

Orion Transit

by Bryan Schuder

Commander Harvos and Master Engineer Vetra walk through the alley between the various open swaths of space. The Orion is only roughly half reconstructed, so many sections are clear and have yet to be refitted to serve the Orion's new purpose. Vetra taps repeatedly on a data tablet, flipping through figures, charts, and other information. All the while, Harvos calmly walks and looks over occasionally to pay attention to a point Vetra emphasizes.

“Commander, I've NEVER seen ANYTHING like this. These design choices are INSANE! I understand that there's an abundant contribution of technology from the Cithcem and Tzk-Tzk, but... WHY use the human ship cores as a basis for these integrations?!”

“Well, you have to look at it from their perspective. The Cithcem, Tzk-Tzk, and Humans are the only three species in the Galactic Coalition that have their own unique means of traversing space. Most other species use Aavo based warp drives and ship designs. So, if you plan to go outside the normal constraints, who else are they going to partner with?”

“But these are HUMANS with their galactic-disaster-in-the-making Ship Cores!”

“A technology that only 10 months opened up the barrier between true space and hyperspace...”

“BY CREATING AN EXPLOSIVE INTER-DIMENSIONAL FATIGUE DEVICE!!”

Harvos leans his head away from Vetra yelling at him, and with a smirk he turns to her, “That's actually a common theme when it comes to Human innovation.”

“And knowing that doesn't help the fact I'm on a Human ship! This ship from this document contains: 2000 small missiles, 250 large non-nuclear missiles, 100 nuclear missiles, 20 fusion torpedoes, 4 fusion torpedoes equipped with with mini-ship cores, and THREE SHIP CORES that are twice the size of the one that ripped a hole into hyperspace augmented with Cithcem, Tzk-Tzk, and some tech I've never seen before!!”

Harvos takes a few steps forward with a smirk still, “If those numbers scare you, remind me to never take you aboard a Human battleship. Even though, I believe you'd find the 2000mm mass drivers fascinating.”

Vetra steps forward in front of Harvos with a stern gaze, “How can you just take this so casually?! I've been on this ship a mere few days and have found nothing standard or remotely normal about this ship... or its crew!”

Harvos takes a deep breath and leans in to stare Vetra right in her eyes, “And I'd be worried if there WAS anything standard or normal aboard this ship.”

Vetras eyes narrow as she abruptly turns and walks through the automatic doors, an indignant aura venting off behind her. Harvos raises a brow, rolls his eyes while shaking his head.

Vetra straightens up as she points and talks about the systems and areas in the Main Engineering center of the Orion. Harvos patiently and earnestly listens to her explanations. They eventually round the corner of a sectioned area to the “Main Engineering Control”.

“And here’s... Main... Engineering... Control....”

Vetra narrows her eyes before glancing over at the area, making exceptional efforts to express her disdain for the three-seater couch in the middle of the area. She quickly points out the surrounding refuse of human snack food bags, cans of carbonated drinks stacked to form a small castle structure, and collection of strange electronic devices with exposed components. Most importantly, she expresses her unfavorable disposition to the tall, overweight human male currently wrapped up in a comforter blanket, resting on a few pillows, on top of the couch.

“Commander, there’s something I’ve REALLY been meaning to talk to you about-”

Harvos holds a finger and quietly shushes at Vetra. She pauses for a moment, her ears flick back. The gesture confuses her. Harvos sighs before speaking softly, “Keep quiet.”

Vetra responses in a stern but softer voice, “This fat, annoying human-”

“Nash.”

“What?!”

“Nash, Vetra. He has a name. Please try to address him as such.”

“Fine. This Nash seems to be either abstractly trying to sabotage the project overall, or DIRECTLY DRIVING ME INSANE.”

Harvos briefly nods his head forward, before slowly lifting it up to look directly at Vetra, “I explained to you this would be an immensely difficult assignment for you.”

“YES. But, I thought it would be due to the level of technology, the uniqueness of the designs, or just the sheer scale. But... This thing-”

“Person.”

“This. Person. He seems to take pleasure in undermining my efforts to bring this area to Galactic Coalition standards. And- Wait, why are we whispering?”

“I didn’t want to wake Nash up. He’s probably been up all night.”

Vetra blinks and tilts her head to the side. Her eyes read Harvos’s honest delivery, while the rest of her face revolts at the realization, “YOU DON’T WANT TO WAKE UP THE LAZY BEAST IN MY FUCKING ENGINEERING DEPARTMENT!?”

A muffled chuckle echoes in the silence left after Vetra's outburst coming from the human on the couch.

Harvos stands up straight and grins towards the couch, "So how long have you been listening to us?"

Nash rises and pivots himself into the middle seat of the couch. Various small tools, snack wrappers, and a game from an antiquated game console fall around him, "Oh, since you both came in down the way. Sounds seem to focus right into this area."

Harvos steps forward and circles the couch, avoiding the debris in the area. He then pauses and kneels down to look closer at the couch, "This feels familiar. But doesn't look or smell..."

Nash shuffles over to the left side of the couch. He takes a moment to clear the seats of junk, with a toothy smile, "Yes. Rebuilt and reupholstered. But, it is THE couch."

Harvos immediately plops himself onto the right seat of the couch. He stretches his legs out and pushes his back into the cushions. Vetra's jaw drops witnessing the scene, her disbelief visible long before saying anything, "What are you doing, Commander?!"

"I'm greeting an old friend."

"I-I- uh- ... What?!"

Harvos drops his head back and sighs, "Long story short. This couch was on the Mintaka. Many times it served as my place to get rest during the roughest times aboard the Mintaka. During long missions, it was moved up into the captain's quarters near the bridge, so we could be nearby but still have a chance to get some sleep. We would have one person a seat sleeping in shifts sometimes. Though, I'm bit confused as to why it is here of all places."

Harvos looks over to Nash. Nash laughs, "It was in orbit around Mars."

"Really?!"

"Yep. Turns out some astronomers on Mars had been tracking it for years after the Tzerkz Earth Defense, but never could get the approval to retrieve it and it was in a stable enough orbit that it wasn't considered dangerous enough to be blasted out of the sky. So, it was just their inside joke. They actually made it a calibration target for some of the short range sensors. It wasn't until a few months ago after the we dropped the hyperspace bomb that I joked in an interview about missing my couch from the Mintaka. Well someone made the connection. Then, some of the survivors from the Mintaka, Alnitak, and Alnilam organized an effort with their new ship and retrieved it. The inter-fleet logistics crews delivered it to me while I was working on getting the three cores rebuilt."

"How the hell did they get it through the AFS logistics system?"

"Categorized as an Official Historical Relic of Human Bravery Upon the Battlefield."

Harvos and Nash exchange a brief moment of amusement before breaking out, laughing hard.

"REALLY?! I can't believe it!"

“I know! I looked up the guy who authorized it and sent him a 100 credits with a note, “The next few rounds are on me!””

Vetra stares with her shoulders squared and the increasingly stern expression on her face reaching the upper limit. Harvos senses the distinctive aura of Vetra reaching her critical mass point, “Master Engineer Vetra.”

Vetra responds with her gritted teeth barely coming apart, “Yes. Commander.”

“You do have an extremely valid point with placement of this piece of furniture in this critical engineering area.”

Harvos pulls himself up from the couch and stands tall and official. “I’ll take your concerns seriously and work with Chief Engineer Nash to relocate this out of the area and into a more appropriate area of the ship. You are correct that this couch doesn’t belong here.”

A very slight smirk displaces the irritation on Vetra’s face.

“But... As a member of the Galactic Coalition and a representative of the Sctillia, I expect you to extend respect and understanding of the traditions and cultures of the other races aboard this vessel, no matter how strange they may seem. This couch holds a significance to many of the crew of this vessel. So, I anticipate an upstanding officer like yourself should be able to perform this request without any trouble.”

The smirk on Vetra’s face fades, “Yes. Commander. May I be excused? I have other duties to perform.”

“Yes, you may. We will continue the rest of the tour at a later time.”

Vetra abruptly salutes, “Yes. Commander.”

Harvos salutes back as Vetra pivots and walks through a nearby bulkhead automatic door.

Harvos and Nash both watch for the automatic doors to close behind after Vetra.

“Holy shit, Harvos, I’m surprised she didn’t trip you with the stick in her ass when she about-faced.”

“Now, now... We shouldn’t judge too much. I especially can’t. I was just as serious as her once.”

Harvos resumes his seat upon the couch. “I would have hoped she be a bit more... open and receptive. She does have a genuine interest in the technology aboard this ship.”

“Oh, she’s damn brilliant. Optimized the hell out of my configurations for the cores. Definitely learning stuff from her. But, a ridiculously stubborn temperament.”

“I just wish she’d realize what we are trying to do here. But, damn if she’s still sticking with all that Galactic Coalition... crap.”

Nash puzzles a moment, turns his head slowly, and raises a brow at Harvos. “So says a decorated Fleet Commander of the Galactic Coalition.”

Harvos throws his head back and sinks back into couch cushions groaning, “Point taken. But in my defense, I know what I am talking about.”

Nash sinks equally into the cushions, slouching a bit when stretching the legs out. “Don’t worry too much. She just- She just hasn’t reached that point. It takes time to get there and that one catalyst to get you started.”

Harvos surveys the vast engineering area. He examines the equipment and listens the slight background noise of the three ship cores. He is silent for some time. “I remember mine.”

Nash takes a slow, deep breath. “Johnston Sacrifice?”

