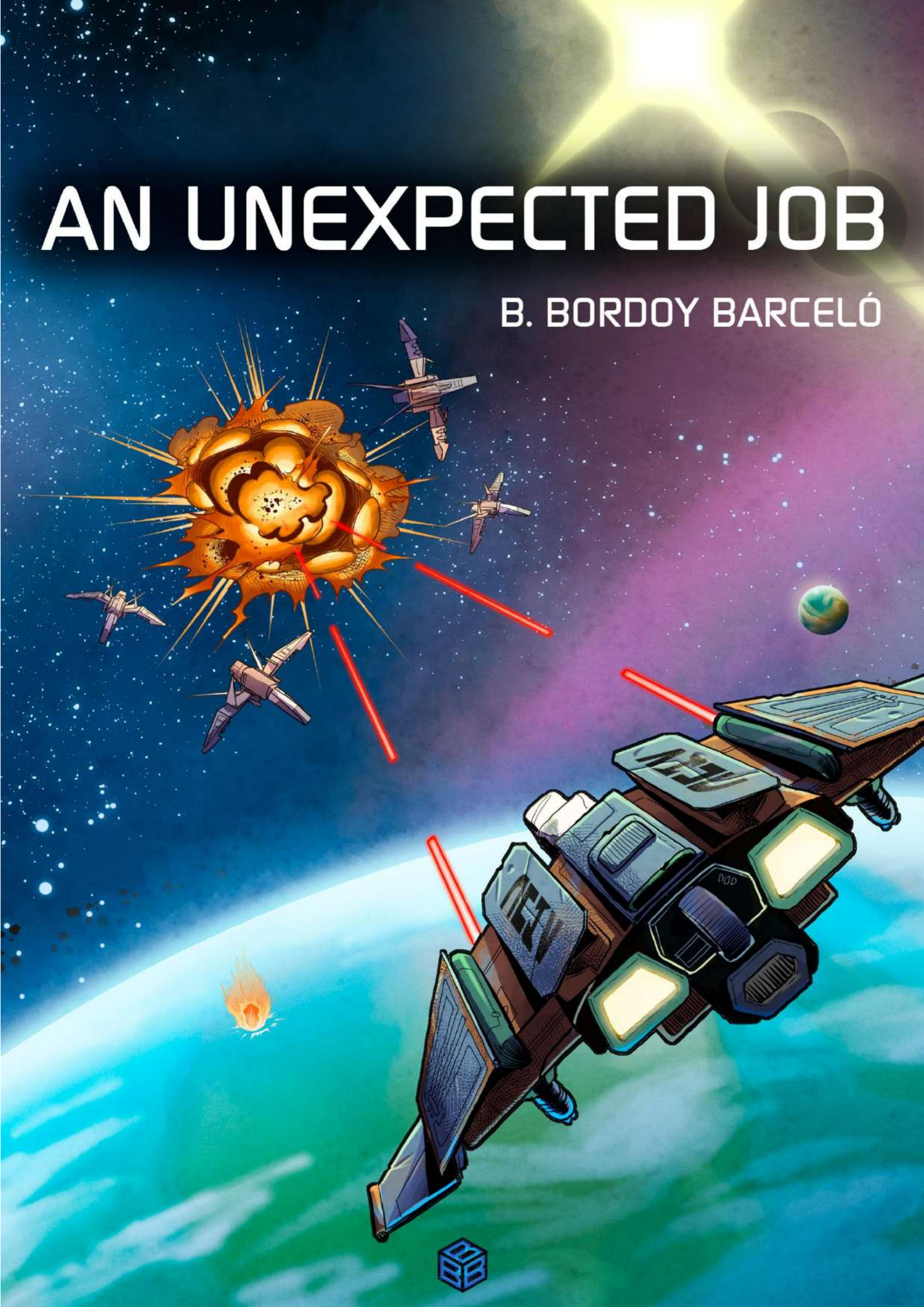
# AN UNEXPECTED JOB

B. BORDOY BARCELÓ



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B. Bordoy Barceló

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*An Unexpected Job*
B. Bordoy Barceló
Translated by: Juliana B. M.
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# 1. 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.

