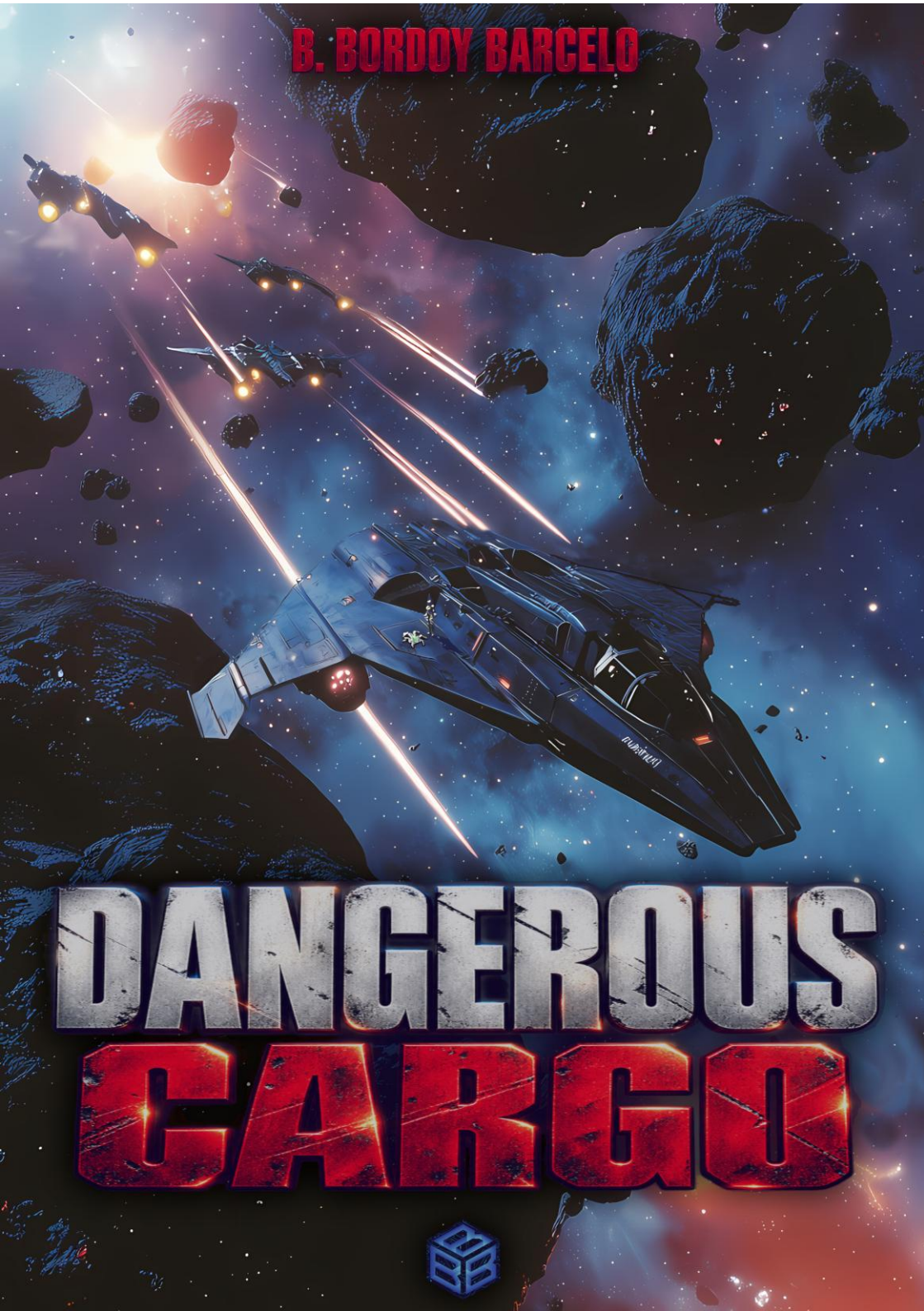

B. BORDOY BARCELO
DANGEROUS
CARGO

Dangerous Cargo

B. Bordoy Barceló



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Thank you all so much for taking an interest in Vhan
and his adventures.
And above all, for giving me the chance to bring him to life.
Thank you.

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ALINUM

BALNIR

CREDITS

DEFENSE CORPS

FUSION RIFLE

GALACTIC (LANGUAGE)

GALACTIC GOVERNMENT

GALACTIC SCIENCE

GALACTIC SPORTS

GALACTIC TIME

GUARDIANS OF THE ORDER OF THE GALAXY

HUMANS:

JUMP DRIVES

MOJEN GAS MINES

OHKSIAN

PALTAR

PLASMA WEAPONS

SCROC

ÜHN

1. A new opportunity

Vhan slowly opened his eyes as his headache intensified, reminding him of the rough night he'd had and the empty bottle now sitting on the nightstand. He pressed a hand to his head, trying in vain to ease the pain. With a frustrated groan, he stared at the familiar, peeling ceiling of his cabin.

I shouldn't have drunk so much last night, he told himself angrily, carefully sitting up as the memories he had tried to drown came flooding back. That beautiful woman in a military uniform, smiling at him; her honey-colored hair drifting around her whenever they switched off the artificial gravity in their room; the faint fragrance she always left on his sheets when she went away the next day; those blue eyes, as clear as the rings of ice where they had first met...

He shook his head hard, trying to drive the image from his mind, but only succeeded in making himself dizzy. He grabbed the sheets to steady himself and keep from falling back onto the bed.

Finally, after a long minute with his eyes closed and considerable effort, he got to his feet and started his day.

While washing his face, the shelf he had been trying to avoid caught his eye in the mirror. It was filled with reminders of a life that no longer seemed real; a life he had tried to protect and, at the same time, forget. A life that had brought him happiness and that he knew would never return. He closed his eyes for a moment, then left the cabin with a lump in his throat.

He strode into the kitchen, made himself a cup of gorloc, and stepped outside the ship. Intense light washed over him, forcing him to squint as he took in the landscape. Enormous trees grew all around, framing the mountain that rose on the horizon, its summit completely covered in snow. The sound of the nearby river mingled with the soft calls of birds and the sounds of insects. He drew a deep breath, letting the fresh air scatter the thoughts that kept flitting through his mind.

“Morning. I was starting to think that bottle of alcohol had done you in,” a strong, artificial voice said beside him.

Vhan grunted in response and turned toward the robot, who was refitting the ship’s ceramic plating.

“While you were asleep, I checked the wing circuits. Everything seems to be in order.”

“Good work, Tidux.” The man took a long drink from his cup, letting the gorloc wake him up. “Does that mean we’re finished with the annual inspection? What’s your assessment?”

“The ship will hold up, for now. Though the last few jobs and the damage we’ve taken haven’t helped.” The robot looked up and pointed toward the recent repairs along the hull, damage sustained during several clashes they had been involved in.

“At least we came out of it better than they did...” Vhan said, thinking back to that job and how close they had come to not making it. They had originally been hired to transport a shipment of machinery and equipment to a mining system without being told that the place was under blockade by a trading group intent on establishing its commercial dominance there. The group had not taken kindly to an outside ship trying

to defy its authority, and the whole thing had ended in a high-speed battle around the planet. “And we took care of the miners’ problem.”

“We did help them, that’s true. But we didn’t get paid anything for it.”

“Part of the job.” The mercenary shrugged. He knew that, more often than not, things didn’t go the way you wanted. “But that doesn’t matter now. What about the ship?”

“The jump circuits are the worst of it. They’re nearing the end of their service life. We should replace them before they fail.”

“Already? But they were fine at the last inspection!”

“We’ve made a lot of trips this past year...” The robot drew out the last words, as though considering how to continue.

“Spit it out, Tidux. I can practically hear your gears grinding from here. What’s on your mind?” Vhan asked, amused. He knew his partner too well not to notice when he was wrestling with something.

“We’ve traveled a lot this year, but the results haven’t been very good. We’ll soon run out of money and supplies. We’ve been here for almost forty days, and even though we’ve been inspecting the ship, no one has contacted us with a job. Shouldn’t we start looking for another one? Shouldn’t we go to one of our usual stations and see if anyone needs us?”

“And miss views like these? Life can’t be all work. You have to enjoy it a little too, don’t you think?” the mercenary joked, ignoring his companion’s concerns as he took another sip. Tidux’s face was expressionless, but Vhan still thought he saw a

flash of irritation in his eyes. As much as he tried to ignore them, they were his own concerns too. Even so, he had decided to put them aside and enjoy the moment—quiet, calm, at peace. "I think we should stay here a little longer. Then, once we run out of supplies, we'll do what you said. We'll go to the nearest station and look for an interesting job."

"I don't understand what's so good about this place, or about staying here doing nothing while the days go by and our food and alcohol supplies dwindle. I thought you preferred being up there, in space."

"I do, Tidux. But now that we've found somewhere this peaceful, we should make the most of it. Not just to inspect the ship, but to get away from the chaos of these last few jobs." A fleeting smile crossed Vhan's face.

Explaining his reasons was difficult, but admitting them to himself was even harder. He didn't even know why he had decided to stay there, dragging out the ship's inspection and running down their supplies. Then the truth struck him with the force of an unwanted memory: *Of course you know. It's the anniversary.* The words echoed through his mind, reverberating in its darkest corner. His expression hardened, and the serenity faded from his smile, revealing the weight of everything he had tried to bury.

He had done everything he could to drown those memories, but he couldn't ignore what he had seen on the screens at the mining station: news broadcasts marking the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Defense Corps. The institution created, staffed, and led by humans, for humans, dedicated to

protecting their own, and to which he had devoted his former life. A life that had collapsed in a single tragic, bloody day. The images had torn open old wounds that had never fully healed, trapping him once again between past and present.

Among the official broadcasts, a familiar face had appeared for a fleeting moment, one he had spent his entire life trying to erase from his memory and that still remained embedded in his soul: the love of his life, the woman who had been taken from him; the woman he had promised he would always protect and whom he had failed. Her appearance had awakened a specter that had lain dormant for a long time, a ghost that followed him everywhere, invading his dreams with broken promises and moments that would never return.

Vhan closed his eyes, trying to contain the pain welling up inside him. He hadn't only lost her. He had also lost the part of himself that could still believe in something better, the part that still had hope. Everything he had built since then, every battle he had fought, every job he had taken, had been nothing more than a distraction, a desperate attempt to fill the emptiness left inside him, the emptiness that was consuming him. Even so, he had never managed to ease that loss. The ship, his life as a mercenary, even his own existence felt like nothing more than shadows of what he had once been, of what he had once wanted to become.

"Vhan, are you okay?" the robot asked as his companion fell silent, staring into the distance, pulse quickening.

"What? Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," he replied quickly, his voice a little rougher than usual. With some effort, he dragged his mind

back to the present, burying once again the feelings that had struck without warning and taken hold of him. “I was just... thinking about what you said. It’s better if they come looking for us. If we seem desperate, we’ll have to take the first job that comes along. But if we wait a little and let the client find us, we can ask for more money.”

“What are you talking about? What happened to everything I just told you? We *are* desperate!”

“Relax. You’ll see, everything will work out.” Vhan mentally crossed his fingers, hoping he could stay there, surrounded by nature, and let those memories fade away once and for all.

Suddenly, as if those words had summoned it, his wristband began to vibrate, alerting him to an incoming call. He looked at it with a mixture of surprise and suspicion. *No way. This has to be a joke,* he thought when he saw that the call was coming through the encrypted channel he used with his contacts. But the number was unknown, with no identification attached. *Who could it be?* Still uncertain, he accepted the call.

“Vhan Stalix here. Who’s calling?”

“I was starting to think no one was going to answer,” said a rough, deep voice, like two stones grinding together. “I’m looking for the human who takes jobs on demand. Is that you?”

“I don’t know who you are or how you got this number, but if you don’t identify yourself right now, I’m cutting the connection.” Vhan hardened his tone, trying to take control of the conversation. His mind was racing now, processing every word and trying to identify the person on the other end.

“Relax. There’s no need to get worked up,” the other caller

laughed, his mocking tone carrying such overwhelming authority that Vhan and Tidux exchanged an alarmed look. “I’m not with the GoG, if that’s what you’re thinking. I’m Bax. Do you know who I am?”

The name hit like a hammer, turning the mercenary’s blood cold. A shiver ran down his spine. He was speaking to the leader of the most powerful criminal organization in the entire sector. Someone even the Guardians of the Order of the Galaxy were unwilling to confront, giving him free rein to control and exploit those systems however he pleased. It was also well known that many among those supposed defenders of Theia had succumbed to the pleasures Bax offered them. Vhan tried to compose himself and make up for the brusque way he had spoken, careful not to show the fear he knew he couldn’t afford to reveal.

“Yes. I know who you are.”

“Good. That saves us the introductions,” Bax replied with amusement, as though he were enjoying the tension in the air. “I need someone to pick up a shipment and deliver it somewhere else the following day. Do you think you can handle that?”

“Yes. I can handle it.”

“Then we’d better talk in private. I’ll send you the location and time of the meeting. I’ll be there in two days. Make sure you are too.”

The call ended abruptly, without giving Vhan a chance to respond. Everyone knew Bax didn’t take no for an answer anyway. The mercenary stared silently at the wristband as the sounds around him filled the air again, as though nature itself were trying to drown out the weight of the conversation that had

just taken place. He looked up at Tidux and gave him an ironic smile.

“There’s your damn job. Happy now? Isn’t this what you wanted?”

“Bax is someone important. If we do a good job, we might never have to worry about money again.”

“And if we do a bad job, maybe we won’t have to worry about anything ever again. I’ve heard too much about that guy to be happy about taking a job from him.” Vhan’s concern was clear as all the rumors and dark legends he had heard about the criminal ran through his mind. “Besides, how did he get my contact information? Who could have given it to him? And what worries me most, why did he call us? He has his own couriers and people willing to do anything for him. Why come to us?”

“You’ll have to ask him that when you see him. Or are you thinking about turning down the job?”

“We’ll do it. Of course we will, Tidux. If we don’t take it, we’re screwed. If we don’t show up for that meeting, we can forget about working anywhere in this sector, and we’ll never sleep easy again. He called us, and we have to go...” Vhan let out a sigh, trying to sort through the chaos of thoughts the call had unleashed. “If we want to get there on time, we need to get moving as soon as possible. How long will it take you to finish reinstalling the wing plating and get everything ready for takeoff?”

“Give me an hour. Two at most to get everything ready.”

“Then there’s no time to waste. The sooner we’re back up there, the better I’ll feel.” Vhan drained the last of his gorloc,

now cold, and watched as the daylight turned the river before him into a creature of light dancing to nature's rhythm. "But first..."

"What are you doing?" Tidux asked curiously as his companion set the cup on the ground and started taking off his clothes.

