

**MONICA VALENTINELLI**

# **REDWING'S GAMBIT**

**A Bulldogs Story**



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## CHAPTER ONE

“Raaaaaawwwrrr!” Marrl was furious; his soft fur bristled. The door to the security chief’s cramped quarters was open, his personal communicator was smashed, and he was hanging upside down from the ceiling. “When this trip is over, Talus, you will face me.”

But Talus, the ship’s mechanic, was nowhere to be found. In fact, no one else was close by either. Not even a single robot.

“Grrr... Dishonorable wretch...” Marrl forced himself to calm down. A couple hours ago, the Ryjyllian security chief was meditating on the floor of his quarters. His boss, an Arsubaran cyborg named Cass Leary, all but commanded him to get on his knees and pray. According to her, Marrl needed to think more and claw less. When Marrl stood his ground, the cyborg shut him up by saying: “*We only have one more day until we reach Illya, Chief Marrl. Can’t you put up with Talus for that long?*”

The burly Ryjyllian snorted at Cass and returned to his quarters. When Marrl reluctantly knelt down to regain his focus, he pictured his kills over the last ten years. The memory of so much blood and so many victories calmed his warrior’s nerves. *Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three.*

Unfortunately, he never made it to twenty-four. All the security chief could remember was a sharp pain followed by a deep blackness. Someone not only burst into his private quarters, but knocked him unconscious, too. Marrl never saw who—or what—hit him.

When he finally came to, Marrl found himself swinging upside down from the ceiling. Whoever attacked him tied him up with an e-mag grapple. To cut through the material, he required a knife—not his sharp claws. Brute force would not be sufficient to free him.

“I should never have agreed to join Redwing Securities,”

Marrl groaned and let his muscular body hang freely. Truth be told, the Ryjyllian was feeling sorry for himself. He was a fighter and a former slave, not a detective.

Or a nanny.

“Finally!” Marrl spotted a small vibrodagger lying on a nearby desk. Jerking his body back and forth, the security chief managed to shove the dagger off the desk and catch it before it fell to the floor. Marrl immediately flipped its switch. The blade hummed as he sawed it through the cable’s tough fibers. It was tedious work, but after a few minutes the wires snapped and his body fell to the hard cabin floor with a loud thud.

Wasting no time, Marrl snarled and buried the blade into a stack of reports on his desk.

“Redwing Securities will learn,” Marrl huffed, smoothing out his grey fur. “Security will be done my way, on *my* terms.”

Immediately, the chief regretted his words and added: “*When* I am free.”

Most Ryjyllians belonged to a clan, but not him. Although he was born on an icy planet, Marrl grew up in a slaver’s pit on Arsubar. The agency he worked for, Redwing Securities, bought his contract almost ten years ago. So, until he paid off his very large debt—the company owned him, body and bank account.

“GrrrrrrRRAAAWWRRRR!!!” The chief threw back his head and let out another, much louder roar. He wanted to run to the back of the ship and challenge Talus right then and there. Deep down, Marrl knew he could not. His impotence was driving him mad.

Maybe Cass was right. Maybe he should simply...think. Was that even possible?

Collapsing on his narrow bed, Marrl wondered if he had the patience to ignore Talus for another day. Space travel always gave him a headache. Unlike the rest of the crew members onboard the Haldis, Marrl’s narrow quarters were modest and its contents

sparse. The cold steel and rigid lines felt more like a prison cell than a room on a spaceship. Luckily, the *Haldis* was scheduled to land in New S'laas, the capital city of Illya, tomorrow.

Marrl sighed. Barging into the engine room without any hard evidence was not an option. He would have to answer to Cass and, no doubt, the rest of the crew. The chief knew exactly what the cyborg would say if he provoked the mechanic: “*Are you certain it was Talus who knocked you unconscious?*”

If he had to be honest with her—he wasn't positive it *was* Talus, but who else could it be?

The security chief quickly ran through the crew's roster in his mind, searching for a worthy opponent. Whoever knocked him out needed the strength to do it. Ryjyllians did not go down easy. *Especially* former slaves like Marrl.

Most days the *Haldis*'s Tetsuashan pilots, Splish and Oogle, were either confined to the cockpit or sleeping in their quarters. It would have taken several miracles for the slug-like creatures to knock him out. That left Cass, Doctor Dunn, her assistant Edna, Talus, and their new client, the green-skinned politician named Vincent Twist.

Marrl immediately ruled out Cass and the doctor. The cyborg detested crude antics and the doctor could not afford to be mean to anyone on board. To her, every crew member was a patient. The chief doubted she knew how strong his feelings were for her. Of course, why would she? Arsubarans were unlike Ryjyllians. Yes, they both had two arms and legs. They both had two eyes and ears. They both ate, slept, and bled.

That was where their similarities ended.

Ryjyllians had the face of a lion, the body of a man, and the thick fur of a winter beast. Arsubarans were less compelling to look at; some had peach skin and brown hair, but no other interesting features. Doctor Dunn's skin was colored like the earth after a thaw and her snow-white hair glittered with silver strands. She was, by far, one of the most beautiful females he had ever seen.

Marrl shook his head and set aside his feelings for the doctor. She was a distraction and one he did not need right now.

Besides Cass, Doctor Dunn, and Talus, the rest of the crew were strangers to him. Marrl did not know much about Edna Keene, the new Arsuburan medical assistant with sickly pink hair. He quickly ruled her out. She was too skinny to be a threat to him.

Vincent Twist had a reputation for causing trouble, even before he was elected Illya's planetary leader, but Marrl did not want to point a finger at the Ken Reeg unless he had to. Although Marrl despised intergalactic politics, he understood all too well that his Ryjyllian sense of honor was unique among most races. Many politicians were also excellent con artists.

That left Talus. Even though the Dolom's file was several pages thick, Marrl had never found anything incriminating. An experienced spacer, the blue-skinned mechanic lived from job to job and was well-liked by his former employers. Despite his large size and trio of eyes, Talus's tentacle-like fingers could disassemble and reassemble an entire robot faster than anyone Marrl had ever met. From what the chief could tell, the mechanic's criminal record was spotless.

Marrl sighed. This exercise in "thinking" was not helping his mood, either. What time was it, anyway?

Glancing at his digiwatch, the security chief swore under his breath. *Three-thirty*. Another reason to despise space travel: it was impossible to tell what day it was. With no suns to mark the passing hours, Marrl kept a strict schedule so he would not lose track of time.

Not today. Talus's trick forced him to miss afternoon rounds. With a high-ranking politician on board, Marrl could not afford to screw up, even if he thought their client was a moon lizard. Fearing the worst, Marrl hopped up and hit the ship's intercom to check in with their main pilot, a Tetsuashan named Splish. Talus would have to wait. How long? Marrl was not sure. He could feel his blood growing hotter. He needed to hit *something*, but what?

“Splish, are you there?” Marrl pressed a squat button by the side of his door.

As far as species went, the Tetsuashans were terrible fighters, but great pilots. Their one-eyed, slug-like bodies were either a colossal accident or a stroke of galactic brilliance. Completely sexless and covered in a slimy mucous, the single-minded creatures had a higher mission success rate than any other known alien species or robot.

“Splish. I repeat: are you there?” Splish was the older of the two pilots; Marrl had never worked with this Tetsuashan before but, like Talus, the alien had great references. If the rumors were true, Splish navigated a cruiser through the heart of the Frontier Zone with a broken engine and hardly any fuel.

“It must be time for a break.” Marrl clicked the button again. The com sputtered.

“Oogle? Are you around?”

According to the pilot's file, Redwing snatched Oogle right out of spaceflight school. If Oogle picked up, Marrl would hear a never-ending stream of happy gurgles, snorts and cackles. This time, though, he did not detect a sound. Not one giggle or even a hint of static.

“Anyone there?”

Marrl frowned. He was about to mash the transmitter one last time when he noticed something strange: a brown residue smeared all over the casing. The chief wrenched the cover off with his claws; a puff of black smoke escaped into the air. Most of the wires had been cut and the inside of it smelled like burnt rubber. He inspected the gunk. It tasted like engine grease.

“By the sons of...” Marrl swore in earnest. First, his personal communicator was smashed and now this? Redwing would, no doubt, dock his pay for the broken equipment.

The thought of going deeper into debt sent Marrl into a rage. He could feel the fur on the back of his neck bristle and his

muscles tense. “The gods damn him and his entire race!” Marrl yelled, punching the wall. His fist left a large dent. “Fight me!”

Marrl was sick of being treated like a pet, but the security chief’s hands were tied. Until Redwing Securities cleared his debt, he would not be free to seek the favor of a Ryjyllian clan or live his life on his own terms.

“One day, I swear Redwing Securities will burn,” Marrl muttered, storming out of his quarters. Furious, he picked up the pace and marched straight for his boss’s quarters. “I declare it is time to stop thinking.”

Marrl hoped Cass would listen to him and deal with the Dolom in her own way. Otherwise, he had no choice but to challenge Talus before another prank was played.

He would hate to write about that in his daily report.

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Deep within the bowels of the cruiser, a small bear-like creature crawled through a grimy pipe and dropped down through a narrow opening. He wiggled his way down, down, down until he landed on the floor of a sooty vent.

The animal bared his teeth, hunting for signs of the enemy, but could not see his prey.

Turning a corner, he came face-to-face with a cat. It nudged its cool body against him and purred.

The mechanical noise grated his ears. It wasn’t a cat, it was cat-like. A robo-cat. And it was colored a bizarre shade. Watered down red. No, *pink*. An albino cat?

“Out of my way,” the creature hissed. “You will move for Fang.”

A clicking sound. Then, a high-pitched squeal. An antenna poked out of the metallic cat’s mouth, its red tip blinked urgently.



“Move. Now.”

The small bear stepped forward, but the robo-cat would not budge.

“Stupid cat.” Fang grabbed the robo-cat’s antenna and yanked back hard. The pink robot yelped in pain, its head spun faster and faster until a thin plume of smoke escaped from its pointy ears. Crouching low, Fang swept his foot and knocked the cat on its back. Then, the creature pulled out the robo-cat’s leg and beat its rosy body with it until he was satisfied.

It was an empty victory.

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Xax hated her new job. Day in and day out, all she did was arrange tubes and label boxes. She was a researcher, not an *intern*. Grabbing a marker, Xax drew a smiley face on one of the shipping labels addressed to the main hospital in New S’laas. Doctor Dunn would be mad, but she didn’t care. Not after their last fight.

On her first day, Xax discovered that several of the ship’s medical supplies had been tampered with; the doctor passed off her findings as a packaging error. When Xax insisted she wasn’t listening to her, Doctor Dunn snatched the broken bottles out of her hands and ordered her to color-coordinate prescription labels. *Labels!*

Thousands of miles from home, first job on a spaceship, and Xax was getting paid to rearrange office supplies. It just wasn’t fair.

“Blue, twenty-one. Mentuminim Asolyate.”

To annoy her boss, she recited the contents of every label she touched out loud. Doctor Dunn never complained; she was too busy work, work, working. As far as Xax knew, everything Dunn cared about was stashed in her portable med-lab. Although they’d been working together for almost three days, the doctor never

bothered to ask her how she was adapting to her first mission or even what name she preferred to be called.

“That’s enough for now, Edna.” Xax didn’t bother to look up. She just barked commands behind the wall of crates that separated them. Was the doctor psychic? It seemed like every time she thought about her boss, the white-haired woman popped up out of nowhere.

“Edna?” Xax bit her tongue. “Do I look like a grandma?” Hot tears welled up inside of her. Why didn’t she listen to her dad? Did she really think this job would be all that great?

Fresh out of graduate school, Xax was desperate to get as far away from ISO-1 as possible and escape the moon colony life her parents wanted for her. Deep down, she knew the only reason she applied for the position was because her father warned her not to.

Devon Slaa was a low-ranking politician who practically ran Illya’s fourth moon. When she told her dad she wanted to become a lab assistant for Redwing, he said his daughter shouldn’t consort with other alien races and tore up her application. What he didn’t say, was that accepting this particular job was against *his* best interests. Imagine! The daughter of a Devon Slaa on the same, small ship as their new leader! Oh, the scandal!

After her dad called one of the managers, begging them to reject her application, she changed her name from Xax Slaa to Edna Keene and applied again. By the time her dad found out what happened, she was already on the transport to Redwing’s headquarters on Arsubar.

Xax wasn’t stupid. She knew how her father really felt about the Ken Reeg, especially after she sat down to dinner with one of his Templari friends. Ever since she could remember, he was always more worried about her mingling with other species than he was about her happiness.

Well, *almost* every alien race. Her wimpy dad wouldn’t hesitate to buy a Ryjyllian slave if she served his needs.

She sniffled. Her father was overzealous and dramatic,

but transparent. Right before she left, Xax had overheard him complaining about the new High Saldralla to her mother. For years, her dad ran ISO-1 the way he wanted to. With Vincent Twist in charge, all that could change overnight. Her parents worked hard to become the most important couple on the moon; they were not going to let go of their status that easily.

Neither Xax nor her sisters had any interest in intergalactic politics. Like her two older sisters, she wanted out. Who cared about a couple of moon colonies, anyway? All that talk of power was getting to her dad's head. He was no High Saldralla. Not like Twist.

"I told you to take a break. Okay?" Doctor Dunn didn't even bother to see if she was all right. She was cold, professional, and efficient. If Xax didn't know any better, she could have sworn her stupid boss was the cyborg on board—not Cass. "We've only got one more day before we drop these supplies off and I need you to stay sharp."

Who the hell did Doctor Dunn think she was? Her mother?

"Sure thing. Guess I'll start cleaning up."

Xax yanked open a couple of drawers and carefully put away the pens, labels and tubes piled up beside her. She prayed the rest of the trip wouldn't be as boring as her job. Sure, she could organize the lab for one more day. But a week? Or a *month*? Even Talus had no idea how long it'd take for him to fix the hyperdrive.

"Oh, drek." The lab assistant frowned. Hopefully she didn't drop any hints to her boss that their trip to Illya wasn't going to end tomorrow. From what Talus said, it sounded like they were all but stranded. The ship was falling apart from the inside!

Still, Doctor Dunn made it crystal clear what Xax was supposed to be doing. Let her figure out that the *Haldis* was a pile of junk. If they did get into a firefight or got raided by pirates, Talus and his robots would protect her.

The blue-skinned mechanic was a Dolom, the first non-Arsubaran she'd ever met. He was exactly like the pictures from

her biology textbooks. The three-armed alien was shaped like an overgrown tree; his bluish-gray skin was ribbed with hard scales and he had a thick waist. When Xax stood next to him, Talus towered over her; his massive frame was supported by a trio of round, stumpy legs. Where his nose and ears should have been? Tiny holes punctuated his skin. Even his fingers—which were more like tentacles than anything else—were exotic and new to her.

Xax knew the Dolomé were supposed to be nothing like Arsubarans, but didn't realize *how* different their races were until she met one in person. His strange appearance didn't bother her, though. So far, meeting a new friend was the best part about their trip to Illya. Even if she had to organize labels all day. At least she was getting paid for it.

“Are you on break yet, Miss Keene?”

The girl tossed her lab coat on the counter and ran over to a small sink. Her hands were covered in marker and crude drawings. Talus would kill her if he saw how dirty she was. He was very protective of his robots and would scold her if she stained Widget's smooth chassis. “Just give me a second.”

Right after they met, Talus had given her a gift—a shiny pink robo-cat she named “Widget.” Xax wanted to do something nice for him, too, but all Talus wanted was to hear about her lunar colony and her frequent trips to the dry planet beneath the desolate moon. She felt bad, because Illya's history wasn't very interesting, so she made up most of her stories. Instead of talking about the former slave trade there or the problems everyone had with the heat, she focused on the golden necropolis rumored to be buried far beneath the planet's coarse sands.

‘Course, Talus didn't know she was lying. Whenever she mentioned the word “gold,” the Dolom dropped what he was doing to pay attention to her. It was an awesome feeling. She wasn't used to being the center of attention. That was usually her dad's job.

Truth was: Xax had no idea where the gold was or if it even existed. She wanted to be honest with her new friend, but right now

she was having way too much fun with him and with Vincent. That was the biggest surprise. Her new leader loved to talk, play cards, drink, and be social. With her!

“Be back soon,” the lab assistant yelled as she finished drying her hands. Xax couldn’t wait to find out if Talus was in a good mood. Maybe then she’d finally have enough courage to tell him the truth—*before* they got stranded on an asteroid somewhere.

## CHAPTER TWO

With the exception of a small robo-cat limping down the hallway, the ship's gleaming corridors were barren. Marrl could tell its metallic pink body was dented in a few places and one of its short legs was missing. His Rjyllian eyesight allowed him to see much in the shadows.

*"Someone is having a bad day,"* the chief grumbled. *"I know the feeling."*

Marrl ignored the damaged bot and sped up. No one deserved to see him this frustrated—especially excited, impressionable recruits like Edna Keene or Oogle. With the mood he was in, Marrl would have thrown the medical assistant against a bulkhead just so she would stop smiling at him. There was no telling how Cass would react if he beat up one of the crew on a whim. By the Flame, he would rather get into a fight with Talus than piss off that cyborg.

Several housekeeping robots were parked outside Cass's door, but no one else seemed to be present in the winding corridor. Marrl kicked a floor duster out of his way and sighed. Maybe his personal situation was not as bad as he thought. All he had to do was follow Redwing's tedious rules and make sure Twist landed at the New S'laas spaceport safe and on time. They only had one day left to go. Nothing else—not even the near-constant pranks or his indentured servitude—mattered.

As far as Talus was concerned, Marrl's goal was pretty straightforward: convince Cass to let him challenge the mechanic and, undoubtedly, stop the pranks as well. If he could do that, then he would be free to focus on the new High Saldralla's safety.

*"I wish Cass was more receptive to my suggestions."* Marrl placed his hand on an iridescent plasma box. After a few seconds, the glowing device sputtered to life. *"Marrl, Unknown Clan, Ryjyllian. Chief of Security. Class A Authorization. Pulse detected. Enter."*

The door to Cass's spacious quarters slid halfway open and stopped. Shaking his head, he turned to a nearby maintenance bot and bellowed, "Attention, rust bucket. Stop rolling around. I order you to find Talus and fix this door."

Marrl was positive Talus was not going to like the way he treated his precious machines, but he did not care. The security chief pushed another robot aside, forced his way into Cass's rooms, and wrenched the door shut.

"Your recommendation did not work, Cass. I was unable to relax. You must understand how dangerous this situation is."

A mixture of vibrant colors and pungent fragrances assaulted his senses. The metal floors were covered with animal skin rugs. Sculptures, holocubes and miniature biospheres adorned every surface in the spacious room. Even the ceiling had been covered with a silvery-blue set of antique star constellations. Visiting Cass Leary's quarters was like walking into an art museum.

"Talus has gone too far this time." Marrl did not mince his words. Sure, he could have asked her how she was doing, but Cass did not have to like his manners. Redwing Securities forced them to work together. It was in his contract. "I warned you this would happen, Cass. You should allow me to challenge Talus to a fight before we land."

"Chief Marrl, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

The velvety sound of Cass's voice made him cringe. Although the cyborg was a decent employer, the strange sight of her caused his fur to stand on end. Oh, it had nothing to do with the geometric runes painted all over her body or her jet black hair and red eyes. Growing up, Marrl had catered to many exotic customers. Even though the cyborg was an Arsubaran, her appearance was extremely pleasing, even to his prudish tastes. Unfortunately, the intricate mechanisms lurking beneath Cass's fiery skin annoyed and disturbed him. They threw off his senses because she did not smell *natural*.

Marrl pictured the tangled mess of living tissue, fancy

wiring and metal alloy lurking beneath Cass's flawless exterior and made a face. He could not help himself. Then, a familiar feeling washed over him: regret.

"Well, Chief Marrl?" Cass tilted her head and smirked. "Do I need to remind you why it's not polite to stare?"