“Yes. I remember the moment, too. The Mintaka was moving away fast from the Johnston, overloaded with rescued crew. We were at a weird angle, keeping our profile against the Tzerkz fleet small. It strangely gave us the perfect view of the Johnston. I was busy trying to coordinate with the damn Coalition Commanders, that were too busy arguing tactics to give me any attention. Something felt strange. I finally broke away from the comm to pay attention. I saw the Captain, Igor, Hans, Saitama, and even you saluting, with tears in your eyes. The last garbled transmissions from the dying captain of the nearly destroyed Johnston...”

Harvos takes a long calculated breath, “We do this not out of desperation... We do this because it is a price we need to pay... For if we do not value what is before us, then what value are we. Then, I heard it... That sound. That torrent of hell storms that somehow you could hear on the ship. I looked up to see space twisted around the Johnston. And... A bright streak across the battlefield. A pure white streak of light fading into iridescent echoes. One of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen, but I’ll never be able to find joy in thinking about. In that moment, the Johnston, the biggest human ship I ever saw, accelerated itself in unwarped space faster than any ship on record, right at the Tzerkz planet killer platform. It tore through Tzerkz defense forces, literally shattering ships. Bursting right through the layers of shielding, straight into the planet killer... putting a crater a quarter of its size right down to its dreaded core. Just as it was about to get into range of my homeworld.”

Nash nods with a sniff in recognition, “Then the call came out from the Fleet Admiral Blair... To all Alliance of Free Stars ships. Form up where you can... Engage. At. Will.”

Harvos rolls his head on the couch over to face Nash. “And I saw these beaten and battered human ships go right into the fray along with remnants of Sctillian Defense Force fleet. But not one Galactic Coalition ship. I knew there were a few Sctillian captains from the Sctillian Defense Forces in the fleets. Something in me had to reach them... I still can’t believe Captain Tylor allowed me to use the comms for that message.”

Nash holds his hand out, bobbing it in sync with his recollection of memory, “To all Sctillian Defense Force captains. Our ancestors watch us at this very moment. Shall we give them reason to welcome us when it is our time to move Beyond. Or will they see no reason to light our way to them. Is that roughly, right? My understanding of other languages is awful in general, and it took me a month to figure out which dialect of what Sctillian language you said at day.”

Harvos smiles with great amusement, “That’s actually a decent translation. Unfortunately, you kind of lose the severity of the call to the core of our cultural honor... You still remember what I said?”

“Hell yes, I do. The sound and tone of your voice when you spoke was metal as fuck. And when almost a sixth of the all ships in the all Galactic Coalition fleets broke formation and charged with the AFS and SDF rally... Honestly, you became my goddamn hero that day! I HAD to figure out what you had said! Even the Cithcem and Tzk-Tzk fleets charged against Aavo orders.”

Harvos laughs, “I don’t know if you should be making heroes out of Sctillians that were the prime subject of a Galactic Coalition military tribunal.”

Nash sits up and turns on the couch right to Harvos. “A Sctillian that got exonerated and TWO promotions out of it?! I reversed the septic system to one room on one ship to teach one asshole of an Aavo officer a lesson, and I nearly get vented out the airlock. Thank god, I knew where the access panel in the chamber was to short out panel controls and override the inner door.”

“And we never got to tour another Aavo commanded ship after that.”

“Did you really miss it?”

Harvos searches his mind with his eyes. “... Not really.”

The two share a quiet moment, as the engineering systems around operate and function.

“It’s strange seeing all three cores together in one place, but nice to know they are functional and in service again.”

Nash takes in a deep breath through the nose before exhaling mournfully through the mouth, “Yah. It’s good to have them flying together again. In different configuration, but still.”

Harvos leans forward and aiming his head to Nash to get a good look at his face. “You doing okay?”

“Yah... I could have gotten salvage from anywhere in the Alliance of Free Stars territories. But I promised myself, if I got the chance I’d get the Mintaka, Alnilam, and Alnitak flying in one shape or form again... I’d do it. It was rough at first, but all three are part of the Orion now. Every single scrap I could find.”

Nash lifts his head to return Harvos’s gaze. “For the first time and in a long while... I feel... Good. I can honestly smile when no one else is looking.”

Harvos reaches his arm out and pats Nash on the shoulder, eventually grabbing hold and playfully shaking him around a bit. “Good to know. And it’s good to be here. This ship has a soul I have missed feeling.”

Another moment passes between the two.

“Do I really have to move the fuckin’ couch?”

“Yes. You have to move the fucking couch.”

“Dammit, Harvos.”

“Damn me nothing. You got a few months of free reign, now you have to share the space.”

“Okay. I’ll look for another place to put it-”

“Not in the hallway outside her private quarters.”

“Dammit.”

“And must be placed in a usable spot by the crew, and not just in some obnoxious spot to make a statement.”

Nash backs himself up and holds his hands out to Harvos, “Dude!?”

Harvos responds the same with a slight twist to the tone of his voice, “Dude!”

Nash rests his cheek on his hand and groans, “Fine. I’ll move it to the rec room nearest the bridge. I was thinking about it anyway after I got all the basic systems calibrated here. But, you should have seen her try to move it.”

A sly smirk grows on Harvos’s face. “Really? She didn’t tell me she tried to move it.”

“Well, when nearly break your foot, blow out a hydraulic hand truck, and burn up a brand new hover lift trying to move a couch; it’s probably not going to be the topic of discussion with your boss.”

Harvos slowly tilts his head down at the piece of furniture he sits upon. He slides down on to the floor, looking underneath the couch. “What did you do to this thing?!”

Nash grins with devious, self-satisfaction. “Ship docking mag locks in the legs with an encrypted control module.”

Harvos glances up from his investigation of the couch’s underside. “And?”

Nash shrugs. “And, I got our resident Cithcem to use a bit of his nanotechnology to reinforce the frame.”

“Franklin did this?”

“Yah, Frank thought it was absolutely fucking hilarious.”

Malva detours from her trek across the Orion and peeks into the empty large recreation room. Only the minimal safety lights illuminate the room. Malva’s eyes stop when she sees the modest figure of Ryusei Oliphant, or Saitama to the rest of the crew. Saitama finishes tucking a blanket around the large

sleeping mass of Nash. She softly pivots, her long hair briefly fanning out, and carefully steps quietly away towards Malva. “Ah, Assistant Commander Malva. How are you doing?”

“Good. Quite good, Gunnery Officer... Oliphant?”

“That is the correct form.”

“I’m sorry, I’m still getting used to human names and proper use.”

Saitama smiles reassuringly. “You are doing just fine, especially given this particular crew.”

“Did I interrupt anything?”

Saitama gives a gentle shake of her head and moves into the doorway with Malva. “No. I was just making sure he good for the night. Are you going to the bridge?”

“Yes. I am.”

Saitama walks a short distance towards the bridge and gestures to Malva. “Good, so am I.”

The two set off side by side in the nearly finished hallways. Malva crooks her head slightly to Saitama. “Pardon me if this is rude, but doesn’t Chief Engineer Howard have his own private quarters to sleep in?”

“Oh, yes.”

Malva waits a few moments for more of a response before refocusing her glance at Saitama. Saitama notices. “Nash just happened to get tired and fell asleep on the couch.”

“I want to make sure the crew has everything it needs. On that subject, do you have any needs or requests?”

Saitama searches her mind as her face quizzically reflects her thoughts. “I think Hanna and I have everything we need-”

Saitama’s eyes spring open and she quickly spins in front of Malva, her hands clasped together in front of her face. “But, if it’s at all possible can you see if it’s in the budget to acquire some functional and decorative pieces for the ship in general?”

Malva blinks with surprised interest at this sudden display, her ears perking. She flips through her tablet and brings up some relevant figures. “Yes, I believe there is some budget set aside for such ship improvements. What did you have in mind?”

“Area rugs to go around the beds. The floors are a bit chilly at the moment when you get of bed.”

Malva stares down at her tablet. She taps through some menus, pauses, and starts writing notes with an honest interest. “They REALLY are! I thought that was just my quarters.”

“Oh no. Everyone has noticed it. Even Franklin and Jefferson.”

“Well, then it is a problem that needs to be addressed. I might be able to allocate budgeting from the cultural expression quota to handle some items... Yes. That would work.”

Malva enters commands on the tablet. After a point, she gazes at something on the screen for a long time. Saitama shifts around to Malva’s side and looks over at the tablet’s screen. “It’s a very pretty design. What is that exactly?”

Malva shakes her head slightly, as she returns to her surroundings. “Oh! It’s my clan’s... I think the correct term is “flag”.”

Saitama takes hold of one side of the tablet and gets a better look. The two hold the device between each other.

“I’ve never seen these before.”

Malva sighs, “Regulations aboard Galactic Coalition ships usually limit the display of such things to very specific times and places. It’s so frustrating to work around, most don’t bother. Though I’ve found various loopholes over the years that have gotten some attention.”

Saitama follows Malva’s longing gaze onto the screen. She reaches a finger out to the tablet and bookmarks the image. Malva blinks and looks at Saitama. Saitama smiles mischeviously. “I believe this is a cultural expression item for the budget.”

Malva returns to the tablet with newfound delight. “I can not argue with that conclusion. Are you familiar with traditional Sctillian attire?”

Malva taps the tablet again to reveal new images of various colorful clothing designs. Saitama’s eyes light up. “No, but I would like to be familiar. Wait! Go back to that one!”

Saitama briefly covers her mouth with a hand. “Oh, Hanna would look lovely in that.”

“It’s a bit formal. You really think the Chief Scientist would wear it?”

“Oh, she has such a weakness for things like these. She would have a hard time not wearing in the lab even.”