"You don't need me for anything. And I'm not leaving here without one last swim." Smiling, he walked toward the water, feeling the cool earth underfoot and the warmth of the star against his skin while he walked toward the water. It was a desperate attempt to recapture the peace he had felt when he stepped out of the ship, a peace shattered in an instant by those memories and Bax's call. "It's a shame we have to leave this place..."

2. Bax, the Ruler in the Shadows

Vhan nervously checked the jump computer, his eyes moving back and forth across the screen as if they might uncover some clue about what awaited them. His heart hammered in his ears, and cold sweat ran down his back.

Only a few minutes remained before they reached their destination: a point in the middle of nowhere, an unsettling void between two-star systems where there was nothing but darkness and the question of what might be hiding there. His hands gripped the controls tightly. When Bax was involved, Vhan knew better than to let his guard down. A deadly surprise could be waiting for them in that abyss ahead.

“When we get there, scan the entire area. I want to know what’s around us,” the pilot ordered. “And ready the jump circuits with a new set of coordinates. If things go bad, I want to be able to get out of there as fast as possible.”

“Anywhere in particular?”

“No. I don’t care. Somewhere nearby where we can disappear afterward.”

“Do you think it might be some kind of trap?” Tidux asked, trying to put concern into his voice.

“I don’t know, but we’ll find out soon enough,” Vhan replied, watching the seconds tick away on the displays.

The purple jump cloud that had surrounded them until then twisted in on itself and suddenly vanished. Dark, empty space welcomed them, dotted with stars.

“Activating radar systems and scanning for threats,” the robot reported, moving quickly over the controls. The holographic display showed a complete absence of objects. “The systems aren’t detecting anything. It’s completely empty. Have we been tricked?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t expecting this...” the pilot checked the location and the time Bax had sent him once again. “He said he’d be here in two days, and it’s not even time for the meeting yet. Maybe he’s still on his way.”

“So, do we wait?”

“We don’t have a choice. I don’t like this at all, but there isn’t much else we can do. Let’s switch to silent running. At least it’ll make us harder to spot by anyone looking this way. Keep all the systems ready and the jump computer online in case we need to get the hell out of here in a hurry.”

“Understood. Activating silent running,” Tidux announced, pressing a series of buttons on one of the auxiliary screens. The roar of the engine faded until only a faint hum remained. The rest of the systems reacted as well; some screens went dark and the lights dimmed, bathing the interior in a reddish glow that cast long, ghostly shadows across the metal surfaces.

“Now we wait,” Vhan murmured, leaning back in his seat with his arms folded behind his head, his gaze fixed on the holographic projection showing the emptiness around the Dark Star.

The minutes crawled by, each one seeming to add another weight to Vhan's shoulders. Since they had switched to silent running, neither he nor Tidux had said a word. But the stillness had brought no peace. On the contrary, the silence only amplified the noise in his mind. As they waited, he had tried without success to unravel the mystery of how Bax had gotten his contact information and why he had called to offer them a job. Every answer he came up with seemed worse than the last.

At the same time, the projection of empty space fed his worst fears, showing him invisible ambushes and traps waiting to spring at any moment. The pressure in his chest grew, as though the void itself were squeezing his lungs. And although Tidux remained impassive, focused on the systems, Vhan knew that uncertainty had to be lurking somewhere in his circuits too. A shadow they shared, even if it was a robotic one

Not much longer, the mercenary thought, watching the clock inch toward the meeting time. The loneliness of the vast, dark space was becoming almost unbearable, as though every distant star were an eye judging him. Then a sharp beep cut through the silence, snapping him to attention as that sea of dark thoughts vanished. The calm before the storm was over.

"We've got company," Vhan announced, straightening abruptly and gripping the controls.

"Jump cloud detected. Type six. It's a freighter. Focusing visual systems on the target."

"That's not a freighter. That's a warship," Vhan corrected him when the image appeared on the screen. Tidux was right that its hull had the shape of a type-six cargo freighter, but it had

been completely modified into an impregnable fortress. Additional reinforcement protected its most vulnerable sections, and an array of turrets and missile systems ran along the entire structure. A massive crest gleamed beneath the light of four powerful spotlights. Although Vhan had never seen Bax, he knew that emblem well: a deep-red skull with sharp metallic wings against a silver background.

“Looks like it could withstand an entire fleet,” Tidux commented, listing the different weapons and systems visible in the image.

“This is Bax’s power...” the mercenary murmured, reading the name “Noejima” beneath the criminal organization’s emblem as a chill ran down his spine. A voice in the back of his mind warned him to get out of there, that staying away from people like that was always the safest choice.

Just then, as he debated whether to listen to his instincts, an incoming call came over the communications channel.

“Our silent running didn’t do us any good,” Vhan muttered, shaking his head.

“They clearly have advanced detection systems,” the robot added as he watched his companion accept the call.

“Vhan Stalix?” a tense voice asked over the speaker, accompanied by murmurs in the background. Vhan pictured a command deck full of terminals and a crew watching every movement and readout.

“That’s me.”

“I’m sending you the approach route to hangar three. They’ll be waiting to search you and escort you to your meeting. If you

try anything stupid, we'll open fire. Understood?" The sensors showed that the warship's cannons had shifted position and were now aimed at them.

"Understood. Setting course for hangar three, as requested," the mercenary confirmed, bringing the engines back online and disengaging silent running as he guided the ship toward the freighter. The transmission ended, returning the cockpit to silence. "I think it'd be best if I go see Bax alone. I'd rather you stay with the ship and keep the channel open."

"Got it."

The Dark Star entered the assigned hangar and began its landing sequence. Vhan pulled the levers and executed the final maneuver to touch down. Just then, as he turned off the engine, the sensors showed that the hangar doors were closing.

"Looks like we're not getting out of here without the owner's permission," the mercenary muttered as the displays confirmed that the hangar was being pressurized.

"I'm detecting movement outside," the robot reported, turning the cameras toward a group of four aliens who had just entered the hangar and were standing some distance away, watching the ship.

"There's my welcoming committee," his companion added, checking that everything was in order before unbuckling his seat belt. "Let's see what Bax wants from us."

Vhan took a deep breath and pressed the button to open the cargo ramp. The hatch slowly lowered, letting in the hangar's recycled air, which filled his nostrils with a mixture of familiar and unfamiliar smells. He knew the Dark Star's distinctive scent

well—a blend of hot metal, machine oil, and burned-out air filters—but he was always surprised by the smells aboard other ships, which often revealed a great deal about what went on inside them. The traces of old oil and scorched metal, mixed with a faint hint of moisture and chemicals, told him plenty about this place: rushed repairs and constant, covert activity.

As he approached the group waiting for him, he noticed them studying him with interest. They seemed calm, but the tension was palpable. Their hands rested close to their weapons, ready to act if necessary. Three balnir stood before him, tall and muscular, their indigo skin and heads crowned with hardened spikes that resembled hair making them stand out. Their long incisors, characteristic of their species, protruded beneath their lips, giving them an air of controlled ferocity. The last was a scroc with rough, glossy skin so dark green it was almost black. His bulging eyes were fixed on Vhan. Every so often, his throat swelled and he let out a small croak, an involuntary reflex accompanying his breathing.

“Hand over your weapons and place them in this box,” growled one of the balnir, who appeared to be the leader of the group. His voice was rough, as though each word had been dragged from the depths of his throat.

Vhan obeyed without argument. With deliberate movements, he removed the pistol strapped to his thigh and placed it in the metal box in front of him. The moment Vhan released the weapon, the scroc quickly stepped forward and ran a scanner over his entire body. The device’s hum was barely audible, but enough to tighten the atmosphere even further. Satisfied with the

results, he gave a slight nod, causing the contents of the necklace he wore to slosh.

“Very well. Follow us. They’re expecting you.”

Vhan followed the balnir who had just spoken, with a second guard bringing up the rear. Their footsteps echoed loudly across the metal floor of the hangar. The scroc and one of the others remained beside the box, guarding it and watching the ship. Suddenly, he felt a faint tremor and a slight tug through his entire body, as if gravity had shifted for a second.

“Did we jump?” he asked, voicing the thought aloud.

“That’s right. For security. We don’t want anyone tracking our movements or knowing where we are.”

“I see... Good system,” the mercenary replied, trying to sound confident and conceal the nervousness growing inside him. His heart pounded as he realized there was no longer any possibility of escape.

Then a thought struck him. *Why hasn’t Tidux said anything since I left the ship? Could they be blocking internal communications? It wouldn’t surprise me, given all these security measures. They don’t want any unexpected problems.*

With that thought in mind, he cautiously studied the long corridor. The walls were lined with control panels and emergency lights that blinked softly. The ventilation system was the only sound breaking the silence surrounding his two guards.

The group entered an elevator, whose doors closed with a dull thud, trapping them in an uncomfortable ride toward the upper decks. It wasn’t long before the doors opened with a sharp hiss, revealing another corridor. This one was narrower and

more claustrophobic, designed that way to hinder the advance of any boarding team attempting to seize control of the ship.

As Vhan considered those possibilities and the intricate layout that deck must have, they reached their destination. The group stopped before a reinforced hatch. The two soldiers took positions on either side with synchronized movements, their postures rigid and watchful. Without taking his eyes off him, the leader activated the door controls and gestured toward the opening.

Vhan obeyed and stepped into a meeting room. A table large enough for ten dominated the space, but his attention immediately settled on the creature seated at its head, studying him with interest.

He was a paltar, a species native to the sector they themselves called Myrnix. His thick, ocher skin contrasted with the expensive clothes he wore, which were adorned with pieces of combat armor. His powerful build and imposing bone structure made him intimidating, while his small, sharp eyes radiated danger. Despite that threatening appearance, he was eating, accompanied by a balnir and an ohksian who were also focused on the food in front of them.

Vhan didn't know any of them, but there was no doubt he was looking at Bax and two of his commanders.

"So you're the human who picks through the scraps and takes the jobs nobody else wants," the paltar said in a dry, deep voice before biting into a piece of roasted meat.

"If that's what people say about me, it must be true," Vhan replied, unable to suppress a faint smile at the jab. "You have to

survive somehow in this galaxy. Though some of us do better than others," he added, gesturing toward the plates in front of the organization's leader.

The remark made the commanders tense. They glanced sideways at their boss, who burst out laughing and sprayed some of his food across the table.

"We all do what we can," Bax replied, pointing with his knife at the seat across from him. "Sit down. Want something to eat?"

"No, thanks. I'm not very hungry."

"Nervous about meeting me, huh?" he smiled, revealing a row of whitish teeth before turning his attention back to his plate.

"Why did you call me? How did you get my contact information?"

"Watch your tone, human," the ohksian growled, fixing Vhan with a threatening reptilian stare.

"Easy, Paken. It's fine. Of course he's curious. Though he should already know..." Bax cut in, calming his commander before turning back to the mercenary. "I know everything that happens in this sector. I've known about your small-time jobs for a while. The problem is when those jobs start affecting my interests..."

The words landed hard in the silent room, sending a chill down Vhan's spine. The tension was palpable, almost sharp enough to cut. Even so, it was clear the criminal leader expected an answer. Vhan swallowed and summoned all his resolve to sound as confident as possible.

"Sometimes business doesn't go the way you want. We can't

always win."

"Good answer..." the paltar said with a smile. "A good answer, don't you think?" he asked before turning his attention back to his commander. "Though Paken might not find it quite so amusing. He's still upset about that job of yours in the Culris system. Aren't you?"

"You got away that time, but there won't be a second," the ohksian growled, biting aggressively into his steak.

Vhan remembered the job. More than half a year had passed since they had escorted a client who was being pursued over gambling debts and helped him disappear. At the time, no one had mentioned that Bax was the one looking for the man. Nor had he asked. It was only near the end that a hostile ship appeared, and he managed to lose it with a few quick maneuvers. The ship had carried no insignia, so he had assumed whoever was aboard was small-time, not one of the commanders serving the criminal leader now sitting in front of him.

"But that's all in the past," Bax continued, ignoring his subordinate's remark. "Like you said, sometimes business doesn't go the way you want. Anyway, I eventually found your client and cleared things up. I got to personally explain what a bad decision he'd made by trying to blow me off and run. He was the one who gave me your contact information so we could talk."

"I see..." the mercenary replied, his heart speeding up as he imagined what kind of end his former client had suffered and what might be waiting for him. He swallowed with difficulty. "You want to kill me over that?"

“What? No! Why would I do that?” the paltar asked, amused by Vhan’s expression. “I don’t want to kill the messenger. Quite the opposite. Like I told you when I called, I want you to do a job for me. I need you to pick up a shipment in Glexer and deliver it to another ship at a safe location in two days. Simple job, right?”

“Why me? Why not one of your usual haulers? From what I understand, you’ve got an entire fleet for this kind of thing.”

“I could say I want to help someone in need, but I’d be lying. My fleet is tied up with more important missions. I need someone to do this job. Interested?”

“How much do I get?”

“Straight to the point. I like that,” Bax said, amused, taking a moment to savor the contents of the glass in his hands. “Don’t you want to know what you’ll be carrying?”

“Would you tell me if I asked?”

“You’re not stupid, I see.”

“Like you said before, I’m a human trying to make a living off everyone else’s scraps. If you want to survive, you learn fast which questions to ask and which ones not to,” Vhan replied, unable to suppress a faint smile.

“I see you know how this works. I like that. I’ll pay you eighty thousand credits for two days’ work.”

“Make it one hundred thousand and we have a deal,” Vhan shot back, trying to sound firm despite the knot in his throat.

The commanders looked at their boss. Bax remained silent for a moment before bursting into laughter that filled the room.

“You’ve got some balls, no doubt about it. Deal. One

hundred thousand. And if you do this right, I'm sure I can find some more work for you."

"As long as you pay me, consider it done. Give me the details and I'll get moving right now."

——※ · ※ · ※——

Vhan finished securing his weapon in place, trying to calm himself as his hands moved through familiar, automatic motions. He could feel the tension built up in every muscle, and as he closed the cargo ramp, he drew a deep breath of the ship's recycled air. *Home, sweet home,* he thought as the hatch gears gave a metallic squeal, sealing the area. Just as he was beginning to calm down, Tidux's heavy footsteps echoed from the threshold of the pressure hatch. His artificial eyes fixed on him.

"I couldn't connect with you. They've blocked internal communications."

"I know. When we jumped and I didn't hear from you, I knew something was wrong."

"How did it go? Did you meet Bax? What did he say?"

"Not bad, actually... Could've been worse," Vhan replied with relief, thinking back over his conversation with the criminal leader. "Remember that escort job we did in the Culris system?"

"Yes. The paltar who was running from gambling debts."

"Well, I don't think they were gambling debts. Bax was the one after him."

“Oh...”

“Exactly. And it looks like they found him despite our efforts. He was the one who gave him our contact information.”

“Then what did he want?”