"You know why I am here, Cass." Marrl folded his arms across his broad, furry chest. He had brought his troubles to her attention before, but the cyborg did not seem to care. Hopefully, this time would be different. "It is the same reason as last time." The Ryjyllian grimaced before he continued. "Earlier today, before you instructed me to relax."

"Come, come, Chief. I'm not a telepath." The joke was not lost on him. While he preferred not to trust cyborgs and robots, Cass refused to work with psychics and insisted on thorough screenings. It was the only rule she fiercely enforced for her clients and her crew. No telepaths. No empaths and no telekinetics.

As far as Marrl was concerned, Cass's quirk was pretty tame, comparatively speaking. In the decade he worked for Redwing, he had met one professed psychic and that Ken Reeg was a terrible gambler. He did not mind the cyborg's decree. A psychic on board would make his job even more challenging than it already was, especially if she could read his thoughts of bloodlust and his deep desire to be free.

Cass snorted. "Chief Marrl, you seem distracted. Perhaps we should have this conversation another time."

For a moment, Marrl wondered how Cass would treat him if she knew he used to be a slave. Would she be as polite? Or would her demeanor turn frigid and nasty like all the others? "Respectfully, Miss Leary, I request the opportunity to challenge Talus on the field of battle," Marrl blurted. He was not sure why, but Cass made him feel embarrassed, as if he had never left Arsubar. "I know I do not have any evidence yet, but I will get what I need. Talus will not refuse my request."

The cyborg patted a silky cushion next to her settee. "Take



a seat, Marrl. Explain to me why you feel compelled to harass our only mechanic. You read his file, didn't you?"

"Yes, I read it. Before we boarded." Marrl stood in front of her, transfixed by her spicy perfume. A twinge of jealousy caused his chest to seize up. There was no way he would ever be able to afford scented oils. Not in this lifetime.

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear, Chief Marrl." Cass's voice oozed confidence and charm. Two more traits Marrl did not have. He was dying to fight, to run, to regain his honor. "I suggest you should sit down and calm yourself. Or..."

Marrl knelt down in front of her on a patterned rug. He was not about to succumb to her wiles. Over the past ten years, he had heard rumors about how Cass Leary got her way. Were they true? Rumors she fabricated? To a warrior, the creation of a living legend had its uses. "Or what?"

"Leave," the cyborg suggested, winking at him. "You've obviously forgotten what you came here to talk to me about, and I'm sure you have better things to do." Even her pearly teeth were straight and uniform. Did she have them fixed, too?

"I did not come here to play games. All I want is permission to ask Talus—"

"Permission denied." Her words hit him hard; Marrl felt like he had just been thrown out of an airlock with no gear. "Now let me ask you a question, Chief Marrl. Are you incapable of doing your job?"

"What? No! I—" Marrl faltered. He had worked with Cass before on other missions. She was not normally this insensitive. Either the cyborg was fed up with his near-constant complaints, or she was trying to tell him something. More tricks, more politics. Marrl wished she was more direct with him. Like Doctor Dunn.

After a moment, the security chief replied: "I am not sure I deserved that blunt of a reply."

“Oh, I’m quite certain you did,” Cass said with a gleam in her eye. “What’s the matter, Marrl? Don’t you have a sense of humor?”

Lowering his voice to a soft whisper, he said: “This is not just about me. Is it?”

The cyborg glared at him. She did not need to chastise him for his stupidity. The disapproving look in her crimson eyes said it all: *If you can’t act like our chief of security, Marrl, maybe I should show you how.*

Marrl bowed his head in shame. Even though he had been working with Redwing Securities for a decade, he was no closer to earning his freedom. He was not a Chief of Security, he was a moving pile of muscle and claws and fur. No brain to speak of, just a broken heart. Obviously, there was something else happening on board, some other issue his mind could not grasp. But what?

The corners of Cass’s lips curled into a sensuous smile. “Do you remember when we stayed at that quaint lunar resort? I thought we’d have a terrible time, because our hotel room was falling apart. Then we found the beach. Its amber crystals glittered like hard diamonds, but the sand was so soft and fine we fell asleep under the stars.”

Marrl sucked in his breath. “By the Flame, I forgot all about that.”

The cyborg tossed her ebony hair over her bare shoulders and smiled. “I still can’t forgive you for not allowing me to capture the moment in my holocube, you know.”

They never took a vacation together. The story was a pretty fiction. The lunar resort did not exist. If anyone else was eavesdropping, they would have a difficult time understanding what they were talking about. The reference had another meaning: Cass Leary was in danger. The fabrication was her idea. She came up with it right before they left Arsubar.

“Miss Leary, remind me again. Did we wake up before or after planetrise?” *Did the trouble start before or after we picked up Twist?*

“Planetrise? I thought we witnessed a rare eclipse, but I could be wrong.” *Not sure. Could be before, could be after.*

“I cannot remember the specifics either. Can you describe the sky? To jog my memory?” *You have any more details to share?*

Cass cocked her head and frowned. Marrl attempted a small smile; the cyborg was an excellent actress. “Well, I can still picture the sky in my mind. A tangerine halo encircled the planet’s ruby silhouette, lighting up the sky. You know, like how my skin color deepens when I’m angry. Gets more intense?”

Marrl nodded solemnly. He had only seen her skin change colors once, right after she ordered the execution of a hitchhiker who double-crossed her. Like other Arsubarans from her backwater colony, Cass’s body was hard-wired to express strong emotions in a physical way. It was one of the traits she retained after her surgeries, and the only biological characteristic she shared with their ship’s medical chief, Doctor Violet Dunn. Where Cass’s skin was normally red, however, the doctor’s was an earthy brown. When Doctor Dunn was upset, her skin turned black and her eyes glowed like the heart of a star.

“Yes, *that* red.” Cass glanced over her shoulder and shooed away a spindly robot. “Like a tall glass of your favorite Arsubaran ale.”

Not good. If he was reading her correctly, Cass was hinting the situation was worse than he suspected. Perhaps she was not acting paranoid. It was possible something else was happening, something far uglier than a series of taunts and mean laughter. Marrl remained silent and pretended to admire the objects in her room. It was clear from the way Cass was acting that she believed her room was bugged. Were her fears and his attack connected somehow? Perhaps that was why she wanted him to leave Talus alone for the time being.

While stroking a velvety plant, he said: “It would be nice to take a vacation.” Marrl assumed her life was threatened, but he needed more to go on. Even he could not challenge every crew

member on board. “That was a long time ago, was it not?”

Cass nodded and abruptly changed the subject. “You know, I think I figured out why you’ve been so uncomfortable on this trip. If I had to guess, our diet isn’t agreeing with you, either. All that tasteless protein has given me a nasty stomachache and I’ve run out of painkillers. My head is pounding.”

Marrl detected a faint hint of desperation in her voice. Was Cass more vulnerable than she appeared to be? After several missions together, he expected her to take control of the ship, not sit in her quarters and dope herself up with chemicals.

“Can cyborgs still feel pain?” It was an honest question.

An odd look crossed Cass’s angular features. Marrl could tell he hurt her feelings. Embarrassed, he asked: “Is there something I can do? To help?”

Regardless of what he felt about her condition, Cass Leary was still his immediate supervisor. Marrl could never allow his personal feelings to get in the way of his job. Not when it mattered. She was one of his crew and her safety—cyborg or not—was his responsibility. His freedom and his honor depended on her.

“*Perhaps,*” Marrl thought, “*I should tell her who I really am.*”

Cass leaned forward and studied his face. Their conversation was unusual, forced, and uncomfortable. Marrl just wanted it to end.

“I suppose you could do me a favor, Marrl. Do you think you could head down to Medical and grab something for my stomachache?” The cyborg’s red fingers trailed lazily over the pleats of her dark dress. Marrl feigned interest, more for her benefit than for his. Even though Cass appeared to be completely rested, the sharp undercurrent in her voice told him otherwise. “I’m afraid unless I do something about it, I’ll have to miss dining with our honorable guest.”

The security chief knew he deserved to be cast aside and treated like a common errand boy, but her hesitation worried him.

There was no telling what Cass would do if she thought she could not trust him. Marrl had been involved with Redwing Securities for a long time, but that did not change the reality of his situation. No one would weep for his death. He was—in a word—expendable.

“Consider it done.” Marrl uncrossed his legs and stood up. The sooner her aches and pains went away, the better he would feel. Maybe then he could calm the cyborg down long enough to sweep her quarters, double-check her communication devices, and reveal what he owed to Redwing. He had managed to keep his secret for this long; it might feel good to tell someone he knew the bitter truth. “Nice holograms,” he said, pointing to her collection of black-and-white photographs. The pictures highlighted the strength and beauty of several races; Ryjyllian, Saldrallan, Arsubaran, Ken Reeg, and Dolom.

The cyborg flashed him a toothy grin. “Thank you, Chief Marrl. Perhaps we can enjoy them together sometime.”

Marrl saw Doctor Dunn in his mind’s eye, and wondered if she would stoop to such a base act. One of these days, he was going to have to learn how to keep his feelings in check. “I will return shortly.”

Frustrated, Marrl quickly tested Cass’s intercom on his way out and headed for the medical wing to grab her medicine. Both of his communicators might be out of commission, but hers was working just fine. That told him the wires had to have been cut when he was knocked out. What he did not know? Was *why*.

The security chief’s mind reeled with questions he could not answer. It would be easy to bug his tiny quarters, but hers? Such an act would take time and preparation. As far as Marrl knew, he was the only crew member who had authorization to enter her quarters unannounced.

Although he was still embarrassed by their odd conversation, Marrl ignored his feelings and reviewed the facts. It was a challenging exercise that led him to a frightening conclusion: Talus was not playing constant pranks on *him*: he was targeting the

chief of security. Was his mind that weak? Why did he not think of that before?

Worse, Cass was so nervous she would not let Marrl confront the mechanic alone. Cass Leary's reputation preceded her. Marrl knew the cyborg could talk her way out of any situation—even if her negotiations cost her dearly. If his boss felt threatened, the entire crew might in be trouble.

Serious trouble.

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By the time Xax walked past the main engines, Talus had already set up a small table and chairs for their afternoon round of K'laans. This time, though, the cards weren't on the table. The Dolom was hunched over a set of tangled wires and gears. Xax could tell he was working on something important; an array of tools was strewn all over the floor.

"Widget had an accident." Talus's fingers slaked around the robo-cat's smooth stomach and slowly turned it on its side. "She's beat up pretty bad."

"How'd she get hurt?" Xax pouted, feeling sorry for her mechanical pet. "Last time I saw her she was in my quarters."

Talus shrugged his massive shoulders. "Don't know, but I'll take care of her."

"What? No game?" Vincent Twist strolled into the engine room carrying a small keg of beer. The Ken Reeg was wearing a pin-striped suit with a black velvet collar and a pair of knee-high boots. He reeked of aftershave.

Xax wondered what would happen if her dad ever met Vincent face-to-face. He'd probably hate him, just because he was a better dresser than he was. Never mind her sister.

"Don't worry, we're playin'. I need more cash, Vinnie." Talus

peered at a crack in Widget's frame. "Xax and I are going to take a tour of New S'laas when we land on Illya."

"Wanna bet?" Vincent sneered, clearing a spot at the table. "Until you get the hyperdrive fixed, there's no telling how many days left we've got on this bird, Talus. You can't win every game."

"I'm not worried," Talus winked at Xax. "I'm friends with the judge."

For the past couple of afternoons, the three of them met to swap stories and have a little fun. It was Talus's responsibility to play host, Vincent's to bring the drinks, and hers to make sure no one was cheating.

K'laans was a card game designed for serious gamblers. Xax wasn't very good at it; she spent most of her time watching Vincent and Talus arguing over the rules. The game was played in a series of five rounds; whoever scored the highest point spread at the end of the game won. Players constructed the best hand by guessing what their opponent had in theirs. Not only did Talus have to guess what suits and numbers Vincent had, her friend also had to defend his own cards, too.

Talus once told her K'laans was the only game he could win. Vincent referred to it as "the con of the century."

Xax, on the other hand, wasn't sure what she thought. It was funny to watch the two of them bribe each other, but there were a few tense moments that made her squirm. The last time they played, Talus growled at Vincent for several minutes before he made a move. His long, snaky fingers wrapped so tightly around his cards he wound up crushing them. For a second, Xax thought Talus was going to pummel Vincent clear across the room and she didn't understand why. When she asked him about it later that night, Talus said they got into an argument and told her not to worry about it.

"You want to play, doll?" Vincent patted his bony knee. "Ask the right questions and I'll let you win."

"Maybe next time," she winked at him playfully. "I like to watch."

Even though Xax wanted the green-skinned Ken Reeg to take an interest in her, she couldn't imagine what it'd be like to be in a real relationship with him. Vincent could never sit still for more than five minutes at a time. Full of energy, he was even skinnier than she was. Every time he moved she thought a rib was going to poke right out of his clothes.

Admittedly, Vincent Twist's position was the most attractive thing about him. In less than a week, Vincent Twist would be crowned the new High Saldralla of the desert planet Illya. Translation? The guy she'd been having beers with was her *leader*. She still could not get over that little victory. Her friends back home would be so jealous! All six of Illya's moons—ISO-1 included—were under his jurisdiction. A fact her dad wanted to forget.

By Xax's logic, if she could get the politician to fall for her, then she had an excuse to cancel the wedding her parents planned for her. She'd do just about anything to avoid marrying a complete stranger like her mother did—even if that meant Xax had to pretend to like someone else. Vincent Twist was okay so far, but she didn't think the Ken Reeg was harmless. The politician fascinated her because he didn't seem the planet-ruling type. No way! Vincent was up to something. She was sure of it.

Just like her father.

"So what's up?" Talus asked her as he cut the deck. "Doc treating you any better?"

Xax let out a dramatic sigh and flopped down on a dingy chair. "You wouldn't believe the day I'm having. I came in early to talk to her, and she shooed me out. Said I was too distracting."

Vinnie shot her a cold stare. "Doll, you have any idea what she's working on? It's nothing dangerous, is it?"

"No, no!" Xax threw her head back and laughed. "The supplies in the lab got mixed up and she's trying to identify what medicine belongs to what shipment. I'm whiny because I thought this trip would be more exciting. That's all."

Talus snorted. "Yeah, well this ain't no pleasure barge. Mr.



High Saldralla over here is our little celebrity. Hasn't even been sworn in yet and the rumors are flying."

"Up yours, Talus. Could you let it go?" Vinnie squinted at the cards in Talus's hand.

"Let what go?" she challenged. What was so bad about a little gossip? She could use some drama in her life.

"Forget I said anything." Talus lowered his head and quickly changed the subject. "Let's see, the highest r'uuk you have is a twelve. So I'm discarding anything lower than a four."

"A spread of eight? That's the best you got?"

Xax rolled her eyes. When the two of them got together, it was like watching an episode of *Galactic Gambling*. Once they got going, the only thing that mattered was the game. "You know, you're both wrong. I shouldn't even be down here. I'm just a stupid lab assistant. Isn't that right, Talus?"

"Huh, least you're not dried up like that lame security guy we got." Talus's fingertips caressed the back of his cards. "Showed him, though. Didn't I?"

"Do tell!" Vincent blew her a kiss. "You know how Xax loves your stories."

"Yeah, whatever." Xax wondered what else they weren't telling her. Well, that and if she could ever kiss an older guy with dark green skin and glossy black hair who smelled like the inside of a merchant ship.

Then again, Talus was probably asking himself why he was friends with a candy-haired girl whose parents hated aliens.

Vincent Twist was convenient. Xax guessed he was using her just as much as she was using him. Talus, on the other hand, was complicated. She prayed the Dolom didn't have a thing for her. Her parents would be furious if they suspected she was intermixing. She'd love to send her dad a picture, though, just to piss him off. They did make a colorful trio: her pale skin and pink hair, Vinnie's forest-green complexion, and Talus's bluish-gray scales. It'd be even

better if she could get a group shot of the whole crew. Then she'd really look like she was in the middle of a science experiment.

"Wait, just a second." Xax put a hand on Talus's thick forearm. "I got an idea. Let's tell each other a secret. Something we can't tell anyone else. To prove we're friends."

"Does yours have anything to do with gold?" Talus sat up in his chair, all three of his saucer-shaped eyes fixated on her. The color of his retinas was so vivid Xax imagined she was looking up at a clear, blue sky. "You'll tell me where that temple is, right?"

"Ah, no," she laughed nervously. "I promise my secret will be a good one, though. Why don't you go first?"

"I'm not sure I wanna tell you what happened to Marrl. Might cause trouble."

Vincent chuckled. "Oh, I have to hear this."

Talus blinked and put his cards face down on the table. Turning to Xax, he said: "So, I was on my way back from the cockpit when I heard something, see?"

The Ken Reeg frowned. "Hyperdrive's still not working?"

"Nope, and don't ask me why, neither. Part's missing. Cass told me to do the best I can with the tools I got and give her an update before dinner. Don't you dare say nothin'. She wanted to keep it between me and her," Talus scolded him, shaking his arms. "Anyways, I was walking up to the cockpit when I saw an open door. Poked my head into see what was going on. Marrl was sitting on the floor with his legs crossed and his eyes closed. I waved, but he didn't notice so I gave him a hard tap on the head. He hit the ground and bounced. Didn't mean to knock him out, but he was gone. Eyes rolled back in his head and everything."

Xax couldn't believe her ears. "Oh my gods, what did you do then?" She was laughing so hard she almost fell out of her chair.

Talus grinned, his smile reached from ear hole to ear hole. "I told him what I really thought of him. I called him a walking pile of skinned dogs."

“That’s it?” Vinnie asked, shuffling the discard pile. “You just stepped on the Chief of Security?”

“Hey now, what choice did I have?” Talus sat back in his chair. It creaked loudly. “Not only do those lion-headed Ryjyllians have thick hides underneath all that fur, they’re also much better at fighting than most Dolomé.”

“I’d probably start running. I can sprint pretty fast when I want to,” Xax chimed in cheerfully. “So what’d you do next?”

All three of Talus’s eyes closed and opened at the same time. “I wanted to wake him up, but then I remembered that Ryjyllian code of honor bullshit. He wouldn’t arrest me. Marr’d just force me to fight until I surrendered.”

“What’s so bad about that?” Vinnie asked. A disapproving scowl crossed his face. Xax cringed. The Ken Reeg could be downright creepy sometimes. “Big-boned mechanic like you? I bet you could hold your scales in a brawl.”

Xax scoffed and tossed her hair back. “Even I know the answer to that one. Doesn’t matter what culture has one, a code of honor is always open to interpretation. Besides, I’m guessing Redwing would take the chief of security’s word over his.”

Talus ignored both of them and continued: “Well, here’s the best part. I made sure no one was watching, but before I left, I fastened this rig to his ankle...”

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Fang scurried through another dusty vent. Its destination? The painful sound of raucous laughter. The closer it got to the noise, the stronger its feelings became—a mixture of white-hot rage and curiosity.

A low voice bellowed. Talus. The furry creature knew the bulky, many-armed alien was good with robots. Not so good with

keeping secrets.

*“...then I spit on his fur and told him to blow it out his hairy aft! Too bad Marrl didn’t hear me, knocked out like he was.”*

Joke. Did Talus the mechanic have time to make fun? Fang shook its head in disgust. He had no right to laugh. Mistress was unhappy the hyperdrive was broken. Talus should fix it, not waste time playing games.

*“So Xax, I’ve made some improvements to Widget. See here? She’ll use that new piece of equipment to defend herself. So, don’t kick her or anything like that, okay?”*

Unfortunately, the bluish-gray alien only had eyes for a young girl he called “Xax.” Her deception was far more appealing than Talus’s. She carried a thousand lies, or so it seemed. Edna Keene wasn’t her true name.

*“Arranged? I had no idea you Arsubaran types were so primitive. I wouldn’t wanna marry anyone I never met, especially a politician.”*

“Duly noted,” Fang whispered. Most days, he used his small size to his advantage. He learned many secrets by keeping low to the ground.