The two continue making slow, but steady progress towards the bridge. Both take turns to peruse imagery on the tablet between them.

The lithe, bipedal crystalline form of the Tzk-Tzk illuminates as a voice oscillates into the air, “I do hope you are not disappointed by our lack of being upfront with you until now Captain Tylor.”

A tall backed chair in the office rotates away from a warping starscape via viewing portal. Captain Tylor chuckles gently, “Of course not. You know from my records and my off-records that this isn’t my first covert purpose assignment.”

A seated mechanical, roughly humanoid Cithcem form pivots its head towards Captain Tylor, "Indeed. But, Jefferson and I felt it would be rude to not apologize for not informing you of all the details of this new undertaking."

"Gentlemen, I do appreciate such. So, let's get straight to the point. What is the full reason of the Orion project?"

Jefferson's crystal body pauses its pulsing lights for a moment before a flurry of colors accompany a ghostly voice, "To defy the Aavo."

Captain slowly raises his head and puts his back firmly into his chair. He takes a few seconds of thought before opening his mouth. "Admittedly, that seems to be humanity's specialty. But... Defy in what way, exactly?"

Silence befalls the room as the Tzk-Tzk and Cithcem exchange a series of non-verbal communications. Captain Tyler notices a few parts as fast blinks of light come between the two. The Cithcem turns his head to the Captain with an apologetic synthetic voice, "Sorry, again, Captain. We are making certain the facts are correct in what we are to reveal to you. Shall I explain?"

"Go ahead, Franklin."

"The Cithcem and Tzk-Tzk have grown tired of the Aavo's Galactic Coalition. Admittedly, it does serve a purpose. But, its methods have done more harm than good. We have been in the Coalition for over three hundred years. We are certain that its methods will never allow species to ultimately progress past what the Aavo deem. Their Uplift Protocol imprisons and impedes."

A flicking reddish glow bursts forth from the Tzk-Tzk, "And after what they've done to the Scillia-WE. CAN. NOT. BE. IDLE."

Captain Tylor immediately notices the strange display from the Tzk-Tzk. He isn't sure, but this may be what Tzk-Tzk show when angry.

Jefferson's tone returns closer to former emanations. "I apologize. The Scillia are a sensitive subject. We... knew of the Scillia long before the Aavo found them. We... hid them."

"Hid them?"

"Yes, Captain. Both the Tzk-Tzk and Cithcem agreed to shield them from the Aavo for as long as we could. We created entire hidden space stations to cancel out their signs of activity and made use of galactic phenomena to aid our efforts. We planned out major trade routes far and away from them. We carefully created reports to the Aavo that would make that region of space be uninteresting to any Galactic Coalition activity."

Franklin continues for Jefferson, "That was until fifty years ago when a flamboyant Aavo celebrity decided to lead an extremely well publicized expedition to that exact region of space. This was a few months before both the Cithcem and Tzk-Tzk were going gain official, recognized territorial expansion in that region."

Jefferson echoes distantly, “They would have been safe to develop on their own...”

Captain Tylor nods with understanding. “I’m sure you are familiar with the human philosophy of Murphy’s Law?”

Franklin nods in return. “Yes. Quite. Such a concept is part of our protocol to identify if a species is sufficiently advanced enough to consider first contact.”

Jefferson lights up a series of flickers through his crystals. “It’s been fifty years and we have had to witness our wards turn into another passive thrall for the Aavo. But...”

The crystal throughout Jefferson grows a warm blue light as a somber resonant voice gives away to hope, “Then twenty years ago, the Aavo found humanity... And they have never been so... Challenged.”

Franklin leans his head forward to Captain Tylor. “For the first time, since the Aavo encountered us, we saw the Aavo humbled. And, the for the very first time, we saw the Aavo hesitant.”

Captain Tyler cracks a dry smirk. “Well, it certainly didn’t seem like they were expecting to be met by fleets of warp capable ships able to provide an honest fight for them when they warped right into the vicinity of Earth.”

Jefferson still glows warmly, “We treasure the discomfort and confusion that Aavo fleet commander demonstrated that moment.”

Captain Tylor strokes his gray beard. He carefully eyes both Jefferson and Franklin. “I doubt just making the Aavo uncomfortable and regretful of allowing us in the Galactic Coalition was enough to justify humanity’s involvement in your plans.”

The crystalline glow dims momentarily. “No. The Johnston Sacrifice made the Tzk-Tzk and Cithcem realize, we needed to consider humanity.”

Franklin bows his head and clasps his mechanical hands. “It is hard for either of our kind to fully express the debt we owe Humans for that act. We were determined to protect our wards at all cost. But, humanity rose to the task without question and spearheaded the effort to save Sctil and ensuring the Sctillia’s continued existence.”

The Tzk-Tzk, Jefferson, literally and figuratively beams with a resonant voice matching, “But the difference we saw in the Sctillia... They were... Independent. Strong. Willful... As they were before the Aavo and the Galactic Coalition.”

Captain Tylor shakes his head. He takes a deep breath in and speaks in earnest, “No. You don’t owe humanity a thing. When the Tzerkz tried to mass rush Earth, it was the Cithcem and Tzk-Tzk that answered the call immediately with as many volunteer Sctillian Defense Force ships still operational that could make it.”

Franklin rises back up. “We appreciate the sentiment. Admittedly, we did not know what to consider humanity for until the Hyperspace breach.”

“So that’s the catalyst for the Orion Project. The creation of the first Hyperspace capable exploration vessel.”

Franklin and Jefferson respond together, “Yes.”

Franklin’s synthesized voice grows a serious tone, “This is a unique chance to not only establish a new united effort between our species, to learn how we are all suppose to progress in this universe, and to show the Galactic Coalition for what it is.”

Jefferson choruses, “And allow humanity to show our Scitilian wards how to be FREE! And maybe... create something for our future wards to be a part of.”

Captain Tylor sits back into his chair, stroking his beard again, taking turns examining Jefferson and Franklin. He sighs, “That’s a lot to put upon this project... Wait- Future wards?”

Both Franklin and Jefferson remain silent.

Captain Tylor nods understandingly. “Very interesting.”

A tall lean woman puts her blonde hair back into a tight bun. With a quick brush of the hands along her lab coat, she hops back into her seat, tapping a few commands into the console.

The giant cybernetic man in the pilot’s seat turns over to the woman, “Miss Hannah, it was Groombridge 1, correct?”

After the woman types into the console, images and charts spring up along an array of displays on the command deck. With a slight smile, Hans spins around in her chair. “Yes! How close can you get the ship?”

Igor responds with a big, hearty laugh and a thick Russian accent, “Close? The ship will kiss it, if you wish Miss Hannah.”

Contained glee fights inside Hans as her face reveals a grin. She takes a moment and deep breath to resume a more moderated demeanor. “I’ve always wanted to see one of these worlds for myself and to personally take the measurements... Write a report about it!”

Igor shakes his head, chuckling, “Such excitement over paperwork! But, at least you have excitement. I will get you so close, you will be able to reach out of airlock and take samples yourself.”

A set of automatic doors open from the back of the command deck, with marginally irritated Vetra walking out of them. She quickly walks onto the deck and sits right in her seat of choice. Igor waves at her. “Miss Vetra! You have come at good time! We will see something very pretty.”

Vetra, with a flurry of console inputs, attempts to bury herself into her engineering work. “That is nice. I have work to do and I do not think looking at pretty things is part of it.”

Hans slyly says, “Even if it is a Rainbow World?”

Igor leans out from the pilot seat and reaches out his long cybernetic arm to Vetra’s station. He gently but solidly places his hand on Vetra’s console to get her attention. “It is pretty thing... And work! Now go to front and take good seat. I will get us very close.”

Vetra startles from large Russian’s old cybernetic hand gripping the screen. She finally processes what has been said in the last few seconds and mumbles in her clan’s dialect, “An Iridescent God?”

She shoots up from her chair and slowly maneuvers towards the front of the command deck to the gigantic viewing portal. Hans takes hold of a data tablet as she pulls herself up from her chair, quickly joining Vetra in the front. Out in the distant void of space, a glowing dot grows larger. Hans beams with her unique blend of moderated excitement. “So many failed sensor readings and failed attempts to explain these worlds.”

Vetra squints towards the dot. “There are number in the sky at night on my homeworld. So many legends and stories about why they exist. And they are still mysteries, even to the Galactic Coalition Science Core. I used to sit at night with the telescope and watch them in the night sky.”

“Well, they’ve just never tried hard enough to understand them.”

Eventually the dot reveals itself as solid round planet with a flowing, streaming rainbows of colors enveloping it. Igor closes his eyes and firmly grasps his controls. “Dropping out of warp now...”

Vetra snaps out of her trance and quickly grabs hold of the front railing, expecting to be shaken around. Her eyes dart around after a few seconds. She relaxes enough to let curiosity and confusion take control. Hans points her over to Igor. “Don’t worry, there’s reason he’s the pilot.”

Hans holds the data tablet in front of Vetra. Vetra studies the real-time figures and her eyes widen with understanding. “He’s adjusting the warp field decay rate dynamically?! But-”

Hans speaks in a near whisper to Vetra, “Igor was part of an experimental program to determine the effectiveness of cybernetics and human-ship interfaces. He got his cybernetics prior to the program for other reasons, so he got in easily. The program was a success, but someone came up with a better solution.”

“The Core Calculation AIs, I’ve read about them.”

“Yes. They are very practical and good with the job. But, can be a bit rough on transitions.”

Vetra comments with a lower, annoyed tone, “That I have felt.”

