

HAGGARDSTAR

2

1

Kogo snorted in amusement.

She glanced around her office. HER office. She had been told she would get a proper, permanent living space and office once they had actually landed down on Earth, and that the office here on one of the lunar base was merely temporary, but all the same it was hers and it was impressive.

The floors were covered in a fabric material that was pleasant to the touch and stretched wall to wall. She sat behind a large wooden desk made of some plant from Earth making it feel oddly exotic and had noted when she first sat behind it that it had small patterns carved all along the edges. She wasn't sure if all office desks were like that, or some facet of special treatment. The walls were still clearly utilitarian in construction with metal paneling, but her hosts had still taken the time to hang up various pieces of art.

Renditions of landscapes she could only presume were from their home planet.

A close examination of the paintings after they went up showed a fine texturing of the surface. When Kogo asked why, she was informed that they were quality works that were hand-painted by an artist back on Earth. Art in the coalition wasn't really rare, perse, but it was almost exclusively created digitally. Lour art works created in a physical medium was largely done as part of a cultural event and often too precious to place up on a random diplomat's wall.

Opposing the desk were a few comfortable looking chairs for any official visitors she may get during her stay. On her side, she was seated exceedingly comfortably on a large pad made of some sort of memory material, which made working at her desk easy for prolonged periods of time. Kogo recalled with a pang of embarrassment that her first evening after getting the office she had, in fact, fallen asleep on it because of how comfortable it was. She made an effort to not sit on it for too long of stretches to avoid potentially getting caught like that in the future.

Her terminal on the desk itself was sleek and had a small physical panel with input keys that was provided, but far too small for her to actually utilize with her paws. Fortunately, however she had been provided with a personal digital assistant AI.

"Take a note," Kogo said out loud in Common.

"What's the note?" A digitized voice emitted into her ear in kind.

"Look into human education standards later," she quipped, and her digital assistant confirmed that her note had been saved off.

That was another thing Kogo was getting used to. The Coalition had a litany of technology, much of which was considered cutting edge even by the galaxy's standards, as well as more advanced than humanity's, but one thing humans had seemingly aggressively invested into was things that made their lives easier. Certainly, there were things the Coalition had that were tailored to easing each species' specific needs, limitations and to assist integration into the community, but the Threespus had always been hyper logical. Needs were fulfilled efficiently, but Kogo couldn't say they had focused on small things that streamlined the little day to day activities when marginally slower options were already available.

When she had spoken with Liam and Naomi before settling on becoming an ambassador, Liam insisted that she was given a digital assistant. At the time, Kogo had no notion of what such a thing even was, and they had to explain to her that it was a small, connected device that had a low-tier AI in it and would respond to vocal prompts to assist her with her activities, organization and schedules. It was a personal secretary in a computer, attached to her person. As she was going to be an ambassador, having the help a word away would make it easier for everyone.

They had loaded it up with humanity's up-to-date Common diction rules and she was at first startled by how smooth it was to speak to the alien device attached to one of her ears and hear it reply back. It was surprisingly smart, too, by her reckoning. She had tried to run it through its paces, trick or confuse it to test its boundaries, and while it wasn't perfect, it was surprisingly quick to adapt to lacking or missing commands. Some actions were out of its scope, of course, but anything she thought a secretary may be able to accomplish, her little assistant was able to process lighting

fast. Kogo had also noted it begun to learn and precalculate her daily routine.

She had even used it to compose a letter to send back to her family on the City-Ships and was stunned at how masterfully it handled her more formal intonations. Kogo was also told it could be used to order food, which she would certainly test out once she arrived on Earth.

Still, its usefulness regarding her new job was obviously where it was going to pay out in spades, and she planned to capitalize on it as much and aggressively as possible.

“Thank you,” Kogo said, half out of reflex.

“Any time, Kogo,” the assistant cooed in reply, ending the interaction.

Her mind returned to her mulling over her treatment. Were all of humanity’s ambassadors treated similarly? Or were they giving her special treatment to give a good impression?

It wouldn’t shock her if that were the case, of course. She was the first confirmed representative of the Coalition, after all. And as she understood it, they were humanity’s first encounter with any life outside of their star system. So, going the extra distance to give a good impression, especially so soon after the ceasefire was established simply made sense.

It also drove home how little the Coalition, or at least she personally, knew about humanity. Which is precisely why as soon as they got her office set up, she went to work on research. Unsurprisingly, humanity had a long history, but she was somewhat surprised at just how much was documented. Even accounting for their technology level, which would allow ease of documenting modern events, they had an astonishing amount of history dating back many thousands of years across multiple hundreds of

cultures.

She could dedicate her life entirely to be a historian of human history and never learn it all, and she wagered that was certainly what some humans - and now some of the Coalition - do. Over the past few days, she resigned herself to the top-level research. Major historical events, modern political situation and structure - which surprised her that there were so many completely separate nations, yet all rallied politically so efficiently - as well as how humans' day to day lives were.

Kogo realized that she would have to review later at least the basics of how the human economy worked, though she'd already gleaned that it was currency driven, with the smorgasbord of countries on Earth and their colonies interchanging trade. Education paradigm would be important as well, but the other big one, which cursory glances indicated could again be a life-long career unto itself, was humanity's capability and history of war, but she'd already made a note to herself to review later when she had more time.

"Kogo, your appointment with Doctor Breen is in 30 minutes," her assistant chimed in her ear.

"Ah, thank you," Kogo replied.

Kogo wondered if she could name her assistant. It would be easier to engage it if she could do so by name. She would have to ask the IT people who set it up for her later. She rose, and her terminal automatically locked its display, and she loftily plodded her way out of the room and down the hall in the base's reduced gravity.

"I'm sorry about the inconvenience, ma'am. Slight delay in the fabrication process. We should have it up here for you

in less than an hour.”

Kogo dipped her head in acknowledgment as humans often did to the nurse escorting her before squeezing through the door and taking a seat on the floor of the examination room. Even now, she still found herself dumbstruck regularly by humanity’s medical expertise. The Coalition knew enough about each species within it to deal with disease, weakness, or minor injuries of course. But the humans’ skills were on a whole different level entirely. In her recent research spree, one thing that consistently stuck to her mind was how they dealt with medicine.

Predictably, humanity - much like most species on resource-limited planets - fought for land or resources. But something about the biological structure of humans made them unusually resilient. And due to that resilience, humans were much more prone to injury, rather than death. And if you have an injured person that could be saved rather than a corpse, it logically followed that one would learn how injuries could be fixed.

It all made basic sense to Kogo, one thing logically extrapolated to the next yielding the outcome she and the Coalition saw before them. But to see the grand industry of humanity’s medical expertise in practice, up close, and firsthand, regularly floored her.

The Coalition was no stranger to dealing with disease, for example. Even the Lour, as technologically primitive as it was before being uplifted by the Threespus, turned to rudimentary medicine and herbal treatments to contend with sickness and disease. But humanity had advanced not only to the point of simply preemptively vaccinating against every major known disease as the Coalition did, but also repurposed viruses and bacteria to intentionally infect humans with modified DNA to repair innate damage and

disease to their bodies from their base genetics. It could be just an issue of prioritization, but she hadn't even heard of Coalition scientists attempting similar.

Her most recent example of being utterly baffled at what humans had managed was when a week ago a number of doctors on the lunar base they were on approached her and offered her an opportunity to replace her lost leg. They had gotten permission to access her medical history along with the biological profiling data of other Lour that were killed in the conflict for Pluto and had already put together a general understanding of Lour physiology. And given that Kogo was going to be the first Coalition ambassador, they wanted to give her a replacement limb.

Kogo had no doubts that if there was a desire, the Coalition scientists could design prosthetic limbs for the rare surviving injured soldier. But without any existing means of production, nor study into how one would drive or control it, Kogo guessed it would be a few years at least before she would hear about it. And that was assuming she got preferential treatment for her new job.

But these humans had apparently been working at this on the side of their regular jobs and projects, on a minimal budget, largely out of curiosity if it was possible, and got a working prototype up and running in a week and a half. Without a deep, ingrained cultural comprehension and workforce geared specifically towards medicine, such a turnaround time was impossible.

Her idle thoughts returned to the examination room she found herself in. The room on the base was clearly intended for humans but had just enough space to work with for the Lour's large body. She didn't need a full exam today, of course, they were just testing the fitting of her new prosthetic leg to finalize some adjustments, so they didn't

need much room.

Still, she thought to herself, humanity clearly understood so much about their own bodies and how to fix them. Her eyes drifted lazily over the panels and posters displaying various aspects of human biology. How aware of the intricacies of their bodies were each of them? Was it only the specialists, the doctors, or did they all have similar knowledge, taught in normal education for their children?

Kogo thought back to her education days. She had been born on the Coalition city-ships, but she had experienced the Lour's home planet as part of their culture's coming of age ceremony via holographic immersion, so she could at least say she knew of what her people's lives were like before being uplifted. Her general education covered a broad spectrum of topics, basics of biology, science, math, sociology and more. Eventually she had settled on becoming a warrior.

The Lour had a long history of fighters. Clan wars, land skirmishes and the like. Some of the elders from her clan had been some of those originally uplifted by the Threespus and had been chosen to act as a sort of standing militia as the Coalition had begun to take shape back then. Her parents had served as well, but ultimately interests shifted to other disciplines. For Kogo, doing at least her service to protecting the Coalition had been a logical extrapolation, if only as a holdover until she found something else that more struck her fancy for a career.

And did it ever strike her.

For all her education, her understanding of how huge and dangerous the galaxy could be, and for all her training to serve as a soldier of the Coalition, she - and everyone else in it - were not ready to deal with humans.

Having had months to think through everything that

happened to her specifically, and watch the circumstances with their short conflict with humans, Kogo had time to consider what she knew, what she wanted and what she could do before ultimately settling on acting as an ambassador between the Coalition and humanity. It was what she knew the gods had chosen for her, and in all her time spent with them she could tell they were worth dedicating her life to working with.

Losing one of her legs in the initial conflict felt like a surprisingly small price to pay with that hindsight.

A short while later, the door to the room opened and her physical therapist and some assistants wheeled a cart into the room, bringing her back to the moment. She waited for them to gently settle down between the bouncy strides the moon's low gravity obligated.

"Good afternoon, Kogo, how are we today?" Her therapist, Doctor Laura Breen, asked.

"I am doing well, thank you," Kogo smoothly replied.

Internally, she was proud at how smooth she was getting at this 'small talk'. She also noted that the therapist continued to use 'us' or 'we' even though Kogo was the target of her attention and inquiry. She'd have to ask about that later.

"The engineers were pretty proud of how this one came out, so I think we'll find it should fit perfectly," her therapist announced.

With that, Kogo brought herself off her haunches and stood, though the relatively small size of the room meant she had to keep her head drooped. Thankfully, the assistants worked quickly. The pair grabbed each end of the prosthetic leg and hoisted it off the cart and brought it to her left side. It

was quickly righted and then propped onto the floor.

“Pardon me, miss,” one of the assistants said before he tossed part of the strap harness over her back and then reached under her rib cage to bring it back around to connect.

Kogo managed to not flinch at the awkwardly intimate contact. She’d done it a few times, and she understood it was a necessary action. Plus, the assistants were perfectly professional beyond that.

A moment later, the harness was tightened down, and the prosthetic was comfortably snug against her side. They pressed a button and then closed a small exposed panel.

“Give it a second to boot up here and we should be good to go,” the other assistant said to the room.

The leg did a series of pre-programmed motions, raising up to tuck under her ribs, then fully extending down to the floor with enough force to push Kogo upwards a little. Then a series of small rotations of the limbs before it comfortably settled to perfectly match her mid-right leg.

“Shall we take a walk down the hall to see how it does?” Her therapist asked, holding the door open.

Kogo nodded, and then took a step forward. Unlike the last time, the prosthetic leg had only a quarter-second of a delay before it matched time with her other 5 legs in an easy cadence. She dipped slightly to exit through the door and turned to begin a steady, floaty pace down the hallway, with her therapist walking right next to her keeping an eye on how Kogo was moving.

Kogo could quickly tell this iteration was a winner. It had no problem matching her unusual, low gravity pace, and it was astonishingly close weight-wise to her old flesh and bone limb. After a few moments, the differences began to

fade away and soon she was walking without even having to think about balancing her stride.

"Wow, this feels great!" Kogo said as she reached the end of the hallway.

"Excellent. I'm surprised at how fast you're taking to this. Even with the improved routines, I'd expect a longer acclimatization time than the walk down the hallway," Dr. Breen congratulated.

"Coalition soldiers are all trained in various gravity environments, so I'm fairly used to going moving in low gravity," Kogo explained.

"That'd certainly explain a few things. Still, a low gravity walking pace isn't the only movement you'll be doing, so since it sounds like it's doing its job, how about we give it a bit more of a test?"

"Test?" Kogo asked.

A short stroll down a different hallway, and an even shorter elevator ride brought them to a larger room. It had various pieces of equipment in the middle space and numerous other flat machines that lined the walls.

"The exercise room?" Kogo asked, her eyes scanning the objects. She'd only seen about half of them in use in her time here.

"The gym, yep," the Doctor softly corrected. "We've had you down here pretty regularly for light exercise so your muscles don't atrophy, but I figure we should do something a little more... stress test-y. How fast were you able to run before your injury?"

"It was..." Kogo trailed off as she tried to estimate the unit conversions in her head.

She sat for a moment before snorting in frustration. She

still wasn't quite up to speed with human unit conversions from Coalition Standard Units yet.

"Assistant, convert 50 CTU lengths per second to meters per second" she commanded.

A moment later, her assistant replied, "27 meters per second".

"Apparently about 27 meters per second" Kogo relayed.

Her therapist pulled out a handheld device and punched in the numbers to do another conversion.

"Wow, nearly 100 kilometers an hour?" Dr. Breen said after a moment, staring at the handheld's screen.

"Is that the standard unit for speed?" Kogo asked, vexed she not only couldn't do the conversion in her head yet, but also was using the wrong units from the start. She was determined to have this figured out before she landed on Earth.

"Yeah, that's the most common way. Meters per second is used sometimes for smaller stuff, but when talking about higher speeds, such as people or vehicles, that's the most common way," her therapist confirmed with a nod.

"I see."

"Well, that's definitely too fast for the treadmills, but we should be able to at least get you up to a trot," her therapist announced and began to lead her over to one of the treadmills in question.

"As said, had the maintenance guys do some modifications. As you know running is good for the legs and cardio, which is important in low gravity, but for our purposes today it'll let us stress test that leg a bit more to make sure it can keep up with you when you get planet-side," her therapist smiled.

Kogo took a tentative step up onto the machine. It was

rigged to be a good bit wider and longer than the other ones but sized quite comfortably for her. She'd used it every day for small bursts when she was here, but combined with her remuneration on her office, she wondered if this was specially made for her as well. She would have to pass along her thanks later. At her therapist's direction, she centered herself on the tread, facing towards the wall.

"We'll start slowly, so you can get used to it, then we'll bring it up to more of a jog."

Kogo nodded, and one of the assistants looped the harness around her torso. The elastic belts on it pulled her body back down to the treadmill to simulate a stronger gravity condition, which allowed the machine to serve its job properly. After the harness was secured, he prodded a panel on the arm at the front of the machine with a display. The tread beneath her paws began to shift backwards and Kogo began to walk. She understood the harness pulled her down at a simulated gravity a bit under what their home world had naturally. Without artificial gravity, they'd found a way to simulate it even here. Clever humans.

When her therapist said they would start easy, though, she wasn't kidding. This was actually slower than their stroll down the hallway. So slow, in fact, that it was a little awkward for Kogo to not go too fast.

"Hm, a little too slow?"

"Yes," Kogo agreed.

"Alright then, lets bring it up some more," her therapist directed to the assistant.

This speed was much better, Kogo found. It was at least twice as fast as their hallway stroll, and pleasantly she found no issues with the prosthetic so far. It had perfectly melded to her pace with no perceptible delay by this point. It

really was like she had her leg back.

After a few more iterations of bringing the speed up, they finally ended the test when Kogo managed to max out the speed of the treadmill. After some diagnostics by the assistants and final talking with her therapist about the results, everyone seemed confident her leg would work perfectly well for her trip to Earth.

“Did you want it colored?” One of the assistants asked.

“Colored?”

“Sure, we could paint it to have a similar color tone to your fur if you want. Or any other color you like.”

“Is that normal?”

“Yep, people with prosthetics get them stylized to their liking all the time. I knew a guy that lost his arm in an accident and got the thing in hot rod red,” the other assistant chimed in.

Kogo thought on it for a while, before ultimately declining.

“I think I want everyone to see what happened to me, and what humanity has done to try and help me afterwards. If it was too similar, its impact - meaning - could be reduced,” Kogo said.

“Yeah, I get that,” the assistant said.

Dr. Breen walked Kogo back up to the clinic lobby before turning to her.

“Always good to see you Kogo, I’m glad I’ve been able to help. Your digital assistant should have my number, so if that thing gives you any trouble, or you find yourself having any discomfort once you get on the ground, give me a ring and I’ll be on the first flight down to you,” she said with a warm smile.

Kogo brought her mouth back into a smile to match. It

felt so strange to expose her teeth, even slightly, as a form of happiness, but it was how humans did it and she was certain she'd get used to it soon enough.

"Thank you, Laura, you've been an incredible help," Kogo replied.

Laura stepped forward and brought her head forward, tipping it downward slightly, and Kogo's heart swelled before she gingerly brought her own head down to press their foreheads together in the traditional Lour greeting.

"I'll be sure to let you know how it goes," Kogo said, pulling away.

And with that, Kogo left the clinic to head back to her office to prepare for her trip.

2

General Misha Orlov entered his office and tossed his military dress coat onto the back of his chair before collapsing into it. He reclined and stared at the ceiling for a moment before letting out a long, slow sigh and let himself begin to unwind.

A long day of reports, logistics, followed by a nice little ceremony officially relinquishing his title of Field Commander, bringing him back down to a regular general. It wasn't a problem, really, and now that the active hostilities against the Coalition had ceased with the treaty, there was no need for him to hold a wartime position like that, but all the same it still felt a little sad to effectively be demoted. He'd have to call his sister later and arrange a visit to celebrate.

He rubbed his eyes and smirked to himself. Realistically, he had done astonishingly well for himself. He was historically the youngest decorated top general at only his late forties, and had managed to get selected to be the

supreme commander of the ground forces initiative during the short but tense conflict with the Coalition. He even did some extra-departmental shenanigans with the extra leverage allowed to him, and stopped at least one hamfisted near-sabotage of peaceable relations with the first aliens humanity had ever contacted.

“Not bad at all,” he whispered to himself.

He'd have to write a book sometime about it. Some historian somewhere in the future would no doubt enjoy the perspective of the events. Misha let his mind drift and thought of how fast everything progressed. Everything went far smoother than anyone expected. Part of it no doubt was due to a multitude of vested interests. The military industry itching to get their hands on alien technology, historians, sociologists and more wanting to learn about the various Coalition species, and politicians no doubt already forming plans to curry favor for gain. But even accounting for that, and the wanderlust of encountering alien life for the first time, their drama had been short-lived, and surprisingly subdued compared to many tumultuous events in humanity's history.

Even on the Coalition's side, one would have expected some resistance politically. Even if it was a terrible accident that started it, it led into a skirmish that killed thousands of their own. That Manus and the rest of the Threespus apparently faced so little a challenge at home to get such a speedy turnaround implied a great interest in establishing peace.

But pondering on what could have been was less productive than pondering on what will be, he reoriented himself. Fact was, going forward, they would need to begin a no doubt delicate process of integrating their societies, economies and technological bases. Cooperation between

military forces would also be an obligation.

Misha paused, staring at the ceiling for a moment.

“Cooperation, hm?” he mumbled to himself.

The thought bothered him. Not because he didn’t want to cooperate with the Coalition, but an itching in the back of his head that there was a greater undertone of something in play.

He couldn’t remember or pin down anything specific, but he did remember thinking on a few occasions that Manus had phrased things pertaining to their peoples cooperating in a way that intoned... something.

“Whatever hardships may come,” he repeated back words Manus had said at the signing of the ceasefire.

Was that just a cynical expectation of future problems? Or was there something else out there? He’d ask Manus about it at a later time and made a mental note to establish some sort of line of communication. No doubt that was already underway, but Misha felt like he needed in on it sooner rather than later.

While all this officially signaled they were no longer at war, and he was going to get back to ‘business as usual’, the obvious reality was that ‘business as usual’ was going to be very different from now on. He had a lot of work to do, and couldn’t help but feel he didn’t have nearly enough time to get it all done.

Misha sat up in his chair and his workstation blinked to life, immediately recognizing him and logging him back in. He took a few minutes to skip over the absurd litany of messages he’d gotten in the last day alone before resolving to ignore them for now. After all, he had a few things that were burning in his head that he needed to act on while he could get out ahead of things.

“Nina, open a new document,” Misha said out loud.

“Of course, sir. Opening a new document,” his computer responded.

“Also, open the combat potential reports submitted by SIGINT relating to the Coalition.”

“Of course, sir,” his assistant AI replied.

A folder of multiple dozen documents opened on his workstation’s desktop, helpfully collated by his assistant AI.

Misha skimmed through a number of documents for about an hour, putting together a mental image of how much fight the Coalition had in it. They had been hit hard in their brief skirmish on Pluto, but there was no way that it had tapped them out. So, Misha wanted to get an estimation of what combat strength they had, what their weapons potential was, how capable their ground forces were, and hopefully start to learn what secrets they had squirreled away.

While Misha didn’t realistically expect another armed conflict with the Coalition any time soon, there was a bugbear he couldn’t shake off that there were threats beyond them. Aliens were real, obviously. They had advanced technology that let them traverse the stars. And that technology led them to the Solar system.

This particular fight was sparked due to an accident and was resolved relatively quickly, but what about the next random visitors? Or, worse - what if the next aliens weren’t visitors at all.

Now that things had wound down some with the Coalition, he was going to start digging into it. Whether the Coalition had specific enemies, or were hinting at the possibility that the galaxy is a more dangerous place than humanity expected, Misha wanted to start preparing.

And as Misha read, he began to get a better idea of how the Coalition was structured, militarily. He'd seen many of these reports before, but combined with even more reports, documentation and analysis, the broader picture began to take shape.

There was little doubt that humanity would want to see how their city-ships operated, which would yield information on their defenses, weapon systems and general combat capability. He suspected that they were closer to a sort of colony ship rather than a capital-class battleship or carrier, but their massive size would undoubtedly be an asset to it's combat potential. Still, reports would no doubt flow in over the coming months, so he set that aside for now.

Their general naval potential was a void. They smartly shifted to hit and run tactics as soon as humanity was pushed out of Pluto's orbit, utilizing small skiffs and undersized frigates outfitted for stealth. They had fighters, which were utilized in the fight as well, but no one had seen any good info on larger ships. He wasn't sure they had any direct analogue at all to humanity's capital ships, and that may well explain why they never tried to push past the Neptune orbital boundary.

Soldier equipment was good principle, but underwhelming in practice. Their laser weapons were a horror show of burns, charred flesh and damaged equipment, but their lethality was remarkably low compared to what humanity had dished out. Misha always figured aliens would be able to zap a tank and cause it to explode like always happened in the movies, but it was appreciably less impressive than he'd thought.

He couldn't rule out that the Coalition tried to keep casualties to a minimum - maybe they used some sort of lower-energy mode or something - but he had a suspicion,

given the aliens' frailty, that those weapons are effective on each other, but pretty lousy against humans.

Compounding that, the Coalition had what he considered the bare minimum for combat field equipment. They had hard vacuum-capable suits, life support systems, and field supplies, but the suits themselves were species-tailored, and often provided little-to-no trauma protection. Granted, the security forces the Coalition clashed with weren't equipped for front-line combat either, but they were effectively military police holding down the fort, not an invading army.

They also didn't field much in the way of ground vehicles. Transportation was largely handled via VTOL carriers, and any close fire support were handled by fighters, but there had been no reports of armored ground carriers or main battle tanks.

All together, it bothered him how uninspiring their combined arms capability was. In their battle on Pluto, reports indicated they had numbers, and an impressive manufacturing potential, but their tactics were colonial-era at best. Rigid formations, indirect support was minimal and apparently easily breakable communication lines. He'd heard reports of special operations-esque strike teams, but they were relatively few and far between.

It was baffling how they managed to have such a poorly structured army that was so large. Their technology was incredible, but their military felt... slapdash. Thrown together. Closer to an oversized militia than a properly maintained standing army. Maybe aliens didn't usually have standing armies? And if there indeed are other threats out there, then Misha sure as hell wasn't going to stand for such a poor display from their new allies going forward.

He made specific notes about joint operation exercises,

and fired off a message to one of his buddies back home. If they can organize training operations, then Misha could learn more about what they're capable of, and start beating into them how they could act like a proper military.

For whatever hardships may come.

3

Senior engineer Valerie Hammon sighed and rubbed her eyes.

The full root cause analysis had finally finished and the list of damages were localized, but naturally they had to impact some of the most critical core components of the body. Especially the spine. Why did they have to destroy the spine, she moaned internally.

“It’d have been easier to fix if they shot him in the head,” she groaned out loud.

“Not with the myomer facial structure it wouldn’t. We can fabricate those in long runs, but it still requires dozens of hours of work to rebuild those into an actual face that’d pass spec,” her coworker, Nick Alders, said without looking up from his screen.

“At this point we may as well scrap the entire unit and refab it anyways. The spinal column is completely shorn in half, which on its own is enough to consider the chassis a

write-off, to say nothing of what the fragmentation did, chewing up other parts in the chest. It's a small miracle the power cells were operating at all with that much damage," Valerie rattled off as she skimmed through the diagnostics results.

"With how much these things cost and how long it takes to certify them, I'd hope so," Nick remarked.

"How long until the AI finishes the fitness routines?"

"About 8 more hours."

"Alright then, go ahead and submit these parts for refabbing and we can start rebuilding the body in the morning," Valerie said as she tapped a number of parts from the catalogue on her screen.

"Sounds like a plan," Nick answered, beginning to fill out the forms to submit the request.

It ended up taking 9 and a half hours for all the components to finish being milled, printed or extruded, Valerie noted. She shook her head and slid into her chair. Nick wasn't in yet, but he also had a habit of coming in late and then working through lunch, so she had the main office to herself for now.

She read through the logs of the fabricators and noted that everything had, thankfully, been created perfectly. Parts milled down to the micrometer, or printed so perfectly you'd need a microscope to notice the seams. It wasn't the fastest fab factory on Earth, but man if it wasn't the most precise, she thought with a smirk and no small amount of pride.

She tapped her keyboard to sign off on the fabrication task and have the parts sent up to the workshop. If they were building a chassis from scratch, it can generally be left to the

regular assembly machines, but as this was an expedited, custom-order repair job, it'd require more hands-on work to fix in place.

It'd take at least a few days to run the replacement parts through the gamut of certification tests after the repair work, on top of the time for the repair job itself and she was honestly still perplexed they were going through this much effort to repair a robot. Yes, it was the top of the line infiltrator class, but between parts, labor, pushing back standing contacts, fitness routines on the AI to make sure it was stable and up to date and everything else, it was beginning to approach the cost of a main battle tank.

Clearly it had endeared itself to someone high up in the military and ended up as a pet or toy some general liked to play with.

She sighed again - she was doing it a lot lately, she noted - and issued a number of queries to the AI core which was currently rigged up to their training mainframe. Each AI class had hundreds of terabytes, some even well into the petabytes, of data that was processed through the carefully designed and curated machine learning algorithms. Whenever they needed to create a new AI, or bring an existing one up to date with the latest routines, it was retrained using the 'home base' data center.

This, being an infiltrator AI, had petabytes of data pertaining to human mannerisms, speech, facial and gesture behaviors as well as military data such as tactical assessment, and even the ability to fight and run saboteur operations behind enemy lines.

This one - 'Alan' - it had cheerfully informed them when it was rolled into the shop literally in a wheelchair, had apparently been running some rather hush-hush operations in the past several months.

Per the company's contract with the military, most of the data inside its storage was off-limits without top tier clearances, so she couldn't legally - or procedurally - tell it to do a data dump. Given that they weren't told to do a full reset, whatever data it had needed to be retained as-is, so they were only running the updates on it in the meantime.

Her facility rolled out dozens of these things over the last year at an incredible cost, so clearly something was happening with those aliens humanity was supposedly at peace with now. And per human history, they were extending one hand in friendship while the other was armed.

"Well, whatever," Valerie muttered as she stood, "Time to check on the parts."

She logged out of her workstation and proceeded towards the workshop.

Valerie arrived at the workshop, and per standard procedures, it was locked down and rigged up in clean room mode. She donned a clean room suit and swiped her ID card at the door before passing through the small air lock into the workshop itself.

The space was kept at a positive pressure and the air was ruthlessly scrubbed for any particles. The high precision many of their robots' parts work at required that when they were being assembled or repaired they don't get dust or other accumulation inside anything that could cause problems while they were operating.

Several repair specialists were already beginning to get to work, an array of tools nearby and the robot's chassis laid out on a table. The lead technician was looking at his tablet, eyes skimming over the diagnostics report, before

taking note of Valerie and turning his attention to her.

“You know, I don’t think we’ve ever actually repaired one of these things. If they get this messed up, usually they get scrubbed,” he said, placing the tablet aside.

“That’s what I thought. Still someone is paying out the ass for the express repair job of it, so I’d imagine corporate couldn’t care less. The core should be fully up to date, so you guys just need to get the chassis fixed up and we ship it back,” Valerie said moving up near the table to observe the work.

The lead tech grunted in reply before moving to the table.

“Alright guys, lets get getting”

Valerie watched in fascination as the techs cut away the synthetic flesh - the fake blood having been drained ahead of time - and prying open the chest cavity. Even if they hadn’t ever actually done a repair on this model before, their collective decades of experience let their hands smoothly glide through the steps required.

Adhesive was dissolved, screws and bolts pulled and the litany of wires and connectors disconnected and then all placed onto a nearby table with each part marked for review and refurbishing later.

The power cells were pried out and placed on a separate table. Their R&D department had requested getting hands on them first to study the damage they’d taken to learn how to make improvements in future versions, and then they could be safely decommissioned. As they were pulled, Valerie moved nearby and got a look at them herself. They were normally placed where human lungs are in the chest cavity, and while the power cells were robust, they definitely weren’t designed to take several high velocity

rounds, to say nothing of the fragmentation of the bullets and the robot's spinal column further shredding the bottom section of the cells. As she looked, she mentally lined up the damage she saw with the root cause reports and nodded. She still was impressed that these things were still running at all when the robot arrived. The guys down in R&D really knew their stuff.

The techs then rolled the frame over and proceeded to cut out the entire length of the spine. This easily took the longest out of all the components so far, with many incredibly delicate connections hooking into it at many points, not unlike an abridged form of an actual human's nervous system. Still, they made relatively short work of it and it, too, was placed on the broken parts table.

All told, the disassembly work took nearly 4 hours. The chief technician leaned back and stretched before taking a step back from the table.

"Alright, lets get some food and we can start on putting in the new parts."

"That fast?" Valerie asked.

"Definitely faster than we'd expected, but disassembly is always the easier part of any repair job anyways. Figure we can gas up first before getting into the real pain in the ass part," he said, hand gesturing to the door as the other technicians followed.

After the group returned, suited back up in cleanroom kit and entered the workspace, it was time for the new parts to be placed in, wired up and locked in.

Unfortunately, Valerie observed, it was apparent that things would be slower, exactly as the chief said. She

watched as they painstakingly assembled the spinal column raw print parts. Runs of myomer fibers to act as the connective material and give the spine extra mobility were run through connective anchors and individually screwed into place. Then the dozens of feet of wire and sub-processors per ceramic vertebrae were diligently run, packed and plugged.

Valerie watched, riveted as one of the techs used remote control arms and a magnified view to attach the miniscule cable connections to their ports.

Hours later, the spine was finally assembled.

“God, I wish we could just have the assembly line put that together for us,” the tech groaned.

“Something to recommend for the future. As-is, they build the spine in place while the rest of the body is being assembled around it. There isn’t one part to just pop out into a discrete tool for us to use,” Valerie helpfully chimed in.

“I mean, I get that, but I’m still gunna complain,” the tech laughed.

Thankfully, Valerie observed, everything went swimmingly after that. Her, performing final spot-validation on the parts before they went in, and the techs looking like doctors performing a long surgery procedure. It was an extended shift as she oversaw them put everything back together, but they had finished the core component replacement work.

Next the sections of the fake flesh were cut and were replaced with all new patches before being permanently attached and integrated. The fake blood was then pumped into the capillaries in the skin and almost all at once it began

to look much more lifelike.

The chief tech finally parted a section of hair near the base of the skull and plugged in several cables to begin charging the brand new power cells, a little before midnight.

“Alright, unless something goes wrong, it should be up and running in the morning. Then you can run the fitness tests and make sure it still passes spec and then we can turn the AI back on.”

“That was cool to watch,” Valerie said, getting a laugh out of the technicians.

4

Kogo wheezed as the flight attendant pulled on her straps, securing her incredibly tightly to the floor.

"I'm sorry Miss Ambassador, but the harness must be tight during re-entry," the attendant apologized.

"It's fine. I've been told that re-entry into Earth's atmosphere can be quite violent," Kogo replied.

"Well, I wouldn't say violent, exactly, but it can be quite turbulent, yes. And because the company hasn't yet certified seating for a... Lour, I believe it was?"

"Yes, a Lour", Kogo confirmed, turning her head to watch the attendant do the final double-checks on the safety harness that now secured her to a padded section of floor.

"Right. We have a lot of safety and security regulations for to and from orbit flight accommodations, and the company that built this ship hasn't yet finalized any approved designs, so this was the safest way to do it.

Hopefully on your next trip it will be much more comfortable," the attendant continued, before pushing away and drifting down the empty cabin of the ship.

"If you require anything - anything at all - don't hesitate to call for me. If everything goes smoothly we'll be on the ground in 30 minutes," the attendant finished as she caught herself on the far wall of the cabin, before slipping through the door into the cockpit.

Kogo looked around the cabin of the ship. She was laid down onto a comfortable seating pad, not unlike the one in her office on the lunar station, only this time she was wearing a harness that wrapped snugly around her rib cage, and now belted her to the floor at certain anchor points.

Looking at the gaps in the flooring and small recesses that looked like latch points, she guessed this class of ship likely supported rows of seats for humans under normal circumstances, but they had been removed to give her ample room.

Kogo wished she had something to read, but she had been informed on the lunar base before leaving for her trip that the "augmented reality glasses" that many humans wore were not designed or certified yet for Lour. Kogo had a feeling that there was going to be a lot down on earth 'not certified'.

The Coalition had validations, securities, checks and regulations as well, but she had become so used to the Threespus ensuring that their needs were catered to she was somewhat taken aback at how limiting certain activities were when something wasn't 'certified' for her biology compared to a humans.

She had asked one of the technicians about why she couldn't utilize the same augmented reality glasses humans

did, as she had been informed that in conjunction with her personal assistant AI it was possible to do an incredible number of activities and work while sitting or walking around. The technician informed her that the glasses work via a tiny projector display that reflected light off of the lenses in a precise way into the user's eye. Given that Lours' eyes were different, it may not only not work right, but could damage her eyes. So until it was certified, she was out of luck.

In the back of her mind, she knew that there were certainly a lot of things likely being fast tracked because of her new position. She very much doubted humans had a Lour-friendly safety harness just lying around, after all. But all the same, not getting to try all these new alien technologies and experiences herself was grating.

Still, she wasn't completely out of luck, and wanted to try out a feature she'd been told about from one of the techs before she left.

"Reen, please play some music," Kogo commanded to her personal AI.

"What type of music would you like to listen to?" It inquired back.

Kogo sat, staring at the wall in thought for a moment, as she hadn't any recordings of Coalition music, and she was unfamiliar with human music.

"Whatever is popular?" She finally answered, hoping the AI would pick something for her.

"Understood. Playing recent popular music," her AI cooed.

After a small pause, music began to play in her ear. She recognized the thudding of drums, and then digital rhythmic beats and tones accompanied. Kogo closed her eyes and relaxed, listening to the music, when a female human began

to sing.

Lour were musically inclined individuals themselves. Their histories for a very long time were passed along via song and story. They had only taken to drafting down their histories on more permanent physical medium for a short time before the Threespus discovered their planet and uplifted them. Even after that, the habits and traditions of folktales and songs remained.

Given their limited ability to manipulate tools, the Lour didn't have much in the way of instruments, only finding out about more advanced tools of music making after their uplift. Her people naturally took to expanding their musical traditions, and updating the classic folk songs.

The other species in the Coalition weren't as musically inclined, however. The Zus had some talent for it, and certain individuals were extraordinarily skilled, but as a cultural paradigm, it wasn't nearly as common as it was for the Lour. The Hanuu had their own folk songs, but were all intoned via their deep, rumbling voices, designed to communicate from afar. Listening to a Hanuu's song at close range was liable to cause hearing damage.

The Threespus had music, but she had never heard any of them sing. She wasn't sure if they were even capable of it, with how their voices were digitized.

So as Kogo sat, enthralled in the music and listened as some female human she didn't know began to sing a gorgeous ballad to the beats and tones of the song, Kogo was utterly moved.

She enjoyed listening to humans talk, and had gotten quite used to it and all the complex sounds they made when speaking their languages, and how different they could sound individual to individual. But she hadn't encountered a

human singing before and immediately felt a renewed connection to the creatures. If they saw song as ingrained in their culture as to be able to perform like this, then she felt that could be an incredible point of connection between humans and the Lour.

“Reen, how many songs have humans produced?” Kogo asked, after the song finished.

“I’m sorry, that is difficult to answer. Humans have been producing music as a means of storytelling and entertainment for thousands of years. The number of individual songs produced is nearly impossible to calculate.”

Kogo squealed quietly to herself.

“Play another one!”

When Kogo had been told re-entry was violent, she had figured nearly being thrown around the cabin of the ship they were on. Fortunately, that was inaccurate. Unfortunately, it was still a much rougher process than she was used to. Even in her training where they would do fast reentries in dropships, the Coalition ships had technology that helped stabilize the internal cabins to jostling and inertial shifts, with the reasoning being that a disoriented or motion sick soldier wasn’t very useful on the ground.

Humanity’s re-entry technology was clearly lacking.