*“No kidding, doll. That should be up to you.”*

But what of the dark green man? The creature observed everything he could about the skinny visitor. He had dirty hair, dry skin, and an oily demeanor. Green man had a problem with his hands, too. He could not keep them to himself. Currently, they were placed on the girl’s shoulders—where they were not supposed to be. Girl seemed happy.

Girl was an idiot. First time in space? Picked a vile race to mate with.

Ken Reeg. High Saldralla or no, Vincent Twist was bred from swindlers, con artists and thieves. An irredeemable race, they were a pale shadow of the Arsubarans they barely resembled.

*“Okay, Vincent. Your turn!”*

*“Sorry doll, not gonna happen. Hate to disappoint, but I don’t have any secrets I can talk about. That’s politics, baby.”*

*“Aw! No fair! I told you mine.”*

*“You could tell her about the mining equipment. She—”*

*“Shut up, Talus. Let’s play some K’laans.”*

Mining equipment? To dig for what? And where? Fang peered through the slots in the vent and waited. After he had heard enough of spilled secrets and laughter, it turned to leave, but couldn’t. Its path was blocked by a white, faceted thing lying on the floor of the vent: a mechanical cluster of eyes. What was it searching for? Programs and spare parts were no match for brains. Someone had to tell it what to do.

“My Mistress will hear of you,” Fang whispered to the multi-eyed robot. “She will know what to do.”

## CHAPTER THREE

On her way back to the lab, Xax dropped by the observation deck to catch a glimpse of the stars. Something strange was going on, she was sure of it. Talus and Vincent were acting weird around her. Mining equipment? And what about her boss? Why wouldn't Doctor Dunn believe her when she told her the medical supplies had been tampered with? The doctor's arrogance she could almost understand. Talus, on the other hand...well, Xax hoped his plans didn't have anything to do with her stories. It would totally suck if her friend was planning on mining for gold that didn't exist.

Xax sighed and peered out the window. Other than the occasional asteroid, the view was pretty dark.

Brushing her fingers along the curved windowsill, Xax remembered the first time she saw the ship. With the exception of its black, pointed nose, the medium-sized cruiser was polished like a mirror. Dazzled by the ship's shiny surface, Xax almost missed the tall, thin letters painted on its side. *Haldis*. She knew from her studies the name belonged to a primordial goddess of power. Right then and there, Xax felt she was destined to board that ship, sail through the stars, and escape her shitty life.

To her, the *Haldis* was more than a spaceship. It was Xax's first job off-moon. Every hour she spent away from ISO-1 brought her a sense of freedom: from her family and the fiancé she had never met. Although she moved out a while ago, her parents still expected her to follow their rules. No space travel. No adventure. No fun.

Xax wondered what her dad was going to say to her when she landed. Her family never welcomed non-Arsubarans to their home; they were secret supporters of the Templari Empire and its religious ideology. The Devalkamanchans were a lot less tolerant of other species than their Saldrallan counterparts. She wasn't sure why her father was so engrossed in Templar rhetoric, but his prejudices were difficult to deal with.

Even before Xax graduated, he put a lot of pressure on her to take an interest in local politics. All three of her older sisters were spacers. One of them married an ex-con, the other had been murdered, and the last one was a tour guide on a romantic cruise ship. No wonder her dad was reluctant to let his youngest daughter go.

Xax realized her impending marriage was probably his way of keeping his daughter safe, but the idea of bonding with a husband she'd never met was suffocating and cruel.

"Edna Keene to Medical Bay," Doctor Dunn's voice intoned over the intercom. "I repeat. Edna Keene, return immediately to Medical Bay."

"Guess I'm late." Xax slid down off her seat and walked over to the com. She was about to patch herself into Medical, when she spotted a bright flash of light out of the corner of her eye. It was coming from a nearby holo-grid.

Xax walked over to the stout pedestal, confused. The holo-grid was supposed to display an interactive map of the ship and a few constellations. Not this time. Strange, yellow glyphs swirled across the screen, bouncing into one another. Xax couldn't decipher what the letters meant; they weren't from any alien language she recognized.

The medical assistant leaned in to take a closer look. A round menu spiraled into the sunny foreground. The words "Press Here" blinked urgently. Curious, Xax touched the field and waited. The pulsing symbols danced into place, forming a new message. One she did understand.

*"Stay away from Twist."*

"What the drek?" Xax wiped her sleeve over the holo-grid. "Talus? Is that you?"

*"Or die."*

She frowned and took a step back. Something didn't seem right. Why contact her? Was this someone's idea of a joke?

As the words dissolved into the background, another set of vibrant letters took their place.

*“Tell no one.”*

Wasting no time, Xax’s fingers flew across the display. If she accessed the right menu, she might be able to take a screen shot of the message. By the time she had a lock on it, the warning had already vanished.

“Damn! I almost had it.”

“Had what?” An unfamiliar voice asked. It was rough, forced, and very masculine. “I believe Doctor Dunn is waiting for you. It would be best if you returned to Medical.”

Xax spun around. The security chief—Marrl—was scowling at her. For a split second, her mind went blank. All she could think about was Talus stepping on his furry head.

She tried not to giggle. “Nothing, I just lost track of time.” Talus would help her out. Not him.

“Are you attending tonight’s dinner, Edna?” Marrl asked as she stepped out of the room.

Maybe it couldn’t hurt to be friendly with the security chief. “Edna is my given name, but everyone else calls me Xax,” She smiled, following close behind. “And, definitely! I hear we’re having real food this time.”

“Anything is better than raw protein,” Marrl grumbled. Xax tried to picture what he’d look like with a smile on his cranky cat face. “I will see you later. I am obligated to bring Cass her medicine.” He held up a couple of vials then stomped off. Of all the aliens on board, the security chief was the strangest one. He had the face of a lion, the body of a hairy, old Arsubaran, and the almond-shaped eyes of her pet cat, Widget.

What was Marrl talking about, anyway? Cass? On drugs? That was news to her and she was the lab assistant. Why didn’t Doctor Dunn ask her to send Cass what she needed? “No problem,” she shouted after him.



As soon as Xax got back to the lab, she dove into a pile of messy labels and started alphabetizing them. Putting the supplies in order helped her focus, and there was a lot to think about: tampered medical supplies, broken hyperdrive, smashed robo-cat, private prescriptions, and anonymous warnings.

If there was a killer on board, Xax didn't want to be anywhere close to it, him or her. "*Tell no one*," the message said. Why? What was so bad about Vincent? She guessed it was a message to scare her off. It had to be. Talus would know.

One thing was clear: Xax was done pretending to be a dutiful, meek assistant. It was time to show everyone else what she was really made of.

It was time to figure out what the drek was going on.

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Marrl quickly dropped off Cass's medicine and headed for the cockpit. He may be forced to leave Talus alone, but that did not mean the rest of the crew was off-limits. If the cyborg questioned his judgment, he would tell her the truth: he simply wanted to ask Oogle if the pilot's com was still working. Safety checks were still on his list of responsibilities, were they not?

The only problem was, Marrl's com was more than broken: it had been sabotaged. The security chief did not have any idea who cut the wires, but he was convinced Talus was to blame. After all, the Dolom had been friendly with everyone *but* him and insisted he work alone. Even if he asked Talus to help him figure out who disabled his com, there was no guarantee he would give Marrl the right information.

*"If I was going to cause trouble, I would definitely take out the pilot's com, too,"* Marrl thought as the door slid open, responding to his security clearance. *"Let us see if theirs has been tampered with, too."*

Similar to other ships in its class, the *Haldis*'s cockpit was built as an orb designed to give pilots easy access to adjust their flight plan and monitor the ship's ops. There were two chairs facing the controls, but only one of them was occupied.

"Splish? Oogle? Are you around?" Marrl did not like to interrupt the Tetsuashans. He had worked with a couple of them before, and found most of them preferred short conversations to long, drawn-out diatribes—especially when their tentacles were wrapped around the controls. Like Talus, the security chief relied heavily on their expertise. Too heavily.

"Ssssssplissssh not here."

Tetsuashans were boneless, moist, and gray. Even though many people referred to each creature as a "him" or a "her" in casual conversation, the aliens were asexual beings with a large, single eye and tentacles instead of arms and legs.

Over the years, Marrl picked up that the only way to tell one Tetsuashan from another was to scrutinize its eye. As their bodies aged, the blood in their saucer-shaped iris faded to reveal a new color. The pattern and color of a Tetsuashan's eye was unique as a fingerprint. In his travels, Marrl had spotted gleaming sapphires, sparkling rubies, spotless diamonds and glittering emeralds. Splish's eye had no trace of blood. Since it had already turned a brilliant shade of teal, Marrl knew the pilot was not very young. Oogle, on the other hand, was younger than his co-pilot. His eye was just starting to turn green. By a Tetsuashan's standards, Oogle was just a teenager.

"Don't jusssst ssssstand there. Come in. I have sssssomething to tell you."

Marrl wandered further into the cockpit and sat down. Redwing forced him to go through flight school, but the security chief knew he did not have the discipline pilots required to fly a ship in deep space. Something about sitting in a tiny room for days on end made him feel claustrophobic. Short runs, dog fighting. That better suited him.

"I still do not understand how you keep track of these measurements," Marrl admitted, admiring the curved display. Dozens of touch-sensitive lights stretched out in all directions, each one unique and crucial to the control of the ship. An overlay on the front window illuminated foreign objects like asteroids, other ships and nearby moons, helping the pilots see what their naked eye could not.

"Not my ssssship," Oogle said, pressing another button. Marrl wondered what it would be like to have six, boneless fingers. Sometimes he could not deal with the five claws he had. "Too many broken piecesssss."

"Like what?" Marrl asked, hoping Oogle was in a chatty mood. "How about your communication device? Is that working?"

"No, it'ssssss not." Oogle never took his bloodshot eye off the controls. Marrl tried to lean in over him, to decipher the various indicator lights, but the pilot would not budge. Even if he could figure out what they meant, the words and symbols were not written in any language he understood. "Com'ssss the leasssst of your worriesssss."

"Care to elaborate?"

"Hyperdrive'ssssss down." Oogle pressed a few more buttons. "Fuel leaksssss. No esssssscape podsssssss. Ventsssssss clogged. Communication sssssspotty."

Marrl cocked his head. He thought he heard something banging around earlier, but he had quickly forgotten about it. A ship like the *Haldis* was bound to creak and groan. "How much time do we have?"

"We'll be fine." Oogle slowly turned to him. His eye swiveled from the top of Marrl's head down to his toes. For a moment, the chief thought he could see the veins in his eye pulse with excitement. The mental image disgusted him. "Mussssssst wait."

"How can you..." His voice trailed off into a hushed whisper. If Cass thought her quarters were bugged, maybe the cockpit was, too. "How can you say that? Wait? Wait for what?"

“Watch thisssssss.” Oogle pressed a button and a series of bright, sunny glyphs tumbled across the screen, displaying an ominous warning about a killer on board.

“That is not what I wanted to see,” Marrl grunted and sat down in the other chair. “What do you believe? Is this threat to be taken seriously?”

“Out here, no one to ressssscue ussss.” Oogle pointed to his forehead. “Be ssssssmart. Think firsssst.”

Marrl chuckled. “It sounds as if you have talked to Cass. If not, the two of you would get along well.”

“Wait.” Oogle fingertips slithered over a virtual keyboard. “Watch the messssssage again.”

A small field popped in front of Marrl. A series of symbols oscillated back and forth until they created another message. It read: *Found a bug this morning. Someone might be listening.*

By the Flame! Lowering his voice, Marrl glared at the pilot. Oogle may be a rookie, but they were some rules he had to follow without question. “Why wait? Why did you not come to me? I could have provided assistance.” To Marrl, listening devices were worse than psychics. There was no way to tell who was on the other end of the microphone.

Oogle sputtered. Marrl suspected that was his attempt at laughter. “You were upssssside down.”

A part of him wondered why he even bothered to ask. With Cass—and now Oogle—keeping facts from him, he could not build a strong case against Talus. The more he learned, the more he wanted to talk to the Dolom.

“Does Splish know about all this?”

“Yesssssssss.” Oogle turned toward the console and pressed a button. The words vanished. “He’ssssss the one who disabled it.”

Marrl’s spirits lifted. “Well that is something at least,” he said with a smile. “Where is he now?”

“Ssssssssleeeppping.”

“Tell him to see me when he wakes up.” Marrl patted the back of the alien’s chair. “I would like to hear what happened. For my report.”

“Ssssssure thing. I’ll tell him.”

“Good, I hope you will join us for dinner,” Marrl said, getting up from his chair. His first real meal was less than an hour away. That did not leave him much time to plan. He could not corner Talus without Cass’s permission, but there was something else he could do: confront him over a beer.

“Why are you so calm?” Marrl asked the pilot as he got up to leave. Perhaps the Tetsuashan could teach him something useful. “For someone who is flying a piece of junk, you seem at peace.”

“I know ssssssomething you don’t.”

“And what would that be?”

Oogle gurgled loudly. “Asssss long asss I’m around, you won’t die.”

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“Meow?” Widget rubbed up against Xax’s bare leg. The robo-cat’s body was silky-smooth but cold.

“Go away, I’m already late.” Hopping around her quarters, Xax pulled on a black dress and brushed her hair out. As soon as her other bootstrap was fastened, she admired herself in the mirror one last time and ran out the door.

By the time she reached the mess hall, a servo-bot was already handing out drinks.

“I’m glad you could join us, Miss Keene.” Xax envied Cass’s polished appearance. Dressed in a pale formal, her black hair was

swept up off her long, crimson neck. To complement the soft cut of her dress, the cyborg wore an asymmetrical necklace carved out of a single gemstone. In short, Cass's outfit was absolutely amazing compared to hers. The only weird thing about her appearance was that the cyborg's skin color was a lot darker for some reason. "Our honored guest will be arriving shortly."

"Please don't use that name," she said sheepishly, looking for a place to sit down. There were only three seats left at the table. Besides Vincent, one of the other pilots wasn't there, either. "It's Xax."

Cass straightened. Her skin was almost black. "Really? Is that what they're calling brides-to-be back on ISO-1? Xax Slaa?"

Uh-oh. Xax glanced at Talus for support, but her friend stared down at his plate and squirmed. The others ignored her and focused all their attention on Cass. Xax opened her mouth to say something but she stopped mid-syllable. How did the cyborg find out the truth?

Doctor Dunn coughed politely, reminding her that Cass was waiting for her answer.

"Um, everything looks really nice. Good job." Xax swallowed her fear and pretended to admire the cyborg's work. She didn't have to try very hard. The mess hall was normally as utilitarian as the rest of the ship, but Cass managed to turn the modest room into a work of art. Large, woven hangings covered the white walls; their iridescent patterns added a soft, luminous touch. It was the kind of thing her mom would do, to ensure that their guests were comfortable.

"Miss Slaa, do you think a compliment is an appropriate response to a serious question?"

Xax shuffled her feet. "Am I in trouble?"

The cyborg gestured to an empty place setting. The circular table was so low to the ground, there was no room for chairs. "Please, grab a cushion and have a seat."

Shaking her head, Xax picked out an ornate pillow and sat down next to Talus. The Dolom grabbed her hand and squeezed it tight. She was screwed. “Well? If you’re going to boot me off this tin can, you should probably do it soon. Though you should know this wedding wasn’t my idea. Never even met the groom.”

Cass chuckled, her laughter sounded forced. “Marrrl, doesn’t she remind you of someone?”

“Not now, Cass.” The security chief was wearing a neatly pressed uniform with Redwing’s company logo emblazoned on the lapel. Xax thought he resembled a badly stuffed doll because his fur was sticking out everywhere. “Just get to the point this time.”

“I agree with Marrrl,” Doctor Dunn replied, folding her hands in her lap. She was so elegant in her navy blue suit and pearls, Xax almost didn’t recognize her. “I’m sure Xax will want to hear what you have to say.”

“Very well.” All the warmth drained from Cass’s voice, leaving behind a hard, icy edge. “Unlike everyone else at this table, you have not yet proved your worth to me, Xax Slaa. I fear, however, I must offer you a choice.”

A shiver crawled up Xax’s spine. She’d seen pictures of the guy her dad picked out for her. The politician was even creepier and older than Vincent was. Worse, he wasn’t even an Arsubaran—he was a Templari. That meant nothing to her, of course, but everything to her father and his political goals. Of all the guys in the universe, and her dad had to pick a crusty alien who’d set him up for life. Xax knew her fiancé was important. Her dad wouldn’t bow down to him otherwise. The thing was: no one was going to force her to marry a guy she didn’t love. No one.

“I’m not sure why you find the tablecloth so fascinating, but I suggest you show me some respect,” the cyborg bit back.

Talus elbowed her side. “Look up.”

“Sorry,” she moped, lifting her head. The last thing she wanted was to wind up like her mom. She’d much rather be stuck in a lab counting labels than imprisoned in a marriage of convenience.

“With our hyperdrive down, our trip has been delayed by several weeks. Since we’re too far out of range to contact headquarters, Splish has sent out an emergency beacon and has locked in a new course. We will be landing at a small space station in a few days. Once there, I’ll try to boost our signal and inform Redwing Securities of our situation.”

Marrl snorted.

“What does all that have to do with me?” Xax wondered aloud.

“Your first option is fairly straightforward. You may enjoy the remainder of this trip as a guest provided you follow a few guidelines. After we safely transport Mr. Twist home, we would then head back to ISO-1 and drop you off at your family’s estate.”

Yeah, no way was Xax going to let that happen. If they took her straight home, she’d hop on the next transport she saw. “I understand, Miss Leary. What’s the second choice?”

Cass toyed with the centerpiece. Xax recognized the subtlety of her actions; several home worlds were represented in the design. A flower here, a ribbon there. Combined, the symbols represented an entire galaxy of planets. “Your other option would be to become my student. Doctor Dunn would let you keep your position. In your spare time, I would mentor you, so you can deal with your problems more effectively.”

Xax’s jaw dropped. She would kill to be more like Cass. “What’s the catch?”

“You would have considerably less freedom on board than you do now, of course. But, your employment would be more valuable to Redwing Securities, enough that I may be able to postpone or cancel your wedding.”

Although the cyborg’s offer sounded great, Xax wasn’t sure she wanted to put herself in another situation where yet another, more experienced blah, blah, blah was making up the rules. “I’m sorry, Miss Leary, but I need to think about this.”



Cass smoothed out the folds of her dress. "I'll give you a few days to decide. Though, I must caution you, I may rescind my offer if more unpleasant details come to light. Understand?"

Xax gulped. For all her beauty, Cass Leary could be really intimidating. "I understand."

Leaning across the table, Cass gave her a second warning. "That includes Mr. Twist, Xax. I will not jeopardize my crew or this ship because you have an itch."

"No, no, no!" Xax protested, throwing her hands up in the air. "It's not like that. You see..."

But she never had the chance to finish her sentence. By the time she thought up an excuse, Cass had already changed the subject. Outplayed and outmaneuvered, Xax sullenly played with her table settings and ignored everyone else.

"Now, shall we proceed with dinner?"

"Well, that's just great. FAN-tastic." Xax didn't want to be rude, but she really didn't feel like talking or eating or anything else until she found out who betrayed her. A part of her wanted to crawl back to her quarters and cry. "I want to know. Who was it? How did you—"

Xax never got the chance to finish her question.

"There's my doll!" Vincent beamed, grinning from ear to ear.

When Vincent Twist entered the room, the rest of the crew dropped what they were doing and stared at him. Xax wished she had that kind of power. Dressed in full ceremonial gear, Twist carried a long vibrosword by his side. She recognized his outfit immediately. His oversized robes reflected the office of High Saldralla; his metal collar was a sign of respect for the Union of the Saldralla and his father's proclaimed "enemy" faction.

"We're pleased you could make it," Cass said, standing up to greet him. "On behalf of Redwing Securi—"

“Save it.” Vincent bumped Cass out of the way and winked at Xax. Before she had a chance to react, he ripped the tablecloth off, slid across the smooth surface, and kissed Xax hard on the mouth.

