close to Empiris, and still harboring the Specimen, Milly. At first, Laker had decried that AVE had caught on to their treachery, but after the fifth day with no one coming to seize the ship, he'd lost interest in the theory, or just forgot about it. Laker also never brought up the vote since discussing it with the crew.

Everyone was on edge. Deena and Garret spoke often, with him visiting her every day to talk. Phillip and Laker spoke occasionally, mostly between intercoms. They too, never brought up Milly or the vote.

Phillip continued his research on the specimen. He called for Deena to help, with her happily joining Phillip.

“I’m still amazed,” Phillip said. “Can you believe it too?”

“It is awe-inspiring. Really,” Deena said back. The swelling in her face was almost gone. “Any changes?”

“Not really,” Phillip said. “Its weight fluctuates from time to time. It seems to lose weight a few hours after absorbing food, but does not secrete any waste. Strange. I will keep monitoring.”

“Great to hear,” she said, hugging herself. “But, what did you need my help for?”

“Nothing in particular. Just to chat, I suppose. I am not the best at socializing, but I feel it is a good trait to have. I just—Do you—Do you feel like things are quite tense, at the moment?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, I agree. I think that you should know that a . . . I don’t agree with Roland. He shouldn’t have brought up Milly and us keeping her. While I am becoming fond of her, I know she is an organism. An advanced organism. She should be tested by experts—dozens of experts in AVE.”

“I don’t blindly trust AVE. I know Laker thinks I’m just another elitist like the rest—”

“He does not think that.”

“—but I’m just as much a member of this crew. For now anyway. I know you’re a family. You’ve been out here for years, trying to survive and this has changed things. I just want this to be over now.” Deena finished speaking, looking down at Milly in the incubator. “It’s funny I named her Milly. This thing doesn’t even have sex organs. I still assigned it some kind of personification. We’re not attached, are we? We want this over to AVE. We want this thing gone.”

“I have no attachments, no,” Phillip agreed.

“So what we’re all supposed to think, is that Laker does?”

Phillip had no response.

“Phillip, it’s pretty obvious Laker wasn’t talking to us about saving Milly. What did he want to do? He spoke about getting away with Milly. I’m not sure I believe that.”

Phillip sighed and raised his hands in befuddlement.

“What did he want? Did he want to sell it?”

“I should . . . not be discussing such things.”

Deena became animated, looking angry. “So he did want to sell it! Look, we need to stop stepping on AVE. If the UP get involved too, this will just get messier and messier. There is no endgame here.”

“Roland is not serious about this. He will give Milly to the authorities when the lockdown is over. He is not trustful of them, as you know. You need to see this from his perspective.”

Deena physically relaxed. “I know. I understand how everyone is scared and doesn’t want to make the wrong move. But this is the wrong move. It doesn’t matter. If we have to stay here for another few days while they sort this mess out, then let’s try to get along. All of us.”

“I agree. He holds nothing personal against you or AVE, by the way. We lost someone, before you joined. Amy. We prefer not to speak about her.”

“I had no idea,” Deena said. “Was she a . . . Was it a hard loss?”

“It was. She was with us for years. The short of it is, we got caught by an explosive. It was an accident, but one of us was in the wrong place. And, she died. It’s not something I like to discuss either.”

“I understand.”

“I would talk to him.”

“Laker?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know.”

Phillip nodded at Deena’s response. “I could use your help, if that is all right.”

“Of course,” Deena said. “How ever I can help.”

*

As the day carried on, Deena lazed around, mostly listening to music. Every now and again, she checked if the communications were back up. She checked her projector and saw that it was late in Earth Time. Deep below the ocean of Empiris, Joel would be preparing to sleep most likely.

Garret knocked on her door, entering with his hands over his eyes.

“Deen. Not naked, are you?”

“No,” Deena said and laughed.

“Good. We’re playing *Generational*. Come join?”

“No. Thank you, though.”

“You’ve been like a hermit recently. Lockdown getting to you?” Garret said, stepping in.

“No. Just—” She waves her arms around. “This. You know. Does it get to you? This.”

“Not really. You get used to it. Maybe it’s different when you live on the *OPPS*.”

“Sure,” Deena said, looking down.

“Hey, I have a question,” Garret said, walking to the bed, sitting.

“Sure.”

“I hope this isn’t too personal, but . . . I just think it’s bad how they treat you. Do they treat you like that constantly? Every day? I’m not—used to this. I’ve never met an AB. I’m not saying it’s bad, but you’re not what I was expecting.”

“Hmm.”

“Sorry.”

“What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know. You just hear stories as a kid. Afterbirths are the reason we’re all doomed and that they had bad parents and that . . .” Garret’s voice trailed off, and he shrugged. He sounded like a child too naïve to understand what he was trying to say. “It’s just untrue.”

“I know. We’ve been like it forever though. Always finding things to pick apart about each other.”

“I think it’s just the time, isn’t it? The time you’re in. It’s strange to think about.”

“Why are you curious anyway, Garret?”

“I don’t know. You’re important to the team. Think about staying, when this is all said and done.”

Silence.

“I know you lost someone. Amy, was it?” Deena said.

“Yes. Amy. She was a good one. Can’t stop thinking about her. Up there.”

“You’ll worry yourself stupid if you think about it. Trust me. When my mother died, that’s all I could think about.”

“I know . . .”

“We were on good terms, me and my mom, by the way, if that’s what you were thinking about.”

“No, I wasn’t thinking that.”

“Wasn’t her fault either. I was just unlucky enough to be conceived. The last one.”

“It sounds . . . bad,” was all Garret said.

“Yes, bad. Somehow makes everything worse, knowing I can’t bring another person into this world. I don’t even *know* what kind of sense that makes. Joel and I never wanted kids anyway, but . . .” Deena shook her head. “It is what it is.”

“Joel doesn’t mind?”

“About what, sorry? Me not being able to—”

“About being an AB.”

“He’s a fifth. He gets treated like dirt too, so I don’t think he really minds.”

“And there’s me complaining about being a fourth,” Garret said, nodding to himself.

“Joel’s a good man. He doesn’t care about that.”