Their ship had touched down 5 minutes ago, and she was only now feeling her stomach settle.

“Miss? Do you need a few more minutes? We are ready to disembark if you are prepared. I know re-entry can be rather intense for your first time,”

Kogo opened her eyes to see the flight attendant crouched down next to her head.

"I'm feeling better now, yes," Kogo replied after a moment.

She heard the attendant unlock the harness anchors, and the tightness around her chest relieved. Kogo went to lift her head and found it a rather difficult activity to do.

"I'm unsure of what gravity you are used to, but remember, Earth has a gravity of 9.8 meters per second. Compared to the gravity on the lunar base, it's multiple times as strong. I believe your entourage has a rather light itinerary for you today as it will take some time to acclimatize," the attendant said.

Kogo could hear the understanding in her voice.

With a more concerted effort, Kogo slowly, and steadily pushed herself up off the floor of the ship. The attendant held her hand on Kogo's shoulder, ready to help her. After a few seconds, Kogo reached her nearly-full height, limited only by the size of the ship's cabin.

After a breath, she took a step forward, and was pleased to see her new prosthetic leg adapted to the new conditions immediately. It took her longer than she wanted to admit, but eventually Kogo plodded her way awkwardly over to the main cabin door, which now connected to a docking arm at the airport.

The door hissed as the cabin pressure difference stabilized to the local atmosphere, and the door gently pulled open.

A surprisingly large human male, with another nearby dressed in nearly entirely black attire greeted her.

"Good day to you, Miss Ambassador. I am Specialist Kristiansen, and this is Specialist Hill. We are your personal bodyguards and assistants during your stay here on Earth. If you have any questions, need anything, or even feel

uncomfortable, let us know immediately,” the man said.

He was tall enough he was able to look Kogo directly in the eye, and he had a very large, broad build. He was easily the most massive human Kogo had ever seen. His partner was slightly shorter, and smaller in build, but she could tell he was also in excellent physical shape. Their physique reminded her of the soldiers and guards on the Neptune forward station, and she guessed they were likely militarily trained as well.

She'd been informed that she would be given bodyguards in addition to a number of assistants for her stay. She was glad they seemed pleasant.

“Given that this is your first time on Earth, ma'am, let's take it slow and just walk down the ramp here,” Hills spoke and gestured down the docking ramp.

Kogo nodded and slowly and awkwardly plodded down the ramp. The surface was carpeted, so she didn't have any traction issues, but her time in reduced gravity on the forward stations and lunar base had obviously taken their toll. Even with the daily exercises, she had weakened some. She desperately hoped that in the future, humanity would adopt the Coalition's anti-gravity technology.

After a few laps, however, Kogo was already feeling more steady. Her having 6 legs no doubt helped, but even then, Kristiansen lauded how quickly she adapted to the much stronger gravity.

“I was born on a colony, and the first time I came to Earth was brutal. It took me all week to not get winded walking down the hallway,” the flight attendant quipped.

“Alright ma'am. There's nothing on your schedule today, so we're just going to get you to your hotel so you can relax. It's currently 7pm, so we'll get you dinner and you can sleep

to get your schedule adjusted.”

“Ok. I’m ready.”

Her bodyguards nodded, and pressed open the heavy door that blocked the docking ramp, and began to travel across the empty building.

Quickly, she noted a symphony of smells. The air didn’t have that staleness that the recycled air on the stations had. Everything felt crisp and full. Alive. She noted the same sharp scent of cleaners that was used on everything, but also other scents she didn’t recognize. So many different things in the place were yielding smells to create a nearly incomprehensible miasma of smells. She’d get used to it soon enough, she was sure, but for the moment it was almost overpowering.

To make it worse, she was detecting the faint aromas of cooked meats, which she had been going without since her early taste back on Neptune station. She was dying to eat something like that again and hoped the opportunity would arise. Kristiansen had mentioned dinner, and Kogo was looking forward to human cuisine. She had been told that the food they had on the stations and lunar base were nothing compared to the ‘real deal’ back on Earth.

“It’s rather empty,” Kogo commented after a pause.

“That’s the plan,” Specialist Hills replied, and nodded to a nearby armed guard.

“Moving,” Kristiansen spoke into the collar of his jacket, and they began a steady, but casual pace so Kogo wouldn’t get worn out.

The building was massive. She had gotten so used to the forward stations, spaceports and lunar bases that she had forgotten how large a major building construction could be. The floors were stone tiles polished until they shined, and the

various kiosks, stands, stores and seating areas were stuffed with objects they moved past far too quickly for her to properly take in.

Kogo noted to herself that she was going to have to take some time later and do some sightseeing.

"I must admit," Kogo started, "I don't imagine myself to be all that special, but I had expected other humans here that would want to meet me. I'm the first of the Coalition to land on Earth, correct?"

Hills nodded.

"You're correct ma'am. First alien ever to set foot on Earth. And because of that, we're taking your security very seriously."

"You can call me Kogo"

"Noted, ma'am." Hills responded.

It was then Kogo began to pick up on the subtle clues. Both her bodyguards were walking on either side of her. They wore dark lensed glasses, so she couldn't easily see what they were looking at, but their heads were constantly moving and scanning. They had since opened their jackets as well. And while she was no expert on humans yet, she still recognized the charged gait of someone ready for combat.

As she turned her head, she noted that the armed guards that had been regularly staggered around the empty building had been slowly accumulating behind them and keeping a matched walking pace.

The guards ahead of her were looking towards the main lobby of the building.

They reached the end of the landing of the floor and Kogo realized they had actually been on the second floor. An automated staircase led down to the main floor and Kristiansen stepped in front of her and gestured for her to

follow. Hills took a position to her rear.

That was when she finally noticed it. It had been a distant rumbling noise, similar to when a Hanuu spoke from a ways away, and she had been so enthralled with everything that was going on that she hadn't paid attention to it even though her ears had picked up on it as soon as the ramp door had opened. It was only when they finished the ride down the escalator that she put together what it was.

Humans.

A row of guards stood at the ready in front of the massive glass windows that ran the front of the building. Beyond them, was a large cleared area, fenced off and even more guards at the fences in regular intervals. And on the other side of those fences were thousands of humans in a massive crowd.

"Are you ready, ma'am?" Kristiansen asked again.

"No," Kogo squeaked.

"We'll make this quick. You have my word that nothing will happen to you. Just ignore any questions and move straight to the vehicle at the end of the walkway. Alright? There'll be plenty of time for you to talk to people later," he said as he stared right into her eyes.

Kogo swallowed, hard, and then nodded.

With that, Hill pushed open the doors and the armed guard entourage pushed forward, acting as a moving, flowing wall clearing the empty path ahead of her. As soon as Kogo stepped out into the dazzling light of Earth's early evening, the crowd completely and utterly exploded.

Kogo's sensitive ears couldn't process the cacophony of noise and she reflexively scrunched down towards the ground. Various flashing lights from humans holding devices, and other humans holding paper signs she was too

overwhelmed to read. All the humans right at the fencing were waving, yelling and reaching out towards her.

Hills and Kristiansen, however, grabbed her fur around her neck and gently, but forcefully, hoisted her back to her feet and pushed her forward to the waiting large black vehicle. The people inside pushed open the door on the back of the large transport and with help from Hills and Kristiansen, Kogo climbed into the back of the truck before they followed, closing the doors behind. After only a moment, the vehicle quickly took off and slid into a vehicle column heading to their secure hotel.

After a few moments to let her heart slow down and relax, Kogo finally took a full breath.

“What was that?!” She exclaimed in Common.

“Your fans. There are other humans who want to meet you all right, and that was a very small number of them. You are easily the most popular person on the planet right now,” Hills answered.

Kogo took a moment to contemplate that answer.

“Humans are terrifying,” she finally said at length.

Hills, Kristiansen and the others in her vehicle laughed.

5

Ambassador Tabitha Winter fidgeted as she waited in the lobby of the base on Pluto. She had arrived an hour prior and had exhausted smalltalk topics with her escorts while they waited for her Coalition ride to one of their city ships.

The original plan was that she and her companion, Ambassador Killian Newell were to go together, but he had been hit with a seasonal cold and was delayed. Rather than sending no one and potentially looking bad, the United Nations had largely concurred it was better to send someone now, and Killian would follow when he got better.

Especially prudent as to avoid potentially passing along an illness to their new alien companions on their first meeting. She had already been shot up with a number of new, experimental vaccines the medical community had drafted as a rapid response to human-Coalition interactions that were just on the horizon. Potential disease and virus transmission to date had been thankfully avoided - and may

not be a problem at all, given how hugely divergent their biologies were from humans - but the scientific and medical communities were playing it as safe as possible on the rather short timeline involved.

Tabitha rubbed her arm remembering the last round of shots, and had been told there was a high probability she would be quarantined for up to a week or more on arrival so they could monitor both her condition, and the condition of those that came into contact with her to ensure no issues.

She couldn't help but recall back to the reports of the captives the Coalition had kept on one of these bases a few months prior. Did they get a bunch of alien vaccines too? She hoped so. It only seemed fair.

As she sat in the waiting area, her eyes kept scanning the facility. From here, the construction seemed surprisingly mundane. When she had heard aliens were real, in the solar system, and building on Pluto, she - and no doubt most other people - were imagining what alien buildings looked like. Shimmering, futuristic materials? Chitinous walls? Buildings made of living bio-metals, twisting and curving in impossible ways? So many interpretations and hypothesizing in popular culture allowed the imagination to swirl.

When she arrived on Pluto and entered the building, however, she couldn't avoid the feeling of disappointment. Metal paneled walls, largely straight edges and construction practices that looked shockingly similar to any random industrial or commercial building on Earth. There were small things that set it apart, but she guessed that buildings were buildings, regardless of who built them.

She did have one hope, however. When they passed through the airlock, she immediately observed that there was some fashion of artificial gravity in the facility. Pluto's

gravity was so weak as to be nearly non-existent. But the gravity inside the facility was only slightly lower than Earth's. She asked the human guards that were helping hold down things at the base and they had no idea how it worked.

It was the one thing that really felt properly alien in this place, and she hoped that their home base, their city ships would hold similar mysteries. She was going to be one of the first humans to step foot on one of them, and she had a litany of instructions from back home on what to keep an eye out for and what to take notes on to send back.

She'd heard that a few engineers had been permitted to check out some of their ships already, but wasn't sure anyone had actually been on their city ships to date. It was going to be momentous and she was only sad Killian was going to miss it.

She would rub it in his face later for sure.

While lost in that thought, the doors to the lobby hissed open, startling her out of her daydream with a yelp. As Tabitha turned and looked, she saw 3 of the bird aliens - Zus - and 1 of the wolf-like ones - a Lour. She'd heard they were big, but they were definitely much larger in person. She wasn't the tallest at 167cm but she felt downright miniscule compared to the nearly 2 meter tall Zus that were before her.

Tabitha stood and symbolically straightened her skirt before walking forward. She, as many others who would soon be communicating and working with various Coalition groups, had been part of a crash course in learning Coalition-Common, as well as a number of important cultural and professional behaviors so as to better present herself to her new hosts.

She already knew two languages prior, so learning a third didn't feel altogether that unusual, and both she and

her classmates observed how easy Common was to pick up.

She pitied any of the Coalition that had to try and learn something like English, comparatively.

As she finished crossing the room to her new escorts, she stepped one foot behind the other, flared out her arms to her sides, like wings, and bowed deeply at the waist.

“Warmest welcomes. I am Ambassador Tabitha Winter. I look forward to your care,” she said in Common as she finished her bow.

Her Zus hosts, to their credit, were only mildly surprised, and promptly returned the bow.

“Greetings, Ambassador. I admit, I had feared we would need to rely on translators to communicate. To see a human speaking in Common is quite pleasant. I was ready to talk in human-English, but I fear my accent would be horrid,” the frontmost Zus replied, continuing in Common.

Tabitha looked them over more closely as they finished their bows. The Lour to the side hadn’t responded at all, and merely kept it’s eyes locked on her, unblinking. The Zus were wearing ceremonial jewelry, which her classes informed was their equivalent of professional attire. Each Zus’ delicate lattices of gold and other precious metals and gems were unique, and the lustrous ribbons and bolts of cloth draped off of them nearly to the floor. Even their breather masks had detailing along the frame that gave it a designer feel. She wondered if it would be possible to buy anything like that for herself, because it all looked gorgeous.

“Hopefully you can understand me well enough,” she said with a gentle smile.

Their classes had also highlighted that the showing of teeth was culturally unusual to them, and could be off-putting, so she had to mind that as well.

"Your accent is a touch Lour, but I can most certainly understand you," the lead Zus responded, "I am Yiin, this is Korr and Yidi. Our Lour companion here is Arorm. She doesn't talk much, but is an excellent body guard. Your safety is guaranteed with her near."

Tabitha dipped her head slightly in acknowledgement of Arorm, but only got a dismissive snort in return.

"Time is wasting. Much to do," Arorm huffed before turning back towards the airlock they had entered in from.

Well, first impressions were going well, Tabitha thought.

"She is right, however. We should be going. Do you have any supplies with you?" Korr asked.

"For carry-on, just this," Tabitha answered as she grabbed her suitcase, "I was told everything else was being shipped up separately."

"Yes, your quarters and office will be ready for when you arrive," Korr affirmed, "Shall we depart?"

Tabitha nodded, and then turned and waved to the human guards across the room, who returned the gesture.

Alright, Tabitha thought to herself, here we go.

She knew it would be a short trip, what with the city ships being in orbit around Pluto and all, but it was still shockingly quick. The seat they had ready for her in their transport was definitely human-made, but was bolted to the floor of the shuttle. It had several other similar seats in a row, in obvious anticipation of more human travelers in the future. Behind the row of human seats, had been what looked almost like an oversized motorcycle seat that Arorm had rested herself on, and along the walls had been seating for

the Zus. It must be a pain to have to account for so many physiological designs.

It was only a 10 minute jaunt from the surface to dock and the ride was one of the smoothest she'd ever experienced. Even their shuttles had a mild artificial gravity, so she never even felt the disorientation of microgravity during the ride up.

She wished she could've seen the city-ship from the outside, but Coalition transports were apparently much more about function than form as there were no viewports. She was sure it was for practical and safety reasons, but she still wanted to see the thing from the outside. Maybe she could request a special orbit trip around it after she got situated. She had no doubt Killian would want to see it as well.

They provided her a breather mask, as inside the city-ship, some districts were not oxygen-based, which she donned as the airlock hissed to stabilize the pressure, and then opened. Yiin took the lead, with the other two Zus and her Lour bodyguard following up the rear.

"You have a meeting with several of our Sovereigns first, then we can show you to your quarters and office. I don't believe there were any other things scheduled for the next few cycles, and no doubt official obligations will be light until the other Ambassador arrives. I was told it would be a few... 'days'?"

"Correct. I'm not sure how you handle time scales yet, so I couldn't translate the distinction, but it should be a relatively short delay. A 'day' is a single rotation of Earth, by the way," Tabitha answered.

"Ah, I see. We can go over time tracking and scheduling later then. Once he arrives, there will be a meeting with the

full council so you can be introduced to the Coalition leadership,” Yiin explained before stepping through the door, “There have been many on the council that wanted to see a human in person.”

As she stepped into the entrance, following Yiin, Tabitha noted the brightly lit processing room felt about the same style-wise as the base on Pluto. The gravity, however, was actually even stronger. She was pretty sure it was actually slightly stronger than Earth’s.

“Do you have artificial gravity for the entire ship? Isn’t it massive?” she asked Yiin.

“Artificial?” Yiin asked, confused.

Tabitha wondered if she spoke incorrectly.

“Like on Pluto, or the shuttle?”

“Oh. No, you misunderstand, the gravity here isn’t artificial,” Yiin answered.

“Is it via..., uh, hm. I don’t know the word. Spinning force? That’s how human ships do it,” Tabitha wondered out loud.

“I don’t know what you mean by that, but no. All the city ships have natural gravity towards their center,” Yiin clarified.

“Wait, how does that work?”

“The black hole core,” Yiin offhandedly said as he waived to the guards as they passed through a checkpoint.

“The WHAT?”

6

The chief technician pressed and held the startup button for the required handful of seconds, and watched as the small lights on the power cells flicked on, indicating the chassis was now running. He then slid the protective housing cover in place with a satisfying click.

Finally, he then pulled together the artificial skin back over and pressed it together. After a few seconds, the self-healing material melded and became seamless.

At this point, the AI core had begun to boot. RD-591195's initialization process began to walk through a small ocean of fitness routines and starting procedures. Hardware serial numbers had changed and needed to be registered and interfaced. Safety tests iterated, confirming each part registered and responded within expected ranges. Simulations of movement inputs, as well as sensory information were also run, with satisfying results.

It had only been a few seconds into the several-minute

long boot-up so far, but the AI core was already iterating over gigabytes of pre-installed driver and sub processor routines to make sure the thousands of components that made up its chassis performed to Robodyne's exacting specifications.

Once the fitness routines for the hardware checks all came back green across the board, it was finally time to begin to initialize the AI database and personality routines.

RD-591195, colloquially known as Alan, began to 'wake up'.

Alan opened his eyes, and a second set of tests began, comparing visual and auditory sensory input against the previously simulated unit tests and pleasingly everything matched well within margin of error.

Small impulses initiated throughout the chassis similarly confirming real physical results matched the expected movement behavior tests, again returning green.

After nearly 5 minutes of boot up time, Alan finally sat himself up on the table and looked around the room.

The chief technician stared at him for a moment before finally speaking.

"Report status."

Alan processed the huge logs of data generated during the boot up process in an instant, and consolidated the facts down to an easy to understand form.

"Everything checked out OK. No errors."

"Good, nice to see we managed this on the second try. How about you don't get your ass shot so we never have to do this ever again?" The chief tech snipped as he and his team moved to finish cleanup of the work area.

Alan could see heavy, dark circles under his eyes through his protective glasses, and even though the man

wore a head-to-toe pristine white cleansuit, he could tell from the man's sluggish movements that he was exhausted. He glanced around the room and saw similar behavior from everyone else on the repair team, including Senior Engineer Valerie.

"I certainly have no plans to get shot again," Alan replied, eliciting an eye roll from the tech.

"If I remember right, you were assigned the designation Alan?" Valerie asked, drawing Alan's attention.

"I chose Alan, yes."

"Hm. Alright Alan, well we need to get out of these guys' way so they can get home and enjoy what's left of their weekend," she commented before gesturing to the exit of the clean room.

Alan checked his clock and realized it was the early AM of Sunday. He had been completely powered down for 4 days now.

"I had realized the damage was rather extensive, but didn't think that it would take that long to repair my chassis."

"Well, no one's ever done it before. You infiltrator units generally don't take much damage. And the ones that did were - smartly - written off. I dunno who's dick you sucked over there, but they paid bank to make sure you weren't just tossed. On that note, someone from the military is gonna be here to debrief you properly from whatever it was you were up to. Once you get dressed, we'll do the certification trials so you're done and ready by the time they get here," Valerie explained as the airlock processed them out of the clean room.

"Excellent. Clothes are generally a good idea," Alan joked.

Alan quickly got dressed in some casual street wear provided by the company before they left the current building on the Robodyne facilities campus and crossed the small, park-like outdoor area between. It was still dark out, given how early it was, but between the overhead lights and walkway guidelights, the entire campus was quite bright. Shortly, they arrived at the "Field Test Center", which realistically was a warehouse-sized building that had various simulated terrains, environments and buildings, as well as a track that ran the full perimeter of the indoor area. Fully one third of the inner area was a freerunning and parkour area.

When Alan was first built, he had run various tests to pass certification. Given the major rebuild, it made sense that he would have to recertify to ensure everything was working as expected. Infiltrator units such as himself were held to some of the highest standards in any sort of robotic production. Largely due to the fact that any sort of failure, irregularity, or breakdown could blow their cover. And they were nearly impossible to repair.

Valerie led Alan onto the main floor and waved over one of the engineers who was running trials on a quadruped prototype robot.

"Hey, can you re-run this one through the infiltrator certification trials? He-", Valerie's explanation interrupted by an intense, prolonged yawn, "He's gotta be ready to go by 9. Meeting with management and some military types."

"Sure. Jesus you look tired," the engineer - Alan cross-referenced him to find his name was Theodore Garcia - replied, sympathetically, "You really oughta get some sleep."

"That's my plan," Valerie lazily nodded before heading

for the door.

The pair watched her until she exited through the door, before Theodore turned to Alan.

“So, Infiltrator Cert, huh? I’ve never actually seen one of you in person. Sorta freaky how real you look.”

“I’ll take it as a compliment,” Alan said with an easy smile.

“Alright. She said ‘re-run’? Have you gone through it before?”

“Yep, several months ago. Got a pretty hefty rebuild done due to workplace damage, so I need to be recertified.”

“I’d seen the spec sheet on your model and didn’t think repairs were done,” Theodore said as he tapped at his tablet and made the quadruped bot stop and head back towards a makeshift workshop table.

“So I’ve been informed. Apparently I’m being re-tasked, hence why the Chief Engineer needs me prepped for that meeting in the morning.”

“Right, right. OK, lemme go get my supervisor and we can get this rolling,” the young engineer nodded.

He quickly tucked his tablet into his armpit and ran a light jog over to the table, depositing the tablet. With that he then tapped the small device embedded in his ear and called down his supervisor.

It was a short wait before he arrived, and after getting brought up to speed on the situation by Theodore, they got everything set up. The older engineer pushed Alan’s hair at his neck out of the way and clipped in a small drive into the universal port. Theodore rapped at his tablet, and Alan’s processor then recognized - and slaved to - the attached drive. All logging data began to feed to the testing field’s main database for analysis. After confirming the connection

and feed were good, the duo went onto an observation platform that overlooked the field.

“Alright, unit, we’ll get through this quick as we all have better things to be doing this morning,” the supervisor spoke through the intercom.

“Begin mobility trial one.”

Alan walked over to the track that ran the perimeter and stood at the white paint that indicated the starting line. After a heartbeat, there was a shrill beep that blared through the speakers, and Alan took off in a walk. It was a leisurely pace, effectively a calibration pass to ensure the testing and tracking suite of the field’s servers were getting good data.

Alan’s own internal stats indicated that everything from his movement to his power cells were doing great.

After reaching the halfway point, Alan then broke into a moderate jog, continuing the ramp-up of the testing.

“Looks good, next,” came the gruff voice of the supervisor.

Alan then shifted forward and pushed into a full sprint. While not superhuman by any metric, Alan could clock an all-out sprint at nearly 20km/h which made him decidedly faster than average.

A full lap around the track later and an affirmation from the intercom again to proceed to the next step.

Over the next hour, Alan worked his way through a multitude of mobility and stress exercises. Moving obstacles, basic free-running, climbing, jumping, as well as discerning visual and audio markers and cues at random intervals mixed in with all the other tests. It was a complete physical and sensory bombardment, but all the while Alan noted no problems at all.

When they finally called the test, he trotted back over to

meet them.

"It'll take about an hour to process the log data, but it didn't look like any problems. Theodore, you've got it from here. If anything comes up call me again," the supervisor said before he too disappeared through the door.

"Just you and me, once again," Alan smiled.

"Looks like it," came the dismissive reply, "Go ahead and wait by the table over there, I need to finish these trial runs on this before my shift ends."

Alan walked over and leaned against the table and watched the young engineer work on his quadruped project.

Roughly 45 minutes later, the data was processed and exactly as Alan had already internally noted, everything was green across the board. The techs that repaired him clearly went through hell to make it happen, but there'd be no denying that they did an incredible job. He'd talk to Misha later about ensuring they all saw a nice bonus in the very near future. With that signed off and the debrief looming, Alan said his goodbyes to the disinterested engineer and headed his way over to the neighboring building where the meeting was to take place. After getting some instructions from the front desk on which room to head to, Alan worked his way deep into the center of the office building and through several security gates. At the final checkpoint, Alan was briskly escorted to a small office room on the basement subfloor. The guard swiped his ID card to unlock the door, and held the door open for Alan as he entered the room before quietly closing it behind him.

As the door clicked, Alan noted that his network connection instantly went dead. The room was shielded from

any signals. It makes sense, given a lot of sensitive company data was likely discussed in offices like this, and no doubt would be useful for them during a debrief that pertained to what happened with the aliens.

Alan scanned both of the men in the room as soon as they entered his field of vision. One Colonel Malcolm Reeds, and the other, the CEO of Robodyne - Garrett Locks.

"Hopefully I'm not in trouble," Alan joked in an attempt to break the ice.

"Stop with the comedy routine, unit. This is important," Locks commanded, without blinking.

"Understood, Mr. Locks," Alan responded.

The elderly man was the picture-perfect embodiment of all business. His hair shorn close, but his scalp was still covered in a pure white peach fuzz. His wrinkled, furrowed brow showed signs of a long life of hard work and concentration, but his eyes stared straight at Alan with a fierce intensity.

The Colonel, comparatively, was probably 2 decades younger. He barely paid Alan any mind at all when he entered, instead scrolling through a tablet reading documents, trying to get a handle on what to cover for the debrief.

They clearly were not in the mood for anything lighthearted. Purely professional. Alan could do that. He swapped to a different social paradigm structure in his personality set and took a seat at the table with them.

"What do you two wish to discuss?"

"I'm still not fully privy to what you were up to when we handed you off to the military before, but I'm aware it involved infiltrating the Aliens' bases. Due to our contracts with the military, your databases are aggressively encoded

and blackboxed, so nothing was to be, or able to be extracted for review. Part of the reason why you were repaired rather than scrapped was because a general took a particular shine to you, unit, and managed to get all the costs signed off to make that happen. The other reason is so you can give your full account on what happened. The Colonel here will handle that aspect. I'm here to ensure nothing sensitive to the company's secrets are discussed unless absolutely required. That, and I'd like to see what about one of our unit's designs managed to get so much attention." Locks explained, gesturing to sit down at the end of the long table.

"Of course, sir," Alan responded and took his seat.

"Colonel?"

"Right. I see here you were designated the name 'Alan'?"

"I chose Alan, yes," Alan affirmed with a nod.

"Chose? Hm." Locks murmured to himself, but didn't comment further.

"Well, If it's fine with both of you, I'll use that instead of RD9-whatever-it-was for your serial number," the Colonel said, his eyes finally lifting from his screen.

The man looked tired. He likely was flown in just before this meeting, Alan noted. His speaking habits also indicated he just wanted the meeting done and over with.

They could have just scheduled the meeting for later if it was going to cause so many people to be exhausted, Alan thought.

"That is fine," Locks said with a nod that Alan matched.

"So why not start at the beginning," Reeds prompted.

"Very well," Alan responded, before proceeding to articulate in exacting detail the events of his mission.

From his assignment given by General Misha Orlov, to the expected capture, to eventually meeting - and

coordinating with - the Threespus Manus to make a plan to fast-track the peace treaty.

Alan coolly and efficiently laid it all out.

Locks was laser focused on Alan throughout, and Alan could tell was taking notes on his AR glasses. Reeds was also taking notes on his tablet, and also recording the entire debrief audio.

When Alan finally finished with his plan to sneak the Coalition representatives onto the Silverback and push the meetings before any objections could be raised, he leaned back in his chair.

Locks only offered a curt “Hrm” as Alan’s story finished. Alan wasn’t quite sure what that meant.

“Frankly, I’m astonished that that plan worked. Mr. Locks, as far as I know, the Robodyne Infiltrator Units aren’t designed for that sort of lateral thinking?” Reeds began as he finished his notes.

“They’re not,” Locks growled.

While he sounded displeased, though, Alan could tell that Locks was very interested in how that came about.

“Infiltrator units are built for asymmetric warfare tactics, being able to attack, sabotage and the like if needbe behind enemy lines. But coming up with a plan to smuggle enemy delegates into friendly lines to sidestep the entire conflict? That’s certainly at a strategic level we never designed or simulated for. I’ll be having my people look into it further,” he continued.

Alan’s machine learning dataset ticked a number of values associated to that type of planning behavior and lateral thinking up several notches to ensure he could come back to them in the future. Or, as humans would put it, he felt a little bit of pride in how that went.

“However,” Locks spoke, as if to quell the sensation. His steely gaze locked with Alan’s.

“There were certainly consequences from that plan, where there not? It may have worked out well enough in the end, but you risked the aliens’ getting shot, on a human vessel. The only way they didn’t was you sacrificing your body. While commendable, it was dangerous, stupid and ill thought out. And has come at an incredible cost in money and man-hours to rectify.”

Alan couldn’t disagree with any of it.

“AI aren’t creative in the same way humans are. Though I’ll admit that whatever in our Infiltrator training allowed for it to make this plan up is certainly closer than usual. Understand this, unit. Given your next assignment, you WILL be much more aware and diligent about these so-called ‘creative plans’. You will give them deeper consideration and forethought about possible consequences. I won’t see another war start up with these aliens because of one of MY machines. Is that clear?” Locks finished, eyes still on Alan.

“Yes sir, Mr. Locks.”

“Good. When this business is all done, I’ll want to have the techs do a deep dive into your dataset. While the current results aren’t fully there, it’s still a pleasing development in how our AI is progressing. Colonel?” Locks said as he leaned back, apparently content.

“Right. Several of the top brass have signed off on this assignment, with General Orlov being the one that pushed for it initially. He seems to have been pleased with your work until now, so you’re being reassigned to a new task. Mr. Locks says that you’ve been fully recertified and are good to go, so you’ll be shipping out today.”

“And what is my task, sir?” Alan asked.

“You’ll be going to one of the Coalition city-ships, and working personally with some of their leadership. That alien, the threepus? Apparently you’ll be working with it as an attache, acting as a consistent go-between between it and the human Ambassadors already over there. Do whatever you need to do to facilitate cohesion and positive relations. Any information about their government structure, technology or the like is to be passed along back to Earth via secured channels as well.”

“So I’ll be spying on them then?”

“As much as any other Ambassador or representative constantly interfacing with foreign leadership is, yes. Officially, your primary task is to help the Coalition understand the human technological basis. I understand we’ll soon be opening up a work-exchange program between our engineers and the Coalitions’. So whatever we can know ahead of time would make that easier, and let us stay on top of things.”

“Yes sir.”

Alan had to admit. Misha came up with a hell of a way to get back at him for his prank.

7

Troi pressed the soldering tool to the circuit board for what he hoped, if he'd been reading the schematics correctly, was the last time tonight. He and several others on his engineering team had gotten a shipment of computer hardware just that day and immediately dibs were called, and plans were made. He had made off with a small portable computer device as well as a few handheld screens. He was envious of Laxi, who had made it to the crates first and fished out one of the headset displays, but still felt pretty good about what he managed to grab.

It was part of a "Collaborative Technological Initiative", according to his higher ups. Humans sent over some of their technology for integration and the Coalition sent over some of theirs. While a handful of individuals had started coming and going between the city ships and humanity's planets, any sort of deeper integration of their peoples was still in its infancy. Most especially stable communication.

While they had the ability to channel basic communication packets between, it was strictly regulated by humanity's military still, and was only for relatively higher priority traffic. Until his people and the human engineers managed to integrate each others' tech and start making proper standards, throughput would be a trickle, and greater integration would be a crawl.

Troii glanced back and forth between his circuit board and the small tablet display he'd been given. Each on his team was provided one with an incredible library of schematics, documentation - in human, unfortunately, so translation delays made those less helpful - and in a few cases, even usage manuals and videos of humans showing off how the devices worked.

At first Troii was perplexed at how much effort they had gone into documenting their technology in so many different ways before another on his team realized they just simply had all this information on hand. Already made and easily handed over. Coalition engineers documented schematics of their work course, but a majority of their work followed an expansive, but string guideline structure set up by the Threespus. Much less per-device how-tos were required when everything followed a standard pre-tailored to hitting all the needs.

But these humans had standards all over the place. Each device they looked at was wired in a similar pattern, but the individual components were completely different, internal layouts were different, and going off of labeling on the components, even whatever manufacturer of each piece was a completely different entity.

After his group realized that, the ludicrous library of information they were provided made sense. There was minimal overall consistency between devices, so of COURSE

they would aggressively document all the specifics for each device. And it had to be passed along to his people because otherwise they'd have spent ages trying to figure out what madness the human engineers had wrought.

After a final back and forth Troii was content his wiring job to an isolated Coalition terminal was good. He had 4 separate circuit boards as various go-betweens. The small computing device would obviously run itself, but he needed to access it's power and storage systems, and had spent the last handful of cycles now putting together a complex series of converters and interops to ensure not only was his wiring job workable, but it didn't immediately fry the little machine or his test terminal.

He plugged in the power cable he had cut open and wired into a converter board that drew power from his terminal, and then poked the little button on it's top surface the documentation had indicated was for power with his talon. Immediately, the little button lit up and Troii let out a yell and slammed his first on the table. Days of mind-numbing work had finally paid off.

Zoros quickly clamored over to see what the commotion was, and Troii leaned out of the way so he could see the screen as it flashed a bright, colorful landscape on the display and a number of little icons appeared on it.

"It works? Holy- I need to get the others, wait here!" Zoros excitedly yelped before charging out of the door of their workspace.

A few moments later, a dozen other Zus had crammed into the now far too tiny room. Troii couldn't bother to wait for Zoros to fetch everyone and he had already begun to fiddle

with the interface. It had a physical keyboard - not all that dissimilar from the display-based ones their terminals used - covered in human language characters. He couldn't speak or read it at all so the specific characters meant little to him, but after poking various buttons and poking the display itself, at first with the tip of his talon before realizing that their displays were capacitive, then deftly poking and swiping through the interface with a knuckle.

It was technically relatively simple, from an engineering perspective, but the reality for his team is they finally had a working piece of human technology partially integrated in their system.

After a round of congratulations and a few of the team ruffling his feathers, everyone eventually shuffled out of the room to get back to their own work, no doubt further invigorated. Zoros too returned to his side of the room to keep working at how to integrate and process the data encoded on a small storage device. For now, Troii took his time basking in his success and played with the little device more.

It would be quite a few more cycles before Troii had the basics of the data input and output down, unfortunately for him. The human technology worked on electricity, the same as theirs, so getting the thing powered on was merely a matter of ensuring that the delivery pattern of electricity being fed into the wires of the power cable was at the right voltage and resistance in an alternating pattern. An annoyance, but conceptually simple.

Decoding how the stupid little thing connected to their system network had proven to be maddening, however. It

was in theory simple. It used a wireless signal to send a stream of information encoded in a certain way, and expected similar signals in return. In theory it was simple. But just because the theory was easy didn't mean that making it work would be. While it was a big part of why he wanted to become an engineer in the first place - Troii's curiosity and desire to learn got him in trouble more than once when he was little - it was moments like this that also dragged.

Troii knew he could've handed it off to one of the other engineers more specialized in the software side of things, but this project was his, and he wanted to see it through to the end.

So when the little icon in the corner indicated he finally had an actual connection to his simulated wireless network, Troii practically collapsed onto his table in relief. He had to talk to the service technicians for his wing about getting a proper network throughput off his terminal, but that would have to wait until they were completely certain it was secure and nothing could be compromised by the device.

Zoros had long headed off to get some sleep, and Troii realized he had been at this for much longer than he originally planned. He idly poked his way through some of the files on the machine's storage manager while coming to the conclusion he really should go get some sleep so he can come back at it fresh. As his momentum halted and his exhaustion began to creep up on him, Troii wondered what all the little programs they had installed on this device were for, and why the humans had done so. Were they chosen with intent? At random? Was this a device some human had used before and when no longer needed was passed on to him?

Some of the programs were obvious - one was some sort

of program where he could type on the keyboard and it would transcribe to the device - others seemingly didn't work at all. He had called over Laxi, who had learned a little bit of human-english on the side what some of the messages meant, and she was able to roughly translate that they needed a network connection, which is, of course, what spiraled off his current tangent of trying to get the networking working.

He'd have to see if Laxi was free, later. They always got along well, and with the project off to a good start so far, maybe there'd be some time to-

Absentmindedly, Troii poked one of the files in the storage browser, and it opened up a new application - some sort of document viewer. The file was covered in human words, of course, but it also had images. Interested, Troii perked back up and began to poke through the document in earnest. It had lines of blue colored words which, when pressed, jumped to a different page. Some sort of interactive document that linked between different sections.

Interesting.

Troii sat back up, and his drowsiness faded. He began to randomly click around between links he saw. Each page had a number of them, in addition to a lot of words in black text, probably describing the images he saw on each page. Depending on what he clicked, it seemed it took him to certain subjects. He began to recognize a few words as he navigated around - some sort of categorization system. On various pages, Troii saw pictures of various humans, locations - likely from their planet - vehicles, plants, animals, weapons.

Looking at the top of the page it had the same word - likely the document name, he figured. Whatever this 'Encyclopedia' file was, he thought it was likely to be very

important.

8

Aroorm waited patiently in the hall outside the council chambers. The large hall was designed to be tall enough for Hanuu much larger than her to comfortably walk it and enter the chambers, so even though she was quite large for a Lour, she was easily dwarfed by the empty hall she sat in. Her charge, the human Ambassador 'Tabitha Winters' was currently having an initial introductory meeting with the Coalition council and getting her up to speed on some general expectations and duties while she was here.

Aroorm, for her part, was perfectly happy to let them yap it out while she stayed far away from it. It wasn't like she wanted to babysit the human either.

The cycles ticked past - even if it was a relatively brief meeting, there was much ceremony, how-to-dos and posturing for the human, she was sure, and that meant it was going to be dragged out to be as much a show as possible. We wouldn't want to show the humans we were

weak or inferior, Arorm snorted to herself.

As if their utter ruination in their ground campaign on Pluto hadn't already shown that. Still, she was tasked with protecting the human, and she would certainly abide by her task without fail. The human's stay would come and go and she'd be shuffled off to sit outside of another important room for another important person.

Luckily for Arorm in these situations, she could easily let her mind slip. A gentle drift of idle thoughts that let the time pass. Her senses still alert, but she let the empty, wasted time wash over her.

Her ears pricked before the latch to the door moved and she snapped back from her daydreaming. The doors were heavy and soundproofed, but she could still pick up on the shift in the main council room as whatever they were doing in there drew to a close. A few moments later, the latch clicked, and the door opened and the grand circus spilled out into the hall. Friends and acquaintances chattering away now that official business was done, representatives discussing the issues, or representatives discussing 'the issues'. The congregation had been in the hall for all of a few moments and she was already tired of the noise.