Someone gasped, breaking the silence. Vincent threw his head back and let out a high-pitched hah, hah, hah. “See, doll? That’s how we welcome friends on my home planet. You can forget about that Saldrallan everybody-gets-a-fair-shot crap now that I’m in charge.”

Xax’s head was spinning. That was the first time she’d ever been kissed by an alien.

Cass was furious. Her ruby red eyes and pearly teeth stood out in sharp contrast to her black skin and blotchy lips. “*Missster Twist.*”

“Oh, Leary. Call me *Honorable*. Please.” Vinnie shot back. Although Xax was scared to death, Vinnie never took his emerald green eyes off of her. If he didn’t back off, Cass would send her home for sure. “After all, I am your client.”

Someone—Talus or Doctor Dunn maybe?—coughed nervously. They were waiting for her to react. Xax had to do something, but what?

Closing her eyes, she avoided Vincent’s intense gaze. As much as she liked the attention, Cass made it clear the politician was off-limits. “*Honorable High Saldralla...*” Her voice quivered. “Would you like to sit down?”

She could feel his hot breath on her face. It smelled sweet, like candied fruit. “Sure, doll. Be happy to.” Twist slid right next to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

Xax wanted to die. Fortunately for her, Cass never lost her cool. “Shall we join the *Honorable High Saldralla*? Talus, I suspect your chef has prepared us a delightful meal.”

“Uh, yeah. Sure thing, boss.” Talus cleared his throat. “You want to eat, then?”

“Almost, I’m waiting for one more guest. If you could please

take your seats.” Cass clapped her hands. Another squat robot holding a full tray rolled into the room. “Drinks anyone?”

Talus pounded two of his fists on the messy table. “I’ll take a glass for each hand. Hers, too.” He pointed to Xax.

“So, Leary. Who’s navigating this busted boat if Splish and Oogle are joining us for dinner?” The corners of Vincent’s mouth curled into a disapproving frown. “I sure wouldn’t leave this heap of junk on auto-pilot.”

“Splish and Oogle preferred to remain at the helm, but they assure me the auto-pilot is functioning just fine. Though, I might question how you know so much since you weren’t here for my announcement.”

Vincent slammed his drink and grabbed another one. “Yeah,” he quipped. “It’s a regular mystery. Isn’t it?”

What did she see in this guy, anyway? Did she really think she could handle him? The politician wasn’t just slimy—he was acting like a complete jerk. Worse, Vincent embarrassed her in front of everybody else. Doctor Dunn and that security guy kept exchanging weird looks with each other. Talus was staring at his plate. No doubt they were trying to figure out what to do with her.

Xax swallowed. She didn’t need a couple of days to figure out what she wanted to do. She had better take Cass up on her offer now, in front of Vincent, before her life got any worse. They still had a long way to go and Xax didn’t want to spend the rest of the trip moping, isolated from her friends. She’d have nothing to do except play with Widget or write in her diary all day. “Miss Leary, about what you said—”

*Clink. Clink. Clink.*

Cass smiled at her. “Ah, here comes our final guest now.”

*Clink. Clink. Clink.*

A tiny bear, no more than three feet high, strutted into the mess hall like he owned it. The little guy—or girl—would have been really cute, if it weren’t for the nasty scowl plastered on its tiny,

round face. It wore a pair of khakis, steel-toed boots, and several explosives strapped to its furry chest.

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Leary. You brought a toy?” Vincent sneered. “What’s it going to do? Cuddle me to death?”

Xax wanted to hit Twist. Hard. Where it counted. That was a crappy thing to say to Cass. Earlier, Twist seemed so charming. Sure, he was a little odd, but no man was perfect. Now?

Turning her head, Xax watched her would-be mentor’s reaction. If Cass was annoyed, it didn’t show on her face. Xax admired that about the cyborg. The others didn’t look happy at all—*especially* Marrl.

“Cass, please tell me I have just lost my mind.” The security chief emptied his glass before he continued. “That is an Urseminite, correct? I am not hallucinating?”

The bear twitched its stubby ears. “Name’s Fang. Mistress asked me to come. Be polite, lion cub.”

Mistress, huh? Xax wondered what that was all about. At least Fang was a nice distraction. Maybe everyone would forget about her, her marriage, and Twist for an hour or two. “Let’s eat!” Xax said enthusiastically.

“A fine idea,” Doctor Dunn chimed in. “Hopefully, that’s the extent of this evening’s entertainment?”

Cass opened her hands. “I have no more surprises. Do you, Mister Twist?”

“Nah, ‘course not.” Twist wrapped another arm around Xax’s shoulders. Good thing she was sitting on the floor, or she would have fallen out of her chair. The others seemed sympathetic, but she wasn’t sure who they were more worried about: Fang, him, or her. “I’m going to enjoy watching you pick up after me, though. You’d make a great pleasure slave, Leary.”

“You know what? I think I lost my appetite.” Xax mumbled, peeling off Twist’s arms. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to head back to my quarters and lie down for a bit.”

“I hope you feel better.” Cass sounded like she won a small victory. “See you tomorrow morning.”

Xax stood up, whispered something into Talus’s earhole, and waited for an answer.

“No, I wouldn’t do somethin’ like that. That’s the kind of message you don’t screw around with. Why do you want to know?”

“Never mind.” Frustrated, she left the mess hall without any dinner. Suddenly, the lab assistant felt very small and alone. Maybe her dad was right. Maybe she should have stayed home.

“Do you want us to save you a plate?” She heard Doctor Dunn call after her.

Xax didn’t bother to reply.

## CHAPTER FOUR

After the crew ate and drank their fill, Fang followed Mistress back to her quarters and waited for her orders.

*“Keep an eye on the girl.”*

Fang argued with Mistress. Girl was stupid. Girl was young. Girl deserved to be taught a lesson.

Girl was not the problem. Robots were.

Mistress told him Fang was too suspicious, but girl wasn't just another new employee. She was important to her people and needed protection from the green man.

On this, Fang agreed with her. Green man also stupid, but green man have no fear. Make him good enemy, the kind Fang want to face in a forest of thorns. Pull his teeth for souvenir.

Fang understood what crew did not. Obvious green man was planning surprise. Maybe others know, others outside this ship. Maybe that's why robots act so strangely. Maybe someone paying Talus to sabotage the ship.

Maybe green man is paying Talus.

He wanted to find out why green man so dangerous. A fire burned inside of him, urging him to torture the Dolom, to take off one of his finger-tentacles and hear his confession.

Later.

Fang bowed and left Mistress to her dreams. She proved her worth, long ago. She almost died to preserve his life. The metal under her red skin was there because of him. One day, he would make it up to her. One day, he would give his life for hers, and the debt would be repaid.

For now? He had a girl to protect.

Fang sniffed the stale air outside Cass's quarters. The only scent he picked up was a complex fusion of musky perfume and

bitter wine. After poking his head around the corner to make sure no one was watching, he quickly rolled across the hall, and crawled toward a small vent.

A pair of almond-shaped eyes—infused with a burning intelligence—stared back at him through the slats.

Not good.

Annoyed, Fang yanked off the vent cover and faced his foe. The enemy glaring at him wasn't made of flesh, it was metal. Shaped like a pet, he recognized the robot. It was the same one he beat up before.

“Talus fixed you?”

Fang pulled out a small gun and turned a knob. Mistress told him not to shoot if others were watching. Didn't say anything about hurting robots. He peered in front of him, but it was hard to see. The shaft was dusty, dark.

The robo-cat howled and lit up like a beacon. Its broad mouth opened. Weapon inside? Tricky. Fang fired his gun at robo-cat; it rolled out of the way, dodging a crackling blast of electricity. *Missed.* He grunted. The Urseminite fired again, aiming a little lower.

This time, he hit it. Right in robo-cat's eye. Robot fell to floor of vent, twitching. Never had a chance to shoot back.

He snickered. Fang hated cats. Robots more. He stumbled over to his prize and yanked out a pink eye. Then, he rolled the cat over and read its name. Widget.

Girl's cat? Not good.

No time to waste. Fang scurried through the vents, twisting and turning until he got to girl's room. Luckily, she was sleeping, safe. Robot probably malfunctioned.

Tired, Fang sat down and closed his eyes. Images of the hunt—his body covered with blood and guts and gore—took over his mind. They were strong memories, the kind he wished he could

relive. It had been a long time since he hunted prey in a forest. Fang remembered gutting a tall deer from hoof to nose; the time he shoved a pole through the belly of a silvery fish. Animals roared as sunlight pierced through the trees, coaxing him deeper into the world of dreams.

Several hours later, Fang woke up in a puddle of drool. Realizing he fell asleep, the creature slid his body over to the vent to make sure the girl was okay.

This time, there was no robot to get in his way.

This time, there was no girl.

After he popped the vent cover off, Fang crawled through and scratched his head. Girl's room was torn apart. Clothes everywhere, but no girl. Was Widget protecting her?

Worse. Was she dead girl? Fang sniffed the air. He detected a pungent scent. Like poison.

Mistress would be furious if the girl was missing. Fang scanned room for sign of intruders. There were none. Only locks of long, pink hair.

Jumping up on her bed, a few drops of blood confirmed what the Urseminite already knew.

The girl was gone. And she was hurt.

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Hard skin, cold shell. Black egg. Smooth, but rough. Deep, but narrow. Throbbing. Pulsing. Humming with life.

“Like a cocoon.” Xax’s words escaped her mind before she said them out loud. Suspended in mid-air, she floated weightlessly for hours. The feeling exhilarated her, it scared her, it worried her. She wasn’t hungry. She wasn’t thirsty, either. She just *was*. “Or a tomb.”



Her words echoed on and on and on until they slammed into the bottom of a deep chasm. Xax heard a deafening thud, then the angry roar of a galloping beast. Panicked, her arms flailed against the inky blackness, but she did not move an inch. Stuck in the void with no way to defend herself, Xax sobbed until her sides ached. Her sorrowful cries were a beacon for the fierce monster. Its thunderous footsteps echoed in her mind, growing louder and louder until the beast reached her trapped body.

“Please. No!”

The beast pounced on Xax’s chest, flattening her against the cold, hard air. Squeezing her eyes shut, she tried wishing the monster away, but it wouldn’t budge. She could feel its hot breath on her neck, its saliva dripping from its sharp, ivory fangs.

Her face wet, she begged the beast to stop. “What do you want?” Xax gasped. “Tell me. I’ll give you anything. Just let me go, please...”

“Watch,” the beast instructed. Its voice sounded like a broken trumpet. “Look at me.”

Xax forced her head to the side. “No, I can’t. Please.”

“Look.” The beast commanded her. It nuzzled her head, gently moving it back to the center. “See me.”

Opening her eyes, she peered into the face of the terrible beast and howled. Two waxy pairs of eyes glared back at her. Bloodless, the bleached eyes were set in the bruised forehead of a swollen face. Even without any pupils, they analyzed every pore, every blemish. They didn’t just see her, the four eyes saw through her, all the way down to her bones.

Although she wasn’t convinced the beast was friendly, she struck up a conversation with it, hoping it would free her. “Who are you?”

“Why do you not recognize me?” The beast spit on her face. “Child, I am your bridegroom.”

“No, that’s not possible. I—”

Something oily wormed its way through her system. It locked her arms and legs together until she couldn't move. Paralyzed, she watched in horror as the beast grazed her bare skin with his teeth.

"This is my price, child." The beast held up a section of her skin, showing her it had bitten off her tattoos. "It is time for you to grow up and accept your birthright."

Xax wanted to scream, to run, to beg for mercy, but her mouth was wired shut. Completely numb, the only tangible feelings she had left were the anxious beating of her heart and the warmth of a single tear running down her face.

The beast tilted its head back and swallowed a patch of her skin. Bending over, it bared its fangs and chomped down on her flesh, gnawing deeper and deeper until it reached her organs. When its fangs pierced her stomach lining, tiny pinpricks of red light burst from her belly, escaping into the inky blackness.

Suddenly, a barrage of cheerful images flooded into her mind, enveloping her with warmth and love. The parade of memories shielded her sanity from the horrors of the beast.

*A rock concert.*

*Walking down the palace steps.*

*Hovercraft lessons.*

*Her first kiss.*

The last image Xax saw in her mind before she fell unconscious was a comforting one.

*Her family's home on ISO-1.*

Quiet, inviting. Safe.

## CHAPTER FIVE

After last night's disaster, Marrl had consumed large quantities of Arsubaran ale, recited his true feelings for the Doctor, and staggered back to his quarters. The Ryjyllian was so intoxicated he fell face-first on his bed and had not moved since.

The potent ale clung to his system like the stingers from a blooming *wyrslyssia*, a poisonous-yet-hardy flower native to his snow-covered homeworld. Like Cass and Violet, he was not from Arsubar. While Marrl had few memories of Ryjyl, he recalled his birth planet was a wintry place, one he desperately wanted to see again.

Homesickness faded as Marrl succumbed to his exhaustion. The security chief barely noticed his blaring holoclock and the insufferable pounding on his door.

"It's Cass. I'm coming in."

Marrl snarled, rolled over, and accidentally smacked his knee against the wall. His head felt swollen, like it had been beaten with large rocks. Whatever it was, Cass could wait. Did he really sing to Doctor Dunn about a ritual mating? Worse, he never got the chance to talk to Talus. The big mechanic was too busy whining about how his young friend was treated and what the girl thought of him.

"Chief Marrl! Did you hear me?"

His stomach threatened to empty its contents and his muscles ached. Maybe after the room stopped spinning, maybe then he would pay attention.

Cass, on the other hand, would not stop pestering him. "Marrl, what is wrong with you? Get out of bed right now."

"Not unless the ship is on fire." Marrl pulled his pillow over his head, hoping she would take a hint.

"Have it your way."

Burrowing into the corner, the Ryjyllian fell into a vivid dream.

*He was standing on top of an icy mountain, the leader of a Ryjyllian clan on its way to battle. A scout gave the signal. All clear. They could not see the enemy, but they marched down the mountainside anyway, through bushy trees, fresh snow, and biting winds. Suddenly, their clan was surrounded. Slimy piles of rotting plants, giant animals with curvy teeth, and frozen pools of blood littered the slope. Marrl bellowed and rushed to attack the mindless beasts, expecting his clan to follow suit. His fist connected with a large jaw. His claws easily tore through the animal as if it was all fat and no bone or muscle. It did not bleed, either. Puzzled, he turned to ask his clanmate if he knew what the creature was, but there was no one there at his side. Every last member of his clan had vanished.*

*Marrl turned his ear to the wind and heard the sound of rushing water. Did the rest of his clan drown?*

*It was his responsibility, as clan leader, to find out what happened. He would not turn back. Mounting one of the beasts, Marrl rode down the mountain to meet his fate. He would defeat the enemy, he would win the day with honor, he would—*

—be splashed with freezing water. “By the Flame, you metal piece of...” Marrl tore the covers off and jumped out of bed. As soon as he saw Cass’s face, he immediately regretted the insult. “Cass...”

Dark blotches erupted all over her skin, marring her cheerful red complexion. The cyborg was angry and she had every right to be. It seemed he was good at making a fool of himself. “Save it and grab your gear,” Cass said, throwing him a towel. “If you want to continue working with me in the future, I will pay you to take a month of sensitivity training. Right now, we have bigger problems.”

“Such as?” The cyborg had dumped a lot of water on him. It managed to sink into his skin and drip from his fur. The towel would not be enough to return his appearance to normal. Marrl would feel very relieved once they landed on Illya and he was able to request another crew, one less confusing and straightforward.

Cass tilted her head. A quizzical expression crossed her face. The Arsubaran was dressed oddly and did not look like his boss, not when she wore shorter pants and a square of material across her chest. At least her belly was not exposed. He wasn't sure why her appearance bothered him so much. Too casual, perhaps? "Is it safe to talk here?"

"I am sorry, Cass, but I have to assume this entire ship is compromised. Though, I am not going to hide or challenge the others. Last night did not go well," he added, though he was certain she did not need a reminder.

"You may be more right than you know. That's part of the reason why I've been taking nanites, though they haven't been working the way they're supposed to."

Was Cass trying to put him out of a job? Nanites were typically used to enhance psychic abilities like mental telepathy or empathy. They were also highly illegal. No wonder she was paranoid about psychics. Technically, she was one.

"I heard that."

"I am not sure I care." Marrl threw the towel in the corner and dug through his closet to find a weapon. He wondered what else Cass knew. Was she aware of his past? "Is there anything else I do not know about? Maybe you have asked Talus to fake the mechanical problems. Is there an extra hyperdrive lying around? Or did you instruct him to cause me grief?"

Cass straightened his crumpled blankets and sat down on the edge of his narrow bed. She was frowning. "If you recall, Chief Marrl, you report to me. I don't *have* to tell you everything."

"Like what?" Marrl did not want to admit it, but now he was not sure Cass was worthy of his trust. To shield his thoughts from her, he pictured the most annoying thing he could possibly think of. Him. With a tie. As *her* boss.

The cyborg wagged her finger at him. "Tsk, ts. If you were in my position, would you tell *me* everything?"

“Only if it related to security. I am not sure that you have said all that is necessary to perform my duties.”

“Chief Marrl, do you really think I would threaten the safety of this ship or its crew?”

“Fine. Let me rearrange my words to be clearer. The unscheduled stop on our route does not sound like a good idea, Cass,” he replied carefully. “We might be headed straight for an ambush. I question any location in the middle of our isolated route. Also, I am more than curious why you prevent me from addressing Talus. So, I will ask you again. Is there something you need to tell me?”

Cass was blunt: “I hope you’re not accusing me of being a traitor in your reports.”

“I am not. I am all too familiar with what Redwing wants to hear.”

Right now, Redwing Securities would be furious if they read his daily reports. This was the reason why Marrl had to find time to edit certain details. Over the years, he had learned his lesson. The security chief had two sets of reports; one for them and one for him.

His version was more complete.

The cyborg raised an eyebrow. “What would you do if you were in my position?”

“I would be more aggressive.” Marrl ran a jagged comb through his fur and grabbed a few tablets for his headache. Normally, he would not infest his body with chemicals, but his job was more important than his pride.

“Do you know how to fly a ship? Fix an engine?”

Marrl shook his head. “Not well enough.”

“Then, give me another suggestion or stop questioning my orders. Talus is crucial to the success of this mission. Not only can he fix the *Haldis*, he knows his way around a cockpit, too.”

His mind worked quickly. “Check with Oogle or Splish and

pick multiple destinations. There has to be another space station or a fuel platform that is within flying distance. Then, I would not tell anyone—including me—where we were headed until it was absolutely necessary. Control the information as much as possible and you will ensure our safety. It is as you said. Not everyone needs to know every detail.”

The cyborg closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The splotches on her face faded completely, her ruby red complexion returned to its normal, bright hue. “Landing at a pre-approved destination in this circumstance will make life easier on all of us. Especially you, Marrl.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“One of the options was a slaver’s outpost. When Splish told me I...” Cass’s voice trailed off into silence.

“So you know then.” What else could he say?

Bowing her head, Cass replied sadly, “Yes, I know.”

“Sometimes, I think life was easier when I was a slave. I knew what was expected of me. If I did not act correctly, I would get beaten.” Marrl did not know why he was confiding in Cass, but it felt...necessary. If he did not desire freedom so badly, he would cancel his contract with Redwing Securities right then and there. “If you feel we should, I would not be opposed to landing in a new location. If Talus is to blame, his guilt would be revealed soon after we docked.”

“Marrl, the only reason why I would even consider heading for that outpost, is because you may be right about Talus.” Cass slouched forward and massaged her temples. “Xax is missing.”

The security chief shook his head. “That is impossible. The *Haldis* is not that large. I suspect she is probably hiding because she feels ashamed. From what I saw last night, the girl did not want to start anything with our client. She is young and confused.”

“I’m not here to argue with you, Marrl. I’m telling you, the girl *is* gone and you have to find her. Fang found blood in her room.