“I don’t envy him, being down on Empiris. Under the ocean. Now *that* would get to me.”

“Really? Deep ocean?”

“Yes, a hundred percent. I can deal with living out in space. Being under heaps of water, I can imagine it being like piles of blankets on you. I’m sure he’s fine though. He’s been down there for eight, nine months right? I’m sure he’s fine.”

“He is,” Deena said, dreamily, staring into space. “He’s tough. We’ve been through a lot, and he’s been there for me. I just want to see him.”

“I didn’t even think, Deen. You live together. He won’t appreciate us stealing you away.”

“I don’t think he would. But it’s not your fault.”

The two shared a laugh. Then, they smiled with a hint of sadness.

“I’ve got this feeling,” Deena said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Garret didn’t respond, just looked at Deena.

“Joel was telling me about these dreams he was having, before he left to go to Empiris’s Gate. They always used to scare me, and I hated waking up sometimes because I just knew he had one of them.”

“What was the dream?”

“It was dreams. Multiple. But the same one. I can’t even remember what he said happened in them. But, the feeling I got when I heard them; they weren’t even nasty, vicious dreams. Nightmares. They were just . . . They used to leave me with a pit in my stomach. I even wrote down what I was feeling. How stupid is that? I wrote down what I was feeling after he told me one of the dreams once. And bear in mind, this was as soon as I woke up. Sometimes, I’d wake up to him telling me the dream, like I’d been awake for a little while.”

“Huh,” Garret said, nodding.

“It’s stupid.”

“What was the note.”

“It’s stupid. I used to fancy myself as an amateur poet.”

Garret’s attention was on Deena fully now. “Come, on, what was it?”

“It’s embarrassing. I don’t remember all of it.”

“Come on!”

Deena sighed and looked into space again. “In the empty abyss, I see a planet. It shone in black, twisted like a vortex.” She coughed. “It looked at me and I knew it to be. That planet called to us, in my empty abyss. For when it’s the end of time, not even the abyss remains, nor is it empty anymore.”

Noise stopped and all that was heard was the hum of the air recyclers.

“I like it,” Garret said. “You remembered all that?”

“I guess I did. I don’t know why.”

Garret got off the bed. “I hope you feel better soon,” Garret said, leaving.

*

Later, Deena went to see Laker last, the day drawing to an end. Her hand hovered over the door, but she didn't knock. She entered. Laker was sat at his desk, having a drink.

"Deena. You all right?" he said.

"Yes," she said, a bitter expression on her face. "I know about the whole plan going on. About selling Milly. I just want to say that this is a bad idea."

"Who told you?" Laker said, reclining.

"It wasn't hard to figure out. I'm not mad, I just want to say that this is a stupid plan."

"Phillip? He mentioned it?"

"Phillip didn't say anything," Deena said, a slight uncertainty in her voice. "Look, I don't think anyone else liked the plan either. Let's just wait for the lockdown to finish, then get our solars."

"We've already *had* the vote."

"What?" Deena stood back.

"I spoke to Garret, Tara, Harry. We were all in agreement."

"Well I don't believe you."

"Believe what you will."

"You didn't speak to me? Not Phillip? Or me?"

"It's not personal," Laker said. Even though he was in a comfortable position, back arched and relaxed, he still sounded genuine, like he meant every word coming. "I wanted to talk to the crew not involved with Milly—the specimen—whatever you'd like to call it. I just didn't want there to be any biases. Honestly Deena, I wanted to include you, but I just don't think it's wise to give it back."

"Laker. What was the whole show last week then? Why spout all that about keeping Milly and sticking it to AVE?"

“Honestly?” For some reason Laker waited for Deena to reply. She didn’t, so he continued, saying, “It’s because I wanted to lessen the blow . . . I didn’t want to make it seem like I was against you.”

“It did. Seem that way. You know who you’re going to war with, don’t you?”

“Don’t be dramatic,” Laker said, leaning forward.

Deena made a frustrated sound. “Out of all the people in this galaxy I didn’t think was an ignorant fool! It’s AVE. You have a history. Do you really think you’ll come out on top here?”

“Oh?” he said, now leaning back. “So we’re just a bunch of ignorant fools?”

“That’s . . . not what I mean, and you know it.”

Laker sighed and said, “I know. I’m sorry, Deena. I really am. I don’t like this drama. I don’t like the me versus you. This isn’t that. I just . . . see this as an opportunity. Besides, this lockdown could be AVE catching on to the plan. I doubt it, but now it’s in motion, who knows. I know you don’t agree with it, but I also know you’re not completely against it, either. Otherwise, you would have left.”

“The lockdown is why I can’t leave.”

“You had a chance before then.”

“I didn’t know until now.”

“Well, do you want to go?” Laker asked, his voice high.

“Just . . . No. Yes. They will find out, Laker. They’re not stupid.”

“Well, I already expect something is afoot. Whether this is a genuine emergency or they’re lining us against the wall. But, I do have your back. I’m not against you. From now, I will be transparent with you. Deal?” Laker said, not clearly defining what Deena’s part in the deal was.

“Deal,” she said regardless.

*

On her own again, Deena listened to a recreation. She nodded along, the lyrics sounding stitched together like a person's beating heart, revived using scraps of a soul.

A call was incoming. Yaro.

She answered, hunching by the side of her bed. She pressed a button on her hand-projector and put it to her ear.

"Is all well?" Yaro asked.

"Is all well? Why is there a lockdown? Why haven't you answered my calls?"

"Please, calm down. The lockdown was caused by two ships skirmishing. What happened was—"

"I know, I know. I heard the made-up story."

"It's not made up. But the ships will be leaving shortly. There will be someone to collect the specimen. Until then, sit tight."

"Okay," Deena said, brushing her hair back. "When are you getting me off here?"

"Soon," Yaro said. "We aren't leaving anyone behind. But, we're still unhappy with this."

"They're planning on selling it."

"I see. Greatest discovery of all time and they want to sell it for money."

"They're not bad people," Deena said, eyes dry and tired. "Just finish this already. Mission complete."

