A STAR ON THE HORIZON



B. BORDOY BARCELÓ

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1. A new day in Uzhar

A sharp, rhythmic sound echoed through the silent room, piercing Akion's drowsy mind. He swatted at the source of the terrible noise with an incomprehensible complaint. With an all-too-familiar mechanical movement, he turned it off and, with some difficulty, looked at the timer on the wall.

"Shit!" An electric shock ran through his entire body, jolting him out of bed. He grabbed the gray pants with reflective bands lying on the table and hurried to pull them on. "What about the first alarm? Why didn't the first alarm go off?"

The question vanished into thin air as he walked over to the pile of clothes on what had once been a chair and sniffed at the T-shirt on top of it. He wrinkled his nose and shook his head before tossing it to the floor and grabbing another, repeating the hygiene strategy. After a moment of judgment, he grimaced indifferently and resumed searching for his clothes. He found one sock next to the alarm clock he had just switched off; he rescued the other from between the sheets. He sat back down on the bed and pulled them on before lacing up his safety boots, ignoring the nagging voice in his head that told him to lie back and forget everything else.

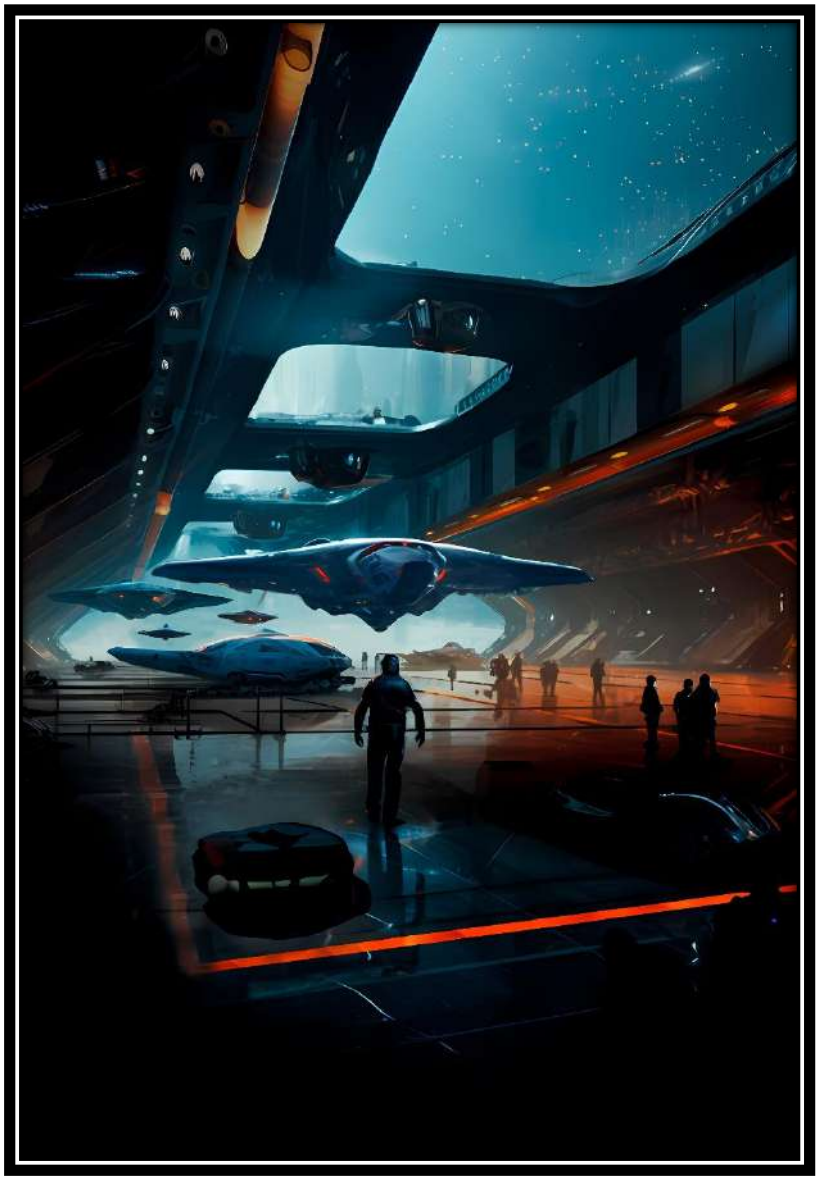
With a push and two noisy footsteps he reached the tiny kitchen where he grabbed one of the buns packed on top of the small fridge and popped it into his mouth as he headed out the door. It had not yet closed when it slid aside again, allowing him to grab his worn orange work jacket, which had several reflective stripes on the sleeves, chest, and back and the symbol of Uzhar Station embroidered on the upper left side.

With any luck, I can still make it in time. He encouraged himself as he wolfed down the meager breakfast and hastened towards the terminal, located in the central area of his deck, from where he could take an elevator to Hangar Three.

He soon realized that Uzhar was already awake. The shops facing the plaza had already opened their doors and were now illuminating their signs to let all the station's inhabitants know that they were ready to serve them.

The young man pressed on with determination, ignoring these stimuli and weaving through the mendes, one of the hundreds of races belonging to the Galactic Government and descendants of a feline species. They had thick fur and a small tail, a remnant of their less evolved ancestors. Their large ears, crowned by tufts of dark fur, added to the sharp features of these creatures. In addition, males wore and tended their bushy sideburns with reverence, treating them as symbols of virility and social status. The females, on the other hand, were largely devoted to dyeing and matching the different color patterns they had throughout their fur, which was a unique sign of identity.

"Wait a minute! Hold on! Wait for me!" Akion shouted, trying to make himself heard above the general commotion in the building and attempting to capture the attention of the group that had just stopped one of those elevators. He ran as fast as he could, but just as he was about to catch up, the warning signal echoed around and the doors closed in front of him. On the other side, slitted pupils rested on him before a smug grin appeared on the mendes's face. "Yeah, laugh all you want, you damn bastard!"



Through the glass window of the Supply and Provisioning offices, Akion observed Hangar Three springing to life with a new shift. He saw the first ships of the day take off, ready to continue their journey, while others descended to platforms designated by the control tower located on the roof of the hangar, overseeing the hustle and bustle of the place. He recognized some familiar faces among his colleagues—operators and mechanics—moving between the vehicles in a perfectly orchestrated choreography.

"You're late, human," announced a deep voice from his right. The young man turned and looked down to see a mendes, dressed in the same uniform and looking at him in discomfort. Although the creature was no taller than his navel, he was as hard as a rock. In the seven years of their acquaintance and partnership, Akion had never once defeated him in arm wrestling. He refrained from laughing as he observed that Poddoc's new clothes appeared to be ready to burst due to his bushy orange fur.

"I know, Poddoc. Sorry. I'll clock in, grab my gear, and be ready in a minute."

"That won't be necessary," he said, holding up the digital tablet and two ID cards in his left hand. "I've already clocked you in."

"Thanks! I owe you one!"