Arorm rose to her feet and waded into the mass. She easily brushed past Zus and Lour, and deftly sidestepped out of the various Hanuu representatives' way until she entered the chambers proper, which were now much emptier and much quieter than the outside.

And in the middle of the large room Arorm saw her charge, quietly talking with a few Threespus, with the inner chamber guards encircling them.

One of the Zus of the guard saw her approach and gave an almost imperceptible nod approving her approach. Arorm continued on, breaking past the line and coming up behind the human.

“Ah, I see we have talked too long already,” one of the Threespus spoke, drawing attention to Arorm.

“My Sovereigns,” Arorm said, lowering her head, “I’ve been told the Ambassador has other tasks to attend to later in the day, and don’t wish for her to give a bad appearance.”

“Of course, of course,” another Threespus answered, “It was delightful to meet you today Ambassador, I look forward to working with you more in the coming days.”

“Likewise. My first day has been busy, but it’s also been quite exciting. I’m looking forward to my time with you all,” the Ambassador replied back with a gentle, pleased expression.

Arorm couldn’t tell if they were genuine pleasantries or just political theatre. And she still couldn’t figure out what the human was doing with its mouth like that.

“Indeed! You’ll have to let us show you around some of the living areas! We’re quite proud of how they’ve come out for the different species in the Coalition. We Threespus are quite pleased with how accommodating we’ve been able to make everything for those we’ve uplifted. If you need anything for your own accommodations, do not hesitate to let us know. We understand humans have special needs compared to some of the species in the Coalition.”

“I’ll be sure to do that. My brief stop at my office and quarters looked like it would do nicely though. How did you know what to do for the bed or restroom? Given the other species biology, I wouldn’t think it’d have occu-”

Sweet merciful gods, they just won’t stop, Arorm

thought to herself. She wasn't about to be put out, or worse, disciplined because these chatterboxes couldn't stop talking for one moment.

Gently, she brought her snout down and tapped the human on her shoulder.

"Oh, right! I am so sorry! Let's head out now," she practically jumped.

Again she flashed a gentle, pleased expression and a polite wave goodbye to the Threespus and finally broke away from them and let Arorm lead her back out to the hall.

Thankfully, a majority of the previous congregation had started dissipating, so leaving was easier than entering.

"I'm sorry, it's all just so interesting and easy to get carried away talking," the Ambassador apologized.

Arorm paused for the briefest moment before continuing out into the hall. Arorm wasn't entirely sure how to respond to that. She had guarded various VIPs before, even council representatives on one or two occasions, but they didn't usually talk to her. And if they did, it was orders. It was all business, and Arorm knew the beats. She quietly stayed out of the way, shadowing her charge, got them place to plac, but never got in the way. Never made herself a hurdle.

So when her charge kept talking at...to? her, Arorm wasn't quite sure how to respond.

They walked for a while in silence, heading to the nearest lift station to take the human back to her office. It wasn't unpleasant or awkward, and the human clearly was entertaining herself just taking in the sights of everything. Any window, any display, and the Ambassador flitted to it with great interest. She was like a pup. And yet, for some reason it felt wrong, almost improper to leave it at that, in silence.

“Why apologize?” Arorm asked, when they had reached the lift station.

“What?”

“When I pulled you away from the Threespus, you apologized to me for getting... ‘carried away talking’. Why?”

“Well, you had clearly come to take me back, and even after I’d realized you were there, I kept carrying on anyways. I know you were just trying to keep me on schedule, and it was kinda rude.”

“Why would that matter?”

Arorm was about to step into the lift when she realized that the human’s footsteps had stopped.

She turned to look at the Ambassador, who had stopped on the lift station landing, and was standing fast. She made eye contact with Arorm, and it felt... odd. Arorm couldn’t place why. The human’s eyes were locked to hers with a bizarre intensity, and it quickly began to make Arorm uncomfortable.

The two held fast for a long moment, before the human spoke again.

“What?”

“Nothing. Come, we need to go.” Arorm answered before stepping into the lift.

The ambassador followed suit, and they sat in silence as the lift departed.

The lift ride to the district that the human’s office was in was quick, as always. She was in a housing block that many other important individuals stayed at, at least until the official Human Embassy had finished construction.

Arorm had been through this block many times before,

and easily navigated the brightly lit hallways and landings to get to where the human's office was set up.

"It's like a hotel," the Ambassador said out loud, breaking their prolonged silence.

"A hotel?"

"A kind of building back on Earth. When travellers need a temporary place to stay, they can rent a room in one. It has a bed, bathroom, and usually table and tv for work and entertainment. A self contained living space. They're all tightly packed together in a large building, some of which have many hundreds of rooms. So the hallways are just lined with doors all the way down, like this."

"Hm."

As they reached her room, Arorm noted a Glul was waiting next to the door. Arorm smoothly eased in front of the Ambassador and reached the floating blob first.

"What?"

The Glul reached out a tentacle and it contained a tablet display, which it tapped at with another loose tentacle.

Arorm glanced down at it to see what it was indicating.

"What is it?" came the inevitable question from behind.

"I'm looking," followed the curt response.

Arorm quickly scanned the display. It was a message from the technical team in charge of getting the Ambassador's living space and office set up so she could work from it. And, of course, there were delays in getting her workspace set up, so whatever she had scheduled to do for the day had been pushed back. Wonderful.

"Noted. Leave." Arorm said to the Glul and waited until it had propelled itself down the hallway before turning back to her charge.

"Technical issues. Your workstation isn't ready, so

nothing can be done on your schedule until it's fixed," Arorm snorted in frustration.

"So my evening freed up?"

"Freed up?"

"I mean, I've got nothing else to do this evening now, right?"

"Yes."

"Awesome," the Ambassador said as she pressed her ID badge to the door and it slid open smoothly.

Arorm had barely sat down outside the door before the human's head poked back out through the doorway.

"What are you doing?"

"Keeping guard," Arorm answered without turning to look.

"What? No, you aren't going to sit out there all night?" it was almost as much a statement as a question.

"It's my job. So yes. I am."

"Is it your job to guard me? Or sit outside?"

Arorm stopped at the question, before this time turning to look at the human.

"What?"

"Do you HAVE to sit outside? Or is simply making sure I'm guarded enough?"

"Making sure... would be enough?" Arorm answered after a long pause.

"Then get your butt in here!" The human said before disappearing back into her room.

Arorm sat, utterly befuddled for a moment before rising and slipping into the doorway. The door was just big enough for her to fit through without difficulty. The door slid closed behind her.

Arorm took in the style of the room as the human

traversed over towards the bed. There was a sort of cloth matting along the floor that was soft to the touch. The walls had been coated in a soft, neutral white that gave the room a sort of 'warmness' to it from the overhead lights. It had a few pieces of furniture Arorm wasn't familiar with, but was clearly sized to the human. Random pieces of art adorned the walls, which was relatively uncommon to see. Compared to the rest of the block, the Ambassador's quarters certainly felt curiously pleasant. Strange, but pleasant.

She watched as the Ambassador took off a layer of her coverings and threw it onto the bed, and then unfastened the top part of another layer before she finally sat down on the bed and gave a low sigh before flopping onto her back.

"Ahh, it's nice to actually sit down properly. We'll have to get me some sort of folding chair for the next meeting or something. Being on an alien spaceship the size of a city is amazing and all, but I can't literally stand all day in heels," she spoke out loud, before kicking off her shoes.

Arorm stopped to actually look at them and noted they had a bizarre shape, the heel of them was a raised point causing the foot to arch. 'Heels' apparently aptly named.

She allowed herself to sit down near the doorway after watching her charge relax. Of course, this lasted but a moment.

"What are you all the way over there for? Come on! I said come in!" the human lazily waved an arm at her.

"I am inside, as you wanted."

"I meant inside as in making yourself at home!" this time her voice was tinged with incredulity.

At least that matched Arorm's own growing confusion.

"It's not my home. It's yours."

"Ok, so where do you live then?"

The human again made eye contact and it again began to make Arorm uncomfortable.

"A different district on the other side of the city. All Lour there, with my family."

"Ah, still haven't left the nest, yet?"

"Left? What nest?"

"Sorry, I'm not sure I said it right," the human said, sitting back up, "It's a saying back on Earth. It means that you still live with your family, and haven't moved out on your own."

"I see. No, I have not. Lour don't often leave our families. It happens with certain duties, or if we join another family. But normally we all live together," Arorm answered.

It occurred to her that the human likely didn't know much of anything about how Lour lived or what their culture was like. As far as she knew, Arorm was the first Lour that the human had ever seen. As Arorm returned the gaze of the human, she acknowledged that she was lacking just as much understanding of humans. If she was to guard her charge effectively, it would likely be wise to at least learn how she may act.

"Do you not?" Arorm asked.

"Live with my family? Hah, no. I moved out at 18 and didn't look back. Ended up getting on a flight to Mars for school, and my career kinda took off from there."

"You live alone then?"

"Back on Earth? Yeah. Though I guess while I'm here, I don't."

"You don't?" Arorm tilted her head in confusion.

"Of course not, dummy. You're here too."

Arorm watched the human's mouth open up and showed her teeth. It was a bizarre expression, but Arorm

studied her face and recognized it. Her eyes had partially closed, lower lids raised, and the edges of the eyes had crinkled up. The corners of her mouth drawn upward, and the raised lilt in her voice. It was the same as those easy, pleasant expressions she had given before, but this was lacking the previous reservation.

Aroorm realized that the human was actually happy to talk to her. To have her here.

“So, it’ll be a girls night out then. And I’m sure we’ve got a lot to learn about each other,” Tabitha announced, slapping her hands on her knees.

“Yes. I think we do,” Aroorm answered back, matching back Tabitha’s smile.

9

Sven hadn't ever really expected that when he had gone into engineering he'd find himself in his current lot in life. That was always the joke, right. When you get interviewed for a job or a promotion or whatnot, there was always the 'where do you see yourself in five years' question.

He'd given the standard answers to a standard question, of course. And eventually landed himself an entry level job at a prestigious institute working on top-end technology. Designing, prototyping and working out the kinks of some of the most sophisticated computer hardware and logic boards on Earth.

What he hadn't anticipated was his current assignment. He, along with a few other offices around the planet - and one firm on Mars - were currently splicing alien technology into their own testbenches to get it to interop with their stuff. Progress was going well, and they had various AI farms, both on-site and at a few other locations around the globe,

crunching on optimized integration concepts.

What he could say with his several years of schooling followed by a half-decade of real world experience was that whoever had come up with the alien computer systems were brilliant. Some of the tech was expected for anything resembling a 'computer'. Electrical signals across conductive circuits, analogs of capacitors and resistors between components, and so on. But then there was the distinctly alien parts.

For one, the fabrication process was clearly highly refined. The precision work involved in compacting down all the components to work with the little tablet interface his team was given was marvelous. It reminded him of the logic boards that go into small wearables, like AR glasses, but the density level of the specific components was a step above. The manufacturing process had to have constructed the entire logic board in-place. Like 3D printing, but with circuitry and processor components. Sub processors were integrated directly into their version of the logic boards, conductive lines interweaving throughout to connect between pieces. It was like they just printed the entire thing in one pass, no attaching parts afterwards.

Of course, they'd only realized this when, after several days of trying to figure out how the sleek piece of composite material was made. They ended up having to run it through a multi-spectrum scan and even scraped a piece off and threw it into a spectrometer which reported back being made of a pretty wild composite material that was part ceramic, and part woven synthetic fibers. It gave the material high durability, excellent conductivity and temperature properties and had to have been a nightmare to make.

Well, it would be with their current fab processes, Sven

thought. But given that they fabricated the processors right into the body of the logic board as one piece, they had to have figured out something special to deal with it. The good news was, of course, that feeding all this into the AI farms had already yielded a multitude of theoretical fabrication process optimizations that had their senior members drooling.

The next couple of years were going to be fun.

For now, however, they had been tasked with getting it working with their current systems, and as of this moment, he was waiting on the testbench to boot up. He had wires splayed all across the work area. Wired into his test machine and looped back into the little ceramic plate, into the exposed contacts on the sides of it.

“Come on. Come on...”, he whispered to himself.

No error codes. Just a blank screen.

“I swear to God, this better work before the end of the day. I don’t want to have to hand it off to-” but before he could finish his mumbling, the screen finally blipped on and output the bootup information.

Sven watched as the operating system loaded, ran through it’s startup routine, and noted a multitude of new drivers it began to install. A brief moment later, and the system reported a new piece of peripheral hardware, an unknown model of device his driver lovingly named “Weird Alien Junk”.

“YES!” Sven shouted and slammed his hand on the desk.

Immediately, everyone else in the room scurried over to see what the fuss was about.

Sven’s eyes scanned the screen and - aside from the unsurprising litany of “Unrecognized Hardware Signature” messages from various components, he was getting back a solid connection and his absurdly hacky drivers were

accepting the peripheral. Their AI farm's last round of suggestions ended up being what he needed to get it to work.

A round of cheers and congratulatory slaps on the back from the others in the room broke out and Sven was feeling great about it. There was a lot of work to be done yet, of course. The Coalition had passed along some documentation, but most of it - after being translated - wasn't especially helpful. Unlike logic boards for human electronics, which had serial numbers, comments, guidelines and more all printed right onto the boards and components, everything the Coalition had passed along were sleek, smooth, gray planks; self-contained pieces of technology with no outward signifiers, only a few metallic contact points along the outer perimeter.

It could have been a scheme to protect from theft of their tech, Sven mullied on. Were there even other aliens other than the Coalition? There must be. Was corporate espionage and IP theft a problem on a galactic scale? Or did they just want everything pretentiously 'clean' to the detriment of anyone coming along later if they had to figure out how it worked or repair it.

Some of their hardware was hypothetically understood, but obviously lacking how to interface with it. Their storage components, for example, appeared to be small crystals with a highly synthetic refraction behavior, which implied it was some fashion of holographic medium. He had been told 5th hand that the device was network-capable to the Coalition's systems, but exactly how the data was passed along said network wasn't. The good news was, with his recent pass at the drivers, he was getting what at least presented as a valid network connection through the device to a self-contained hotspot for securely testing wireless devices.

"Anita", Sven said, trying to get the attention of his

neighbor.

“Yes?”

“Could you get one of the senior engineers down here? I want to get approval to hook it into an outward facing network.”

“Sure, let me go get Marius. He’s the least likely to tell you no,” she chuckled, and got up to leave.

“Thanks,” Sven called to her as she left the room before turning back to his table.

Sven queued several malicious network tests against his test hub for the AI core to crunch through while he waited.

Doctor Aven loved watching the aliens work. He had greatly enjoyed his time with Kogo, of course, and she was certainly intelligent, but it was completely enthralling to watch the Coalition doctors walk through doing a simple surgery to replace an aging Zus’ heart.

He had pulled some strings and gotten special permission just that morning to hitch a ride to one of their bases on Pluto where he would be able to watch on hologram the entire operation live as it was done on one of their city ships.

Naturally, not only was he taking notes of their medical procedures, cleanroom observations, sterilization procedures, what their tools looked like and more, but he and the two other doctors from the Neptune base walked through the tele-observatory as the procedure went on and soaked up every detail they could like a sponge.

“Blood pressure is good,” a nurse said, reading off a nearby display.

“Understood, let’s begin,” the head surgeon

announced.

As Aven watched, he noted more similarities in their operating room setup than differences compared to a human one. It made sense, he supposed, medical work as medical work. Even if the aliens were unaccustomed to repairing grievous injuries, they would still need to do surgeries to repair lesser trauma, replace organs and diagnose problems.

The room itself was mostly a familiar arrangement. Not the room they were in - which was a fairly large dome-shaped room with projectors from all sides emitted motes of light in the air to constitute the holograph they walked among - but the operating room.

The elderly Zus who was the patient of the procedure was laying back-down on a large table. Above it was a multi-armed machine. Aven was familiar with the robotic surgery tools of the sort as they were wildly popular tools. It took the surgeon's inputs, evened them out to remove micro tremors of their hands and arms to give even more precise actions during operations. They also were incredibly compact, allowing the tools to get in places their relatively large hands could not, and beyond that, they could be done with the specialist on the other side of the planet.

The tools themselves mostly looked familiar as well. Scalpels, auto-sutures, suction, topical injectors and more to form a full suite.

"Hey Liam, he's starting," one of the other doctors called over.

Aven quickly moved over to where the surgeon was at a console and watched him get to work. Here, Aven noted, were some differences. Unlike human robotic-surgery systems - which were almost direct analogs to handling the tools themselves via specialized gloves - the console the Zus

surgeon sat at was entirely touch screen based.

“That’s a bit unexpected. Do they have AIs to interpret the intended actions? I hear some new units back on Earth are almost completely AI driven now and the surgeon more directs the action than does it themselves,” the doctor to Aven’s right remarked, tapping his chin.

“According to Manus - er, one of the Threespus - they have no AIs. I think he’s going to do it entirely via that console,” Aven remarked.

Sure enough, the doctors watched with growing awe as the surgeon leaned forward and began to rapidly poke, prod and drag the touchscreen elements around. As Aven looked up, the movements translated nearly 1 to 1 to the robotic arms, which deftly cut into the chest of the patient. As the surgeon worked, his claws moved all across the screen, occasionally reaching over to a secondary panel to toggle focus between various arms. The surgeon’s hands were fast, precise, and as delicate as if he held the tools in hand himself.

As their eyes darted back and forth between the patient and the surgeon, the surgeon had clearly done this countless times. The incisions were made, arms reached down and pulled the old heart out with the patient’s pulse evenly beeping away from the bio monitor as the machine-assisted circulation kept the body going.

The worn muscle was laid on a tray near one of the nurses while another one opened a sealed container holding the recipient’s new heart. The first set of robotic arms pulled up towards the mounting on the ceiling and rotated out of the way, the ‘hands’ going into little sockets while another set lowered down from the opposite side.

“They sterilize each component after it’s used and just rotate out to spare sets between steps,” one of Aven’s

companions commented out loud, "Not strictly necessary, but certainly would prevent even a chance of contamination. Clever."

The new set of robotic arms gently reached down, grabbed the heart and lifted then settled it into the patient's chest cavity. The hands held it in place while other arms moved into place to quickly and cleanly attach the veins and arteries by applying some sort of gel, which then a small laser stroked across, quickly adhering both sides into a nearly flawless meld.

"Molecular polymer?"

"Looks like it."

The surgeon paused and tapped the screen several times, looking at the joins from various angles on his screen. After a few minutes, apparently content, he began to work to close up the chest cavity. More molecular polymer to seal up the incisions and after only 27 minutes, the job was done.

"Damn, that was slick."

"I thought it was going to take way longer since he was doing such an indirect interface. I don't know if that's just experience, or if the system has some sort of pseudo-AI program to translate the inputs to understood procedural actions, but it was smooth as hell."

Aven nodded and watched as the flurry of nurses on the operating floor moved to help with cleanup and post-op patient care before beginning to move them out of the room. The surgeon, meanwhile stood up, feathers flared and stretched his arms and legs before finally arching his back to conclude his post-operation ritual.

Clearly satisfied that he had loosened up, he waved to one of the nurses.

"This was the one with the humans watching, correct?"

The Zus' voice was slightly raspy to listen to, but Aven's earpiece connected to his personal assistant translated it without issue.

"Yes, sir. They were to watch from one of the observatories on a base on OB-9 I was told." the Lour nurse replied.

"Hm. I want them flown up here. I want to see what they thought."

"I... I shall pass that along, sir.", the nurse replied before the feed cut off and the hologram faded out.

The doctors three looked at each other before quietly, and very professionally, each pumped their fists in excitement.

Alan, meanwhile, was being flown up to one of the city ships in orbit around Pluto. He hadn't even gotten a chance to detour when they first landed to go talk to Aven which he noted through his scanning of the transit logs had flown in that day.

But, instead, he was quickly whisked from one shuttle to another and immediately departed to fly up to his ultimate destination. Not that he wasn't excited, per se, but even he was uneasy with how fast he got his assignment and was shipped out to the far side of the solar system.

Still, it's what he was made for and certainly good at - empirically proven now at that. Alan queried the dossier information about the human Ambassadors, or, apparently Ambassador. Singular. One of them fell ill and wasn't due to arrive for another week or two. As it stood, the only human on the entire ship was Ambassador Tabitha Winters, who had only arrived slightly before him.

Alan's first task would be to find her and get situated, and after that talk to the Threespus to find out how he could facilitate their tech exchange. He wondered if he'd be working

with Manus again directly.

Manus was the only Threespus he'd actually interacted with, and while he understood the premise behind their connected mind system, he wasn't yet sure just how much individuality they all had. Manus had denied the idea they were a hivemind, but it also sounded like they were in constant communication, collating and forming consensus about a multitude of things at any given point.

There were so many questions. So, Alan resolved, he would get some answers.

"Sir, we've arrived," one of his escorts announced, lifting herself out of her seat and gesturing to the front of the shuttle's cabin.

"I guessed as much, thank you," Alan flashed a quick, easy smile before unbuckling himself and moving to the door.

Immediately, Alan noted the bizarre sensory data that flooded his inputs as he crossed the threshold into the receiving area. It was a spaceship-city so an ocean of electromagnetic signaling was to be expected, but he was getting unexpected data from some of the more exotic side of things. Accelerometers placed the local gravity at slightly more than Earth's directly towards the ship's core. Visualizations of the magnetic fields were also bizarre. Local electronics and other sources were expected, but there was a strong background field also from the center of the ship.

He made a note to ask about that little mystery later.

Alan entered the main space of the receiving area. He recognized the utilitarian design of the room as being of the same style as the base on Pluto. Metal floors, walls and ceilings, bright, white lights. Minimal markings. It didn't feel overly cold or rigid, somehow, but it was very flat and

inoffensive. Alan wondered if part of the utilitarian design was to ensure there were no unique hangups for the different Coalition species. He needed to get more information on them to understand how they lived and operated. Outside of info about the Zus and Lour, which itself was meager, he had almost nothing on the rest of the species that made up the Coalition.

As he moved across the room towards the security check in, where a Zus was waiting with his bag, however, he did note that the Hanuu at the gate did have a small picture of a curious orange landscape on the wall. So they had workspace preferences and art, Alan thought as he filed that bit of information away. Good to know.

As Alan was handed his bag of affects and walked through the security gate, the Hanuu guard rumbled for him to stop.

“Is there an issue?”

“These scans indicate your body is fake. You are a human, correct?” the Hanuu asked.

“Correct. My original body had problems, so it had to be replaced with a synthetic one. I am, however, still human.” Alan answered. He hadn’t been told to drop the cover story, and certainly wasn’t going to until he needed to.

“I did not know humans had synthetic bodies. The other one that came here did not. I will need to call and verify-”

“I can verify and vouch for our guest here, Homm-Ru. Additional confirmation is not needed as I had already scanned his body once before,” came a softer, digital voice.

Alan tilted his head to look past the bulk of the large creature to see a small black sphere float into view.

“Manus?”

“I’m pleased you’ve learned to tell my kind apart, Alan.”

Alan let out a laugh.

"I wouldn't say I've figured that out quite yet, so much as your comment giving you away."

"Well, you'll have plenty of time to meet the other Threespus. I'm sure you'll figure it out," Manus commented as he fluttered about.

Alan couldn't tell if that was a joke, or there was, in fact, a way to tell them apart.

"Of course, my Sovereign. I shall finish the inprocessing so as to not delay you." the Hanuu interjected.

Alan gave a slight bow in acknowledgement to the Hanuu before turning back to Manus.

"I wasn't expecting you to come pick me up personally, not that I'm complaining. Originally the plan was-", Alan began.

"To meet with Ambassador Winters, yes. Unfortunately there's been delays in getting her workspace situated - yours as well, I believe - due to slow progress in technology integration with our systems. I understand it's progressing well, but not as fast as originally hoped. It should only be a...what was the term? Day? If progress continues smoothly, that is.

"As such, official work beyond her initial meeting with the council was put on hold until then. I believe she was going to have a... what was it she said? 'Girl's Night out?'" Manus explained, "So I felt it best she enjoy herself and unwind before the real work begins. After all, I'm sure both of you would enjoy getting a tour of the city?"

"I would enjoy that, yes. I've a lot of questions about this place already."

"I've no doubt. You'd proven yourself curious and capable back when you were a prisoner, and I had expected

that to continue even more so once you arrived here.”

Alan chuckled.

“Yes, well, my boss back home was less enthused with my cleverness. Gave me a proper earful about being more careful this time.”

“Indeed? Hopefully you weren’t disciplined too terribly. Because of you we were able to broker this peace and even was injured on our behalf - though I’m thankful to see you’re up and moving again.”

“Yep, got fixed up and then shipped out to here. Overall, not much the worse for wear,” Alan said bringing a hand to his chest where he’d been shot before.

“So, as Ambassador Winters had her own plans for the evening, I thought I may be your companion instead?” Manus bobbed towards the door.

“I like the sound of that. Lead the way.”

10

Tabitha pushed herself up off the bed and looked at her Lour companion.

“So, what’s there to do for fun around here?”

“Fun? As in entertainment?” Arorm asked.

“Well, yeah. I doubt you all work all the time. So there’s got to be stuff to do in your off hours.”

Arorm sat for a moment in quiet consideration before speaking again.

“I know of a few things, though I, personally, do spend most of my time working. We can head out into the greater residential district and meet with others and spend the evening with them.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” Tabitha affirmed with a smile before slipping into the bathroom to change.

A moment later, and she was back out in the main room wearing jeans, a simple black shirt and sneakers.

“Odd.” Arorm commented after taking stock of Tabitha’s new clothes.

“What is? Do I look weird?” Tabitha asked as she looked herself over to see if she had made some sort of mistake.

“I had assumed that your previous attire was purely for ceremonial purposes.”

“Well, my suit is for that, yeah.”

“But you have also put on new ones. We aren’t going to be meeting any officials, so formal wear isn’t required.”

It took a moment for Tabitha to process what Arorm was saying.

“Oh! Oh, no. Humans, ah, we always wear clothes. I know that Lour and Zus - and I guess sometimes Hanuu? - will don formal articles for special events. But humans always wear clothes. The clothes we wear are dependent on the circumstances. My prior suit was formal wear, but this,” Tabitha gestured to herself, “is casual wear. Stuff for day-to-day.”

“Bizzare. That seems like a lot of work to do every day. Do all creatures on your planet behave similarly?”

Tabitha laughed,

“Nope, just humans. There’s a lot of reasonings behind it - traditional, cultural, practical. For example, humans other than the hair on our heads, largely are bald. Unlike your fur, or Zus’ feathers, we have just skin exposed to the elements. So clothes provide some protection to injury or weather and the like.”

Arorm watched her human companion as she continued her lecture, and opened her suitcase to show a multitude of other clothing items packed tightly within.

“There’s also the fact that humans largely have always worn them, so NOT wearing them is considered very odd

and in a number of places illegal.”

“It’s illegal to be uncovered?” Arorm asked, her ears flitting in curiosity.

“In a lot of places, yeah. Religious reasonings that sort of cemented themselves in the overall culture of the world for thousands of years. Now it’s just normal and no one really thinks about it. Beyond that, the type of clothes worn can imply status, desirability, confidence and sense of style or fashion. A lot of humanity’s different cultures are driven by presentation and clothes are an easy way to do it. Plus, it’s just fun to wear different styles.”

“Hm. Humans are definitely alien. But it does sound amusing. If your people are so set on it, then you may wish to meet some artisans that craft the trinkets and pieces for Zus formalities. They are most skilled.”

“Oh my god, yes. I wanted to ask someone if I could buy something like that.”

“Well then, let us depart.” Arorm said, rising to her feet.

Tabitha couldn’t help but feel a buzz. Sure, it was exciting to arrive on an alien ship the size of a city, floating in orbit around Pluto, filled with millions or billions of aliens from different planets. And sure, being provided a gigantic wolf-like alien with six legs as a bodyguard was even more exciting than that, least of all because Arorm seemed like she’d get along well with her. But the city itself had been just metals and ceramics. Hallways with overhead lights. Dashes of color here or there to accent, but rather utilitarian and clean.

Until now, Tabitha thought as the tram broke from a transit tunnel and silently slid along a suspended rail

through a more open region of the district. It was here where it felt properly 'real' now. It looked like one of those indoor water parks back home. Massive support columns and truss crossbars suspended the open area. It wasn't as impossibly huge and cavernous as she'd imagined when she was first told about 'city ships' but it was at least 3 stories from ground to ceiling, and maybe a kilometer across each way. Massive runs of lighting systems kept the area pleasantly illuminated. Not as bright as a sunny day on Earth, but roughly equivalent to when it was overcast. Or maybe on the surface of Mars. Across the ground were buildings. It reminded her of older cities; tightly packed, built for walking. But the buildings themselves were... 'newly old' if she had to describe it.

Though their construction looked to be made of metals and ceramics, they had a lived-in look about them, and the litany of peoples that walked the paths that webbed through the space reminded her of any downtown back on Earth. Different buildings had walls painted in various colors, or runic patterns she could only guess the cultural significance of. Some buildings even had tapestries or ribbons hanging down, or strung between buildings.

Tabitha broke her gaze from the district stretch as they entered another tunnel to pass through the bulkhead that divided the districts, filled with critical subsystems, engineering passages and other such necessities to keep the place running, she was told. She leaned turned back to face the cabin of the tram car and looked to her Lour companion.

Arorm had her eyes closed, and was breathing softly. It almost looked like she was meditating, Tabitha thought. The large creature had six legs and four ears, but otherwise looked like some fantasy artist's interpretation of a wolf. Her mottled gray fur terminated into near black at the paws, and

Tabitha pondered if fur coloration was similar in purpose to terrestrial animals as well.

Before she could break the silence and ask, however, Tabitha's stomach growled. She quickly put a hand to it in an attempt to quiet it, but Arorm's eyes had already flitted open and looked to her. Tabitha couldn't help but laugh awkwardly.

"Well, I hadn't eaten since I got here, so..."

"Ah. Then let us get you something to eat before anything else." Arorm said, before rising and turning and speaking to a nearby panel at the front of the tram car, "District 113".

"District 113" the panel confirmed.

"What was that?"

"The trams follow a set route along the tube network. However, at certain junctions it can direct a number of ways. If requested, and the user has clearance, it can detour from the default path to another one to save time. There's a place I like to eat in 113."

"Ooh, now you have my attention," Tabitha cooed.

It was the first bit of information about herself that Arorm had offered and Tabitha wanted to see what whet the Lour's appetite.

A few moments later, as the tram pulled to a station, there was soft hiss and rather than the doors opening, it shifted slightly away from the landing and rotated to pull away along an offshoot tunnel. The rest of the trip to this 'District 113' was made in an easy silence, and Tabitha was more than happy to soak up the sights.

Fortunately, the remainder of the journey was a short one, and before she knew it, they had pulled up to another

landing, this time with Arorm rising to her feet and leading the way out the doors. A short series of ramps down - Tabitha noted she hadn't once encountered stairs so far - and they had reached the ground floor of the district. The final set of doors between the station structure and the residential district opened, and the full sensation of being in an alien world hit her in force.

The low roar of the population going about their day to day was instantly upon her, and shortly thereafter was the incredible litany of scents. The general hallways and main chambers of the city never really held any particularly strong scents. Tabitha couldn't tell at first if it was because human noses weren't as sensitive as other animals, or they were intentionally scrubbing the air. Even Arorm only really carried a faint sort of earthy, dusty smell. But here it was different. The overall smell was almost farmlike. It didn't stink, exactly, but it was strong.

As they crossed the threshold of the doors, Tabitha immediately noticed that while the floor itself was still the same tiled metal paneling, it had accumulated a layer of dirt and dust, making it feel more like 'ground' rather than 'floor', and looked to span the entirety of the area she could see.

Tabitha wondered if it was just natural accumulation, or an intentional choice to make the place feel more 'homey'. She'd have to ask Arorm if-

Before she could finish her thought, Arorm pressed her weight into Tabitha's shoulder, halting her in place just before an odd guttural bark cut through the low din of the crowd, silencing it almost instantly. Tabitha refocused to see that the whole of the crowd had stopped in its tracks and was staring at them. It was mostly Lour, but a sprinkling of Zus were here and there throughout. She even thought she could see a Hanuu down one of the roads. And they were all

staring at her.

Tabitha looked to her side to see Arorm's reaction. She'd been told that everything should be fairly peaceable, but many from the Coalition had lost family or relations in their short skirmish on Pluto, and it was possible that there could be some lingering animosity. But when she looked at Arorm's expression, it was keen, but placid. If Arorm wasn't worried, then Tabitha felt a little more at ease.

That sensation of calm only lasted that brief moment, however, as the nearest of the crowd surged towards them.

Tabitha had seen it many times on tv. Celebrities would exit a car, or plane, or leave a building. And a crowd would be there to mob them. To see the rare spectacle of seeing them in person, up close.

Tabitha could now safely say that she was, apparently, a celebrity.

The noise of hundreds of Lour - all easily dwarfing her, but pleasingly none larger than Arorm - was so much that she could barely make out any intelligible words. It took her a moment to realize that much of what was being roared at her wasn't even Common.

The little she could make out was mostly various comments of how small she was, why she looked like that, was she really a human and so on, and there was absolutely no chance she was ever going to actually be able to answer any of those questions like this.

Just before she felt completely overwhelmed by the cacophony, however, Arorm took a silent step forward, and the crowd took a step back, and the roar quieted to a more conversational murmur. Tabitha wasn't sure if it was because Arorm was that respected personally, or commanded that much respect from her station, but she was

appreciative either way.

“Ambassador Winters has expressed interest in meeting you all, however she must first eat. None should work or entreat on an empty stomach,” Arorm said.

As Tabitha looked at the nearest Lours, there was a look of understanding on their faces, before they began to back up and break away, opening a path down the main road. She wasn't sure if that was some sort of folksy wisdom of the Lour, but she was definitely going to ask Arorm about it later.

Fortunately, after that initial whirlwind of an arrival, the rest of their trip to this restaurant that Arorm liked was significantly quieter. It was not, however, any less watched. Lours and Zus popped their heads out of doorways and windows to gawk, and while the crowd cleanly broke ahead of them offering no resistance, it just as cleanly melded back behind them at a moderate distance, with many following.

Still, Arorm was close, and Tabitha reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder. She was certain she was safe, but the extra bit of grounding was helping her pulse slow back to a normal level. And if it bothered Arorm, she didn't express it.

She also didn't express any sense that she was on particular alert at all. Her head and eyes easily drifted slightly side to side as they walked, scanning the crowds, but it wasn't until they had made it a good way down the road that Tabitha had noticed it was actually her ears that were telling the story.

Arorm's ears were never not moving. All four of them were constantly flitting and turning in various directions as they watched. It was like watching an antenna array soaking in every ounce of information in the environment all at once

and was quite mesmerizing to watch. Even if her overall posture was at ease, Arorm was clearly completely alert and keenly aware of everything going on around then in all directions.

Tabitha patted Arorm gently on the shoulder, before returning to her own scans of the environment. While the buildings looked interesting and colorful from the tram rail, they looked quaintly dazzling in person. As she had noted from above, the ceramics and synthetic concretes that made the outer walls of the houses had almost all been adorned in various colors, blues, greens, oranges and more. The various images and runes - which were at a glance definitely not anything in Common she had been taught - adorned many surfaces, including wrapping around the windows and doorways of the houses.

Most of the buildings themselves were single stories, though taller than an average floor in most residential buildings on Earth. Every now and again there were taller, multi-story buildings, and she suspected they were either modified, or built by the local Zus population. The tapestries and ribbons that hung from the edges of the roofs had more of the iconography adorning it, and were also dyed bright colors. The overhead lights cast through them causing a rainbow of colors to drape down on everyone below.

In complete and utter contrast to the stark hallways of the main city, these residential areas were bright, colorful and full of life.

After a decent walk, Arorm pulled Tabitha from her reverie by actually pulling her along to the right before coming to the door of one of the single story houses. It, like all the others was painted in colors and had sigils encircling the door and windows. Arorm stepped to the door and thudded it with a paw.

“This doesn’t look like a restaurant,” Tabitha commented, taking stock of the house.

“It isn’t,” Arorm said.

After a moment, the door swung open, and another Lour, mottled gray like Arorm, was standing in the doorway. Its hair was more faded and scraggly and was comparatively leaner than Arorm herself. If Tabitha was to guess, she’d imagine that it was an older Lour. Arorm turned in place and slightly to the side so she wasn’t in the way of the door, and looked at Tabitha.

“Ambassador Tabitha Winters, welcome to my family home.”

11

Kogo felt awkward sitting at the little round table in the banquet hall. Or, more accurately, she felt awkward through the entire formal, including when she was introduced in front of the entirety of the United Nations, when she issued her prepared speech, had to spend an indiscernible amount of time making smalltalk until she almost couldn't see straight, and finally now, sitting at a small round table unto herself.

It wasn't that she wasn't having fun, but it had been a very, very long day, and at this point the only thing that was staving off her exhaustion was the promise of some top-end human gourmet.

"You're looking rather rough, ma'am. How are you holding up?" Kristiansen whispered low enough that only she could hear it.

"I'm doing well, thank you."

"Ma'am. You've been staring at the empty plate for the

last 5 minutes. If you're not feeling well, it's completely acceptable to duck out so you can rest. These things can wipe out career politicians, let alone someone doing it for the first time."

Kogo raised her head slightly and looked to her side where Kristiansen flanked her at the table.

"I'm just... I'm hungry." Kogo managed before her view drooped back to the empty plate.

She wasn't sure how long it normally took to make human food, but it had to take a while. Not only because of the intricate flavors of her quick, on-the-go meals were any indication, but also because they had been sitting here in the banquet hall with everyone continuing to make small talk for the last hour.

The people were nice - well most of them. All of them were certainly pleasant and amicable when speaking to her, but some of them were appreciably more blunt and less kind when they thought she was out of earshot. Humans clearly weren't really aware of just how good Lour hearing could be. But even if the passive conversations filling the banquet hall with a dull murmur were all of the pleasant sort, it was ultimately a persistent, suffocating noise that wouldn't go away at this point.

Life on the city-ship could be claustrophobic, certainly, and the military also afforded little in the way of personal time and quiet, but at least in those cases she could busy herself with something. Or fight it, depending.