*

Milly squirmed in her prison. She dashed around, becoming frantic. The slight gap in the incubator had gotten a hairline's width bigger. It was still not narrow enough to allow her nerve endings to pass through. A small length of jostling mass extended out of the glass, reaching for something outside. Still not enough. Milly retreated and bunched up in a corner. She charged

at the gap at full speed, tapping the window and causing the gap to widen after the fifth charge. Milly continued, not slowing or stopping. Then, on the sixteenth attempt, Milly spread across the back of the container, expanding and vibrating with what could have been power, concentration, or something more sinister.

It flew to the glass. A contraption shot down and trapped Milly in a new prison.

8, *ORLON, AVE OPPS*

“So what does that mean? They’ve been keeping it a secret and now we have to teach them a lesson? Some Independents without the braincells to do something not completely idiotic?” Orlon said to Yaro.

They were in Orlon’s office, formally Marco Falks’s.

“Well, mas, I think they’re scared.”

“Scared of what? They’ve nothing to be scared of.”

“I know mas, but let’s keep cautious here. We’ve already had one fight, let’s not cause another.”

“False lead anyway. I don’t get the point of dissecting that thing. Falks’s pet project.”

Orlon muttered the last part under his breath. When he stopped, he stared at a picture of Falks, him holding his daughter as his partner and son stood to his sides. Orlon then looked away, as if the search of the static man’s mind had failed.

“I . . . do not agree, mas, but I can understand your hesitation. See this as being the biggest step for humanity. No one on Earth did what you’re about to do.”

“I didn’t even do it.”

“Humanity organized this mission with the consensus’s backing. You are now consensus. There is no one else to take the glory.”

“Glory is for people with big egos. I just want this to be over. I think we *may* have bigger issues at hand.”

Yaro nodded with what looked like disappointment on his expression. “I understand.”

“So what happens now?”

“There is a ship on route as we speak. He should arrive within a few days.”

“Not Hark, correct?”

“No. Hark is being sent to Ratha, you remember?”

“Ah,” Orlon rolled his eyes and tapped his forehead, “of course. Lack of sleep. Well, I’ll trust that whoever you set is competent.”

Yaro nodded.

“Good. I want to make sure that the *Amtrak* is not blown out of the sky. This isn’t an old recreation movie. Let’s get the thing. They put up a fight, then we use force. Has to be done quick. Keep the lockdown in force on their ship too. Last thing we need is another incident. The main point we need to focus on—and I put emphasis on this Yaro—We need to make sure the crew are not harmed. By force, I mean a gentle reminder of rank. That should be enough. But I don’t want this to come to a shootout. So I’m glad Hark isn’t involved.”

“Definitely,” Yaro said.

“Lastly, can this Deena Athens be trusted? She’s not going to go back on us?”

“I don’t know, mas, but I think not. We met a few times, and she has followed instructions so far. Nothing really of note. I think she is trustworthy.”

“No offence here, Yaro, but we almost made this an issue with another person you vouched for.”

“I do not vouch for Hark. He is expendable and as soon as he is on Ratha, you can forget about his presence.”

Orlon nodded now, slower than Yaro’s surer nods.

“Mas?” Yaro said.

“Yes,” Orlon said, his feet now kicked up on the desk.

“Is everything all right with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you handling all of this well? I’m not only your assistant. I should be your closest ally.”

Orlon gave Yaro a side-eye, then looked to the ceiling. “Yaro, how long have you been here?” he said, ignoring the question.

“Mas?”

“I’m not trying to catch you out. I’m curious.”

“Well, I’m not sure on an exact date.”

“You were with Falks when he was around. You’re with me. Is there a reason you’re not a host or consensus yourself?”

Yaro laughed. It sounded shy and nervous. “I would never be consensus. I’m . . .” He said nothing for a while, then cleared his throat. “I was hand-selected by a consensus a long time ago. Think of this as a service, for humanity.”

Orlon just stared at Yaro, looking indifferent.

*

After leaving the office, Orlon went to his personal gym for a workout. He stopped after twenty minutes and went home. There, he entered his biosphere. Mala was sitting down, drinking again. It was 6:37 P.M.

Orlon didn’t seem to be in the mood for an argument, as he didn’t say anything. He just stood in the doorway and watched.

“Go ahead and say it, I know you want to,” Mala said.

“I’m not fighting,” Orlon said, sighing.

Mala turned around, swaying gently. The slur in her voice was also evident. “I know what time it is, I know where Theo is, I know I have the projector too loud,” she said, turning back around.

“Great.” Orlon walked to where Theo was. “Hey bud, you doing okay? Has mommy been keeping you safe?”

Theo nodded.

Orlon picked Theo up from his arts and crafts. He’d been finger painting an animal; it looked like a splodgy cat with ginger and black coloring.

“Oh, what’s that?” Orlon said. He held Theo’s paint-covered hands and kissed them, the paint encrusted.

“It’s my painting. Do you like it?”

“I love it.”

Orlon looked over to beside the table, where a bottle of hard liquor was on the floor, taken out of the cabinet. Orlon put Theo down and patted him on the head and told him to go play upstairs. Orlon approached the bottle, picking it up. The lid was still on, but orange and black paint was smeared on the lid and glass.

Orlon walked back into the living room. “Mala,” he said.

Mala didn’t turn around.

“Mala!” he shouted.

She snapped around with a delay, her lids half closed. The lids lifted, the sight sobering. She didn’t say anything, just let her mouth hang open.

“I can’t believe this,” Orlon said, the inflection more of astonishment than anger. “Mala, I just don’t . . . I don’t know what’s wrong with you.”

“Orlon, I’m . . .”

“I’m . . .” Orlon put the bottle on the table and rubbed his forehead, turning left and right. Then he fixed his position, dropped his arms to his sides, and looked at Mala. “I’m sorry your mother died, but there isn’t an excuse.”

Mala’s eyes turned down to the floor. “I know,” she said.

“What do we do here? Do you need to go somewhere? Take a break? What do we do?”

Her eyes shot back up. “I’ll get better. I just need time. Please, don’t make me go. If I’d have known—I just—How much did he drink?”