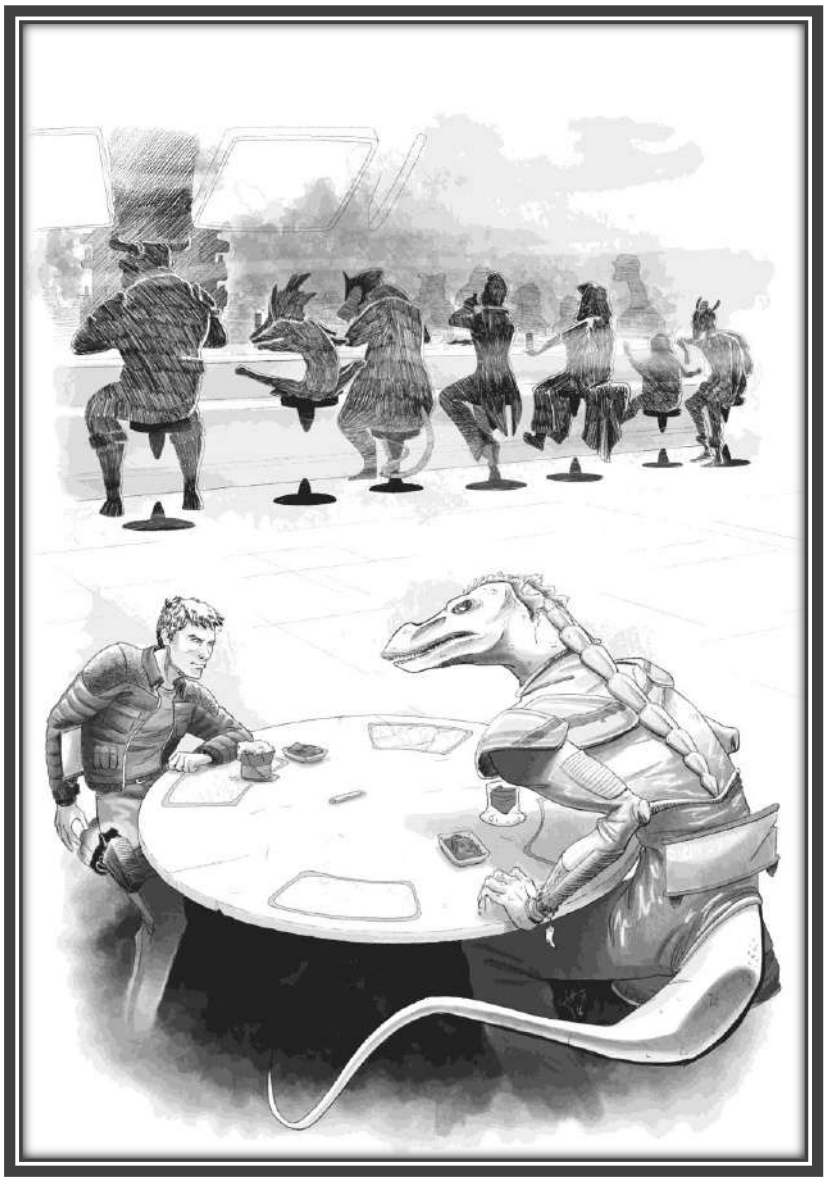
"That's not our problem, human. You took the job and promised to deliver the entire shipment. You knew it wouldn't be a pleasure cruise through the stars…" The reptile's words grew sharper. "I thought you were a professional. Someone who understood the stakes. You should be thankful Bax is generous enough 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!”

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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.

The stars outside blurred as a massive funnel-shaped purple cloud formed and drew the ship inside. Suddenly, a powerful jolt told them they had escaped their enemies and were now traveling at speeds far exceeding light.

"We made it," he sighed, leaning back with relief. Suddenly, a thought struck him, and he turned to the young woman. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

She shook her head, her eyes fixed on the mercenary's hand, which had swollen to twice its normal size. Realizing this, he tried to tuck it out of sight against the seat.

"It's nothing. This happens when you punch a scroc. Their skin is irritating."

"You fought a scroc?" Tidux asked, swiveling to face him. "I thought Bax was happy with us."

"No. Well, yes, he is. But Paken only gave me half of what we agreed on. According to that damn lizard, we didn't finish the job, so that's all we get."

"If Bax wants to keep things quiet and pretend the job didn't go well, it makes sense he'd only pay us for the half we delivered," the robot said, oblivious to his companion's incredulous gaze. "But that's not even enough to cover the ship repairs."

"I know. We'll have to figure something out because… I also had a small disagreement with Paken."

"Define small," Tidux inquired, fully aware of what those words meant.

"I pointed my gun at him," Vhan said, trying to smile.

"How are we supposed to get more money if you point your gun at the only one who's given us a job in more than forty days?"

"Well, something will come up. You'll see."

"So, the scroc?"

"It was after that. I was heading back to the ship when I ran into her. The scroc and a balnir were chasing her," Vhan continued. She nodded slowly, confirming his words. "I fought them, and then another group showed up and started shooting at us. I guess they were all working together." He turned back toward the woman. "Now that we've got a breather, why were they after you?"

She didn't answer. She just curled into her seat, visibly shaken, still nervous from everything that had happened.

"Don't worry. They're not going to hurt you anymore," he said as a thought occurred to him. "Come to think of it, with all the chaos, we never introduced ourselves. I'm Vhan, and that's Tidux. We're… How should I put it? On-demand workers."

"Nice, the least convincing way of saying we're mercenaries," the robot quipped.

"You're not helping, Tidux," Vhan muttered, shaking his head. "It's true, we're

mercenaries, but we're the good ones. We helped you, didn't we?" The woman nodded, slightly self-conscious under his gaze. "And you, what's your name?"

"Gesandaryan, like the star in the system, but my friends call me Ges."

"Ges," Vhan repeated, a small triumphant smile crossing his face now that he'd gotten her to speak. "Earlier, when we met, you said they hurt your family, right?"

She didn't answer. Her eyes answered for her, turning glassy in an instant.

"Do you know why?"

"No," she replied slowly. "I'd gone out to buy food at the station's market. When I came home, I found my parents on the floor…" Her voice broke, and the first tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry."

"When I got closer to see what had happened, those two jumped me. They were waiting in another room. We struggled for a moment. I don't remember how I did it, but I escaped. I ran out of the house as fast as I could, but I couldn't shake them."

"I didn't recognize them. I don't think I've seen them before," Vhan said. "They were probably slave traders from a nearby system. It happens all the time on stations where humans live. Organized groups, like the ones chasing you, enter human colonies and kidnap women and children to sell them as slaves on the black market."

"Yeah, most likely those beings ran into your parents and killed them to avoid getting reported," Tidux added, earning a sharp glare from the captain for bringing up the matter in such a way.