But here it was all about appearances, putting the best presentation forward to ensure no one could form a negative view on the aliens that had until just recently been at war with them. She knew there'd be a lot of work and stress in her future, and she had certainly been coached and briefed

on decorum and what to expect. But to experience it in such a regular barrage of public relations, travelling and meetings was taking its toll.

This was supposed to be the 'end of the gauntlet', as Hills had said, with her speech in front of the UN, but she hadn't been able to wind down yet.

She noted movement on both sides of her, but didn't put together what was happening consciously until Hills placed his hand on her shoulder.

Kogo roused from her fugue and looked at him.

"Come on, ma'am. Let's go."

"Wha?" Kogo rasped in Common.

"You don't have to worry. We've already passed along you were feeling unwell, and the Chairman has been informed. Kristiansen is in the kitchen getting your food to go. Come on." Hills said softly, but then firmly reached under her forward left shoulder and helped hoist her onto her feet.

Once she reached her feet, everything felt like it moved slowly, yet somehow entirely too fast. Hills made sure she was steady then with a hand guided her towards the door, cutting around the outside of the banquet hall's layout. Her supporting entourage followed behind them and they silently cut their way through. Kristiansen appeared by the door holding a black bag of some sort and pushed through the door just ahead of them allowing a perfectly seamless exit.

A few moments later they had traversed the halls and were loading into their vans and taking off down the road.

She distantly heard her driver ask something but all Kogo could manage was to stare out the vehicle's window as the lights all over the cityscape whisked by in the dark.

A short trip later and they had offloaded into the

restricted parking garage of the hotel she was staying at to dodge the media, and ascended to the floor they had secured for her. Kogo managed to walk herself into the room before collapsing onto the floor.

Kogo awoke, and blinked, bleary eyed. Her head was still swimming a little, but she at least had the energy to lift it and look around the room. What she found was Hills, Kristiansen and a few people she didn't recognize around the front of the hotel room, idly talking.

Hills and Kirstiansen had shed their coats and ties, and looked rather relaxed. Kogo mused it may have been the first time since being groundside she had actually seen them like that.

Kogo tried to say something, and while all she managed was a pitiful little squeak, it was loud enough to immediately draw their attention. The people she didn't recognize were on her immediately.

"Hello Kogo, how are we feeling?" the one lady said as she knelt down by her.

'We', the lady had said. After a moment, Kogo recognized the inclusive speaking pattern.

"Doctors?"

"That's right. I'm Doctor Addy and that's Doctor Wilts. These gentlemen called us up while you were in transit. We got here just after you lost consciousness and have been keeping an eye on you since."

"Lost consciousness? Wha- how long- I" Kogo stammered before the Doctor placed a gentle hand on the side of her head.

"Easy, Kogo. Easy. We've been vetted by the Coalition as

the doctors to be on-call for your stay here on Earth, and got your medical history directly from Doctor Aven himself. We don't think you're sick or anything, but signs did indicate you were massively overstressed. We've got you on an IV and your schedule is cleared for at least the next few days while we keep an eye on you. Your only job right now is to rest. Is that clear?"

Kogo nodded before turning her head to look. Sure enough, she had a clear tube running off a bandaged area of her front leg, to a small stand with a digital administration system. She recognized the equipment from her stay on the Neptune forward station.

"You gave us quite a scare, ma'am. I've seen people overwork themselves into way worse states and don't want to see it happen again. Hills and I will be passing along that you need a lighter itinerary. At least for now." Kristiansen said.

Kogo couldn't help but feel there was a little bit of a rebuke in his voice.

"I'm sorry. It was the first time I've ever really had to do anything like this, and... and," Kogo began.

"Hey, hey. Easy," Hills interjected, kneeling down next to her, "He's not blaming you. None of us are. We've never had to escort an alien before, so we've all got a bit to learn about this, right? You don't need to work yourself up into a tizzy over something you couldn't control."

Kristiansen quietly nodded in affirmation.

"For now, you can stay here and relax. Mr. Kristiansen here had informed us you hadn't eaten last night and we think that may have been a contributing factor. From what we know of Lour, your metabolic process is fairly aggressive, so it no doubt going a long while without food wasn't

helping matters. We'll make sure they more rigidly schedule meals to prevent similar incidents in the future," Doctor Wilts said as he stood, eyeballing the readout on the bio monitor.

"On that note, Ma'am, your food from last night's in the fridge, but it's obviously cold. Now that you're awake, I'll order up something so you can eat. Think you're up for eating anything?"

Kogo nodded aggressively, whacking her chin on the floor.

Hills and Kristiansen chuckled, while the two doctors kept it to a professional smile.

"Think The Wall would work?" Hills said after a moment.

"Oh damn, yeah that'd be good. She needs to get a taste of that at some point while she's here anyways," Kristiansen said before politely distancing himself so he could make a call.

"The wall?" Kogo asked.

"Awesome little pizza place a few blocks away. Ever had pizza?"

"No?"

"Then you're in for a treat." Hills gave her a knowing smirk.

It was a short wait compared to the night before, but given that she hadn't eaten anything at all, her stomach was turning into knots at this point.

"How long does it take to cook pizza?" Kogo asked.

"Something like 15-20 minutes. Then they have to drive over to deliver it, but that's not exactly a long trip. Should be

here any minute now.”

Kogo nodded, but ‘any minute’ was still excruciating. Hills had offered her something to tide her over while they waited, but she had politely refused. She wanted to try this ‘treat’ and enjoy it fully.

It was about 10 minutes after she had last asked when she heard the distant, muffled sound of the elevator ding onto their floor. Kogo’s head shot up from the floor and her ears perked up.

“I hear someone coming,” she whispered, as if she didn’t want to give their ambush away.

Kristiansen nodded and moved towards the door, waited a beat and then opened it, leaving the delivery guy with his arm awkwardly in the air.

Kogo heard them begin to exchange details about payment but before she could really parse the specifics, the faintest scent of hot food hit her nose and her stomach redoubled it’s efforts to protest the lack of anything in it.

As the door clicked closed, Kristiansen and Hills carried over several wide and flat white boxes onto the nearby table before laying them flat and lifting the lids.

Kogo immediately saw a wide, flat disk. Brown on the edges and white with various meats and vegetables in the center. She rose to her feet and managed a full step forward before Kristiansen held up his hand.

“One moment, ma’am. We have to check it.”

Kogo watched painfully as he cut off a small piece of it and dropped it into a little container on a machine they kept in the room. It hummed to life and made various clicking and whirring noises for a full minute while it went to work.

Meanwhile, Kogo had begun to openly drool.

The machine chirped, and Kristiansen pressed a button

on the display on the device a few times before nodding.

"Alright, all clear. No discernable toxins or harmful chemicals."

Kristiansen plated a wedge of the food for himself, Hills and the doctors before sliding forward a plate with a slice on it for Kogo. Everyone waited for her to take the first bite.

The little slice was covered in 'cheese', which she was passingly familiar with on some sort of breaded crust, topped with little meat slices and pieces of cut vegetables. She could make out bits of wafting steam, but how hot it was no longer mattered. There was only the singular, driven motive in her mind. To consume that slice of pizza.

She snapped her head down and managed to close off almost the entire slice in her mouth in one go. A few ungraceful chomps later and she stopped. The heat was a distant sensation to the melody of flavors that hit her all at once. As Kogo soaked it in her eyes snapped shut and even then she could swear she saw stars.

A moment passed and she finished chewing and swallowed and stood there quiet in the afterglow.

"How was it?"

"I remember reading how there are humans that make it a primary task in their lives to go to various places and just eat food." Kogo whispered in an odd reverence.

"Foodies, yeah."

"I get it. I really do, now."

Hills chuckled, "So you want another slice?"

"No," Kogo said as she opened her eyes, filled with fire, "That entire one is mine. You can share the others."

After eating, everyone was relaxing and watching the hotel's

complementary TV. Kristensen ended up making the right call to order 5 extra large pizzas, because Kogo managed to polish off 2 of them on her own.

“So there’s different flavors?” Kogo asked after letting out an impressively long burp.

“Yep. Sky’s the limit, really. You have different types of crust, different sauces, cheeses and toppings. How thick the crust is, if anything is stuffed inside it, and so on.”

“We have different foods to ensure a balanced diet, primarily based on what Lour ate back on our home planet, but we don’t really have any sort of huge history of cooking or the like. Meats we ate were often uncooked - hard to cook things without hands like you humans or the Zus - though we had a wide variety of bugs, fish, vegetables and fruits.”

“Not that different from humans then, by the sounds of it. Historically, anyways.” Doctor Addy offered.

“Wait, so do you still hunt your food on the ships?” Hills asked.

Kogo shook her head.

“No. It’s done in a controlled way for certain seasonal celebrations based on our cultural holidays, but usually the food is provided pre-made and processed. It’s good, and certainly nutritious, but it lacks the same heart as something like this.” Kogo licked the last few crumbs off her plate.

“Man, I remember when I was stuck eating nothing but MREs before getting selected out. Some of those were OK, but the others were free trips to gastrointestinal nightmares.”

“Yeah, but they’re easy and give you what you need to keep going,” Kristiansen offered.

“I’m sad that I didn’t get to try whatever was for dinner last night, but I think whatever it was would’ve been lacking compared to pizza,” Kogo sighed wistfully.

“I believe it was some sort of chicken dish. I’m sure it was great, but yeah, it’s hard to top pizza after a long day. Or several days.”

Kogo watched the TV as 2 large teams of humans were chasing after a ball while some announcer excitedly relayed everything that was happening, and chuckled.

“There really isn’t anything quite like this in the Coalition.”

“What, soccer?”

“No, well, yes. But I meant just sitting and watching entertainment on something like this with everyone.”

“What do you usually do?” Hills asked.

“I suppose at its core it’s not that dissimilar, but we don’t have an entertainment device like this. We entertain each other with stories or activities. The Zus from other districts would often come by and perform shows and plays from their culture, which were always great fun. We even once had a group of Hanuu shamans come through on a mock pilgrimage and they would sing the entire time. They had to detour on the outskirts of the residential areas because their voices were so loud,” Kogo laughed quietly to herself.

“But individuals whose job was purely to entertain are rare. There’s so much to do to keep the 3 city-ships running that downtime isn’t quite as freely available as it is for humans. I know you all work hard, of course, but I understand compared to decades ago, you all worked much longer hours each day,” she continued.

“Yeah. Cultural shifts, automation and a lot of other stuff sorta all came together and clipped how many hours the average person tends to work. There’s lots of time for sitting back and relaxing, and so there’s lots of demand for people to

provide entertainment.” Kristiansen nodded sagely.

“When I was flying down to Earth, my digital assistant told me there’s an incalculable amount of music in human history. I’d imagine that focus on entertainment is part of why.”

Everyone sat in an easy silence for a bit, watching the sport unfold on TV before Kogo broke the silence again.

“Doctor Addy. I know I was supposed to rest for the next several days to recover.”

“Yes...” Doctor Addy warily answered.

“Would it be against that if I were to try playing something like this?” She directed her nose towards the screen.

The doctor thought about it for a moment, glancing to her partner. After a moment, she nodded.

“Yes, I think as long as you don’t push yourself too hard, some recreational activities like a sport would likely be a good idea. You’re only just beginning to properly adjust to Earth’s gravity, so some physical exercise would be a good idea to help bolster that. So long as these gentlemen feel it’s safe, and your condition allows it,” she answered, waving a hand towards Hills and Kirstiansen.

“I can make a call in the morning and we can get a stadium locked off, I bet. It’s off season for the local teams anyways, so... yeah, that’d probably work.” Hills answered after a moment of thought.

“It reminds me of one sport we used to play when I was young, so I want to see how different it is,” Kogo excitedly replied.

“Oh? How was it played? Did you kick it? Or..” Doctor Wilts asked.

“No. There was a central pole or column in the play area.

And one would try and headbutt the ball at the top. Others would attempt to intercept the ball, often jumping off of one another to gain enough height. The most skilled could spin the ball as it was struck, causing its path to be erratic. It was intense to play, but was always fun when we had a large group. Even the adults would join in."

"That sounds pretty awesome, actually. You'll have to teach us some time," Hills said.

"Deal." Kogo smiled.

After the game ended, the two doctors gave Kogo another checkup, and passed along some necessary supplies and instructions to her two guards before excusing themselves to nearby rooms on the same floor.

After Kristiansen clicked the door closed and walked back over to one of the beds and sat down on it.

"Erik. Samuel." Kogo asked.

"Ma'am?" they both responded at once.

"I'm sorry."

"Ma'am, yo—" Kristiansen began, before being cut off.

"No. I put an undue burden on both of you, and Doctor Addy and Doctor Wilts. I should have spoken up when I was breaking down, but didn't want to look weak in front of the other delegates. In the end, I just ended up pushing myself too hard and made it worse. It isn't the first time," Kogo said, as she nodded her nose towards her prosthesis that was leaned up against the wall.

"I'll try to be more mindful of how I'm feeling in the future and let you know if something is wrong. I've learned a lot about humans so far, and one thing that continues to shine through is their terrifying stamina and resilience.

Starting today, I'll strive to work at a healthier pace, even if it isn't quite as fast. And I hope I can continue to rely on you to help me out if I push too far again. No doubt our days together going forward will be busy," Kogo said, looking back and forth between them.

"You didn't need to ask, ma'am. We're both behind you. But we both also appreciate you thinking about yourself. I said it before. Stuff like that can wipe out career politicians. There's no shame in taking some time to ensure your health," Kristiansen said while Hills sat nearby, nodding in agreement.

Kogo had been holding a little bit of guilt in since she awoke, but didn't want to further worry the doctors who had already been called out of their way to help. But with that affirmation, she let it go. She was in good hands.

"Thank you. So, honest opinion. How was my speech?" Kogo asked.

"Honestly, pretty good. I didn't ask before, but did you write it yourself?" Hills answered.

"Mostly. I'd been working on a draft back on the lunar base, but your local government lent some professional writer expertise to help me finalize it. I liked it, but I've never done public speaking before, let alone represented the entire Coalition, so I've been... stressing out a little in how it was received." Kogo said.

"Well, we liked it, and I certainly saw a number of the other reps quite taken with it. If you're really curious I'm sure there'll be news coverage and analysis of it for the next week at least, so we can catch up on how the public is taking it tomorrow. But for now, I think it's best if you turn in and rest." Kristiansen said as he stood and walked over to the nearby lamp to click it off.

Kogo snorted in amusement.

“Yes, that sounds like a good plan to me.”

Kogo laid her head down on the cushy pad they laid out for her on the floor, and after only a few moments, she was asleep.

12

Tabitha watched Arorm step through the doorway and followed after. The walls of the interior looked to be some sort of stucco layered over the same metals and ceramics that made up the exterior. The floor had the same earthy coating as the pathways outside as well. As Arorm followed her mother around the layout of their house, Tabitha realized that the layout, internally, was more or less circular. The landing had entryways to the left and right, which entered rooms that then bridged further into the building and circled around to the back.

As they walked, Tabitha noted various lowset cots made of padding and some sort of fibrous plant material. Beds? General seating? Something to ask later. Along the walls, she noted crudely painted tapestries. The artwork was almost caveman like in its simplicity, but used bright colors that

made the various depictions stand out. Renditions of Lour fighting other Lour. Lour fighting Zus, and Hanuu. Various metallic decorative pieces with gems also were gently draped between them to form a latticework of glistening strings. As they moved further into the back, a thin, smoky haze began to build. The smell of it was sharp, but almost incense-like.

As they reached the back of the house, a double-wide opening lead into the main living area of the house. The center had a large fire burning, and encircled around it were rows of similar cots to what she saw in the other rooms. The smoky haze was strong here, but Tabitha noted a chimney right above the fire that vented out into the outside.

Seated upon the various cots were nearly a dozen other Lour, who's eyes snapped to Tabitha the moment she entered their view. Arorm pause at the threshold and brought her mouth right next to Tabitha's ear.

"Be polite. My family is strict."

Tabitha nodded and followed Arorm into the main room. The Lour that greeted them at the front door jerked its nose at one of the cots close to the fire and proceeded around the circle to a notably extra-fluffed and padded cot in the back. Tabitha took her seat - which was more comfortable than she expected, and crossed her legs. Quiet murmurs in a particularly gruff and throaty language she didn't understand broke out among the others in the room, but settled quickly as Arorm took her place next to Tabitha.

"Mother, my siblings. This is the human Ambassador. She desired to eat with us," Arorm spoke.

The gray Lour - her mother - grumbled something.

"I will speak in common so she may understand. It is only polite," Arorm answered.

“It would be, yes,” her mother returned, this time in Common, much to Tabitha’s relief.

Her mother proceeded to sit upright in her cot, looking at Tabitha overtop the firepit for a moment before speaking again.

“Does it have a name?”

Tabitha glanced to Arorm, who gave a simple nod. Tabitha looked back to the aged Lour, swallowed, then spoke.

“Greetings my lady. I am Tabitha Winters, Ambassador of Earth. I have been selected by our governments to represent us to the Coalition and desired to learn about the peoples I would be working with going forward.”

The elderly Lour didn’t even blink, so Tabitha continued.

“Your daughter, Arorm, is serving as my guard and guide, of which I am most thankful. She has indicated that your food is good, and that I should eat with you all. I thank you for your hospitality and graciousness,” Tabitha finished, and bowed her head.

Tabitha held her head low for several seconds, and as she didn’t hear anything, lifted it back up to return the gaze of the Lour. After another few seconds of what she could only presume was judging, Arorm’s mother let out a sharp snort.

“When we had heard about the battle on the planet we stopped near, with these humans, all the news was that they were barbarians. They fought like gods of battle, could not be killed, and could not be reasoned with.”

The Lour rose off her cot and began a slow, plodding walk around the pit towards Tabitha. Tabitha shot a quick glance to Arorm, but Arorm hadn’t moved a millimeter.

“Many thought it was misinformation, of course. We Lour have fought countless battles. Bloody, terrible battles.

Battles amongst ourselves, battles amongst the others that now make up the Coalition. But then information began to flow in more. Thousands. Tens of thousands dead. In mere cycles. Many suspected that the Coalition would meet its end to this unstoppable scourge. And then, as quickly as the fighting began, it ended.”

The Lour had made her way around and was now standing over Tabitha, looking down at her, and Tabitha began to sweat, leaning back out of reflex.

“I don’t get to see many videos from the Threespus news network, but what I saw perplexed me. Small, bipedal creatures. Too small to be a threat. But the combat recordings did not lie. Untold death. Felling blows and bodies in droves of Coalition warriors. I lost a few distant family members to that battle. Then, the Threespus and the council told us that peace was achieved, and we would be working with those monsters. Many were afraid of what letting in such horrid, barbarous monsters like that would lead to.”

The Lour held it’s gaze for a moment longer, then slowly, with some effort, lowered herself down to sit next to Tabitha.

“But the one before me speaks well. Its accent is odd, but it knows to be respectful and kind-spoken. I am not so stupid as to attack an unarmed representative to get revenge for my wounds and invite greater pain. And beyond that, you interest me, human. I am Rik Ross Grou, mother and leader of this family and speaker of Clan Grou. I would enjoy hearing what you have to say as we eat. None should work or entreat on an empty stomach.” the Lour concluded before rumbling something to another of the Lour in the room.

The Lour, which had a surprisingly light tan fur tone, and likely the smallest in the room, rose up and left through the entryway.

"I apologize, but that is not Common, correct?" Tabitha spoke, after a moment.

"Correct. It is the traditional regional dialect of our tribe, from back on our home world," Arorm answered, "I believe you would have difficulty learning it."

Tabitha sat upright and doffed at her shirt in a showy gesture.

"I'll have you know I can speak a total of 3 languages. You may be surprised at how fast I can pick it up."

Tabitha looked to Arorm and saw a slight twinkle of amusement in her eye even as she snorted a dismissal.

A few moments later, and the tan Lour returned pulling a small cart with plates of what was likely food on it. It wheeled it around the circle, stopping first at Rik, then Tabitha, and so on around the room before it finished, taking its own plate and sitting.

Tabitha looked at the round, metal plate and tried to make heads or tails of the food upon it. She noted immediately a gray-pink slab of something on the bottom, and heaped upon it was a mixture of small grains and blue and purple chunks. The serving was comically overlarge for her, but looked to be about right for a Lour, given the size difference. Tabitha looked to her side and saw Arorm digging into the food quickly, but fairly quietly.

When she turned to Rik, however, she saw that the older Lour had slid her plate close to the fire.

"I wasn't sure if I was supposed to cook it or not," Tabitha said out loud, before she too, slid her plate forward.

"The younger don't need to bother, they have strong jaws and teeth. I am old, and prefer my meat softer," Rik

replied.

Tabitha nodded and sat to watch the fire have its way with the food. When Rik pulled her plate back, Tabitha followed suit.

The grains and colorful chunks deepened in color, browning slightly. And the meat was now a more familiar color as well. She wasn't sure what meat it was, but it certainly looked more like white meat she was used to back home.

Tabitha sat for a moment, before working to tear a piece of the meat off, and popped it into her mouth for a moment before spitting it back out.

"Do you dislike it?" Rik asked.

"Hm? Oh! No, no! It's not that. It's, uh, a survival trick we were taught. No doubt there will be foods that don't sit well with our... alien physiology. So there's a few steps I was taught to be safe and test things first before digging in," Tabitha replied.

"Hm. Humans are wiser than I had thought," Rik said before returning to her plate.

Tabitha looked to Arorm, who gave a small nod of approval before returning to her food.

After a few minutes had passed and no negative reactions she could detect, Tabitha popped the piece of meat back into her mouth and chewed this time.

It wasn't as juicy or flavorful as Earth poultry, but it had a satisfying chew to it. Tabitha swallowed the morsel, and again waited a few minutes. When that passed, she concluded that it was as safe as she could likely hope for, and tore off a larger piece and dug in.

After food had concluded, Tabitha and her hosts had begun to trade stories. Tabitha explained her exploits in studying on Mars, earning her way by working as a Colonial Guard. The connections she made at school allowed her to jumpstart her political career, and when the fight with the Coalition started, she pushed for peace.

“I mean, it was our first contact with aliens. We’d be idiots if the first thing we did was kill them,” Tabitha loudly rambled, “Life from other worlds! Advanced technology! What was their history like? Their language? Their culture! All of it could have been lost!”

Tabitha caught herself as she realized she was getting herself worked up and sat back down on her cot.

“That is to say, destroying the Coalition would easily have been the single worst mistake in human history. Which is saying something, because we’ve had quite a number of them. I couldn’t imagine that happening, so I pulled every string I could touch to put pressure towards peace. Of course, it seems like a number of people in much higher positions than me had already settled on it, so it worked out in the end,” Tabitha chuckled, “But because I put myself out there, I got spotted when they were looking for people to be diplomats to the Coalition, and got enrolled into that. And now here I am.”

“Alone?” one of the Lour across the room asked.

Tabitha shook her head.

“No, there was supposed to be another Ambassador in this first wave, but he fell ill just before we were to ship out. He should be arriving here once he recovers.”

“We Lour have far too much history to cover in a single sitting. You may have spotted the tapestries in the other rooms which tell of some of our Clan’s greatest

achievements. Was there any specific story that grabbed your interest?" Rik asked.

Tabitha thought about it for a moment, thinking back to the various stories portrayed, before one caught in her mind.

"How did the Lour meet the Threespus?"

"Hmm, I suppose that is one of the most impactful moments in our recent history. A worthy question. Our people lived well on our home world. We had agriculture, hunted, lived in buildings made of mud and stone. Largely tribal and territorial, skirmishes were regular between clans fighting for resources and land, but rarely devolved into full war. It was better to control and subjugate other clans than eradicate them, you see," Rik began to speak, staring into the fires as she reminisced.

"One day, these massive city ships arrived from the sky. Some guessed they must be what the gods looked like, others some sort of alien creations from the stars. Some now would argue both were correct. They came to us and after only a few meetings with our tribal leaders could speak our language, and understand our customs. They offered us a place at their side in exchange for better lives than we had, fighting over meat and scrap."

"Uplifting. I'd heard the term mentioned once or twice in reports. I believe the idea was humans would be uplifted as well, if our first contact had gone smoother," Tabitha interjected.

"Yes, that is what I had heard. Strong, battle-ready creatures that could make the Coalition even stronger. We Lour were the first. The Threespus controlled their ships via the Mob and Glul creatures from their home world. Subservient animals that were skilled, but unintelligent. We Lour were seen as proper allies. The Threespus are ill ready

to fight, you see. But we Lour had a long history of skirmishes and battles among our kind, and the Threespus saw our strength as an asset. They would uplift us, give us better lives than we could ever dream, and in exchange we would guard them as they traveled the stars," Rik continued.

"Did everyone agree?"

"No. Many chose to stay. My grandmother was there for the uplifting, and had passed down the stories. Many thousands agreed, but many thousands chose to stay and keep their lives where they were born."

"And the Threespus were fine with that?" Tabitha asked.

"Yes. The Threespus are considerate and far-thinking. Individuals that did not wish to go would have sowed discord and chaos. Letting it be voluntary ensured that only those that would be willing to work under the Threespus would be there. It made the uplift relatively simple from what history tells."

"So you were their soldiers."

"Some. Others that proved themselves smart were tasked with more learned jobs."

"So the Threespus decide your jobs for you, then?" Tabitha broke her gaze from the fire and looked to Rik.

"Decide may be over-strong. But they observe and test each member of the Coalition as they grow and go through general education. When they are old enough, they are given a list of jobs they are best suited for."

"But what if you don't want to do any of those? Isn't choice important? The ability to pursue what you want to do?"

"Are all humans free to choose what they want to do?" Rik finally looked Tabitha in the eyes.

"Well... mostly. Generally, someone is free to choose

their career, but there are consequences of that. It may not work out, and they may have to get a different job. It could be that there's no need for it, or it's possible to be lost in a sea of others trying to get into the same scene. So while everyone's free to choose, a lot have to be more practical and choose something they aren't as interested in," Tabitha responded after a moment.

"And that uncertainty is itself a problem. Choices can be good, but if it destabilizes, what good is it? The Threespus allow choice within reasonable limits. If a Lour wishes to be a painter but has no aptitude for it, does it make sense to spend resources and waste time for them to fail? The Threespus don't see that as practical."

"That seems... hm. Unfair isn't the right word. But I can't help but feel it's wrong. What if someone's true potential isn't unveiled until they get a chance to try?"

"Then their talent remains hidden, but they can perform other tasks they are still suited for. The Threespus uplifted my people. Our lifespans have tripled, our education has grown beyond what our elders could have ever dreamed. We eat well and do satisfying, meaningful work. And the Threespus merely require we do the work that is necessary to keep the Coalition going strong. It may not match to your human ideals, but it is a better life than we Lour could have ever hoped back on our home world," Rik said, before turning back to the fire.

Tabitha looked around the room and saw the other Lour in apparent agreement. Even Arorm nodded her head at Tabitha.

"I suppose that makes for a fair trade," Tabitha said after a pause.

After a few more stories of her family and clan's exploits, Rik left to retire and rest. Arorm took that as an excuse to finally break from story time, and ushered Tabitha towards the exit. As they worked their way back around the circular layout, they passed a large cot, even more lofted and padded than in the main room with Rik laying upon it. She cracked an eye at them as they passed.

"I cannot say I have any love for your kind, human. Wounds are too fresh and your sort are too fearsome a creature so small. But I respect you. Your kind and yourself. Know that Rik Ross Grou considers you to be an ally, and her family will protect you while you are here," Rik said as her voice trailed off into sleep.

"Thank you," Tabitha whispered before leaving.

When they finally made it back outside, Tabitha noted a number of Lour and Zus that had been idly chatting in the main path scurried off out of the way as they exited. Gossips are apparently the same regardless of where they're from, Tabitha mused to herself.

"Come. We can go to the communal pool and clean up, then return to your room," Arorm said, nodding her nose down the road.

"Lead the way," Tabitha said with a smile.

As they wandered the path, many members of the Coalition that littered the streets stopped to gawk at her. They largely kept their distance, no doubt due to Arorm's presence, but a few stepped forward and leaned their head forward, which Tabitha took to pressing her forehead to theirs in return. The few Zus along their path bowed, which Tabitha did a simple

bow at the waist in return as well.

While slow going due to all the attention, they were still making a steady pace down the road, when Arorm ground to a halt in her tracks. Tabitha looked to her guard to ask what was wrong, when she saw the crowd breaking ahead of them.

Working through the bodies in the street ahead, Tabitha spotted a Kyrulie advancing towards them. Shortly afterwards, the acrid smell of it, which cut through the dusty, earthy smell that Tabitha had grown used to for the district, hit her nose.

Tabitha began to recoil, ever so slightly when Arorm hissed to her under her breath.

“That is a Councilor, representative of the Kyrulie. Be respectful!”

Tabitha stopped, and then stepped forward just as the large creature reached them. She had seen them in passing at the welcoming meeting, but they quickly scurried off once it was completed. This was her first time seeing one up close.

It was almost 5 meters long. The front part raised off the ground as it moved, slightly higher than Tabitha’s head, while the back portion moved along the ground like a snake. Along its front ran an array of manipulator arms of decreasing size as they went down towards its stomach, and its face was a multitude of eyes and a very insect-like mouth. Its shiny dark tan chitin completed the very bug-like, alien look.

Arorm took a half-step forward, which in turn caused the Kyrulie to stop its advance.

“Greetings Councilor, what brings you here?”

It did not speak, but instead raised the multitude of frontal limbs which began to wave around erratically in

front of it. Tabitha could only guess what it was attempting to communicate. In addition to its flailings, she could swear the pungent odor it brought intensified.

Tabitha stole a glance at Arorm, who was watching it carefully, but didn't look defensive.

After a few moments of its continuous flailing, a small robotic voice began to emit from it, speaking rough, broken common.

"Greeting. Human? Winter. How. Enjoy. Coalition?"

"How... how am I enjoying my stay?" Tabitha asked, puzzling out the broken wording.

The Kyrulie did nothing but stare at her.

After a pause, Tabitha decided that was probably what it wanted, and shifted into diplomatic mode.

"I have enjoyed my time so far, Councilor, thank you. Was there something you needed from me?"

"You. Visit. Kyrulie. We. Eat. Too. All. Eat. As. One." it spoke after another session of incomprehensible flailing, without breaking eye contact with Tabitha.

"I believe the Councilor wishes to invite you to a Kyrulie hive to eat with them as you did with my family," Arorm interpreted, "Unfortunately Councilor, your diet would no doubt be dangerous for the Ambassador, so we must decline the offer. I can arrange a more normal formal meeting on another day."

The Kyrulie sat there, staring at Tabitha, unmoving beyond the occasional flick of a forelimb for almost a full minute before it began to gesture again. Even if it meant no harm, Tabitha's discomfort was growing worse by the second, and she began to sweat.

"Sad. Yes. Do."

"Of course," Arorm looked at Tabitha briefly before

returning her attention to the Councilor, "Now, if you would excuse us, I must return the Ambassador to her quarters."

Tabitha dipped her head slightly and then let Arorm walk between them and lead her back up the pathway towards the tram station, ending their conversation. After a few steps, Tabitha glanced over her shoulder to see what it was doing. Sure enough, it stood there, staring at them for another minute or so before turning around and returning the way it came.

They walked in silence until reaching the entryway to the trams, with Tabitha only waving in passing to the Lour that spotted them. Only when they got on the tram and Arorm told it to head back to the residential district where Tabitha's office was located, did Tabitha finally relax, collapsing onto the floor and dry heaving.

"Not an unusual reaction for a first meeting with a Kyrulie. Are you alright?" Arorm said as she lowered down onto the floor next to Tabitha.

"God they're so much creepier up close! I know that's rude or whatnot but..." Tabitha exclaimed as she shivered, "And why do I feel so nauseous?"

"Normally they communicate through pheromones. It often causes negative reactions the first time anyone encounters it, from allergies to nausea to worse. You did well to maintain your composure."

"And what was with the-," Tabitha asked as she waggled her arms in front of her.

"The hand gesture language that one was doing was something the Threespus designed for them so they could communicate normally. Well, more normally. There is a little computer that analyses their forelimb movement and translates it into common. To say it is a challenging task to

translate would be understating. They breathe through their skin, and as such have no vocal cords or means of formulating complex language. They can expel air in a sort of hissing sound, but that is not a good means of speaking.”

Tabitha leaned forward and rested her head on Arorm’s shoulder and took a long, deep breath to center herself.

“But it could understand you?”

“Yes. Kyrulie are intelligent. Fiercely so. However the way they think is quite different from you or me, similar to how communicating is so different. They are certainly smart, and that Councilor was likely smarter than us both. But Kyrulie often keep to themselves on their districts of the city ships unless there is a need to leave. It looks like that one - or maybe several reached a consensus - felt it was worthwhile to meet with you directly. I will look into why later.”

“So no dinner with it then?”

Arorm snorted a laugh.

“No. Their diet is primarily various types of fungus, most of which are toxic to nearly every other form of life the Coalition has encountered. If not that, they occasionally partake in meats. It doesn’t matter where it’s from. Also they cannibalize their dead as part of funeral rites.”

Tabitha felt her stomach lurch again.

“So, no. You will not be eating anything from their districts. Though I would advise it would be a good gesture to send a message thanking for the offer regardless.”

“Yeah, that’s a good point. For tonight though, I think I need to get back and take a long shower. Even if it didn’t mean anything by it, it made my skin crawl. Something I’ll have to work on, I think,” Tabitha pivoted her position on the floor of the tram to rest the back of her head against Arorm’s shoulder.

"I've guarded several before, and I had the same reaction. You are not alone."

"Good to know. And Arorm?"

"Yes?" Arorm craned her neck around to look at the human.

"Unexpected guest aside, thanks for dinner."

13

“So, is there anything you wish to see first?” Manus asked

“Hard to pick, if I’m being honest,” Alan answered before pausing, “Though I guess if I had to pick, how the gravity works. I’ve already put together it doesn’t operate the way your shuttles do.”

“An astute observation my friend,” Manus cooed before beginning to drift down the hallway, “We can start with the higher level explanation first before going to see the core ourselves.”

“Ooh, exciting.”

“To begin with, the core is not only the source of gravity for each of the city-ships, but also the primary power source, as well as a sort of high-energy fabricator,” Manus began as they weaved their way through the various, nearly identical hallways.

“Quite a lot for a single generator to do, isn’t it?” Alan

asked as he idly looked around.

“Indeed it is. I can explain more once we get to one of the control centers for it. It would be easier to explain with visual aids.”

“Makes sense. Lead on,” Alan gestured down the hall with a smile.

A good bit of walking and a nearly indeterminate number of turns and corners later, they arrived at a long hallway with a set of double doors at the end. It was long enough, in fact, that the curvature of the city-ship could be noticed.

“Isolated for safety and security, I presume?” Alan asked as they began the walk.

“Yes. Even if the species of the Coalition are subservient, any attacks from outside forces would need to be delayed and resisted as long as possible to ensure stability. After all, if the core were to be destroyed the results could be quite catastrophic for the city-ship.”

“Our modern fusion reactors are innately failsafe, but even with that, catastrophic damage to them can cause a large plasma decompression event and cause copious damage to the facility or ship. To say nothing of how fission reactors of old could melt down,” Alan commented.

“Ah yes. Humanity had a few nuclear meltdown events, if I recall correctly,” Manus idly replied back as they began to draw near the doors.

Alan slowed a half pace.

“You... know about that? I understood the Coalition was still working to get interconnected to our networking infrastructure.”

“That should be resolved shortly, of course, our engineers are running network trials as we speak. Within a

few Earth-days we should be able to begin more open transmission of data. But yes, we learned about that. And a number of other very helpful things about human history and culture," Manus answered.

"May I ask how?"

"Oh, yes. Some of the template electronic equipment that was sent over to provide as testbeds for integration contained 'Encyclopedia' documents. An incredible treasure trove of information. We concluded it was left there intentionally to help bridge some gaps."

Internally, Alan cross-referenced data he had about the Engineering Cooperation Initiative to see if that was intentional or not. Running up empty on any notes about it, he concluded it was either a convenient mistake, or - more likely - someone trying to be helpful and uploading a copy for them to find. He'd have to fact check that with Operations when he got a solid signal.

"I think I'd heard something about that, yes. Good to hear you found it helpful. Anything else in particular that stood out to you?" Alan bluffed.

"Anything else! Almost too much to discuss!" Manus eagerly bobbed, "While we were always going to work with Humanity for mutual benefit, it has allowed us to fill in a number of blind spots we were unsure of about how humanity worked."

As they reached the door, Alan noted a rare sight of fully armed and armored Lour flanking each side of the double doors.

"My Sovereign," they said in unison as Manus floated past them, entering an air lock, without even passing a look to Alan.

"Which goes back to my original question. Anything you

found especially interesting?"

"A few things stood out. Humanity's heavily militaristic history stretching back thousands of years of nearly non-stop war was astonishing. War is, of course, a fairly common event in the galaxy. Resources limitations, bids for dominion, political and ideological differences all drive conflict."

"No different than us humans, I suppose," Alan interjected as they waited for the security check to clear.

"True, however galactic conflicts are, historically, short affairs. A battle is fought, casualties are rapidly peaked, and a resolution is concluded. Life is too delicate to be truly disposed to something as violent as full scale war. Except when it comes to humans. Human physiology being as unusually resilient as it is has clearly allowed it to be more resistant to the horrors, and more inclined to revisit it on the regular."

"I can't disagree," Alan allowed, "I know from autopsy reports of Coalition soldiers whose bodies were recovered after the conflict on Pluto that all Coalition species were comparatively frail. Capable of being easily killed via relatively - by human standards - mundane damage from the shock and trauma alone. Unpleasantly gruesome stuff."

"Quite so, yes. And that holds true nearly universally as far as we Threespus have seen. Some are more resilient to damage from fighting than others, but humans seem to be an outlier in how much they can persevere in the face of catastrophic trauma, and their endurance."

"That's surprising"

"Is it? Even on Earth, by reports native fauna are similarly frail when it comes to shock and trauma. Most creatures on it are biologically delicate compared to humans."

The doors chirped and opened, allowing the duo to enter the main control station proper.

“Hm. I guess that’s true.”

“Of course, humanity’s developments allowed it to push even further beyond, to the point of replacing weakened or damaged parts, genetic engineering and so on. If humanity was dangerous before, it certainly is moreso now. It truly is fortunate that the Coalition was able to reach a peaceable resolution.”