The conversation hung in the air for a second as they both felt a faint current of energy pass through their bodies when they emerged from the jump cloud and returned to normal space.

“I’ll explain in a second. Let’s get to the cockpit. They’ve already told me they want us out of the hangar right now,” Vhan said, crossing the cargo area and heading forward. When they arrived, he saw that a call was already coming in from the freighter’s command deck. “This is the Dark Star.”

“We’ve exited the jump cloud and are proceeding to depressurize the hangar. You have clearance to depart.”

“Understood, thank you. Initiating takeoff sequence.”

Vhan watched as Tidux brought the systems online. The monitors lit up one by one, and the engine roared back to life, filling the ship with its familiar sound. The pilot pulled firmly on the controls, and the Dark Star rose smoothly, gliding toward the hangar door as it slowly opened ahead of them, giving them a clear path out once more.

Space enveloped them, and he fed more power to the thrusters, feeling the vibration beneath his feet as the ship picked up speed and moved away from the freighter. At that moment, the systems warned them that a jump cloud was forming. The Noejima vanished before their eyes in an instant, as though it had never been there.

“That’s it. We’re alone again,” Vhan said with relief, feeling

the nervousness that had dominated him until then slowly fade.

"Well? What's the job?" Tidux asked, turning toward him.

"Pick up and deliver. I'll give you the details in a minute, but first I'll transfer the locations they gave me to the central computer so we can get moving. We don't exactly have much time, either," the mercenary explained, quickly working his wrist computer as the data appeared.

"I hope they're paying us well for this."

"Yeah, don't worry. I asked for a hundred thousand. Though I get the feeling I could've asked for more."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I was already taking a risk by asking for more. Especially after he told me he'd killed one of our recent clients. If you want, next time you can negotiate our rates."

"At least it'll keep us going for a while."

"You and your damn money..." Vhan snorted, shaking his head as he entered the coordinates for the planet Glexer into the computer.

"I'm not the one who needs it to eat," the robot replied firmly, trying to sound amused. The remark drew a smile from Vhan as he activated the jump sequence.

3. Pursuit through the streets of Glexer

The Dark Star emerged from hyperspace in complete silence, gliding through the stellar void. Inside, Vhan watched the planet coming into view before them. Glexer was a hive of manufacturing activity, fueled by the abundance of mineral veins running across its entire surface. The greed of major mining corporations and factories had turned the planet into a vast industrial complex, filled with stations and spaceports that exported their products throughout the rest of the Myrnix sector.

If it had ever been a green world, those days were long gone. Its ocher atmosphere was now saturated with dust and smoke, a toxic mixture produced by relentless extraction and the ceaseless work of machines and industries.

“This is our destination,” Vhan said as he checked the data on his screen and located the pickup point, a small shop in Terfar, the planet’s capital and the hub of its largest companies and businesses.

“We have an incoming communication from the planetary control station,” Tidux said, pointing to the auxiliary screen. “What are you going to tell them?”

“The truth. We’re here on business,” he replied with a smile, activating the device.

“Unknown vessel, attention. Unknown vessel, identify yourself immediately.”

“This is the Dark Star. Registration number XZ-843. Transmitting data.”

“Checking. One moment…” a voice replied through the speaker as the information was transmitted. “Everything is in order. Purpose of your visit?”

“Business, Control. We have a shipment waiting for us. Requesting permission to land at Flover Spaceport.”

“Understood, Dark Star. Permission granted. I’m sending you your approach vector and assigned landing bay. We’ll inspect the ship on arrival and departure. Have all the necessary documents ready. Safe flight.”

“Thank you, Control,” the pilot replied, ending the communication and adjusting their course according to the coordinates he had received. As he increased the ship’s power, he turned toward his companion. “See? That was easy.”

“That’s always the easy part. What are we going to do when they inspect the ship? We have some illegal goods aboard, not to mention the cargo we’re supposed to transport.”

“You’re forgetting something very important, Tidux.”

“What?”

“We’re working for Bax now, the real ruler of this sector. Do you think he hasn’t paid off every customs team in the area?” he asked, amused as he watched his robotic companion’s impassive expression and the artificial eyes now studying him with programmed curiosity.

“I hadn’t thought of that. My apologies.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for. Like I said, this should be easy.”

With that thought in mind, Vhan pushed the controls forward and began their descent. The Dark Star entered the upper layers of the atmosphere. The readings on the monitors spiked as the ceramic coating began to heat up. Soon, the first tongues of flame licked at the ship's nose, enveloping it in a searing glow that lit the cockpit. The hull vibrated violently as they left the blackness of space behind and plunged into a maelstrom of suspended particles and gases. Within seconds, visibility outside the ship dropped to zero. A dense haze of dust, ash, and fragments of floating matter surrounded them, making maneuvering a nightmare.

Vhan could feel the strain through the controls, as though the Dark Star were fighting for every ühn they traveled. *It's like flying through the cloud of an erupting volcano,* he thought, gritting his teeth as he switched to instrument navigation, knowing that trusting his eyes under those conditions could be a deadly trap.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity of jolts and alarms, the dense cloud began to dissipate, revealing a lead-gray sky. The pilot exhaled slowly as he saw, for the first time, the vast industrial city stretching as far as the eye could see. Colossal factories dominated the landscape, their endless smokestacks spewing torrents of smoke that merged with the perpetual cloud they had just passed through.

Farther in lay the residential districts and, at the center of it all, the government district, where more modern buildings broke up the industrial monotony.

The radar showed the chaos engulfing Flover Spaceport.

Heavy transports laden with manufactured goods or freshly extracted materials, along with hundreds of ships of every kind, moved frantically up and down while technicians and workers hurried throughout the spaceport, providing countless services and making sure everything ran smoothly.

Vhan maneuvered cautiously through the traffic, following the route marked on his holographic display. At last, he reached the assigned bay. He reduced speed and brought the ship in for a gentle landing. The engine gradually powered down, and silence settled over the cockpit. Before he could even unbuckle his harness, the ship's exterior sensors told him that two customs officers were already waiting to conduct the inspection.

"Well, they're fast," he commented, impressed by the staff's efficiency. "Guess it's time to let them in."

Vhan opened the hatch, allowing the dense, heavy atmosphere to seep inside. He coughed as the air filled his nostrils. While he recovered, the two customs officers came aboard through the cargo ramp. They wore spaceport uniforms and masks covering their noses and mouths, essential for breathing outside.

"First time on Glexer, right?" one of them asked, stepping beside the human and pointing to his own mask. "I recommend you don't go outside without one of these, or it won't be long before your lungs feel like they're turning to stone."

"I'll keep that in mind," Vhan replied, trying to suppress his cough. "Thanks for the advice."

"You're here on business, correct?" the officer asked, checking the tablet in his hands.

“That’s right. I have a shipment to pick up here under the name Alres Arteans,” the mercenary replied, using the code name they had been given aboard Bax’s freighter for situations like this. At the name, he noticed the two officers exchange a brief glance before one nodded and the one who had spoken entered something into his terminal.

“Perfect. I don’t see any problem with your cargo. You may proceed, but be careful in the city. I wouldn’t want to have to explain some kind of incident to my superiors.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be careful.”

“Don’t forget the mask. Have a good day,” the officer said as they both left the ship.

“That’s it?” Tidux asked over the communicator, having watched everything through the cameras.

“Told you. We’re playing in a different league now,” Vhan replied, smiling toward the camera in the cargo bay. “We don’t have time to waste. I’ll grab my things and head to the workshop. The sooner I get in touch with the people handling the shipment, the better.”

“So I get stuck watching the ship again?” the robot asked in a tone that, despite its artificial quality, sounded sad.

“It’s for the best. Clear some space in the cargo hold for whatever we bring back and keep an eye on the communicator. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Understood.”

Vhan checked the map on his digital wristband. He was close to his destination. He took a deep breath, trying to clear his head. Despite following the customs officers' advice and putting on a space exploration mask to filter the air, it was still dense and carried an acidic, metallic taste.

Terfar was dirty and depressing not only because of its industrial, utilitarian appearance, but also because of the obvious wear everywhere he looked. Everything seemed corroded and rusted by the planet's hostile climate. The citizens, their faces marked by exhaustion and their clothes faded and worn, completed the picture of desolation the city seemed to be mired in. *I had it so good just a few days ago,* Vhan thought, remembering the enormous forest where they had landed and the clean air he had breathed during his stay on that beautiful planet. A place that now seemed incredibly far away.

With that paradise still on his mind, Vhan turned a corner and found himself on a narrow street packed with workshops and homes. At the far end, a small, ramshackle workshop greeted him, its logo almost completely faded and countless old, rusted parts scattered across the ground.

"Tidux, I think I'm here," he said over the communicator.

"You think? What do you mean?"

"This place doesn't look good enough for Bax. Even I wouldn't dare buy anything here. But this is the address I have."

"If it's the address he gave you, then it must be the place. So go ahead."

Vhan approached the door, but to his surprise, it didn't open automatically. He examined the frame for some kind of opening

mechanism but found nothing. Before he could decide what to do, a voice echoed around him.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

Vhan quickly located the source: a small speaker above the door, beside a camera watching him closely.

"I'm Vhan Stalix. I'm here to pick up some parts."

"Sorry, we don't sell parts retail," the voice replied coldly. "Especially not to people like you."

"The parts aren't for me," Vhan said, ignoring the contemptuous remark, one he was all too familiar with. "I'm here on behalf of Mr. Balef Xhelm. Does that name mean anything to you?"

The code name seemed to have the desired effect. The voice hesitated.

"On behalf of Mr. Balef?" The disbelief was unmistakable.

"That's right. Do you have the order ready?" the mercenary asked firmly, taking control of the conversation.

"I'll let you in right away. Come in, please."

The workshop door opened with a metallic screech, inviting him inside. Vhan was about to remove his mask but stopped short when he saw the state of the interior. The workshop was an even worse mess of clutter and decay than he had expected. Rusted shelves were crammed together, packed with obsolete electronic components and all kinds of old parts from discontinued ship models, while tangled cables hung from their edges like dead roots. Scrap metal and worn engine parts lay scattered across the floor around him, gathering dust beneath dim yellowish lighting that could barely penetrate the cloud of

particles in the air.

Everything looked out of place, and the prices, written on yellowed labels held on with tape, were ridiculously high. None of it made any sense. As Vhan made his way toward the counter, stepping around small piles of metal and abandoned tools, an old paltar watched him with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. The merchant was a hunched, pale-skinned being who barely seemed able to stand on his thin legs. He looked so frail that a single gust of air might knock him over. Yet his small, dark eyes shone with unexpected energy, scrutinizing Vhan's every movement with calculating sharpness.

"I wasn't expecting a human. Where's Madulmer?"

"Sorry, I don't know anyone by that name. I'm just the courier. I was told to pick up the order, and that's why I'm here," he explained with a shrug as the paltar tried to decide whether he was lying. "If you prefer, contact the person we both know and check whether you can trust me."

"No, that won't be necessary," the merchant replied, visibly nervous, waving his hands dismissively. "We'd better discuss business in my shop."

"Your shop?" Vhan asked, puzzled as he looked around.

The paltar made an odd motion beneath the counter, and a click sounded from one of the walls, revealing a hidden hatch leading to a staircase. Without looking back, he began descending slowly.

The man hurried after him. As he went down, the stale air from the upper floor gradually disappeared, replaced by cleaner air carrying the faint scent of well-oiled machinery. When he

reached the lower level, he found himself surrounded by the gleam of polished metal.

The contrast with the shop above was overwhelming: clean walls, orderly shelves filled with high-quality parts, workstations equipped with top-of-the-line machinery, and about ten workers laboring nonstop.

Looking more closely, Vhan recognized the parts and equipment.

He was standing inside a clandestine weapons factory.

"This is the shipment you came to pick up," the paltar said slowly, giving the mercenary time to take in the place. "We promised the entire order would be finished and ready by the time you arrived, but there was a delay in the delivery of some materials. I need a little more time to finish it. It'll save us a lot of trouble…"

"How much time are we talking about?" he asked, watching weapons and explosives being moved rapidly from one workstation to another.

"About two hours. Three at most. Is your ship at Flover?"

"Yes. Bay AXG745."

"Give me the time I'm asking for. I'll finish the order and bring it to your ship myself."

Vhan folded his arms and glanced at his wristband from the corner of his eye, letting the seconds drag by while the paltar swallowed nervously, anxious about the mercenary's reaction and waiting for an answer. **At last,** he spoke, his voice cutting like a knife.

"I'm on a tight delivery schedule, and any delay puts me in a

very dangerous position. Do you realize what you're asking me to do?"

"I know, but you could enjoy the… charms of this place. There isn't much to see, just factories and workshops. Maybe a decent bar or brothel."

"This could make things difficult for me," he repeated, feigning uncertainty despite already having decided to give the paltar the time and avoid the problems that would come from delivering less than the full shipment they had requested. "Still… I can give you the time, but I'll need something in return. Is there anything decent to drink around here?"

"That's the one thing we do have!" the merchant exclaimed with a nervous, relieved laugh. "The stills on this planet are famous. Give me the time and the first round is on me. I only ask that you don't tell our mutual acquaintance about the delay."

"One round won't be enough," Vhan said coldly. "You'll owe me a favor. And I promise you, I'll call it in when the time comes. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," the paltar replied with a grave nod, aware that his request had just turned into a new deal, something all too familiar in that world.

"Then if anyone asks, I'll say customs gave me a hard time and there weren't any landing bays available."

"Thank you very much." He rummaged through his pocket and held out a card from the workshop. "Give this to any bartender in the area and tell them I sent you. You won't need anything else. Before you go, give me your contact information. I'll let you know when everything is ready."

“Understood,” Vhan replied, taking the card and showing him the contact code on his wristband. “I’ll give you two hours. No more.”

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After updating his robotic companion on the latest news about the delivery, Vhan ended the communication and headed for the cantina across from him. The old, run-down place had the same air of decay as the workshop he had just left. As he had agreed with Tidux, he would wait there until everything was ready, then head straight to the bay and load the cargo.

Despite his explanations, the robot had reminded him how little time they had to finish the job and make the delivery. *Sometimes he’s a pain in the ass,* the mercenary thought as he pushed open the cantina door. It creaked loudly, alerting everyone inside to his arrival.

The bar, covered in a thin layer of dust, looked like a museum of better days. Its old, neglected decor bore traces of a time when the city had been prosperous, back when everything was still new and gleaming. The furniture was made of dented metal, with curved-back chairs that looked as though they belonged to another century. Yellowish lights barely illuminated the room, casting shadows that concealed cracks in the walls and damp-stained ceilings.