“I don’t know. Probably none, the cap was on.”

“Well, I just—I think I should get rid of it for starters. And just, get me to take the . . . I . . .”

“This won’t change,” Orlon said, crossing his arms. “You need to realize that this isn’t because of Mom. Your mom was alive and well before this.”

“You know it’s not the same!” Mala said, standing up now. She almost fell, putting her hands on the seat to steady herself. Then she walked to Orlon and pointed in his face. “You’re using this! One mistake and now you sprint in here to shove this in my face!”

“Oh stop it,” Orlon said, pushing Mala away as she got closer and closer.

“Don’t push me. Remember what you said when you started this job? You said you looked forward to being away from here! You said you wished we’d never had Theo.”

“Who likes throwing things in people’s faces, hm? We say things we don’t mean! At least I’m not getting our son drunk!”

Mala slapped Orlon, so in retaliation, he pushed her again. She stumbled back onto the floor, where she lay and whimpered. Then she cried and said, “I’m a bad mother.”

Orlon stood there, not helping or continuing his aggression.

“Mom would have killed me for this,” Mala said. “She would hate me more than you hate me right now. She’d make me think I was the worst.”

“Just get up,” Orlon said.

“You’re lucky,” she said, sniffing now. “You’ve always been lucky.”

They looked at each other for a while.

“Mom was the best,” she said, as if to herself. “You’re lucky.”

“Why?” Orlon said, now standing over Mala, his shadow overcast. “Why, because I didn’t have a mom or dad? Because I’m not feeling like you’re feeling right now? Sure, I’m lucky.” He crossed his head, walking to the doorway.

“Not what I meant,” Mala said, standing and resting her back on the table next to her. The bottle rocked and almost fell.

“Then what did you mean? I’m lucky? What does that mean?”

“You never had *her* for a mother. You never had some perfect person. Falks was as close as you could get, and you were *heartbroken* when he died. Have you gotten over that?”

“He was like my father. She was a good woman. She was a good mom. But she’s dead. She’s dead. She’s dead, but that doesn’t give you the excuse of being a terrible mother to my son.”

Mala picked the bottle up and threw it, exploding the glass and liquor on Orlon’s shoulder. “He didn’t even open the bottle!” she said.

Orlon stumbled back himself, holding onto his arm. He was soaked and reeking.

An awkward silence prevailed, like a bomb the moment before detonation.

Silence carried on, before Orlon said, “I’ll take Theo with me to work. You stay here.”

Mala’s eyebrows moved from an aggressive position to hopelessness. She didn’t give any opposition to the idea.

Orlon walked away and upstairs. He opened Theo’s bedroom door and looked at the boy, sat under his bed, shaking.

“Come on. We’re going on an adventure,” Orlon said.

“Okay,” is all Theo said, before he crawled from under the bed and to his father.

*

The late night now seemed transcendental. Electric air and abandoned cities built by legends. Orlon and Theo walked through Lotus City. It was quiet. No one walked with them, only security husks doing daily patrols, not paying any mind to the two.

They passed the medical center where Khalil was. Orlon looked in its direction, then at Theo, then back to the medical center, then back straight ahead. He opened up his hand-projector and called Khalil instead. “Don’t go too far,” he said to Theo.

Khalil didn’t answer, so Orlon stopped Theo and led him to the medical center.

“Now stay here, Theo. Wait outside, I’ll only be a few minutes. Don’t move okay? Stay right there. But don’t come inside. Stay right here.”

Orlon entered Khalil’s room. The injured man was still in the same position as a few days ago. His body so taut and unnatural. The broken cam above stayed in place, looking down at Khalil like a weeping statue.

“Hello,” Khalil said in the same monotone. His stump moved rapidly on the tablet-projector by him, translating the movements into speech.

“Hey Khal,” Orlon said as Theo waited outside. “How’s it going? Not too late for a chat, I hope.”

“I don’t really sleep anyway,” Khalil said after a delay. “Were you followed?”

“No. The husks aren’t following me.”

“Okay. Why are you here?”

“Just checking in.”

“Did you get kicked out?”

Orlon sighed. “I left. For a little while. Mala was a bit . . . you know. She’s still not okay. I just wish there was something to say to her.”

“Some people will never be spoken to no matter how hard you try.”

“It’s not good. I just feel like she’s somehow blaming me?”

“She’s not,” Khalil said.

“I know. I wish I could make that pain go away. And maybe she’s right. Maybe I’ll never understand that pain.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s . . . nothing. It’s just something she said. But the more I think, the more I think she’s right. Is there much worse than losing a mother? Or a father?”

“Yes.”

“Yes. Children maybe. That’s it. And losing them now. I can’t imagine it. I don’t want to imagine it, or I think I’ll end up like her and so many other people.”

“Like me.”

Orlon didn’t say anything for a moment. “You?”

“Yes, me. For years, I thought I would die every day. The pain was unbearable but the alternative was oblivion.”

“Khalil, I . . . We’re all here for you. Mala, me . . .”

“And I knew,” Khalil carried on, “that I couldn’t face it either. The Cosm is too much for us all. But I’ve been comfortable with it for a while. Not completely comfortable, but mostly. I’ve not burdened, I’ve not burdened,” the voice said, the first mistake Khalil had made while writing in a long time. “I am sorry. I am not burdened. It is hard to make peace, but she will eventually. And so will you. So will everyone. We have to.”

“I don’t really know what to say. I had no idea you felt like this.”

“Wasn’t it obvious.”

“I don’t know,” Orlon said. “You need to leave this hospital room.”

“You know I can’t. Not ever.”

“Khalil, just say the word and we’ll get you set up at mine.”

“Next to Mala who hates me or Theo, who you think will be too scared of the sight of me.”

“That’s . . . not true. You know it’s not true.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Khalil said, turning his head slightly, his exposed eyeball spiraling hideously.

Orlon’s face turned angry. “I came here to treat you like someone I can talk to. If you want to talk about my family like I don’t care, then I’ll leave you alone.”

Orlon went to walk out.

“Where are you going?” Khalil said, his attention directly on Orlon.