“There are aspects that they haven’t replaced yet.”

The two turn back around to watch the light from the stars and planet return to focus as the ship eases completely out of warp. The rainbow world fills the background of the view from the portal, with the long, gigantic deck of the Orion in the foreground. The planet grows larger and larger. Vetra’s awe tinged with worry as she looks to Hans. Hans notices Vetra’s concern and calls out to Igor, “What are you planning?”

“How close?”

“How close can you get?”

“That is not question I asked.”

Hans blink slowly. She dons an evil smile as her head rises from the data pad. “Touch it, please, Igor.”

Vetra goes back and forth between the two. “Touch it?! What do you mean?!”

“I’ve been wanting to get upper atmospheric samples and have a series of probes waiting to be launched down into the planet.”

“What?!”

Hans presses one spot on her data tablet and hands it to Vetra.

“Has this been approved-?!”

“Yes. I’ve submitted a number of experiments and have many of them approved by the Captain.”

Vetra takes hold of the data tablet and studies it. A fight between genuine interest and panicked self-preservation plays out on her face. She opens her mouth, but Hans interrupts her by touching another spot on the data tablet. Vetra studies it more and what she sees shocks her, “What is this technology?”

“All human warships are capable of atmospheric re-entry. Most aren’t very graceful, but they work. So, when browsing the Galactic Coalition’s tech archives, many on the design team found an astounding number of technologies regarding ship construction from your species’s collection. So, we’ve integrated everything we could find a use for.”

“This is all dated over fifty years ago. I’ve never seen or heard of any of this.”

“Most government projects aren’t public knowledge.”

Igor laughs, “Don’t worry, you get used to government business. Many things happen, but do not. Many thing are made, but are not made. We are here, but we are not.”

Vetra slowly browses through a list of archived documents in the Orion’s computer systems. Her expression wilts as more entries show up as she continues down the list.

Hans pushes the tablet up to Vetra’s chest, til she can no longer read it. “You’ll have plenty of time to read up, but right now I think you need to be a part of this.”

Igor presses a button on a nearby console, a chirp comes the intercom system of the ship and he speaks, “To everyone. We are going to do Miss Hannah’s Rainbow World experiment. If you hurry, good seats will still be here for you.”

The Orion lowers into the upper layers of the rainbow world. As it graces the very edges of the planet's influence, massive panels along the Orion hinge out, pivot, and rotate. Soon the friction of the thick upper atmosphere blasts against the Orion. The rainbow soupy haze jets around as the friction rockets the heat along the surface of the ship. When the surface of the ship heats up, a blue glow forms along the hottest paths. As the glow intensifies, the surface of the ship repulses and sculpts the rainbow haze along the ship. The rainbow soup swirls into vortexes as the array of panels shift, vectoring the vortexes to use. The massive Orion stabilizes and sleds upon the cover of the world below.

Upon the deck of the Orion, armored panels slide open reveal a series of small launcher tubes. Prismatic powder swirls along the deck of the large ship, moving in waves similar to snow dusted roads during a snowstorm. Seconds later a series of small tiny rockets swarm out and clear from the ship before cutting out. They fall into the rainbow haze. The haze obscures their bright beacons only meters deep.

Vetra looks at her data tablet. "And communication lost with the last probe."

Hans stands over her console excitedly browsing through the readings flowing out onto the screen. She holds out her finger to punctuate, "But further than anyone else has managed before!"

"Which confirms it is an issue of signal degradation from the atmosphere's influence. So, the amount of atmosphere does make a difference."

"Vetra, could you set up another launch of probes, but alter the parameters this way."

Hans carries over a tablet and holds it next to Vetra's console. Vetra reads the specifications and types them up into her console. The two go back and forth discussing the details for the next launch.

In the back of command deck, the rest of the crew stands. Idle exchanges of conversation take place inbetween looking out of the viewing portals. Nash, with an arm resting on top of Igor's large shoulder, chats about adjustments to pilot systems as Igor continues to pilot. Captain Tylor walks along side Saitama, both agreeing about thermal issues in crew quarters flooring. Franklin asks Harvos about the movement a particular couch, which Harvos recounts a necessity to maintaining crew morale and preventing the destruction of ship flooring. Malva and Jefferson discuss the variations of different optical lenses on a subject, while Malva laims out the viewing portal and pushes buttons on a Scillian camera.

A strange chirp silences all activity aboard the command deck. It continues non-stop until Malva rushes over to panel and sorts through various menus. Alarm jumps onto her face. "Civilian Emergency Distress Signal! It's weak, but we are getting some data."

Captain Tylor switches to the business face and issues commands, "Igor. Immediately bring the ship out of atmosphere. I promise to resume your research when possible, Hans."

Hans nods with a slight bow and quickly returns to her station. She feverishly activates the Orion's full sensor array. In seconds, screens display the efforts to track down the signal. The Orion pitches up fast and the front viewing portal soon shows only the stars. As the ship exits the influence of the rainbow

world, sensors spark to life. They quickly locate the source of the distress signal. Hans sends the results to the main screen, “I believe the source is there.”

Jefferson remains very still as his crystalline form grows completely dark. Light erupts back after a few moments with a confident resonance, “Yes, I can confirm. She exactly correct.”

Malva’s eyes dance quickly. She reads the text on her current console, “Emergency Distress Broadcast from the Delaro Commune Ship Seppa-Tau-Yal. Ship was... attacked by unidentified pirates?! Extensive damage done... Dead drifting after emergency panic warp. They transmitted sensor readouts for pirate ship.”

Malva slowly angles her head to Harvos and Captain Tylor, “This doesn’t make sense, Captain, Commander.”

“No. That doesn’t, Malva. Captain, I don’t think pirates in this area would go after Delaro commune ships.”

Captain Tylor nods his head. “I agree. Let’s make some sense of this. Nash. Vetra. Fire up the holo-projector and get us a visual of this unidentified vessel.”

Nash, over a busy console, calls out, “Projector up!”

Vetra follows up with a final press, “Data processed, showing on the projector.”

A ghostly visage of a ship forms and rotates above the middle of the command deck. Everyone gazes up at the imagery. Nash’s face contorts with pure confusion at the presentation, “WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS?!”

Vetra ears lay back momentarily at the outburst. But, eventually she develops a similar expression of confusion. “I have to agree with the sentiment. This ship is absolutely strange.”

Captain Tylor’s eyes open wide and he slowly moves closer to the projection. “It’s an old Southern Crux Union Cruiser. It’s a Hellstrom. I served aboard one a VERY long time ago.”

Nash squints his eyes and pulls back his head. “Holy shit. It is! But where the hell did they get a functional one?! They were all de-cored over 20 years ago.”

Vetra raises her hand and points a finger out, circling a section of the holographic ship. “These are Aavo standard design warp field stabilizers. The most common ones out there. There’s no human ship core in the thing.”

Nash leans on a railing to process the information. “You mean some asshole shoved an Aavo make warp system into the husk of an old human cruiser?”

Hans nods to Nash. “Yes. They did. It took extensive effort. But, I don’t know who would take that effort.”

Saitama approaches the projection and makes gestures on her data tablet, highlighting weaponry systems on the ship. “It’s not a human organization. There’s not a mass driver or missile launcher anywhere on the ship. These are Tzerkz particle beams and plasma bolters.”

Harvos straightens up and shifts his weight side to side in thought. “Are we dealing with a Tzerkz in Human clothing?!”

“No.”

Attention turns to Malva as she shifts away from the console and quickly moves in range of the projection. “It’s a privateer. There’s emblems and symbols that are from pirate groups... but are not right. For example, this logo wouldn’t be on this ship with this marking surrounding it.”

Harvos blinks astonished, slowly rotating to Malva. He asks, “Why not?”

Malva with a smug air about her and a perked brow to Harvos. “That whole alliance broke down a month ago and in the individual groups are still warring for control over the territory.”

Franklin’s synthetic voice confirms, “She is correct. This was a subject of a recent Cithcem sector security bulletin. A number of our listening posts recorded the activity.”

Harvos sides up next to Malva and attempts inconspicuously tilt his head to Malva. He quietly inquires, “How do you know this?”

Malva straightens up with pride and returns with a quiet response, “Sources I cannot reveal via channels that do not exist as part of an organization that is not part of our homeworld’s government.”

Harvos returns to looking up at the holographic projection, with astonishment residing.

Captain Tylor calls out, “Saitama. What are our chances of fending off this ship?”

Saitama thinks and makes gestures to rotate the projection around to points of interest. After a few tense minutes, she takes a deep breath in. “We have range. With a coordinated mass driver and missile barrage, I think we may have a chance. But, it depends on what tactics they implement against us. If nothing else, we stand a good chance of hurting it enough to make it leave. Without full armor and shielding systems, we won’t be able to withstand too many full barrages from it. Unfortunately, there’s not much more I can go off of with these limited sensor readings.”

Captain Tylor turns to Hans, “How far are we?”

Hans somberly sighs, “Five hours out at cruise warp factor.”

Nash feels the Captain’s gaze turn to him, “Captain. Theoretically, I could get that down to one to two hours... But there might not be anything but scrap left of us. That’s if the core synchronizer is even in working condition.”

Captain Tylor takes slow, purposeful steps to his chair. He places his hand on the back of the chair and looks up to the crew. “Vetra, full power to the hyperwave transmitter. Hans, direct a narrow focus

transmission to the Delaro ship. Malva, open a comm channel. Jefferson, please assist where you can.”

The crew enacts the orders. Jefferson’s body dims, and a nearby console flickers to life as some force remotely controls it. A chirp from the comms system sounds out on the deck. Malva nods to the Captain.