“I’ve lost count of how many favors you owe me, human. There’ll come a day when I get fed up. Not only will I stop helping you, I’ll call in every favor you owe me. And on that day, neither the Galactic Government nor your Defense Corps will be able to protect you,” he threatened, looking at him with extreme seriousness before his whiskers contracted and a weak laugh broke the tension of the moment, making the young man relax as well. “Come on, no time to waste. The customers are waiting.”

“I don’t know if I can, Poddoc. I’m very sleepy,” he announced mischievously, taking the tablet offered to him and checking the note that appeared in the order section, “so much so that I don’t know if this is a one or a seven.”

“I’ll put you to sleep... If you stopped staying up late on days when you have a morning shift, this wouldn’t happen to you,” he grumbled, approaching the exit of the offices and taking his hearing protection and communication system from the shelf. After putting them on and checking that Akion had done the same, he opened the door to the hangar. The deafening roar of engines, machinery and voices from the loudspeakers assaulted their senses. Poddoc activated the noise cancellation and let only those voices continue to alert him to what was going on around him. “You hearing me?”

“Perfectly,” the human said, giving a thumbs-up before following him.

The mendes quickly chose one of the enclosed wagons lined up nearby, each marked on both sides with chemical contamination and radiation warnings.

“If I don’t stay up late once in a while, what do I have left?” Akion asked as his companion pulled the container into the supply station. He inserted the ID into the control panel and entered a quantity. A strobe light came on, indicating that the order had been accepted. The compartment closed, and a series of metallic sounds signaled that loading was underway. “Between this and helping Rappol at the workshop, I barely have any free time. How am I supposed to meet a girl if I’m working all day?”

“I pity the woman who has to put up with you someday,” Poddoc chuckled before a green light and a beep signaled that the operation was complete. The human removed the identification and the hatch opened, allowing the mendes to activate the suspension system and pull the trolley. “Besides, I bet you were eyeing the ships, not the women.”

“It’s platform twenty-two,” Akion pointed out, checking the tablet again. “How do you even know what I was up to? Like I’d spill the beans to you.”

“You don’t have to tell me. I know perfectly well. You should just forget the whole thing. You’ll never get one. You’re as broke as I am. And being human doesn’t make your case any better. I doubt if any bank will give you a loan. After all, you’re not even members of the Galactic Government, just another group of refugees within our borders, without even a planet to live on,” Poddoc concluded emphatically. He knew Akion too well to expect his words to offend him or change his mind. At best, he could get his friend to drop the subject and focus on work for a while, though even those stretches were getting shorter. “Seriously, you should stop this fantasy and concentrate on what’s in front of you.”

“On the ship in front, you say? No, that’s not it. Our customer is a little further away,” the young man countered vehemently before waving at the technician who was checking the undercarriage of this vehicle.

“You’re going to...” the mendes spat, pushing the wagon into his companion’s heels and making him stumble for a moment. Akion gave him a victorious smile, pleased to have gotten a rise out of him.

“You know for a fact that if you get your act together, you could move up in this job or take over Rappol’s company when he retires. And considering his age, that might not

be too far off," Poddoc continued. "You have to accept that we can never afford big dreams. A ship, running away from Uzhar or starting our own business? That's for others, not for us."

"Here we are," Akion declared, brushing off the lesson his companion tried to impart. A lesson he was tired of hearing and which only reminded him of how painful his life was and what little future he would have on this space station. A station from which it was almost impossible to escape. The young man gazed gloomily into the cavernous cargo bay before them. It was completely empty. He checked his tablet again to make sure it was the right ship: "Hello? We have the alinum cargo you requested."

"I'm in the cockpit! I'll be right out!"

Akion signaled to the mendes and the two pushed the container onto the transport. While they were re-securing it, a balnir appeared from inside. The bony spikes on his head glistened in the dim light of the spotlights, and his bluish complexion blended with the dark walls of the deck.

"Good to see you're here. I was getting worried. My cargo arrives in half an hour," the merchant explained, showing his trademark incisors as he checked the time on his digital wristband, "so we don't have much time before this place turns into a chaotic mess of containers, crates, and transporters."

"Are you Mr. Oner Barlix?" Akion asked, double-checking the name to avoid mistakes, following protocol and setting aside the urgency of the customer. "You ordered a hundred units of alinum?"

"Yes, yes, that's me. And that's the quantity, can you get to work now?"

"It says here that it has to be loaded from the inside. So, if you tell us where you have the feeder, we'll start refueling immediately."

"Perfect! Although..." The balnir eyed the two workers and the metal wagon. "I reckon the access is narrower than your container. That happens to me at a lot of stations."

"Then it's going to take us a bit longer. Manual labor it is," Akion explained, catching Poddoc's muttered curse.

"I'll get the hazmat suits," the mendes said, turning and stepping off the ship as he shook his head. "First ship of the day and we already have to load it by hand."

"Excuse my partner," Akion apologized when he saw that the customer had heard the last comment. "It's something we come across on a lot of ships that don't have external loading systems. The engineers are always more concerned with the interior space than the ease of refueling. And that makes our work slower and more expensive. Not to mention the increased danger of the operation," he hinted, curiously checking the hold before turning to the balnir, who was listening intently, "but we can't help it. So, if you don't mind, show me where the refueling system is and I'll get to work."

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"Where do you think he's headed?" Akion inquired through the suit's communicator. He carefully lifted a transparent box with five alinum spheres, no bigger than his fist and of a dark, glowing hue. Then, measuring each step, he carried it to his companion. Poddoc, continuing the process, took it and placed each of the spheres into the feeder.

"You're already asking questions that don't matter. Focus on the alinum, human. I'd hate to end up in the hospital," the mendes growled, closing the unit and opening the inner seal to allow the system to take over the fuel. A moment later there was another click and

a pilot light came on, allowing him to open the hatch again and continue refueling the ship.

"Can't help it. It's an occupational hazard," Akion replied, casually checking radiation levels to ensure everything was in order.

"No, it isn't. You must call it by its proper name. Obsession. Every time we enter a ship, you look it up and down, commenting on its design, its cargo, the journeys it has taken or will take," his partner countered, taking a new container and emptying it back into the system. "I don't care. I don't give a damn what they do or don't. All I know is that this ship sucks. No external feed and no internal space for refueling. I'm sick of these designs! What will it cost them to get it right?"

"A lot of credits, for sure. I was also surprised. This ship is not too old. It must be forty or fifty years old, and yet it doesn't have an external refueling system. Also, this corridor looks strange to me. It should be bigger if it follows the design of the cargo bay." Suddenly, an idea flooded his mind, causing him to pause dramatically. "Unless..."

"What?" Poddoc asked, turning to look at the young man, who seemed lost in thought. "Unless what?"

"Nothing, never mind. It was a silly thing. This is the last one," Akion commented, trying to put the matter to rest and placing the box on the floor before looking down the corridor with renewed interest.

"The last one? Thank goodness! I was already starting to roast in here. We should really ask to upgrade the cooling systems on these damn suits," the mendes grumbled before checking the levels and the state of the environment after shutting down the whole system. With satisfaction, he took off his helmet and breathed in sharply. "Let's pack everything up, get these suits off, and get paid."