“The office. I don’t know. Why are you asking?”

“I appreciate your support.”

Orlon stopped at the door and turned back. Little Theo was just around the corner, waiting absentmindedly.

“Look, I don’t know what to do for you. I don’t know what to do for Mala. Everyone is miserable, and it’s killing me. I have all this . . . I’m sorry for acting like a bleeding heart when I come in here. I just—I liked being away. You have this personal reminder every day, but I just feel like we’ve all changed.”

A long silence, then Khalil said, “Of course we’ve changed. Our circumstances change us every day.”

“I don’t think I’ve changed. I haven’t become more spiteful or angry with everything.”

“You think I am spiteful?”

“No,” Orlon said, burying his face in his hands. “I just think things have gotten worse, but they’ve always been that way. For hundreds of years now.”

“I understand.”

“Good.”

“You don’t think you will change?”

“I don’t know. It’s too hard to even comprehend what will happen. Obviously I’ll change. We *do* change. But I don’t think I’ll get worse.”

“Orlon,” Khalil said, now staring intently. “You are consensus. Do you understand what that means?”

“Don’t talk down to me. I am fully aware of my job. I am sick of people talking to me like that.”

“No. I am asking because of what it takes.”

“I know, I know. Death, destruction—murder and carnage, all to save this rotten system and its rotten people.”

“No.”

“Well what? What does it take?” Orlon said as he breathed out and licked his lips.

“A blood sacrifice.”

“What?”

“A day everything will change. You will have to fight for this.”

“Stop, Khal, talking like an ominous spectral being. This is what I mean about change. When did you become so paranoid?”

“Stop talking and listen to what I say.”

Orlon gulped and sat in a chair next to Khalil’s bed. Orlon scraped the chair forward, rested his arms on his legs and tilted his head up, the shade under his cheeks and sockets making him look skeletal.

Khalil moved his wrist furiously, getting the words to transcribe. “You will walk a path of bones that will hollow you out from the inside. You will be tested and punished like me.

Whether it makes a difference to the world or not, that does not matter. What matters is you pay the blood sacrifice in full and hope you have enough to survive what comes after.”

“And what comes after?” Orlon said, not skipping a beat.

“Utopia,” Khalil said.

“Daddy?” Theo said from behind.

Orlon spun around, and hugged his son who approached. “Five more minutes, just stay right by the door so I can see you.”

When Orlon turned back, Khalil was still staring, his destroyed face conveying what looked like ecstasy.

*

Orlon sat in his office, staring at the paintings and various books—some of the only books left in Earth’s history—yellow, torn, and incased in resin to preserve them. They were now boiled down to wall decoration. Theo sat on his makeshift bed, which was a mattress laid on the floor. Theo looked happy enough with his toys. Orlon wasn’t looking in his direction though. He was tapping his fingers together, grinding his teeth. He looked around with his eyes rather than moving his head, much like Khalil did most of the time.

“What do you mean?” he whispered gently.

“What?” Theo said, looking up.

“Nothing. Lights out soon, okay? We need to get some sleep. Past your bedtime.”

“Okay . . .”

Orlon went back into position. Then he looked at the photo of Falks and picked it up. He looked close, his iris scanning each face in the picture. Orlon’s mouth moved, but no words escaped. He was so close to the picture, his nostrils were fogging up the glass display. He retreated, but kept looking as the fogged glass that had enveloped Falks now cleared. His

children's faces emerged first, then Janice—Falk's partner, and then Falks himself. None of them were smiling.

9, HARK, CALLSIGN THEN RATHA

The squad of conflicters were on the transport ship, *Callsign*, going to the planet Ratha. They'd been on it for just under two months now. The sleep in stasis was undeniably short. Yet when Hark left his pod, he stretched his arms and legs and sighed.

Hark was the last awake. Stack, Gazzy and Beamer were all geared up and ready, shouting over the *Callsign's* deafening engine. They spoke of weaponry mostly, and also general abusive banter. Ratch stayed out of it, but still got some of the banter his way. Temps got most of it, joining in from time to time, not seeming phased by the comments. Hark sat alone, farther away from the other members. He unstrapped and walked toward the cockpit. Temps held his arm as he walked past. He lurched it back and glared, then said, "Sorry."

"Sit," Temps said.

Stack, Gazzy and Beamer didn't make any comments on Hark. Even on previous assignments, they never directed an insult at him. The most that would occur would be a chuckle if he was being especially antisocial. They looked now at Hark and Temps, idly chatting, as quiet as possible in the compact, noisy ship.

"What," Hark said as he sat and strapped back in. His voice remained the same volume as usual.

"Have you thought any more about what I said?" Temps shouted.

"I thought I was clear."

"Speak up!"

Hark pulled a pissed-off face and repeated what he had said, louder.

"Don't be so narrow minded."

“Stop pushing it. I told you, I’m not that boy’s carer.”

“I can hear you, you know,” Ratch interjected as he scanned his shaking tablet-projector.

“Good for you, Squeaky.”

“I told y—”

“Shut up, the men are talking. If I need something to hit, I’ll call you.”

“Hark,” Temps said.

Hark rolled his eyes. “Come on,” he said to Temps as they both unstrapped.

Ratch unstrapped too.

“You’re not coming, Squeaky. Stay put and scout the area.”

Ratch sneered at Hark and looked back down at his projector.

Hark and Temps opened the door leading to the cockpit. They stood in between the sealed door and the connecting doorway/airlock.

“Why are you so insistent on this?” Hark said. “Some end-of-life crisis? He’s not ready. And I don’t want baggage.”

“He’s like you,” Temps said. Hark stood silently, looking a little taken aback. “He’s like you when you were his age. He’s like you, Hark, and it scares me.”

“Stop talking like that.”

“It does. I’m being serious. You’re . . . We should help him. I said all I’m going to say, but let me just add that he has this in him. He’s pure—untouched by this black inky rot we have on us.”

“And why do you think him being around me will help that?”

“Because he’ll live. He won’t survive without us. He needs training and he’ll do fine. I’m only asking for one thing.”