"We need to go to the authorities! That's a criminal act!" Ges cried angrily, clenching her fists until her knuckles turned white.

"Unfortunately, no one will do anything about it," the man said. "This is what happens when our race has no voice or vote in the Galactic Government. We're just refugees with no place in the galaxy. Many see us as simple creatures to be exploited."

Ges sobs intensified, and she covered her face with her hands, trying to hide the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Don't worry. You're safe now. They won't get you," Vhan said, trying to comfort her. He wanted to stop her from crying and help her recover, but he didn't know what to do.

"They were just lying there. They hadn't hurt anyone…"

Suddenly, the cabin lights flickered, followed by a shrill alarm that blared throughout the ship, startling them.

"What is it, Tidux?"

"What was bound to happen. The mess you made in the circuits is overheating the engine. We need to stop the jump right now and let everything cool down, or we'll explode into a thousand pieces."

"Damn it! Fine, shut it all down," the captain ordered with resignation before an idea popped into his head. "We're not going to crash into anything, right?"

"Negative. There's nothing around. We're in a completely empty sector," the robot said while checking the star charts on one of the monitors.

"We'll let the engine cool down. How long do you think we have before they track us?"

"Not long. An hour, maybe a little more."

"Alright. We'll check the jump system again and try to improve the patch I made so we can continue the trip in… forty minutes."

Vhan tapped a couple of buttons on the screen in front of him and turned to his metal companion. A section of the surrounding galaxy appeared on the holo-projector.

“We’re not far from Rhesa. I’m sure Heilen could get us the parts we need and repair the ship on the planet. Then, we just have to hide on the Moons for a while until things calm down with Bax and the slavers.”

“Sounds like a good plan. We need parts to fix the Dark Star again. But what are you going to do with the woman? Do you plan to take her with us to the Moons?” Tidux asked, raising his arm and pointing at her with his thumb. Ges swallowed hard and looked at the captain, curious and fearful of what he might say. She knew her future depended on what he decided.

“Well, we could leave her on Rhesa. I highly doubt those men would still be looking for her there. And if we ask Heilen, he’ll help.”

“Who’s Heilen?” she asked, her voice barely audible.

“He’s not human. He’s a carnak,” Vhan explained. “He runs a ship repair shop. A little stubborn and stingy with money, but a good friend. I’ve known him for years. He still owes me a few favors. Don’t worry, he’ll help you hide. You might have to stay in Rhesa for a while, but then you’ll be able to go home,” he concluded with a faint smile, trying to comfort the young woman.

“Thank you,” Ges said, a little calmer after hearing his words.

“It’s settled,” the robot announced, catching the attention of the two humans, who had been looking at each other for a second in silence. “Slowing down the jump.”

He grabbed a lever to his left and slowly pulled it down. The intense purple cloud surrounding the ship during the jump began to dissolve, revealing the starscape around them.

“Alright,” Vhan said, clapping once. “Time is against us. Tidux, do a full scan of all the ship’s systems and subsystems. I’ll check the circuits and the engine’s power supply. Let’s make a list of all the parts that need to be replaced and send it to Heilen. Let’s hope he has everything we need.”

“Can I help you?” Ges asked, trying to recover fully from the sadness that had been tormenting her.

“First, you should take a shower and get out of those clothes.” He pointed to the dried blood on the fabric. “Go down to the lower deck. On the right, you’ll find a cabin you can use. I’m sure there’ll be some of my clothes in the closet that’ll fit you. After that, you can help us,” he said with a smile, his white teeth standing out against the darkness of space around them.

# 2. Old friendships

Rhesa was a place known to all kinds of merchants. It was the largest trading city in the entire galaxy, covering more than half the planet and welcoming any creature eager to buy or sell. It didn't matter what one was looking for—whether it was a chronx alloy knife, forged on the surface of a dying star and considered by top chefs the best in the galaxy, or the bile glands of the kruk insects from Duls, used to regenerate dead tissue.

However, you had to be careful which parts of the city you wandered into—organized crime was rampant in Rhesa. Many stores were ruled with an iron fist by these syndicates, while others were run directly by them, selling all sorts of goods that mercenaries, criminals, or people with questionable morals might need.

Weapons, slaves, drugs, forbidden technology—there was nothing that couldn't be found in that clandestine market in full view of everyone. No one—not the police, the government, the planet's army, or even the Guardians of the Order of the Galaxy—was unaware of what went on in the city's dark corners.

Still, no one dared—or even wanted—to interfere with their operations or dismantle the organizations that had formed over the years. The arrangement gave the authorities considerable control over most criminals and their activities. Not to mention the bribes collected for turning a blind eye—money that flowed directly into the coffers of the Galactic Government, the economic and political association that formed the backbone of the entire nebula.

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Vhan slowly made his way through the great tide of people flooding the wide avenue, with Ges and Tidux following close behind, trying not to lose sight of him.

"It's this way," the mercenary announced, turning down a side street and away from the city's main arteries, crowded with stores, stalls, and street vendors hawking whatever they could.

"Don't wander away from us," the robot said to the young woman, who had stopped in front of a stall to look at the small sculptures of some of the wonders of the galaxy. She turned and quickly rejoined them. "It is dangerous to go alone, especially for a woman."

"Don't say that. You'll scare her," Vhan spat, causing the android to pause for a moment to look at his companion, who smiled knowingly. "Tidux may be exaggerating, but you'd better do what he says."