"Yes, I'll take care of the customer."

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Akion, now back in work uniform, approached Oner Barlix, who was now checking what appeared to be a cargo manifest.

"We have finished refueling. If you would be so kind as to sign and authorize the payment." The human held out his tablet with the data and the amount due. The balnir looked over the tablet for a moment before sliding the identification wristband under the reader. He inserted a code into that device, and a soft beep echoed across the deck as the screen confirmed that the transaction was complete. "Perfect. That's it for us. Have a good flight."

"Thank you very much for everything. Goodbye."

"Before I go..." The young man took the tablet in both hands and held it behind his back with an innocent air, drawing the customer's attention. "I couldn't help but study your ship. And, although I like its design, there's something that doesn't quite add up."

"What's that?"

"The ship is quite new. I find it odd that it doesn't have an external refueling system. Not to mention that the interior layout isn't quite right. I'd say some kind of modification has been made to the whole refueling area," he explained, still smiling as he studied the balnir's reaction.

Akion knew he had been right when a wave of surprise and terror swept across the balnir's face. The customer tried to regain his composure, but it was too late.

I already knew there was something hidden in the bulkhead in the corridor. It's probably some kind of hidden compartment for contraband. And I'm sure the ship also has an external refueling system, but he must have disabled it to gain more usable space. Everything set up so the whole arrangement can be dismantled if the ship is ever searched or when it undergoes periodic inspections. That would be the smart thing to do. Although this guy doesn't look very professional if he reacted like that just because I mentioned the modification, Akion thought, studying the balnir from head to toe. *Even better. That'll make everything easier.*

"No idea. Didn't bother checking when I bought it. And, to tell you the truth, I don't really care. As long as it gets me around and allows me to do my business."

"Sure, sure. That's normal. All you want is a ship that gets you from place to place without any trouble. Aren't you curious to know a little more about it?"

"No, not at all. And now is not the time to think about that. If you'll excuse me, the transporters are about to arrive and I'll need to focus on the cargo," the balnir replied, trying to end the conversation and get the annoying human out of his cargo hold. But Akion didn't seem willing to leave him alone.

"Right, the transporters. Excuse me, it's just that when I come across something curious like this, it's hard for me to get it out of my head. Do you know what we can do? I have some friends in customs who also like ships and their designs as much as I do. How about if I let them know? I'm sure they'd be happy to look it over. They're very good and will do it in a jiffy. That way, while they use their scanners, you can continue to take care of the hold and the cargo."

A heavy silence settled over the deck as they locked eyes, each sizing the other up. Finally, Oner Barlix sighed with resignation, realizing that he was between a rock and a hard place and accepting that there was only one way out of there.

"I think what you need to do is take a break and give that head of yours a rest. I recommend you enjoy a nice dinner and a couple of beers in a decent restaurant, don't you think?"

"For starters that would be fine, yes. But my mind is very unruly. A drink after dinner to finish relaxing would be great. And well, you know what they say, despite all those pleasures you can never be happy if you don't enjoy good company. So, to relax and forget about a hard day's work like today, I always count on my partner, who will now be waiting for me down there."

"Of course, your partner..." he repeated, dejected, knowing that he had lost a good handful of credits to that nosy human who, knowing he was the winner, kept smiling.

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Poddoc looked up as he noticed the loud rumble of footsteps descending the loading ramp. Akion was approaching his companion full of enthusiasm.

"What took you so long? I've been waiting here for more than five minutes. Didn't he want to pay or what?"

"Let's just say I was grabbing our tip for the awesome job we did." The young man tossed a small piece of metal into the air, which flashed in the hangar lights, before catching it again on the fly. "What do you have to say now about my supposed obsession?"

"Supposed? There's nothing supposed about it. It's an obsession, no doubt about it. That doesn't mean it isn't useful to us from time to time. If you didn't have it, you

wouldn't have noticed something was wrong with the ship," Poddoc conceded reluctantly. He hated having to admit Akion was partly right after they had argued about the same thing only a short while earlier. "But one doesn't cancel out the other, you hear me? I can already see where your mind's going."

"I don't know what you mean," Akion replied mischievously, tucking the payment into his work pants.

"What a day ahead..." Poddoc snorted, giving his neck a scratch and tending to his long sideburns, characteristic of his race, that now hung over his uniform. "At least we got enough money for a couple of days' worth of rounds at the tavern. What do you say we start tonight?"

"Sorry, tonight won't do. It's my father's birthday today. So when I finish at Rappol's I'll go to dinner with them. Tomorrow would be better."

"I'll take your word for it, human. And don't even think about spending it without me," Poddoc threatened as the digital tablet lit up and beeped. Akion looked down to check it. "That sure sounds like a new order! Let's go load the container and get on with our work."

2. Threats and engines

Akion made his way through the commercial area around Hangar Three, where one could find everything from extravagant souvenir shops to construction and repair companies for spacecraft, ground vehicles and all kinds of heavy machinery. There were also several professional tool rental and sales companies where you could buy all sorts of sensors, control equipment, weapons, ammunition and some defensive systems. The supermarkets along the deck offered not only products made or grown on Uzhar, but also goods from all over the star system and even more exotic products from beyond the stars, though one had to be prepared to pay a good sum for them. For this very reason, the transport of goods was one of Uzhar's most important businesses, as it was responsible for supplying everything that could not otherwise be obtained.

A heavy sigh escaped Akion's lips. He was exhausted. The last few refueling runs had been tedious, and the customers had not helped to make them any more bearable. And to make matters worse, his stomach protested with a furious growl. The midday meal had been inedible, and he'd thrown away his tray with almost everything untouched. *At least we got something extra for today's work,* he comforted himself, reaching into his pocket and stroking the piece of metal the balnir had given him.

As he thought back over the ships he had refueled that day, he arrived at his destination. The rickety sign that read Hulz Workshop welcomed him. He had told Rappol many times to replace the sign, but Rappol had always turned a deaf ear, saying he didn't have to worry about "good customers".

"I made it," Akion said wearily, the soft chime of the door's opening adding a gentle melody to the workshop.

"You sound rough, boy. Bad day?"

Rappol appeared from behind a shelf stacked with calibration parts for stability systems, fixing his gaze on the weary human. His fur was lighter in places and had lost some of its shine, a common sign of advanced age among his species, though it could also have been due to the various accidents he had suffered, which he had told Akion about from time to time during their three years working together. The last one had been just over a year ago, when a high-pressure cooling system had exploded in front of him, leaving a beautiful scar that ran from one side of his muzzle to the other.

The mendes always wore an indigo jumpsuit with the shop's logo on the chest and back. To complete this work uniform, he wore goggles on his head, which managed to flatten his fur and bring out his large ears, which were trimmed with a tuft of dark hair and slightly burnt at the tips.

"Tough day. The last few orders haven't gone so well—I'm sick of those old ships!"

"What do you mean? They're our lifeline!" Rappol chuckled, then turned back to the counter with the young man following closely behind. "Just think what we'd do if we didn't have these ships to repair. We'd have to close up shop and change careers. Who knows? Maybe we could open a flower shop like those snobs in the Dolep sector. I still can't believe that business could be successful on this station."