“This is Captain Tylor of the Alliance of Free Stars vessel Orion. We have heard your emergency broadcast and will offer assistance in any way we can. Please respond.”

Silence falls across the command deck. Everyone expectantly awaits a reply, hoping to have the silence broken in their own way. After a minute, Captain Tylor lowers his head. Without the competition of other voices, a quiet prayer whispers out. A few more seconds, the Captain raises his head, drawing a deep somber breath. Jefferson shudders as weak flickering patterns flow across his body and the nearby console streams data.

Shattering the silence a crackling static strewn voice erupts out of the noise of the comms system, “This is the Delaro Commune Ship Seppa-Tau-Yal. Grand Monk Tol speaking.”

A smile cracks the face of Captain Tylor, “Grand Monk Tol, we receive you. Please give a status update.”

Seconds later the voice returns from the noise, “Our ship is still unable to warp. Our pursuers are actively scanning the region with sensors trying to locate our vessel. We launched our broadcast decoy beacons into the local sector, but it won’t be long before they figure out which one is our ship and warp directly to us.”

“Is there anyone else responding to the distress signal?”

After a delay, “Yes. There is a Galactic Coalition patrol stationed at a nearby outpost. But... It will be two hours before they can get to us. I fear we will be lucky to have an hour.”

Captain Tylor closes his eyes and as concern fills face. He concentrates on his thoughts, eventually opening his eyes. His gaze settles on Harvos, who gives a simple nod. He then shifts to both Jefferson and Franklin. Franklin nods. “You do not need to ask, Captain. We trust your decisions fully.”

Jefferson finishes, “I cannot think of a better reason. This is why we are here.”

Captain straightens and squares his shoulders, “All hands... Prepare for Maiden Hyperspace Transit.”

The crew of Orion hurry to their stations as the klaxon alarms blare throughout the ship, accompanied by visual alerts. The reinforced seats of the Orion showcase one very important feature upon all human vessels: Multi-point seat belts and safety restraints.

Igor presses a few buttons on a side panel, triggering his pilot seat into full-reinforcement mode. Control panels shift to new positions to allow easier access with the extra movement restrictions. Igor

pushes himself back into the seat and locking mechanisms secure his cybernetic body. Finally the ship's neural interface system fully engages itself, activating the fiber optic cables attached to the back of Igor's head.

Captain Tylor, Nash, Hans, Saitama, and Harvos, without waste in movement, place themselves into their seats. Each performs all the steps to engage the safety equipment in near synchronicity. Franklin and Jefferson clamp and latch onto their customized seats. With each final step in procedures, power engages to the seat and equipment erupts to life. Malva and Vetra stand and dart their eyes around trying to figure out what they need to do. Harvos gets their attention and speaks, "Malva. Vetra. Listen carefully... I'm going to recite A B C D protocol for seats. It helped me learn."

Both Malva and Vetra take positions next to their seats and watch Harvos. Nash and Igor exchange smug, mischievous glances.

Harvos takes a deep breath in and strongly chants, "A is for your ass in the seat!"

The sudden change in volume and tone jar Malva and Vetra into action as they both promptly drop themselves into their seats.

"B is for the belts around your body!" Nash and Igor echo the chant.

Malva and Vetra quickly take the metal seat belt tongues around the four corners of their seats and drive them into the central buckle assembly.

"C is for clamping your boots in!" Saitama and Hans help with the chant's chorus.

Malva and Vetra lift their shoes and place them onto the extended mechanisms from their chairs. As they put the full weight down upon them, systems adjust to provide support and moderate restraint.

With a quiet laugh, Captain Tylor glances at Harvos. "And D is for dropping the lock!"

Malva and Vetra in unison grab the handles on the upper restraint above their heads and pull it quickly down to a locking position.

Captain Tylor nods. "Not bad, Harvos. Not bad at all."

"Well, Captain, I made sure to learn it."

"It's amazing how fast the learning process happen after a gravity generator failure."

Harvos chuckles with gritted teeth to Nash, "Yes, sir, a gravity generator... failure."

Nash returns Harvos's awkward glare, before turning his attentions back to his console. He quietly mouths, "It's been five years, man. Let it go!"

Vetra's ears perk to his knowledge and she pauses a moment to process it.

Captain Tylor's attention shifts over to Nash. "Nash. Status if you please?"

Nash grins wildly as he watches the displays. “Systems are charging and I’m uploading the new optimization protocols to the cores.”

Vetra halts and snaps her head towards Nash. “Wait... New optimization protocols?! Why wasn’t I informed of this?!”

Nash shrugs. “I didn’t think I’d have to inform you of your own optimizations?”

Vetra’s narrows her eyes at Nash, before they slam wide open. “Those protocols are meant for normal warp transit! Not THIS!”

“Ah, same difference to the cores. The weird shit happens after stage three or so. Don’t worry, I checked it all with the simulation model.”

“What simulation model?! There is only one for general Ship Cores, that I know of.”

Nash’s grin returns now going from ear to ear. “Yes. And with all your optimizations it crashed it three times faster.”

Hans calls out, “And a significant amount more energy recorded right before the simulation crashed. You should be very proud Vetra. It’s not an easy thing to do.”

Vetra’s distantly stares with the overwhelming knowledge of the situation at hand descending upon her. She turns her head back towards her console and makes preparations by tapping commands. “I can not believe I am actually assisting in this.”

Nash scans over the many screens of data flashing before him. “Ah, don’t worry, it gets better with time.”

Vetra grits her teeth while entering commands at a feverish pace. “How does this get better with time?! I’m watching myself enter the initialization sequences to prime three devices that are mere steps away from being inter-dimensional fabric ripping bombs!”

Nash’s grin bubbles up to a chuckle, “Missing the forest for the trees-”

“Another one of your strange human phrases!”

“Vetra. You are too busy focusing on the bullshit to see what the most amazing thing about this situation is!”

Vetra stops tapping at her console and cranes her head to sternly stare right at Nash. “And WHAT is that?!”

Nash smiles, with his head resting on his fist. “You are sitting ahead of Harvos and Malva. You are going to be THE FIRST Scyllia to transit hyperspace.”

Malva’s posture changes as the realization sinks deeper into her mind. Harvos happily shakes his head, taking a moment to meet Captain Tylor’s knowing smirk. Malva quickly gestures commands into the console nearby to engage recording sub-systems on the ship. She reaches in her uniform to pull out her

personal communicator and sets it up on a holder, turning on the recording function. Vetra's stern expression... melts. She drifts squarely back into her seat, remnants of her sternness eventually losing out to the growing awe.

Captain Tylor addresses the crew, "Remember. The point of the Orion is to forge the new paths we collectively seek. Outside the stagnating safety of what we know. Within the daunting and dangerous is where our true futures exist. While we should never forget the nature of the situations we face... damned if we are ever going to let that stop us from taking the next step."

The Captain adjusts his position in the seat before assessing the bridge, "Jefferson. Status?"

The echoing sounds of Jefferson resonate in conjunction with crystalline illumination variations, "Dimensional Resonant Field ready to engage!"

"Franklin."

Franklin responds with a gleeful, synthesized voice, "Particle Overdrive ready to engage!"

"Nash."

"Alnilam, Alnitak, and Mintaka are at 100% pre-charge. Ready to release!"

"Vetra."

"Um- Yes... All minor and major ship systems stable. Ship core conduits prepared for task assignment!"

"Hans."

"All sensors, positioning, and transit assistant systems ready. Ideal Hyperspace entry point detected and course plotted!"

"Saitama."

"Railguns and Gauss cannon batteries charged. All missiles loaded and primed. Nuclear weaponry activated, ready for safety disengage. Fusion torpedoes fueled and charging to near critical."

"Igor."

"I am ready! I feel ship is ready! I can't wait to fly in new space!"

"Malva."

"Recording systems engaged. Safety and lock-down protocols activated. Emergency systems reporting ready. Ready to scan for Delaro hyperwave radio signature once we transit."

"Harvos."

“Transmission sent to Galactic Coalition fleet. Alliance of Free Stars has been notified. Ready to scan for privateer’s signature once we transit.”

The Captain takes a moment to adjust his Southern Crux Union fleet admiral’s hat, finishing with a long stroke of his gray beard, “On my mark.”

A long silence settles upon the bridge, all members of the crew expectantly watching the Captain.

“ Mark.”

Nash quickly shatters the silence, “Alnilam release in... 3! 2! 1! Release!”

A low powerful, singular vibration resonates throughout the ship. A rolling and growing background rumble fills the idle air, with beating rhythm punctuating.

“Alnitak release in... 3! 2! 1! Release!”

Another similar vibration and growing rumble joins in.

“Mintaka release in... 3! 2! 1! Release!”

A chorus of resonance and rhythm fills the background noise of the bridge. Vetra stares with wide eyes at the readouts from her consoles. “Systems stable! Somehow... Routing core powers to tasks!”

A furious cacophony of color erupts from Jefferson as the Tzk-Tzk transmits information into the console before it. “Engaging Dimensional Resonance Field and charging hull structures!”

With a pulse, a wave of energy jets through a web of conduits in the Orion’s outer hull. A prismatic light follows moments after, leading with violet and drifting through the rainbow to red.

Around Franklin’s station data, graphs, and text stream at rates that the screens can barely keep up with displaying. “Particle Overdrive Transformation Engaged!”