The patrons, silent figures stooped by age, cast furtive glances his way. Their skin had all been turned ashen by the dust hanging in the air, the same grime that coated everything

from the cloudy glasses to the old holograms decorating the walls. Vhan caught the surprise in their eyes. Humans were not a common sight on the planet, much less in a place as forgotten as this one. Even so, he went inside. He removed his mask, letting the stench of stale booze and reheated food fill his nostrils and abruptly remind him that he still hadn't eaten anything. He approached the bar slowly, noticing that the floor, covered in blackened tiles worn down by thousands of boots, was sticky and clearly in need of a good cleaning.

Behind the counter stood a stocky, middle-aged paltar whose eyes studied him with suspicion. Like the rest of the bar, he seemed almost part of the furniture, covered in a layer of dust that did not appear to bother him in the slightest.

"What would you like?" he asked in a formal tone laced with obvious disdain, perhaps annoyed by the presence of a human in his establishment or simply by having to serve a new customer.

"I've been told you have a good selection of local drinks," Vhan replied, ignoring the tone as he held out the card he had been given at the workshop.

The bartender's expression changed completely when he saw it, and a smile crept across his face.

"Yes, we have quite a selection. I'm sure you'll find something to your liking," he said with sudden enthusiasm.

"What do you recommend? The merchant at the workshop told me you have some first-rate stills."

"That's right. We distill our drinks right here, downstairs. You should try the blorn. It's our specialty," the paltar explained, now animated as he moved behind the counter. He

pulled out a bottle of pinkish glass that glowed faintly beneath the dim lights, poured a liquid of the same shade into a cloudy glass, and slid it toward the mercenary with a slight nod. “Go ahead. Try it.”

Vhan picked it up and smelled it. The aroma was intense, something fruity mixed with a strange undertone he could not identify. He raised the glass and drained it in one gulp.

The potent liquor went down hard, burning his throat like liquid fire all the way to his stomach. He coughed sharply, struggling to control the burning sensation as laughter from the other patrons filled the room.

“Good?” the bartender asked, clearly amused.

“Not bad,” the mercenary managed in a low voice, forcing a smile as he tried to regain his composure.

Seeing that, the paltar nodded, pleased.

“I can see you make good stuff here.” Vhan set the glass down on the bar with a soft tap. “You wouldn’t happen to sell any of your stock, would you? I want a bottle for myself. And I’ve got a few clients I’m sure would be interested in trying your products.”

“I’m always willing to talk business,” the paltar said with a smile as he poured him another drink.

Vhan staggered out of the cantina, giving a casual farewell to the patrons he had managed to win over during the two hours he had spent inside. At first they had kept to themselves, distant and reserved, but before long they had relaxed and joined the conversations. They talked about the planet and local life, sharing stories and details about businesses in the area, many of them connected to Bax and his people. Once again, it showed him just how much power that paltar wielded and how much control he was capable of exerting over the worlds of the Myrnix sector. Despite the effects of the alcohol, he filed all the information away, looking for new and profitable jobs for the future.

He tightened his grip on the bottle of blorn he had bought from the bartender and started back toward the workshop. The old merchant's call still echoed in his mind: the final batch of weapons was complete and ready for delivery. To supervise the loading and avoid any further delays or complications, Vhan had told him he would return to the workshop and ride with them in the transport to the hangar.

As he made his way through the dusty streets of Terfar, his thoughts turned to the weapons he was about to transport. Then something made him stop. An instinct ingrained and honed by years of experience warned him that something was wrong. His gaze sharpened and, without moving too much, he noticed a figure walking about twenty paces behind him. The stranger's dark clothing stood out against the clothes typically worn in the area, setting off an alarm in his mind.

"Tidux, it's me," the mercenary murmured, raising his digital

wristband to contact the ship. “Have you noticed anything strange in the hangar?”

“Define strange. What do you mean?”

“I think someone’s following me. I’m not sure yet, but I’ve got a bad feeling about it. Have you seen anything unusual around the ship?”

“Negative. Everything’s clear over here.”

“Stay alert. I’m on my way to pick up the cargo, so get the ship ready for us.”

“Understood, boss. Standing by.”

Vhan lowered his arm and glanced discreetly over his shoulder. The figure was still coming closer, keeping a constant distance. Without thinking twice, he abruptly turned a corner and ran as hard as he could until he found a doorway shrouded in darkness. He slipped into the shadows and held his breath. His heart was pounding, and the alcohol that had clouded his mind only moments before had vanished completely. In silence, he released the restraints on his weapon, preparing for a confrontation.

The stranger’s footsteps echoed along the deserted street, drawing closer and closer. Finally, the figure stopped a few ühns away, beside the doorway. A single glance told him everything he needed to know: a young, powerfully built paltar—and, unfortunately, armed.

For an instant, their eyes met. Startled, the stranger reached for his weapon. Vhan moved first, lunging forward with brutal force and driving him to the ground. Blows and shouts shattered the silence of the street.

Breathing heavily, he looked around to make sure there were no witnesses. His attacker lay unconscious at his feet. *Could he be hunting humans?* he wondered. Galactic Government law protected them, but the black market remained a constant threat, especially now that the Defense Corps was gone, leaving his people more vulnerable than ever.

A quick search of the unconscious figure revealed nothing about his identity or motives. Suddenly, the communicator on him crackled to life, and a voice rang out through the empty alley.

"Dlasel, report in. Where's our target?"

Vhan felt a knot form in his stomach. The paltar was not alone. Others were with him, and they would soon be on alert when their companion failed to answer. *I need to get out of here now,* he told himself as he quickly got to his feet.

He looked once more at the enemy lying on the ground. His hand settled involuntarily on the grip of his weapon as he hesitated. *Should I kill him?*

He rejected the idea, secured his weapon again, and headed for the workshop, where they were waiting for him.

It did not take him long to make it through the shop door. The mechanic greeted him with a smile that disappeared when he saw Vhan's serious expression.

"What happened?"

"We've got company. Someone had been following me since I left the cantina. I took him down, but he had friends."

"Then we need to hurry. You have to get off the planet as soon as possible. We're almost done loading the transport."

“All right. Let’s get moving before this gets any more complicated,” the mercenary said, running a hand over his face and finding a smear of blood there, a reminder of the fight he had just been in.

4. Crossfire

The old merchant started the transport's engine, and they headed for the spaceport. At the same time, the city's lights came alive again, marking the end of the workday and the beginning of its nightlife. Signs for bars and adult clubs lit up every street they sped through. Despite all those distractions, Vhan kept a constant watch from his seat, one hand firmly on the grip of his weapon, alert for any possible threat.

Beside him, the two workers accompanying the merchant were tense. Their shallow breathing, darting eyes, and trembling hands revealed the gravity of the situation they found themselves in.

"Can't we get airborne?" the man asked, watching the vehicles soaring above them as they moved easily over the congested streets.

"No. Because of that shitty regulation they brought in, we're only allowed to travel on the ground," the merchant replied, shaking his head and muttering a curse under his breath. "If we try it, the police will intercept us in less than two minutes. Trust me, I know from experience."

Vhan nodded in resignation, knowing that making their way through the streets would take longer and give their enemies more opportunities to ambush them. With every passing minute, the tension in the air seemed to thicken, as though the city itself were holding its breath. He pictured his enemies hiding around every corner, waiting for them, and every passing vehicle

seemed like a potential threat.

To his surprise and relief, however, they reached the spaceport without incident. The transport glided smoothly toward the checkpoint, following the traffic signs that guided them into the inspection area, where the officers would check their cargo and permits.

“Relax, kid. This is nothing,” the pilot said when he saw the worry written all over Vhan’s face. “I’ll handle this one.”

“What are you carrying this time, Fuendar?” the officer in the booth asked when they stopped beside him, looking at the merchant, who now gave him a brazen smile.

“The usual, you know. A little of this and a little of that,” the old paltar replied slowly, letting the words sink in. “You know how it is. When the boss gives an order, you obey.”

“I see... Destination?”

“Dock AXG745. If you need anything else, the pilot’s right here,” he said, pointing at Vhan.

“No, that’s fine. I’ll take care of the paperwork. Be careful, and try not to draw attention to yourselves.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be discreet,” Fuendar replied with a nod before stepping on the accelerator and driving through the entrance. Once they were past it, he heard the mercenary let out a heavy sigh of relief. “I had everything worked out. These guys won’t give us any trouble. There’s a reason they call Bax the Ruler in the Shadows.”

The transport sped past the different ships scattered throughout the spaceport, which was now much emptier and quieter than when they had arrived. Neon lights illuminated

much of the area, helping the technicians and night-shift workers go about their jobs while the control towers stood out against the perpetual cloud of ash and grime.

The headlights swept over the Dark Star. Vhan knew perfectly well what condition it was in and how much damage it had suffered, yet the transport's cold light seemed to make it young again, reminding him of the first time he had seen it and known he had to have it. But as the vehicle maneuvered, that image vanished like a mirage, leaving a stab of pain in his chest as he looked at the reality before him. He felt a mixture of nostalgia and frustration. It was his home, his refuge, and a symbol of his freedom—but also of his failures. Every scratch, every dent, every defect told a story of better times that would never return.

The transport braked with a screech, snapping the mercenary out of his reverie. They had parked perfectly aligned with the cargo hatch. Within moments, everyone climbed out and prepared to unload.

"Tidux, open the cargo hatch. We need to work fast," Vhan ordered.

"Understood. Opening cargo hatch," the robot announced. A click echoed through the air as the ramp lowered, revealing the nearly empty cargo bay, ready to receive the new shipment.

"Get to work!" Fuendar shouted at his two workers. They picked up the first crate and carried it into the ship.

"Come down and help them too," Vhan said over the communicator.

"Understood," Tidux replied, descending with steady steps.

The workers stopped for a moment, staring at the metal being with a mixture of curiosity and fear.

"You have a robot?" the old paltar asked, approaching Vhan with obvious concern in his voice.

"Yeah, a cargo model. I bought him a few years ago from a scrapyard. Sometimes he has trouble understanding my orders or figuring out what he's supposed to do, but he's pretty useful when it comes to moving or loading things," the mercenary lied, watching the merchant relax a little once he understood that it was supposedly a low-quality machine.

It's incredible how deeply they've had the fear of the Dark Ages drilled into them. He doesn't hesitate for a second to hand over a shipment of illegal weapons, but he does at the sight of a robot. Good thing he has no idea what Tidux really is. Otherwise, they'd turn us in themselves, he thought as he watched his metal companion lift one of the crates with remarkable ease and carry it quickly into the Dark Star.

"I thought robots would be pretty common on an industrial planet like yours."

"Not as common as you might think. The regulations are still strict, even in manufacturing. Not even the big companies here have more than five or ten percent robots in their workforce."

"Funny. I thought a planet like this would be different..."

The Dark Ages had left deep scars on the collective psyche. The struggle against the robots who called themselves the Chosen had forced many civilizations to sacrifice their worlds and their own pasts in order to survive. But the cost had gone even deeper: those who made it through carried with them a

legacy of fear, a persistent echo of the battles they had fought, and a constant reminder that technology could be both a powerful ally and a lethal enemy—one capable of unleashing chaos and nearly destroying all of Theia.

That was when an unusual movement caught his eye. Instinctively, he drew his weapon and shouted a warning to the others, but it was already too late. A shot rang out, striking one of the workers and knocking him down along with the crate he was carrying, which was damaged when it hit the ground.

The others took cover behind the transport as shots cracked around them and lit up the dock. Vhan turned to the other loader, who was now beside him, trembling with fear.

"How many crates are left?" he shouted over the noise.

"Three... Four. Four or five," he managed to answer, terrified.

"Tidux, take care of the rest of the cargo. I'll cover you."

"Understood," the robot replied, leaving cover without any sign of fear, quickly moving the dead worker aside and picking up the fallen crate.

Vhan moved quickly, looking for a good angle on his attackers. He spotted six armed paltar advancing fast, taking up positions as they tried to surround them. Among them, he recognized the one who had followed him from the cantina. The paltar was firing erratically, one eye swollen and almost shut from the beating he had taken earlier.

I can't let you off this time, the mercenary thought as he took careful aim and pulled the trigger. The cries of the paltar's companions echoed across the dock, confirming what he already knew: he had brought him down.

The unexpected sound of a different weapon firing beside him made Vhan turn nervously. Fuendar, wielding a pistol nearly as old as he was, was firing determinedly at those trying to kill them. The mercenary couldn't help but smile before turning his attention back to slowing the enemy advance.

His accurate fire slowed the attackers, buying them a brief respite. Barely five minutes had passed since the fighting began when police sirens started sounding in the distance. The spaceport had wasted no time responding, sending troops to restore order and take down those responsible for the chaos. A ship descended rapidly behind the paltar lines, flanking them and forcing them to split their attention. The confusion gave him the opening to bring down another attacker.

"Everything's loaded," Tidux announced.

"Good. Start getting the ship ready for takeoff," Vhan replied. He turned toward the merchant, who was still firing accurately and clearly enjoying the chaos around him. Fuendar looked back at him.

"Don't worry about me. Get out of here. We'll use the confusion to escape."

"Understood. Be careful," He watched as the old paltar gave new instructions to the young worker with him and the two prepared to flee.

With one last shot, the mercenary forced his enemies back into cover, then used the brief opening to throw himself inside his ship. He ran up the ramp and hit the closing control while continuing to empty his weapon at the attackers. Once the ramp was fully raised and sealed, he hurried through the ship to the

cockpit, where his companion was waiting for him.

"We're leaving the others here?"

"They'll be fine without us," Vhan replied, checking the exterior cameras and watching his companions climb into the transport as the police tightened their encirclement around the attackers. "We need to get out of here. Now!"

The mercenary picked up the launch sequence where Tidux had left off and pulled back on the controls. The engine roared as the Dark Star rose rapidly into the air. Shots ricocheted off the hull with hollow thuds while the comms erupted with orders from spaceport control, demanding that he land again for an inspection and explain what had happened. Vhan ignored them. He set a course away from the planet, leaving the threats from the spaceport behind as it quickly shrank in the distance.

"What happened? Who were those people?" the robot asked once they had cleared the outer layers of the atmosphere and he saw his companion finally breathing easier.

"I'm not sure. They can't have been slavers. They attacked us directly. Human hunters? Maybe... Or maybe they were after the cargo. But if they knew about it..." Vhan said aloud, considering the possibility and what it would mean. "If they knew, then someone's been talking more than they should."

"Who?"

"I don't know, and I don't want to go back down there to find out," he said, allowing a smile to surface as he activated the jump computer and entered the coordinates for their next destination. "Are we ready?"

"Do you think they'll be waiting for us on the other side?"

Tidux asked, voicing his own thoughts.

"I hope not..."

Vhan pulled the lever, generating the jump cloud that swallowed the Dark Star and hurled it through hyperspace at speeds far beyond that of light. He checked the data and readouts to make sure everything was in order. They had three hours of travel ahead of them before reaching their destination.