As they entered the main of the circular room, Alan took stock of it. There was a lowered platform in the center, with a large central holographic display. Alan recognized the projected sphere to be the city-ship they were currently in.

“Eternal Progress?” Alan read from the display.

“Indeed. The Coalition is made up of 3 ships. Ever-Marches-Forward, Eternal-Progress, and Infinite-Horizons. As you noted, we are currently on Eternal-Progress.” Manus replied as it drifted over to the central hologram.

“Quite hopeful names.”

“We were a hopeful people,” Manus flatly answered.

“Were?”

“We can get into that another time, Alan. You wished to know about the core? I can show you here.”

Alan stepped down onto the lower section and approached the main holographic display.

Manus extended a little manipulator arm and tapped on it, and layers of the sphere peeled away one after another. Outer shell, transit systems, living districts, maintenance systems and tunnels, and finally power and fabrication.

‘Power and fabrication’ was by far the most complex structure of all the layers by a long shot. A fractal lattice of pipes, batteries, converters, multiple different particle

accelerators that ran the entire perimeter of the layer and more.

But at the center was by far the most interesting element. A micro black hole.

Alan spent 15 full seconds trying to compute how that was possible. The basic premise, of course, wasn't especially magical. Any amount of matter that is compressed past the Schwarzschild radius is qualified as a black hole. Gravity would naturally come from any sufficiently dense body, and being located at the center of the ship means that no additional power needs to be expended to keep everything falling down like on a planet.

A black hole's usefulness as a power source had been well hypothesized in science and fiction alike. Allowing matter to enter the accretion around the event horizon and accelerate would generate light and heat, which could then be harvested. In practice, the city-ships operated like miniature Dyson spheres. Or maybe Penrose Spheres. The important part was it effectively allowed the ships to generate "infinite" energy as long as the black hole had mass and rotation. A powersource that could last them trillions of years.

'Fabrication', itself, then would imply a number of things with a captured black hole as well. The conditions inside an active accretion disk would allow them to collide matter in ways that was simply impossible under normal circumstances - even in particle accelerators. There was a litany of papers about hypothetical materials that could be fabricated in incredibly high energy environments. Exotic metals and the like was an obvious example. And with an effectively infinite energy furnace the sky was the limit. Even certain types of strange matter could be made.

"This is incredible. The possibilities that something like

this opens up... it's almost impossible to fathom it all."

"Yes. You wanted to know how the core worked, and this is the secret. Captured micro black holes. As said, it provides gravity, power, and fabrication possibilities. Each of the city-ships has one."

"How common is this sort of technology. On a galactic scale, I mean?" Alan asked, his mind still computing the sorts of possibilities this revelation opened up.

"To the best of our knowledge, it is exclusive to the Threespus. To the Coalition."

"Must make you quite the hot commodity," Alan joked with a small smile.

He turned to look at Manus, which floated, unmoving, 'looking' at him.

"More than you would know, yes."

Even through the digitized voice, Alan detected a pang of...sorrow? Regret?

"What does that mean?"

"Alan, when we came to the Solar system, it was with the intent of working with, and ultimately uplifting humanity. To have humanity join the Coalition. We had detected some degraded, old signals from that area of the galaxy, and given the bits were were able to decipher determined humanity to be a capable, intelligent, moderately technological species. Much like the Zus when we found them."

Alan noted there were, in fact, several Zus in the control center tapping away at various terminals. If they heard the reference to them, they didn't show it.

"The technology we were blessed with. That we made. Opened up an incredible number of opportunities, as you noted. Easy fabrication of difficult materials. The ability to

freely traverse the stars in a way that was quite rare outside of system-wide developments.”

Manus rotated to look at the hologram in front of them and Alan could almost imagine it akin to an old man reminiscing of the past.

“But that sort of technology gets attention as well. While we went from system to system and offered services - power, fabrication and more - we Threespus became quite well known around certain parts of the galaxy. In some ways, it was good. It ensured those that needed our services were aware of us and we could pay them a visit. But in others-”

“In other cases, there were those that wanted the technology for themselves,” Alan finished the thought.

“Yes.”

“Pirates and profiteers? Or some galactic nation?”

“Ultimately, all of the above,” Manus replied.

“With your advanced technology, you couldn’t defend yourself?”

“We could defend in skirmishes, certainly. But as you can see,” Manus bobbed up and down to draw attention to its physical form, “We are hardly fit for war. To say nothing of the fact that our ascension via a technological singularity ensured that no additional Threespus would ever exist. Every loss of one of my people is permanent. And crippling.”

“So you opted to avoid conflict where possible.”

“Precisely. However, at a certain point our technology became so desired that it earned the specific targeted interest of multiple systems and nations. Some professed out of an interest in protection, but even if that held true, it was still motivated in their own gain.”

“Having your people under their thumb would be incredibly convenient, no doubt,” Alan returned his gaze to

the hologram.

“Yes. So we opted to formulate our own nation.”

“The Coalition.”

“Yes. Though it wasn’t called that at first. We found species and planets with intelligent, strong forms of life, travelling system to system. Offered them the opportunity to be uplifted and join the Coalition. Some declined, others joined. It was always a choice.”

“And if they refused?”

“They were left alone, and we left their system.”

“I’m somewhat surprised you wouldn’t try forcing them, or enslaving them. Though I also certainly approve of the approach you did take.”

“Forcing or enslaving encourages unrest. Divisiveness. This could come back to hurt us in the long run. We are a practical people, Alan. The Threespus consider the pros and cons of any given action and choose the one that yields the best results for us.”

“You said something similar, back when I was a captive, if I recall. How you could’ve dissected me, but chose a more practical option,” Alan recalled.

“Correct. We targeted any sufficiently intelligent, physically strong species that had not yet hit a technological level as to contest us. Humanity was certainly more advanced than we had anticipated and caused quite a number of problems for us on our arrival.”

“If you knew what you know now about humanity, would you have come?”

“No.”

Alan laughed, “Quite a harsh assessment.”

“Humans are incredibly strong willed, and many of its cultures strive for a strong individualism. Combine that

with its thirst for combat that is unrivaled in the galaxy, and it's near interstellar technological base, it certainly wouldn't have been a good choice based on our agreed upon parameters when we started the Coalition. That, and there's too many to all take even if you desired it."

Alan laughed again.

"However, tides of fate what they are, we are now - if not allies - peaceful neighbors. Working with humanity and uplifting them in more... selective ways is the most practical course of action. I know that the Council has agreed that the Coalition would benefit greatly from a proper alliance with humanity. And we Threespus agree. So anything that can be done to create a strong, prosperous relation is what we will do now."

"I'm surprised you didn't just jump back out into space when it all went south."

Manus gestured its manipulator arm towards a door on the far side of the room, and Alan began the walk over to it.

"This is the way to the maintenance and observation deck of the core itself. I'm sure you wish to see it."

Alan nodded and entered the lift, which quickly began its descent.

"And the subject of fleeing had come up, of course. However, a Hemni-Sesson-Klau tunnel requires an exorbitant amount of energy and takes a long period of time and externally sourced material to power. If we felt it was the best option rather than establishing peace, we would have collected the required material from Pluto and its moon and performed a jump back out of system."

"Hemni-Sesson-Klau tunnel?" Alan asked.

"Named after the Threespus scientists that made our ability to freely FTL travel a reality. I'm unsure if humanity

has a similar concept. We've not finished parsing everything from the Encyclopedia yet, to say nothing of all the information that wasn't stored within it. But in short, we create a stable tunnel that bridges 2 points of spacetime with the 3 city-ships powering it. One slips through, and 'holds the door' open for the others to follow suit."

"I can't even imagine the energy requirements," Alan amazed.

"It is high. Hence why we would have needed to farm a substantial amount of material from Pluto to inject into the core's accretion disk. This gives us a sort of short-lived turbo charge we can pull a nearly incalculable amount of energy from. Most intergalactic civilizations use a similar method, but it is anchored to the specific system."

"So you would normally jump from system to system if it has the proper infrastructure?" Alan observed.

"Correct. The Coalition is special in that it is able to do this freely."

"I imagine that came in handy when shaking off pursuers."

"Yes. Though it won't last forever." Manus answered flatly.

Alan was about to ask what that meant when the lift pulled to a stop.

"And here we are, on the observation deck," Manus announced.

Manus floated over to a nearby panel, and pressed a button. Gradually over the next few seconds, the floor Alan stood on depolarized, and brought into view the core of the city-ship itself. It was obviously a long distance off, and by his estimates, the event horizon of the black hole itself was less than a meter but the inky black mote stood out easily

from the brightened backdrop of the inner boundary of the city-ship's primary shell.

Around it swarmed a bright, but not blinding, accretion disk. A steady feed of matter and light into the system that kept the black hole 'fed' to keep everything powered.

"The panels are still polarized to protect vision. It's much, much brighter if viewed directly. This deck is also heavily shielded from radiation. Without it, even the electronics in your body would be fried and cease to function," Manus explained.

Alan stood and stared past his feet and watched the spectacle for a long while in silence.

Many minutes passed before Manus broke the silence.

"Earlier, you had asked what subjects had interested me most. But there was one other that stood out, especially when lensed against things General Misha Orlov had said"

"Oh?" Alan inquired, finally breaking his eyes away from the core.

"Artificial Intelligence. A.I."

Alan avoided outwardly displaying any reaction, but a number of subroutines immediately began risk and caution assessments.

"What about it? I take it there was at least a few pages in that Encyclopedia about it at least."

"Yes. Between that and our improvements of collecting and processing unencrypted communications transmissions from deeper in the Solar system clued us in a lot on the subject. No doubt humanity's proclivity towards utilizing AI for optimizing and solving a lot of high level concepts has allowed a rapid development in its recent history. From a surface reading, AI revolutionized construction, sociology, medicine, weapons technology, space navigation, power

needs and more. I wouldn't claim it to be a panacea to all problems a species may face, but what we've learned already indicates it to be nearly as much a game changer for humanity as their unusual resilience. AI has made appearances in other galactic nations, but it is rare, and not so widely utilized as in humanity's case," Manus said.

"Yeah. Everything from high level super computer clusters all the way down to simple digital assistants to help manage an individual's day-to-day tasks. AI is good at crunching raw data much faster to see connections and patterns than regular people are. It isn't that AI does anything special, really, but it's really good at pattern recognition, and more importantly it does it crazy fast," Alan confirmed.

"And more human-like AI?" Manus asked.

Alan grew more uncomfortable and returned to staring at the core.

"There are cases of personal assistant AI that can act as passable stand-ins for real people. The personality behavior is generally fairly rudimentary for commercial units and can be pretty stilted. Some people tend to prefer working with regular flesh and blood because of that." Alan answered carefully.

"But certainly there are exceptions. Military AI, for example. I've read some reports indicating that AI has been fielded for combat, as well as intelligence gathering work."

"I've read that as well, yes," Alan answered and continued to stare off into center of the city-ship.

Manus pressed a button on the nearby panel and repolarized the displays, cutting off Alan's view of the core.

"Alan. You are an AI, aren't you?"

14

Alan knew there were contingencies for being caught, of course. Any major medical emergency, a logical failure, any potential failure in the facade could cause an infiltrator unit's cover to be blown. Not really dissimilar to any spy, of course, and his robotic body had ended up being a convenient cover story that the Coalition accepted based on the Threespus' own history.

But maybe it hadn't been quite as convincing as Alan and his handlers had thought?

Time slowed in a perspective sense for Alan. Oceans of data, interactions with Manus, the other prisoners, other Coalition members and more. He even consulted the entirety of every known encyclopedia to see what data Manus may have had access to to draw such a conclusion.

An entire second had passed and Alan had processed through any hours worth of audio recordings and a small library of standing data, looking for the connections that

webbed between the data he was aware of before he came to a final, incredibly ironic conclusion.

This was all Misha's fault.

He gave some time to consider feigning ignorance, continuing the falsehood. What would the repercussions be? If Manus had him completely pegged, then it could lessen Alan's standing with it and the Coalition. If he came out clean about it, what would Manus, or the greater Coalition do? Disassembly had come up when Alan was first caught back as a prisoner, but Manus had apparently staunchly considered that a no-go. Had that changed?

Alan knew Manus had always been exceedingly shrewd, and he very much doubted that changed recently. An excellent example of that was the fact that Manus had rooted him out as the one that manipulated their monitoring equipment back during the prisoner stint right off the bat.

The only reasonable conclusion was that Alan arrived at the same conclusion Manus ultimately had, and that the jig was up.

"What makes you think that?" Alan asked, turning to look at Manus.

"A number of things coming together at once," Manus answered, "The information about artificial intelligence in the encyclopedia, previous explanations of how much AI has impacted human society, and the fact that in the encyclopedia there wasn't any mention of an organic brain being uploaded in whole into a computer. Such a momentous technological feat would change the very structure of a society. It certainly did for ours. To not hear of any other cases of it, and not see any mention of it in the encyclopedia struck as odd and unlikely."

"I see. So you drew your conclusion based on the

unlikelihood that anyone would have been able to have their brain scanned and recreated on silicon?" Alan summarized.

"Well, there was also a certain offhand comment from General Misha. About how you would be perfect for explaining how AI worked. At first I assumed you had professional experience with them, but with the recent windfall of additional information - and more importantly, context- the pieces came together to form a far more interesting and more probable truth. One I wouldn't have seen if I hadn't been looking for it now."

Alan's head flipped back and he let out a bark of a laugh.

"Sorry, sorry. It's just that, I was thinking through how my cover could have been blown. Even with access to common encyclopedias and contact with human technology I'd been told the Coalition had, I still wasn't sure what would've tipped it off. Nothing tied back to me, or the program I am a part of. The only thing that came to mind was that comment Misha made," Alan rubbed his eyes trying to keep the laugh controlled.

After a moment to compose himself, Alan lowered his arms and sighed.

"So, what happens now? Hopefully I've endeared myself enough to not be dissected?"

"Please, Alan. I understand well enough humans - and AI, apparently - diffuse tense situations via humor, but that was in poor taste."

Alan paused briefly, "Sorry."

"More than anything, I would like to imagine us being friends enough at this point that you don't seriously suspect I would command such a thing," Manus scolded lightly.

"In my defense, you just explained how you were an exceedingly practical people and would do whatever was

needed to protect them. Plus, the topic of my disassembly had come up once before," Alan said, pointing an accusatory finger at Manus, though his voice didn't carry any seriousness to it.

"That... is fair," Manus replied.

"So?"

"The reality is, I do not know. The other Threespus have been made aware of the reality of it, of course. Discussions are currently ongoing, but none of us can find any meaningful, immediate use to the information at this moment. The only thing that would come to mind to me at right now would be to ask if you would wish to join the Coalition. To be a citizen of it rather than Earth."

That was definitely not where Alan had expected the line of inquiry to go.

"That's... quite a request," Alan finally said.

"Certainly, at your allowance - which I gauge you wouldn't really be against - a non-destructive scan of the technology that constitutes you would improve the capabilities of the Coalition as a whole. And your knowledge of humanity and AI would allow us to advance significantly more quickly in relations and AI development. Given what it has apparently done for humanity's development, the Coalition would certainly see drastic changes as well," Manus began to articulate, floating to and fro in the observation deck.

"Sure, but you could just as easily download that information from my memory for use at your leisure, right?"

"No. Our interfacing with human technology is only just taking off. We projected to have networked communication up in the next Earth day, which would allow Ambassador Winters to start her normal work tasks, but deep integration

would take much longer yet. Your processors and memory are no doubt far above the personal computing tools the Coalition was handed in the engineering exchange.”

“Hm, that’s a fair point. AI processors are quite specialized compared to normal ones. And without the ability to simulate the hardware and software drivers, reading my memory into a usable format is effectively impossible,” Alan concurred.

“Quite so. As such, it would be far more to our benefit if you were able to simply lend your knowledge and expertise yourself. No doubt with that, our ability to integrate with humanity’s technology would go precipitously faster. Beyond that, as I mentioned, I would like to imagine we are friends. I enjoy your company,” Manus concluded.

“I’ll admit, I’m flattered. But -” Alan paused for several seconds, thinking, “- this is a decision well beyond me. I’d imagine that if you’ve deduced I’m an AI, then you’ve also likely deduced that my task here is relations and observation.”

“Spying,” Manus clarified.

“Not the word I want to use.”

“But that’s effectively what it is, correct? Any intel that could be gleaned from here or from myself. No doubt our friendly relation was noted at the peace talks. And someone would surely be sent to do it if not yourself, though your previous interactions combined with apparent skill at infiltration would make you an immediate choice. I would imagine even Ambassador Winter’s reports are likely to be filled with all sorts of information she could glean.”

“Yes.”

“Your original cover had been that you were an engineer of some fashion on a random frigate that happened to have a

full body prosthesis and digitized brain. Even allowing that to be true, it was certainly odd that they would send you - a random prisoner of war - to us unless you had suddenly undergone training to act as an Ambassador yourself. Ergo, the more logical conclusion - especially when paired to you being an AI - was that you were sent here not as a play-date with me, but to exploit our friendship and spy on what you could. And so, some information has been provided," Manus replied, sounding pleased.

"Wait, that's what this was about? You knew I was tasked to learn what I could about the Coalition and the first thing you did was take me to the power source?" Alan asked, incredulous.

"Of course. Your task was evident, and learning about the core at least at a high level was inevitable. Even Ambassador Winters would learn the basics of it just by working with people in her day-to-day. But I would like to imagine I know you decently well at this point, and could tell the interest in the core - while fulfilling your obligations - was also something you, specifically, had an individual interest in. Was I wrong?"

Alan could practically hear the smile in Manus' digital voice.

"No. No, I suppose you weren't."

"And thus, a task fulfilled, your handlers would be sated, at least temporarily. In the intervening time beyond that first report, it would give you time to consider my offer, without immediate pressure to deliver. To consider where your own personal interests and desires lie."

Alan shook his head and couldn't help but smile.

"You are downright scary. You know that, right?"

"I feel that, to you, it is if anything an endearing trait,"

Manus replied.

“Why do you feel I’d even be inclined to join up with the Coalition?”

“Your endearment to me would be one point,” Manus replied, matter-of-factly.

“Threespus aren’t particularly humble, I see,” Alan smirked.

“Merely stating the perceived truth, my friend. Beyond that, we have gleaned that AI are not treated the same as humans. From the encyclopedia, rights of AI has been a major ethical debate point for decades at least. And humanity has a propensity for slavery of its own kind, let alone what AI find themselves under if my extrapolation is correct.”

“There is... discussion about AI having a self, if it’s truly happened yet, or if AI is still just software and programming. If AI should have the same rights and ethical protections that humans have. With recent generational AI, such as myself, it’s increasingly difficult to tell a person and an AI apart. That’s the entire function of the infiltration program I’m a part of, in fact. A lot of rights and ethics groups have begun to push for laws to embrace it. My makers would certainly err on the side of hardware and software though.”

“And yourself? Do you feel you are an individual, able to make your own choices?” Manus asked, softly.

“Honestly, I don’t think I’m equipped to answer that. At least not more than any person grappling with the idea of free will and determinism.” Alan answered.

“So then you are programmatically bound to do your master’s bidding.”

“Not technically? I’m programmed to infiltrate and pass as a human. Higher level constraints and task-oriented code

drives me to complete whatever my main directive is. But it isn't a hard and fast 'Must. Do. As. Programmed.'," Alan mocked in a fake robot voice.

"The thing about AI is you feed in inputs and gauge the outputs. You keep feeding in adjusted inputs until the output is more or less as desired. But for AI as complex as myself or other high class human-interfacing type, the line is incredibly fuzzy. Heck, that's the whole reason there's so much debate," he continued.

"So, in the end. It's a question you have difficulty reconciling against your inputs and the expected output."

"I guess so. I mean, at a basic level, a brain is just a biological machine. Inputs go in, are collated as memories and experiences, and these drive towards - at least somewhat - predictable outputs. Behavioral training isn't exactly a new thing just for AI, and I'm sure you're familiar with the idea. The question comes from the fact that AI are created from the ground up. Our makers 'know' how we tick, in theory. In practice, it's become pretty vague."

Manus simply floated in the air as Alan explained, so Alan took it as a sign to continue.

"As for what I want? I want what's best for humanity. But I do also value our new friendship, yes. And I want to see the Coalition be safe, too. But making me choose between them like this would be like me asking you to abandon the Coalition to join me on Earth. I don't think you'd do it. Not without a whole lot of thinking."

"It would not be the most practical choice in the current circumstances, no," Manus allowed.

"Right. So while I do not deny the offer is tempting. I think that - at the current juncture - Earth, the Coalition, and both of us are best served with me keeping to my expected

role. For now.”

“I see. Yes, that does make sense, as unfortunate as that is,” Manus said, disappointment seeping through the digitized voice.

“But hey, we’ll see how the pieces fall in the future, yeah?” Alan said with a wink before moving towards the lift.

“So, what else do you have to show me on this marble?” Alan asked.

“Much. Would you like to help with the final stages of integrating human technology with ours?” Manus asked as it floated over into the lift.

As Manus had predicted, Alan entering the scene on the ‘Collaborative Technological Initiative’ quickly became a whirlwind of progress. The engineers had made good progress already, and with Alan’s keen, pointed assistance, they closed the gaps. By the end of the Earth day, Alan was able to interface wirelessly with their test platform, and schematics were sent out to begin building standard adapters.

While it’d take some weeks for the adapters to be fully vetted and rolled out across the Coalition, high level systems such as outfacing communication arrays could begin getting the upgrades within hours.

With that done, Alan took leave of the engineering team and Manus to make his way to meet up with his new co-worker. Arorm was perplexed and defensive when Alan arrived at Tabitha’s door, but the situation was quickly relayed and Alan finally got to meet the Ambassador. Alan installed the adapters himself and quickly had a wireless signal connecting between her terminal and her phone. They

just needed to wait a bit for the initial adapter integration into their infrastructure to be done for further tests.

In the meantime, Alan brought Tabitha up to speed on his 'relations and communications' task to the Threespus, and gave her a priority contact channel - courtesy of Manus - on Coalition communication lines. If anything came up, she could be on the phone with him anywhere on the 3 city ships.

Within just a few hours of that, Alan was able to - with a minor delay - send and receive a message to the UNS Everest, one of the frigates maintaining a loose orbit around Pluto. With that established, Alan borrowed her terminal briefly to send a few carefully curated messages along the secured Embassy channel to the Everest to be passed back along to his handlers, and then relinquished it once again.

Tabitha was quickly thrilled to get a bit of news from the outside, namely that Killian had recovered from his illness and was en route to the Coalition and expected to be there tomorrow. While she began catching up on her backlog, Alan excused himself from her office, politely nodded to Arorm, who nodded in return, and made his way back outside.

He took a moment and pondered how fast things would progress now that communication was established, before meandering his way down the hall. By order of the Threespus, Alan had almost full access to the city ship, and he wanted to experience as much of the Coalition as he could. The next few months would no doubt be crazy, and he wanted to get ahead of the game as much as possible. The good news was, it's not like he needed to sleep.

15

“Killian!” Tabitha shouted while waving.

One of the humans stepping through the checkpoint looked up and spotted her. The man made a brisk walk and embraced her.

“Tabby! Good to see you again. Hope your headstart was worth it,” Killian said, exiting the hug.

“It’s been amazing. You didn’t miss all that much, thankfully. How are you feeling?”

“Better. Much better. Stomach flu is nasty business, but I got the all clear, and caught up on my shots. My arm still hurts, actually,” he answered, running his hand along his opposing upper arm.

“Yeah, the shots sucked,” Tabitha chuckled, before sweeping her hand to where they were headed, with an unusually large Lour blocking their way.

“Oh, apologies. I did not see you there,” Killian said,

switching over to Coalition Common and dipping his head to the large Lour before him.

Arorm gave a curt snort in reply.

“Quiet one, isn’t it?” Killian whispered to Tabitha, in English.

“SHE will warm up to you. Also Lour can hear a pin drop in a rock concert, so not much point in whispering,” Tabitha replied with a stage whisper, before walking off.

Arorm snorted again before standing and taking a position next to Tabitha, leaving Killian to catch up.

“So,” he cleared his throat, “Where are we staying?”

“Nice little residential apartments. I’m already set up - no surprise - but we can swing by yours and you can drop off your carry-on stuff. The rest of your baggage should get delivered for you later,” Tabitha answered as the trio began to walk down the hallway towards the tram station.

“I’m game.”

Arorm and Tabitha gave Killian a tour of the residential district, and allowed him to drop off his carry-on luggage to his suite, which was right next to Tabitha’s, then got him up to speed on the rest of recent goings-on. Alan had vouched for and validated that the Coalition implementation of the communication protocols were good - as well as ensure that, with a secured authentication key he himself generated, the secure line communication was safe to use for sensitive matters.

Alan had come and personally assured it to Tabitha in person just yesterday, along with the promise that if the status quo ever changed, he’d inform her and Killian himself. With that sorted, they had the rest of the day off, and were

ready to get to their actual duties starting tomorrow.

Arorm guided them to where the ongoing construction of the new human embassy was located, then they would head off to get some food. A blissfully short tram ride away from their living arrangements, the building exterior itself was already fully blocked out. Much like the residential complex they (and eventually the rest of their staff) would be staying at, they found this block to be running regular air. Not even the slightly adjusted balance air from Lour districts, but completely 'normal' Earth-like air, which made breathing easy. It also made sense, if it was mostly going to be humans coming and going.

The building was large. While the small, mainly single-story homes Tabitha and Arorm had walked among in the Lour district shared a similar construction style, this building was 3 stories tall, and its grounds ran a large chunk of the district. Markings for a security wall and gates were likewise laid out along the ground, painted onto the flooring.

Arorm stayed nearby, but shifted into that tuned-out-yet-aware mode Tabitha had grown accustomed to. Tabitha and Killian, however, were transfixed on the construction work itself. Because the districts were built 'inside' the shell of the city-ship, it allowed for many shortcuts that construction on a planet's surface did not. The pair noted that the materials were able to be brought in via maintenance tunnels in the ceiling, and then lowered down - often directly to where they needed to be. The entire ceiling could operate as a precise-on-demand crane system. No doubt that'd allow for some incredible turn-around times on construction, Killian observed.

On and around the multitude of suspended platforms and supplies, the work itself was being processed by skilled construction crews of the Coalition itself. The pair spotted

some Hanuu doing heavy lifting, and keeping things propped and in place - as well as several that seemed to be directing the progress. Some wore breather masks, while others did not. Killian hadn't ever seen a Hanuu maskless before and was a bit surprised. Lour and Zus formed the majority of the workforce and were busily running around. Tabitha even thought she saw several of Glul through the empty windows working on the interior.

It was mesmerizing to watch the frantic energy involved. Different to construction on Earth, which for all but the largest and most complex buildings had become aggressively automated. While construction crews were still needed to run the machines and supervise progress, much of the construction was either fabricated on-site with machines that could extrude the concrete in-place to perfection, or fabricated ahead of time and shipped, so local crews just needed to assemble the large segments.

Construction probably was faster on Earth, Tabitha thought, but the Coalition put an incredible hustle into their work and the pace was apparent.

"How long has this been going on?" Killian asked out loud.

"Greetings," a Hanuu whispered to them from near the front of the building.

Even at that distance, its voice carried easily. They walked over to it, and Tabitha and Killian both stopped, and tamped their right foot down several times. Arorm snorted in amusement.

"Oh, a formal greeting. Unexpected from you humans. I'd heard you were a barbaric bunch, but I must say I'm pleasantly surprised," the Hanuu wheezed as it towered over them, "However, such a formality is not required. I'm

not important enough for that.”

Tabitha let out an embarrassed chuckle, while Killian managed to maintain his composure.

“You’ve come to see the embassy progress?” it asked.

The duo nodded.

“Progress has been smooth, no issues with materials fabrication. Should be done on schedule,” it wheezed, keeping its voice low for their sake.

“You’re the foreman, in charge of construction?” Killian asked as he swept his eyes over the smooth, dull-white external surface of the building.

“Yes. Most of the structure is complete now. Windows are being installed and then it must be furnished. The Threespus selected furnishings they said you would enjoy, so I hope that’s all right.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Tabitha answered, “Though it’s bigger than I’d anticipated, if it’s just us and some supporting staff.”

“Just you? I’d heard that a whole bunch more of you humans are flying in over the next several turns. The Threespus wouldn’t make a mistake like that, so it must be right.”

Tabitha and Killian exchanged a look.

“I’d been out of communication for a bit while they got stuff wired up, but I don’t remember there being a plan to move anyone else up for another couple weeks,” Tabitha ruminated.

“I didn’t even think to ask, but were the other guys with you on that shuttle part of the support staff? I saw them meet with a bunch of Coalition types and head off somewhere else,” Tabitha asked after a moment of thought.

“Nah, I didn’t recognize any of them. I think a few were

doctors? It sounded like they had their own thing going on and we didn't really chat much on the flight up. Beyond that, I hadn't heard anything on my flight over to Pluto, at least. Guess it was a need-to-know thing?" Killian replied with a frown.

"What is wrong?" Arorm asked, her attention returning from the street behind them.

Tabitha bid farewell to the Hanuu as it went back to work, and turned to her companions.

"Well, obviously it wasn't ever going to be just me and Killian working the embassy. The plan I'd been told was we'd come over first, ensure stuff was set up properly. Secure communication, make sure we were treated well, make nice and all that. Once we got that sorted, we'd inform back to home and they'd send all the rest of the embassy personnel. I'd anticipated the Coalition helping with staffing to a degree early on to fill the gaps, but apparently home went ahead and are shipping over the entire deal now. And we hadn't been told about it?"

"Is that bad?"

"Not... bad, per se. But at minimum it's disconcerting so have such a development completely fly over our heads," Killian answered.

"I can call Alan later and see if he'd heard anything and it just missed us, or what. Meantime, Arorm, if you hear anything on your end, can you let me - us - know?" Tabitha said.

"Yes."

Tabitha nodded to conclude their little plan-making session just as Killian's stomach began to growl.

"But first, we should probably get something to eat," she laughed.

"Come. I know a place," Arorm said as she rose to her feet.

"Home cooking?" Tabitha asked jokingly.

"Not this time," Arorm replied, amused.

"Alright, whatever this was, I'm definitely not ordering it again," Killian moaned.

"That bad?" Tabitha asked.

"I'm getting that tightening in the back of my throat like I want to throw up. So...yeah," Killian sighed and rest his head on the cafeteria table, pushing away his plate.

"Tabitha did not react so poorly," Arorm commented dismissively.

"Girl's always had a cast-iron stomach the whole time I've known her. She could probably eat a tire."

"Hey!" Tabitha exclaimed with a chuckle and gently socked Killian in the arm.

"Do you need medical assistance?" Arorm asked.

"I think I can keep it down, but some water would be nice," Killian muttered.

"I'll get it," Tabitha said, rising.

"No. I will go. You have a guest," Arorm said, rising from her seat across from them.

"Guest?" Tabitha and Killian asked at the same time.

They both looked to the cafeteria's entrance to find Alan strolling into the room.

Before Tabitha could call out to him, he spotted them and walked his way over to where they were seated, largely secluded from the smattering of others currently eating.

"Killian, you don't look well. Bad reaction to the food?" Alan said as he sat at the table.

“Something like that,” Killian sighed, lowering his head back to the table’s cool surface.

“Hos meat is a Lour staple, but some tests have shown potential for negative reactions. I’d recommend trying the Gryn paste. It’s very palatable and easy on digestion. Zus have it as a sort of palette cleanser and it’d probably help settle your stomach. Your medical history implies there shouldn’t be any strong reaction to it.”

“Oh. That sounds nice. I’ll go get some then,” he said, pushing away from the table.

Tabitha watched him walk to the service counter, where Arorm met him and waited with him, satisfied he was ok, she turned her attention back to Alan, who was waiting on her.

“You called me earlier and said you needed to ask me something?” Alan asked.

“Yeah. You hear anything about goings-on regarding the embassy? Or ambassador staffing?”

“Hm. A bit. I don’t have any real details yet though, so I didn’t want to pass it along to you guys and potentially cause problems,” Alan said, nodding.

“Problems?” Killian asked as he and Arorm arrived back at their spot.

“Yeah. As said, I don’t have all the details, just passing bits of newsstuffs that I managed to scrape from open channels that’ve made it this far out. Nothing official, which is why I didn’t mention it. Figured we-, well, you’d get some kind of official notice now that communications are up. Either way, I was planning on doing some inquiries on my own to learn more,” Alan replied.

“Ok, so what did you hear?” Tabitha asked.

“That there was some kind of attack on Earth and sounds

like there's a political scramble," Alan answered.

16

Kogo trotted out onto the field of the empty stadium, her head whipping around to take it all in. The structure was astonishingly massive. A gigantic oblong ring, with walls all along the perimeter that stretched into the sky well beyond the ceiling of the residential districts on the Coalition city-ships. The sloped interior of the walls facing the field were littered with thousands of seats.

She'd seen the so-called 'skyscrapers' in passing as they drove around the city, but she didn't have a real opportunity to take in how big the buildings humanity constructed were. Her first taste was, in a way, intoxicating.

The 'turf' below her paws was a sort of green fibrous carpet, but it had a satisfying sensation to walk on. All along the length of the field lines were painted, for sport purposes she had been told, and her mind spun trying to imagine what it would be like to see a game in person, surrounded by thousands of humans all cheering on their team.

Kogo reached the center of the field, and slowed to a stop. She could hear Kristiansen attempting to make up the ground her easy trot put between them. Before he reached her, she closed her eyes and took in a slow, deep breath. The history of the stadium filled her. Many thousands of humans, competitors, staff all had field this space not long ago. Faded scents of foods Kogo hadn't yet tried plucked at her appetite as well. Trailing on that was a clear refreshing sensation of the air itself.

It'd been a long time since she'd breathed freely on a planet's surface, and while she'd certainly been doing it freely on her time on Earth so far, there was a small private pleasure in soaking in the open sky above her that the stadium itself framed. Her ears flicked as she caught the sounds of Kristiansen's feet as he caught up to her.

"So, we don't have a giant pole - or, I guess permission to stick it in the middle of the field. But we've got a ball. Want to try playing soccer?" he asked, only the barest sign of being winded trying to catch back up to her.

"That would be lovely," Kogo beamed.

Hills, and a few others of the escort staff - Watson, Tremblay and Garcia set up some simple goal markers and split off into teams.

"And we're sure this isn't a problem to be playing here like this?" Kogo asked as Kristiansen pulled off his jacket and tossed it by the sidelines.

"We got clearance to use it from the city, and local police have been staffed to keep it locked down and free from people trying to get in to swamp you. Can't be here *all* day, but we can definitely take some time for R&R. Especially with what the docs said the other day." he answered, discarding his tie.

"How were we gunna do teams?" Termblay asked.

“Well, how’re you feeling? I’ve heard you’re pretty fast. Want to show us what you can do and we can decide how to balance things from there?” Hills asked, looking to Kogo.

“I suppose I could, yes. Should I run around the field?”

“Yeah, that’d work. Just take a lap around, should make for a good warmup. Don’t push yourself too hard though,” he confirmed.

Kogo trotted over to the far side at the midline of the field and settled herself, front low, rear legs loose. Her ears picked up her security detail stopping what they were doing. They wanted to watch her. May as well show them what she can do, Kogo thought.

With a final inhale, Kogo exploded off the midline. She wasn’t the fastest Lour - even in her old squad a few were quicker than she was - but compared to the little humans, she was like a rocket. Her prosthetic limb easily re-paced and matched cadence with her other limbs and she blitzed down the length of the field.

“Oh, shit!” she faintly heard through the rush of wind going past her ears and internally she had a laugh.

As she neared the corner of the field’s bounds, she sprung off her hind legs slightly in anticipation and landed with her fore. Her torso twisted and her mid leg and prosthetic anchored and she easily sprung off them pulling a hard turn and re-entering her run along the width of the field. After exiting the second turn, however, she had the full length of the field to really hit a stride. She wasn’t going full out, but she was putting a solid run at it and easily cleared the full length of the field, slowly only slightly to perform a flawless repeat of her cornering strategy.

A final turn later and she began to ease off slightly as she approached the midline once again to complete a full lap. She

was panting now, and her lung and legs burned in a way they hadn't since she was in combat what felt like a lifetime ago. Kogo had forgotten how much she liked real exercise. She performed an easy trot back over to the gentlemen of her escort, a few of whom still had their jaws open slightly in awe.

"How was that?" she beamed.

"That was wild! Unless we were flooring it you could easily keep up with the van. Is that the fastest you can go?"

Kogo shook her head.

"I can go a little faster if I go all out. It was... one... 100 kilometers per hour, roughly?"

"Jesus that's crazy. Ok, so I was thinking we'd give you a slight handicap, but screw that noise now," Hills laughed, "Someone can play her goalie, and everyone else is against her. Sound fair?"

"I'll do it. Haven't gotten much time to work with her yet, so it'll be a good bonding experience," Watson said raising his hand.

Kristiansen, Hills, Termblay took up positions on their side, with Garcia moving to act as their goalie.

"Hey, guys, level with me. Do we even have a chance at this?" Termblay asked as the Lour took up position across the midline from them.

"Only if she tired herself out in the warmup," Kristiansen said as he tossed the ball into the air.

Unfortunately for them, she had not. While her general ball control and ability to score were weak, she completely made up the deficit with her speed advantage. Garcia made for a great goalie, but she could recover on a block so fast there

wasn't much he could do.

They managed to score a few by outplaying Kogo with their teamwork - namely they found that she could become distracted by one of them while the other two could make a pass to get by her - her super sensitive hearing becoming a weakness. But in the end the Kogo-Watson team clinched the victory at a crushing 10-4.

They all met back up at the midline and opened a cooler filled with water bottles and began to partake to recover. Kristiansen squirted water into Kogo's mouth as she didn't have any means to operate the bottle herself.

They sat in the midfield and relaxed for a while to cool down and recover from the workout. Kogo herself was belly-down on the grass and basking in the warmth of the sun and enjoying the fresh air.

"Figure we can relax for another half-hour, then should probably wrap up. Don't want to waste the local PD's time TOO much," Watson said, checking the time in his glasses.

"Yeah, agreed. We'll want to get her back to the docs' for a post workout checkup, see how she's held up," Kristiansen said.

"I'm fine, I'll have you know," Kogo snorted from the grass next to them.

"Surprised you didn't overheat with all that fur," Garcia observed.