The Orion’s massive main engines stop and dim dark in the void of space around it. Strangely, the massive atmospheric intakes emerge from areas in front of the main engines, along with numerous others along the sides of the engines. A growing pulsating glow fluctuates in intensity before igniting in a brilliant flash. The main engines erupt out blue-white plasma in a jetted cloud behind the Orion, eventually settling to an ominous, idle burn throughout the thruster cavities of the engines. The command deck lightly rocks in sync to the contained chaos just brought into creation.

Nash with wild eyes pans around the deck as a growing trembling vibration takes hold. “FATIGUE BURST READY! AWW YEAH! She’s READY!”

Vetra’s ears flinch back at the outburst from Nash. She groans annoyed, but notices something strange on her screen... A program window with a big red button with the caption “Press me!” Vetra checks around to only find the borderline psychotic grin of Nash glaring right at her.

“So... you gonna press it?!”

“Press what?!”

“The button!”

“The button on my screen?”

“Yes!”

Vetra studies the button on her screen. The button pulsates with light, then arrows appear pointing with elaborate animations to the button. She snaps to Nash, then back down to see that a set of pictograph instructions on how to press the now accompany the button on screen.

“I KNOW HOW TO PRESS A BUTTON.”

“Well, it’s certainly taking you a while to do so!”

Vetra glares at Nash with wary contempt. Nash drops his head and shakes it a bit before lifting it back up to Vetra, “Listen. I’ll the probably be the idiot who’ll go into the history books for blasting a hole in hyperspace. I figured the person who actually cares to do things the right way should be in the history books for getting into hyperspace the right way.”

Vetra pauses a moment and then sighs to Nash, “You are an annoying, disgusting creature that seems to revel in my frustration and the chaos of the universe. But... Thank you for this...”

With a solid press of the red button, the rumbling throughout the ship stops. An encircling ring vortex of red miasma erupts from behind the ship. The ring streaks forward, loosely following the contours of the Orion as it closes in on the front of the ship. For brief moments the miasma solidifies providing strange windows into another dimension of reality. The ring accelerates at blinding speeds in mere moments, narrowing to a point in front of the Orion and beaming off into the space before it.

The crew maintains a tense silence as seconds pass. Then space... Opens. Not erupting. Not tearing. Not even bursting. A slow methodical spiraling opening of the barrier between True Space and Hyperspace in a near perfect circular portal before the Orion. The energies of the rift vibrate the Orion, allowing the rift to be “heard” through the void of space.

Captain Tylor calls out, “Excellent work everyone. Igor. Since this is a special occasion, I will defer piloting details fully to you. Approach how you please and give a generous countdown for everyone to prepare.”

Igor laughs his cybernetic hands flexing and grasping in anticipation as each takes hold of a flight control slowly. “5... 4... 3... 2... 1...”

Blue-white narrow, laser-focused jets burst from behind the Orion. The main engines glow as bits of the miasma coming out of the hyperspace rift fall into the intakes and vents. The Orion rockets forward into the rift, quickly disappearing into the other realm. Moments after the ship is well into the red sparkling, turbulent world, the rift draws in fast and seals, leaving no trace.

The marred and marked hull of the Delaro commune ship drifts, slowly rotating with only specs of dim light coming from viewing portals throughout the ship. Grand Monk Tol stands on the command deck of the vessel and looks with both columns of eyes out into space.

A robed figure somberly moves near Grand Monk Tol. “Grand Monk, our pursuers have found us. We detected positive active detection from their short range scanners.”

“As anticipated. Any word from the engineers about the warp drive.”

“... .. Total loss. It would take months to repair the extensive damage done to all the systems.”

Grand Monk Tol lowers his head on his long neck. “Understood. As much I would love to maintain hope in the face of adversity, I believe we should inform everyone of the most likely outcome from this.”

The robe figure momentarily rises up before lowering in acceptance. “I hate to agree.”

“I will prepare an address to inform everyone. I highly doubt there will be a peaceful option-”

A loud rumble rattles the vessel. Grand Monk Tol’s eyes dart around trying to find the cause. Eventually all focus on a distant point in space. Grand Monk Tol pulls himself close to the deck’s viewing portal. “What is that? Did something... Poke? A hole? In space?”

Another robed figure presses various controls on his console with many tendrils before turning part of his body towards Grand Monk Tol. “Message coming from- Nearby- in Hyperspace itself?!”

“What is the message?”

“... Human English. One word. ... Incoming?!”

Every eye on Grand Monk Tol’s head slams wide open and focus back on that strange spot in space. That spot now shows a small red, pulsating dot. All four of his arms reach out and grab hold of nearby deck structures. When the last hand grasps onto a railing, the red dots explodes, out spiraling away from the center. A maelstrom of cloudy miasma erupts forth in a torrent. As the mass expands, it thins to reveal something within. Behind the billowing cloud, a bright blue-white glow contrasts the red thinning cloud, as something vacuums the miasma into it. Grand Monk Tol sees a metallic surface revealing large written letters as the miasma dissipates away.

“By the Powers Behind Existence, it is the Orion.”

The robed figure nearest Grand Monk Tol darts his head around trying in vain to confirm what his leader just said. “That’s impossible! It’s only been 30 minutes! The Orion IS at best five hours away-”

Grand Monk Tol turns his head, “Was. The Orion WAS. It IS HERE. Now.”

“But- How?!”

“Child, there are times to question nature of things... And there are times you should just appreciate that this universe allowed them to happen.”

“But, a human ship?”

Grand Monk Tol shrugs, “A strange expression the humans have for situations like this. Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

The crew aboard the command deck of the Orion sit quietly. Everyone examines their respective systems before checking out the rest of the command deck. Captain Tylor pans his gaze across the deck. “Status report from all stations.”

Nash calls out, “All cores are at safe idle.”

Vetra blinks a few times before turning away from staring into the front viewing portal and taps on her console. “All distribution systems at the ready, and all common ship subsystems are registering nominal status.”

Franklin’s consoles blitzes various streams of data before he pivots his head towards the captain. “All engines have successfully returned to true space mode and are operating within parameters.”

Jefferson crystalline body flickers with various colors as his voice echoes, “Field integrity wonderfully intact and no issues with power down.”

Hans taps a few items on her screens. “Hyperspace portal has sealed back up with no signs of issues.”

Saitama confidently smirks. “All weapon systems online and at the ready. No disturbances or problems.”

Malva realizes the Captain’s eyes are on her. “Oh! Systems show that everything logged and recorded. Sensors have confirmed the Delaro ship’s location.”

Harvos confidently calls out, “The ship is intact, the crew is alive, and the Delaro Commune ship isn’t under attack yet. An excellent start so far. But, the privateer ship is closing fast and I think it just picked up the pace.”

Saitama studies her displays and notices an alert appear. “Hard active scan hit. Short range sensors of Tzerkz signature.”

Malva squints at her console. “I’m getting a message from the privateer. It’s in Dratton. Roughly translates to “Go away. Or else.””

Captain Tylor ponders and asks Harvos, “What experience do you have with Dratton?”

Harvos searches his mind for a few seconds and replies, “Cold, calculating, and careful. They are about the only species I can think of that the Tzerkz would get for this type of work.”

The Captain strokes his beard and looks onward at the main viewing screen. “Would it be safe to assume this is strictly business right now?”

Harvos nods. “I believe so. Malva?”

“It makes sense. I have read a number of reports about the Tzerkz occasionally providing ships and tech to competent, proven mercenaries.”

Captain Tylor drops his head down in thought. Some seconds later, he raises his head back up with a slight smile. “So the ship is the payment?”

Malva searches her thoughts and confirms, “Yes. Actual equipment and materials are about the only things most mercenaries accept, especially the Dratton.”

Harvos scratches his chin and asks Hans, “Do you have a visual of the privateer?”

With a few presses from Hans, a visual image of the privateer appears on the main viewing screen. The Captain lightly chuckles, “I don’t think there’s a scratch on the paint job, Harvos.”

“This one is careful. Using an old Human ship, near Human space, attacking ships with barely any defenses, far from where anyone could reliably help...”

Malva appends, “And the privateer has just slowed down.”

Saitama nods in agreement. “The privateer just finished performing a whole scan of the ship.”

Captain Tylor enters commands into his console, taking the moment to address the crew. “Saitama. Prepare firing solutions, I authorize FULL use of the arsenal aboard this ship. If that privateer approaches with any hostile intent and comes into range, you give it plenty of damn good reasons to keep its distance.”

The Captain places his hand on the console and it blinks with acceptance. Numerous screens near Saitama change to display the weapon systems of the Orion. New alerts appear on the nuclear and fusion payloads showing full authorization. Along the hull of the Orion, panels slide and open to reveal the exit ports of missile and torpedo tubes. Massive covers split open, allowing the mass drivers cannons to rise and pivot to ready positions.

Captain Tylor commands deck with a serious tone in his voice, “Igor. Get the Orion between the Delaro ship and this privateer. Malva and Jefferson. Monitor everything that privateer does, especially if it starts using its hyperwave radio. It is NOT hunting alone. It will be calling for reinforcements once it figures out what this ship is. Hans, Nash, Vetra, and Franklin. We’ve got probably less than 10 minutes to figure out how we are going to get the Delaro ship to safety. Find a solution. Harvos. Contact the Galactic Coalition outpost. Transmit the data we have on this privateer and ask them very nicely what the hell is taking so long.”

The command deck of the Orion explodes into a flurry of activity. Igor pilots the Orion into a defensive blockade position to shield the Delaro ship. Saitama flips through weapon systems switching them from prepared to ready status. With each confirmation, missiles slide to fill tubes and mass

drivers glow from rails and coils charging. Malva and Jefferson sort and triangulate data looking for the rest of the hunting pack. Franklin, Vetra, and Nash debate feverishly over the fate of the Delaro ship. Harvos puts on his best Galactic Coalition Fleet Commander graces and tries to communicate with the Galactic Coalition outpost.