It was only then that he realized that, after everything that had happened, he still hadn't taken off his mask. He pulled it away with a quick motion, letting the familiar recycled air he knew so well fill his nostrils. He couldn't help smiling at the feeling of being home again. At the same time, he became aware of the strong stench of smoke, chemicals, and machinery clinging to his skin and clothes.

"I'm going to take a shower and get this damn smell off me," he announced, rising from his seat. "Let me know when we're getting close."

"Understood," Tidux replied with a nod, turning his attention back to the distorted view of hyperspace unfolding in front of them as he listened to his companion walk away.

"Shit!" Vhan exclaimed, bringing a hand to his head and making the robot turn back toward him, concerned by the sudden outburst. "I left that bottle of blorn I bought on the seat of the transport... I paid good money for it. Now that old paltar's going to drink it."

5. Shadows of Past Battles

Vhan had finished showering and was in the kitchen, regaining his strength as he reviewed the ship's data on the auxiliary monitor. As they had discussed before setting out on this venture, the jump systems were on the verge of critical failure. *With the money from this job, we'll be able to replace them,* he thought as he took another bite of his food. But his mind soon drifted to the cargo they were carrying. *Who are we supposed to deliver all those weapons to?* With the question still on his mind, he got up and headed for the cargo hold.

From the doorway, he looked over the scattered crates, some scorched by plasma fire from the fight at the spaceport, showing that the job had not been as easy as he had first thought. The mercenary stepped forward and opened the crate that had been damaged during the confrontation, revealing around twenty pistols he knew all too well.

He picked one up, feeling its weight as memories flooded back. He relived the emotion he had felt almost thirty years earlier, on his first day of training with the Defense Corps, when they had given him his uniform and a pistol just like the one in his hand. He remembered firing his first shots and missing the target in the practice room, smiling at how poor his aim had been at first and how he had gradually improved until he became a decent shot.

But the memories did not stop there. He remembered his rise through the Corps, the camaraderie, and the missions they had

shared. Names and faces he had not thought about in a long time returned to him. *Could they still be alive?* The question hit him hard. After surviving the attacks on the Corps and the Galactic Government's hunt, he had severed every tie with that life. He knew many of those who resurfaced had been gunned down or captured, used as scapegoats for a conspiracy the public barely understood. Vhan knew the truth well, and it was far darker than the official story that had destroyed not only their lives, but also the future prospects of an entire civilization.

Lost in thought, he did not notice Tidux enter the cargo area. The robot waited in silence until his companion finally noticed him, looked up, and wiped away a tear that had slipped free before he could stop it.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, it's nothing. Just memories from the past," he replied with a smile, trying to brush it off. "What's up?"

"We're almost there. You'd better come up."

"Coming," he said, placing the pistol back inside the crate and turning toward the robot. "Let's finish this."

Once in the cockpit, Vhan watched the seconds tick away on the jump computer. The Dark Star emerged from hyperspace, leaving the purple cloud behind to reveal a blanket of stars. The radar showed exactly what they had expected: a young star system, with a distant star and a vast cloud of asteroids. No habitable planets, only rocks and debris.

"With this many asteroids, the radar's saturated. Tidux, switch to visual scanning. We need to find the pickup ship. They could already be here waiting for us," he said as he checked the

time. Despite the wait on the planet for Fuendar to finish the weapons and the brief confrontation afterward, they had arrived on time.

"Understood. Activating systems," the robot replied, linking himself to the ship's computer and accessing its systems. Vhan smiled for a moment as the auxiliary screens filled with images of the space outside. That was one of the advantages of having a companion like him.

Several minutes passed in silence, both of them watching their surroundings and searching the space around them for the mysterious ship. Suddenly, the sensors activated, warning them of a new jump signature.

"We've got company. A type-three ship," Tidux announced as the image appeared on the screens. Judging by its design, it seemed to be a cargo ship. "Could that be them?"

"We'll know soon. They're hailing us," Vhan said when he saw the incoming communication. He opened the channel, allowing a voice from the unknown ship to fill the cockpit.

"I'm a traveler looking for a lost friend. Have you seen him?"

"Lost friends always find each other, and new ones are made along the way," the mercenary replied, reciting the code phrase and feeling relieved to know it was the ship they had been waiting for.

"You're right on time," the voice said, sounding surprised. "Do you have everything?"

"Yes."

"Move in. We'll use the boarding passageways to transfer the cargo. Better to do it away from the asteroid field."

“Copy that. Changing course,” Vhan announced, adjusting the control levers as he moved away from the dense cluster of rocks and headed toward the newcomers.

Suddenly, the radar beeped, displaying a fleeting, irregular signal hidden among the asteroids. But before they could investigate it, it disappeared.

“Did you see that, Tidux?”

“Yes. It was an unusual reading, something separate from the asteroids. But the radar’s lost it again. I’m going to check with the optical and thermal systems.”

“Could they have followed us? Impossible! They were fighting the police, and there was no one nearby who could have detected our course. Unless…” he swallowed, looking anxiously from the cargo ship they were approaching to the radar, which showed nothing but glowing dots. “Unless they knew the details and the coordinates of the meeting too.”

“I’ve got it!” the robot exclaimed, bringing up an image on the screen of someone in a combat spacesuit perched on an asteroid. The helmet glinted in the faint starlight, and the figure held a large-caliber weapon.

“Shit! We’ve got company!” Vhan shouted over the communicator to warn the other ship. A flash burst from the rifle, and before he could react, the Dark Star took a heavy hit that reverberated through the entire hull. Every screen immediately turned red, flooded with alarms and error messages. “What the fuck was that?”

“A jump inhibitor. The systems are overloaded. The computer is offline.”

“Who has weapons like that?”

As if in answer, the sensors began beeping again, detecting several plasma trails emerging from the asteroid cloud.

“Three… No. Five contacts. Type two,” Tidux reported. They were small but heavily armed combat ships, with a maximum capacity of three crew members. An unmistakable emblem marked their hulls: a red robotic arm gripping a planet.

“The Red Claw? What are they doing here?” Vhan muttered, knowing the answer lay in the cargo hold. “Forget the delivery. We need to get out of here. Find me a new location so I can send it to them.”

“It’s already in the computer.”

“Dark Star to pickup ship, the site’s compromised. They hit us with a jump inhibitor. We’re going to disable it and meet you at the coordinates I’m sending. If we’re not there in two hours, or if anyone other than me shows up, consider the cargo lost.”

“Copy that. See you there. Don’t let us down,” the other ship replied, quickly repositioning itself.

“What about us?” Tidux asked as he watched the jump cloud envelop it and make it disappear, leaving empty space where it had been moments before.

“Like I said, we’ll have to disable the inhibitor before we can jump.”

Before the mercenary could say anything else, another transmission came through on the control panel. Vhan glanced at it for a second, then swiped his fingers across the display, allowing a new voice to fill the cockpit.

“Transport ship, cut your engines and hand over the cargo. If

you do, you will not be destroyed. Repeat, hand over the cargo and you will not die."

"How long do you need to disable the inhibitor?"

"I can't do it from here. I have to go outside and disable it," Tidux replied calmly, as though it posed no danger at all. "If I go out now, I'll be an easy target. We'd need to put some distance between us and shake them first."

"I have an idea, though you might not like it…"

"Surrender the ship immediately!" the speaker blared again.

"Don't you want to do what they say?" the robot asked. Vhan could almost hear a hint of amusement in Tidux's voice. They both knew what the answer would be.

"You know how little I like threats," the mercenary replied, an amused smile spreading across his face as he powered up the engines and turned the control lever, changing course toward the asteroid cloud.

"You're going in there?"

"It's the best way to shake them," the pilot growled through clenched teeth as the alarms blared, showing him just how many dangerous objects now surrounded them. At the same time, the sensors showed the five ships giving chase. "With a little luck, one of them will smash into an asteroid."

At that moment, a fragment of rock struck the ship's hull, triggering another cascade of alarms and damage warnings.

"If we don't crash first…"

The minutes seemed to drag on forever as Vhan focused every sense on finding a path through the rocks that never stopped moving. His sweaty hands gripped the control levers tightly as he reacted instinctively to the obstacles appearing ahead of him and the shots from their pursuers. Every turn, every bank, was a struggle to keep the ship in one piece as they moved through the asteroid field. Every minor impact against the Dark Star sent a shudder through the entire ship, each one making him wonder if it might be his last.

"We can't keep this up much longer," he growled under his breath while the alarms continued to thunder through the cockpit, warning them of the chaos they were facing.

Tidux, meanwhile, had taken control of the turrets, firing relentlessly at their enemies and the nearby asteroids in an attempt to create an impassable barrier. But his efforts seemed futile. The enemy ships were smaller and faster, and although their pilots were not as skilled as Vhan, the difference in power between their ships and the Dark Star was tipping the balance against them. Soon, there would be no way out.

"I can't hit them. They're too fast." The frustration in his metallic voice was unmistakable.

"I thought this would be enough…" the pilot muttered, yanking hard on the control levers to dodge another attack that passed dangerously close to the wing. "We need to change tactics. Go to the cargo hold and check the weapons. Get every fusion rifle and explosive you can find ready."

"What do you have in mind?"

Vhan did not answer immediately. He focused on

maneuvering between two asteroids that looked as though they were about to collide. The ship banked sharply, almost grazing the rocks as the engine roared, pushing the Dark Star to the limit of its capabilities. Once they were clear, he took a deep breath before finishing his thought.

"Something Bax isn't going to like very much…"

Through the screens, he watched his companion move quickly through the cargo hold, handling the crates and equipment with ease. Every second seemed endless as he kept the Dark Star weaving around enemy fire and through the hellish field of rocks appearing ahead. A short while later, his suspicion was confirmed: what he had asked for amounted to almost half the cargo. He shook his head and let out a sad sigh before opening the ship's internal channel.

"Tidux, seal the cargo hold and open the hatch. We're going to jettison everything you set aside."

"You want to dump it?"

"Yes, but first prepare the explosives and overload the rifles so they'll explode once they're outside, near the asteroids. I want to trigger a chain reaction with the rocks and trap those bastards in there. That should give us enough time for you to get outside and disable the inhibitor."

"The cargo isn't ours…"

"I know! And if we don't do something, it'll belong to those bastards! We don't have time to argue. Do it!"

Tidux picked up the last fusion rifle and worked on it with precision. His fingers moved quickly over the weapon, adjusting its feed systems and recalibrating the circuits. A red light

blinked, bathing his metallic face in a sinister glow. He placed the weapon in the crate with the others, all of them overloaded and ready to explode.

"Everything's ready."

"Good," Vhan replied, his eyes fixed on the readouts as he adjusted their trajectory. "I'll take us closer to the asteroids. Connect to the computer and monitor my course. Jettison the cargo at exactly the right moment."

"Connecting to the computer." His sensors synchronized with the ship's central computer as dozens of windows and pop-up displays flooded the cockpit's auxiliary screens. "Adjusting cargo dispersion. Ready to release."

The pilot pulled on the controls, guiding the ship precisely between the asteroids as he watched the robot throw out the first crate on the screen. The cargo floated through the void for several seconds, slowly spinning before crashing into one of the smaller asteroids and bouncing away in the absence of gravity.

"First charge in position."

From that moment on, Tidux began emptying the cargo hold as fast as he could, strategically scattering the crates throughout the asteroid belt while the Dark Star threaded its way between the rocks. At the controls, every move had to be perfect, with no room for error.

"That was the last one. Ten seconds to detonation." His metallic voice remained cold and calculated as a countdown appeared on the cockpit screens, the numbers dropping with agonizing slowness.

"Get ready," Vhan growled, his eyes fixed on the countdown.

“When they go off, you’ll have to move fast to remove the inhibitor.”

“I’m set.” Tidux took a tool belt and a tether system that would allow him to move more easily in space. Every adjustment he made was flawless, the product of meticulous programming and unmatched mechanical efficiency.

The detonation lit up the space around them, setting off a chain reaction that quickly spread to the nearby asteroids. The radar showed the enemy ships maneuvering desperately to avoid the explosions and the chaos the asteroid belt had become. Suddenly, two of the blips vanished. Vhan smiled at the small victory.

At that instant, Tidux shot out of the cargo hold and into the void without hesitation. As he cleared the ship, he activated the hull tethering systems and pulled on them. The reinforced cable responded exactly as he had calculated, swinging him hard toward the ship. His momentum carried him to the upper hull, where he activated his magnetic feet and came to rest a short distance from his target.

Impossible. It was the only thing Vhan could think as he watched the robot’s maneuver and begin examining the jump inhibitor attached to the ship. It was a metal device that reminded him of a spider: six legs, each about the size of an arm, extended from the main body and clamped onto the hull with such force that it seemed impossible to remove the device without tearing away part of the ship’s structure.

Tidux studied it for a moment. The device was more complex than it appeared. The entire mechanism was armored and

protected against any attempt to dismantle it. There were no visible bolts or joints; its surface was completely smooth. The only feature was a small panel with a keypad, used to deactivate it whenever the attackers wanted to regain control of the ship.

“I don’t know what kind of code they’re using to deactivate the system, and I can’t access the internal circuits. The sensors are detecting an explosive booby trap inside. If I tamper with it, it’ll explode and take half the ship with it.”

“What options do we have?” Vhan asked desperately as he watched the remaining ships regroup, preparing to resume the pursuit.

“There’s only one, but you might not like it,” the robot replied, echoing the tone his companion had used earlier and catching him by surprise.

“I don’t want to know. Do whatever you have to do. We need to get out of here,” the mercenary replied, closing the channel and turning his attention back to flying.

Tidux crouched down and took out the screwdriver he was carrying, then went to work on the ship’s ceramic panels. If he could cut away the section of structure the inhibitor was attached to, they could free themselves. The robot moved quickly from one panel to the next, releasing the fastening bolts and leaving them behind.

The Dark Star raced through the asteroid belt, trying to pull away from the ships that were already closing in on them again. Then their cannons began spitting plasma once more. The projectiles passed close to Tidux, lighting up the area where he was working.

"How's it going? I don't know how much longer I can keep this up."

"I need a couple of minutes. I have to cut through part of the outer hull," he replied, activating the plasma cutter and inserting it into the narrow opening he had created by removing the bolts that secured the ceramic plating.

"We don't have that much time. Hurry!"

Vhan watched the exterior cameras nervously, following every movement Tidux made around the inhibitor as he worked without pause, oblivious to the enemy ships drawing ever closer despite the Dark Star's constant evasive maneuvers. He checked the systems again. Every one of them was in critical condition; even the engine was overheating and would soon fail under the strain. If that happened, it would all be over for them.

Without realizing it, he murmured a prayer to the universe, asking for compassion.

He had not finished speaking the words when he saw a huge piece of metal tear free from the ship and shoot out into space. At the same time, some of the alarms fell silent and the indicator lights returned to a vivid green.