She's been hurt—”

“By the Flame! I *knew* this was going to happen,” Marrl said as he checked his vibroblade's power levels. Just in case. “Nanites? Whispers? Rumors? Let us face the facts. Subtlety is not working anymore. You should let me do my job.”

“Did you hear what I said? I can't lock up our only mechanic. Not out here, not where we're vulnerable to pirates and the stars knows what else. Can you imagine what damage Talus would do to the ship if he knew you were coming for him?” The cyborg raised her head and stared at the ceiling. Marrl understood why she could not face him. Her skin turned pitch black. She was angry, but not with him. “The situation is more complex than you realize. I have reason to believe Twist and Talus are working together. They might even be spying on us both. Maybe Violet, too.”

“I should go. I will find the girl.”

“Wait, please! Wait!” Cass gestured wildly. Her anxiety was starting to get on his nerves. If the cyborg could not compose herself, how could she expect him to do the same? “We should work together on this, Marrl. I don't want to argue with you anymore. I need your help.”

“I...” Marrl stiffened. She was right. They did need to join forces. He had been so focused on his problems with Talus, he forgot to bond with the rest of the crew. “I realize I have complained a lot about him, but I will swear on my honor that the Dolom would not resort to kidnapping. We should acquire his assistance in this matter.”

“Are you sure? Xax is so young. She doesn't have any idea how to judge someone's character let alone fend off an attacker.” Fresh tears streamed down Cass's face. Lowering her head, she sobbed and gave into her emotions. It was a weakness he understood all too well. Though, the security chief did not cry. Ever.

Marrl did not think the three-eyed mechanic would dare to hurt the girl. From what he heard after Xax left, it was obvious the Dolom had a soft spot for the people he cared about. Marrl regretted



that they were not friendly with each other. If Talus trusted him, then perhaps Xax would not have been attacked. “My instincts tell me Talus is trying to protect the girl.”

“Why kidnap her, though?” Cass sniffled. “To get back at her father? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Her disappearance forces me to wonder what Twist is up to,” Marrl said, scratching his chin. “Or perhaps you are right. Maybe he wants to upset her family. Does that sound like something a politician would do? What would he gain?”

“I’m not sure I want to think about that.” Marrl handed the cyborg a towel. He did not have any tissues. Cass patted her face before she continued. “Right now I think we should concentrate on finding Xax. Alive.”

“I agree, but your advice is sound. Perhaps I spoke out of anger. We should proceed with caution, work alone or in small teams, and search for a ransom note. I do not want to turn this ship upside down unless it is absolutely necessary.”

“Why’s that? We don’t have anything left to lose if we scour the ship. Just grab Fang, Violet, and one of the pil—”

Marrl lifted his hand up to silence her. The security chief did not want to be rude, but he needed Cass to pay attention to his words. “Right now, I must assume Xax Slaa is a valuable, living hostage. I do not want to return to ISO-1 with a corpse.”

“If I had my old crew, none of this would’ve happened.” Cass cradled her head in her hands. The security chief was not used to seeing her come unglued. Maybe Marrl’s senses had been fooled. Maybe the metal in her brain did not affect her. Maybe, beneath all that cutting-edge technology, she was a scared woman just trying to do her job.

“Something puzzles me, Cass. Do you not have a high completion rate on your missions?”

The cyborg nodded. “Yes, my percentages are solid.”

“What is different about this mission? From the others?”

Cass tilted her head. “Well, this is the first time I didn’t get to pick my staff. Redwing said the mission was time-sensitive so everything was arranged beforehand. Sure, it’s a skeleton crew, but they promised me that Talus’s robots were more economical than hiring on more personnel.”

“How can you not take this fiasco personally?” Marrl wandered over to his sink to clean up more thoroughly. No time to brush through all of his fur, but at least he could polish his teeth. The Ryjyllian cleansing routine calmed his nerves. “Perhaps Redwing intentionally put us together because they hoped we would fail.”

“Redwing isn’t that devious. If they wanted to fire us, they would have already,” she said, tightening her ponytail. “You’re still thinking like a security chief. Put yourself in management’s position. They only get paid when and *if* we deliver Twist safely to Illya. Still, I did catch a strange detail when I read Xax’s thoughts. Her father is afraid of Twist.”

Marrl gargled and spit into the sink. “I am not sure I follow you.”

“What if Xax’s father hired Redwing to make sure we didn’t make it to Illya, and Twist found out about it?”

“What does Xax’s father have against him?”

Cass smirked. “Let’s just say I picked up on a few things at dinner last night.”

“That would explain why Twist does not trust us.” Marrl bit down on a protein bar. His stomach grumbled. “Do you believe he has held her hostage?”

“Maybe, but if anyone knew the answer to that question, it’d be Twist,” the cyborg explained as she unclipped a two-way radio and a headset from her belt. “Before you start searching the ship, I’d like you to check out Xax’s quarters. You’ll need this.”

“Thank you,” Marrl said as he adjusted the unit. He had to bend the headset to fit his head.

“Fang’s already there, waiting for you.”

“Fang? You are joking, correct?” A three foot tall teddy bear was not the partner Marrl imagined watching his back.

“Do you have a problem with Urseminites? Believe it or not, you two have a lot in common.” Cass sounded annoyed. “Fang and I have a history together, so please don’t be a jerk to him. He may sound mean, but he’s honest. He will never, ever stick a gun in your back. If he shoots you, you’ll see the bullet coming.”

“Fine,” Marrl growled, quickly masking his thoughts. He almost forgot she could read his mind. “I will obey your wishes, Cass.”

“Then it’s settled. You and Fang will finish sweeping Xax’s quarters and inspect the ship. In the meantime, I’ll check in with Violet. She was able to retrieve some hair and blood samples from Xax’s quarters. After you’re done, meet us there.”

“I don’t know if...” Marrl shifted uncomfortably. He could not remember how Doctor Dunn reacted to his drunken confession.

“Grow up, Marrl. Violet’s a big girl. Let’s find Xax first and worry about your duet some other day.”

“Duet?” he whispered. Cass was probably mistaken. The security chief was certain the doctor did not join him in song. Marrl turned the volume down on the communicator and strapped a single gun to his belt. He did not require many weapons; his built-in claws were an asset Redwing could not ignore. “What about our client?”

“For now, we have to leave Twist alone. Let’s explore all our options before we run around accusing the new High Saldralla of kidnapping and sabotage,” the cyborg ordered. “Though, I suggest you include our conversation in your report. There’ll be a full scale investigation when we land, and I don’t want to give Redwing any room to fire us. Just leave out anything that sounds incriminating and focus on the facts.”

“I cannot argue with you there.” Marrl did not want to worry her, but he suspected someone would die by the end of the trip. Talus was big, even for a Dolom. The mechanic may not have kidnapped

Xax, but he was guilty of other crimes. Marrl was certain of it. If he panicked? Then weaker members of the crew would get hurt. Like Cass, Fang, or the doctor. “I hope you have put your nanites to good use, Cass. If I cannot find Xax, then I assume you will.”

“About that—”

“No, do not tell me.” Marrl cut her off again. “You do not have any left?”

Cass twirled her ponytail. Yet another sign the cyborg was stressed out beyond belief. “Not out. Missing. Someone has cleaned out the Medical Bay. They took ten vials, which is enough to read our thoughts for two or three days depending on the species.”

“Psychic enhancements are illegal.”

The cyborg winked at him before she continued. “Remember, the nanites work differently depending upon who has taken them and whose mind is being read. In order for me to read someone’s thoughts, I have to make eye contact.”

“What about my broken coms or my pranks? Have you learned anything?”

“No, but I’m not surprised. Violet and I are still trying to figure out how the nanites work. No matter how many I have in my system, they don’t work on Talus, Splish, Oogle or Fang.”

“But you can read my thoughts.” It was more of a statement than a protest.

“Yes, but I’m not sure why that is. I don’t know if the reverse is true, so be careful.”

“I am not worried about mind-readers,” he shrugged. “I have no more secrets.”

“You don’t, but everyone else on this ship does.”

“Good for them, Cass Leary,” Marrl muttered under his breath as they left his quarters. “Good for them.”

**CHAPTER SIX**

Floating in an empty sea.

*Snap.*

Drop anchor.

*Twinge.*

Hurt.

Bob.

Weave.

Wake up.

"I'm alive." Xax whispered the words, more for her benefit than anyone else's. Every pore in her body burned. She wanted to cry, but couldn't. Her body was still frozen stiff. "Just breathe."

"Hey, doll."

A familiar voice. It was not the one she expected.

"Thank the gods you're here. My insides, they feel all scrambled. This monster. You don't want to know what he did to me. He ate part of my..."

"Shhh," Twist whispered softly. "Don't want to wake him up now, do we?"

"Where are you?" Xax squinted but couldn't pinpoint his location. There were no stars, no lights, no discernable landmarks. "I can't see anything. Am I blind? Did the monster eat my eyes? Oh gods..."

"Doll, don't worry. I got everything under control."

She could hear Twist's voice, but she still couldn't see him. Was she losing it? One second he was standing right next to her, calming her down. The next he sounded as if he was far, far away, talking inside her mind.

“Are you a telepath?”

Twist chuckled. “No, doll. I’m not psychic.”

“I don’t know what’s so funny. You’re not the one trapped in this coffin.” Xax was getting impatient. “Can’t you help me escape?”

More laughter. A loud, high-pitched giggle burst in her ear. “*Help* you?” Twist said. “Why would I want to do that? I trapped you in here. With me.”

“No...” Xax gasped. “That’s not possible.”

“Look, doll. You think you know me, but you don’t. We flirted for an hour and you were ready to jump me. You have no idea who I am or what I’m capable of.”

Xax wasn’t going to let Twist talk to her that way. She wasn’t some girl, some toy to be played with. She was no victim, either. What did he want with her, anyway? He never met her before. Did he know her fiancé?

“I don’t care, Twist. You’re an asshole. First trip out in space, and you took advantage of me. I won’t let that happen again.”

Twist hissed in her ear. His breath was so rancid, her skin rotted when he touched it. “Yeah? Well, I don’t think you’ve got much of a choice, doll. Sides, I’m not interested in taking advantage of you.”

At that point, Xax figured she had two options left. Give up or fight back. She couldn’t hit him, but she could piss him off. “Right. Well, Vinnie? I don’t have to listen. Especially since you’re too much of a wuss to talk to me face-to-face.”

Seconds passed. The silence scared her.

Finally, Twist said: “I’ve captured tougher broads than you, but you’ve got a lot of fire. I’ll give you that. Have it your way then.”

Xax felt something slimy crawl across her field of vision. Suddenly, the cloud covering her eyes lifted and she could move again. Panicked, she pounded against the walls of her tomb, but they would not budge. That’s when she realized, her coffin wasn’t

made of stone. A cold, hard plastic encased her body. Tubes were stuck into her nose and mouth. She wore a suit, a spacesuit.

Bit by bit, Xax finally put the pieces together. She realized with painful clarity how helpless she really was.

She was floating in an escape pod.

“Show yourself!” Xax yelled. “Show me your face you bastard!”

More laughter. This time, it was low and grating.

Like the beast.

“Miss me?” the beast asked, blood dripping from its fangs. “I’ve been here the whole time you know. Thought you would have figured that out.”

Xax shook her head. “Where’s Twist? Didn’t he..”

“Right here, doll,” the beast mimicked.

“But where...”

The beast examined her closely. Its eyes—bloodless and beady and yellow—stole whatever remaining courage she had left.

“Here.”

With one swift gesture, the beast tore a hole open in its face. There, underneath its mask of dead skin, were the green features of Vinnie Twist.

“Like what you see, doll?” The Twist-beast teased.

Xax took one look at him and screamed.

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“Fang? Are you there?” Marrl tapped his headset, but did not hear a response. The furball either did not turn his on, or he was not bothering to pick up. Shaking his head, Marrl placed his hand

on the box outside Xax's quarters and waited for it to respond.

It did not.

"Of *course* you are not working," Marrl snarled. "That would be too easy."

His radio crackled to life. "*Fang here. What you need?*"

"I cannot get Xax's door open. Can you help me—"

"*Fang busy. Try handle. Goodbye.*"

"Grrrrrr!" Marrl yanked his headset off and threw it against the wall. It cracked in half. What handle? There was no handle. Stubborn little creature. The security chief kicked the door a few times, but it would not budge.

This was not helping his hangover.

To center himself, the security chief crouched down and recited a list of asteroids near his homeworld. "*Galactia Imperius, Galactia Micronius, Galactia Supremius. Galactia Ferris...*"

The door behind him slid open. Fang waved a tiny, round paw in front of his face. "Stop resting. Show you something."

"It is nice to see you, too." Rolling his eyes, Marrl stood up and followed him into the room. The height difference between them was obvious. "Partner."

Xax's quarters were not arranged the way he expected them to be. When they first boarded, the security chief thought Edna Keene was quiet, studious and shy. Sure, the lab assistant's outfit at dinner was a little revealing, but she was Arsubaran and, no doubt, obsessed about her clothing. But this? From the way Xax decorated her quarters, Marrl never would have guessed she enjoyed working in a lab all day. Most medical assistants were plain, discreet, and boring.

Much like Cass's quarters, every inch of Xax's room was covered in a different color and texture. Marrl's senses did not know what to focus on first. Several flowering plants hung from the ceiling; vivid holos of musicians and artists covered her walls. Even



her floors were covered with loud, patterned carpets and enormous stuffed animals. Compared to Cass, Xax's tastes were obnoxious and extreme. There were so many decorations lying around, it was hard for Marrl to tell if anything was out of place.

"I require assistance, Fang. What am I looking at?"

Fang jumped up and tugged his fingers. The bear was no bigger than a child. "Down. Come down now."

"Whatever you say, partner." Marrl knelt beside him. At that height, he could see a pattern emerging. A knickknack out of place there. A patch of wet carpet over in the corner. Torn sheets. Crooked bed. From his vantage point, he could tell Xax was dragged forcibly out of bed. But by whom?

"This confirms she was kidnapped. Is this what you wanted to show me?"

Fang scratched his belly. "Must promise we not alarm Mistress. Haven't told her everything."

The security chief snorted. "It sounds like you know her pretty well."

The Urseminite pulled his lips back, revealing a full set of blunt teeth. Was he *smiling*? "Mistress will not take news well. Fang small, able to fit in tight places. Figuring out why ship is screwed. You're security guy, you know. Keep secrets until it's safe to say."

Marrl had to hand it to him, Fang may be small, but he was smart. "Have you figured out who is listening to us? How we are being bugged?"

The bear pointed at his eyes, then traced a line in the air toward a nearby wastebasket. Marrl snatched it and peered inside. There, nestled between a few empty wrappers, was a pile of scrap metal. "*Wait, that is not scrap metal,*" Marrl thought, sniffing the device. "*This was a robot.*"

"Not certain. Only guess."

"I see." If what Fang was hinting at was true, then Talus may

have programmed his robots to spy on all of them. Was it possible he did kidnap Xax after all? Cass was not sure if Talus was behind Xax's disappearance, but manipulating robots to keep tabs on the entire crew was worse.

Much, much worse.

The security chief doubted the mechanic would spy on the rest of the crew for fun. It was possible that he was getting paid for the information his robots extracted. If the mechanic was snooping around *for* Twist, then the Ken Reeg had the upper hand. For now.

Fang bobbed his head from side to side. "Have more to tell. I recognize picture."

Marrl did not like the sound of that.

"Girl omitted important detail."

"What are you talking about?" The meaning of Fang's words was not clear until the Urseminite handed him Xax's diary. Opening it, Marrl tapped the holoscreen several times and scanned through its contents.

He stopped when he saw the wedding invitation. He did not need to see a picture of the groom to know who he was.

"By the Flame!" Marrl shouted, hoping Talus—or the kidnapper—was still listening. "Why would she marry a Templari?"

While the galaxy teemed with many, alien species, only one had a frightening reputation—the Templari. Their xenophobic Empire was a direct threat to the Union of the Saldralla. The purple-skinned aliens, also known as Devalkamanchans, worshipped their biological superiority and all the trappings of war. Lived it. Breathed it. Spread it like a plague. Their gods, Deval and Kamanch, demanded many sacrifices. The Devalkamanchians did not mix well with other races, even those that resembled their physical appearance like the Arsubarans.

"News strange. If kidnapper know..."

More secrets, but Marrl knew exactly what Fang was trying

to tell him. Xax might have been kidnapped for her own safety. Her husband-to-be, Gavanch Fal'n, was an aging warlord and a raider known for his brutality. Even if Xax was not aware of Gavanch's true identity, it was likely someone else did. Like her father.

Marrl heard rumors that the Templari were preparing to invade the Frontier Zone from other spacers, but he did not dare visit the Empire to find out if it was true.

The galaxy was shaped like a disc, but separated into two, distinct parts. On the one side, the Union of the Saldralla ruled a collection of planets as a democracy. Although the Saldrallans as a whole were more religious than the other races within their borders, they were more tolerant than the Devalkamanchans outside of the Frontier Zone. Only a treaty and a belt of fiercely independent colonies stood between the two empires.

If Marrl had his way, he would wipe the Templari from the galaxy. Their twisted race was responsible for the attack on his homeworld and selling him into slavery.

Suddenly, the security chief realized a terrifying possibility: the entire wedding could be a ruse. The ceremony would justify a visit from the Templari in the Frontier Zone. If the Empire was planning an attack, few would see it coming. Many would die.

Or be enslaved.

"Fang, do you think Twist is a sympathizer for the Empire?"

The bear stood on his tiptoes and gently touched a paw to his face. "Why you nice to me? Something broken?"

Marrl laughed. The sound emerged from his throat like a cross between a purr and a roar. Most people were not kind to the Urseminites; they treated them like toys or worse. "Well, we are partners. Are we not?"

Fang extended his paw. "We are."

Marrl bent down and shook his paw. He did not fully understand the creature yet, but he felt he owed it to Cass for the way he treated her earlier. It was the honorable thing to do. Not

to mention, the cyborg was right: Marrl would rather have Fang watching his back than shooting it. Even if the security chief did not trust the bear, he knew he would fight fair. That was enough for him.

“Twist doesn’t think like Devalkamanchans. He not want conquest. Read more.”

Marrl skimmed through the diary. The entry was tough to absorb: it was filled with expressions of guilt, anger, regret, and loneliness. There were repeated confessions about a buried city of gold. In one paragraph, Xax claimed she knew the entrance was in a secret cave outside of New S’laas.

In another? Xax admitted she was lying to Talus. In exchange for friendship, she told him stories about gold. Twist had to be involved. If anything, the Ken Reeg were opportunists. Marrl was tired of waiting, but he knew he could not challenge the politician. His hands were bound.

“Redwing Securities briefed us on the gold-hunting scams before we left, but this is a fantasy.” Marrl glanced over his shoulder to see if any robots were lurking nearby. They were conspicuously absent.

“Other strange thing,” Fang said as he scratched his head. “Twist buying up machines to dig sand.”

“Mining equipment? Are you certain?” Marrl frowned. “So that is why Twist is headed for Illya. It is not about ruling a planet. It is to dig beneath it.”

The Urseminite nodded. “I go to engine room. Keep Talus busy. You search for girl.”

“And Cass? What do we tell her? She did not want to pressure him.”

“Fang know.” The bear winked at him. The Ryjyllian did not want to admit it, but the gesture was...cute. “Your headset malfunction.”

“You still have one.”

Fang ripped his radio off and dropped it in a nearby fish tank. "Not anymore."

"Poor fish," Marrl licked his lips. "I will see you in Medical when I am through."

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Fang was happy. Marrl-man was listening to him and Mistress didn't punish him when she found out girl was gone.

Not yet, anyway. The last time Mistress was unhappy she tortured him by scanning him from head to toe.

Fang did not like having his picture taken. Would rather starve to death.

No time for Mistress. Marrl-man thought Talus was innocent. Fang did not agree. Time to teach the Dolom a lesson.

"My lesson," the creature growled. He was not happy the mechanic spied on Mistress. Not happy at all.