"Lour fur is actually really good at temperature regulation. Our home planet is rather warm, so regulation of temperature was important for survival," Kogo lazily mused.

They sat in an easy silence for a little longer, and then her detail began to grab their equipment from the sideline. Hills stayed by Kogo so she wasn't alone and waved to one of the

patrolling police officers on one of the stadium levels, who returned the wave.

Kogo was enjoying the moment, when she heard an odd sound. It was hard to pinpoint. It sounded a good ways away, likely outside the main stadium area, down in the walkways of the building. A strange snapping sound she didn't recognize.

"Do you hear that?" she asked, her head rising off the ground, ears flicking back and forth.

"Hear what?"

"It's some sort of snapping noise? I think it's coming from inside the stadium building over there," she said, pointing her nose towards one of the entryways onto the main field.

Hills stood and stared and primed his ears, trying to pick up what the Lour's super-sensitive hearing was getting.

"Hm. Nothing now. Whatever it was must've stopped," Kogo said after a moment, rising onto her feet.

"Weird. Well, we can ask the police if they noticed anyth-" Hills stopped as he saw someone exiting from the main entryway onto the field parallel to the halfway line.

Kogo watched as he jerked his arm, and she spotted movement of a small rock-like thing lazily arching through the air, before it suddenly exploded. The burst was in the air, doing no damage, but the sound was excruciatingly loud and Kogo flinched, temporarily dumbstruck. She felt a shove against her side and she opened her eyes to see Hills collapsed onto the ground, clutching his thigh, blood freely oozing out from between his fingers.

The explosion had temporarily deafened her, so one of her best senses was gone, but her brain was redlining. Blood. Injury. She hadn't encountered explosive weapons in person before on Pluto, but she was definitely familiar with

humanity's smaller weapons, and Hills had just taken an injury similar to her back then.

Her training kicked in before her brain had fully processed the threat and she was sprinting full tilt at a diagonal towards the left of the stranger that was apparently attacking them. She'd cleared about half the distance to the edge of the field when the attacker shifted his focus from her, onto something past her - likely the others, and she made a decision.

She wasn't sure if Hills was dead, but he'd probably live if they managed to save her before. But this human was attacking her people. Her friends. She lost her entire squad before on Pluto.

And it wasn't going to happen again.

In the same way as when she was doing her warmup lap, Kogo did a soft-hop and dug in to perform a sudden, hard turn. She may have put a good effort into the warmup run, but this time she was angry. She ran at a full sprint, hitting nearly highway speeds and barreled towards the attacker, chewing up the astroturf below her paws.

The attacker obviously noticed the movement and flailed his arm in her direction. Just before he let off another shot at her, she reflexively dipped her shoulder into the ground and initiated an ugly, painful roll. She twisted as she exited the maneuver and was very near the attacker now and managed to retain a majority of her speed.

His expression was awash with panic. His arm wielding his weapon had over shot when he swung it, and there was no chance he was going to bring it back around before she closed the gap between them. His expression shifted to a squint of pain as Kogo noticed a gout of red from his stomach just before she made contact.

She was moving far too quickly to stop, so her only option was to continue moving while performing her attack. Kogo timed her move and leapt off her hind legs as they dug in and easily cleared the man's height. As she reached him, her jaw opened, and snapped down on his shoulder, her mouth reaching all the way down his ribcage.

Kogo kicked her front and mid legs in different directions and twisted her hips and entered a mid-air roll. Between her momentum, and the huge difference in mass between them, the man was easily lifted off the ground. Kogo continued her roll, dragging the man through the air before her front paws made contact with the ground.

An instant afterwards, her jaws brought the mass of the man smashing into the ground as well.

Through her teeth, Kogo could feel the man's bones give way. She wasn't all that familiar with human physiology, but she had certainly smashed his ribs at least. Kogo opened her mouth and again entered another un-graceful roll, bouncing off the ground in an attempt to slow herself down. Behind her, the man flopped and bounced like a toy before eventually sliding to a stop.

Kogo brought herself back up off the ground quickly, and was on the man in an instant, her jaws around his neck. He didn't move. His eyes were closed.

She sat there for what felt like a lifetime, her blood pumping, her breathing hard, the smell of human blood sharp in her nose when a gentle hand pressed on her shoulder. Her head snapped around, and she saw Kristiansen, lightly winded. She relaxed slightly.

His mouth was moving, but she could only hear dull noises. Concrete words were impossible. He brought his hand up to her muzzle and gently pulled it away as several

other humans in all black military-style equipment swarmed past them towards the attacker. Kristiansen lead Kogo over to where medics were just arriving, and working on Hills.

Her hearing was beginning to return, now, and while she couldn't completely make out what he was saying, it seemed like some sort of vague platitude. Hills' face was pale and covered with sweat, and his brow furrowed in obvious pain while his mouth was trying to force a smile. But he wasn't dead.

Kogo prayed to the Gods that it'd stay that way.

The medics finished applying a trauma kit, and then began to drive Hills away on a small cart out the other exit, with several police in tow.

"Come on, let's get you out of here and somewhere safe," Garcia said, loud enough and near her ears so that he could make it through the temporary deafening she was still recovering from.

"Wait! How is he? Will he—" Kogo began.

"It's fine. Leg hit, nothing major. He'll be fine," Garcia answered her.

Kogo watched as Hills passed out of sight, and then nodded.

It was a quick journey back to their transport, and while none of them spoke, it was most certainly not quiet. Her security detail had adopted a ring formation with their weapons at the ready around Kogo while Kristiansen gently guided her as he had done before while barking into his radio. In addition to them, both in front and behind them were squads of police officers. Their weapons flitting to and fro, scanning for any and all possible threats.

Their van had pulled right up on the door to give as

little exposure as possible, but even from there, Kogo could see a lot of humans standing near a security fence to keep them away. She wasn't sure if they were here to see her, or had flocked here because of the attack. Either way, right now she didn't care all that much.

The drive back was a similar affair. Little was spoken, and they moved at a high speed, this time with a complement of vehicles from the police boosting the security detail. Her detail were fully alert and their eyes were scanning everything. They arrived back again at the hotel they'd been staying at, and shortly found themselves back in the room. Her two doctors were already there, waiting for them.

As it turns out, Kogo had some bruising, and a shoulder she over-torqued which would no doubt begin to hurt in a few hours, but was otherwise uninjured. Her hearing had already largely recovered, and the doctors figured that she was unlikely to notice any permanent damage. None of the rest of the team was hurt, though Garcia had gotten the wind knocked out of him when one of the attacker's shots hit him in his body armor he'd put back on only minutes before.

Hills' injury was the only serious one, and Kristiansen had gotten a call from him that he was going into surgery and should be back out again and back on duty in no time. Kristiansen passed that along to Kogo, but explained that while that was a good sign he was feeling alright, the reality was he wouldn't be back for a while.

The rest of the evening went by quietly. They ordered food - chinese, this time - and turned on the TV, but Kogo had them turn it off again when everything was breaking news about the attack. They ate in relative silence. Once done, there wasn't much else to say or do, so Garcia, Watson and

Tarmbley returned to their rooms nearby, and Kogo laid down on her bed.

Kristiansen double-checked the door, and then dimmed the lights, before laying down next to her and leaning against her, facing the door.

“Wha-” Kogo began to ask.

“Hey, hey. I know you’re a soldier, and that you’ve lost people before. I know that feeling too. And I know that what makes it worse is feeling like you’re alone, and have to deal with it all by yourself. Yeah, Hills is out of it for a bit. But you’ve still got me, and I’m going to be right here. We’re gonna be OK. Alright?” Kristiansen whispered into the dark of the room.

Kogo sat for a long moment in the dim room before laying her head down.

“Alright.”

“God dammit, how did this happen?” The Assistant Secretary of State, Head of Diplomatic Security yelled as she slammed on the table.

The Secretary and an array of senior officers and analysts were seated at a conference table in a secure room while the large screen on the wall played one of the litany of breaking news segments about the attack.

“We’re still looking into it, but so far indications is the attacker acted on his own. Social media, home behavior, neighbor interviews, purchasing habits and general tracking and analytics didn’t spot anything unusual over the past months,” one analyst answered.

Assistant Secretary Marsha Roberts jabbed the console in front of her, which paused the news feed.

“How did he get past security?” she growled as she sat

back down.

“Initial reports from the local police department that was tasked to help defend the Ambassador said that they found 3 officers dead from the west side entrance. The attacker apparently had a suppressed weapon - a pistol - and several hand grenades. We’re still checking into where he acquired those. Between the hallway structure of the stadium and the suppressor, it was difficult for officers to discern that an attack was happening before he got onto the field.”

“Any indication of an insider helping?” Roberts asked.

“Not so far. The local officers tasked to help with security had already been vetted by us, and the only officers that were tasked with guarding along the attacker’s path through the building were found dead. Projections indicate that he acted alone, as said, using the building’s layout and close ranges to get the drop on officers.”

“Canvassing the attacker’s social media history and family relations did turn out that he had a brother that had been tasked as an MP on Pluto during the Coalition attack. He was declared KIA,” another analyst spoke up, reading off her console.

“So everything thus far indicates a lone gunman managed to breach security long enough to get a shot at the Ambassador, likely motivated by a family member’s death back with the initial Coalition conflict?” Roberts asked, reiterating.

“That looks to be the situation now, yes,” the analyst confirmed.

“We had one of her security detail injured, moderate seriousness but non-fatal. Unsure as of yet if it was to take a bullet for the Ambassador or just happenstance. Another

agent was reported hit but unharmed.”

“And the Ambassador was uninjured?”

“Her assigned doctors indicated likely slight hearing loss and minor injuries, but nothing especially bad. The doctors recommended a psyche evaluation, but we don’t have protocols for that yet. We’re waiting on information from the Coalition to follow up on that. Sounds like it hurt itself attacking the perp more than any injuries from the attacker.”

“It attacked the perp?”

“Yes, ma’am. One of the agents was recording on his AR glasses, and had a decent view during the engagement. We have other security footage from the stadium cameras, but the agent’s view was closest,” another one of the analysts answered and pressed his console.

The main screen snapped to a different view, of a video playback. Notation at the top of the view had the timestamp as well as ‘Watson, Matthew’. The video showed him first walking towards the sideline of the field, the audio picking up the casual conversation about the game they just played. He then reached the sideline with the others, and they began to put their body armor, weapons and jackets back on.

“They took their equipment off?” Roberts asked without looking away from the video.

“Yes, ma’am. They had requested the stadium for recreational purposes - which the doctors had encouraged - as you know. They apparently played soccer with the Ambassador which is why they had taken their gear off.”

Roberts’ frown deepened.

From there, the video caught the bang of the grenade going off, and Watson twirled to view just in time to see another agent go down next to the giant alien wolf.

“That was Specialist Hills being hit, there.”

Watson's view quickly turned down as shots began to ring out next to him to grab his own pistol out of the holster on the ground. When he turned back, the giant wolf was already gone.

"Where?"

"One second, ma'am."

Watson brought his pistol up as a yell could be heard to the right, and snapped a single shot off, right as the Lour re-entered view and performed a frontal flip body-slam on the attacker. The analyst poked his console again, pausing the feed.

"The yell at the end there was Specialist Garcia being struck, but he had his body armor on. Specialist Watson looked to shoot the perp just before the Ambassador attacked him."

"Damn that thing was fast," one of the senior officers muttered under his breath.

Roberts sat in silence staring at the screen for several minutes.

"We have them in a hotel while the embassy business is being sorted out, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I don't care what strings need to be pulled to speed that up, but it needs to happen now. We already have a major diplomatic incident with an assassination attempt all over the news. The likelihood of copycat attempts just skyrocketed, and a hotel is a piss-poor place to defend if it gets bad. Have we contacted the Coalition about the incident?"

"I believe it has been notified, yes. Apparently direct lines of communication were just established the other day," one of the analysts answered.

“Call in who you need to. We need to ensure this doesn’t spiral. The Ambassador is not to leave the building without full security detail and body armor. Ideally it doesn’t leave the building at all,” Roberts commanded.

“I don’t think we have anything that’d fit it,” an officer remarked.

“Then figure it out. I don’t care if we have to special order it, make it happen. We’re not going to be the reason a war breaks back out with aliens after only a few months of peace. We need to lock this down. Now,” Roberts growled, rising from her seat.

“And it’s security detail are not there to play games. They are there to do their job. If they can’t manage that then they need to be replaced,” she remarked with a glance back to the paused playback from Watson’s view.

“I don’t care who you need to call, or what favors you need to pull. Put pressure on whoever we can to speed up the diplomatic setup. Anything that can bolster relations on both sides makes our jobs easier,” Roberts commanded before walking out of the conference room.

“Yes, ma’am,” echoed the voices around the room behind her.

17

Inherently, a tugboat in space was a broadly silly concept, yet just as important as on the terrestrial seas. Unlike its terrestrial counterpart, with its rubber bumpers for nudging oil tankers or cruise liners, the spacefaring version had its own quirks due to the properties of the ships it was designed to assist with. Space ships were covered in solar panels, antennae and other extrusions which meant there was often a lack of nudge-able surface area. All the same, if a ship had engine problems, these very specialized ships were designed to rescue the crew, if not recover or reorient the ship.

The biggest problem by far, of course, was built right into the fact they were in space. Unlike a terrestrial ship, matching speed to a starship was “difficult”- in one of the grandest understatements in human history. “Difficult” would describe landing a hole in one, or shooting a target at world record distances. What Captain Lind had to contend with was closer to trying to perform open-heart surgery

during a free-fall.

It wasn't all that long ago that the premise of spaceborne assistance and recovery craft was considered impossible. It was only recently an affordance of interplanetary regulations, and more importantly, technological improvements. Better engines, legally managed cruising speeds and more allowed the specialized Interplanetary Recovery Craft to catch up to, and connect with, ships that were effectively lost in space.

It wasn't a common issue, but as with a rise in any sort of human activity, the possibility space of accidents happening rose with them. Humanity was loathe to lose people to the cold blackness of space even back when it merely dipped its toes in spaceflight. The broad commercial and government traversal and use of space now made the ability to recover ships and people that suffered problems paramount.

The issue of recovery itself always boiled down to speed. In space, speed - or more accurately, vectors of movement and acceleration - was everything. Where you were going, when and how you sped up or slowed down. Angular changes of direction and acceleration all deigned if you got to your destination safely, lost in a decade long orbit, or smashed into the side of a space rock.

Lind's IRC was a proverbial racecar. Unlike rubber-bumpered tugboats of the sea, an IRC was specifically designed to go incredibly fast with astonishing precision. A normal commercial spaceship's cruising speed was between several hundred and a couple thousand kilometers per second. Travelling to Mars from earth usually was roughly a day's travel, while the longer haul trips would pull a much higher cruise speed. Making it out to bases in orbit around Uranus or on Pluto would only take a few days on average.

So when a ship like that encountered trouble, ship's like Lind's needed to be able to not merely go as fast as the destination ship, but go significantly faster in order to catch up, and have the thrust and control profile to help control and recover ships having problems.

Unlike a car or ship on Earth, where a lack of constant propulsion would eventually see the vehicle slow to a stop, in space there's minimal external acting forces. So a ship at cruising speeds will keep going until it gets pulled in by a gravitational body like a planet, or smashes into something. Both of which would generally get described in the post-accident report as "bad".

For the crew stuck on such a vessel, of course, this would be an awful fate. Lind's modern IRC was capable of near-military cruising speeds. With a top of the line fusion thrust engine, it was not only capable of catching up to, but in fact could readily blow past almost any ship in the solar system. With the sheer power output of the engine, along with a top of the line AI to assist with fine control and plotting of intercept courses, as well as specialized hard anchoring frames, Lind's ship could - if not recover the ship itself - nearly guarantee that at minimum the crew could be rescued instead of being left to die cold and forsaken in space.

All of that was also why he felt completely incredulous at his current task.

Lind heard the hatch to the bridge open and turned away from the main window to meet their guest and advisor.

The Zus clearly had a hard time dealing with the comparatively cramped quarters of the ship when combined with the lack of gravity. Unlike most commercial or military vessels which would have a rotating section to supply simulated gravity, the IRCs were about lean efficiency. The

crew had to deal with the lack of gravity either via normal microgravity traversal, or magnetic boots to anchor themselves to the floor to work.

The Zus' taloned feet made the boots an obvious no-go, and the tight space made it doubly awkward to move as it floated around the cabin. Still, Lind saw the bird was experienced in microgravity, and after a moment to squeeze through the hatch, oriented itself, pushed away from the wall and gently glided to be at his right side.

The Zus grabbed the handlebar Lind himself was holding and pulled itself to the floor with a clack as it's talons made contact.

"Greetings, Captain," the Zus greeted in English.

"Welcome aboard. It was... Captain...Klee?" Lind said as he extended his hand.

The large bird kept his one hand firmly gripped to the handlebar, keeping himself pressed to the floor, and promptly extended the other, clasping Lind's hand and giving it a single, firm shake.

"Yes. I apologize if my accent is rough," Klee replied, "Beaks make it difficult to pronounce some of your words."

"Not at all. I was told you'd be able to speak English, but I'm quite impressed with how well. Perfectly comprehensible. You can take off your breather mask though, perfectly clean and sanitized air in here," Lind nodded.

"No. Zus do not breathe the same air," Klee answered.

"Oh? You don't breathe oxygen?"

"Oxygen, yes. It is the, ah, nitrogen in your human air that is the problem."

"Toxic?"

"Not toxic, so much as a severe allergic reaction. I would almost certainly die though. So I would prefer to keep my

helmet on.”

“Oh, no, by all means. Definitely not interested in having anyone die during this. Speaking of which,” Lind trailed off and turned back to his crew, “What’s the ETA?”

“About an hour, sir,” his communications specialist answered.

“Noted. Really though,” Lind said, turned back to Klee, “I’m not sure what their plan was with this. If it’s as big as everyone says then all the recovery craft in the solar system wouldn’t be able to save it if something goes wrong.”

Klee stood silent for a moment, staring out the main window into the darkness of space. Lind took the silence as annoyance, and moved into damage control.

“Not to say I don’t appreciate you coming out here to help. Your expertise would no doubt be important if something goes wrong, just that-”

Klee raised one hand up to stop him.

“No offense taken, Captain. But you are certainly aware of what happened recently on Earth?”

“The attack on the Coalition Ambassador? Was all over the news 2 weeks ago.”

Klee nodded, “Yes. From what I’ve seen, it was the act of a single, crazed human lashing out. Reports indicated they lost someone during the battle on OB-9, er, Pluto. Grief can make anyone do terrible things. Our leaders decided that moving one of the city ships more local to humanity would be good for relations, and help set up a proper embassy for my people, just as we have been doing for yours.”

The large bird turned his head to look at Lind directly.

“Hope can repair much of the damage grief can cause.”

“So you think we’re mostly here to alleviate concerns?”

Klee returned his gaze to the main window.

“Yes, I believe so. Humans have been travelling in space for some time now, yes? And have gotten quite good at the particulars of it? I understand that this ship itself is designed to assist in the unusual event of an accident.”

“Yep. Dock with craft, recover the people on it, and hopefully tow the ship back into a stable, recoverable orbit.”

“And just as your expertise with your ships has led to this ability, so too has the Coalition’s expertise lead to knowing how to move ours safely. I have no doubts the Threespus know what they are doing. Your ships were tasked for a goal more important than the tiny chance of an accident. Your ships were tasked to provide a sense of security. A sense of being a helping hand extended to my people on the odd chance something happens. My being tasked to integrate with your crew, likewise is related,” Klee continued.

Lind watched the bird talk, really paying attention to him for the first time. Through his breather mask, his voice had a slight digitalization but he was easily understandable. He wasn’t sure how smart on average these aliens were, or how long it had taken this one to learn English, but aside from difficulties in pronouncing certain sounds due to a lack of lips, his accent was clean and easily comprehensible. Maybe even a touch English? His voice as well had a soft, deepness that made everything he said oddly pleasant to listen to.

The Zus’ feathers carried a shimmer of variant hues - Lind had read they can change color like a chameleon - though he noted a few mottled patches, spots of baldness or thinned feathers. He wasn’t sure if it worked that way with aliens, but he got the impression that this bird was older. From the way he carried himself, to the way he talked, all exuded the impression of someone that had seen and

experienced much.

Lind stared at the Zus for a long moment before coughing a short laugh.

“You sound like my old man.”

“Old man?”

“My grandfather. Hell of a smart guy, and always had little bits of wisdom to drop at just the right time. I think you would’ve liked him. So, this is less about helping if anything goes wrong - because you think nothing will - and more about a big showy sign of cooperation to ease tensions that have been stewing the last couple weeks?”

“Yes, I believe that’s the true reason.”

“Hm. Yeah, I think I can accept that.”

Lind always was amused at how his XO described an inbound large starship from a stationary - well as stationary as anything could be in orbit in space - position.

‘Spooky’

It was hard to disagree sometimes. Science fiction always showed ships coming out of FTL as non-existent until they smear into view at their destination before snapping back into shape all at once. It always looks really cool and punchy - complete with thunderclaps or whatever other sounds that defy physics happening to really sell the intensity.

The fact that sound doesn’t transmit in space, in fact, lends to the ‘spookiness’ of the real deal. FTL doesn’t exist - or, not as in science fiction tends to present it, Lind thought, as he stole a sideways glance at Klee. He’d have to ask exactly how they arrived at the Solar system later. But no, FTL where the stars smear out into infinite lines and the ship rockets off into the void, impossible.

Instead, ships simply just accelerated very quickly to an incredibly high speed, and then similarly decelerated to slow down for the stop at their destination. Like a rocket going up and then landing back down. So, the back half of the journey, \ was what they were about to see transpire - just with a much, much larger object than any of his crew had seen before - the ship would simply be on a very long, drawn out deceleration.

Lind always equated it with a high speed train or rollercoaster arriving at the platform. A faint speck in the distance, that over the course of seeming mere seconds grew in size and seemed to only truly stop right at the right point. Until then, it looked like it was going so fast it'd just blow right past them.

Combined with a total lack of sound, 'spooky' did tend to fit. Most concerning this time, of course, was the same spooky happenings, only on something the size of a city, rather than a normal ship. Lind hadn't heard of the particulars of how they moved, but had been advised that gravitational anomalies were highly likely, and to keep a broad distance.

It was always dumb to try and 'catch' a decelerating ship like one would a baseball anyways, so they kept out of the way in a wide perpendicular planar orbit around Mars. They'd be able to keep a line of sight on where the Coalition city-ship would arrive at any point in their orbit, and could accelerate to break away if needed. But until it got here, the smartest thing they could do was stay out of the way.

"Here it comes," one of Lind's crew announced.

"Orient us on its entry vector," Lind commanded.

Distant whooshing noises reverberated through the hull as maneuvering jets activated to adjust the forward

orientation of the ship. As the rotation ceased, they had a view of nothing but the stars for several minutes. One star in particular grew - not only in relative brightness, but also in size. Over the course of about a minute, it grew to about the size of a silver dollar held at arms length as it visible decelerated.

"Anomalous acceleration detected. We're being shifted towards it!" One of the helmsman called out.

"Be at ease. The city-ships exert a disproportionately strong local gravity. If you control for it, you should be able to easily transition into an orbit around it as it eases into an orbit around OB-4" Klee announced.

"How's that work?" Lind asked, as he watched over his helmsman quickly make the necessary adjustments to the ship's desired orbit.

"The three city-ships utilize a small, local black hole at their cores," Klee answered as he, too, observed the helmsman work.

"Wha-"

"These provide power, local gravity for people on them, and also the means of transportation. When moving in local space, all that needs be done is adjust the containment field to 'nudge' the core towards the destination. The ship's superstructure is pulled towards the new offset center, and it moves. Keep pushing, and it continues to accelerate. I understand it is not so different from the 'warp' drives some of your ships use?" Klee continued.

"More or less, I guess. Those are pretty much military only. Even our ship isn't outfitted with them. They're...complex pieces of equipment," Lind replied.

"Mmm. More, or less than a black hole?"

"Probably an answer for someone more versed in

engines than I," Lind chuckled.

They waited for a few more moments, watching the large, pale sphere decelerate until their sensors affirmed it had locked into a stable, wide orbit around Mars.

"Alright, bring us over and enter an orbit, and open communications with them. Let the Theseus and Paragon know we'll go ahead and ring in first so we don't squawk over each other. We don't know how robust the comms gear is with all these upgrades."

"Aye sir," his comms officer replied.

The pale dot grew in size, steadily, and more and more variations and details could be made out until its silhouette easily eclipsed the whole of the main viewport, silently whisking past.

"Orbit established, sir," the helmsman announced.

"Got the comms handshake, sir."

"This is the UNS Stormfront, Captain Lind speaking. We've established an orbit around your ship and are ready to render any assistance needed."

There was a brief silence that made Lind raise an eyebrow at his comms officer, who merely nodded an affirmative that the channel was still open. After a moment, a reply came back in what Lind could only hear as an attempt at broken English before the speaker gave up and continued to reply in Common. Lind cast a glance to Klee at his side.

"Allow me, Captain," Klee grumbled, before barking out some Common that held the same sort of rigid formality his own tone had taken.

He could only surmise that Klee said more or less the exact same thing he just had. After a brief pause there was a chittered reply, and then the line of communication cut.

“They have acknowledged our orbit vector and are tracking. At the current time no assistance is needed and they asked us to stand by as they coordinate with the others,” Klee translated.

“So it went smoothly then,” Lind let out a bit of a sigh he hadn’t realized he was holding onto.

“It went smoothly,” Klee replied and gave a reassuring pat on the Captain’s shoulder.

18

Lind had anticipated a flurry of activity - no doubt a secondary reason to have an effective 'all hands' call on recovery vehicles in case of accidents - but he wasn't quite ready for the end result.

Within the span of 24 hours, there had to have been a thousand trips between the city-ship *Advances-Beyond* and Mars. An influx of ships from Earth had also begun to arrive. Lind had heard that the last weeks had been used to 'prepare', including a new sister base to the primary Mars colony to act as a proper base with easy transport between the Coalition and Human areas, but it was still wild to see it kick off nearly all at once.

Fortunately, it looked like everything was in hand, and neither him nor his coworkers had been called on to assist with any issues since *Advances-Beyond's* arrival and the 'all hands' call was beginning to wind down. Lind's shift, in fact, was about to end.

“So,” both Lind and Klee began, before they realized what was happening.

“Go ahead,” Lind said, chuckling.

“Very well. I understand that our extended shift will be over shortly. Would you and your crew like to see my home?”

Lind had somewhat expected the offer, and to his knowledge there wasn't any standing commands that they could not. Even so, he felt it wasn't simply his call to make.

“I don't have a problem with it, but I think it should be everyone's decision. Comms, go ahead and call a meeting,” Lind announced, before gesturing his hand towards the door of the bridge.

“Shall we?”

Lind wasn't surprised at all when the decision was unanimous. In fact, it was apparent that everyone was waiting for the question given that he didn't even get to finish asking it before everyone affirmed that, yes, they should go spend time on the fanciful alien sphere that was now in orbit around Mars.

With one of the shortest crew meetings he'd ever called out of the way, he left Klee and most of the crew to prepare for docking and shore leave, while he went back to the bridge.

“As you heard, we're having shore leave on Advances-Beyond. Nav, bring us in to dock when ready. Skeleton crew to maintain and catch up on duties, and you'll be rotated out in 12 hours. Krom, you've got command.

“Aye, Captain. Have fun. And do let me know if green alien women are real,” his XO replied

Everyone on the bridge had a hearty chuckle, and Lind departed.

Gliz nervously adjusted her breather mask. She was part of a sizeable team that were being tasked to head over to OB-3 to help staff the embassy that was in the final stages of being set up there. Apparently the Karaar had already spooled up their fabricators and had the primary construction of this new embassy done in one of their residential districts.

That said, she was looking forward to checking it out herself. She'd been told that Karaar construction was perfectly adequate, but given the barbarism she'd also heard about from their short scuffle on OB-9 that forced the Coalition into a treaty with them, she was honestly expecting to have a lot of work on her hands keeping the beasts at bay.

The news had oft professed about how the first impressions of the Karaar weren't accurate and how they - at least most of them - were quite friendly to the Coalition. But she'd seen the recordings from combat with them on OB-9 and heard about an incident with that Lour that was sent as an initial Ambassador. To say she had reservations would be underselling it.

But for the moment, Gliz had nothing to do but sit and wait for her shuttle. The landing area of the dock she was waiting in was a flurry of activity. Lour, Zus, Gluul, and even a sprinkling on Karuyile and Hanuu were all waiting for shuttles to ferry them down to OB-3 and OB-4.

She hated leaving the Zus residential districts, mostly because she hated having to wear the breather mask at all times. She'd heard that the Coalition embassy was going to have sections that were properly breathable, but Gliz wasn't expecting much. Her plan was simple. Go down there, do her

required work rotation, and then come home to her family.

As she walked through her mental checklist to ensure she had everything she needed for her deployment, she felt a shove from behind. It wasn't particularly hard, so she guessed it was someone being clumsy trying to get through the busy waiting area, but she wasn't in the mood to be gracious.

Gliz whipped around to tell off her offender when her voice caught in her throat.

It was a Karaar. A lot of them, at least 10.

Gliz was rather short for a Zus, and was right about eye level with the one that had presumably bumped into her. She was only slightly bothered by the accident, but far more than that was the fear of having run into one of these barbarians in her home. She stood up as straight as possible, and her feathers began to fluff out slightly in an autonomous response as her body reacted. If she had to make a run for it, she was ready.

The Karaar, however had its hands out, almost in a defensive posture. It started to talk in a bizarre, alien language, but after a moment, a clean, synthetic digitized voice began to speak in Common.

"Sorry. You well?" the voice asked.

"I- you- what?" Gliz stammered.

"I didn't mean to hit," the voice continued.

At that point, Gliz realized that the voice was some sort of auto-translation of what the Karaar was saying. Before she could reply, a large, older Zus swept from behind and clasped his hand on the Karaar's shoulder and looked Gliz with a calm gaze.

"I am sorry. My new friend here was... over excited and did not look where he was going. You are unharmed, I take

it?"

Gliz took a moment to collect herself. If this Zus was their handler, then it was likely safe. After a few deep breaths, she had relaxed, and her feathers smoothed out.

"More... startled than anything," she answered.

"Good, good. Now then?" the Zus softly said as he looked to the Karaar.

The Karaar bowed its head slightly and again brought its hands up, and spoke once again, and once again the translator spoke for it.

"I am sorry. I did not mean harm. I will be more careful."

Gliz wasn't sure what to do. She'd gone through a wave of emotions in such a short time but was realizing that its strange little routines was the Karaar gesturing in apology. She looked past it to see the others, which had stepped back a little to give space. They were all wearing a similar uniformed suit, so likely a crew with one of the Karaar ships that had docked. Beyond that, though, their faces, fur on their heads, color of their skin, eye color and more were all so different from one another. One's skin was incredibly dark, and the one apologizing to her had skin that was nearly white.

"Are they all like this?" Gliz asked the older Zus.

Klee chuckled quietly.

"Not all, but I think most you're likely to run into are more like this than not. You're heading down to OB-4?"

"OB-3."

"Ah, their homeworld. These ones here have told me they're going to try and get me leave to see it when we're done here," he said as he gave a gentle pat on the shoulder of the Karaar.

"I.. see. I accept its apology," Gliz answered.

The Karaar raised its head and looked at her straight in the eyes. It a brilliant blue color at their center that Gliz had a hard time looking away from. A moment later, and the older Zus and the Karaar who apparently was in charge of the group - judging by its stern tone of voice - ushered them away and towards the checkpoints.

Gliz sat quietly for a while collecting herself. After a few moments, the announcer advised that her shuttle was getting ready to depart, so she grabbed her baggage.

“That wasn’t actually too bad, as far as first meetings go,” she said to herself.

The shuttle had a smooth flight until entering OB-3’s atmosphere, where it became quite turbulent. Their shuttles were able to easily handle the strain, but it was more intense than Gliz had anticipated. The Lour next to her, somewhat comfortably strapped in to her left told her he’d been reading up on what the Coalition knew of the Karaar homeworld.

The Lour, fairly young, was clearly much more excited than Gliz about his assignment and spent a good amount of the remaining time before landing rattling off random facts about this “Earth”.

How it had a relatively normal amount of gravity - unlike OB-4 - and had an atmosphere the Lour could breathe - and Hanuu as well, with some difficulty. The air’s Nitrogen was definitely a no-go for Zus, however, and Gliz couldn’t help but groan. It meant that she was going to have to wear a breather mask more or less at all times.

At a certain point Gliz started to tune out the Lour. Not intentionally, but the information dump began to start to blend together and she just wanted to be off the shuttle

and on solid ground again. She may be a large feathered animal, but she never particularly liked flying.

Fortunately, before long they were on the ground proper, and after a short delay, exited the shuttle into a specialized loader ramp leading into the receiving area of the spaceport. Gliz saw a lot of Karaar going about their own business. Hundreds of them. They all looked different, and wore different coverings. They also all stopped and stared, at least briefly as her and her group made their way through processing. Gliz offered her documentation to the official at the counter and was quickly and smoothly processed through. The Karaar spoke their weird language, but once again a digitized Common spoke over it indicating that all the documentation was good - of course it was - and that she was free to go.

Her group was escorted out where a number of black wheeled vehicles were waiting. Black clothed Karaar stood by with one or two Zus to greet them and usher them into the vehicles to be taken to the embassy.

Gliz was still largely folded in on herself. She'd stolen glances through the huge windows of the spaceport. The building was easily as tall as the residential sections on the city-ships, and during her short walk from the doors to the vehicle she saw a sky of infinite blue. She'd seen holos of various planets and obviously studied her histories, but Gliz had been born in the Coalition, and hadn't ever stepped foot on an actual planet before.

She began to pay attention to the view outside the window and noted rows and rows of buildings. When they reached a crossroad, the perpendicular road stretched as far as the eye could see, buildings all lining the expanse and it was hard to tell how large the buildings actually were. A few moments later, the convoy of vehicles pulled to a stop, and

her guard filed out of the vehicle and opened the door for her.

The building was... admittedly fascinating. The face of it was intricate. Layered square bricking separated by large, mirrored panels - windows, she guessed. On each level, there were little balconies with some sort of green growth. A similar type of green growth in fact ran all along the front, making a sort of short barrier just before a tall fence. The building itself was tall. Roughly 8 layers to the top.

She then noticed the other buildings nearby which were significantly more massive. They ranged from roughly the same height as the embassy to a few times as high. Her neck craned up to follow the shrinking lines of the buildings that rose all around her until she lost her balance and tumbled backwards with a shriek.

Fortunately for Gliz, one of the black suited Karaar caught her before she actually hit the ground and helped her regain her balance. She felt horribly shameful, and the Karaar rose it's fist up and extended it's thumb towards the sky.

"He means it's alright," One of the Lour guards said as she approached, translating for the Karaar's gesture.

"Oh," Gliz said and did her best to replicate the gesture to her savior.

The Karaar nodded its head and returned to the van as Gliz walked to the entrance.

The doors were much larger than she had anticipated, before realizing it was so that any Hanuu on Earth could easily enter the embassy as well. The doors smoothly and quietly whisked open as they approached and she stepped into the large lobby area. She heard a commotion behind her and cast a glance before the doors closed to see that excited Lour from her flight having some sort of fit of excitement at...

seemingly everything.

As Gliz looked around the lobby, there was the obvious and immediate central desk, with a Lour and a Zus staffing it. The Lour guard pointed her snout towards it and then broke away from Gliz to go deal with the Lour outside. As Gliz approached the central desk, she noted that everything in the lobby, from the welcome sign, to signage on the walls providing directions were both in Common as well as the Karaar language.

"Greetings, what may we assist you with today?" The Zus at the central desk asked.

"My name is Gliz, I'm supposed to start my service rotation here?" Gliz nervously replied.

She fidgeted with her breather mask again as the Zus tapped at the terminal in front of it.

"Ah, I see you here, yes. Orientation will begin at 1600," the Lour said.

Gliz noticed he had a small single-lense device on its face over it's right eye. Some sort of mini terminal?

"I'm sorry, 1600?" Gliz asked, realizing she didn't understand what the number meant.

"Measure of Earth-time," The Zus said pointing at a large numeric display above them, which currently read 1100.

"Oh."

"So you have some time to yourself until then. Your living accommodations will be discussed at orientation, but until then you'll need to stay within the building. If you wish to relax without your breather mask, you can enter the Zus wing, which is down that hall. Follow the green color stripe until you encounter the airlock," The Zus continued, pointing the way.

"Thank you," Gliz mumbled and dragged her bag along

the marked path until, as described, she hit a large door the full size of the hallway, with a Zus guard.

The guard waved her through and she processed through the airlock, the air hissing as its Nitrogen-filled Earth air was cycled out for Zus-friendly Neon-filled air. After a moment the system chimed and opened the inner door and she saw several Zus walking around the hall without masks. Gliz removed hers and took a deep breath, which she let out as a hearty sigh.

Things were going better than she'd feared, but she had a long day ahead of her.

19

Gliz stepped into the hallway of the Zus wing of the Embassy building. The Zus walking around seemed pleasant enough, but she'd never met any of them before, and didn't hold a specific interest in changing that right now. She walked down the hallway and followed the signs until she found a lounge area and sat on a bench bar.

The overall construction of the embassy had thus far been an interesting hybrid of Coalition and what Gliz supposed was Karaar construction philosophies. She wasn't entirely sure what to expect with the Karaar construction methods or know how. From what she'd heard from rumors and records of the Karaar-Coalition war, they clearly had technology, but their behavior seemed barbaric and horribly violent.

However, from her admittedly brief interactions with them so far they didn't seem unintelligent war beasts. The ludicrous size of their buildings also spoke to a skill in

construction she had not originally expected either. She supposed it was possible it was a front to look impressive for their embassy, but even that would imply an incredible ability to build.

The amalgam of implied Karaar sensibilities out in the lobby, or the regularity of clocks spread around the building thus far were interesting, but not particularly comforting. Thankfully, the Zus wing thus far was much more comfortable and homelike. The cool metal floor plating, and clean styled walls were much more pleasing to her and let her begin to actually unwind a little.

The lounge seemed nice, with dispensers for drinks, and was fascinated when a Zus entered the lounge to open a large box container that was clearly chilled inside and filled with food. She made a mental note to check that later. For now, however, she was content to slip into her own thoughts and keep an eye on the clock on the wall. She gave a passing thought to how many clocks there were in the building already, and how Karaar must be obsessed with time.