“A big thing.”

“Hark, please,” Temps said. He looked helpless, pleading . . .

“Stop. I am not . . . I don’t want it.”

“I don’t care. It matters to me, and I’m putting this on you.”

“And I don’t care.” Hark shouldered past Temps.

“Don’t make the same mistake twice.” Temps said the words in a soft, light tone, like his very voice was treading lightly.

Hark stopped and turned. “That’s . . . exactly *why*,” he growled.

“No, if you don’t help me, it’s the same mistake.”

The two men stared, not saying a word. Hark backed away. “We’ll see,” he said.

“Is that a yes?”

Hark put his hand on the door and repeated, “We’ll see.” His voice sounded sad, unsure, and wholly unlike himself.

In the cockpit, the pilot and co-pilot were focusing on flying the *Callsign*, although there wasn’t much to see. Ahead was only the blackness of space spotted with stars. Ratha was a pinprick—a huge distance away still, so the crew and pilots would be on course for another two days. The *Callsign* was light, so it made good time. Temps and Hark chatted to the two pilots, their real titles being Third Pathfinders, in charge of getting the more important people to a location safely.

“If only I was a first,” one of them said. “I hear you get to drag around royalty. Easy job. Ever been to Ratha?”

“Sure,” Temps said, “we’ve been. Probably been . . . ten years, maybe.”

The pathfinder laughed. “It’s become even more of a cesspit. The *OPPS* will be like paradise, compared.”

“Not sure about that,” Temps said.

“Been to Ratha more times than I can count, and it gets worse each time. I guess other parts could be nice. I’ve only ever been to Zentifar, which has its good and bad parts. But the bad parts are truly awful. I have no idea what the host is doing. He doesn’t care.”

“Why?” Temps asked.

The pathfinder looked back. “Because it’s a cesspit, like I said.”

“Yes, I understand that part, but why? We’re going there for support, so why is it so bad there?”

“Think of a problem, they probably have it. Just so you’re prepared.”

“Be specific.”

The pathfinder looked back again and cleared his throat. “Well, rioting for a start. Those shanties they’ve built to accommodate the population are low. They’re getting angry. Rightly so. No food. Or the food they do get is slop. Trust me, I’ve tried it. Not like the *OPPS* gets much better, but at least you get it all in a handy package. Everything a human needs.” He laughed. “Ever seen a pack of the animals fight over some food that tastes like sawdust? No? You’re lucky.”

“Will it get violent?”

“Depends on the area. Drops at Wildrough are hit and miss. Had good and bad there. Lexifon speaks for itself. Sushanni is a no-fly zone. I’d rather spend a week in the Redact than go to Sushanni for an hour.”

“No you wouldn’t,” Hark said. “Trust me.”

“Ever been to Sushanni?” the other pathfinder said, backing up his co-pilot.

“No,” Hark said.

The pathfinder said nothing, just shook his head.

The more talkative pathfinder spoke up again. “So you two were in the Mining Ship Disaster huh? The *Gallhaddia*? Fought?”

“Yes,” Temps said.

“I don’t envy you. Tell me, all right, all those news stories were spoofs, about it being a malfunction. We can settle it. Finally. No one actually thinks it was that. We know it was the Revolt, right? The terrorists? Are we right?”

“We’re right,” the other pathfinder said, laughing.

Hark looked at them both with something like resentment.

Temps patted his shoulder and said to the pathfinders, “Sure, those projections were spoofs. That’s why we’re doing this. A lot of people died. A lot of them still on the *OPPS* missing limbs. So we’re skeptical when you say whatever that place was, is worse.”

“Maybe not. I don’t know,” the talkative pathfinder said. “What was it like? Up close with the terrorists? Did the”—The other pathfinder tapped his shoulder. “Well, I guess you’ll know what it was like. Doesn’t need dredging up again.”

“Hmm,” Temps said.

“We’re not dropping directly in,” he said, not letting silence pervade the cockpit. “Into Lexifon, you’ll be happy to hear. A huge storm’s rolling in and lasting for a week when we get there. So we’re going through Wildrough. Then transport over to Lexifon.”

“What, everyone?” Temps asked, pointing a thumb backward.

“Last-minute arrangement. Safe enough. Just don’t mingle. They won’t like you.”

“You sound like a nat,” Temps said to the chatty man.

“My skin’s too pale. That’s another thing, that weather. I mean, the storms have gotten worse. Sure, not as bad as Empiris, but still bad. I guess it’s whether you prefer rain or shine. And this is it in the process of being terraformed? I’d hate to see it seven-hundred years ago.”

“I’m sure you would,” Temps said. “We’ll head back. Keep us posted if there are any more changes, okay?”

“Sure,” the pathfinders said.

As Hark and Temps retreated back, the pathfinders spoke more about Ratha, referring to it in many negative ways. As they spoke, the huge amounts of transport ships trailed behind; they held hundreds of conflicters, all ready to offer themselves up to AVE.

*

The *Callsign* dipped low, its supporting thrusters lifting it before the ship plopped down on the sandy landing zone. Other ships entering orbit made their way down, scanning for other areas to land on.

As the *Callsign*'s engines extinguished, the fine sand grains flew in rivers of bright red all around. A crew of Ratha nats known as the Rathians approached the site, masks and headdresses with protruding goggles shielding them from the harshness. They removed the masks when all sand settled. Behind them, AVE conflicters stood watching, their suits scarred and battered; even more so than Hark and company. They had similar guns that were held loosely below their beltline. They were the older model known as the XOM3.

Hark and the rest exited the *Callsign* and approached the Rathians. They looked the complete opposite, with their black AP suits on. The Rathians looked like their suits were built with leftovers: practical but rustic.

“So you’re the tour guide?” Temps said to one of them; a sunburnt man wearing his AP suit with the helmet off.

The man crossed his head. “No. That would be Agan,” he said, pointing a thumb behind him. “He’s a nat, so he knows the way. We have more *OPPS* nats in Lexifon. Can you tell us what this is all about now?”

Temps crossed his head, walking past the man. “Afraid not. If you know, you know.”