The three of them wandered further into the maze of streets that made up the city until they reached their destination half an hour later. It was a large, faded building, its walls chipped and rusted with age. The outline of a huge sign that had once covered the entire façade was still visible: *Heilen Mechanics*.

"This is it," the mercenary said, approaching the worn door, which opened with a thunderous creak.

The foyer was a small, square room, no more than five ühns on a side and completely enclosed. Of the four spotlights suspended from the ceiling, one was burned out and another flickered incessantly, casting limited light across the rusty metal walls. Only the door leading farther into the building had any color: a wide yellow line ran across it, indicating that it opened horizontally.

Two robots stood guard, one on either side. They were wider and sturdier than Tidux, with simple rectangular heads and glowing eyes that seemed to follow the visitors' every move.

"I'm Vhan Stalix. I have an appointment with Mr. Heilen."

Neither android responded, but he knew they were informing their superior of his arrival.

"What do we do?" asked Ges, who had walked up to him, somewhat nervous about being in that cramped, smelly room.

"Wait. Easy, they'll let us through soon," he replied, clasping his hands behind his back. He glanced at his metal companion, who stood beside the entrance, completely still, as if he weren't even there. "I'm sure they already knew we were in the city before we got here."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, surely some informant must have told them that we had landed. In a city ruled by criminals, information is very valuable."

"Criminals?" the woman asked, astonished. "But on our way here we ran into a score of police officers."

"How little you know about the galaxy, Ges!" Vhan exclaimed with a smile, amused at the woman's shocked expression. "Those cops are bought and paid for. They won't lift a finger to save anyone unless whoever pays them tells them to." The woman's face contorted at his words. "But don't worry, no one is going to chase you or care about a mere human in this place. Besides, Heilen will help us and before long you'll be able to go home."

"Will he help me?"

"I'm sure of it."

Suddenly, the artificial, metallic voices of the two robots interrupted the conversation, speaking in unison:

"Come with us, Mr. Heilen is waiting for you."

The door opened and the automaton on the right stepped through while the other gestured for them to follow. At that moment, Tidux snapped out of his reverie, and the three followed the guard who had taken the lead. The second robot closed the door behind them.

As they walked through the narrow, dimly lit corridor, the sound of cutters and tools grew louder around them. There was no doubt that those androids were leading them toward the workshop, located behind the building they were passing through.

After a couple more steps, the one at the head of the line stopped and, before Vhan could ask what was going on, a new door opened. Light from outside streamed into the hallway, causing the mercenary to let out a slight grunt as he shielded his eyes from the sun.

"Bless my eyes, the great Vhan has returned to the city!" a voice exclaimed as the group emerged from the corridor.

The mercenary turned toward the speaker, who stood by the exit, waiting for them. He was a bipedal creature, roughly human in height and build. The main difference was his head, slightly elongated and covered with large bone plates in place of hair, giving him sharp, angular features.

"You could've let me dock my ship here, Heilen," Vhan grunted by way of greeting, pointing toward the upper entrance of the workshop where a vehicle was lifting off into

the clear sky. “And I wouldn’t have had to pay for the city hangar just to keep them from stealing even my landing gear bolts.”

“You know as well as I do that it’s safer there than in here,” he replied with a booming laugh, revealing a dark tongue behind bluish teeth. The carnak held out his hand. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too. It’s been a long time since we’ve seen each other.”

“Almost a galactic year. What’s the matter, did your communicator break? You could have called me sooner. I was so glad to hear your voice and know you were coming to see me.”

“You were glad to hear I was coming to do business with you,” corrected Vhan.

“That too, you got me,” he commented, amused, before looking at his companions and taking a step towards the young woman. “Who did you bring me? How do you do? I’m Heilen. I’m sure this madman has told you all sorts of lies about me.”

“Gesandaryan,” she greeted shyly, losing herself in those deep black eyes that seemed to hold hundreds of stars within them.

“Well, I told her you were a great person—humble and hardworking,” the mercenary said, letting a smile cross his face.

“You still don’t know how to lie, dear friend,” said the businessman, turning back to the human.

“I’ll never be as good as you,” Vhan replied. “That aside, she’s a friend who needs your help. Slavers were after her, and she was lucky enough to run into me. I was hoping you could help her out—give her some work here and hide her for a while until she can go home.”

“Sure, no problem! Vhan’s friends are my friends,” the carnak said, lifting the woman’s hand and kissing it. “I’m sure we can find something to help you get back home, but…” He turned back to his old companion, who raised an eyebrow in confusion. “Wouldn’t it be better if she stayed with you? It might be good for a disaster like you…”

“Our lives are complicated and dangerous enough without having to worry about anyone else—besides me and the metal one.” He pointed at Tidux, making the android pause for a second and analyze the words. “And my ship.”

“Did I hear that right? Did you say it’s yours?”

“Let’s not start that again,” the mercenary said with a smirk. “It hasn’t belonged to you for eons. You lost it in a game of bakum against me, remember?”

“You can say what you want, but it will always be mine,” he argued. “Besides, you know perfectly well that I let you win.”

“I don’t remember it that way.”

“That’s normal. Human memory is fragile. Give it a couple of years and everything gets distorted.”

“Have you found everything?” interrupted Tidux, noticing how the two companions were talking about subjects that had no relation to the reason that had brought them there. Vhan looked at the robot with disapproval for being so blunt.

“Yes, you were fortunate. I had everything you asked for,” Heilen announced, ignoring the interruption and motioning for them to follow, along with the two robots who had brought them. “But tell me, what did you do to it?”