“Cleaning off dirt is way easier than dealing with oil,” the human quipped, a smirk playing on his lips.

“Good point, Akion. Well spotted,” he remarked with satisfaction, turning on the counter computer to check the time. “I’ve been waiting for you. I’ve got an appointment in the hangar to check an air recycler. Could you handle the shop for a bit?”

“Sure, no problem. I’ll start on the engine containment system. I think I’ll finish it today and we can test it.”

“Don’t you dare turn it on until I’m back, I don’t want to miss it!” he exclaimed energetically, getting a knowing nod from the human. “Alright then, I’ll pack the equipment and be on my way.”

Akion said goodbye to Rappol and made his way to the back room where the actual workshop was located. He paused for a moment to look around. The wall panels meant to hold the tools stood mostly bare, their contents strewn across the various metal tables scattered around. These were filled not only with these tools, but also with other machines, new and secondhand equipment, and some other discarded items, creating a different ecosystem on each of these pieces of furniture. The floor, on the other hand, was full of dirt, dust, metal shavings, oil stains, paint and other chemicals, all fighting for every inch of that surface. He knew that most people would have described the room as an absolute mess and would never want to set foot in it again. But to him, it was a beautiful place, where everything was where it needed to be, organized according to his needs.

With purpose, the young man strode to the workshop’s end, where the partially dismantled engine awaited his attention. From the moment he saw it in the scrapyard, he knew he wanted to take charge of its restoration. It was a complicated project, as Rappol had told him after examining it. Nevertheless, he had allowed Akion to take it and work on it.

The people at the scrapyard had sold them the part for a ridiculously low price because, as they had been told, “it was just scrap and not even worth the time it would take to dismantle it.” Ignoring those comments, he kept working on it whenever Rappol didn’t need his help or whenever he had some free time. As he replaced damaged parts with new or used ones, the mendes asked him to concentrate on the engine, seeing that if he could fix it, they could make a good margin when they sold it.

Akion looked with interest at the containment system on the floor next to the thruster. It was a myriad of pipes and conductive circuits that had to be placed around this sphere to contain the nuclear reaction taking place inside it, which was on the scale of a red giant star. This energy was needed not only to propel the ship, but also to make a hyperspace jump possible.

For two weeks he had been assembling, disassembling and reassembling this metallic heart, because every time they ran a test, something failed. Although he tried to keep things in perspective, since it was the first time he had done anything like this, the constant failures gradually chipped away at his confidence, causing him endless nightmares and occasional sleepless nights. Still, he wasn’t about to give up. He had promised himself he would make it work.

He took the first piece of the now-familiar circuit and set to work.



The melody of the front door echoed through the workshop, jolting Akion from his intense focus on the engine. Glancing up at the timeband above the door, he couldn't believe it. *Could it really be that late already?* He was surprised to see that it had been four hours since he had started the work. Hurriedly, he grabbed a cloth from a nearby table and, after searching for a relatively clean spot, wiped his hands. As he left the back room, he recognized the mendes waiting for him at the counter; it was an old customer whose ship Rappol had repaired a few months ago.

"Good afternoon, nice to see you again. How can I help you?"

"I'm here to talk to Rappol," he replied dryly, glaring at him.

"Sorry, he's not here," Akion replied, trying to ignore the customer's hostility and be as polite as possible. "He's working in the hangar at the moment. If you'd like, you can try calling him. Or, if you prefer, give me a number where we can reach you, and I'll pass on your message as soon as he returns."

"I need to speak to him now. Your boss installed a faulty air-conditioning system that almost killed me." The customer's voice grew louder as he spoke, remembering what had

happened and letting his anger take over. “I don’t care where he is. I want him to come here now.”

“I’ll try to call him and see if he’s available and we can arrange a visit to the ship and check out the problem,” the young man explained, trying to calm him down as he picked up the phone and looked up Rappol’s number.

“Check? What’s there to check?” he demanded angrily, his fur bristling by the minute. “Do you think I’m lying? Do you think I made up that I almost died of cold in space because of you?”

“No, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.” Akion tried to defend himself, seeing no chance of calming the mendes down and only managing to infuriate him more. “I meant...”

“I know what you meant!” he shouted, cutting him off. “You were implying that I don’t even know how to use my ship. How dare you insult me like that! You damned human! I don’t know why Rappol hires scum like you. You should all be thrown out. You are nothing but a disease that pollutes our lives.”

Akion felt his temples throbbing and a suffocating heat penetrating every part of his body as this being continued his insults, leaving aside this technical problem and turning it into a personal attack against him and his race. He knew that this mendes was not alone and that a large part of the galactic population hated humans. Or, to be more precise, they considered them an inferior race. A race that should not be among them.

They were a civilization of refugees. It had been nearly seven hundred years since they had been forced to abandon their home planet and colonies to escape the total destruction of their solar system caused by the impact of a gigantic celestial body. They had lost most of their people, their culture, and their technology, and their knowledge wasn’t even advanced enough for them to be part of the Galactic Government, the most important economic and political community of Theia. Yet there they were, scattered across the stars to prevent those who were supposed to care for them from taking advantage of them. Many believed that humans were expected to repay the small acts of charity they received—and bear the complete loss of hope for their people and the suffering of living in a galaxy where no one wanted them—with a smile, servitude, and blind obedience.

Akion’s eyes flicked to the metal bar under the counter that Rappol occasionally used to scare away petty criminals who entered the shop, as well as the occasional debtor.

A terrible idea. Threatening him with that bar would only complicate things. I’m sure he’ll report me to the authorities and they’ll arrest me instead. The best thing to do would be to call them and wait for them to come. Maybe he’ll leave out of fear of what they’ll tell him, he told himself. He looked back at the mendes, who had moved to one of the supply shelves while he wasn’t watching and, with a quick motion, swept everything onto the floor. The sound of metal hitting the ground was thunderous.

“I finally have your attention!” the customer bellowed with satisfaction. “Come on, you human piece of shit, what are you going to do now?”

“He won’t lay a finger on you, but I plan to tear off your whiskers one by one for demolishing my shop.”

These words were accompanied by the gentle melody that now played to welcome the shop’s owner. The two interlocutors looked in the direction of the door to see Rappol enter and switch off the earpiece in his ear with a flick of his hand. Akion, surprised,

glanced at his phone and realized the call had ended. *The nerves and tension probably made me call him without realizing. And he's clearly heard the conversation,* he thought, then looked back at his boss, who seemed to have grown by a foot. His fur was bristling, and his eyes, cold and penetrating, remained fixed on this mendes.

"I wanted to see you, you bastard! I'm going to..." He interrupted himself as he watched Rappol carefully place his toolbox on the floor, open it and take out the biggest pipe wrench of all, weighing it slowly, menacingly.

"Don't hold back. Go on, go on—what were you going to say?"

"You... You installed a faulty air conditioner for me. I almost died in space because of you," the customer explained, lowering his tone slightly as he saw that the opponent in front of him was not only undaunted, but ready to face him.