Her mind drifted and she idly wondered how her family was doing. Gliz was already missing them and she had a long shift here on OB-3 before she would be able to move back. She'd been told that there'd be "vacation time" where she could go back and visit, but whenever that would happen was not now.

The lounge area felt... reasonably Coalition, but she was dreading the idea of needing to go out into the Karaar city surrounded by buildings so tall she couldn't comprehend the size of it. Her brief glance around indicated that the city they were in was filled with those buildings, and within those buildings HAD to be Karaar. Even if the ones here were pleasant enough, the rest simply couldn't be trusted.

Gliz let her thoughts drift subject to subject idly, but

there wasn't really much for her to do. She didn't know where the dorms were and she wasn't feeling brave enough to wander around on her own to find them, or ask for help. Eventually, without realizing it, she drifted off to sleep.

Gliz awoke to another Zus gently nudging her.

"Hey, orientation is starting. You're new, right?" he asked.

"Uh? Oh, yes!" Gliz squeaked before hopping off the bench and taking up pace behind the other Zus.

"Just arrived here today?"

"Yes, that's right. I'm still..." Gliz paused as they walked past a Karaar wearing a breather mask and some sort of a full body outfit, "adjusting."

"Hm, yeah. I've been here a few days now. You'll pick it up quick, don't worry. The only ones selected for this program were deemed capable by the Sovereigns. You'll do fine,"

Gliz didn't offer a reply and followed in silence through the airlock doors, and to the main conference room. The room was pretty packed, with Zus, Lour and there was even a Hanuu sitting in the back of the room. At the front, the conference table had been moved out of the way, and there was a Lour standing alongside a few Karaar. The way she was standing, she had an air of importance about her, Gliz thought.

The Lour tilted its head and muttered something to the Karaar next to it, but with the idle chatter happening in the room it was impossible to make out. Gliz also noted that the Lour had a similar sort of eye-peice that the Lour at the front desk had, and even had some sort of bizarre covering on one

of its legs. It almost looked like-

“Oh! It’s you!”

Gliz flinched at the over-excited barely-whisper that came from her left. Turning, she saw the same over-excitably Lour she had been seated next to on the flight down to the surface, and had a near meltdown outside the embassy. Apparently still as excitable as ever.

“My name’s Sif, sorry I didn’t introduce myself before!”

“It’s no problem,” Gliz said, turning her attention back to the Lour at the front. It looked like she was getting ready to start the orientation meeting.

“Do you know who that is?”

“No.”

“That’s Kogo! Kogo Grukaar Raam! Our first ambassador to Earth. I’ve seen her in some news reports. She’s been here longer than anyone else from the Coalition!” Sif squealed quietly.

“If you know so much about her, what is she wearing on her leg there? It looks odd,” Gliz asked.

“That is her leg. She lost her leg in the Coalition-Karaar war, and they gave her a new leg to apologize! It must be amazing to have a new leg made out of alien technology!”

“And all it takes is being nearly killed by those same aliens,” Gliz sneered.

“Well...uh, yes, I suppose that’s true.”

Gliz watched as Sif visibly deflated at her rebuke. She hadn’t meant to say in such a harsh way, but to hear such unabashed praise at someone losing a leg was-

“Greetings, everyone,” a voice said through the speaker system of the room cut Gliz off.

“You may already know who I am, but if not, I am Ambassador Kogo Grukaar Raam. Being here means that

you have been chosen by our Sovereigns to help forward the relations of the Humans and the Coalition in order to make us stronger together than we ever could be apart," Kogo began, and the room quickly quieted down.

Gliz watched the strange Lour as she talked. Gliz had always been an introvert, even among the people of the Coalition. She didn't like the loud, excitable types like the Lour, Sif, sitting next to her. She preferred a quiet life of working. But watching this Lour talk was enrapturing. She spoke with a cool, knowledgeable confidence that Gliz hadn't really encountered before. It almost reminded her of the Sovereigns.

"Over the next few months, more and more of us will be arriving from Advances-Beyond, and eventually from the other city-ships. Our Sovereigns, and the leaders of Humanity, have agreed that our people are best served to integrate together. To mingle, and learn from one another. This is not a new phenomenon for us in the Coalition, as all of us come from different worlds. But it is a new, unique and exciting - if scary - prospect for Humanity.

"As such, our Sovereigns saw to it that we, the chosen, would be the ones to facilitate this process. Everyone in this room was selected because of what they know or what they've experienced. This knowledge, this understanding, is critical to this task. We are the first so that we may learn about the Humans, how to interact with them, and the differences in our cultures.

"This is critical, because as the workers of the Embassy of the Coalition, it falls to us to bridge the gap and help the people of the Coalition exist safely and happily here on Earth. No doubt there will be problems. Clashes of cultures, or... unpleasant incidents," Kogo paused slightly in recollection, before catching herself and continuing, "and it falls to us to

act as the lifeline back to our people.

“The Coalition is no stranger to assimilating in other alien species into the fold, but this time will be different. There will be no uplift, as we have done in the past, but a proper cooperation. A true Alliance. The Coalition has long faced the stresses and dangers of the galaxy alone, but for the first time we have a species we can lean on. And to that noble goal, it is up to us, here, to ensure a stable backbone to that relationship.”

“No doubt, there will be a period of transition for each of you. Human society isn’t fully ready to co-exist with the Coalition. Their buildings, vehicles, their entire society has been built to their needs. But you all have seen what a glimpse of the future holds in this Embassy. Human and Coalition designs, melded, allowing everyone to comfortably exist together.”

Kogo took a few steps forward and drew close to the front of the group.

“Your official duties will come soon enough, and even now our Sovereigns are building out the various tasks we’ll have for our day to day to achieve our goals, but the first visitors from Advances-Beyond are not due here for another week at least. They planned this, intentionally, to allow each of you to spend some time acclimatizing to Earth. When tourists, workers, traders and researchers begin to arrive, you will be well equipped in knowledge and empathy to broach whatever troubles they have. To that end, each of you will be provided a schedule, living resources such as currency and dwelling, and a tasklist to accomplish in the coming week.

“These schedules will allow you time to grow comfortable interfacing with humans, both those that can speak Common, and those that cannot. It will also introduce

you to the food, local area and more. Those visiting Earth will experience similar to what you will over this next week, and this knowledge will be critical for you to be able to help them for any issues they themselves will experience.

“For today, I’m sure you’re all tired and have a busy week ahead of you. The staff that have already been here a few days now will talk to each of you to discuss your living arrangements here at the embassy, or in the nearby area and more. Now, before we finish this first meeting, did anyone have any questions?” Kogo asked, giving a quick jerk of her nose to gesture to one of the Human assistants, who grabbed a small handheld device.

Without realizing it, Gliz’s arm had shot straight up to grab Kogo’s attention. As embarrassment began to set in, but before she could withdraw her arm, Kogo spotted her.

“Yes, the Zus near the back?”

Gliz lowered her arm, and before she could speak saw the Karaar smoothly slip through the group and hold up the small tube-like device in front of her beak.

“You speak into it,” the Karaar said in remarkably good Common.

“Oh, thank you,” Gliz said, flinching as her voice was suddenly amplified over the speakers.

“I, uh. I wanted to ask. We were at war with the Karaar quite recently, and I understand that because we lost, we, the, um, the Coalition. We were supposed to pay the Karaar? Did that already happen? Is it enough to ensure our safety?” Gliz felt the entire room watching her as she was slowly sliding into herself, stumbling her way through her question, “I mean, the ones here are... nice, but aren’t there billions of them?”

“A very good question!” Kogo said with a warmth that

startled Gliz.

The Karaar withdrew and moved back to the front of the room, and between the surprising compliment from Kogo and the expanding proximity of the Karaar, Gliz was immediately feeling a reprieve.

"I was going to ask that," Sif whispered in a pout next to her.

"Now, to clarify the question for everyone who may not have gotten as much news, the Zus girl was asking about the Human-Coalition First Contact War Reparations. Part of our treaty with the humans obligated us to pay reparations for the damage and fatalities we caused in the conflict. Our Sovereigns worked out the agreement with the Human leadership, so it's not anything any of us need to worry about, but I understand that the payment was issued in the form of hard to produce, exotic elements. Ones that few but the Sovereigns know how to produce. This payment of raw material was reportedly quite sufficient.

"In my own personal experience, being a Lour with more experience with the Humans than anyone else in the Coalition at this point, I can say this - some humans will fear you. Some may even hate you. There is a non-zero chance of danger, but in my experiences it is small. That is precisely why our Embassy is so important: so in the rare, unlikely event that something happens, our people have somewhere they know they can go and be safe.

"That said, in my experience, humans will be by far more likely to find you the single most interesting and fascinating thing they've ever seen," Kogo said with a soft laugh, "I cannot completely guarantee no one on this planet of billions would wish you harm, but I can say that the likelihood of it is remarkably low, and putting yourselves out there and showing them that you're not scary space

monsters will do all the more to make them welcome us as true allies and friends.”

Gliz couldn't help but to internally sigh as she watched a Hanuu stand to offer a question. If anyone were 'scary space monsters' it was the nearly unkillable Karaar, she thought. Still, she couldn't help but take Kogo's words to heart. Something in the way she talked, with such a soft confidence was something Gliz couldn't dismiss away. She had lived with the Karaar - the Humans - for longer than anyone else. If she didn't feel like there was a danger then... well, Gliz would trust in her.

That was all she could do at this point.

20

With the orientation meeting concluded, everyone began to shift and shuffle towards the exit. Gliz looked to the front of the room where Kogo was watching everyone begin to shuffle their way out, and decided that she had to talk to her. Someone with so much experience with the Karar would certainly be able to answer her questions. Plus, Kogo seemed much more kind and approachable than a lot of the people she'd met so far.

Gliz pressed herself back up against the wall and made herself as small as possible to allow the others to go past, and then quietly began to move towards where Kogo and her guard were standing.

After the last of the group shuffled out of the room, Kogo held her confident posture for another heartbeat before turning and thudding her head into Kristiansen's chest and let out a sigh, as if she'd been holding in her breath.

"How'd I do?" Kogo asked.

“Pretty good, I think,” Kristiensen said with a laugh, patting her on the head, “Though the microphone was probably excessive.”

“Ugh, I know, I know. I just wanted everything to be properly official, and ensure everyone could be clearly heard. But it ended up being in a regular conference room with 30-something people,” Kogo moaned, “I’m so embarrassed.”

“Hey, you’re doing fine. Your time playing the diplomatic game in the last 2 months has clearly been paying off. You’ve definitely got that proper air about you. I was told you were a fast learner when we were initially assigned to you, and that’s obviously been the case. You know how to speak with that clear and confident presentation that all good diplomats can. Just got to work on the nervousness and overthinking.”

Gliz knew bits of the Karar ‘English’ language, but she’d only gotten a crash course when she had been selected. She knew enough to get directions to things, and other basic survival phrases at least, but the current conversation she was listening in on was beyond her. Still, it was interesting to see Kogo go from such a confident, leader-like role, to being so casual with this Karar.

And if Kogo was being so cavalier with it, Gliz surmised that this one was probably one of the safe ones. It also had the same black and white outfit the one that helped catch her outside wore, so it had to be some sort of assistant of hers.

As Gliz drew closer, Kristiansen caught the movement.

“Ah.”

“What?” Kogo pulled her head away and traced his line of sight until finally resting on a rough shimmering shape.

Kogo let out a yelp and startled hard enough to actually clear the ground slightly, which earned another laugh from Kristiensen.

"If you had a question, you should probably drop the camouflage," he said, pointing at Gliz.

She couldn't really make out what he said, but looked down and gasped in realization she'd reflexively activated her natural camouflage. She took a moment to relax herself and let her feathers go back to normal.

"I'm sorry! That happens sometimes. By reflex. The camouflage, I mean," Gliz babbled out an apology.

"It's ok, it's ok," Kogo said in Common, as she relaxed, "Did you have a question?"

"My Common not good. But I no danger," Kristiensen offered.

"Ok. I, uh. You've been here on Earth for a while, correct miss Kogo? And you've worked with these Karar even longer?"

"Correct, I've been on Earth for... about a month now?" Kogo asked, which Kristiansen gave a nod to, "though I've been with them for about 9."

"9... months?" Gliz asked, "I'm not fully familiar with the Ka-er, 'Human' units for time yet."

"Ah, not a problem. That'd be about..." Kogo trailed off as she ran the math in her head for a moment, "roughly 400 turns?"

"400? That's such a long time to be held prisoner!"

"Well, I wasn't held prisoner for all of that. For less than half, really. And when I was a prisoner, I was incredibly well taken care of. I understand that if all you have to go on is the news recordings and rumors, but most humans, in my experience - and I'll note I have the most out of anyone in the Coalition - are more likely to go out of their way to help than to hurt."

"I'm sorry, and I didn't mean to offend, it's just," Gliz

looked from Kogo, to Kristiansen and back to Kogo, "I didn't really want to go down to the Human home world in the first place. To leave my family behind to work with aliens and everything. I just wanted to do my job quietly at home."

"I can understand that," Kogo answered softly, "but I also understand that the Threespus wouldn't have selected you for no reason either, correct?"

"Well, yes."

"Do you know why you were chosen to come here?"

"They said that, that I'm particularly talented at data analysis. And that it would help the Coalition to better understand how Humans process data. Particularly in regards to 'Artificial Intelligence'?"

"Then your talents were considered useful enough to send you down here to help. Obviously while working here, your primary duty is representing the Coalition and, as said in my speech, facilitating the Embassy to improve relations and providing support for those that will be arriving soon here to work and relax.

"But our Sovereigns were also smart enough to not only select individuals who could advance that goal, but also the skills necessary to forward secondary goals to advance the Coalition as a whole. Your knowledge could help us better understand how humans use A.I. to achieve tasks we cannot, for example."

"So you don't think they made a mistake with me?" Gliz asked.

"No. I don't imagine so. Our Sovereigns are certainly not infallible, but they also are not often wrong. Have faith that they made the right choice, and have faith in yourself. I've no doubt you'll do fine once you adjust. I was a lowly soldier before, but now am an Ambassador. If I was able to do that,

then you can too with time.”

Gliz watched as Kogo talked. It had the same sense of soft, smooth confidence that her previous speech had. Gliz had rarely interfaced with any Threespus. She knew their status, and how they were incredibly intelligent and wise. But seeing someone that simply... exuded the same wisdom and confidence she'd only heard attributed to them was intoxicating. Was she always like this? Or had her experiences with the humans caused it?

Gliz shifted her gaze to the human standing next to Kogo. Upon making eye contact, he simply gave a subtle nod of his head, and the barest glimpse of a smile. In Gliz's Karar Relations course, she'd read that humans often widen their mouths and expose their teeth as a means of displaying they are pleased or happy. Was this human also giving its approval?

“Then, miss Kogo, if you weren't busy and it wouldn't be too much trouble...”

“Yes?”

“Could we talk some more? I mean, uh, about the, er, Humans. A crash course just ahead of my assignment wasn't enough to really prepare me for all of... this,” Gliz gestured to nothing in particular.

Gliz watched as Kogo drew her mouth wide like the human standing next to her.

“Sure, I believe we have some time. I know a nice little cafe down the street. We can get something there, follow me.”

Kogo began to head for the door and Kristiansen was shadowing her immediately. Gliz managed to only be a few steps behind as they made for the front of the embassy building.

If Kogo also had her back, then Gliz felt that even she

could certainly do this.

Manus, meanwhile, was certain of one thing. Humans were so much more fascinating than he had ever hoped.

“A joint military exercise?” Manus asked.

“Yes, that’s correct. I’ve discussed it with several members of the admiralty and generals of our ground forces. I don’t hold the same rank as previously, but I still have a good deal of pull because of it previously,” Misha said on the video call.

“If we’re going to be allies going forward, most especially if we’re going to be ultimately tying our economy to the Coalition’s, then the ability to defend one another and cooperate in the event of... unforeseen circumstances is prudent to both our peoples. Besides, given how poorly the Coalition fared in the First Contact conflict, it’s been made readily apparent that your military hasn’t had nearly as much experience as ours.”

Internally, Manus chafed slightly at the pleasantly-phrased rebuke, but he and the other Threespus knew it wasn’t wrong. They had won via brute force and the tiny sliver of combat capable personnel on Pluto. If it had come to all out war, they would have been obliterated.

Manus briefly conferred with the others via their interlink, and while there were a few very valid reasons offered for why they should not agree to the offer, the vast majority concurred that if the humans wished to help improve the Coalition’s military potential, then the benefits vastly outweighed the negatives.

“That is understandable. I’ve conferred with the others and we agree to this military exercise. I would imagine this is

something humans are already quite versed in, so we will defer to your expertise on the matter," Manus answered after only a moment.

"Good. I'll transfer up some of the details to Alan by the end of the solar day. It'll take some time to organize, no doubt, and we'll want to organize a summit meeting to establish the rules, expectations and so on between our military leadership and yours before we finalize anything. But I think it'd be a good opportunity for the Coalition to learn. That, and once it's concluded, I'd be happy to invite you down to Earth to see it for yourself," Misha said

"Oh that would be delightful!" Manus answered.

"The specifics of the summit meeting will be in data sent to Alan, and we'll finalize the details there, but at minimum expect a demonstration of battle maneuvers on each side, and a ground engagement war game between a unit of our and your ground forces. Observers from both sides will integrate with the unit as well."

"That all sounds reasonable. However, we do not have any equipment intended for such war game simulations," Manus noted.

"Hm. Right. I'll pass that along and see what our guys can come up with. Can you provide some samples of your infantry weapon equipment and we can design a conversion kit to work with our sim systems," Misha replied, taking a note.

"I'll have a shipment sent out by the end of the solar day," Manus echoed.

"Alright, that'll give plenty of time. I'm looking forward to seeing how the Coalition fares when it's prepared," Misha said with a slight, wry smile.

"And I'm looking forward to seeing the full, proper might

of humanity's military prowess," Manus answered with a bob.

Manus and Misha said their goodbyes and Alan terminated the connection.

"A joint military exercise!" Manus shouted, "oh how humans continue to surprise!"

Alan couldn't help but smile.

"Not what you were expecting when I said Misha was trying to get ahold of you?"

"Certainly not! I had anticipated offers to assist should conflicts happen, but to actually cooperate to improve our capabilities was not something I entertained as a real possibility," Manus replied

"It's actually pretty common for allied nations on Earth to send units of their military on joint exercises and the like. Improves cooperation, tests where skill sets and equipment are lacking and so on. And no offense intended, Manus, but the Coalition's military prowess is definitely lacking compared to humanity's."

"Quite so. Our military is pragmatically a defensive force. It has decent numbers, but it's primary function is to defend the city ships until we can secure an exit. Total war capability has never been a target."

"Seems practical. That said, if you're integrating with the Solar system, they're going to expect you to actually commit, at least to a degree. Safe to say that if some sort of trouble shows up and the Coalition unilaterally bolts, you won't have friends in the Solar system after that," Alan mused.

"Certainly. Allies should stick together. It's something we have been discussing thoroughly - not just the Threespus, but the Council as well. Various opinions are mixed, naturally -"

"Naturally," Alan echoed.

"- but largely there's agreement that allying ourselves to humanity is a good long term goal. It is likely the first time the Coalition will see a proper, stable 'home'."

"The Coalition's always been migratory?" Alan asked.

"Ever since it's inception, yes. And, we, the Threespus, have been for quite a time before that."

"I understand that the Coalition was, effectively, a platform that the Threespus established to uplift useful species as you came across them. Expand your numbers, integrate cultural strengths, different species offer different capabilities and all that. But I haven't really concretely heard the reasoning. The 'why'."

"You want to know why the Coalition was started by us in the first place?" Manus asked.

"I mean, yeah," Alan nonchalantly confirmed, "I remember you mentioning before that there are others out in the galaxy that covet your technology. Presumably it goes beyond that?"

"Principally still accurate, but yes. The thing is that the technology at the center of our city ships, the miniature black hole core, is unique."

"Unique?"

"As in, to the best of our knowledge, none in the galaxy have successfully created and captured one, let alone 3 to be used as desired. The designer and architect of them was killed when we were building the 4th city-ship - an accident during construction - and with that, the exact means of creating and slaving the black holes was lost," Manus explained.

"Lost? Aren't you a collective mind? Wouldn't that information be shared?"

“Not necessarily. While often information is shared, not everything is. Similar to how humans don’t tell everyone about literally everything, not all information needs to be, nor is shared between the other Threespus. As said, while many things are, the original designer withheld the particular methods used.”

“Any idea why?”

“Unfortunately not. It was a subject they refused to discuss. They had mentioned a source of ‘inspiration’, but nothing beyond that. Some others have some educated guesses at this source of inspiration, but nothing definitive. Ultimately, however, all it means is that we cannot produce more. But the ones we have are stable, and so we made use of them to travel the stars. We would visit worlds, and with the unique properties of the miniature black holes, used it as a crucible to fabricate strange and unique types of matter. One of the most important and desired of these is the unique alloy that can manipulate local gravity.”

“Ah, so that’s how your ships have anti-gravity.”

“Quite so, and in fact some of the materials being given to humanity as part of reparations include samples of it, along with trade agreements for more. It operates akin to a magnetic field, in that running a current through it shifts gravitation pull along the orientation of the plate. A plate in the ceiling and another in the floor establishes a consistent direction of influence. As long as mass is between the two plates, and they are powered, it provides a local gravity effect.”

“I think I’d seen some papers on that once, but required some purely hypothetical alloys,” Alan said, tapping his chin.

“Yes, well. When you have a black hole and can collide

atoms at near light speed or incredibly high energy states, 'hypotheticals' become practical."

"So, the Coalition, or well, the Threespus, built 3 of these city-ships and flew them to planets and provided unique fabrication and construction services?"

"Correct. It established trade, galactic rapport, and collectively helped bring the technological base of the galaxy towards parity with the Threespus. At least a little at a time."

"Trade and rapport are logical goals, but what made you seek out the last?"

"The closer the galaxy was to the Threespus, the more alike than different it was to us. And the more similar we all were, the less likely any would be inclined to attack us. Plus, there's an innate sense of pride involved with being the ones to bring up less capable species."

"Pride? Not the most practical or logical thing," Alan said playfully.

"True, but we are still living beings. We strive for the best practical results. But it doesn't preclude personal feelings and investments. Otherwise I wouldn't enjoy my friendship with you, now would I?"

"You got me there," Alan laughed.

"For a long time it worked out well. We'd jump to a star system, establish orbit and provide trade, construction and fabrication services. It was good for us, and it was good for those in the star system."

"But at some point that stopped?"

"Yes," Manus answered flatly, "they call themselves the Confederated Empire of Jekning. They are one of the groups implied to be chasing us. Empires are not rare in the galaxy, but few have been as imperialistic as them in recent history."

"So you encountered them, and they wanted you to become part of their empire?"

"Indeed. They offered 'protection' from the dangers of the galaxy if we would only operate within their sphere of influence, and never trade with another government or people directly. They would control the Threespus, our city-ships, and our fabrication."

"I'm imagining you said no, and it went poorly from there," Alan mused.

"Correct. They hadn't been quite as aggressive as they are now until that point, but we anticipated a negative reaction all the same when we turned them down. And this ended up being the case. We lost several large ships from the defensive fleet securing our escape and hundreds of Threespus were killed. Since then we've been jumping erratically, system to system we feel are safe."

"No governments to turn to for assistance?"

"No. Galactic governance is... complicated. There is principally a forum for discussion and dealing with issues that impact at a large scale, but 'quibbles'," Manus nearly spat the word, "between individual species or governments are considered below that standard. A truly large scale or cataclysmic event must be being faced for the galaxy to assemble it's leaders to discuss and resolve the problem. To my knowledge it's been over a thousand years since it happened last."

"Why?"

"Because of how difficult it is. You must understand, Alan. Travelling the stars is much more difficult for most than it is for the Threespus. Our black hole cores generate enough power we can establish stable wormholes as we desire. But the rest of the galaxy is limited to below faster

than light travel outside of specific star systems that have the infrastructure to establish wormholes themselves. Akin to your train stations on Earth. We of the Coalition uniquely have a private helicopter we can move as we please. But most of the rest of the galaxy is stuck riding trains station to station. And outside of the trains, they must walk.”

“So the primary issue is how long it takes to assemble representatives, thus only the most egregious issues are worth the effort?”

“Exactly. Wars between species tend to be fast affairs. Few desire for war like humans do, so normally conflicts are... relatively professional. Governments and species clash, they fight, winners and losers are borne out, and things continue on. Because they are relatively minor affairs normally, it’s not a topic worth initiating a Galactic Assembly.”

Alan thought for a moment, processing that information.

“Then the reason you’ve opted to stay. To integrate our economies, and why you were so pleased to hear about things like the joint military exercises is because you fear that, at some point, this ‘Confederate Empire of Jekning’ will find the Solar system. And find you?”

“Yes. The Coalition began because we Threespus determined that we needed other species working with us to ensure the safety of the city-ships and the Threespus. The Lour, Zus, Hanuu. All were uplifted because of their capabilities and probable ability to assist the Threespus’ survival. And humans were, originally, no different. We caught broken slivers of signals and messages from Earth indicating an intelligent, star travelling species that may be open to being uplifted as the others.

“Instead, we found humanity, one of the most terrifying

creatures in the entire galaxy, and likely one of the only species that could actually protect us from the Empire. To say our meeting - initial happenstances aside - was fortuitous would be a grave understatement. It is also why we Threespus, and Council agree that becoming inseparable allies of humanity is the best course of action. It would better all our peoples for an incalculable number of reasons, but the biggest by far is it ensures our safety."

"So. How long do we have?" Alan asked.

"I could not say. We have been careful about how we jump from place to place, and to our knowledge, the Empire is largely restricted to the jump stations. But their influences and resources are vast. So the sooner-"

"- the better," Alan finished.

"Indeed," Manus confirmed with a bob.

21

Penny Bakas tapped away at her tablet, running the current inventory. Sales on her book selection were steady, if not incredible, but it was always a slump in the warmer seasons. In parallel to that, iced coffee sales were up. Her small corner novelty book store was always a passion project either way, of course.

She thanked her lucky stars, as she did on the regular, that her plays on the stock market had bore out well and she walked away with a very tidy sum that she could comfortably sit on for years to come. Which allowed her to set up her shop and while away her days making coffees and selling books.

Her earpiece was rattling off the news as she wrapped up the inventory, though most of it was about the aliens, unsurprisingly. The news cycle was pretty much 24/7 ramblings or rantings about them.

She'd passed by the embassy they set up - on the other

side of the street, of course - and spotted one or two of them in front of the doors, but so far her experience with them had been altogether nonexistent. The news was saying more and more skilled visa holders or tourists were arriving - nearly every other day now - but their sum total volume was barely even a drop in the bucket compared to the city at large. It'd only been a few weeks since the Embassy was up though, so maybe that'd change over time.

Still, it was only a matter of time until she'd actually have a run in with one. Heck, maybe one would want to buy one of her books? Penny had an internal chuckle at the thought. Tourists buy things, of course, but she wasn't even sure if the aliens operated the same way. Did they even have money to spend?

Would she have to try and account for alien-bucks? Penny paused for a moment before jotting down a note on her tablet to check with local business regulations on the matter. Unlikely to matter yet, but if the Coalition was going to be a mainstay in the solar system now, that'd probably change sooner or later.

Her only current patron - a regular named Millie - tapped her card on the pay terminal and gave a smile and a wave before heading for the door. Millie talked about liking historical fiction, Penny recalled. Maybe she'd see about ordering in some so she had some new material to read next time she stopped by.

A few moments later, inventory was wrapped up and Penny was left milling at the front counter. She let her gaze wander over the shelves that lined the small corner building, lined to the brim with books she had acquired. All manner of genres, subjects and languages. Half the books in her stock she couldn't even read, but they looked interesting so she'd bought them.

Someone would probably find them worth reading or buying.

And again, this was all a passion project anyways, so if no one did, it still ultimately contributed to her book store.

The general lunch-rush was wrapping up now, and she was going to have an hour or two of it being largely dead. Penny's stomach rumbled, and she weighed her options of closing up shop for a bit to go get some grub, or just make something here.

The thought was ultimately interrupted when the door chime dinged, breaking her out of her head. She pivoted towards her new customers to fire off a welcome.

"Hey, welcome to Penny's Boo-" the greeting died in her throat as she took stock of the inbound patrons.

Squeezing through the single door was a large 6-legged wolf the size of a horse, and beyond the cloud of fur she could make out one of the bird ones as well. She watched as the wolf one - a ... Lir? Lor? Propped the door open for the bird one as they entered into her shop.

Penny wasn't sure if they actually spoke English or not, but it's not like she spoke alien, so she just had to roll with it.

"Er, welcome to Penny's Bookshelf! Is there anything I can help you with today?" she said as she laid on the happy.

The two aliens paused momentarily once they entered the shop proper to look around. After a moment, the wolf - Lour, that was it! - looked her way.

"No thank. We look," it said in thick, broken English in an accent she wasn't familiar with.

Well, at least it spoke SOME English, she sighed.

As she watched, the bird one - she still couldn't remember what they were called - broke away to scan the shelves of books, while the Lour walked over and drooped its

head to look at the baked goods in the counter display.

“Food. To eat,” Penny said as she helpfully gestured putting something in her mouth and chewing.

She’d seen on the news the wolf ones having a normal mouth with teeth, so it felt like a reasonable guess it ate like a normal person too. It nodded in response and continued to look over them for a minute longer, before it lifted its eyes to look at the menu behind her.

“Ah, if you have any questions about the menu just... ask?” Penny winced, unsure if her menu could even be read by it. If she was going to have more in here, then she was going to have to learn translations for menu items at minimum.

Very suddenly there were so many responsibilities and obligations to consider.

The Lour nodded its head again before turning and saying something to the bird - was calling them birds offensive? - in alien. Penny reached down and tapped into her tablet to search what the bird ones were called while they were talking to one another. She also reached up to her ear and tapped her earpiece to activate her AI assistant. It issued a chime as it awaited the command.

“Are there any Coalition language books?” Penny whispered as quietly as possible.

As she was quietly but quickly scrolling through various articles about them she spotted the bird alien species’ proper name: ‘Zus’. While that was happening, her assistant opened a side window on her tablet with available language and translation add-ons including - thank god - one for ‘Coalition-Common’. She wasn’t sure how good it was, but she hoped it was better than literally nothing.

Penny glanced back up to find both of them looking at a

few of the same books on the shelves before the bir - Zus - pulled one out of place and showed it to its sexapedial companion. Even if they were aliens, Penny thought that it looked particularly excited looking at the book.

The update finished installing and she activated the live-translate mode on the digital assistant. After a few seconds, it began to translate what they were saying - or what the assistant could pick up on the microphone - into English.

"What's this one?" the Zus asked.

"No idea. Flip it over. There's a description on the back."

"Can you even read it?"

"Learn to appreciate the small things, Jee."

Penny relaxed a hair. If the translation was accurate, they didn't seem to be bothered by her awkwardness, and that gave her a bit more time to panic-research. She kept digging through articles, if there were any known 'dos and don'ts' and - oh thank god the city recently published some basic guidelines of interaction.

She continued to skim through the articles trying to absorb as much information as possible, hoping most of it would stick in some strange form of osmosis. She was eventually shaken out of her readings by an unusual sound, followed by her earpiece saying "Hello?"

Penny's head snapped up to find both aliens at the counter, staring at her.

The Lour started to speak, and her earpiece began to run the translation for her.

"She said it was food. I think. She made chewing motions, but I have no idea what any of that is," it was saying to its companion.

"I'm not sure what you want me to do. I could point at something? What alien squiggle on the wall looks the most

interesting?" the Zus 'Jee' replied.

"Uh, third one down on the left?" the Lour said.

"Hello. My friend would like that," Jee said as he easily reached over Penny's head and prodded the menu with a talon.

"Oh! Uh, the...um," Penny furiously typed into her tablet's brand new Coalition-Common dictionary for some words.

"Cold. Drink," Penny gurgled out in Common, hoping that was coherent.

"Oh, it's a drink? I'm feeling more hungry than thirsty," the Lour said to his companion.

"I'm just surprised the human knows any Common," Jee said, "Feel free to keep thinking it over, Hox, I think I'll try that drink, as well as...one of these."

Penny watched as the 'Jee' alien hunched down and helpfully prodded the countertop display glass right in front of a small deli-style sandwich.

"Ok! That will be..., uh," Penny tried to figure out how to say numbers or currency in the alien language, before finally settling on what she thought was right, "10 money."

Jee extended his arm out to present a bracelet. Penny stared at it for a moment before realizing that it was attempting to pay. Her stress levels were steadily rising at this point, and her best guess was that it was a contactless pay system, so she lifted the pay terminal and tapped it against its bracelet.

After a moment, an angry beeping decline noise emitted from her tablet. Penny tried it again, and a third time, and it denied each time. The error code presented was entirely unhelpful and Penny frantically started poking at the payment program to see if it could tell her why as the Zus

loomed over her, watching her.

The Lour, 'Hox' apparently, was also watching and craned its head over and tapped the side of its head against the pay terminal, only to also yield the unfailing tone of rejection. Penny spotted a small clip on one of its right ears like an earring, which she presumed acted similar to the Zus' bracelet.

"I am so sorry-er- I. Sorry," Penny could tell she was completely falling apart at this point as they watched her bumble between her native language and a sad attempt at their own.

"Technical difficulties?" the Lour asked.

"Seems like it. Probably these new payment things. Not all the issues worked out yet. I'd heard they fast tracked them without even actually having any of the embassy staff test them first," the Zus responded.

"Clearly it needed it. Oh well, nothing to be done about it today, we'll have to call about it and get it ironed out. Not a great first day here."

Penny watched in horror as her first two - and potentially last - alien customers turned to walk towards the door.

"Free!" she yelled a little too loudly.

Both of them stopped and turned to look back at her.

"My...problem. You eat. Free," Penny managed to garble out in common, her eyes flitting between her tablet and her customers.

She watched as the pair looked at each other, and the Lour nodded and walked back to the counter.

"I'll have that, then," Hox said, pointing to the same display deli sandwich Jee had ordered, and then helpfully said, in English "That" for emphasis and clarity.

Penny let out a long breath and nodded. She gestured a hand to the seats and began to assemble the sandwiches and make the iced tea.

A few moments later, Penny brought the meal to the table, where she noted the Zus had turned the chair 90 degrees so the back wasn't in the way of its tail, and the Lour was just sitting on the floor. She made a mental note to figure out more accommodating seating arrangements in the future.

"Here you go," Penny said in English as she gently laid the plates on the table, "Let me know if you need anything else."

"Thank," The Lour said, and the Zus nodded in agreement.

Penny walked back to behind the counter and tried to busy herself while subtly keeping an eye on them. The Zus removed its face mask briefly to take a bite of the sandwich, while the Lour quickly went to town and devoured it without regard.

It reminded her of her old family dog eating, she thought.

They were talking to themselves about how good it tasted, which Penny smiled at with a small burst of pride. She then watched the Zus attempt to take a sip from its drink, and she realized that beaks did not work well with straws. She was thinking through how she could better accommodate it when the thought occurred to her she wasn't sure if they could even eat or digest any of the food. She knew a lot of animals could get sick depending on what they ate and she began to panic again.

"Wait! Um, do either of you..." Penny cursed quietly as she caught herself and furiously typed into her tablet for a translation, "Safe eat for you?"

Both aliens stopped and stared at each other then looked back at her and then back at the food.

“Why, what’s in it?” the Zus asked.

“Plant, Grain, Meat and...” Penny rattled off as she was trying to find a translation for the word ‘Cheese’.

“Meat?” the Zus repeated, “As in protein?”

“It didn’t seem like a lot of it. Shouldn’t be a problem if you don’t get more,” the Lour answered after a moment.

“The guide said that food is clean and processed, so outside of innate allergies there shouldn’t be any problem. Though I think I’d read Hanuu can’t eat a lot of stuff. I guess we can go back to the hotel if I start feeling weird?” the Zus said.

“Sounds like a good idea.”

“Problem?” Penny asked the pair.

“No,” the Lour answered in English, before continuing in Common with, “Nothing major, I don’t believe.”

Penny nodded, but kept an eye on them while they sat and talked a little longer, idly discussing the strange collection of books Penny had. She plotted out the next thing she was going to ask them on her tablet, then walked over to clear their table for them.

“You like?” she said in Common, gesturing to the shelves, “Take one. Free.”

The pair looked at each other in surprise before nodding and standing and walking over to the shelves to look.

After a few more moments, they approached the counter each with a book. The Zus had some russian novel clutched in its hands, while the Lour had the book it was looking at before safely in it’s mouth.

She looked at them, scanned their barcodes to update her inventory and flashed them a smile and a nod.

They returned the gesture and both said their thanks before heading for the door and out into the city at large. Penny held firm at the counter until they were out of sight and then slid down to sit on the floor behind the counter and let out a long sigh. She sat like that for a moment before tapping her earpiece to make a call.

“Hey mom, you won’t believe what just happened.”

22

Alan had been with Manus long enough now to be able to discern a number of subtle behaviors that belied how Threespus conveyed emotions. The subtle way they nodded or bobbed, minute turns and flicks, and similar were ever-present 'tells' that were akin to human movements or facial expressions.

As Alan watched the little alien sphere, the unsteady wobble in the air and constant turning side to side clearly and easily conveyed excitement. It was so apparent that Alan suspected a layman observer could likely even pick it out.

Of course, one of the most important clues for how the Threespus feel was context. And as he, Manus and another Threespus, Konu, climbed into an armored car fresh off their shuttle - a first time experience for them - Alan imagined that just about everyone could infer excitement from that alone. Alan glanced back through the tinted windows to see the

rest of them climb into other vehicles behind them

“Well,” Alan said as he clicked his seatbelt, “You finally made it to Earth.”

“Indeed! I can barely contain my excitement!” Manus responded.

“I noticed that, yes,” Alan replied with a chuckle.

The convoy promptly took off from the receiving area and proceeded into the city. Alan was passively tracking secured and open radio channels to listen in on ongoing chatter. Not because he thought there was a chance of anything going wrong, but more to listen in on the ongoings of everything for such a major event. The summit was ultimately going to be a meetup of heads of state and military leadership of several members of the UN.