"You did it! The jump computer's back online!" Vhan exclaimed, elated as he confirmed that the system was responding. "Get back inside immediately. We need to get out

of here. Now."

Suddenly, a shot slammed into the hull, rocking the ship. He tightened his grip on the controls and maneuvered to avoid the next attacks.

"Tidux?! Are you okay?!" he shouted when he could no longer see his companion on the screen, his heart clenching at the thought of the worst.

"Yes, I'm still here. That was close," the robot replied through the cockpit speakers, reappearing on another camera as he moved along the hull toward the cargo hold.

"I'm changing course. We need to get clear of the asteroid cloud before we can jump. I've already set the coordinates. Let me know when you're inside."

The Dark Star veered sharply, catching its pursuers by surprise and gaining a small lead. Vhan rested his hand on the jump lever, waiting for good news as the holographic projector showed open space spreading out ahead of them and the asteroid belt falling behind. His heart pounded against his chest, each second seeming to last forever.

The cargo hold closure alarm came on. He glanced at the auxiliary screen and confirmed that Tidux was already inside, safe. Without hesitation, he pulled the lever. The engine roared more fiercely than ever. The jump cloud expanded rapidly, surrounding and swallowing them, leaving the Red Claw ships behind.

The pilot checked the readouts and, once he was sure they were safe, at least for now, finally released the controls and leaned back in his seat. He sighed in relief, feeling his body and

heartbeat gradually settle.

"I'm sorry. Repairing the hull is going to be expensive. It's wrecked," Tidux reported, his footsteps now echoing through the silent cockpit.

"It doesn't matter. We're alive. That's what matters. You did a great job," Vhan said with a smile as the robot sat down beside him and took his place in the copilot's seat. "We wouldn't have made it out of there if you hadn't made that decision. You can be proud of what you did."

Tidux watched him for a moment, processing and unraveling the true meaning of those words. Before he could say anything, his companion pointed at the computer.

"I made a quick jump to try to shake the Red Claw. Once we reach our destination, we'll need to set the coordinates for the rendezvous point. So let's not waste any time. We've got five minutes to get ready."

6. Scars from a Job Gone Wrong

The Dark Star emerged from hyperspace with a slight jolt. Ahead of them, Pykek Station, which shared its name with the system it occupied, stretched out in the distance like a metallic hive suspended in the void. Vhan watched it for a moment as they approached, waiting for clearance from the Control Tower to land. It was an industrial station that served as a strategic hub for harvesting comets and asteroids rich in minerals and water, which were then shipped to the two planets the paltar had colonized. For that reason, the station's structure was functional, designed to facilitate the constant work of collection and processing. The blinking lights along the docks and loading platforms cast shadows across the worn surfaces, emphasizing the rough character of the place. This was not his first visit to the station, and he had spent enough time there to know its inhabitants: rough, proud, and convinced that their work made them indispensable to the survival of those living on the system's central planets.

A light on the communications panel blinked, interrupting his thoughts, followed by a transmission that came through the cockpit speakers. The Control Tower had cleared him to land and assigned him a course for Hangar One, a vast, bustling space where countless ships moved in an incessant, hypnotic choreography. Industrial freighters came and went while smaller service and maintenance craft buzzed between them. Traffic was constant but controlled with military precision. With quick,

familiar movements, Vhan deployed the landing gear and followed the assigned coordinates.

The ship descended and touched down smoothly. A few seconds later, he shut down the engine, letting its roar fade as the distant sounds outside slowly filled the silence. His fingers drummed against the control panel while he waited for the landing procedures to finish. He used the moment to glance over the diagnostics, where flashing warnings reminded him of the battle they had just fought.

The memories and the sense of imminent danger came rushing back: adrenaline coursing through his veins, the roar of the engine, the constant buzz of alarms. They had come close to disaster yet again. But this time, Vhan realized just how close they had come to not making it out alive. The desperate maneuvers, the engine overload, Tidux's frantic attempt to get rid of the inhibitor... It had all been a race against time.

And that was how he had recounted it to the pickup ship.

After the first jump they had made to throw off their attackers, they headed for the agreed coordinates. There, at last, they were able to make the delivery. Vhan took the opportunity to explain the whole story, from the attack in Glexer to sacrificing much of the cargo to buy themselves enough time to escape.

After hearing his account, the smugglers contacted the Noejima and sent them a message reporting not only that the delivery had been completed, but also everything that had happened with the cargo and the Red Claw.

Once they had finished transferring the weapons from one

cargo hold to the other, they said their goodbyes. The smugglers explained that they had to continue their journey, since they still needed to deliver that same shipment to one of the sector's border systems, where Bax was fighting a fierce, merciless war against the Red Claw—a war that, so far, he was losing.

Hearing that, Vhan understood the importance of what they had done and the true extent of the risk they had taken. Those weapons could change the course of the battle and make Bax the new criminal leader in the system. That was precisely why the Red Claw had come after them. Someone had leaked information about their movements and the shipment that would threaten the Red Claw's hegemony, and the organization had decided to act.

While he was still turning those thoughts over in his head, watching the pickup ship disappear from view, a call came through the Dark Star's encrypted channel. It was Bax.

"I've been informed that you made the delivery to one of my ships," that booming voice announced without so much as a greeting.

"That's right. It just made the jump right in front of us," he replied in a cooperative tone, trying to read the paltar's mood after Bax had learned what had happened.

"That's good news. They'll reach their destination soon and do what they're supposed to do. I hear you took out some of those Red Claw bastards. Is that true?"

"Yes, although we had to sacrifice part of the cargo to do it," Vhan replied slowly, spacing out the words to make the seriousness of the situation clear.

“That’s fine. Sometimes you have to make sacrifices to reap the benefits.” Although he couldn’t see him, he knew at once that the paltar was smiling, enjoying the situation. “Besides, this wasn’t the only shipment I was sending to my troops.”

“Now I understand why you hired us for this job...” A slow nod accompanied the realization. At last, everything fit together. Unbeknownst to them, Bax had put a target on their backs. Before he could stop himself, the words spilled out. “You used us as bait in your game with the Red Claw, didn’t you? You manipulated the information to find out who would take the bait, and we were an acceptable sacrifice. Did you at least expect us to survive?”

The silence on the other end of the line was heavy, almost tangible. When the criminal leader finally answered, his tone was calculating, without a trace of remorse.

“You’re smarter than you looked at first. Yes, I needed someone unconnected to our usual operations, and you played your part perfectly. You survived, which tells me you’re better than I expected. That’s an advantage, don’t you think?”

“An advantage?” Vhan clenched his teeth, struggling to stay calm and keep himself from saying anything that would mean confronting him directly. It was a battle he couldn’t win. And yet, despite the fury he felt, part of him could understand why they had been used. *If I’d been in his position and wanted to find out who was leaking information to my enemies, I would’ve done the same thing. Separate operations, teams and transports with no connection to one another, different pickup and delivery points. I may not like it, and he may have used us as his puppets,*

but it's the best way to get results. And if someone dies... He already said it: sometimes you have to make sacrifices to reap the benefits. "I don't like being played like this, but I understand why you did it."

"I'm glad you understand." Bax's voice softened, almost paternal. "I'll tell you this: even though I played you today, in this universe we're all pawns on someone else's board. Today, it was your turn. Tomorrow, it'll be someone else's. Maybe mine. That's why you have to become a good player and adapt to the rules of the game. Remember, only the best survive."

"And what about the ones who tried to play by their own rules?"

"Don't worry. I'll deal with them personally. But I'll take my time and make sure they pay dearly," his voice returning to its usual dry tone, once again revealing the power he wielded. "In the meantime, I want you to keep your mouth shut. This stays between you and me. As far as everyone else is concerned, the job didn't go the way either of us expected, and half the cargo was lost. So go to Pykek Station. Paken's there wrapping up a job. He'll pay you."

"Understood. This conversation never happened," the mercenary said, forcing down the fury burning inside him at having been manipulated that way while, at the same time, feeling a certain admiration for the criminal's cunning. "I just hope next time you explain the rules of the game before we play."

"I'll do my best," Bax replied mockingly before abruptly cutting the connection, leaving a bitter taste in Vhan's mouth.

After the conversation, they set course for the station, Bax's words still circling in Vhan's mind. He was more aware than ever of the fragility of alliances and just how dangerous Bax was.

Suddenly, the control panel beeped, snapping him back to reality. He quickly checked the systems, confirming that everything was in order, the ship was properly docked, and they had clearance to head out into the hangar and enter the station. He let out a long sigh of relief and sank back into his seat. The weight of the last few hours came crashing down on him. The job had cost them dearly in material terms, and only sheer luck had kept it from costing them their lives.

The seconds passed in heavy silence as he tried to relax, but his mind remained trapped in a loop. Images of the battle overlapped, every decision and every mistake they had made replaying in his mind. The exhaustion wasn't just physical. He felt it in every fiber of his being.

He knew he had to move, that there were still plenty of things to do, that he couldn't stay there. And yet, at that moment, getting to his feet seemed like a monumental effort, as though the gravity of his own thoughts were holding him pinned to the seat.

Finally, with an exhausted sigh, he shook his head and, gathering what little strength he had left, forced himself to stand.

"I want you to finish checking the systems and repair whatever you can with the parts we have," Vhan ordered.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll go wait for Paken. The sooner we get the money, the

better. With any luck, it'll be enough to cover the damage and get the jump systems back in working order."

"Understood. I'll get started right away."

Vhan stepped down from the Dark Star, and the bustle of the hangar immediately engulfed him. The air was thick, heavy with the smell of overheated metal, oil, and the faint scent of alinum. Around him, tools hummed without pause, technicians moved back and forth between ships, and voices and languages blended into an endless chorus. He had seen hundreds of stations and hangars like this one, but for some reason—perhaps because of his accumulated exhaustion or the latest near-death experience he had just survived—it felt as though this were the first time he had ever set foot in a place like it, taking everything in with new, almost innocent eyes.

After a brief moment of contemplation, he turned toward his ship. His heart sank when he saw the state it was in. The Dark Star was a shadow of what it had once been: much of its indigo paint was gone, leaving bare metal exposed; the orange lines outlining its shape had almost completely faded; even its name had become a dark smear that was difficult to make out. And that was without even counting the damage they had suffered on their latest job.

If I had the money, I'd restore you the way you deserve, he thought bitterly. The tools, the hurried footsteps, the voices... all of it suddenly flooded back into his ears, like a wave pulling him away from reality and dragging him back into his memories. He relived the moment he had first seen the ship and knew he needed it. He had done everything he could to convince

Heilen, its former owner, to put it up as the prize in one of the games of bakum they used to play. That had been more than ten galactic years ago, and since then they had lived through hundreds of adventures and done plenty of other crazy things along the way.

A smile appeared on his face as he remembered some of those stories. But his mind didn't stop there, choosing to torment him once again. The images, faces, and names of the friends he had lost along the way returned to him. Not only those from his time in the Defense Corps, but also those he had lost over the last twenty years, which he had spent surviving in a galaxy that had never wanted him. A cruel life, filled with sins he knew he could never atone for.

Resigned to that unchanging truth, he stopped looking back and focused on the present. He knew his life wasn't going to change, and that the only thing he could do was keep going, just as he always had.

He headed into the station, and although the bustle of the hangar surrounded him, within him there was only silence.

7. Why are they chasing you?

The cantina was filling up fast. Most of the workers at Pykek Station had finished their shifts, and many had decided to spend part of their daily wages soothing their parched throats. At the back of the room, a group of musicians played their instruments, trying to drown out the shouting and chatter echoing in a dozen different languages. Massive screens, mounted and secured where customers could not rip them down, displayed various channels, all showing violent sports where blood was the main attraction.

Paken, a bipedal lizard native of the planet Ohks, slithered between the tables, careful not to let anyone step on his scaly tail, which moved from side to side. It didn't take him long to reach a table where a human sat, sipping a glass of fizzy green liquid. The reptile studied him for a moment.

The man wore a red T-shirt under a dark vest filled with pockets and gray pants with two wide colored stripes running down the sides. He had sun-kissed skin and a friendly face. But Paken could see an intelligence and coldness in the man's eyes that did not quite fit someone so affable.

"My boss isn't happy with you, Vhan," the ohksian said as he slid into the seat across from him.

Vhan set his glass down and gave the lizard a quick once-over. A faint smile appeared on his face at the sight of the thermal suit, designed to regulate body temperature. Its garish hues still managed to stand out despite the cantina's

multicolored lights.

"Did you bring my money?" he asked bluntly, shifting in his seat.

"Here's your payment." Paken tossed a piece of gleaming golden metal onto the table. It was about ten centühns long and as thick as a finger. "Bax says that's what your work is worth."

Vhan stared at it for a beat. That was not what he had expected. He looked up at the lizard, who was clearly enjoying the moment.

"Is this how Bax pays people now?" he muttered tensely. "We agreed on one hundred thousand credits for the shipment."

"But you brought half." Paken flicked his pink tongue across one of his eyes, making Vhan grimace in disgust. "I think you dumped the rest into deep space, didn't you?"

"We had to sacrifice part of the cargo to shake off the Red Claw." He kept his voice low so as not to draw any more attention or let anyone at the nearby tables overhear.

"That's not our problem, human. You took the job and promised to deliver the entire shipment. You knew it wouldn't be a pleasure cruise through the stars…" The reptile's words grew sharper. "I thought you were a professional. Someone who understood the stakes. You should be thankful Bax is generous enough to pay you for what you delivered. If it were up to me, you wouldn't have seen a single credit. You'd be floating in space right now."

Vhan lowered his gaze, trying to look weak. The Ohksian wasn't simply enjoying the moment—he needed it to avenge the humiliation he had suffered after failing at his task because of

him. But he was missing a crucial detail, one that still left him at a clear disadvantage. He knew nothing about the deal between Bax and the mercenary after the delivery, or about the conversation the two had shared. And that said a great deal about the criminal leader's relationship with his commander.

Your boss doesn't trust you. Maybe you won't be his commander much longer. Or maybe you were the one who leaked the intel. If that's true… I'll be the one savoring the moment soon enough.

Vhan smiled faintly at the idea.

"What are you laughing at, human?" Paken asked, clearly confused.

"Nothing." He slowly leaned back. "Just thinking… If someone had told me those bastards might show up, I would've asked for double from the start."

"If you don't like the deal you had with my boss, I'll take the money back." Paken reached toward the metal piece.

"Hands off!" Vhan drew the pistol strapped to his thigh and aimed it at him. The ohksian froze, blinking—first with one eye, then the other. "That's mine."

"So, you're accepting the payment after all," the lizard hissed, revealing a row of gleaming white teeth on one side of his snout. It almost looked like he was trying to mimic a human smile, though his features weren't made for it. "You mercs are all the same."