"So it finally failed on you?" Rappol asked, amused. "It's about time! It's taken you longer than I expected. I warned you the moment we made the repairs. We had to replace all the equipment or you risked a catastrophic failure. You were the one who told me you didn't want to pay for the full repair and that we should forget about it. And now you dare to threaten me and my assistant?"

"You were responsible for the installation and you knew it could put my life at risk and yet you didn't fix it. This is an attempt on my life. I'm sure the police will see it the same way I do. They'll take away your license and this shitty shop. And as for your human..." he threatened, turning to look him in the eye again, "I hope they throw him out an airlock."

What a son of a bitch! Akion screamed inwardly, clenching his fists and feeling his nails dig into his palm. Though the urge to leap over the counter and confront him surged within him, he stood his ground. *I can't give him any more reason to go to Uzhar's security. If he goes to them, we're finished. Even though he told us not to replace everything, we should have refused to do a partial repair. He's right—we were responsible, and we should have insisted on doing it properly. What's going to happen now? What about me?* He fretted before looking to Rappol for help. To his surprise, the latter seemed extremely calm despite all the threats.

"Tell me, what do you think the authorities will say when I show them the messages I have saved in which you expressly tell me not to do it, disregarding the installer's advice? Or what do you think the tax authorities will say when they find out how you paid me for the job? I'm sure they'll be happy to check your accounts, because I have a feeling that my repair won't be the only one you've paid for in this way," Rappol said with remarkable calm, taking a step forward. "If you want, we can both play that game. I'll go down, but so will you. So, tell me, what do you want us to do?"

The customer was caught off guard, the arrogant smirk wiped from his face. His body deflated slightly, showing that this was not in his plans. Rappol watched his adversary's reaction and fiddled with the tool for a moment, letting the fear now flooding the customer's mind do the rest of the work.

"You know what we're going to do? I'll give you ten seconds to get out of my shop, and we'll both forget about this. Like it never happened," he said. "But if you decide to go through with this and talk to the authorities, I intend to take you down with me. And if you continue to blame me for a mistake of yours, or threaten me, my business or Akion

again, I intend to crack your head open with this pipe wrench. So what do you want to do? I'll give you a choice. Do we continue to argue or do you get out of my sight?"

The question hung in the air, unanswered.

You didn't expect that, did you? Rappol also had an ace up his sleeve. Obviously he hadn't expected this answer. What will he do now? Will he leave without further ado, or will he decide to fight? Because if he decides to fight and attack, I won't stand idly by, Akion concluded, watching him and feeling the tension grow by the minute. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the client flattened his ears and seemed to become even smaller, slowly moving towards the door in submission.

"And don't even think about coming back here. This is the last time you set foot in my shop," Rappol blurted out before the mendes walked out, leaving behind an eerie silence. Akion watched his boss slowly approach the toolbox, put the makeshift weapon back inside, and look up at him. Then he asked, "Are you all right, boy?"

"Yes. I'm fine. I'm sorry. I just didn't know how to handle him."

"Take it easy. It's normal. That bastard just wanted a fight and we gave him a taste of his own medicine," he commented, walking over to the items the customer had thrown down and picking them up. Akion came out from behind the counter to help him. "Good thing I was already on my way when you called me."

"I didn't even realize what I had done. He started insulting me and my people. I had the phone in my hand and must have pressed the button in anger."

"I'm glad you did. We had to stop him as soon as possible. Now I don't think he'll bother us again, do you?"

"No, I think you gave him a good scare. The truth is, for a moment I thought you were going to attack him with the pipe wrench."

"If he'd kept going, I would have. Nobody threatens me in my own shop. I would have pushed things until he made the first move and it was recorded on the security cameras. From there I would have had a free hand to teach him a good lesson. And that's exactly why he left without making a fuss, because he knew he had everything to lose."

Yes, he may have had the odds against him, but in the end he left out of fear, knowing that you meant business and that you wouldn't have hesitated to finish him off, Akion said to himself, looking at his boss, whose fur was slowly settling back down.

"Changing the subject, have you finished setting up the containment system? Is the engine ready?"

"Almost. I've finished installing everything, but I still need half an hour to finish it," he explained, regaining his excitement for this project and putting aside the last moments of tension.

"Then go and finish it. I'm going to do a few things out here, so I'll leave you to it," Rappol said. Akion nodded, preparing for another assault on the metal monster.

A little over half an hour later, he came out of the workshop and told his boss that everything was ready for the test.

"Is it ready?" he asked, putting aside the delivery notes he was checking.

"Yes. I just put an ignition strip on it and sealed it."

"Well, let's find out if it works!" Rappol exclaimed, following the young man to the massive transparent box in which the engine was hermetically sealed. "You put it back

behind the security panels? I thought this would be the one and we'd do the tests outside. You still don't trust what you've done?"

"I don't know if I trust it anymore. This is the fourth time we've done it. Even if the containment system works now, something else could fail."

"That's the way I like it. Safety first—better to avoid an accident than regret it later." He nodded with conviction, pleased with the young man's professionalism. "Have you got all the systems hooked up and recording the readings yet?" he asked, taking a quick look at the equipment and the tangle of cables connected to the computer embedded in one of the panels, from which endless other cables ran through the engine from one side to the other.

"Yes, it's all ready to go. We just need to start it," Akion said, picking up the remote ignition device he had left on one of the tables.

"Then let's not waste any more time! Turn it on now!"

"Very well. Starting in three. Two." *Please work*, he mentally pleaded as he placed his thumb on the power button. "One..."

His thumb hesitated over the button. Then he pressed it decisively, and the engine roared to life. Numbers and graphics cascaded across the control monitors. The containment and cooling systems produced a loud hum that permeated everything, and suddenly, just as the metal beast had awoken, it shut down again.

"I can't believe it! You did it, Akion!" Rappol exclaimed, his excitement and pride evident as he affectionately slapped the human's forearm.

"I did it, didn't I? It worked!" he managed to say, still stunned by what he had accomplished. He turned to the recording devices and began checking the readings. "The fuel has been completely consumed. No residue remains. The containment worked perfectly. There was no fluctuation in the magnetic field; it remained stable throughout. The cooling held, and there was no dangerous rise in temperature. Power output is normal. No faults have been detected. The engine is... functioning."

"Congratulations, my boy. It took time, but you pulled it off. You did it. And I thought you were crazy for wanting to bring that junk out of the scrapyard."

"It was worth it in the end," he replied, unable to suppress the joy that threatened to flood his eyes with tears. He had managed to turn what had until recently been nothing more than a useless hodgepodge of metal into a working engine. "Now all that remains is to find a buyer."

"I've already got a few potential buyers, and I doubt they'll be haggling much over the price. I'm sure we'll get a good deal," Rappol reported, approaching the security panels and placing a hand on them, smiling as he thought of all the possibilities this equipment could offer them.

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Rappol activated the workshop security and closed the shop doors firmly. Following the engine tests, Akion focused on dismantling the logging equipment and tidying up that part of the workshop. Meanwhile, his boss had taken the opportunity to send the test

readings they had obtained to several of his best customers, hoping to find a couple of bids in his inbox the next day.