Captain Tylor sits with a console turned to him. He looks onto the screen with Grand Monk Tol, “We are trying what we can. Worse comes to worst, my crew has extensive experience in doing mass evacuations from vessels under fire. I don’t know if that is any kind of comfort.”

“Captain, the fact you are here attempting to save my children in our darkest hour humbles me greatly. Any assistance you can provide is appreciated. We will prepare for evacuation and ready ourselves for any action you may take.”

Saitama yells out, “CAPTAIN! Privateer is moving right for us!”

Captain Tylor snaps alert. “Malva. Jefferson.”

Malva spins to face the Captain. “We’ve detected at least two targets from their hyperwave communications. They have allies moving fast to this area.”

“Harvos.”

“Creators damn these morons! The fleet at the outpost hasn’t even warped yet! Some rookie Aavo commander thought it would be more efficient to put the whole fleet in the refuel mode, since nothing was happening in the region. They won’t be able to warp for another hour!”

Captain Tylor’s expression turns dire. “What options do we have!”

Franklin’s synthetic voice rises from the argument going on between Nash and Vetra. “Clamping on warping would not allow us to move fast enough to escape the privateer. And there is a risk of harming and killing everyone on the Delaro ship if the inertia dampers are not calibrated correctly. Their own dampeners do not seem fully functional. The Delaro has no propulsion, so a human style fleet warp is improbable with current equipment.”

Nash slams his fist down on the console in frustration. “Fuck this goofy Delaro ship design! There’s only a few ways we can latch on and so few docking points. It’ll take us FOREVER to evacuate! FUCK! If I could only slice off those weird wingy bits! It’d fit just fine in the hangar!”

Vetra points a finger and opens her mouth to retort, but stops. She tilts her head and inquires, “The ship has something that can cut that much, that quickly?”

Nash shifts his attention to Vetra. “Yah. The hull laser slicers. I took all of them from the Mintaka, Alnitak, and Alnilam and worked with Jefferson and Franklin to upgrade them into precision asteroid cutting lasers. Figured they’d be a bunch of steps up from the normal mining pulse lasers.”

Vetra spins her console’s display over to Nash. “Show me!”

Nash reaches over to enter a few commands and a set of design specs appear on the screen. He turns it back to Vetra, who immediately studies it. Nash quizzically watches Vetra. “Are you seriously considering cutting off the wingy bits?”

Vetra grins to a confused and slightly scared Nash. “Not considering. We are!”

“WHOA! Aren’t those bits important for the ship?!”

“Yes. For the dead and completely fried warp system.”

Nash sits back in chair. “Oh shit. We CAN cut them off.”

Vetra maintains reserved, anticipating smile. “We still would not be able to warp as fast due to the mass increase, but they would be inside our dampening fields. So we will still be pursued-”

Nash laughs near maniacally, “They can’t chase us into Hyperspace!”

Vetra’s smile drops to worry and uneasy acceptance. “That is... true.”

The crew does not say anything as a tense silence hangs in the air. Igor breaks the silence almost jovially. “I like this plan! We put them in safe place inside our ship. Then our ship goes into safe place inside hyperspace. It is dangerous. But it is dangerous other way. This way is more fun.”

Captain Tylor pushes back into his chair, taking a long, deep breath as he ponders the scenario present before him. A slow nodding leads to acceptance of the plan. “It’s worth a try. Given the circumstances, this is our best option. Saitama. Please present our privateer with a distraction. Igor. Align the ship appropriately to the Delaro vessel. Everyone else. Prepare for hyperspace transit and assist Nash and Vetra in their surgery. I will inform the Grand Monk Tol of the plan.”

The main screen shows Grand Monk Tol standing. His columns of eyes blink in series as his mind processes the plan proposed by the Captain. He continues to stand, wide eyed through the screen. Another battery of mass drives fire along the Orion with swarm of missiles following the projectiles’ paths through the void towards the privateer. Grand Monk Tol nods his head. “I will place our fates in your hands, Captain. I must admit I have my reservations to this plan. But, given circumstances... It is surprisingly the best course of action, if it works.”

The Captain nods slightly. “I understand. We will get you to safety. Please prepare your people.”

The screen blinks off as another volley of mass driver rounds streak off with an accompaniment of missiles. Saitama growls with frustration, “Damn this privateer. He’s using all his weaponry to counter my missiles barrages and has directed his shields full front to absorb the mass driver barrages. At least he’s taking it slow.”

Malva traces something on her console screen. “The privateer’s allies will be here very soon!”

Nash yells, “Laser capacitors charged! Ready to operate!”

A smile forms on the Captain. "Igor. Get this ship into position, open the forward hangar door, and prepare to welcome our guests aboard."

The cybernetic Russian belly laughs, "Of course! I will show them red carpet treatment. Biggest room on ship all theirs!"

Another volley of mass drivers fire off, the turreted cannons pivoting and articulating as the Orion flies into position behind to the Delaro vessel. The large hangar's lights switch on, and an ominous blue-white glow grows brighter by the second. Blue beams streak from the Orion contacting the Delaro ship. They drag across the hull with slow methodical slices through the ship, the molten structure oozing around the seams cuts. As the first swath completes, a section of the ship drifts freely away from the bulk of the vessel.

Vetra pours all her attention into the complicated control system. Fine, gradual moves of her fingers on the console translate to path and power adjustments on the cutting beams. Nash mans his own set of controls and tractor beam emitters lock onto the Delaro vessel, holding it in place and send the severed pieces clear.

Another volley of mass drivers and missile fire off, Saitama grits her teeth and glares angrily at her screens.

Hans signals the Captain. "Hyperspace entry point found."

With a series a fast glows, Jefferson calls out, "Dimensional Resonance Field ready."

Franklin nods. " Particle Overdrive ready."

Malava screams out, "Privateer backup has arrived! IT'S-"

Harvos snaps to the visual of the privateer on the main screen, his expression flashes shock, "TZERKZ CRUISERS!"

The Captain's eyes narrow, "I guess they know who we are. SAITAMA."

With a slam on the console, an alarm blares out as various status animations change on the arsenal monitors and Saitama screams, "YES SIR!"

From the larger tubes of the Orion, huge nuclear missiles jet out into the void of space. Swarms of missiles, counter-measures, and rockets spill forth in an unyielding torrent of projectile chaos. They form in a chaotic school providing cover for the slower missiles. From the largest ports, massive torpedoes lurch out and begin their careful, methodical flight towards their targets. The horde of warheads momentarily coordinate, allowing the streaks of mass driver rounds to clear through. As the maelstrom moves towards the privateer, two Tzerkz cruisers speed ahead and fire streams and bolts of energy to intercept the missile barrages. Bright white flashes explode as nuclear payloads trigger early. Through the afterglow of energy, torpedoes burst on through the nuclear plasma clouds and engage engines to full power, barreling right at the Tzerkz cruisers. The cruisers react almost instantaneously and emergency warp to dodge clear of the torpedoes. A few of the torpedoes break off to chase the new

locations of the cruisers, while the remainder head straight for the privateer. The privateer concentrates all weaponry to intercept the torpedoes. The armor and shielding of the torpedoes deflect and absorb the energy from the weapons. The torpedoes contact the energy shielding of the privateer and press against the barrier. The force of the torpedo engines operating at full power warp the energy barrier. After a few seconds, the torpedoes glow brilliantly before the void of space is filled with blinding blue-white light.

Malva peers out the viewing portal as it automatically tints the light levels down. Harvos hunts through the console's output of the ship's scanners. "Why the hell didn't the privateer warp away?"

Vetra throws herself back into her chair and sighs, "The warp configuration. It's non-standard and probably couldn't react as fast. Also. Last section has been removed from the Delaro ship!"

Captain Tylor yells out, "NASH. IGOR. Get that ship inside and secure!"

Igor grins excitedly. "Time to come with us!"

The Orion juts forward. It makes small pivots and shifts as it closes in on the Delaro ship. The Delaro ship has been trimmed down to a very rough cylindrical shape, just enough to clear the main front hangar entrance. The Orion engulfs the Delaro ship. It floats into the massive hangar of the Orion, coming within meters of colliding into inner structures. Through viewing portals various alien races gawk out in sheer astonishment. At the command deck main viewing portal, an apprehensive Grand Monk Tol exchanges glances with his crew. When the Delaro clears the hangar entry, magnetic panels rise up and lower down, docking clamps launch out, and maintenance arms reach out. Each device secures onto the Delaro ship in any way it can.

"Delaro ship is as locked as it's gonna get!"

The Captain acknowledges Nash. "Thank you. Igor. Get us to the Hyperspace entry point as fast you can manage. Nash. Vetra. Get the ship ready for hyperspace transit!"

Malva squints her eyes and then uses her console to zoom into an image before sending it to the main screen. "Captain! The privateer survived!"

Hans interjects, "It's shields are down, but everything else seems functional from scans."

Nash briefly glances up before returning to work. "Fucked up that paint job, though."

The privateer's outer hull glows with a fading red to reveal a blackened, charred outer surface. Residual plasma from the torpedo explosions vent off into space, and the ship stabilizes from a drift as parts of the ship come back online.

Saitama turns around in her chair to address the Captain. "The Tzerkz cruisers took care of the torpedoes that were after them. They're turning around and coming fast."

A familiar rumble rattles the ship, as Nash announces, "Cores are at full power!"