Engines were at back of ship, next to Talus's sleeping place. Great, copper machines whirled and buzzed. Large tanks of fuel were nestled behind the main generator. If Fang did shoot, he could not afford to miss. Explosion would kill him and Mistress.

"Talus," Fang growled. "I am here to ask questions."

"Ain't you supposed to be puttin' on a bow or something?" Talus crawled up from behind a large cylinder. The alien was covered in grease and dust. "What's up, shorty?"

"You will face me."

Talus tapped the side of an engine. "No go, fuzz-tick. I got a couple of air hoses to patch up. So unless you want to stop breathing, you better let me get back to work."

"Xax Slaa is missing. Where is she?" Fang stood his ground. He wasn't ready to pull out his gun. Yet. But he was close.

“Don’t know. Don’t care.”

“Liar! Break your heart, did she?” Fang couldn’t resist. “You hurt her? Snatch her while she slept?”

“Xax is my *friend*.” Talus beat his gray, rippled chest and trembled with anger. “I didn’t even know she was missing. Is she hurt?”

“Tell Fang the truth. Why spy on us?”

“I can’t do that,” Talus whined, his scales were shaking. “Wasn’t in my contract.”

Fang pulled a gun out of its holster and aimed it at Talus’s knee. “Tell Fang why now.”

The mechanic cracked his neck and all nine of his knuckles. “How ‘bout we’s do this my way, bear. Let’s dance.”

“Here?” Fang fired off a warning shot. The bullet whizzed past Talus’s ear and lodged into the bulkhead. “You sure? Good idea.”

“I’m not leaving ‘till I fix the engines. So’s either we fight and I kill you, or you leave. Them’s your options.”

“Fine.” Fang ducked behind a large pole. “Take first shot, loverboy.”

The enraged Dolom stamped his front leg. Fang couldn’t tell what kind of a weapon he had. It was bigger than his. That did not mean it was better.

“Have it your way,” Talus said, cocking his blaster. The mechanic fired off a round, but missed. Fang shot back, grateful his target was a massive pile of flesh and scales.

He missed, too.

“What’s the matter, cutie? Can’t handle an itty bitty gun?”

“Shut up,” Fang snapped back. This time, he aimed low. If he could knock Talus over, he’d straddle his neck and stick his gun in the mechanic’s mouth. Then he’d talk.

Fang pulled the trigger. The blasts scorched the mechanic's ankles. Talus howled in pain.

“Talk. Why robots spy? Who paid you? Green man?”

Talus rubbed his foot. Ignored Fang.

“You know too much.”

A sinister laugh. Shriill. High-pitched. Feminine.

*Green man.*

Fang spun around, but green man was too fast for him. Green man kicked him hard in the stomach, knocking him off-balance. Fang managed to fire another shot, then slid across the floor. The blast hit a casing and bounced around the room. Up, down, sideways.

Toward the fuel tanks.

**CHAPTER SEVEN**

Marrl decided to put as much distance as he could between Fang and himself. The Urseminite was covering the back of the ship and Cass was with the doctor in the middle. So, the security chief ran to the front and checked the cockpit for signs of Xax. This time, Splish was there. The Tetsuashan pilot pressed many buttons while it reviewed star charts and—

—argued with himself.

“No, better to land on the sssssouth sssside. Not the north. Bigger ssssstrip.” Splish pointed to an overhead schematic of a large space station; its snaky fingers trailed across the perimeter of the map. Was that asteroid field where they were headed? It did not make any sense. If the ship was broken, why lead it into a graveyard? “Ssssve an hour or two. That’sssss not too long to wait for a ssssafe landing.”

Marrl was blunt. “I am interrupting you.”

Splish turned around and scowled at him. “You sssssshouldn’t be here.”

“Do you have any idea where Oogle is?” Marrl asked, leaning against the door frame. “I have to ask both of you a few questions.”

“Oogle is sssssleeping.” Splish rolled his giant, teal eye. It sparkled like an expensive gemstone.

Unlike his co-pilot, Splish had fully matured, so the cornea of his eye was not bloodshot and full of thin capillaries. Marrl winced. Compared to Oogle, Splish was more appealing. “Hissssss sssshift issssss in an hour. Come back later.”

The security chief ignored the pilot and checked under the console to see if there was any sign of Xax. Marrl opened up his mouth to explain, but quickly changed his mind. It was obvious the Tetsuashan was not in a talkative mood. Maybe he should wait to press for answers. Maybe Splish was flying the *Haldis* to safety.

Still, that did not explain why Splish could not stop staring



at him. Obviously, Marrl's presence annoyed the older Tetsuashan.

"Do you have something to say, Splish?"

The pilot rolled his chair around and focused all his attention on the forward console. "You ssssshould go."

"I need to know why."

"I'm plotting a new coursssse," Splish gurgled. "Mussssst concentrate."

Marrl scratched his head. Did Cass take his advice? The pilot's behavior perplexed him. "I am starting my rounds early today. Do you mind if I search your quarters?"

"Be my guessssst." The pilot zoomed in closer on its target and reviewed the exterior of a doughnut-shaped space station. "It'sssssss empty."

"I will leave." Marrl hesitated. Something did not seem right, but then again, Splish's bad mood might not have anything to do with him. They were all under a lot of pressure.

"Meet me in the Obssssservation deck," Splish said. There was no trace of emotion in his matter-of-fact voice, no indication he was scared or freaked out. Marrl sniffed him, to see if he could detect his feelings through his excretions, and immediately regretted it. Splish smelled like a salted pig. The scent reminded Marrl he had not yet eaten and he was still hung over. Fortunately, his headache was starting to subside. "Twenty minutesssss."

"Is there anything you want to tell me, Splish?"

"Not yet."

Question after question flooded into Marrl's mind. Why was Splish acting so peculiar? Did he know who was responsible for kidnapping Xax? If so, who else was in danger?

Marrl quickly excused himself to resume his search. "I will see you then."

"Good-bye."

Running through the short list of kidnapping suspects in his mind, the chief realized he could not cross Oogle or Splish off his list just yet. For all he knew, Splish could be the one sabotaging the ship. Or, Oogle could have been lying to him about the bug he found. What would either Tetsuashan have to do with Twist? Redwing?

Xax?

Maybe the pilots were trying to distract him. Maybe Splish needed to make sure he was occupied so he could kill Twist. Would that be such a bad thing? If he had to choose between saving Twist's life and finding Doc's assistant, Marrl would rather find Xax.

Still, there were too many questions and not enough answers. The chief wanted more information and could not think of a safe way to get it. With such a limited crew, Cass could not afford to lose any of them. Their ship—their limping freighter—was a death trap.

*"I had better check in with Cass. Perhaps she has found a ransom note."* Marrl thought, opening every crew member's door and bulkhead storage unit on his way back to Medical. He was brief, but thorough. *"Let us hope I do not wind up missing, too."*

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Luckily, Fang's shot missed the fuel tank, bounced off a pipe, and embedded itself in the floor.

"What'd you go and do that fer? Don't you know we're leaking fuel?" Talus darted behind a nearby vat. His arms worked quickly, adjusting dozens of knobs and valves. "Fang, you better go."

Twist screamed at Talus. Fang could see trails of spit flying from his mouth. "Let him leave? Are you nuts? I don't want Leary and her cronies screwing up my plans."

Fang backed away from the green man. He was careful, but he wasn't ready to leave. Not yet. Wanted to learn more, to understand what Twist was really up to. Maybe he had something to do with the girl after all. Maybe not. Gold sounded too easy.

"Fang, did you hear me?" Talus scooped out some goop and pressed it against the side of the tank. "I need you to send Cass a message. Tell her we have to land. I can't hold all these leaks for long."

"Where is girl?" Fang asked. Even though he was starting to suspect Marrl-man was right about Talus's innocence, he needed to know for sure.

"Why would I say anything to you?" Twist barked at him. "I won't confess my crimes to a freaky pet. Where I'm from, we cut out your tongues so you can't talk back."

Fang was about to tell the green man what he really felt about him, when Talus threw his body in between them. Talus wasn't trying to hurt Fang, the mechanic was *helping* him. "Aw, Vinnie! Deal's over. You can have your stinkin' credits back. I'm not spying for you anymore. If workin' for you means I gotta be mean to my crew, then I quit."

"You can't quit! I still need your intel to make sure the crew'll protect me."

"Deal's off, Vinnie. I'm done playing around. No more jokes, no more tricks. I'm finished with that, too. These are my people, not yours to mess around with. You got that?"

Green man snorted. "What about the information I paid for?"

The mechanic lowered his voice and snarled at him. "My robots are off-limits. You want to spy on somebody? Then program one yourself."

Twist placed his hands—and his gun—on his hips and leaned against a pole. "Talus, Talus, Talus. And what about our gold? Don't you want a piece of that?"

The Dolom shook his head. “If there’s any buried gold on Illya, you can have it. Not worth betraying my friends or losin’ my job. Your price is too high.”

Fang raised an eyebrow. So it was true. Twist was out for gold and used Talus to spy on the crew. “Can I shoot the green man now?”

Talus loomed over him. “Get going, Fang. I got nothing to say to you. I gotta tell it to Cass. Her ears only, you hear me?”

Green man crazy, but Talus was more nuts than he was.

Mistress’s problem now.

“Stay here. I’ll bring Mistress.”

“Don’t think you gotta worry ‘bout me leavin’. I got a lot of work to do back here. Gonna take some of my magic, but I can patch ‘er up if we land soon. Too many missing parts.”

“What kind of mechanic are you?” Twist taunted the Dolom as he fiddled with his gun. “You can’t even fix the damn hyperdrive? What. Did somebody walk in and steal your toolbox or something?”

The mechanic waddled over to Twist and grabbed him by his skinny, green throat. “You’re the only one here who doesn’t have a job to do. You want to help? Go find Xax.”

“I’m the High Saldralla you moron. I don’t have to do shit. Besides, who cares about a punk kid anyway?”

Talus hoisted Twist up with one hand; the Ken Reeg’s polished shoes lifted up off the floor.

Fang was bored. Green man was an asshole, but didn’t know anything about Xax. Talus didn’t, either.

He needed to see Mistress.

Now.

“Stop! Can’t... Breathe...” Talus released his grip and the Ken Reeg fell to the ground. Twist waved his gun and kicked Fang’s feet out from under him. He teetered and landed on his elbow. “Fang’ll

ruin everything. I want that gold! It's my right! Gotta get it before—”

Talus didn't blink. Surprised Fang. The mechanic grabbed Twist's hand and squeezed. Fang heard a loud, popping noise. Hoped it was a bone. “Now you listen to me, Vinnie. Fang doesn't care about the gold. Cass, neither.”

Fang pretended he was more hurt than he really was. He needed to listen, to hear what green man had planned.

“You don't know that,” Twist whined. “All it takes is one archaeologist to verify Xax's story is true. Soon Illya will be crawling with immigrants hoping to get a piece. Well, I'm not going to let that happen. They're my underground temples now. My planet, *my* gold.”

“Look, Vinnie. My job is to fix the ship so we reach Illya alive, and that's what I'm gonna do. So either you play nice or...”

“Or what?” Green man struggled against Talus's massive frame, but his skinny body was no match for the trio of thick, gray arms wrapped around him.

“Or I'll let Fang here have his way with you. I hear there's a reason why you never want to get on an Urseminite's bad side.”

Fang looked up at Talus and smiled. None of the other crew members would harm a client, except for him. Green man was not worth the trouble. Twist wasn't a friend, but he was not an enemy, either.

He was a petty thief.

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“Are you all right? Cass? Doctor?” Marri was concerned by what he saw. The Medical Bay was trashed. Every crate was torn apart. The floor was littered with bottles, metal containers, and packing material. It was difficult to navigate, but eventually he made his way toward a tall, portable med-lab.

As he got closer, the security chief heard Cass say: “I stand corrected. Dying would be better than that.”

Marrl poked his head inside. Both Cass and the doctor were sitting inside on tall, spindly chairs. Unlike the rest of the Medical Bay, the med-lab was small, but clean and well-organized. “I have checked the cockpit, several of our quarters, and all the units in the hallway. Xax is not there.”

The doctor was shivering and her arms folded across her chest. From the look on Cass’s face, he suspected they had news for him and it was not good.

“We heard shots. Chief Marrl, was that you?”

“No Cass, it was not. Where is Fang?” the Ryjyllian asked, hoping the bear would quickly join them. Marrl did not want to be near the doctor for too long. He had embarrassed himself enough.

Then, he distinctly heard the doctor muttering softly under her breath. “Wish he’d shoot me.”

Marrl pretended he did not hear her self-pity. “Have you found Xax?”

Cass shook her head slowly.

“Is something else the matter?”

“It’s my fault,” Doc said weakly. She sounded tiny and small, like a little girl lost in a crowd. “Xax was probably drugged with powerful hallucinogens.”

“Recreational?” Marrl was familiar with drugs and what they were used for. He abhorred them.

Shaking her snowy head, Doc started to explain. “No, Marrl. Military grade. The kind used to...” Her voice trailed off. Either she could not finish her sentence, or she did not want to.

“To what, Doctor? I need to know.”

“To detain prisoners. Mentally, I mean. They were designed to frighten criminals, to use their own worst fears against them.”

Marrl was furious. "Why bring something like that on board, on *this* ship without telling me?" he wondered aloud. "What is wrong with you, Doctor? Did Cass put you up to this?"

"I needed the money," she confessed, rubbing her jaw. "We're dropping off medical supplies for the hospital in New S'laas, but the hallucinogens are for somebody else. Black market."

"Like the nanites," the security chief frowned. "That is one too many illegal substances for my liking."

The doctor's voice was soft and weak. "Mine, too, but they pay better than Redwing does."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Violet," Cass tried to reassure the doctor. Marrl was not sure anyone could relieve her guilt until Xax was found. "You've got the antidote, now we just need to find the girl."

Marrl scratched his head. This side of the doctor's personality was too tender for his tastes. If he was in Cass's position, he would not respond so softly. "Yes, that is correct."

"Why don't you tell him, Cass?" Doctor Dunn raised her head. He could tell she was annoyed. "Now would be a good time as any."

"There is more? Did I not ask you to confide in me?" The security chief was honestly confused. Why was he wasting time here? Perhaps he would be better off searching the rest of the ship with Fang.

"It's about the nanites," Cass said flatly. It was clear she was ignoring his question. "We figured out who stole them and why we can read your mind."

"We?" Marrl did not like her use of pronouns.

"We."

"So, you both know. Everything." It was a statement. A fact. Another witness.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Marrl." There was a hard

edge to the doctor's voice. "Yes, I can read your thoughts, but that's not how I found out you were a slave. It wasn't because you gave yourself away or screwed up on the job. It was because of the way you talk and your treatment."

"I do not understand."

"It is a common practice for slave owners to use nanites to protect their interests." Doctor Dunn spoke quickly. Hurriedly. No doubt, to gloss over how uncomfortable their conversation was. "Only, the nanites were originally developed by the Ken Reeg. Arsubarans are close enough to them, biologically-speaking, so they still function. Throw in other races, though, and you're talking invasive surgery or fake vaccines to get them to work. Couple that with your reduced accent? It wasn't hard to figure out you weren't raised on Ryjyl."

"Vaccines." The word did not reflect the raging storm that brewed in his chest.

Cass went on. "Mr. Twist was the one, Marrl. Xax delivered the other nanites to him on her first day."

"I was too hard on Xax," the doctor admitted, focusing all her attention on Cass. "When she discovered some of the seals on the vials were broken, I couldn't tell her I knew why. Tampering with the bottles was the only way to get the nanites and this drug through security. I never would have found out about the stolen nanites if she hadn't filled out a medical log."

Marrl nodded. The lab assistant may have had a legitimate reason to be upset with the doctor. "I think I understand. You removed her from her regular duties to avoid suspicion. If she had been allowed to do her job, you would have known who had taken the other drugs."

Cass rolled her eyes. "Well, when you put it *that* way..."

"There's more good news," the doctor continued. Though, Marrl was puzzled by her choice of words. How was any of this *good*? "I don't know what kind of a dose Xax has been given. If her body metabolizes the compound fast enough, she'll regain



consciousness and be able to fight back.”

“What happens if her kidnapper has given her a higher dose? Like a full bottle?” Marrl asked, wondering if Twist was his primary suspect. All this running around was causing his headache to return. He wanted to claw his way through the problem, not avoid it with talk. “Will she survive?”

The doctor’s eyes widened. He could practically smell her nervousness. “If her body couldn’t handle the drug, she’d slip into a coma.”

Marrl did not know whether he should laugh or cry or yell at her. Furious, he kicked an empty crate, and shred it to pieces with his claws.

Cass and Doc watched on in silence.

“Why so sad?” Fang wandered into the room. “Mistress, need to talk to you.”

“Not now, Fang.” Marrl growled at the bear. Partner or not, he would have this moment. One, single instance of uninterrupted rage. Was that too much to ask for?

“Marrl-man, be smart. Anger not always good.”

“I said *not now*, Fang!”

The security chief turned his back to the Urseminite. Then, he flung his vibrobrade at the bulkhead. The tip of the humming blade lodged into the metal.

“Turn around.”

“I accept your challenge.” Marrl obeyed. Finally! A chance to fight!

Fang got down on all fours and leapt onto Marrl’s chest. The creature almost knocked the wind right out of him. Shocked, the security chief grabbed the bear by the nape of his neck and tossed him across the room. The Urseminite sailed through the air, tucked his short arms and legs in, and rolled to a standing position. He was unhurt. A lopsided grin split his tiny face. Before Marrl could

respond, Fang pulled his gun on him.

“This is no longer a fair fight.” Marrl snarled at him. The Ryjyllian stood up, raised his arms, and shook his mane. “How dare you pull out a gun?”

Fang smiled and pointed the gun at him. “Surrender?”

Neither Cass nor Doctor Dunn said a word. He was glad they did not interfere. “Why? If you know the rules of honor-battles, then why would I give myself up to you?”

“I have gun.” Fang tapped the nozzle to the side of his head. “My say-so.”

Marrl roared, but did nothing. He did not want to appear weak in front of his boss or the doctor. He did not want Fang to shoot him, either.

“Your rules are full of excrement.”

“I accept apology. Must prove Marrl-man no weakling,” Fang growled. The creature cocked the trigger and aimed for his chest. Marrl did not think. He reacted. One minute he was waiting to be shot. The next? Fang was dangling from his wrist and the gun was halfway across the room.

“Feel better?” The bear tilted his head. “Your heart like Urseminite, your mind weak. Fight more, worry less.”

He did not want to admit it, but Marrl was grateful Fang reminded him he was not as helpless as he felt. It was almost comical: Fang was telling him to do the exact *opposite* of what Cass had suggested.

The cyborg laughed nervously, breaking the tension. “Well, at least we know how Miss Slaa is being detained. Now it’s just a matter of finding her.” Cass tossed Marrl a holopad. “From what we were able to figure out, we’ve experienced two different kinds of problems. The personal attacks—pranks, odd behavior, trust issues—mostly revolve around Talus and Twist. Missing drugs and sabotaged equipment aside, our client has cracked this crew apart before we’ve even had a chance to bond with each other.”

“Mistress right.”

“Tell her what we learned.” Marrl winked at Fang, encouraging him to tell his side of the story. Cass was right. He did have a lot in common with the bear.

“Twist is after gold. Xax marry bad Templari. Talus tell you rest.”

After a few moments, Cass eventually nodded and put her hands up. “So, is Mr. Twist responsible for all of our misfortune? When this unravels, I wonder what else we will find.”

The security chief agreed with her. Vincent Twist was proving to be an excellent gambler. They were playing his game, wandering through scenario after scenario until the Ken Reeg got what he wanted. “What was the second type of problem?”

“Mostly mechanical. Robots, bad communication, leaking fuel, malfunctioning doors.”

“And my broken communicators,” Marrl added.

Doctor Dunn beamed. “Wait, I think I know who’s behind the mechanical failures. I bet it’s that rookie, Oogle. Has anyone seen him lately? We should check him out.”