“Here, Akion. This is for you,” the mendes said, digging into a pocket and holding out a piece of metal the size of two centühns, gleaming silver in the corridor light.

“For me? Why?” he asked, puzzled by the thousand credits being offered and unsure whether to accept them.

“For your relentless dedication to the engine project. You’ve earned it. Without you we wouldn’t have started this project. You’ve shown knowledge and professionalism that very few mechanics have, myself included. So, although we will be going out for a proper meal when we sell it, I wanted to thank you now for everything you have done for me and the shop.”

“Rappol, I... I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t bother with words! Just brace yourself because we’re heading back to the scrapyard to rescue another engine to fix. With your skills we’ll be rich!” he exclaimed happily as he gave Akion a few affectionate pats.

“Another engine? Can’t we take a break first? I haven’t recovered from the nightmares this one gave me, and you already want us to go looking for another clunker to fix. I’m beginning to think you want to torture me,” the young man protested, rolling his eyes theatrically, before the two of them burst into laughter and left the workshop, chatting animatedly about the unexpected visit, the great result they had achieved and how important it could be for the workshop and for them.

3. Bad news and job offers

Akion ran his hand over the reader and the door swung open, the intoxicating aroma of food surrounding him and drawing him inside. He took off his work jacket, hung it on the crowded coat rack in the foyer and crept across the living room to the kitchen where his mother was preparing dinner.

"I'm here!" He placed his hands on the woman's shoulders, causing her to jump. Amused, the young man kissed her cheek. "The food smells so good!"

"How many times have I told you not to do that?" snorted Erilda before slapping her son who had tried to steal a piece of meat from the plate. "Hands off! No eating until we're all here!"

"That hurt," he howled mockingly as he saw his mother smirk. "Where's the birthday boy?"

"I don't know. He's running late." She shrugged and checked the kitchen timer. "He should have been here almost an hour ago. Maybe he had a setback at work."

"He didn't mention anything to you?"

"No. We spoke this afternoon and everything was fine. He probably had a meeting with the next shift. If you want, set the table so all we'll have to do when he gets back is serve the food."

"Coming," he replied, approaching the piece of furniture in the living room and removing the small vase of artificial plants that decorated it.

The front door opened shortly afterwards as Akion finished setting the silverware down. He looked up to greet and congratulate the newcomer when he saw his father's tired and sad face. Kana looked at him and said in a low, barely audible voice, "Hello, son."

"You're here at last, we thought you didn't want to eat!" Erilda exclaimed as she recognized the sound of the door. "Come on, let's all go to the table before we..." The woman fell silent as she came out of the kitchen and ran into her husband's gloomy face. "What happened? Are you all right?"

"I need to sit down," he replied, leaving his work gear by the entrance and walking into the living room, taking a seat as the other two watched him intently. He poured himself a glass of water and downed it in one gulp.

"Are you all right, dear?" Erilda asked worriedly after putting the food on the table and sitting across from him.

"We lost thirty-eight percent of the aquaponic farm's production," Kana explained solemnly, shaking his head.

"How? What happened?" asked Akion, taking a seat like the others and looking expectantly at his father.

"We don't know. It was after lunch when the scientists took their periodic readings and it's all gone to hell. They discovered some kind of bacterial agent that had seeped into the water and contaminated my entire section. Since then we have been checking and removing every single affected plant. The fish were also infected, so we had to empty, clean and disinfect all the water circuits and the rest of the systems. We have done a lot,

but it will take the night shift to finish. We hope to be able to start refilling tomorrow, bringing the first specimens from the nurseries and putting them in the tanks. Then we will have to gradually replant what has been lost.
"Even if it comes back online this week, food production has suffered and will be lower than usual. That means the price of food is going to go up all over Uzhar, and I have no doubt that we'll feel the effects elsewhere too. We will also get a pay cut," Kana continued uneasily, causing a heavy silence to fall over the table. The other two sat tensely as he took another drink of water, attempting to calm himself. "They're cutting our pay by the same percentage as the production loss because they say it was our fault. A mistake that we could have avoided. So, until production is back up to a hundred percent, our salaries will be cut. It's going to be a difficult few months. Some of my coworkers decided to quit and leave us in even more trouble when they found out, but I can't leave..."

Akion gave his father a knowing look. He could have finished the sentence for him: *because no one else is going to want to hire a human, and even if it's less money, I still need those damn credits.* The insults of that same afternoon echoed again in his mind. Unconsciously, he clenched his fists tightly.

"I didn't want to say it today because it was your birthday, but since we're on bad news..." Erilda announced, drawing the attention of the two men, who had become engrossed in their own thoughts. "They've cut my hours at the restaurant. Fewer customers are coming in, so Sonnte has decided to cut our hours and reduce costs."

"All because they replaced the cook," Akion muttered uneasily. "We discussed it the other day. Sonnte shouldn't have let Rosses leave. You know that the cook is the soul of the restaurant and if he's bad, he ruins everything."

"And he's really bad! Even the regulars have stopped coming! The day before yesterday he made a broth so disgusting that he had to throw it away."

"Let's see if that broth is to blame for the contamination of the farm," said Kana with a mixture of seriousness and humor, looking at his wife. "You'll have to give me the address of the new cook so that we can go pay him a visit with my boss."

The three of them let out a loud laugh, letting their joy echo throughout the room, chasing away that moment of gloom. When the laughter faded, Akion watched his parents hold hands affectionately and let silence settle around them as they simply looked at each other and smiled. Finally, after a long minute, Kana comforted her with a few simple words, saying, "We'll get through this, as always."

"Yes..." replied Erilda, bringing a hand to her face to wipe away a tear that was trying to run down her cheek. "As always."

A bittersweet feeling came over the young man. All his life he had seen his parents struggle in this way in the face of the problems and injustices they suffered. They always put on a good face, trying to smile, make jokes and look on the bright side of life. No matter what happened, they carried on and refused to be defeated. Still, he could see those things taking their toll on them, and the vitality they once had was slowly fading away. Unfortunately, he couldn't do anything to help them and recapture the past he missed so much.

"Well, that's enough bad news," Kana said, tapping lightly on the table to break everyone's reverie and change the heavy atmosphere that had taken over the room.

“Today it’s time to celebrate my birthday. It’s time to celebrate that I’ve become a little wiser. We can’t waste this delicious meal your mother has prepared, can we, Akion?”

“True. Though I think ‘older’ is more accurate. As for ‘wiser’...”

“Hey!” he shouted, looking up from the plate he was starting to fill and glaring at the young man. “Some respect, I’m your father.”

“Stop fighting at the table and have some gravy,” she instructed, holding the bowl out for her husband to help himself to. “How’s everything going, Akion?”

“Not much, the work in Hangar Three…”

“That’s not what your mother is asking,” Kana interrupted, looking at his wife with a mischievous smile. “What she wants to know is how it’s going with the young ladies.”

“Daddy!”

“What? Am I right, darling?” he asked hastily, seeing the knowing smile on his wife’s lips. “See? That’s what I said. So how’s that going, son?”