Vetra continues, "Redirecting power to hyperspace systems!"

Jefferson brightly glows and echoes, “Dimensional Resonance Field engaged!”

Franklin follows, “Particle Overdrive engaged! Transforming engines now!”

Hans joins in, “Hyperspace entry point confirmed, and we are on target!”

Nash signals to Igor. “Hangar closed and sealed!”

Vetra energetically hits a button image on her console, as an eerie silence dawns. A familiar pulse vibrates the ship as the dimensional ribbon glides swiftly around the ship to the bow and beams into a point in space. A red portal opens up and the Orion blasts white plasma out the engines, propelling it into the portal. The portal seals quickly behind it.

The two Tzerkz cruisers hold position. Eventually, just as the privateer gets near, they break off and warp away. The privateer pauses, a number of panels opening to reveal sensor equipment and scanners. After a number of minutes, the privateer sets course in another direction and warps away.

The command deck of the Orion is quiet. Everyone checks the area around. Nash slowly raises his fists turning up his thumbs. Hans sinks back in her seat, letting out a sigh of relief. Saitama powers down weapon systems and commands them to return to idle state. Malva takes a number of slow deep breaths. Igor reaches out of his pilot seat, opens a side compartment, and pulls out a towel. He wipes the sweat off his face and head. Nash tilts his chair back and spins slowly in it. Jefferson’s pattern of crystal glows slow to a calmer pace. The data streaming on Franklin’s console considerably slows. Vetra rest her head along the restraint bar and closes her eyes, momentarily reaching her hand out to confirm a few ship functions on her controls before continuing to rest her head. Harvos leans back in his chair. After some time, he turns to Captain Tyler. The Captain’s expression is not far from his usual, but his eyes slightly wider than normal.

“Captain, how is Grand Monk Tol and his crew doing?”

Captain Tylor glances down at his control panel and presses a few buttons, “Let us find out, Harvos.”

An image of Grand Monk Tol appears on the main viewing screen. Grand Monk Tol greets the Captain and crew, “I am safe to assume that the plan was successful? We noticed a considerable lack of explosions and other anomalies.”

“You are safe to assume, Grand Monk Tol. We have successfully transited to hyperspace and are ferrying you towards the outpost. Is there anything we can provide you at the moment.”

“Nothing I can think of. Thankfully, no serious injuries were suffered and my engineers have been freed up to contend with other systems of the ship now that we longer have to concern ourselves with our warp drive.”

“I apologize for having to dissect your ship.”

Grand Monk Tol shrugs, “It was a necessary sacrifice. Because of it, we are here having this conversation. I do not worry. We have always found a way to move forward.”

“That is good to hear. If you’d like, we could pressurize the hangar to an acceptable atmosphere and let your crew have an easier time repairing your ship. Also, you are more than welcome to board the Orion and enjoy a modest tour.”

“That sounds absolutely intriguing. I am curious as to what this hyperspace looks like from within.”

“What do you mean it disappeared?!”

The screen aboard the Aavo battlecruiser shows an unamused Scillian outpost overseer, “Disappeared. No hyperwave transmissions. No warp echos. Nothing. Not even our high power hyperwave pulses are picking up anything in that region. I don’t know what more to tell you.”

The Aavo Commander leans forward on his command console to eye the screen, “Was it possibly destroyed?!”

“I do not believe so. We would have detected the gravity fluctuations over the hyperwave this close. But, we did detect other oddities and signatures-”

The Aavo commander stands up straight and indignant, “That will be all.”

The unamused Scillian outpost overseer salutes before the images closes out on the screen. The Aavo commander addresses his crew, “Prepare fleet for warp transit. It looks like the worst has happened. Hopefully, there may be survivors.”

A bank of screens start to light up with alerts and a crew member speaks, “Commander?”

“Yes, ensign?”

“There’s a strange anomaly being detecting near our fleet. It’s unclear what it is. I’m detecting hyperwave disturbances, true space warping, and... gravimetric waves?!”

The Aavo ponders a moment. His face distorts as the last phrase stirs an old memory to the immediate surface of his mind. He snaps at the ensign, “WHERE?!”

“Behind the fleet, sir.”

“ALL SHIPS-”

The fleet of Aavo warships shake slightly. They start to disperse away from a point in space. Within seconds a red portal in space twists open, jetting out a billowing stream of reddish, cloudy miasma. The miasma spreads, thinning out. The portal seals shut behind the cloud. A minute passes, and the cloud fades to reveal the Delaro vessel, missing major sections of external warp stabilizers, but now functioning on a very limited thruster system.

The Aavo Commander... along with most the captains and crew of the other ships in the fleet just gawk in awe at what just transpired.

“Commander, we are being hailed from the Delaro ship. It is Grand Monk Tol.”

The Aavo commander comes to his senses, trying to salvage what decorum is left after witnessing such events. “Put it on the screen.”

“Ah, yes! You are Commander that answered my calls! Well fortune has brought me here, I must admit, I am in great need of your fleet’s services.”

“Yes. Indeed. But HOW are you HERE?”

Grand Monk Tol puts on an endearing face with a healthy amount of assertion. “That. I will be most delighted to answer to any extent you desire... aboard the outpost, in nice comfortable lodgings... For myself and my wards. Correct?”

The Commander Aavo looks a bit taken back but complies, “Yes. That will be arranged.”

“Good. Very good.”

Igor and Nash almost fall over laughing at the video on the screen. The Aavo warships wandering aimlessly away from the portal, many nearly bounce their protective energy shields into each other.

“HAHAHA! Look at that destroyer! Poor bastard doesn’t know what the fuck to do!”

“It look stuck choosing outhouse that smells bad and outhouse that smells weird!”

The crew is up and about, free from the safety restraints of their deck seats. Harvos stands attentive to the main viewing screen. “Thank you again, Itteros.”

The previously unamused outpost overseer nods with smile. “Any time Harvos. Thank you all for getting the Delaro ship to us, no matter how strange the methods.”

“At this point, I don’t even feel this is strange anymore.”

The outpost overseer laughs, “Well. For now. ... Keep my application in mind. I’d be willing to fill any role you got aboard there.”

Harvos nods back. “Will do. For now.”

Malva stands next to Harvos. “Who was that?”

“Ah, that’s an old academy classmate. He and I go back. He served as a captain in the Galactic Coalition.”

“Really? Why is he serving as an outpost overseer?”

“Johnston Sacrifice. He joined the rally, and never felt good about serving with the Galactic Coalition since.”

Saitama stands up and stretches. “Well, if nothing needs to be decimated with mass or kilotons, I’m going to start getting food cooking in the rec room. Any requests?”

Hans smiles at Saitama. “Anything sounds good right now, Ryusei.”

Captain Tylor slowly rises from his chair and walks purposefully to Harvos. He places a hand firmly on the shoulder. “I leave command to you for now. I need to go for a good walk over the rec room. There’s some of fish we caught off the terraformed world of Delta Gorno 1 that I’ve been meaning to pull out of the stasis lockers and prepare.”

Both Nash and Igor listen and have their eyes locked on like hawks to the Captain mentioning cooking. They both excitedly whisper between themselves. Vetra edges over to the conversation between Nash and Igor. “I overheard Delta Gorno 1 and catching fish?”

“Oh yah, we had to go over there as a meeting point with the Cithcem and Tzk-Tzk reps to get some parts for the core rebuilds. We got there a week early, so we had some fun beach hopping around on the planet.”

“I know about Delta Gorno 1. It doesn’t have a space station for docking space ships, yet.”

“Yah, we went down to the planet surface.”

“I haven’t seen any functional drop ships aboard the Orion.”

“Why would we need drop ships?”

Vetra tilts her head and her eyes dramatically widen. “There’s no landing facilities for a ship this big-”

Igor laughs, “It was great fun! We landed on water, float ship like boat. Captain was happy. We even setup ship steering wheel like boat for him on observation deck.”

Nash partially covers his mouth, “We totally scared the shit out of that fishing boat’s crew.”

Vetra’s eye twitches.

“But, we totally paid them back. A really nasty hurricane was coming their way, so we tractor beamed their shipping boat into the hangar, and dove down about 50 meters or so and just let the whole thing blow over us. Pretty cool bunch of folks.”

Vetra erupts, “WHAT IS WITH THIS SHIP!?”

Jefferson and Franklin stand on the deck near a viewing portal. A quiet conversation takes place.

“I believe the decisions made have been fruitful. Our wards seem... Alive and strong again.”

“I agree. More time is needed. But. I do feel this path is correct.”

“I thoroughly enjoyed the method of delivery for the Delaro ship. I will admit I felt a particularly devious glow about me when I saw the video... and listened to the hyperwave broadcast.”

“I am curious as to how Grand Monk Tol will explain the situation.”

“Does it matter? Aavo are so dismissive of humanity, I doubt the higher ups world even entertain reading such a report? Somehow a human ship got to a 5 hour warp location in 30 minutes, rescued a Delaro vessel by engulfing it, fended off Tzerkz warships, and then dropped off the Delaro vessel right behind one of their prizes fleets? I doubt Aavo ego has waned that much.”

“Aavo will not be dismissive forever. For each success, our wards and humanity obtain, I believe they will get harder and harder to dismiss. I do not know how exactly the Aavo will ultimately react in the end.”

“That is a bridge we will cross when we get there.”

“Picked that up from Nash?”

“Yes. Igor has a number of them, too.”

“That reminds me, I need to pay off a betting debt to Nash.”

“What? Really?”

“Yes. He does not cheat, but he still somehow wins against me.”

“Hmm... That sounds very descriptive of humanity.”