“Why Oogle?” Cass did not look like she approved of the doctor’s wild theory.

“I’ve worked with a lot of Tetsuashans before. Something doesn’t seem right. He’s not like any rookie I’ve ever met.”

“Do you have anything to support your theory?” Marrl was not sure the doctor was correct. She seemed scattered, off.

“Do you have anything to support yours?” The doctor retorted, crossing her arms across her chest. “We’re all in the dark here and those two were the only crew members we hadn’t talked about. I’m just trying to help.”

Suddenly, Marrl remembered his meeting with Splish. “I am sorry, but I must leave.”

“Oh?” A confused look crossed Doctor Dunn’s face. He

knew, one day, he would have to face her alone. The security chief's feelings for her were an unwelcome distraction, but he was almost relieved she knew who he really was. The doctor was safe. Right now, that was enough for him. "Where are you going, Marrl?"

"I am meeting with Splish on the Observation Deck. He claims he has something to tell me."

"Maybe he knows where Xax is," Cass said excitedly. Her skin brightened when she mentioned Xax's name. "How much time do you have?"

Everyone was staring at him—including Fang. The security chief checked his digi-watch. "I have five minutes."

Fang kicked him in the shins. It did not hurt. "Don't be late."

"Now do you understand why I enjoy Fang's company, Chief Marrl?" Cass was beginning to sound like her old self. More relaxed, more composed, and more in control. "I for one enjoy the way he thinks."

"Right," Marrl grumbled. "An Urseminite is somehow smarter than I am."

"Obvious to Fang," the bear pointed to his oversized head. "Urseminite brains much bigger than yours. More to eat."

"I did not know you were a cannibal."

"He's kidding." Cass snickered, patting Fang on the top of his head. "Go on, Marrl. You should get to your meeting. Maybe Splish will feel more comfortable talking to you alone."

"But why?" Marrl shook his head. Something else Cass said earlier was bothering him. Whoever was attacking them *was* picking them off one by one: maybe not by hurting them physically, but by breaking up their relationships. There were too many diversions getting in the way—like his reappearing case files, pranks, and broken coms. Maybe the doctor was correct. Maybe the rookie was to blame for sabotage. "Cass, when was the last time you saw Oogle?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe two days ago? What are you alluding to?"

"I think we should explore the doctor's accusation. If she is correct, then I will need Fang to secure the cockpit while I meet with Splish."

"It's your call, Chief Marrl."

If Oogle was sabotaging the mission, then Splish would be the first to know about it. That made him a target. The pilot's life could be in danger.

His mind made up, Marrl addressed his partner: "Fang?"

"Yes, Marrl-man?"

"Take the vents up to the cockpit. While you are on your way, I need you to glance inside the rooms you pass. I swept the ship earlier, but it could not hurt to double-check."

Fang shrugged. "Easy enough."

"Thank you," Marrl turned to Cass. "I suspect you will take care of Talus."

Cass folded her arms. "From what Fang said, our mechanic has a lot to confess. I am ready for whatever he has to tell me."

"And Twist?" If it was Marrl's decision, he would kill him. The Ken Reeg did not deserve to live. "We should not ignore him any longer."

"I've got an idea," Doctor Dunn said, a sly grin plastered on her round face. The mischievous smile was something Marrl had never seen before. It was...odd. Even for her. Why was she acting so strangely? "There's nothing science can't do."

"The sooner I find Xax, the better I will feel. This meeting will not take long."

"The better we'll *all* feel, Marrl." Cass scolded him. "She's one of us. None of us wants to lose her—including Redwing."

"That is what I am counting on."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“This isn’t real,” Xax said out loud. Her words sounded fuzzy, muted.

Opening her eyes, she stared straight into the Twist-beast’s black pupils. She wasn’t strong enough to kill the Twist-beast, but a part of her knew the monster was all in her head. It had to be.

“You aren’t real. None of this is,” she declared, her voice stronger and clearer than she’d ever remembered it. “This is all in my mind.”

The word “mind” echoed into the abyss. Over and over again, the truth of her condition resonated throughout the darkness, shattering pieces of the nightmare that enveloped her. Even though she still saw terrifying and unusual things—red lights, a row of sharp teeth, a yellow eye—the visions were starting to make sense.

She’d been drugged. Kidnapped. Stuffed into a small container. Earlier, Xax assumed it was an escape pod, but now she wasn’t so sure. Fighting off her drowsiness and the visions of an angry Twist-beast, she gently pressed her fingers to her cheeks. So far, so good. There weren’t any tubes there; she imagined them because she *thought* they existed.

Her hands were free: she hadn’t been tied up or anything. That probably meant her captor expected the drugs to keep her quiet.

Won’t he—or *she*—be surprised.

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The observation desk was one of the few places Marrl felt he could be at peace. It was also the jewel of the *Haldis*, an insulated bubble where guests could experience the wonders of space travel and a few creature comforts, courtesy of Redwing Securities.

Like a virtual map of the ship.

To pass the time while he waited for Splish, the security chief inspected the console, wondering if he missed opening any door, any cargo bay. If the map was correct, he did not. When he resumed his search, he would have to start from the back end of the ship and work his way back up.

Frustrated, Marrl tapped the interactive display and waited for it to load. A few seconds later, he was taking a virtual tour of the ship, through the cockpit all the way down to the engines.

Marrl was surprised by the level of detail the map provided. The grid was white, translucent. It showed every bolt, every girder used to build the *Haldis*.

And every piece of equipment that belonged on board.

On a hunch, Marrl flipped through the images, scrutinizing them for unusual details. There were no heat sensors or life sign indicators. He could, however, find out if any of the ship's storage units were missing.

Or the escape pods.

"By the Flame," he whispered, shaking his head. "Xax? Where are you?"

One of the pods was missing. The reason why he could not find the girl? Xax was no longer on board.

"Oogle." Marrl swore under his breath. "It has to be. Perhaps Twist is paying him, too."

Shaking his head, the security chief decided not to stick around and wait for Splish. Whatever the pilot wanted to tell him, it would have to wait. Instead, he opted to double-check the escape pods on his way back to the cockpit to hunt for clues. If the pod was missing, then he would need Talus's help to find her. For that, Marrl would have to ask Cass's permission or risks the cyborg's ire. Sooner or later, he would have to return to Medical and bring her up to date.

Standing taller, Marrl kept his claws out as he walked. Just in case. No one would stop him from saving that girl's life.

An uncomfortable thought wormed into his mind. Marrl could not get rid of it until it was too late.

*"Hopefully, she has a life left to save."*

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Fang popped open a vent in the Medical Bay and crawled back inside. He wasn't worried about robots. Not anymore.

He wanted the truth.

For that, he had to stay invisible. Small. Insignificant.

Unnoticed.

That part not always easy. Guns made noise.

The Urseminite managed to crawl all the way up without getting stuck. Glad he did. Fang peered through every cover as he inched his way closer to the cockpit. Vents useful to hide. See many things.

He did not see Xax. He did, however, hear green man.

*"Murder and kidnapping weren't part of the deal, Splish. You were supposed to keep 'em distracted, not kill anybody. You think I want blood on my hands?"*

Green man.

Fang squinted through a slot. Saw feet. Slime.

*"Sssssoo what? Lessss witnesssesss."*

Splish.

Fang suspected green man had more secrets. Now he find out what.

*"So far no one's put all the pieces together. Between you, me*



*and Talus, we've done a hell of a job confusing them."*

*"I'm not sssssssssso lucky. Too many quesssssstionsssss."*

*"Ah, don't worry about jungle-head, Splishy. He's harmless. If you hadn't told me about Xax's father hiring Redwing to kill me, I'd be dead by now. Guy can't even figure out Talus knocked him out. He's an idiot. Terrible investigator."*

*"No one sssssussspects how much you know?"*

*"They've been too busy worrying about their own safety. I'm guessing by the time we get to New S'laas, they won't care about a few slaves or the Empire taking over Illya. I gotta tell you, though. You ever want to do business with one of them Templari? Just say the word. They pay extraordinarily well considering."*

Slaves? Templari? To do what? Dig for gold? Saldrallans don't have slaves. Free people. Like Fang, Mistress, Marrl-man. Even Talus.

*"That'sssss your problem. Not mine."*

Fang had to know, had to find out what slaves were for, but it was hard to hear. Whispers. Shuffling. A pair of feet? Blocked his view.

*"It's that damn Urseminite's fault. Who'd have thought Leary'd keep one of them chained up."*

"My fault?" Fang turned the words over in his mind. "Green man full of shit."

*"What doessss Talussssss ssssssay?"*

Fang didn't need to see green man to know he was upset. "No more spying from him. He gave me back my credits. We're on our own."

*"Sssssorry, Twissssst. I work alonnnnnne."*

*"Why you triple-crossing—"*

A gurgling noise. Laughter? Then silence. More whispering. More quiet.

*“What’ssss the matter, Twissst? Can’t handle a ssssssmall toyyyyyy?”*

*“Yeah Splish, I guess you’re right. That’s all those Urseminites are good for. Toss ‘em around a bit, fluff ‘em up and stick them on a shelf.”*

“Grrrrr...” Fang growled quietly.

Not soft enough.

Twist wrenched the cover off the vent and kicked into the opening. His foot knocked Fang flat on his stomach. Fang tried to regain his balance, but there was little room. Twist grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him out into the cockpit.

“Gotcha, you little fur ball.”

Fang swung his body. The momentum freed him from Twist’s tenuous grip. Luckily, he managed to land on his front paws and bounced—right into Splish’s big, blue eye.

“Lookssss like you need my help.”

Splish wound his tentacles around his neck and squeezed.

Fang coughed. “Splish-splash, you all dried up. They’ll know you the bad guy.”

“Doessssn’t matter.” The pilot’s great eye twitched. “I will esssscape.”

“Escape?” Green man sounded confused. “You better tell me what you’ve got planned, Splish. I can’t afford to waste any more time here. I got miners coming in from all over the galaxy.”

“Watch thissssssss.” Splish grabbed a long needle and plunged it into Fang’s furry chest. His heart beat faster and faster. The shot hurt, but the pain had already passed.

Fang was a patient creature. He would kill Splish.

Slowly.

“What is that stuff?” Twist asked.

“Hiss worsssst nightmaressss.”

Something pushed at the back of his mind. A memory? A vision? He saw a boy—a young kid—take out a needle and thread. Buttons. Cotton stuffing. A large, red bow. Storefront window.

Instead of scaring him, the images pissed him off. Filled with rage, Fang's field of vision blurred. He wanted to gut Splish where he stood, then turn on Twist. But he had nothing to fight with. No weapons, no armor, no claws.

Just his teeth.

Fang flung his body onto the pilot's back and bit down hard. The creature screeched in pain and his tentacles flailed wildly. Fang chomped down harder. Splish's slimy skin was tough and thick, but not dense enough. Fang spread his paws and tore into the pilot's gaping wound—all the way down until Splish screeched in terror. The pilot spun around. Threw Fang against the wall. Then he slid out of the cockpit and headed for the hallway.

“Sssssssshe'sssssss mine.”

Splish had Xax.

Splish was not dead, but he was hurt.

Fang wasn't done yet. He scanned the room to target his next victim. Green man. Vincent Twist. High Saldralla.

Asshole.

Thief.

*Slaver.*

“No hard feelings, eh?” Twist backed away from him, toward the door.

Fang glowered at the green man and whooped his warrior's cry.

“Dead man!” he yelled.

Twist shot him a wicked grin. “We'll see about that.”

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Xax giggled. She could feel her toes again. As soon as she regained feeling in her finger, she lightly pressed the tips against the sides of her prison. The walls were smooth, like ice. Flat, but curved. She swore she felt tubes before, and the inside of a spacesuit. Maybe that was how her captor was feeding her? Xax remembered something about the different kinds of suits; some were for short trips, others for exploration in case they got into trouble.

Still, something didn't seem right. Maybe she wasn't floating in space. Maybe this, too, was a trick.

Closing her eyes, Xax swung her bare foot back as much as she could and kicked the container's lid, but it wouldn't budge. Frustrated, she felt around her for something she could use. All she needed was a tool like a bar or—

—a clothes hanger. Xax sighed with relief. She wasn't floating randomly in space. She was still on board the *Haldis*.

“In a closet? That can't be right,” The girl frowned, wondering if she really had been trapped in someone's quarters. “How long have I been in here?”

Once the others knew she was missing, they would probably try to rescue her. The only way they were ever going to find her was if they turned each room upside down—unless she had already been transported to a different ship.

Xax wasn't going to wait for Chief Marrl or Talus or anyone else. She was going to do her damndest to rescue herself. If she was on another ship, then she'd grab an escape pod or send a signal or something. Grabbing the plastic hanger, the lab assistant cracked it in half. Now she had not one, but *two* weapons.

“Won't be long now, little girl,” a voice threatened. “It'ssssss too bad you didn't ssssstay away from Twissssssst.”

## CHAPTER NINE

Green man was many people—a con artist, a politician, a thief—and he had many flaws. Twist reminded him of a giant peacock, always preening feathers and strutting about. He knew the tall Ken Reeg didn't think much of him.

Compared to Twist, Fang was the better hunter: he knew how to blend into his surroundings, how to take a shot, and how to be patient.

To buy Marri-man time, Fang kept him occupied. He knew the chief was out there, waiting for Splish. The pilot was bleeding. Hopefully, his partner would not be fooled by excuses or stories.

Instead, Fang sparred with the green man, used him for practice.

He wanted him dead, but that was out of the question. Now he just wanted Twist to pay.

“You're really something, you know?” Twist said to him, nursing his ankle. “Not even the nanites work on you, you rutting piece of shit.”

“Talk less, fight more.” Fang toyed with him, his fur bristled. For the first time in a long time, he was excited. Twist was a different kind of enemy, the kind he had to keep alive because of his value. Green man was smart. No one would shoot a gun on the bridge. Probably had other tricks shoved up his billowing sleeves.

“Have it your way.” Green man shrugged him off and continued his attack. Obvious Twist believed Urseminites were too small and too cute to be dangerous. If Fang bruised him, it would hurt Twist's pride. Do that, and Fang lose his advantage.

Do that, and green man would try harder to kill him.

“You're nothing!” The next time Twist spun around, Fang allowed the green man's boot to connect with his belly. He was small and round and soft, but he could still take a hit.

Still, green man's kick was sharp, sudden. He didn't have to pretend he was in pain: the Ken Reeg wore metal-tipped boots. Rolling over on his stomach, Fang crawled underneath the console where Twist couldn't get to him. The green man yelled and swore at him, but Fang did not move.

"Guess I win, then?" Twist bent down and jabbed him. Fang moaned, hoping to give Twist the impression he was done fighting. "Time to deal with my other problem."

As soon as Twist was out of sight, the bear inched out from his hiding place. It took him a minute or two, but eventually Fang managed to stand up long enough to know he was hurt more than he thought he was. The creature slumped to the floor, dragged his body back under the console, and curled up into a ball. The green man won this round, but only because he let him.

Next time they met, Fang would have his revenge.

\*\*\*

Xax knew her kidnapper had to be one of the pilots, but she still wasn't sure which Tetsuashan it was. To her, Splish and Oogle sounded the same. Both of them sounded like they got stuck every time they said a word beginning with "s."

The door to her prison rattled. Gripping the ends of the hanger in both hands, Xax crouched down as much as she could. Didn't matter which pilot it was, both of them had a large, nasty-looking eye. Poke that and she'd be free.

Or so she hoped.

"Too bad Marrl isssss poking his nossssse into my busssssinesssss," the voice continued. Then she heard something else jiggle. A lock, maybe? No, a panel in the wall. She'd been stuffed inside an empty storage container and hidden in a secret compartment. "He'll be easssssy to frame for your murder. Ssssstupid Ryjyllian."

Something creaked open and a slit in the wall appeared. Then Xax saw it. A watery green eye bursting with a thousand twisted capillaries glared back at her. "You're awake?"

"Fuck you, Oogle!" Xax jumped out with both hands aiming at the pilot's eye. The Tetsuashan swerved and circled around. The pilot's eye rolled up toward the ceiling. When he leaned forward, Xax stabbed Oogle in his side. He didn't fight back. His body jiggled. He was hurt bad.

Good. Wait a minute. She was in the pilot's quarters? What a jerk!

"Here, Oogle. Come to Xax. I won't hurt you that bad." She was tired, hungry, and pissed off. "What's the matter? Can't kidnap a little girl?"

Oogle's eyelid twitched. "You don't have the gutsssssss to kill me."

"I don't want to kill you. I just want to blind you." In one, swift movement, Xax leapt in front of the Tetsuashan and stuck the sharp ends of the broken hangar into his giant eye. Oogle shrieked and wobbled in lazy circles around the room. Satisfied, Xax made a break for the door, ran out into the hallway, and screamed at the top of her lungs.

"Anybody! Can somebody help me!?"

"Here!" The security chief spotted her and rushed over. "Are you okay? Who did this? Was it Oogle?"

Xax panted, trying to catch her breath. "It was... It was Oogle. He's in there. He's..."

Marrl put his hands on Xax's shoulders. "I am glad you are unharmed. From what I hear, you have been through—"

"—Look out!" Xax pointed behind him. The door was open and Oogle had a gun.

Luckily, Marrl had faster reflexes than the pilot. "I do not think so." The security chief slammed Oogle's slimy body against

the wall; the pilot's gun fell to the ground with a loud clatter. The Tetsuashan flailed, then wrapped a tentacle around Marrl's ankle and twisted. He howled in pain, swung his fist, and knocked Oogle in the center of his giant eye.

Oogle gurgled loudly. Xax recognized the sound. It was laughter.

"Not thisssss time." Oogle leaned into Marrl's leg and fell on top of him. Marrl winced as he tried to claw or even bite him, but he was pinned to the ground.

"What do I do?" Xax wanted to do something, but she felt like she was in the way. "Chief Marrl, how can I help?"

"Allow me, doll," a familiar voice shouted. "Just step aside and let me be the hero."

Vincent Twist.

"No!" Marrl shouted. His words were muffled. "Do not trust him!"

Against her better judgment, Xax took a giant step back and let Twist through. Oogle kidnapped her, not Vincent. Maybe that proved he was a good guy after all. "What are you going to do?"

"What I should have done hours ago." Vinnie fired—

"No, don't! Twist, I trusted—"

—at Oogle.

The pilot fell to the ground, hard. The Ken Reeg stood over the Tetsuashan's body and unloaded his bullets into the slug-like creature again and again and again.

"—him." Marrl collapsed to the ground.

"Sorry, Marrl." Twist tugged the lapels of his coat then slicked back his hair. "Splish double-crossed me, too. Pulled one over on all of us. A triple."

"What do you mean? That was Oogle, wasn't it?" Xax asked. She was relieved Splish was dead, but even with her limited



experiences, she knew they weren't safe. Yet.

"We are down one more crew member." Marrl grunted as he got up. "Since you are still alive, I suppose that means Oogle murdered Splish."

Vincent shook his head. Marrl did not like his beady eyes. "Not even close. Wrong species. Boy, won't you be surprised?"

"Come again?" Marrl backed away from Vincent, slowly and carefully. "Where is Fang? Where is my partner?"

"Oh, he's still breathing. For now, anyway," Vincent added.

Xax hoped the creature was all right, but was more worried about what happened to her. She had to know, while she still had a chance to ask. "What's going on? Did both pilots kidnap me?"

"Oh, doll. Use your pretty head," Vincent giggled, tapping his gun to the side of his head. "Splish and Oogle were one and the same. Brilliant, eh? That's Redwing Securities for you. Take out a very important politician, and make sure someone else takes the fall."

"So Oogle did not exist," Marrl said, addressing Twist. "If you had been murdered, the rookie would have been blamed for your death. Splish would then be free to collect a bonus and your gold."

"Now you're getting it. Though, I don't think you'd be off the hook, either. I hear you have some...obligations."

"Who told you that?"