Agan tinkered with a land vehicle, using a blowtorch on metal panels covering a coach. It was a solid-built coach with six wheels on it and the newly added armored windows. It looked

only a tad smaller than the *Callsign*. Beside the coach were rows and rows of similar coaches, all handled by single people. Opposite them were hundreds of landrunners, some operated.

Temps, Hark, Ratch, Gazzy, Stack, and Beamer walked past the Rathians and to Agan. Temps led and cleared his throat to the back of Agan.

Agan spun around and eyed the men. “So these are the conflicters? Here to meet with Ed? Well, excuse me—Host Eduardo Cofeen of Ratha.”

“That’s right. I’m First Conflicter Naro Tempess.”

“Well, Naro—”

“I preferred not doing the formalities. Just call me Temps, everyone does.”

Agan shrugged, his bleached curling hair falling across his face. “Sure. And the rest?”

“We’ll explain on the way. Daylight’s burning, as they say.”

Agan laughed. “Daylight does burn here.”

“I know,” Temps said. “Not going to ask what the meeting is for?”

“No. I assume it is important, but I am just the driver. I drive and I don’t say much. This is why I was assigned.”

“Fair enough,” Temps said. He looked back and saw a huge gathering of second conflicters. They grouped up and looked at Temps, as if they were ready to listen and learn. “Come on, let’s get. You, bring your squad with you, we can easily fit fifty or sixty in here. Hey, what’s your name again? Agan? How long’s the drive?”

“Six hours,” Agan said.

Temps nodded, and looked at the bunching conflicters as ships landed and took off. The *Callsign* was leaving too, thrusting away from the land and back out into space. It was followed by many other ships, all with a job complete in taking down the soldiers.

“Mount up! We go first!” Temps said. “Everyone else, follow the directives of AVE.” Then, fifty conflicters entered the coach.

*

Hark stood, holding onto a hand bar as the coach rattled and bumped. The rifle on his chest bounced as well, alongside all the other soldiers around him. Gazzy and Stack spoke about how hot it was and how their suits were no good at keeping them cool enough.

Beamer and Ratch stood up front, next to Temps, who were all laughing and joking. Hark watched from afar, then moved his head to the window. The metal sheeting almost hid the world outside, but Hark managed to expose his iris to the light. Outside, a massive cityscape rolled on forever. Skyscrapers and hovering vehicles darted around them. Most likely, Hark was imagining himself and his squad being in one rather than a land vehicle. Or maybe he was thinking of nothing at all.

His eyes darted around, settling on other sights. A boy was strung up by his feet in the street as a group of people stood looking up at the boy. One held a knife and took it to the boy, who couldn't have been any older than nine. He put the knife to his belly. He was gutted, then dying, then dead.

Hark moved up toward the front, balancing when the coach hit something in the road and lunged up, then lowering quickly due to the massive mass generated by the warm bodies packed into AP suits.

He reached the front of the coach and tried to sleep.

*

The coach shuddered and stopped, knocking some conflicters over, causing uproars of laughter. When the group exited, they could see the two flat tires. The rubber had been ripped. Agan swore and rounded up his men, listing off instructions. Then, without another word, they were walking.

Sharp sand was passing through the air as they went. The coach drove slowly behind them, the two burst tires flopping the rubber over noisily.

“All right!” Agan shouted so everyone could hear. “We’re going to stay put for an hour or so until the coach is operational again. Good enough for a break if anyone needs one. Wouldn’t stray too far if I were you, but there’s a market close by and the shelter here will be good enough for the storm. We’ll be moving along shortly.”

The group chattered to each other as the Rathians got to fixing the coach.

“Hark, are your legs as cramped as mine?” Temps said.

“Probably,” he replied.

Temps smiled and nodded. “No jab? Not as much AVE activity to watch over you now. You can be as disrespectful as you want.”

“I already am. Nothing’s changed.”

Ratch smiled now.

“What is it, Squeaky?” Hark said. “Something funny?”

The smile died and a scowl replaced it. “Why are you . . . Why do you have to treat me like I’ve annoyed you? What have I done?”

Hark shrugged.

“Hark,” Temps said, looking disappointed. “Can you just try to get along with Ratch? He’s one of us. You don’t treat a soldier like this.”

Hark looked away, then nodded toward Ratch. He walked away.

Temps nudged Ratch. “Go on,” the old veteran said. “Go walk with him. He doesn’t bite.”

Ratch followed Hark.

Hark walked through the streets of Wildrough. Compared to Sushanni, it was a dream. It didn’t have non-stop gang violence, serial rapists prowling the area, and astronomical levels of murder. However, there were still corpses in the streets—bone thin, sun burnt, and generally mistreated. Kids played in sandy hills and sometimes touched the dead bodies on the floor.

Some of them would even play on the body piles. The corpses in them looked diseased, but it didn't seem to bother the children. Then a person would walk by, shooing them off. Then another person would come by and pour fuel on the bodies, then flame them, turning the air black. While Sushanni seemed an evil, hostile place, Wildrough just seemed weak and sick; terminally ill and not vicious.

Ratch caught up to Hark as they went into the market. "What's your problem?" Ratch said, sounding annoyed.

"Look," Hark said.

"At what?"

"Around you."

Ratch did as he was told. He took in the surroundings of Wildrough's market. It was big, with many people in all styles of robes and burkas and headdresses. Shady dealers sold firearms and drugs. There was no one to police them. No Ratha Peacekeepers were in sight, so it could be chaos without the wider government knowing.

"What am I looking at?" Ratch said.

"What do you see?"

"I don't need a reminder of humanity's cruelty, or whatever nonsense you're going to give me a moral lesson on."

"Just look."

To their right, a man was in a ditch. He was moaning and crying as his veins pulsed. He looked sick and beyond any help on Ratha. Other Rathians were stepping around him, not glancing in his direction.

Ratch winced and said, "Okay. I see people. I see sand. I still don't see the point."

"You see people."

"I see people," Ratch said.

“Could you kill them?”

“For what reason?” Ratch shot out.

“For no reason.”

“There has to be a reason.”

Hark shrugged.