“Do you think I’d be here having dinner with you if I had a girl?”

“Well, that was a low blow. Where did you learn to answer like that?”

“You taught him, dear.”

“But I didn’t think he’d use it against me. I’ve created a monster!” Kana announced theatrically and got everyone laughing, pushing the problems away and allowing them to enjoy the evening and the delicious food.

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The door opened with a whisper and Akion stepped out into the hallway, pulling on his jacket. Erilda stood in the doorway, watching her son’s heavy movements after such a large meal. She smiled with a certain culinary pride at having made it.

“Thank you for coming today.”

“Everything was very tasty, Mom. As always.” The young man hesitated for a moment, then reached into his pocket. “Here, this is for you. I had a good day at work today. I got a nice tip at the Hangar and Rappol gave me a bonus for a job I did. I’m sure you can...”

“No, I don’t want you to give it to me. It’s yours,” she said, interrupting him when she saw the two pieces of metal in his hand.

“But you need it more than I do. With your jobs and the loans.”

“No, we don’t need it. We’ll manage with what we have. Keep it, go on.” Akion obeyed and closed his hand sadly, searching his mother’s face for the reasons for this answer. She hugged him tenderly. “It’s all right, don’t worry about us.”

“Okay, I won’t,” he lied as he carefully placed the credits in his mother’s pocket.

They parted and Akion wondered for a moment if she had noticed the trick, but he saw no sign. So, he smiled, said goodbye and headed for the terminal, where he would take an elevator to his deck, five levels below. *I’m sure she’ll tell me something when she finds them in her pants, but now there’s nothing she can do but use them. They’ll only be good for this month’s expenses, maybe next month’s, but nothing more,* the young man calculated as he walked into the terminal to catch his ride. *I wish I could give them more, but money is really tight. The truth is, the bonus from Rappol would have done me a lot*

of good; and tomorrow afternoon it will be my turn to explain to Poddoc what happened to our tip. He's going to kill me. The young man sighed heavily as he stepped into the elevator just before it was due to start, letting his companion's words sink in. *No matter what he says, I won't get anywhere in this company. I've been a beast of burden for seven years. The only thing I can hope for is to get the odd tip by blackmailing traders who try to smuggle contraband. But nothing more*.

A slight melody echoed in the elevator, indicating that he had just reached his destination. *And don't even get me started on Rappol. Even if I work very hard, when he retires, he won't leave the business to me—or I won't be able to take it over. Who will take their ship to a workshop run by a human? Look at what happened this afternoon.* Images of that mendes insulting him flooded back into his mind. The young man gritted his teeth as a strong pressure built in his chest. *It's true that not everyone is like that, but as long as they keep thinking that about us, we won't have much of a future*, he said to himself as he walked through the terminal to the main square. Many of the shops had already closed and there were few passers-by, like him, still moving through the corridors at this hour.

We are miserable. And the only thing we can do is try to survive in this shitty universe, he concluded as he opened the door to his house and turned on the light, coming upon the chaos of clothes that adorned much of the furniture. Akion took off his jacket and hung it up. Then he stripped as he made his way to the bathroom, leaving the clothes on the chair. For a moment, it seemed to collapse under the weight of them.

The hot water ran down his back and over his stiff muscles, while all those thoughts continued to bubble uncontrollably inside him. He hadn't been there long when it ran out and the control screen indicated that he had used the maximum amount allowed by Uzhar Station. Akion slammed a hand against the shower control panel, causing the words to distort for a moment. Cursing, he stepped out of the shower and dried himself with a towel that had seen better days. After changing into the worn clothes he slept in, he lay down on the bed and picked up his digital tablet, unlocking it with a simple flick and entering the main menu. *I'm not too tired, but I don't feel like watching anything. I think I'll check the offers, see if they've posted anything interesting*, he said to himself as he opened the browser and went to one of the pages he had saved for buying and selling ships. With a few commands and filters, he saw that some new listings had been posted and began to inspect them.

This was his little hobby. He studied the ads and the ships that were offered, checking if everything was correct or if there was any wrong information, as well as the design and the features. But that wasn't the only thing. With every ad he checked, there was that brief moment when he was no longer Akion, a simple human working as a mechanic and alinum loader, but a human able to pay those prices, to rebuild the ship to his liking and to leave Uzhar once and for all for a new destination, a different future.

After exploring these new vehicles, he continued his routine by examining the jobs section on the same page. There, he could find all kinds of jobs related to the aerospace sector: from technicians or mechanics for space stations or spaceports, to crew members for cruise ships or pleasure craft, engineers for shipyards, specialized salespeople and a myriad of transport contracts.



As usual, he applied the search filters for the Oshin system, his current location, and let the page fill up with all the offers he already knew so well: listings asking for some kind of superbeing with more years of experience than a lifetime could hold, with endless lists of skills and knowledge no one could possibly meet, and no chance for someone with his background. He had applied to many companies and very few had even bothered to reply. All of them indicated that he did not fit in with what they were looking for at the time, and although most of the replies were similar, he could see in some of them that the deciding factor in rejecting him had been his humanity. As he scrolled through the job listings that had been posted in the last few days, he came across one that made him pause: "Test Pilot for the University of Mendran." Curious, he opened it and read it carefully:

‹The University of Mendran is looking for a test pilot for an experimental spacecraft developed by the Faculty of Aerospace Engineering. His task will be to verify, together with the engineering and control team, the feasibility of the prototype through the following operations:

- Vertical takeoff and landing test.

- Stability control and engine operation.
- Flight test on the planet, checking thrust, speed and performance.
- Test in space, verification of thrust, speed and performance.
- Hyperspace jump and efficiency tests.

The work will take six days.
Payment will be 5,000 credits. Accommodation, per diem, and transportation will be covered by the University of Mendran.›

"Five thousand credits for six days' work? That's crazy!" Akion exclaimed, rereading the payment section to make sure he hadn't made a mistake. "That's over four months' work as an alinum loader. I'm sure there will be plenty of people who have applied. Although it does seem a bit dangerous," he continued, reading the skills, knowledge and abilities they were asking for: a cool head, the ability to work under pressure, analytical skills, mechanical knowledge, and jump theory. "Bah! Never mind. I don't think this is for me. Me? Test pilot? I almost crashed the ship Rappol let me take out of the hangar to do the sensor tests," he argued, trying to convince himself. "I'd better stop now and go to sleep."

Akion closed the digital tablet and placed it on the bedside table. He checked that the alarm was on and turned off the light, closing his eyes and letting his mind wander as he waited for sleep to take over. It was then that he imagined himself accepting the job offer and becoming a test pilot, taking to the skies and achieving great results; returning home with the credits and being able to help his family in these difficult times. With that last thought, he fell asleep.

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Akion sat heavily in the gravity chair, which lowered slightly to accommodate his height and weight. The tavern was quickly filling up with those who had decided to have a drink before heading home after a hard day's work. Despite the noise from the crowd, faint music played over the loudspeakers to liven up the evening. A few news and sports channels played on the various screens scattered around the place.