The Ken Reeg pointed to his head. "You did."

"Does everyone know?"

"Show me," Xax commanded, breaking up their conversation. "How did Splish trick us?"

Vincent smirked and pointed. Splish's eye. Leaning over the dead alien, Xax noticed a filmy material had shifted on the pilot's retina. Underneath the blood-green iris, a thin sliver of gleaming, brilliant blue-green flecks poked through.

“Contact lens. Nice, eh?”

“The only way I could tell the difference between the pilots was by the color of their eyes,” Marrl said softly. “Simple, but effective.”

“Even I was fooled, Chief. Splish had to show me the disguise before I believed him.”

“So what were you after?” Marrl faced him. “The gold Xax told you about?”

Vincent inspected the gun barrel. “Thanks for reminding me, doll. Why don’t you—”

“You and I must have a conversation, Twist.” Marrl’s face grim. “Xax, please run down to Medical and find Cass and the others.”

“—but,” she objected.

“Now.”

“Run away, doll. You go get Leary and the rest of the gang. Won’t this be fun?”

The security chief threw his hands up and hopped back. It was now or never. “Vincent Twist of the Ken Reeg, I challenge you to open combat.”

“You think I’m that stupid? That I don’t know how you people work? How do I know you weren’t hired to kill me, too?” Vinnie asked, lowering his gun. He was aiming it at Marrl’s leg. “Better go, doll. Or I will shoot.”

The security chief nodded solemnly. “Do as he says. We will finish this.”

“How’s this work, anyway. If I don’t want to fight, all I gotta do is surrender. Right?”

“Yes, that is correct. I am obligated to honor your request.”

“Well, then. I surrender. Okay? You got me.”

Satisfied the two were not going to fight after all, Xax spun

around and ran as fast as her legs would carry her. As soon as she turned the corner, she heard gunshots.

*Bam. Bam.*

“You can come back whenever you’re ready, doll.” Vincent yelled after her. “We should definitely chat about your dad.”

Xax pumped her arms and sprinted down the hallway. She wasn’t a religious person, didn’t believe in the gods, but she mumbled a simple prayer anyway.

For Marrl.

“Please gods, let us live through this.”

For all of them.

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Marrl felt a cool hand slapping his face. Twist’s hand. “Are you listening to me, Chief? I’m offering you that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Tomorrow, you could be a free Ryjyllian. You could find a clan, settle down, have baby Ryjyllians. Cycle of life and all that shit.”

“Sorry, I must have dozed off.” Beads of sweat formed on Marrl’s nose and forehead. He could not feel his legs. Panicked, he tried to sit up, but he did not have the strength. “I have been shot.”

Twist tapped his foot, his shoes clicking to a rhythm only Marrl could hear. *Tap, tippity, tap. Tip, tip. Tap.* “I know Redwing owns you, Chief. Read it in your mind, see?”

“I know you stole the nanites.” Suddenly, Redwing Securities and all his financial problems did not seem that important. Compared to dying, anyway. It would not be a glorious death. “I do not understand why you have made our lives so complicated. What is it that you want?”

The Ken Reeg sneered. “What do I want? Easy. *Money.* Day

I got elected High Saldralla I get a call. Xax's father. Says he's willing to pay me to keep my hands off his girl."

Inhale, exhale. *Tip, tip, tip*. "So what? You kidnapped Xax? Why sabotage the ship, too?"

"Don't be stupid. Your ship was supposed to crash a long time ago, but Talus is too good at his job. That's why Splish grabbed a bunch of parts and launched 'em in an escape pod. Busted your communicator, too." Twist scoffed. *Tip, tappy, tap*. "Don't you see? That's why Redwing hand-picked you for this job. They knew you'd be too stupid to figure out what Splish was up to. You're a beast, not a detective."

Dark spots appeared at the edges of Marrl's vision. He was fading, and he knew it. "I do not believe you."

"That's the truth, Chief. You were set up from the start. Talus knew something smelled bad the minute they got on board. No security agency in their right mind would allow a ship like this to fly with such a tiny crew. He came to me first, and we made a deal. No harm, no foul. He just wanted to know what was going on. Didn't like you much, though. Guess you made a bad impression."

"Splish?"

"Where to start with that slimeball. When I told Xax's dad to bite me, he hired Redwing to take me out. When it comes right down to it, Splish was a greedy bastard. Everything went to hell when I let it slip that Xax was the only one who knew where my gold was. So he sets up this plan to kidnap the girl and pin it on you guys. Criss-cross. Get it?"

Marrl wanted to gut Twist, but he did not have the strength to do it. "If you say so."

"See, I wanted this job for the gold. Hired the slavers first thing. Have the whole Empire behind me, too, just waiting to see what I'd find beneath all that sand. Then Xax fell right into my lap like a sad, little puppy. She'll lead me straight to the treasure. Lucky for her, eh?"

“Right. Lucky.” Marrl closed his eyes. The security chief could barely make sense out of what Twist was telling him. All he could think about was: he was shot for no reason. “And the Empire? Will they attack?”

“Trust me, Marrl. They won’t. My gold’ll keep ‘em happy for a long time. They won’t conquer Illya as long as I pay ‘em for the slaves they’ve given me. Which is where you come in. You want to be an overlord?” Twist leaned over him. His breath smelled fruity, like a lemon.

Marrl hated lemons. They tasted bitter.

*Tip. Tappity, tip, tap. Tappity, tappity.*

Like floor polish.

“You sure you don’t want to help me out here? We’d make a great team, you know. My gold and your claws. I could use you.”

“I am sure.” Marrl coughed. His throat felt slimy, wet. Bloody? “I—”

“—out of my way!” He heard the doctor’s voice, but did not believe she was there. “You can’t die, you son of a bitch. Stay conscious, dammit.”

*Tippity, tippity, tippity.*

“You’re losing him!”

“...don’t die...”

“Murderer...”

“...Illya...”

“Hero.”

“Marrl? Can you hear me?”

He grunted.

“This is going to hurt.”

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Xax winced when she saw Doctor Dunn take the needle out. She knew she was pumping Marrl full of stims to help keep his heart rate up. If he slipped into a coma now, the Ryjyllian might never recover.

“Grab one of those bandages and put pressure on the wound,” Doctor Dunn barked as she rummaged through her kit. “Slow the bleeding as much as you can. Once he’s stabilized, you’ll have to help me shave his fur and take the bullet out.”

The cyborg cut in front of her. “What can I do, Violet? Tell me what to do.”

Doctor Dunn lowered her voice to a whisper. “You have what you need to deal with Twist. Worry about him. In the meantime, Xax and I will work on Marrl.”

“What was that, Doc? I didn’t quite hear you.” Twist scratched his crotch with the barrel of his gun. Ugh. Was he really that gross? Xax was glad she didn’t kiss him back.

“I told Cass there was nothing she could do. Xax is the only one qualified to help me.” Doctor Dunn winked at her. They had a plan, and it was a simple one. All they had to do was keep Vincent Twist talking until the robots picked up on his confession. Then, Cass would hit him with a fistful of tranquilizers.

“Okay, Doctor Dunn,” she said as she knelt by Marrl’s side. Normally, Xax wasn’t very good at fieldwork, but after everything that happened to her? The assistant felt like she could deal with anything. Sure, it could be her adrenaline talking, but for the most part Xax just wanted to make sure the security chief was okay. Marrl saved her life. Maybe she could return the favor.

“Xax,” Doctor Dunn repeated. She looked totally stressed out. Her hair was frizzy, like it had a mind of its own. Her lab coat was covered in blood. “That’s a nice name.”

“Thanks.”

The doctor stared straight into her eyes. They were brown, gentle. Caring. “Help me save him.”

“We will, Doctor Dunn.” Xax reached out and grabbed the woman’s hand. “Marrl doesn’t know, does he? How you feel about him?”

Marrl moaned softly. He was barely conscious. Not good.

Doctor Dunn slowly stretched her hand across his chest and ignored her. “When I heard his thoughts, I had no idea...”

Xax leaned closer and whispered: “Don’t worry. I won’t tell him.”

Her boss offered a weak smile.

“Yap, yap, yap. Quit flapping your gums, doll. I don’t want to hear no whispering or chatter.”

“You’ll pay for this Twist.” Cass did not sound happy. “Don’t assume your political position gives you immunity from attempted murder.”

“You think you’re the victim here? You have no idea what’s at stake, do you?” Vinnie asked. Xax wasn’t scared of him, she pitied him. What was so important he had to kill other people for? “Underground temples and streets lined with gold, doll. That’s worth more than you.”

“Knock it off, Twist. You’ve had your fun,” Cass barked at him.

“Have I?” Vincent leaned over and planted a kiss on Doctor Dunn’s forehead. She spit at him. “Yeah, I know what you want to do to me, Doc. Interesting, though, your feelings for the chief, there. That’d make a great vid, wouldn’t it?”

“Just shut up, Twist.” Xax shouted over her shoulder. The bleeding slowed, but Marrl was still barely conscious. His eyelids fluttered and he was groaning a lot. Doctor Dunn placed a small box in between the security chief’s teeth so he could bite down. “I lied to you. Don’t you get that? I don’t have any idea where the gold

is. It's just a stupid story I made up for you and Talus."

"I don't believe you, doll. See, I read your mind. You know too much about them temples. You may think they're not there, but deep down—"

"You're full of shit! Even when I'm telling you the truth you think I'm lying to you. Are you insane?"

Xax caught a glimpse of Cass sneaking up to Vincent; her skin was pitch-black and her eyes were twin pits of fire. "I have one more question for Mr. Twist."

"What's that, Leary? You finally gonna have some fun with me?"

Xax sucked in her breath. That bear she saw earlier—Fang—was on the other side of Twist. He had a gun, too.

"He's going to—" The warning slipped out of Xax's mouth. Twist immediately spun around and the two shot at each other. Their bullets both went wide. No one got hit.

Cass, on the other hand, did not miss her target. As soon as Vincent's back was turned, she plunged a fistful of needles into his scrawny shoulder. "Are you sleepy now, Mr. Twist?"

The Ken Reeg's arms flailed. His gun clattered to the ground. Fang kicked it away. "What did you do to me? What did you..."

Vincent Twist crumpled to the ground. Fang hopped on top of him and checked his pulse. "Still breathing, Mistress."

"Can you move him somewhere else now?" Doctor Dunn frowned as she pulled out an electric razor from her kit. "Xax, shave off part of Marrl's fur. He's as stable as he's going to get right now. Let's take this bullet out."

The cyborg sprung into action. "Fang, help me secure our former client. Then run down and tell Talus what happened and where his missing equipment is. Let's make sure we're not headed for an ambush."



“Yes, Mistress!” Fang winced, clutching his stomach.

“How’s he doing?” Cass knelt down. “Is Marrl going to make it?”

“I hope so.” Doctor Dunn focused all her attention on her patient. The security chief’s eyes were open and the bleeding slowed to a trickle. “Let’s hope Talus can bring that escape pod back so he can fix the ship and fly our way out of here.”

Xax giggled. She knew it wasn’t appropriate, given the seriousness of Marrl’s condition, but she needed to laugh. “Sorry, Doctor Dunn.”

“It’s all right. Marrl’s lost a lot of blood, but the bullet didn’t go that deep,” the doctor smiled as she inspected the wound. “Have those forceps handy?”

“Sure thing!”

## CHAPTER TEN

“Please give me another moment, Cass.” Marrl carefully propped himself up with another pillow and bit down on his tongue, hard. A sharp pang exploded in his belly; the sensation spread all the way down to his bare toes. The pain was so intense, he almost felt a tear escape his eye, but he did allow it to. Not in front of Cass.

The cyborg tilted her head and waited for him to continue. Cass was concerned, he knew that much, but she did not visit him as much as Xax and Fang did. He preferred it that way.

Marrl closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Maybe he should take sensitivity training. Or maybe, he should schedule a vacation.

“How are you feeling? I heard Violet is anxious to clean up her lab before we land this afternoon.”

“I would like to get out of this hospital bed,” he admitted. “What happened when you spoke with Talus? Was he upset?”

“You did manage to sleep through a lot.” Cass’s voice took on a serious tone. “Talus has made amends and the *Haldis* is in great shape. Though, I am a little upset with Redwing,” she added.

“Why?”

“Twist exaggerated a few details. The Empire was never interested in raiding Illya. That’s not who our client was working with.” The cyborg took a seat next to his bed, her long hair swung behind her like a death shroud. “It was Redwing, Marrl. They’re running a slave trade on the side for extra cash. Operated by freelancers and thugs, mostly. A few Ken Reeg and several pirates are involved, like Xax’s fiancé Gavanch Fal’n. Though, he wasn’t with the Templari. He was working on his own and needed a legitimate reason to stay near Illya.”

“I am assuming Redwing did not give you this information.”

“No, they didn’t. And never mind where I got it from.” Cass

smiled before she continued. "Xax's father contracted Redwing Securities to make sure Twist never reached Illya. Mr. Twist, on the other hand, hired us to make sure he did. It didn't matter what the outcome was, Redwing Securities would have gotten paid either way. Add gold fever on top of that? That's a lot of money for our company."

"So you were right all along. They are only concerned with profits. That still does not clear my conscience," Marrl replied sullenly. "What did Redwing expect us to do? Fail this mission?"

Lowering her eyes, the cyborg continued. "We were supposed to head for an abandoned space station, fix the ship there, and wait for their instructions. Redwing assured me there were no pirates, no mercenaries, no threats of any kind."

"So you ingested the nanites to read Redwing's mind. That is ironic."

Cass ignored him. "After we secured Twist in Oogle's quarters, I told Talus to go through with the original plan. Then, I reestablished contact with headquarters and provided them with a status update."

"What?" Marrl sat up sharply, ignoring the throbbing ache in his belly. "You *knew*?"

"No, not everything. Only what Redwing told me, which was more than everyone else but less than you might think. I didn't even know Devon Slaa was Xax's father until it was too late." Dark splotches broke out all over the cyborg's red skin. "It didn't matter how many nanites I took, I had no idea Xax was in danger. You have to believe that."

Marrl ignored her last comment and propped himself up a little higher. Lying down all day was driving him mad, but he supposed it was better than the alternative. "Can I kill Twist now?"

Cass smirked. "Don't be too hard on our client, Maarl. He's not evil, just greedy."

"I am sorry, but you are wrong. He is evil."

“Yes, well you have a right to be angry,” she nodded. “We all do, which is why I’ve negotiated a deal with Redwing.”

“Hush money,” Marrl growled. “So either we take the deal or owe them. Is that it? How many more years of indentured slavery would I have to endure?”

“None.”

Marrl propped himself up a little higher. “Excuse me?”

“Redwing wired me a sizable bonus in exchange for my testimony against Twist and Xax’s father. I used it to buy your contract. Now, they’re both being charged. In fact, Xax’s father has just been arrested for attempted assassination.”

“And Twist?”

“In addition to your attempted murder, the Saldrallans are bringing other charges against him. The Ken Reeg’s recent purchases of several slaves are in violation of his duties. If Twist is found guilty, he’ll be incarcerated for a long, long, time.”

Of all the words Cass had spoken in the last ten minutes, there were only three that mattered to him: He was *free*.

“The contract is solid, Marrl. You earned your freedom many times over. As soon as you’re ready, you can sign the papers.”

“It is... Overwhelming.” He had wanted to be free for so long, now that he was, he did not feel any different. Marrl did not expect that. He always imagined there would be something grander. A party or a celebration or a dance. With his clan mates. The ones he had never met. The ones he had yet to find.

Now that he was free, Marrl felt more alone than ever.

It was obvious Cass’s nanites had worn off, for she took his silence to mean he was happy.

“Good, I hope you’ll stay on with Redwing. I’d hate to lose you now. Sooner or later, this company will get what’s coming to them.”

Marrl did not know why, but he agreed with her. It felt

strange to be valued as a person. Perhaps he could take his revenge on Redwing by remaining an employee. He found the idea was oddly satisfying. Maybe then, he could have that private conversation with Doctor Dunn. When he wasn't sick, of course. "Yes, I will stay for now."

After she hugged him, she said: "If you'll excuse me, there's still one more thing I have to do."

The security chief feigned interest. The drugs were beginning to wear off. "What is that?"

"Stop a wedding."

\*\*\*

Xax sank back in her chair and cradled a keyboard in her lap. Before they left the abandoned spaceport, Talus managed to get their long-range communication back online. Cass told her she should call home right away, but she wasn't sure she wanted to. It meant dealing with her mom, who probably had no idea why Dad got arrested. She was always clueless.

"Do you want me to call her for you?" Xax had asked Cass to meet her in her quarters. She was glad the cyborg found the time to join her. "I could tell them you're indisposed at the moment. That you're recovering from the flu or something."

Xax inspected a split end and pulled her hair up until a bun. "No, thanks. I just want to get this over with."

"Do you remember what we talked about?"

"Yeah, I do." After Talus took the helm, Cass pulled her aside, offering her a couple of solutions to her problem. The best thing Cass said to her, however, was that she shouldn't lie to her mother anymore. Xax didn't want to be a homemaker or a politician's wife. She wanted to be an adventurer. To meet other alien species and explore places she read about in her textbooks—and there was

nothing wrong with that.

After she typed in the number to her parent's address, Xax waited for the call to go through. It took a while, but eventually the connection started to hum. "Just promise me one thing, Cass."

"Name it."

"If you meant what you said at dinner, will you mentor me? To be more like you, I mean?"

Cass threw her head back and laughed. "I thought I already was."

Lines of static filled the holo screen. After a few moments, an older woman came into view. "Xax? Is that you?"

She grinned. "Hi Mom, I'd like you to meet my mission leader, Cass Leary. She's my boss's boss."

"Hello, Mrs. Slaa." The cyborg waved to the monitor. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Why haven't you called? Do you have any idea how much trouble you're in?" Although she wore a fuzzy housecoat, the woman's hair was tied into a severe bun. Xax could tell she had been crying; her cheeks were puffy. "Did you even know your father has been arrested? Your fiancé called, too, and said he's been searching for you. Do you have any idea the mess you and your father have left for me?"

Taking a deep breath, Xax felt a sense of calm wash over her. She had no idea how her life would turn out, but if this trip was any indication? It was going to be one hell of an adventure.

"Xax? Are you listening to me?"

"I wish Widget was still here." Xax said absent-mindedly, remembering the day Talus gave it to her. It was hard to forgive the Dolom for using it to spy on her, but Xax understood Twist was more to blame than he was.

Maybe he could teach her how to build her another unit, a blue one this time. Maybe she could even program it herself.

“Mom, I want to tell you about my trip,” she spoke firmly into the monitor. “And you’re not going to like it.”

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Fang spun his chair around and stuck out a paw. “Money, now.”

“Aw, you picked up on K’laans pretty quick.” Talus the mechanic said, forking over a pile of credits. “How’s ‘bout another game before we land? Four out of five?”

“Pay attention to sky,” he said, rubbing his paw over the cockpit’s sleek controls. “Land first. Then we drink. Auto-pilot not good enough.”

“Heh, got that right.” Talus punched a button on the overhead monitor. “Heard some cops are waiting for Twist, too. I wouldn’t stick around if I were you. You’re not on the roster and Redwing might get a little weird about that.”

“Agreed,” Fang nodded. “Many places to hide on the ground.”

Once Talus retrieved the missing escape pod, the mechanic was able to piece the ship back together. With the back end of the ship repaired, the Dolom re-programmed his robots and freed up his time to fly. Talus and Fang spent the rest of the trip in the cockpit, playing K’laans, and adjusting their route as they went.

While the mechanic’s flying skills were not as great as a Tetsuashan’s, Fang was impressed. Best part? Mistress said their mission was more fun than last time. Marrl-man still sore, but mending. Xax safe. Green man tied up. Doctor turned into a maid to clean up lab. Talus was tolerable.

And Mistress very pleased. Even tried to take his picture.

“You ready, little guy?” The Dolom asked as the planet Illya’s wispy atmosphere came into view.

“Fang always ready.”

**THE END**