"I need it for my ship." Vhan slipped the piece into his pocket. "Half the cargo, half the payment. I accept. But tell your boss there won't be a next time. Tell him there'll be no more

games if he hides information from me again. Especially if he then refuses to pay me what we agreed on."

"You should remember your place in this galaxy, human. Or have you forgotten it?" Paken leaned back, letting his words sink in as he fiddled with a beaded wooden bracelet on his left wrist, from which hung a fang. "Bax gave you an opportunity others far better than you would've killed for. And what do you do? Complain. Even after failing your mission, you dare to ask for more than you've been given. You should be grateful you're still allowed to breathe. For some strange reason, my boss likes you. But your luck could run out. And you know damn well there aren't many who hire humans for this kind of work. Unless you want to try your luck in the Mojen Gas Mines. They say that between the whippings and the toxic air, the slaves there don't last a year."

Vhan's gaze hardened. His finger throbbed against the trigger, itching to squeeze it. But he held himself back. He knew perfectly well he wouldn't gain anything by firing into the creature's head.

"Fuck you!" he shouted. "I don't give a damn what some fucking lizard like you has to say. Go on, get out of here before I put a bullet through your head and make your boss scrape what's left off the walls."

"This isn't over, human scum." Paken spat on the floor and stood. He cast one last look at the mercenary. "I won't forget today. You know what happens to those who threaten me, or Bax."

Vhan remained seated, keeping the pistol aimed at the empty

space in front of him as he watched the ohksian disappear into the crowd. Then, finally, he sighed and holstered the weapon. He knew the lizard's final words were absolutely true—his outburst would have consequences. Bax might've told him something very different during their last conversation, but getting away from the station—and from his domain—for a while still seemed like the safest option. At least until things had calmed down and the criminal leader had tracked down and made the traitors within his own organization pay the price for crossing him.

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Vhan stepped out of the cantina after one more drink to steady the nerves thrumming through his body. That mix of fear and alcohol made his steps uneven as he moved through the station's corridors toward the hangar, where his ship was docked.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been wandering through the station when, suddenly, a young woman burst out of one of the side corridors and slammed into him at full speed, sending them both sprawling onto the metallic floor.

"Watch it!" he barked, grabbing at his throbbing head as he glanced at the person who'd collided with him—a human woman around thirty, maybe younger.

"Help me! They're after me!" she cried out, clutching at his leather vest; as he rose to his feet, she was pulled up with him until they stood face to face.

"Who's chasing you?" the mercenary asked, gripping her

shoulders to steady her.

That's when he noticed her clothes were soaked in blood. He pulled her back to see if she was hurt, but there were no cuts or injuries. It wasn't hers.

"What happened?"

Before she couldn't answer, a booming voice with a harsh accent echoed from the end of the corridor.

"You! Human!"

Despite her long, dark auburn hair partially shielding her face, Vhan saw genuine terror flare in her green eyes at the sound of that voice. The young woman clutched his torso even tighter, trembling. He stared at her for a second, surprised by her reaction, before turning to the two figures approaching.

He recognized them instantly. The one on the left was a balnir, a humanoid with indigo-colored skin and spiky protrusions on his head that resembled hair. Even from a distance, the two long, distinctive incisors sticking out beneath his thin dark lips were easy to make out.

The other was a scroc, an evolved relative of frogs. He had bulging orange eyes and a bulbous necklace filled with a greenish liquid, designed to keep his species' skin from drying out. Their attempts to conceal their weapons weren't convincing. The balnir had a pistol strapped to his thigh—very similar to Vhan's own—and the scroc had the hilt of a blade peeking from his right boot, flashing as it passed under a corridor light.

"That woman belongs to us. Hand her over," the amphibian growled.

“Please help me. They killed my family,” she sobbed, clinging tighter to him.

“Are you deaf, you stupid hairless ape?” snapped the horned one, clearly irritated by the man’s lack of obedience.

“Give us her and you won’t get hurt,” added the scroc, pulling the knife from his boot and twirling it in a way that made his intentions crystal clear.

“Don’t let them take me, please!” she begged through tears, looking up at him as if he were her only hope.

“She doesn’t seem willing to go with you,” Vhan replied, carefully guiding the woman behind him. “What did she do? If this is about money, I can—”

“This doesn’t concern you!” barked the balnir, pulling his weapon and holding it so close that Vhan could see the unnatural darkness inside the barrel. “Hand over the woman and you’ll walk out of here alive.”

“Easy now. I don’t want trouble,” the mercenary said slowly. The alcohol haze was gone—his mind sharp as a blade. He studied the two aliens, gauging how far they were willing to go. There was no doubt they would do whatever it took to get the woman. “But I know you can’t just take her. You need a warrant—or at least proof she’s broken some law or committed a crime.”

“I’ve had enough of this stupid man,” the scroc snarled, lunging with his knife.

Vhan sidestepped, driving a punch into the creature’s face. A wet, irritating sensation spread across his hand as he struck the amphibian’s skin. The balnir, surprised by the quick reaction,

tried to pull the trigger, but it was too late. Vhan grabbed his arm and threw off his aim.

With a faint hum, the plasma shot burst from the weapon and struck the corridor's metal wall, leaving a large scorch mark and causing the frightened woman to crouch down and cover her head with both hands.

The balnir bared his sharp teeth beneath his dark lips as he struggled to break free. Vhan's next punch landed in the alien's ribs, doubling him over. He used the opening to slam a knee into the balnir's head. His nose cracked loudly, echoing down the corridor, and the creature collapsed backward, unconscious, his face smeared in yellowish blood.

"Shit!" Vhan hissed, shaking his right hand. It was completely red, and small blisters were already beginning to form across it. He turned to the woman, who was still crouched in a corner of the hallway. "You okay?"

She looked up at her savior, who offered a wide smile and extended a hand to help her up. She hesitated for a second, then nodded and took his hand.

Before either of them could say a word, a plasma bolt sizzled between them and struck the station's wall. Vhan spun around, drawing his pistol and returning fire at a group of four figures charging toward them, all armed with dangerous energy weapons.

"Run!" he shouted, grabbing the woman's hand and pulling her along.

The voices of their pursuers, the impact of plasma shots, and the pounding of footsteps filled the corridor in a chaotic

symphony that echoed through the surrounding areas. Station residents scrambled to hide, trying to avoid getting caught in the crossfire.

"Where are we going?" the woman asked, her voice shaky and broken from the effort of keeping up with him.

"My ship. We need to get out of here, now," he said, ducking into another passageway and firing a few shots over his shoulder to slow their pursuers. He let go of her hand long enough to roll up his sleeve, revealing a wrist-mounted device, and tapped a button. "Tidux, do you hear me?"

"Yes, what's going on?" an energetic, slightly synthetic voice responded. "Is that noise what I think it is?"

"This isn't the time for questions. Fire up the thrusters and be ready to take off the moment we get there. We're going to need a fast exit."

"We?"

"Just do it!" Vhan snapped, cutting the comm. He turned and fired again.

"Who were you talking to?" asked the woman.

"My co-pilot. Now come on! If you can talk, you can run faster!" Vhan exclaimed, grabbing her hand again and pulling her along.

That's when he spotted a large pipe marked with a hazard symbol. He blasted it with a quick shot from his weapon. A large cloud of hot steam burst out, flooding the corridor and blocking the pursuers' path.

"Run! We're almost there!"

The heavy, worn steel doors slid open, revealing the massive hangar hidden behind them. The two humans crossed the threshold and stepped onto a suspended platform overlooking the entire lower level, where most of the space station's ships were docked. There was no way to tell how many there were; dozens took off every minute while many others descended into that vast space in what looked like a carefully choreographed dance. The roar of engines powering up, along with the voices of technicians, mechanics, engineers, and merchants moving about, created a deafening hum.

All kinds of ships filled the place—from dusty old vessels barely holding together to brand-new models fresh from the shipyards, still gleaming under the overhead lights.

Even though most of the spacecraft in the station were civilian—used for scrap collection, trade and transport, maintenance, or gas and mineral extraction—many bore plasma cannons or projectile turrets on their hulls. Even the largest ones had missile bays and high-powered lasers.

Every pilot knew that space could be dangerous and deadly for anyone unprepared; those weapons offered the protection they needed to carry out their jobs more safely.

"Looks like we lost them," Vhan said as he caught his breath and checked the corridor behind them to make sure they weren't being followed. He turned toward the hangar and scanned it for a long moment before pointing to one of the ships resting on the lower level. "That's our ride. Let's go. The sooner we're out of here, the better."

The woman followed the direction of his finger and felt her

heart sink when she saw the state of the ship. Most of the paint had peeled off, exposing the metal beneath the once-indigo surface. The orange stripes that outlined the more prominent parts of the structure were nearly erased by projectile impacts and scorch marks. Still, with some effort, she could make out the words “Dark Star” painted in black. The wings didn’t look any better—one had a gaping hole exposing the double hull, where sparks flickered.

“That… that’s your ship?”

“If you want to stay, be my guest. But I’m leaving,” Vhan shot back, catching the tone in her voice. He grabbed the metal ladder leading to the lower level and slid down, making it screech as he descended.

She looked at him, bewildered—unsure if she should follow this stranger or bolt in another direction now that they’d shaken off their pursuers. Just then, the deafening hum of a plasma weapon snapped her back to reality. They’d found them again. The assailants had just emerged through another door onto the platform, already opening fire on Vhan, who was taking cover behind a stack of crates and returning fire.

“What’s it gonna be!?” he shouted from behind cover, raising his voice over the chaos filling the hangar.

She took a deep breath, grabbed the ladder, and began climbing down quickly as bolts zipped past her. She shut her eyes as she continued down, hearing the sizzle of plasma slicing through the air and smelling the distinctive scent it left behind, which lodged itself deep in her mind.

Suddenly, someone grabbed her by the waist. She let out a

startled cry before realizing it was Vhan, helping her down the final rungs. He kept shooting as he shoved her in the direction he had pointed earlier.

They wove between ships as the crowds scattered to avoid getting caught in the crossfire.

“Tidux, open the damn door!” Vhan yelled as they reached the ship, taking cover behind it and firing another burst at their pursuers, who were now descending from the upper platform via cargo lifts.

“Password?” came a melodic voice from his wrist communicator.

“I’m not in the mood for jokes—just open the damn door!” he barked, unloading a blast at one of the attackers.

“The other day, when I was away, you told me this was fun…”

The voice, slightly offended, went silent just as the cargo bay door groaned and began its slow descent toward the hangar floor. At the same time, the mercenary saw those creatures were closing in fast, taking positions. Every second stretched endlessly as he tried to hold them off, firing at anything that moved toward them.

Suddenly, as the ramp slammed onto the ground, a projectile shot out from inside the ship and struck one of the pieces of cover the pursuers were using. A large column of fire erupted, forcing everyone to duck even further behind their hiding spots.

“Yeah, stay down or I’ll roast your asses!” shouted a voice from the top of the ramp. “Move it, I’ve got you covered!”

“Run, get aboard!” Vhan ordered.

Despite the fear gripping her, she crouched and moved past him while he kept firing to cover her. She scrambled into the cargo bay almost on all fours, and that's when she realized someone else was there, standing in front of her.

It was a robot.

She slowly raised her gaze to take him in. She'd seen a few throughout her life in the station, but this one stirred a strange unease within her. He stood two ühns tall and more than one ühn wide, and much of his worn metallic body was shielded by ceramic plates the same orange hue as the ship. With a low hum, he shifted the large fusion rifle he held in his hands and fired again, briefly illuminating his artificial frame as the weapon unleashed its deadly burst at their pursuers.

"Come on, forget them, let's get out of here!" shouted Vhan, who had followed her up the ramp and was now running toward the cockpit.

"Who's this, a new flame?" asked Tidux, lowering his weapon and scanning her with his robotic eyes.

She met his gaze, surprised by the face before her. Most androids she'd seen didn't have distinct features, but this one did. Although he lacked a nose or hair, his facial structure made it clear he had been designed to resemble a human.

"Quit busting my balls and get over here!" Vhan shouted, leaping into his seat and pressing a sequence of buttons to close the rear hatch and power up the thrusters.

"Follow me," urged the robot, already stomping through the cargo bay.

"Sit there, hold on tight, don't say a word, and don't even

think about touching anything you see," Vhan commanded, pointing to the seat behind the co-pilot's, where a console full of switches and monitors was located.

She nodded, watching as Tidux, already in the front seat, checked the indicators and screens. Suddenly, one of the enemy projectiles struck the ship hard, making her duck her head.

"Damn bastards! If they keep shooting like that, we're gonna blow!" the mercenary yelled, yanking the levers and lifting the ship into the air above the rest of the hangar. "Let's get out of here!"

The Dark Star sped away from the fire of their pursuers, heading toward the energy shield that sealed the hangar from outer space.

"Destination?" the co-pilot asked as he entered a security code into the computer to pass through the barrier safely.

"The Moons of Medic. We'll need to lay low for a while," Vhan replied. "I think we'll be safe there."

Before he finished speaking, space enveloped them in darkness, cold, and silence, leaving only the sound of the engine and the vibrations coming from the engine room. He looked through the windows. As they distanced themselves from the space station, he searched for any signs of danger among the many ships cruising the cosmos around them.

"I think we've moved far enough off the transit routes to jump," he announced shortly after.

"Alright, setting the coordinates…" Tidux said, activating the control panels. "Moons of Medic set. Jumping in three, two…"

"Hold on," Vhan interrupted, turning to the woman.

“One, jumping,” the robot announced as he pulled the lever, but nothing happened.

“What? Why didn’t we jump?” the pilot asked, staring at the surrounding stars.

“The jump circuits have failed. There’s a short in the propulsion relays. We knew they were about to fail,” Tidux explained, checking the data on the screen.

“Really? Now?!” Vhan muttered between clenched teeth, unbuckling his seatbelt and jumping to his feet.

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Loud bangs and shouted curses echoed from the engine room as Vhan fought to bring the ship’s jump system back online. His hands, grimy with dirt and slick with sweat, moved rapidly over the panels and circuits, trying to revive something he knew had reached the end of its life.

“I know you’ve warned us many times, and the systems are critical. But did you have to fail now?” he asked aloud, making a new connection and checking the systems. They still weren’t working.

Suddenly, the lights went out, plunging everything into darkness.

“Don’t fuck with me!” he shouted, launching himself toward the power systems. He opened up the panels, rechecked the circuits, and pounded on the connection terminals, each blow more desperate than the last. “Come on, please. You had to fail now? You couldn’t do it when we weren’t in a hurry. No. You

had to do it right now. Come on! Work!"

As if the ship had heard his plea, the lights flickered back on. The cockpit panels flared to life in a cascade of color, and the radar's holographic display flickered back on. At that moment, a group of signals began to blink on the screen, approaching the central point, which was shaped very much like their ship.

"What is that?" the woman asked, pointing at the radar. The robot turned to look.