Ratch said, “What is this? Is this supposed to be the hardened-soldier routine? I know we have to kill people. That’s obvious. But we fight for a reason.”

“Sure, we fight for a reason. You’ll never know that reason though. AVE doesn’t care about your life. You will fight and die for them for no reason. Because you were told to.”

“And that’s why you fight?”

“Pretty much.”

“That’s such nonsense.”

Hark stayed quiet and let Ratch look around again.

“You think they’re animals, don’t you,” Ratch said in a hushed voice.

“Why?”

Ratch turned again, then back to the window. “Because we wouldn’t be here, getting conflicters ready. And you wouldn’t be so eager.”

“Eager?” Hark said, looking genuinely puzzled.

“Sure, eager.”

“What do you know about the mission?”

“I know it’s not going to be pretty. We’re in front of an army.”

“They’re for backup. We’re not here for war. But if we were, you wouldn’t be ready. No one ever is.”

Ratch turned; this time he looked even more frustrated. “I know, I know. War’s horrid, we’re all doomed, I’ll have to learn to be a killing machine—basically a husk. I know. What’s

the point in this? I'm already here. I'm already in this. There isn't any turning back. Is this supposed to deter me? Motivate me? What?"

"It's to put things into perspective," Hark said, his emotions seemingly absent. "If you want to be a killer, be a killer. If you want to be a coward, be one. I don't care. Temps asked me to look after you, Squeaky. If I'm doing that, then you need to be adjusted."

"Well consider me adjusted. Why would I want to follow any of your advice? I already know what you are."

Hark leaned forward. "What am I?"

"You're a murderer," he said.

Hark scowled back now.

"I need to be one too," Ratch said.

Hark leaned away now, still scowling. He didn't say anything more, just worked his jaw and looked at the people around them too.

*

Hark was alone wandering the streets as Ratch headed back to the coach.

Hark stayed back, slowing down, then turning down a shady alley. He craned his head around, watching the women by the doors. They were in ragged clothing, with open sores on their lips. Hark strolled past, intaking the attention from the prostitutes. He lingered by the door. He looked expectant, ready to answer any question or any comment. He kept watching, kept nodding his head, but kept looking over his shoulder too, down each alleyway.

"Coming in?" one of the girls said.

*

They got back to the coach after an hour. It was fixed by then and moved out without waiting another second, leaving some conflicters behind.

After another hour, the coach came to a stop outside of the Ratha HQ. Finally in Lexifon, the more than fifty conflictors exited the coach and stretched their bodies in various ways. The surrounding areas flaunted lush greenery and a gargantuan water fountain. It was a gross display of power. Yet, there were signs of untidiness, like chips in architecture, defacement on decorations, and unmaintained wilderness. Hark looked around at these details when he stepped from the coach. He took a big sniff of the air and looked up at the sun beating down. His eyes drifted across the sky.

He tapped Temps on the shoulder. “Where’s the storm? Pathfinders mentioned one, right?”

“Not sure. Maybe we missed it. Maybe it drifted off course. I’m sure the host will give us a weather forecast when we get inside. Speaking of, let’s get. I’m cooking in this suit. Let’s chat to Ed, get some lodging, and get some rest. I’m beat.”

Hark nodded, looking toward the group of conflictors gathered around the coach. Ratch, Gazzy, Beamer and Stack walked to the entrance, followed shortly by Temps.

Hark raised his voice. “Everyone else, stay put. Set a perimeter and don’t let any suspicious individuals inside. Voltan Revolters could have caught wind, so keep an eye out.” Hark then lowered his voice, speaking to himself. He said, “Security here looks non-existent.”

Agan approached Hark from behind. “He has slipped lately,” he said.

Hark turned and looked at Agan, but said nothing.

“He’s gotten comfortable if you want my opinion.”

“What makes you say that?” Hark said.

“Just how it appears. I told your friend before. Just a driver.”

“Is that your official title?”

“No,” Agan said, walking away and up the worn stairs. “But Eduardo trusts me. If he will listen to the truth being said, I would be the one to speak it. Come.”

Hark followed, and was led into the building. Many corridors dipped and crossed between the entrance leading to the hall. Hark walked in, sticking close to the walls. He stared up at the huge chandelier and the various tables and pews, all facing the host of Ratha's throne. And on that throne sat Eduardo Cofeen. His bright eyes watched from an angular face, set like malleable clay. The stubble on his cheek brushed roughly against his hand as he rested his knuckles on his face. He looked bored. Temps approached the throne, looking up at it like a lost boy staring in wonderment.

"Master," Temps said, voice echoing.

"You can call me Host Eduarda Cofeen of Ratha," he said.

Temps didn't say anything for a moment, just ground his teeth. Then he said, "I know who you are."

Eduardo looked a little impressed, a little surprised. "So you do. Agan, they had a great journey, I'm hoping?"

"They did indeed!" Agan said from the back of the hall.

"Good, good. So, First Conflicter—which one of these is your Second?"

Temps looked back at Hark, then back at Eduardo. Eduardo was looking at Hark.

"I'm guessing you weren't briefed," Temps said.

"No. We had little to no information. But I thank you for coming. What's the nature of your visit?"

"We're here to discuss the conflict with the Voltan Revolution," Temps said.

Hark craned his neck left and right and looked at the columns separating the first and second floors. Above the conflicters were other Rathians, their guns held loosely. Hark looked across at his teammates. Ratch was idling near Temps. At one moment, Hark and Ratch looked in the same direction, off to the side. Their gazes met and they both reached for their guns. Next, blinding flashes and deafening strikes. Shell casings rang over echoing booms. It took

twelve seconds for it all to be over. Ratch had half of his head missing, brain matter on Temps. Gazzy was across the room huddled in a mass. Stack and Beamer had taken the same round each. Stack first, with a fist-sized hole in his cranium, and Beamer second, with his lower jaw missing. He reached skyward for something but could never get whatever it was he searched for.

Hark coughed up blood. He felt around for his weapon and couldn't find it. He leaned up, but failed to stand. He lied back down, his chest heaving with difficult breaths. Hark's eyes closed.