“It happened on our last job for Bax. It was supposed to be simple, but the Red Claw intercepted us. We managed to escape by the skin of our teeth, though we had to sacrifice half the cargo. You know those damn pirates stop at nothing, so you can imagine the ship

took a beating."

"I took better care of it when it was mine."

"Don't worry, it runs perfectly fine. With the new parts, it'll run like a dream again." Vhan looked around the workshop they were in. Everywhere he looked, different crews were busy repairing more than a dozen transports. "Business seems to be going well for you, Heilen."

"Can't complain. There's always something to keep us busy," he replied, watching a group of his workers trying to start a freighter's engine.

"Are those our parts?" Tidux asked, looking at the three large crates beside a hover-sled, several components protruding from them.

"Yes, a new generator, two induction coils, some resupply circuits, thirty ühns of cable and the list goes on…"

"There are a couple of little things to change," the mercenary announced with a smile, trying to hide the embarrassment of requesting that amount of spare parts. He stepped up beside Tidux, and together they began checking the contents of each crate. After a few minutes, he turned to Heilen. "It seems to be all there."

"I'm offended you ever doubted me. Come on, let my androids load the crates into the transport while we go to my office and reminisce about old times." He draped an arm over Vhan's shoulder and pulled him along as the two escort robots broke away and approached the cargo. "Then we'll take you to the hangar where your ship is and help you load everything."

"Perfect. Thank you."

"No need to thank me," he said, waving his hand dismissively. "Follow me, I'll buy you a drink. I got a bottle of fasex liquor you need to try. Then you can tell me what happened with this beautiful young woman in Pykek."

The mercenary pulled away abruptly, reaching for his holster and pointing the pistol at him.

"Easy, I'm not going to charge you for the drink," he said, raising his arms in amusement.

"How do you know I met Ges in Pykek? I didn't tell you—not now, not even when we discussed the parts."

"Once you mentioned Bax, I figured that was where you were coming from. After all, even though he controls the entire Myrnix sector, he does a lot of business on that station."

"That's true…" A thought suddenly occurred to Vhan, and his grip on the weapon tightened. "But you had no reason to know anything had happened to us in Pykek."

Heilen let out a dejected sigh, looking at the human as he lowered his hands.

"Okay, you got me. Guys!"

His words echoed over the workshop, prompting the workers to draw weapons they had hidden throughout the place—clearly prepared for moments like this.

"I see you were already prepared," Vhan commented, glancing sideways at the group of henchmen who were slowly approaching, aiming at them. "Tell me, what do you know?"

"Not much, really. You may have left with the girl from the station by chance or intentionally, but they've put a price on your heads. They're giving a hundred thousand credits for each of you," Heilen announced, savoring the words. "I'm sorry."

"I thought we were friends!" Vhan exclaimed angrily, his left hand clenched into a fist.

"Business is business, you know. Be glad I was the one who caught you first. Plenty of others are already after you, and they won't be as considerate as we are. You can be

sure of that."

"And I'm supposed to be grateful?" the man snorted. "You've betrayed us for a handful of credits."



"I'm not doing it for the money. I'm doing it for you. Turn yourself in. We'll go to the exchange point and straighten this out. Together, we'll tell them it was all a misunderstanding. We'll hand over the girl, get your bounties canceled, and split the money from hers."

"You bastard!" shouted Ges, trying to take a step towards Heilen, but Tidux grabbed her by the shoulders, stopping her.

"Who the hell can afford to put up that kind of money for a mere woman and two mercenaries who have helped her?"

"I don't know. The client was anonymous, but I'm sure it's someone in high places. The person I contacted was simply a mediator. And now, if you don't mind…" He stepped closer and placed his hand on the pistol, prompting the mercenary to lower it. "I'm sorry, but you are now my prisoners."

“We were friends! I saved your ass a couple of times—and this is the thanks I get!? Selling me out to the first guy who puts a price on my head. You betrayed me. You stabbed me in the damn back!”

At that moment, Vhan could no longer contain himself. He swung his left fist into Heilen’s face, catching him completely off guard and knocking him backward. The mercenary turned to Tidux, shouting and diving to the ground.

“Now!”

Tidux hugged Ges tightly, pressing her to his chest as a shockwave erupted from his body, blasting the attackers backward and leaving them dazed on the floor.

“To the vehicle!” Vhan shouted, getting up again and firing at one of the androids who had been loading his parts into the transport. It had been farther from the blast and remained operational.

The plasma projectile tore through the robot’s chest with a sharp crack, exposing circuits that sputtered and sparked as it collapsed to the floor. The other robot charged at Tidux, who was carrying Ges toward the transport. It swung a metal fist at him, but he dodged effortlessly as he set the young woman down.

“Run, get in the transport, I’ll take care of this one,” he announced as the woman hurried toward the vehicle, casting a quick glance toward the two metallic combatants.

When the android lunged again, Tidux quickly raised his right arm and deflected the blow with a thunderous clang that echoed through the workshop.

Before his attacker could recover, he drove his hand beneath the chestplate, piercing the weakest part of the armor and reaching the power core buried in the ribcage. He pulled hard, ripping it free as dozens of sparks flew from the machine. He looked at it for a second as the robot fell to the ground, deactivated.

“Stop wasting time and turn the damn ship on!” ordered Vhan, taking cover behind some containers. Several projectiles flew over his head, striking one of the columns that supported the workshop’s ceiling.