"We've got company!" Tidux's voice rang through the ship's internal speakers. "Two contacts. Type two. They just left the station and are coming straight for us."

"Just what we needed," Vhan muttered, raising his head from the relays and wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. "How much time do we have?"

"Two minutes, maybe less."

"Alright, I'll try to bypass the system. If that doesn't work, we're screwed."

His hands trembled as he began disconnecting wires, each one more frayed and brittle than the last. The flashing lights on the console seemed to mock him, a harsh reminder of just how precarious their situation was. The repair dragged on, and with every passing second, the pressure increased. The hum of the engine faded into the background, eclipsed by the pounding of his own heart, reminding him that time was slipping through his fingers.

Suddenly, the ship jerked violently from side to side, throwing him against the wall.

"That was a shot. They're on top of us," Tidux's metallic

voice echoed through the internal speakers.

"Thanks, I hadn't noticed." Vhan clenched his teeth against the pain and tried to regain his composure as he focused again on the jump system. Despite his efforts to concentrate on the work, memories of what he had gone through only hours earlier began taking over his thoughts again. Even though fear was overwhelming him, he couldn't afford to stop.

With a final move, he connected one more cable. The system crackled, and a vibrating hum filled the air. The pilot lights showed him that power was flowing through the equipment again.

"I think it's done! Try now."

Tidux checked the screens and controls. Indicators that had been blinking incessantly now shone a steady green, ready to function.

"Affirmative, they're operational!"

"Then initiate the jump. I'm heading to the cockpit."

"Understood," the robot confirmed. He repositioned the controls he had adjusted while Vhan was in the engine room, switched them back on, and sat down again. "Preparing interstellar jump in three…"

Vhan crossed the cockpit and dropped into his seat.

"…Two…"

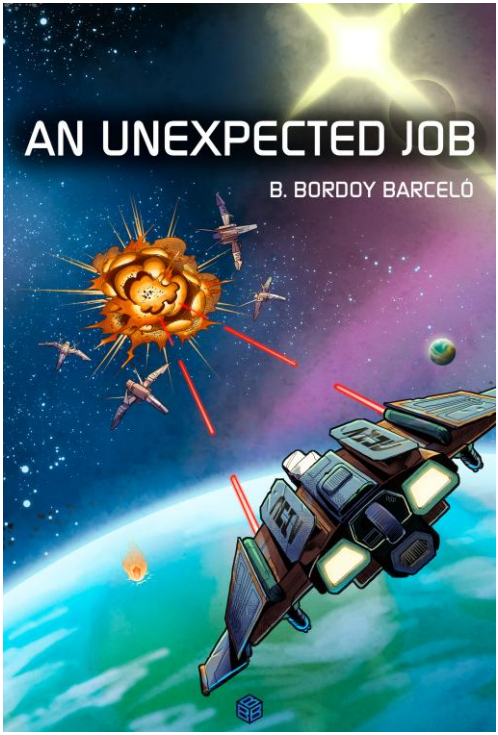
He buckled in as another impact shook the ship.

"…One…"

"Please work," Vhan begged.

Want to know if Vhan and Tidux manage to escape their attackers? Want to know who that mysterious woman is and why they were after her? Want to know how this story ends?

Find out in An Unexpected Job



Galactic encyclopedia

(Last updated on day 65 of G.G. 7,183.)

ALINUM: A chemical element listed in the periodic table, with the symbol Am and atomic number 380. It is radioactive and the heaviest member of the Vlednos, the group of elements that make up group 14. Alinum has a dark, lustrous appearance and a melting point of 6,432 S. It is the rarest element in nature, found in significant quantities on fewer than thirty planets across the entire galaxy, and is extremely difficult to extract. These planets are primarily located in the Rhüng sector, which belongs to the Trade and Transport Federation.

It was not until the year 6,003 G.G. that a complete analysis of its properties was conducted. Researchers discovered that when alinum is bombarded with Kele atoms—the most abundant element in the galaxy—it undergoes a nuclear reaction capable of releasing more energy than a red giant star. This discovery triggered extensive research into its potential applications, leading to its eventual incorporation into the jump drive created by engineer Glum St-háunsen.

***BALNIR*:** A bipedal species from the Ashmelan system, named after their home planet. They have slender, elongated bodies with indigo-colored skin, elongated faces, and two long incisors protruding below the upper lip.

Males possess several bony spikes along their heads, used during mating periods to attract females.

The balnir became part of the Galactic Government on day 89 of year 3,560 G.G., joining as member number 184.

***CREDITS*:** Established during the early days of the Galactic Government to address the problems of currency exchange between the different planets of the alliance.

Today, credits serve as the standard currency across all member civilizations.

While most transactions are conducted virtually using digital wristbands or hypodermic chips, precious metal rods are also used in many cases to pay large sums of money.

The production and regulation of credits are centralized on Klhän, the fifth planet of the Jahxon system, which also houses the permanent headquarters of the Galactic Government.

***DEFENSE CORPS*:** A human military institution founded by the Galactic Government on day 196 of year 6,684 G.G., in response to attacks on humanity during the early years of contact with other civilizations.

It reported directly to the Galactic Government, under the supervision of the Guardians of the Order of the Galaxy, and was tasked with protecting the free exercise of human rights and freedoms and ensuring the security of humans throughout the nebula.

On day 8 of year 7,163 G.G., the Defense Corps suffered attacks against its facilities throughout the galaxy. Its installations and personnel were destroyed by the terrorist group

Space Freedom, which claimed responsibility for the attacks a few hours later.

Although those responsible were captured, the Galactic Government also condemned the Defense Corps for its negligence, dissolving the institution on day 35 of the same year.

FUSION RIFLE: Classified as dangerous and prohibited weapons by the Galactic Government, fusion rifles are powered by nanoscale nuclear generators.

They were officially banned on day 152 of year 5,621 G.G. due to the danger they posed and their destructive potential.

These weapons fire high-penetration projectiles and contaminate impacted objects with harmful radiation discharges.

Despite their prohibition, many criminals, soldiers of fortune, and some military forces continue to use them.

GALACTIC (LANGUAGE): A language spread throughout the galaxy to enable easy communication among all beings within the galactic alliance.

Its origins date back to the formation of the Galactic Government itself, when the high rulers of the fifteen races that formed the first assembly commissioned the finest linguists from their respective worlds to develop a universal tongue.

The process took over one hundred galactic years, during which thousands of ancient and contemporary languages were analyzed.

Today, Galactic is spoken across more than two hundred

million planets.

***GALACTIC GOVERNMENT*:** The largest political and economic entity in the nebula, currently composed of two hundred and seventy-three civilizations.

It operates under a system of representative democracy and has developed a unique legal and political framework, evolving over the centuries into the institution it is today.

The Government promotes the integration of new species through comprehensive policies spanning economics, science, linguistics, culture, law, and politics.

The admission of a new civilization requires a gradual and intricate process, culminating in a unanimous vote by the council.

The Galactic Government was originally formed by fifteen founding members to counter the threat of the robotic army that devastated the galaxy during the Dark Ages.

***GALACTIC SCIENCE*:** As civilizations evolve, they develop their own systems of measurement, knowledge, and nomenclature regarding the universe. These systems may be regarded as valid for thousands of years until contact with other species reveals differences that can lead to confusion or accidents.

To prevent this, the founding members of the Galactic Government tasked their scientists with creating a unified galactic reference and cataloging system.

This ensures consistency in scientific measurements,

analyses, and results across the nebula.

Science and education are among the most important factors in the admission of a new civilization into the Galactic Government, as that civilization must transform its individual culture into a communal one.

GALACTIC SPORTS: Sports are one of the most influential cultural phenomena across the galaxy.

Following the end of the wars that plagued the different civilizations of the Galactic Government, sports emerged as displays of power and strength, not only for the players but also for the societies they represent.

Some competitions have come to resemble wars on a microscopic scale, where blood and death are treated as just another rule.

While sport is considered a way to reduce violence and crime in society, violent outbursts among spectators are still common during or after competitions.

The most notable incident occurred at Maudios Station, in the Thega system, when fans of *Cranial Fire* and *Sidereal Void* clashed for five days, leaving more than four thousand dead.

***GALACTIC TIME*:** Although each civilization maintains its own temporal measurements, the Galactic Government established a standard time system based on the Jahxon system for practical purposes.

Galactic time defines the second as the duration of 8,273,368,593 oscillations of radiation emitted during the

transition between the two hyperfine levels of the ground state of isotope 133 of the Guhnium atom (133Gh) at 0 S.

By convention, 4,000 seconds constitute one galactic hour.

Twenty-five hours constitute one galactic standard day, corresponding to the rotation period of Glahän, the second planet of the Jahxon system and the political cradle of the Galactic Government.

Two hundred and fifty galactic days equal one galactic year, the time required for Glahän to orbit its star.

Interestingly, for reasons yet unknown, the spelling and pronunciation of Galactic time units are similar to those used by the human race at the time of their discovery by the Galactic Government.

***GUARDIANS OF THE ORDER OF THE GALAXY*:** Commonly known as the GoG, they serve as the military force entrusted with establishing and maintaining peace in conflict zones.

Their responsibilities include monitoring peace processes and assisting former combatants in the implementation of peace treaties.

Operating under the direct mandate of the Galactic Government, they are composed of members drawn from the armed forces of all member civilizations.

The organization was founded after the final defeat of the robotic army on day 159 of year 180 G.G., with the mission of safeguarding the galaxy against another Dark Age, as historians of that period called it.

HUMANS: A species within the primate order, bipedal and intelligent, originating from the Rhengis region. The word human comes from an archaic language of their home planet, known as Earth.

Humans departed their solar system in the year 6,587 G.G. to escape the destruction of their home planet and its colonies established on other planets within the same solar system.

Data reveals that this destruction resulted from the impact of a meteorite on the planet's surface, generating thousands of new dangerous bodies and making survival impossible.

Just before this catastrophe, humans chartered thousands of ships to depart the endangered solar system and seek a new place to settle.

Subsequently, on day 79 of year 6,679 G.G., the first human refugee ships were discovered by trionat star racers during *The Supernova Race*.

In response to the attacks humanity suffered from other species during its early years of contact, the Galactic Government ordered the dispersal of humanity across hundreds of galactic stations and colonies throughout the nebula.

Although retaining their ancient language, humans have implemented the Galactic language and science across their colonies in pursuit of Galactic Government membership.

Despite multiple attempts, humans have yet to secure unanimous acceptance from the other members of the institution.

***JUMP DRIVES*:** Invented by the gujuro engineer Glum St-háunsen, the jump drive creates a tunnel through space, enabling rapid travel between two points far faster than conventional interstellar engines.

The technology relies on the recent discovery of alinum, a material capable of opening the fabric of space itself and allowing travel through an extension of it.

Later research revealed that Glum St-háunsen did not fully complete the jump drive. His notes referenced the scientist Gülf Sh'áhns, who theorized that the fastest way between two points in the universe was not a straight line, but one in which the journey itself did not exist.

His calculations indicate the possibility of folding the universe around the jump drive and reaching another point instantaneously, without any journey or time lost.

Although improvements continue, this theory remains unproven.

MOJEN GAS MINES: Located in the Noubular system, these mines are one of the major sources of RCKB gas, an essential element in the alloying of spacecraft metals.

Due to their poor and, in many cases, nonexistent safety conditions, as well as the harmful nature of the gases extracted there, the Mojen gas mines are considered one of the most dangerous workplaces in the galaxy.

OHKSIAN: An intelligent species belonging to the reptilian suborder and originating from the Squamata system. Their name

refers to their homeworld, Ohks, where the first individuals evolved.

They are bipedal creatures, retaining a long tail as a vestige of their evolutionary past. Their hands possess opposable thumbs, while the toes on their feet, which are longer than the digits on their upper limbs, allow them to detect the vibrations of prey through the ground or water.

Ohksians live in warm climates, jungles, and swamps.

They are a belligerent and predatory species that hunt their prey in small groups. They have numerous rituals, the most important in an individual's life being the maturation ritual, during which young ohksians must hunt their first kinetic, one of the large predators of Ohks. By doing so, they become full adults and receive one of the creature's teeth as recognition.

Although they are not members of the Galactic Government, their hunting instincts, enhanced senses, great stability on any terrain, and highly developed vision—despite having one eye on each side of the head—have made them valuable assets.

They are often recruited as mercenaries and soldiers of fortune by other species.

PALTAR: A bipedal species native to the Myrnix sector. Their name comes from their ancient language and can be translated as "Children of Pal," a reference to the star of their home system. The paltar are known for their imposing physiques and robust bone structure, as well as their strength and endurance. Their skin is thick, with ochre tones in adults during their prime. As they reach old age, the paltar lose the

pigmentation in their skin and their bodies begin to weaken, giving them a more fragile appearance.

The paltar's home sector is a hostile environment with few habitable planets, which has led them to terraform many of its worlds. They have worked tirelessly to improve these planets and increase their population. Several systems are currently undergoing terraforming, with Pykek being one of the most important among them.

Although the paltar are full members of the Galactic Government, their civilization remains largely focused on its own territories. They show little interest in external affairs, prioritizing the improvement of their internal infrastructure and the development of their society. This constant drive to improve their planets stems from the difficult conditions they face in their home sector.

PLASMA WEAPONS: The most widespread class of weaponry in the galaxy, used in handguns, rifles, cannons, defensive turrets, and spacecraft armaments.

These weapons function by converting gases or combustible materials into plasma, a high-energy state of matter.

Upon firing, a miniature reactor transforms the gas into plasma and encapsulates it with a magnetic field to prevent premature dissipation.

Upon impact with solid matter, the magnetic field collapses, releasing the superheated energy onto the target.

SCROC: A species evolved from amphibians. Their name comes from the word for croaking in their native language. They originate from a single system, Adenom, located at the edge of the Färdenas constellation.

They are bipedal, with large bulging eyes and robust limbs. Their skin is extremely rough and, in most specimens, poisonous, capable of causing anything from mild irritation to paralysis.

Although they prefer to avoid dry environments and live on humid planets, the scroc have developed *cracor*, bulbous necklaces filled with a mixture of water, salts, and chemicals that prevent their skin from drying out completely, allowing them to live on other planets without major difficulty.

Their civilization joined the Galactic Government on day 64 of year 6,852 G.G., becoming its 269th member.

ÜHN: A standard galactic unit of length, denoted by the symbol ü.
It is defined as the distance light travels in a vacuum during 1/299,792,458 of a second. The most commonly used multiples and submultiples are as follows:

Submultiples			Multiples		
Value	**Symbol**	**Name**	**Value**	**Symbol**	**Name**
10^{-1} ü	dü	decühn	10^{1} ü	daü	decaühn
10^{-2} ü	cü	centühn	10^{2} ü	hü	hectühn
10^{-3} ü	mü	milühn	10^{3} ü	kü	kilühn