The young man looked at the screen closest to his table, which showed the image of a lulnien. Although he could not hear what the reporter was saying, he could read from the caption that it had been five years since an arrest warrant had been issued for Grundry Glädlet, one of the most wanted criminals of all time. His oval head and completely flat face, with no cheekbones or nasal bridge to define his features, together with his mouth, a barely visible cleft in his bluish complexion, made him an unforgettable figure. He was one of the foremost robotics experts in the galaxy. According to the media, he had published a treatise entitled '*The Artificial Linkages of Learning*', in which he had studied forbidden technologies from the Dark Ages, thus breaking the government's laws on robotics and artificial intelligence and endangering all of Theia. And although the Guardians of the Order of the Galaxy had devoted many resources to finding him in recent years, they had still not caught him.

“You’re not going to catch him either,” the young man commented, unconsciously responding to the screen.

“I beg your pardon?” Rappol asked, approaching the table with two beers and placing one in front of the human.

“No, nothing. I meant the news about that lulnien.” He pointed to the television, prompting Rappol to look at it as he sat down. “If they haven’t caught him in five years, they won’t.”

“Time really has flown. I remember when they used to show his face all the time, on all the channels,” he commented, before taking a sip of his beer. “Either this Grundry guy is dead, or he’s hiding in some hole somewhere, knowing that if he tries to stick his head out, they’ll blow it off.”

“That’s why I doubt they’ll catch him if he’s still alive,” commented Akion as he watched the report on the lulnien end and the newscast move on to the latest political developments in Glahän, the seat of the Galactic Government. “Has this ever happened before?”

“What do you mean? The media coverage and the mobilization of the Guardians of the Order of the Galaxy to capture this criminal?” the mendes asked, watching Akion nod. “Not that I can recall. Not even the bloodiest radical groups or the biggest pirates have ever had a campaign of this magnitude. There’s no doubt that he screwed up pretty badly. But that’s to be expected when you’re flouting the laws of robotics or playing with some kind of Dark Ages thing.”

“I don’t get it. Why make such a big deal out of something that happened over seven thousand years ago?”

“Because that war almost wiped out all life in our galaxy. Entire civilizations were lost, and those who survived still fear the ghosts of the past. The founders of the Galactic Government managed to win by sacrificing entire planets. That is why they have made such restrictive laws in this matter. They are afraid it might happen again.”

“If I remember my school history books correctly, you were not affected by the conflict.”

“No, we were not affected by the war,” Rappol replied. “Our position within Theia, away from the galactic core, allowed us to keep those robots from finding us and annihilating us. We were just taking the first steps in our space race, so we would not have been able to defend ourselves, as happened to many other civilizations developing at that time.”

“I don’t know much about ours. But I think it was around that time that the first human civilizations began to emerge.”

“It is just that you are a young race compared with the other members of the Galactic Government. When they found you, you had not yet developed your own jump drive. You were moving through space at sublight speeds.”

“And that’s exactly why so many hate us,” Akion replied sadly. He took a sip of his beer, trying to wash away the bitter aftertaste he felt at having to think about it.

“You must understand that you broke the rules. It wasn’t your fault, that’s true, but that’s what happened. Every race must meet certain requirements and undergo extensive tests that can take hundreds of years to complete before they can even contact the Galactic

Government, let alone become part of it. But you appeared as refugees, and they distributed you among all the races, gave you access to some of our knowledge, and allowed you to use technologies you were not yet supposed to know.

"There are rules governing contact with more primitive races when we explore the cosmos, including limits on exposing them to our civilizations or technologies. But before you, no one had considered the possibility of a fleet of ships wandering through space. It was only after you appeared that new laws and protocols were put in place to deal with the possibility of new contacts such as yours."

"We were the first, and so we suffered the consequences, confined to space stations with little hope for the future."

"I see you've been waiting for us," a voice growled beside them, interrupting their conversation and causing them to turn to see Poddoc, who had just arrived. Behind him were several more members of Hangar Three, now making their way to the bar to order their drinks.

"You're late. And around here, you snooze, you lose. What, were your asses too heavy to move?" Rappol asked with a grin before taking another sip of his beer.

"These guys are just slow. I hate shifts when they don't pair me with the human," Poddoc said with a grin. "He may be obsessed with ships, but he works hard, not like the others," the mendes said, pointing with his thumb at the operators, who were now returning to the table with a round of drinks. "Not to mention that thanks to him we sometimes get free beer. Right, human?"

"Well, Poddoc, about that..."

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Akion opened the door and stumbled in as he slid his hand along the wall to activate the lights. He had to try three more times to get the switch right. The lights came on, eliciting a grunt from the young man as he crawled to the bed, sitting on the edge. He tried to lift one foot to remove his safety boots. On the second attempt, he managed to grab one of them and pulled the boot off with a strong tug. The other was easier and fell to the floor with a loud clatter, startling the human.

"Shhh, don't make any noise," he said to himself with difficulty, his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth.

He had drunk too much. After explaining what had happened to the tip they had received the day before, he had had to buy Poddoc several rounds, drinking along with him, and they had both ended up drunk.

Akion tried to take off the shirt he was wearing and, realizing it was a bad idea, decided to leave it on. He lay down with one leg off the bed, resting it on the floor to try to stop the room from spinning. He focused his gaze on the timeband on the wall to calm the dizziness and checked that it was two in the morning. *Good thing I don't have the morning shift,* he thought with relief before spotting the digital tablet on the table. *A little fun wouldn't go amiss*, he thought. He couldn't suppress the lust now taking over, fueled by the alcohol. With a slow but steady motion, he reached for the device and turned it on. The screen lit up and the job offer he had seen the night before appeared. *Of course. I*

didn't close it after looking at it, he said to himself, looking at it again and checking the duration and salary. *If I ask to take a few days off, I could do it. I'm not much of a pilot, but I think I could do the tests they're asking for without too much trouble. They are similar to the ones we used to do with Rappol. And I'm sure that even though it's a prototype, it's already passed a lot of safety tests. If it hadn't, they wouldn't let anyone fly it. With the money, I could help my parents while they recover,* he argued, trying to convince himself and imagining himself doing the job to decide whether or not to apply.

"It doesn't matter what I do. I'm sure they've got plenty of experienced pilots lined up*,"* he said aloud and started to close the page. Suddenly something stopped him. He didn't know if it was his subconscious or the alcohol coursing through his body, but a sense of vengeance was growing inside him. It told him he couldn't leave it at that. "Fuck them! Let them waste their time reading my résumé!" Akion tapped the button to apply for the job. After accepting the site's terms and conditions, a notification confirmed that his application had been submitted successfully. "That's it! Let's see if they have the balls to get back to me."

He closed the browser window and felt the alcohol hit him again, making him dizzy. With a sigh of exhaustion and disappointment, he turned off the digital tablet and put it back on the table. *That killed the mood*, he thought to himself, turning off his light and letting himself fall asleep.

If you want to learn more about Akion Tiles, his life aboard the station, and what happens with his application to become a test pilot, the rest of his story is just one click away.

Click on the image.