Tidux, who was staring intently at the metal heart, slowly raised his head to look at the mercenary, who was firing at one of Heilen’s henchmen, who had already recovered from the shockwave. Then the robot turned toward the transport and confirmed that Ges had already reached it and slipped inside. At that moment, a projectile flew past his head, awakening him from that strange reverie.

“Run, I’ll cover you!” the man shouted, ducking behind cover again. He saw the carnak and the workers recovering—preparing to counterattack.

“Get them!” Heilen shouted furiously, grabbing the pistol held out by one of his own and firing rapidly at Tidux as he headed toward the transport, but every shot missed.

Within minutes, the entire workshop echoed with screams and the fire of plasma pistols and rifles. The element of surprise from the blast was gone, and the workers were pressing Vhan hard while he tried, with little success, to keep them pinned down.

The mercenary opened fire on a cluster of drums two of his attackers were using as cover. The first shot punched through the material. The second ignited the liquid inside, creating a huge fireball that engulfed the two beings behind them amid screams.

That provoked a moment of confusion, giving him a chance to use his wrist communicator.

“How are you doing, Tidux?”

“Five minutes,” the robot announced as he ripped a plate off the control panel, exposing hundreds of intermingled wires. “They didn’t leave the keys in, and the transport

uses an employee identification system. I have to bypass it before I can start it."

"You don't have that much time!" Vhan shouted before another projectile streaked overhead and slammed into the transport, leaving a soot mark on the metal.

"Patience is a virtue…"

"If we get out of this, I swear I'll take you apart piece by piece and sell you for scrap," the mercenary growled through clenched teeth, rising again and firing at one of his enemies. The projectile hit the left shoulder of that being, severing his entire arm.

At that instant, a voice rose above the rest of the sounds.

"Cease fire!" Heilen ordered, stepping out from cover where everyone could see him.

The shooting stopped at once, and a strained silence settled over the workshop.

"Vhan, my friend, you know this can't end well for you. You've pissed off some important people, there's no doubt about that. But if you hand the woman over to me now, I'll let you and your robot go. You can even take the parts for the ship. I don't care. I'll tell them you died and we couldn't salvage anything from the wreckage. You'll just have to disappear for a while. What do you say?"

"He wouldn't do that, would he?" Ges asked. She had heard the conversation through the transport's open hatch.

Tidux looked at her for a moment and attempted a shrug, without quite achieving the effect he wanted.

"No, Vhan wouldn't do that," he replied before turning back to the circuits.

"And we'd be free to go?" the mercenary inquired, still shielded behind cover and letting his voice rise to reach his companions.

"Or maybe he would," Tidux said, his eyes fixed on his work. Although he couldn't see her face, he could sense her elevated vital signs and had no doubt her expression held a mixture of emotions he would rather not have to identify.

Ges stormed out of the interior of the transport and, glaring at the mercenary while clenching her fists tightly, shouted at him:

"How dare you? You think I'm just a simple object to trade with?"

"Get down and get back to the ship!" ordered Vhan, swinging his arms quickly.

"Why? So I don't get shot? What does it matter if you're going to sell me for a few parts for your stupid ship?"

"Get inside at once!"

"So, do we have a deal?" Heilen asked slowly, interrupting the conversation between the two humans even though he was enjoying it.

Vhan stepped out from cover and looked at his former companion as the rest of the enemies pointed at him, ready to unload their weapons at him.

"Promise me Tidux and I can get out of here with the parts, load them onto my ship, and leave without you coming after us."

"You piece of…!" shouted Ges, but she fell silent as he turned and looked at her. She could feel a shiver run down her spine as she noticed those eyes on her.

"I promise you. None of my people will lay a hand on you. You will be able to leave the planet without trouble. You just hand the woman over to me and I'll talk to the people behind the bounty. I'll tell them you're dead."

Before he could finish, the transport's engines roared to life, kicking up a huge cloud of dust behind them.

Vhan seized the moment of surprise and ran toward the vehicle. When he reached the hatch, he turned back toward the carnak and raised his pistol again.

“No deal, you lied to me, I can’t trust someone like you anymore.” The mercenary fired his weapon at him.

“Fire!” Heilen ordered as he gritted his teeth and quickly dived for cover to shield himself from the projectile, which passed mere centühns from his head.

The henchmen opened fire on the two humans. Vhan shoved Ges into the vehicle, which was already lifting slowly from the ground, then jumped in after her.

The carnak watched the projectiles strike the metal hull as the hatch closed and the transport sped toward the top of the dome. Although furious that he had failed to capture them, he felt proud of his old companion.

“I expected nothing less from you, old friend.” He looked down at his workers. “Stop shooting and chase them down!”

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“Are you both okay?” Vhan asked, looking at his companions as he tried to catch his breath.

“You lied to me! Was all that about trading me just a trick?” Ges snapped.

“Of course. We needed to buy time. It was obvious.”

“But you…”

“I couldn’t leave you here. It didn’t matter what Heilen said or promised. I couldn’t trust him anymore. He betrayed me,” he replied quickly.

Ges’s face was filled with anger and, at the same time, gratitude. She seemed unsure what to do or how to respond. Finally, she sighed and nodded, an amused smile spreading across her lips as she realized she had been fooled.

“Friends—just so they can betray you later,” Tidux remarked before turning the transport’s controls to the right.

The vehicle lurched sharply, narrowly avoiding another craft moving around them.

“At least we have the parts,” commented the mercenary before turning to look at the three crates at the back of the ship. “Now the most important thing is getting out of the city as soon as possible. We’ll load the spare parts and find a place far from here to repair the ship.”

“So, what do we do about the ones chasing us?” the robot asked, letting a hint of amusement slip into his artificial voice.

“How many?” Vhan inquired as he approached the cockpit to view the radar images.

“Two vehicles, heading toward us at full speed. By my calculations, they’ll catch up in less than three minutes.”

“When we reach the hangar, grab the parts and get them onto the ship. Ges, help him. We need to move fast and get out of here.”

“Understood,” the woman replied immediately.

Then she processed what he had said and realized something was missing.

“But what about you? What will you do?”

“I’ll stall them as long as I can,” he said slowly, eyes fixed on his gun.

“We’re approaching the hangar. Get ready—this’ll be bumpy.”

The transport burst into the hangar at full speed, and the communications system immediately flooded with insults from the hangar staff. Tidux shut them off with a quick wave of his hand as he drove into the area where their battered ship sat, initiating the landing and opening the hatches.

“Hurry! I won’t be able to hold them off for long,” Vhan announced.

He rummaged through the cockpit, searching for anything that might help him deal with their pursuers. He grabbed a few flares from the emergency kit and the fire extinguisher from beside the control panel, then bolted from the vehicle toward a stack of cargo a few ühns away that could provide cover.

Seconds later, the other two transports burst into the hangar at full speed, drawing the attention of the crewmen, merchants and technicians wandering along the hangar. As the transports landed, their hatches opened simultaneously. Ten armed figures poured out and opened fire on the Dark Star and its crew.

Civilians ducked and screamed, bolting for the emergency exits. Vhan returned fire, trying to hold the line and stop their advance. Despite this, he was being overwhelmed and his pursuers were moving quickly to surround them.

The mercenary crouched behind cover, feeling the impacts slam into it. He leaned his head against the metal boxes, which vibrated with each new blow, closed his eyes and drew a deep breath.

After a brief moment, he opened them again and looked to his left, where the tools he had taken from the transport ship rested. He reached out and picked up one of the flares, lifted it, and struck it sharply against the ground to ignite it.

The reddish glow washed over his face as a large cloud of smoke began to rise toward the ceiling. He waited a moment for the enemies to stop firing, stood upright, and threw it forward. He quickly bent down again to pick up another and did the same. Before his pursuers realized what was happening, thick crimson smoke enveloped him, obscuring him from sight. He fired a burst through that artificial fog and backed toward the Dark Star, ducking to dodge the erratic enemy projectiles.

Vhan was about to hide behind a forklift, which its driver had left abandoned with the goods still half-lifted, when he spotted two of his pursuers. They moved through the smoke to the spot he had just left. They looked around, confused—until they spotted the fire extinguisher lying at their feet. The mercenary took quick aim and pulled the trigger.

The explosion threw back the two beings and made the rest stop for a second, trying to understand what had just happened.

“Everything’s loaded! Let’s go!” Tidux’s metallic voice announced through the wrist communicator. The mercenary smiled as he made out a flurry of plasma projectiles flying rapidly at his pursuers. The android was trying to cover his return to the ship.

He ran at full speed toward his companion, perched on the ramp of the cargo hold. Enemy gunfire buzzed around him as he returned fire. But, as he was ascending the slope leading into the interior of the Dark Star, one of the plasma bullets struck his side. A cry of pain tore from his throat as he collapsed into Tidux’s arms. The robot caught him, hauled him inside, and slammed the hatch shut.

“You’ve been hurt!” shouted Ges as she saw that much of his side had been scorched. The clothing was gone and the flesh underneath was giving off small wisps of smoke. Part of the wound had already healed, but blood still trickled out, soaking his clothes as it dripped to the floor.

“Don’t worry, the bullet just grazed me—it’s a simple scratch,” he replied with difficulty as Tidux helped him into the pilot’s seat. “Come on, activate the turrets, we have to shoot back.”

“On it.”

The robot pressed a few buttons and, with a crackle that echoed throughout the ship, the two cannons under the wings activated. One of the monitors lit up, showing the attackers' worried faces as the turrets locked onto them. Vhan pulled the triggers built into the flight controls. Two large plasma projectiles traveled the short distance that separated them from their pursuers and exploded, engulfing them in a great cloud of fire and screams of pain.

"Enjoy the fire, you bastards!" he exclaimed excitedly as he pulled the control stick and caused the ship to rise.

The Dark Star surged away from the gunfire, cutting through the hangar and soaring into the gray sky above the city.

Soon, they reached the edge of the atmosphere. The ship's vibrations ceased as space embraced them in silence and darkness. Suddenly, as he relaxed slightly in his seat after gripping the controls tightly during the ascent, the radar began to beep. Tidux studied the radar, fingers sweeping across the holographic display to identify the threat.

"That's why Heilen said he wouldn't attack us—they were already waiting outside. A blockade of three Trade and Transport Federation cruisers."

"What the hell do these guys want?" the mercenary asked in disgust. By way of reply, a red light flashed on one of the side screens.

"A communication from the capital ship," the robot reported, opening the channel.

"Crew of the fleeing vessel. This is the battlecruiser Khálsnur of the Trade and Transport Federation. Surrender immediately if you do not wish to be destroyed."

The voice was slow and menacing.

"I'm beginning to think today is a bad day," Vhan commented, trying to lessen the tension that was flooding the atmosphere.

"We won't ask again. Surrender now, or we'll open fire."

"One moment, please," the man replied before cutting the channel and turning to the robot. "Do you think we could jump?"

"I doubt the ship can hold out much longer. Besides, where do you intend to go? They'll be on our trail as soon as we do."

"To the Moons, as we said at the beginning," Vhan answered seriously, thinking over every word he spoke. "If we jump directly into one of the stardust clouds, the traces of the jump would be lost in it and they wouldn't be able to locate us. They would know the direction of the jump, but their sensors would fail to distinguish the actual position of the ship. At least long enough to fix the ship and find a new hiding place."

"You know that inside the clouds there's ice and rocks, right? If we miscalculate, even if it's only by a few ühns, we'll end up slamming into something, and that wouldn't be very pretty."

"Can you do it or not?" Vhan asked, watching the screen light up again with a new communication.

"Yes. I have enough stellar data to calculate a safe location—or so I hope. But I need a few minutes to establish safe coordinates… which, frankly, we don't have," Tidux said as the screen flooded with information. "Not to mention that we should get through the blockade before we make the jump. Those cruisers could cause us interference and divert us from our exit point, turning us, almost certainly, into stellar junk."

"Leave that to me," the pilot announced, tapping the command to reestablish communication. "Sorry, Khálsnur. We're having some issues with the controls. We're coming toward you to surrender."

“Negative, shut down the engine immediately. We’ll send a pod to board you.”

“Damn, they’re smart!” the mercenary exclaimed, slamming the throttles forward. The ship roared, pinning all three into their seats.

Before any could say anything, the Federation cruisers began firing at them. Projectiles streaked past them while the radar sounded another warning. Twenty fighters had emerged from the capital ship and were closing on them at full speed.

Despite their speed, their structure was clear—small, single-pilot ships with long wings that glinted in the light of the distant star.

Their shapes were reminiscent of the great seabirds of the Qua sector, moving among the air currents. Each elongated cockpit housed two forward-facing plasma cannons. Beneath the wings, and hidden within the shadows of the ship itself, several missiles pointed menacingly toward the Dark Star, ready to be launched on a simple command. Vhan tightened his grip on the controls—he’d heard enough stories about what those fighters could do.

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Ges gripped the sides of the seat as the Dark Star lurched from side to side, trying to avoid its pursuers, who now crowded the space around them. Tidux sat silent and still, seemingly in a trance. Vhan, meanwhile, gritted his teeth and pushed forward—racing toward the cruisers to get too close for their long-range cannons to be effective.

Suddenly, a loud beeping sound echoed in the cockpit.

“What’s that?” she asked, craning her neck toward the blinking screen.

“They’ve locked on to us and fired two missiles,” the mercenary replied matter-of-factly, making the woman’s heart skip a beat. “But don’t worry—we’ve got countermeasures,” he said, flipping switches to the right of the console.

A strange whoosh came from the rear of the ship as the mercenary moved the control levers. The Dark Star began a series of barrel rolls, pulling away from the decoys it had just released. A few moments later, the beeping ceased, leaving the cockpit in complete silence.

“Coordinates set,” Tidux reported, finally emerging from his trance as he entered the last of the data into the central computer.

“Perfect. Divert all power to the thrusters—we need enough push to break through the blockade.” The robot nodded as he flipped some switches and the lights throughout the ship went out. “Hold on tight, we still have the hardest part left.”

The three crewmen were pinned in their seats by the thrust of the engine. Federation fighters swarmed around them, unleashing fire from every angle. Vhan focused solely on dodging and preventing another missile lock. As they accelerated, the cruiser loomed larger, filling the viewport. The proximity warning blared throughout the ship.

“Change course—we’re going to crash!” Tidux warned as the distance to the cruiser shrank rapidly.

“No, a little more!” the pilot shouted, pushing the engines—which were already at maximum—harder.

“A thousand ühns!”

“Just a little more!”

“Four hundred! Straighten it out or we’ll crash!” He glanced at the screen. “Two hundred, Vhan!”

The mercenary gritted his teeth and pulled hard on the joystick, causing the nose to lift slightly as the ship sped past the enemy hull, less than a score of ühns away. Suddenly, the gray surface of the cruiser disappeared behind them, leaving only space ahead.

"Now, let's jump!" he ordered, adrenaline surging through his body.

"Jumping…" Tidux confirmed, pulling the lever.

A dense purple cloud filled the front viewport as the jump pressure slammed into their bodies. The ship was pulled inward and the stars disappeared from the firmament in an instant, as did the radar signals, leaving them all alone. Vhan sighed in relief, letting go of the controls and dropping back into the seat.

"Flight time: twelve hours. If the ship doesn't blow up first," the android said, breaking the brief silence.

"Let's see if your calculations are correct," said the human, an exhausted smile spreading across his face.

"Relax, I've calculated it a hundred times," Tidux commented proudly.

"I hope so, because, if not, we'll either turn into stellar mush or we'll jump out of the cloud. In which case we'll have to jump again before we're detected. And I don't think the ship can take much more." Vhan turned to Ges, who was still clinging to the seat, terrified at the pilot's maneuvers. "It's time for you to tell us what this is all about. I think you owe us a good explanation…"

He clung to the armrest and shook his head slightly. He was dizzy and his face was pale. His companions looked at him for a moment as they realized something was wrong and noticed that much of his seat was stained red.

In the chaos of the flight, they'd forgotten his wound was still open—bleeding steadily. The mercenary pressed a hand to his side, his palm darkening with blood—then his eyes fluttered shut as he slipped into unconsciousness.

*If you want to find out how Vhan Stalix's story continues and what happens to Ges, the rest of their adventure is just one click away.*

*Click on the image.*