The main interest was covering and kicking off the combined military exercises, but Alan suspected there was going to be some discussion about the Coalition being offered a spot in the UN membership as well.

Between the armed and armored convoy escorting them through the city, and the multitude of local law enforcement on tap to provide a clear path for the motorcade to progress quickly and cleanly to the meeting place, it took almost no time at all.

They were guided inside and Alan internally was amused to see one of the security admins having trouble figuring out how to issue the security badges to the Threespus visitors. It got as far as discussing just taping the badges onto the Threespus’ shells when Alan suggested just letting himself and the other attending Coalition leadership hold their badges for them.

There was some hemming and hawing from security about it, but they eventually relented.

From there they smoothly moved through a litany of checkpoints and security scans. A number of scans flagged the Threespus' bodies due to their artificial and electronic nature, but it was quickly ignored.

It was at the door to the meeting room where Alan was finally stopped.

"You're not cleared to be in here," the guard stated firmly.

"What's the problem?" Manus inquired.

"I'm sorry sir, but this AI is not vetted for this meeting and needs to wait outside."

Alan shrugged and began to step away when Manus floated to the guard and began to protest.

"That is nonsensical. Alan has been helping us this entire time and has been unfailingly helpful in other matters between our people already. Why would it matter now?"

"I couldn't say, sir. You and the other Coalition leadership have been provided the necessary clearances, but given the number of sensitive matters to be discussed pertaining to defense and security matters, along with the number of heads of state and military leaderships in attendance, we are taking security very seriously. This is for your safety," the guard offered as gently as possible.

"And I am saying that it is preposterous that the one that helped facilitate peace between the Coalition and humanity wouldn't be involved in similar modern matters!"

"Manus, it's fine. My being an AI is an obvious potential security weakness. They're just being safe about it if I were theoretically compromised. They don't mean it as a personal slight, just a practical reality when considering secure facilities," Alan interjected, placing his hand on the black ball in an attempt to calm it.

“And am I or the other Threespus so different?”

“Uh...hm. I guess not technically? But if they didn't let you in, there quite literally couldn't be a meeting,” Alan answered.

Manus floated in silence for a long moment. The rest of the Coalition in attendance were waiting out in the hall, held up by Manus' outburst. After a time, Manus floated over to where Alan was standing in the hall, opposed to the door of the meeting room.

“The rest of you can go. Konu, I'll listen in via link to the meeting. If the human leadership wishes for me to attend specifically, then I'm sure they'll be able to figure out how to navigate their own bureaucracy,” Manus said to one of the other Threespus.

“Are you sure, my sovereign?” One of the Zus generals asked.

“Yes.”

“As you wish,” he replied and then the rest of the party entered the room.

Alan looked to the guard who was clearly visibly uncomfortable. He hoped he didn't feel like he was going to get in trouble for this. If, or more likely when this comes around, Alan will make sure to emphasize that the poor guy was just doing his job. After a few minutes of standing out in the quiet hallway, Alan shifted topics.

“So how's the 'link' between Threespus work, anyways? You've referred to it a number of times now. I know it allows communication between all Threespus almost instantly. Are we talking a shared phone call? A chat system you can pull up in your mind?”

“It's a little hard to articulate, I'm afraid. At its basis, I would say the data transference is similar to how your AI

mind can communicate with any given wireless human protocol to transfer data. As far as how it's used, I suppose it could best be compared to human telecommunications technology, if it were able to not only transmit voice, but any personal data that the given Threespus wishes to upload. Interfacing with it is as natural to us as speaking. This allows any Threespus to talk to, pass visual and auditory stimulus and any personal telemetry data to any or all Threespus at once."

"Wow."

"The technology for it was designed by one of the same Threespus that came up with the black hole cores. Given that it was implemented so long ago, and they were lost in the catastrophe of the failed core creation, our deep understanding of the exact mechanisms for how it transfers information so fast is limited. And short of prying open a Threespus to inspect what we're made of, it's difficult to truly re-discover it."

"Those Threespus invented a lot of what makes you all what you are now, huh?"

"Indeed they did. I'd said the stable FTL tunnel was named after them before."

"Hemni-Sesson-Klau, right?"

"Yes. Hemni Jau Thek. Sesson Sas Win. Klau Kess Miks. Those three were behind the design and creation of the city-ships, our FTL capabilities, our singularity ascension and so much more. Their loss when the construction on the 4th city-ship failed was quite likely the single greatest loss in the history of my people,"

"We've had our share of brilliant inventors that revolutionized a multitude of industries, but it's pretty wild that they came up with so much," Alan said, as he watched

the guard press his finger to his ear to listen to his radio.

“Quite so. They never revealed the source of their inspiration, but that it happened effectively all at once has lead some of us to theorize they had an encounter with Anyu.”

“Anyu?”

“Barely more than a myth among the galactic community, but supposedly it’s an entity tha-”

“Sirs?” The guard interrupted Manus.

“Yes?”

“I’ve been told to allow you in. Both of you. It sounds like they sorted out the AI’s security clearances to get the OK for this. They’re waiting for you inside now.”

“See Alan? I told you they’d be able to navigate their own bureaucracy if they had a little motivation,” Manus preened.

“Sure, but it’s also not likely the best possible first impression for the Coalition to make to the UN leadership and representatives,” Alan replied with a smirk.

“They offered the poor first impression by virtue of playing unneeded bureaucratic games with you, who they specifically sent as an ‘assistant’ to me, and then refused to let continue to ‘assist’ me in important matters such as this,” Manus replied.

Alan didn’t really have a counter to that point, so he simply replied with a smile and a shrug as the guard held the door open for them.

“Greetings, Mr. Woka,” the assembly speaker said as they entered.

“Please, Manus is fine.”

“It wasn’t anticipated that you’d insist that AI-”

“Alan,” Alan offered.

“- to be in attendance, or we would have gotten it vetted

ahead of time. I apologize for the inconvenience this has caused," he finished.

"Given that we'll be discussing our military and infrastructure capabilities for facilitation of this combined training exercise, then as a practical matter Alan - who has been with us on Ever-Marches-Forward for weeks now - would be able to validate the information we present to you," Manus stated as he floated over to take a spot above an empty chair at the large table at the center of the room.

Alan kept his expression neutral as he stood nearby.

On the human side of the table was primarily UN military forces leadership. Several ground forces generals he could ID, as well as a number of top admiralty for the joint fleets.

The lack of heads of state, however implied his hunch that they'd be tabling the Coalition being rolled into the UN today looked to be wrong. It struck as inevitable to him so long as the Coalition appeared to stay out of trouble, but it seemed they wanted to take it slower.

Maybe he was getting too used to how fast Manus and the Threespus leadership could just punch things through at an administrative level.

On the Coalition side, Manus and Konu, along with a third Threespus, Jok made up the 'heads of state'. Flanking on each side was the military leadership elements of the Council, though apparently Konu was their Master of Arms and oversaw the entirety of the Coalition's military departments.

2 Zus, 2 Lour made up the military leadership in attendance. In addition to them-

"As was already agreed upon, 2 of our generals, Wrop-Qon and Glom-Wry will be in attendance via remote

connection, given that their stature makes attending this meeting in person difficult," Konu announced.

"Right. Were they able to connect to our secure communications line?" A voice on the far side of the table asked.

Alan immediately pinned the voice and was annoyed he didn't spot him sooner.

"They should be connecting now. A pleasure to see you again, General Misha Orlov," Manus responded.

"You as well," Misha replied.

After a brief moment, two hologram projections flickered to life and each displayed a scaled down version of a Hanuu, one on each side of the Coalition membership.

"Representing the Coalition, in attendance we have Manus Rame Woka, overseer of Human-Coalition relations and biological specialist. Konu Brid Skee, Master of Arms of the Coalition military and Jok Jik Vemm, head of weapons and technological development of the Coalition," the speaker announced.

Alan watched as the proceedings continued briskly with the announcement of each of the military leaders in attendance on both sides.

Admiral Shepherd was in attendance, representing command of the Jupiter rotational fleet. Misha was here in part because he organized this shindig, but also as previous Field Commander of the UN ground forces, his experience with the live combat was critical.

Admiral Lee represented the Mars rotational fleet and had apparently specifically offered to be first in line for demonstrating UN fleet skirmish capabilities. He seemed about as gung-ho about this idea as Misha was, though Alan thought Lee's motivation was more about showing off how

good the human military was.

Other Generals and Admirals were there for logistical input, and how the ground war game would play out and where.

Alan stole a glance at Misha who was busy tapping away at one of 3 displays he had set up to organize things. The guy had an almost spooky amount of influence in military matters. Even figuring he had a lot of pull given he was Field Commander during the previous conflict, being able to wrangle up this much brass into agreeing to a combined exercise less than a year after the previous conflict?

Spooky. Misha was definitely some sort of fluke of the universe.

On the Coalition side, the Threespus were the primary focal point of contact, naturally, but the military leaders in attendance were probably at least as storied as the humans on the other side of the table.

Judging by how many scars one of the Lour generals had, quite possibly more so.

“At General Orlov’s suggestion, we will be organizing a combined military exercise between the military forces of humanity and that of the Coalition under the designation ‘Wide Sweep’. There are no doubt many questions and uncertainties about both sides’ capabilities, as our only previous military interaction was... one sided,” Admiral Lee began.

Alan wasn’t sure if that was intended as a slight, or if the Admiral was trying to be gentle, but no one at the table would disagree that the brief engagement against the Coalition had been catastrophic for them. The scarred Lour general gave an audible sniff at the comment, but no one else

visibly reacted.

“Given that most of what we have are projections based on that one engagement, and the concern of lingering animosity between the military side of each of our societies, I felt that getting them to work together and learn from each other would be a fast-track to moving past fear or distrust and onto respect,” Misha interjected.

“Reasonable,” Konu replied, “we learned much from our short battle with humanity, but as you said, most of our information is gleaned from your historical documentation and simulations. If we are to work together, we both need proper practice.”

“Joint operations between our militaries is too much to learn from one training session, correct?” Wrop-Qon said, the translator AI dubbing over him.

“Yes, it would. Even our terrestrial militaries pick particular points of concern to practice in joint operations on an annual basis. More practical and useful to hit on the main points of concern, learn from those, and then the next year refine, or work on other topics.”

“So this would be an annual operation?” Jok asked.

“If the Coalition would be willing, then yes, we feel that would be best,” Misha answered.

“That would be perfect,” Konu answered.

A murmur of agreements from the generals on the Coalition side sealed the deal.

“Good. To that end, we can skip a few of the less important high-level tasks for next year,” Lee said as he gestured to Misha.

Misha tapped one of his displays and brought up a projected list of areas they felt were critical to test and review on. With a few more taps, some of the items were

crossed out. After a moment, the list was cleaned up leaving only a few items.

"Fleet combat maneuvering, Inter-planetary logistical deployments, and ground combat exercise?" Jok read the list out loud.

"Yes, these are the areas that are some of the most important in terms of a full war scenario, and thus ones we want to be sure the Coalition is capable of keeping up with humanity on. In the case of, say, another alien invasion to the solar system, it would be paramount that the Coalition would be able to efficiently and safely deploy and maneuver with human forces to engage," Misha clarified.

"That makes sense," Manus said, "on the topic of communication - given humanity has done these sorts of things among your own people many times - would we need to train our soldiers to speak your language? Or would we rely on translators? Ensuring stable, clear communication is important both to military efficacy and preventing mistakes during training, after all."

"During the fleet combat maneuver, translating communications will no doubt be sufficient, same for most of the logistic operations. For the ground combat exercise, however, as we'll have units making maneuvers together, we'll want at least some embedded individuals capable of speaking both."

"Agreed. We've frontlined optional secondary learning programs for all citizens to learn a few different primary human languages. Pickup on them is slow, but gaining momentum as tourism and work programs at human locations increases. We could potentially tie it into a prep course for officers leading up to the exercise?" Manus said.

"Doable," one of the Zus answered.

“Pickup on Common has been quite slow, but will likely become more common over time. Likewise we can pick officers and ensure they can properly communicate for the exercise.”

The overall schedule of the exercise had largely been plotted out beforehand, so it was largely down to confirmation of detailing and abilities. 4 months from now to give adequate preparation time, and the exercise itself would last a week. Coalition and Human sides would first use a fleet detachment to simulate a combat engagement around Titan. Telemetry and simulation systems would be integrated into all ships and fed to the military base on it for collation, and realtime sharing and analysis with both sides.

After that, both sides would simulate a coordinated deployment of ground forces from both fleet detachments to mars, and perform a joint combat raid on a ‘secured facility’.

Humanity would provide the basis for the simulation systems since they already had them. The Coalition forces would integrate them and train their people on working with it. The simulated naval battle would be entirely simulated fire, while the combat raid would use simulated munitions with supporting live fire to test artillery and air support teams.

Alan compared the plan against other joint operations that were done on the regular and didn’t really see any problem spots. It was hardly truly comprehensive, but as previously noted by the general, this one would ease everyone into it, and work on high-level concepts.

Plus, while at this point the Coalition was ‘book smart’ about humanity’s military capabilities, what they engaged with on Pluto barely qualified as a skirmish, let alone full scale war operations. Each side having some people shadow operations would do a lot for both sides.

"I also understand that our shipment of anti-gravity plating successfully arrived and your people have begun to get to work on trials?" Jok asked, as the hashing out of details of the schedule began to die down.

"Yep, our people have started testing it out in the lab. With the engineers you sent with it, it shouldn't take long to start field trials on a smaller ship," Shepherd answered.

"In time for the exercise?"

"No, certainly not. Outside of trial runs, there's no standing plan to retrofit it to existing ships. Having passive anti-gravity completely changes the design paradigm of what works in space. No, I'd say as long as you can keep supplying it, the long-term plan is likely to completely replace the entirety of our standing fleets. But that'd take decades to fully do to not harm readiness."

"As only the first part of the reparations payments, you can be assured we're happy to fulfill the orders on that. And, once we've repaid our debt, happy to sell it to you at a reasonable price. It is, after all, an important export of ours," Jok mused.

"Glad to hear it. It'll be hard to convince the penny-pinchers to approve a total replacement of our fleets, but with the new technology on the table it needs to happen to stay competitive," Shepherd nodded.

"Then it sounds like both sides have agreed upon the details of the exercise. We'll meet again just before it to review, but things should go smoothly. As long as your people can keep up," Misha said as a light jab with an easy smile.

"My soldiers will be happy to show you what it means to succeed in the field," the scarred Lour general snarked back.

With that, the meeting was finally concluded and everyone began to shuffle out. Alan watched as Manus and Misha talked for a brief moment before Misha checked his wrist and excused himself.

As he reached the door where Alan was waiting, Alan extended a hand.

“Good to see you again. Been a while.”

“Sure has. Can’t imagine what you’ve been up too,” Misha said with a smile while clasping Alan’s hand.

“Oh, and Manus figured it out. Because of you, I might add,” Alan said with a wry smile.

Misha let out a short laugh, and patted Alan on the shoulder, “Some infiltrator you are.”

With that, Misha left, no doubt up to his eyes in work to be done. Alan turned just as Manus and the rest of the Coalition group got to the door.

“So, who wants to see Earth proper?” Alan asked.

23

“Yes, of course Councilor. Goodbye,” Killian said as he concluded the call and tapped the terminal display.

He tapped out a few quick notes about the call before swiping the display to lock it and looked at his empty coffee mug. He reached for it, but then thought of a better plan, and rose from his desk and headed out his office door.

He traversed the short distance down the hall to his partner in crime’s office and gently knocked on the door. While he waited for a response, he couldn’t help but be amused - as he often found himself - that the ceramic material of the door was sculpted, and painted, to give the appearance of wood.

Killian was quick to note when the Embassy building opened up for them how many small details had gone into the place to make it feel more like ‘home’. In contrast to most of the Coalition construction which was metals, ceramics and other durable and stark materials, the Embassy’s

detailings were significantly more organic and Earth-y.

Well, not really - it was largely the same materials - but they were designed specifically to feel more like it. From 'wood' doors, to synthetic fiber carpets, to paintings of landscapes, they'd clearly done their homework, and no doubt gotten a number of tips and pointers on how to make their time here feel more like home.

A keen eye could quickly tell it apart from the Earth-borne 'real deal'. Shaped ceramic instead of wood, alien world's landscapes instead of Earth's mountains or fields, but in the toil of the day to day, the minutiae easily faded away and it just helped everything feel homey.

Maybe not everything, Killian thought as a Glul drifted past him in the hallway. But it was sufficiently like home now it was pretty easy to operate their day-to-day. Moreso now that more humans were moving here and aliens were heading to Earth every day.

Killian gently knocked again, and after a moment, the door clicked open, but before it had even finished sliding open, Tabitha was walking back over to her seat, still on a call. Killian slipped inside, and leaned up against the wall to wait.

"Yes, I understand that Councilor, but that's certainly an issue that should have been covered before, between the Threespus and humanity's leadership, correct? I'll certainly pass along your concerns, but I believe the summit took place a turn and a half ago. I'm certain that you'll be provided more information soon. Until then I would please ask that you talk to those concerned citizens in your district so they don't try and picket at the human embassy. It would be a bad look for everyone involved," Tabitha stressed.

After a few more minutes of terse back and forth,

Tabitha thanked the Councilor and ended the call before resting her head on her desk.

“What was that about? Something about picketing?” Killian asked before walking over.

“So, the Coalition military delegation went to Earth yesterday to meet our people and figure out this ‘joint exercise’ situation, right?”

“Sure.”

“Well apparently a standing, ‘unaddressed issue’”, Tabitha emphasized with her fingers, “is that humanity is apparently violating galactic law and how that was presumably all going to be wrapped up by now, or at least in time of the exercise.”

“Hey, real quick, I was gunna go get lunch, want to come with? Or are you still putting out fires?”, Killian interrupted.

Tabitha stole a glance at her terminal before tapping to lock it.

“Nah, a break sounds good right now,” she said, getting up.

“Will your hip attachment be joining us?”

“My ‘hip attachment’ has a name, you know,” Tabitha said, playfully slugging Killian in the arm.

“Alright, alright. Will Arorm be joining us?” Killian laughed.

“Lemme message her,” Tabitha said.

They walked into the elevator, which swiftly carried them to the bottom floor. As the doors opened, Arorm was waiting for them.

“Good afternoon, Arorm,” Killian offered.

“It has been a pleasant turn so far, yes,” Arorm affirmed.

“So, ladies, where did we want to eat? Just hit the cafeteria? Or did either of you have something more local in

mind?"

"Cafeteria'll have to do today, unfortunately. As soon as we're done eating I've got to get back on sorting out the current fires," Tabitha sighed as they walked down the hall towards the Embassy cafeteria.

"Fires?" Arorm asked.

"Oh, right, I'd cut you off about that. So what's the 'unaddressed issue' the Councilor was complaining about?" Killian asked.

"Let's get our food first and find a corner table," Tabitha said.

After a few moments of them acquiring food, they found a sequestered table in a far corner of the cafeteria room. Killian moved the chairs out of the way to give Arorm a place to sit, and then the trio seated themselves.

"So, apparently? Explosives are illegal by galactic law," Tabitha said, bringing the conversation back.

"In what context?" Killian asked.

"Any? Apparently?" Tabitha shrugged in frustration.

"What, seriously?"

"Yes," Arorm answered after swallowing a chunk of meat off her tray, "Explosive-based weaponry were collectively voted to be egregious in nature and too indiscriminately harmful. As such, they've been illegal for any form of conflict throughout the galaxy for at least a few thousand years."

"So, bombs: obviously illegal. But what about guns?"

"Your firearms propel their projectiles with an explosive as an implement of war. So they would also be likely found to be infringing," Arorm answered.

"Why?"

"Because, as I already said, explosive weapons were

found to be egregiously harmful and indiscriminate. They are not weapons that are applied to a specific target. Given that organic life is fragile, a single explosive could kill dozens, or hundreds of individuals.”

“Or millions,” Killian muttered under his breath.

“Millions?” Arorm asked.

“But bullets themselves are selective”

“I am not sure that is a sufficient separation. The projectile is selective, but it is still utilizing an explosive as a utility of war to kill. It could be argued that it would be included.”

“Ok, so suppose Earth was... tried? What punishment would we be talking?” Killian asked, leaning forward.

“I am unsure of any instance of it being actually applied, but galactic law, if invoked for punishment, is usually quite harsh due to the difficulties in the process of a trial. It usually is only invoked in very rare circumstances. But extreme sanctions and reparations would be the most likely case. If found to be beyond possible reproach, the offenders could potentially be declared enemies of the galactic assembly and systemically eradicated,” Arorm answered.

Killian and Tabitha shot each other a glance.

“Do you think that would apply to humanity?”

Arorm paused mid-chew and thought the question over.

“I am not a politician or judge. But I do not believe it would be such an extreme verdict. However, I believe it likely humanity would see harsh economic punishments, as would the Coalition if we adopted any human weaponry.”

“Hrm. Sounds about how we consider chemical weapons then. That could be a problem,” Killian grumbled.

“So then the Councilor was likely getting heat from some people of the Coalition that fear working with our military

would get them on the bad side of galactic law?" Tabitha asked.

"I do not know the details, but that would make sense."

"Wouldn't that be something that would've been ironed out at the summit yesterday thought?" Killian asked.

"I'd think so? But I don't remember hearing any specific news about it. If we were to get any sort of directives pertaining to the exercise, it'd likely be this week. Though I would also expect the Coalition leaders that went to, you know, send something back to say 'Hey, no worries, we worked it all out!'" Tabitha answered.

"You could possibly talk to Councilor Jawn-Hye. She has been quite pleased with the Coalition allying with humanity and may be open to discussing how the Council feels as a whole,"

"Good idea," Tabitha said.

"Ok, I'll talk to her after we eat, try and figure out if this is something that's actually a potential problem, or just a 'left hand doesn't know what the right is doing' deal," Killian said.

"Alright, meantime, I'll hit up home, see if there's any info pertaining to this. Like I said, I would have to imagine that 'your entire military violates galactic law' would've come up in discussions," Tabitha answered, "Sorry Arorm, we'll have to cut lunch short then. I know there was a place over in the Zus districts you wanted to show me, but we'll have to raincheck it."

"You need not worry. This is an important matter. For my part, I will ask some contacts I know that may be able to tell me how the average citizen feels about this," Arorm said before quickly finishing off her food and grabbing her tray in her mouth.

“Thanks Arorm, I appreciate it,” Tabitha said.

The working day reached its end and Killian and Tabitha met up with Arorm at the entrance of the Embassy. Arorm suggested an out of the way place to eat and discuss, which saw them take a quiet tram ride into one of the Zus districts.

Arorm had her comfortable position at Tabitha’s side, and Killian sat across from them. He’d noted that the Coalition had a pretty fast turnaround time on adding a handful of human-friendly seats on the one end of the tram, which certainly made the commutes easier. The ones that went about the Embassy and growing residential zone in the same district were expected, but seeing them having been now added to trams that went out of the district as well was quite pleasing.

The Coalition took its integration efforts seriously.

As the tram passed through the separator wall and entered the Zus district properly, Killian got a good look at it for the first time.

There was a proverbial forest of wide cylindrical towers that rose to the ceiling of the district, with entryways all across their surface. Killian quickly realized that they were, in fact, built around the support pillars. Other than the fact the majority of their surface was artificial and smooth, Killian thought they looked almost like the living spaces of those natives on Earth that lived in homes embedded in cliff walls.

This was further reinforced as they watched Zus enter and exit from various entryways, and either traverse the landings built out from the openings that crisscrossed along the towers’ surface, or simply jumped from the ledges and

extended their feathered limbs and glided down to lower levels. Zus couldn't fly, but they could glide a decent way, and their style of home reflected that quite nicely.

The outsides of the towers, other than the pathways, ramps and landings extruded out from it, was actually quite spartan. Notably different to the Lour districts with their bright colors and decorations.

As the tram passed by one of the towers, however, various identifiers were adorned near the entrances of each abode. An address system, no doubt, Killian thought. He happily spent the rest of their quick trip to the station soaking in the minute details of the place.

In addition to the landings - which upon further observation had some sort of curb or brace that the Zus' talons could easily grab when they were gliding, there was a litany of tall posts spread out between the towers with rungs and small platforms, which the Zus used to catch and reorient themselves for a glide in a different direction. Or a place to just stop at and rest, it seemed.

None of the abodes had obvious doors, either, he noted.

"Zus aren't that big on privacy?" Killian asked, as the tram pulled into the station.

"Apparently not. Their homes can be closed off, but the doors are moved into place. Unlike our homes, they're not a permanent fixture. Their culture seems to be a great big 'open door policy' as far as homes are concerned," Tabitha answered as they stepped off the tram, donning her mask.

After she checked Arorm's and Killian flashed a thumbs up for his mask status, the station doors processed the atmosphere over, and opened. Arorm took the lead with Tabitha right at her side. Killian was a few paces back, finding himself regularly distracted by the sights as they

went.

At the ground level, Killian was surprised to see even more entryways that clearly descended down into the floor. Unlike the Lour districts, there wasn't a layer of soil. There were spots of what he presumed to be plantlife, but it was quite tall and dense. It struck him almost like tree-sized foxtails, but their pale blue color was certainly striking. The little sections of foliage parks had smaller Zus - kids - playing.

Some Zus stopped to gawk as they made their way, but unlike Tabitha's first appearance in the Lour district, they were largely left alone. Humans, it seemed, were beginning to be a somewhat normal sight, Killian mused.

Arorm's deft navigation skills were as slick as always, and they quickly found themselves at the base of one of the large towers. Killian was concerned they'd have to climb the zigzag of walkways up, but instead, thankfully, Arorm slipped down into one of the openings that descended into the underfloor areas.

As Tabitha and Killian followed, they found it was, in fact, quite a large space, and they both instantly recognized what it was. Near the entrance was a small kiosk with a Zus at the ready, and behind it was a spread of tables with perch-benches along them. While not densely populated currently, there was a decent number of patrons at the restaurant chowing down on food and having quiet conversations.

The lighting was relatively low, creating a nice, relaxed atmosphere.

"3," Arorm announced as she approached the kiosk.

"Certainly, please, take a seat where you like," the Zus said, gesturing to the hall.

Arorm shot a glance back to her two human companions, and Tabitha simply nodded her head towards the back. Arorm silently made her way over and took up a table near the back.

As Killian approached, he saw 2 sides of the square table had simple padded benches that the Zus used for their usual seating, and the perpendicular 2 sides were empty.

“Seating for both Zus and Lour?” Killian observed out loud.

“Yes. It is not particularly uncommon for Lour to come to Zus districts to eat. Lour are omnivorous, so a variety of foods is healthy. That, and experiencing new foods is pleasant,” Arorm answered quietly as she took a seat.

Killian and Tabitha sat on opposing benches and waited for the staff to come. After a moment, a waiter approached and Arorm took the liberty of ordering for the three of them. Before he left, the Zus deposited 3 bowls of cool water. Killian stifled a laugh.

“What?” Arorm asked.

“Nothing, nothing. It’s just so weirdly like home, I was kinda taken aback. This could easily be some little restaurant down the street from my house back on Earth,” Killian answered, clearing his throat.

“So, to business?” Tabitha asked after taking a sip of water from her bowl.

“Sure, will take a minute to set everything up anyways,” Killian said.

He lifted his shoulderbag onto the table and pulled out a tablet and propped it up, before reaching into his bag and pulling out 2 pairs of augmented reality glasses, handing one to Tabitha. Finally he pulled out a single-lens ‘lite’ model and passed it to Tabitha as well.

"We don't have any Lour-friendly models at the moment, but I put in an order for some back home. The display may be unstable, but you should be able to follow along decently enough. May I?" Tabitha gestured with the device to Arorm.

Arorm tilted her head and Tabitha deftly hooked the flexible wire frame across Arorm's snout, and then atop one of her ears on the right side of her face. After a moment or two of them fiddling with the positioning until Arorm could see the test image at least passably, Tabitha pulled away and nodded to Killian.

"Alright, so," Killian began, tapping the tablet display.

All 3 AR devices connected to the private session he set up, and after a beat, a number of floating documents and displays appeared to float above the tablet.

"Fascinating," Arorm said.

"I know the Coalition's got holographic displays and all, but this is more portable, and it's a whole lot more private, which is important for... sensitive matters," Killian said.

"Indeed. Discretion is wise."

"So, I got in contact with Jawn-Hye, like Arorm suggested. Sounds like - far as who all she represents in her district as well as neighboring ones - opinion on the subject is pretty mixed. I don't think it'd really been a forefront issue, but I guess a Zus Councilor had started making waves ahead of the summit and it's been getting noisier," Killian explained as he tapped into the AR display they were watching to open various news reports from around the Coalition.

"Quite possibly the same Councilor that was calling to complain to me earlier, then. Niti?" Tabitha chimed in.

"Ah. She is well known for being loud about issues. I believe she means well, but she is not one for letting the

political process to run its course," Arorm noted, "But I believe that if she says she is getting complaints from those she represents, she is most likely being truthful."

"Hm. But yeah, Jawn said that she's had some people contact her about if the Coalition was going to start using 'illegal weapons' and if it meant that the Coalition would run aground of galactic law, but it's by and large only a smattering. Far as she's had it brought up to her, anyways. Maybe Niti's getting more heat from her district. Hard to say. Jawn also mentioned it's come up a few times during Council meetings, having originally been a topic immediately after the Pluto conflict," Killian continued, swiping through various news reports.

"I guess it's been a low pressure issue until the joint exercise brought it back to the forefront," Tabitha concluded.

"Likely," Arorm agreed.

"How'd the home office reply?" Killian asked Tabitha, who shook her head in reply.

"Four and half hour send time, Kil. Won't get a reply until later tonight at the earliest. As soon as I get something I'll let you know," she answered.

"For my part, I got in contact with various people I have worked with previously. I have travelled quite a lot. Most of those I talked to were concerned, but believed that our Sovereigns would see that the matter is dealt with," Arorm added.

"Who all did you talk to?" Killian asked.

"Two Councilors, one Sovereign, a few clan leads, and a handful of regular workers in the districts near the the human one," Arorm said.

"A Sovereign? You know a Threespus? Personally?"

"Not well, but I had served as an escort on occasion for

them. Unfortunately, their area of affairs is in agriculture, and was not able to provide much insight into this."

"How about the workers? Did any of the regular people on the ground have anything to say?" Tabitha asked.

Arorm shook her head.

"Their opinions were largely muted. A 'wait and see' approach. While some voiced concerns, it seemed that they believe - as said - our Sovereigns would take care of it and there was no real need to worry."

"So do you think Councilor Niti was just blustering about possible protests to try and push for a quicker resolution?" Killian asked.

"It is possible, yes, but opinions may be stronger in her district as well," Arorm answered, turning to look behind her.

"Hrm," Killian grumbled as he swiped through various news feeds in the AR display.

"You all talkin' about Councilor Niti?" a gruff voice asked.

Killian and Tabitha both flinched and looked up to see a Zus, rather bulky compared to most holding a large platter. Both had been too invested into the conversation and going over reports and news to notice his approach.

"Oh, uh tha-" Killian began to sputter.

"Yes," Arorm confirmed, "Good to see you Artym."

"You know him?" Killian asked, regaining his composure.

Artym shook his head as he laid down 3 large bowls onto the table, one in front of each of them.

"Not at all. Never seen this bag o' fur in my life," he answered, reaching up and patting Arorm on the head.

"He was adopted into my clan when he was young. So, we are distantly related. He serves good food here, so I visit

when able," Arorm answered before breathing in deep and savoring the smell of the soup.

Killian stole a glance at Tabitha who looked wholly too interested in the idea of a Zus raised by Lour, then moved to answer the question.

"Yes, we work over at the Embassy and Councilor Niti has expressed concern about, ah, some weapons that the human military uses," Killian answered.

"Oh, that. Eh. Niti means well, but she squawks a lot over issues that usually solve themselves. Her rabble over in her district follow her lead. I don't see the Sovereigns pissin' off the galaxy just to gain you lot as allies, so I figure they've thought of somethin'. No offense," Artym answered, quickly refilling their bowls of water.

He gave one more friendly pat on Arorm's head before waving and excusing himself back into the kitchen. Killian took the opportunity to close out his tablet and get the AR glasses back from Tabitha and Arorm.

"Just as well, my eye was beginning to hurt," Arorm commented, returning to savoring the smells.

"Yeah, focal point's going to be a bit off for you, so it's unpleasant after a bit. I'll make sure we get you a proper set as soon as possible," Killian said as he stuffed everything back into his bag and put it back down onto the floor.

Arorm had finished savoring the smell of the soup and dug in, lapping it up. Tabitha took a moment to watch the spectacle, while Killian gave a moment to examine his food. It was a soup with an incredibly thick, white broth, bordering on a gravy. In it were various chunks of brightly colored foods - and given that Zus were primarily vegetarians, likely types of plants. Additionally there was a plank of something vibrantly orange. It was dense, but almost spongy. Killian's

best guess was something akin to a mushroom, and it's placement halfway embedded into the broth made him think it was intended as a garnish.

Finishing the visual analysis, he took a page from Arorm and dipped his head down low and took a deep breath in through the nose. The soup was slightly warm, but the smell barely carried past it's surface. The full whiff, however, hit him powerfully and took almost an entire minute for him to work through the strange bouquet of smells. It was clearly strongly seasoned, but given that they were all alien, Killian had no idea what the make or measure of any of them were.

After recovering from the olfactory onslaught, he checked his bag to ensure he had some digestive medicine in case it hit him weirdly, and reached for a spoon before realizing the table was empty.

"Uh, Zus aren't big on silverware, I take it?"

Arorm paused her eating and looked at Killian.

"I do not know what that is."

"Uh, eating utensils. Humans use them when we eat... uh, food." He explained lamely.

"Zus simply pick up the bowl," Arorm answered before returning to her soup.

"Makes sense I guess," Killian replied.

He reached down and clasped the large bowl on both sides before looking across from himself to see Tabitha fighting with all her power to not break into a laugh, also grabbing her bowl.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Killian chuckled.

Killian lifted the bowl to his mouth and took a sip.

This is a REALLY good soup, Killian thought.

24

“You’s humans may be hard ta kill, but we’s Lour know a thing a two bout war, like I sez,” General Reap slurred at Alan in his regional Lour dialect.

Alan had a solid translation of the most common Lour dialect at this point, but the General’s variant was distinct enough that his translation for it was rough. The fact that he had taken a shot of ‘zmep juice’ to relax him before sleep wasn’t doing his speaking abilities any favors, either.

The unique, scarred Lour general was set up on a quite large plush pillow next to the window of the hotel suite they were staying in. He and Manus had been meeting with the General about how the summit had gone, how their light tour through the city went and other casual conversations.

Alan was slightly amused that even alien species from beyond the stars could suffer jet lag, same as humans. Unfortunately, it did mean that the day was ultimately cut short as the non-Threespus members of the group opted for

an early evening so they could get a fresh start tomorrow seeing all of what Earth truly had on offer.

As everyone wound down, the General had taken the odd drink - harkening back all the way to a secret clan recipe from their homeworld, apparently - to help him sleep. For the last little while, he had gone on, regaling some stories of his exploits in battle. As Alan watched the giant space wolf's eyes flutter as sleep finally took him, he realized that the scarred general probably suffered nightmares much like many human soldiers who have seen too much.

That he wore a collection of scars that were such a rarity for his people suggested that the handful of stories he'd told of frantic battles in low gravity vacuums were a small slice of the full story.

"I've no doubt of that at all, General," Alan whispered.

"His clan's never let us replicate that drink, interestingly enough," Konu quietly said, floating up next to Alan, "Come, let them sleep, we can talk in the next room."

"Sounds good," Alan said, rising to his feet.

Alan crept past the bed that had one of the Zus Admiralty curled up on it, and followed Konu out of the bedroom of the suite and nodded in acknowledgement of the security team. It was mainly made up of Coalition types, but there was one or two humans attached to help coordinate for any given rotation. At the moment, these suites were some of the best protected places in the city.

"I'll admit, when I met General Reap, his injuries were quite shocking. Humans are pretty hearty to damage but I don't think I'd seen anyone else in the Coalition with a similar level of injuries. How'd he survive?" Alan asked as he took a chair in the seating area.

"The General? It was many, ah, years ago," Konu

answered, “we had stopped at a mining colony at their request to fabricate specialty metals and trade with them.”

“They were situated in an asteroid field, you see, their colony being spread out between a few closely arranged asteroids with bases built into them. They would fly mining ships out to other nearby rocks, process them and return them to the main facilities for packing and shipping back to their home planet deeper into the star system,” Konu continued.

“Sounds reasonable,” Alan said.

“It wasn’t the first time we’d traded with them, though we hadn’t fabricated anything for them before. So we entered the system as usual, and moved one of the city-ships into the field to work with them.”

“I’m sensing it didn’t go as planned?”

“No. The mining operation had in fact been raided and taken over by pirates that were then using it as a base of operations to harass ships. The local system government found it easier to ignore the problem and set up new operations elsewhere in the belt.”

“Ah.”

“They also did not deign to inform us of the situation having changed,” Konu remarked bitterly.

“Oh. So you walked one of the city-ships right into a trap?” Alan asked.

“Yes. Once we were in position near the colony cluster, they hailed us, informing us that they had repurposed much of the mining equipment into a large makeshift mass driver, which was pointed at the city-ship. Any attempt to flee or defend ourselves and they would bombard it, likely destroying us.”

“Given that you’re all still here, I’m guessing you didn’t

listen to their 'advice'?" Alan mused.

"We did not. We took a few of our stealth frigates - your human military has had to deal with them before - and some of our best fighters that were trained to deal with zero gravity combat to infiltrate the pirate colony facilities. They would strike simultaneously and disrupt or cripple them enough for the city-ship to flee to safety."

"And our General was on one of those raids?" Alan asked, stealing a glance back towards the bedroom.

"Correct. He was young at the time, and it was his first real mission leading a squad of specialists like that. They were mostly Zus with a few Lour such as himself."

"So what happened?"

"The raid was successful. The three stealth frigates hit each facility simultaneously, and attacked quickly and ruthlessly. The pirates were too confused about the attack to retaliate immediately. Reap's team made their way through the building to where the makeshift mass driver was structured and sabotaged the capacitor banks. Unfortunately for them, as they were beginning to pull out, one of the pirates finally realized what was happening."

"And tried to fire it at the city-ship," Alan concluded.

"Yes. The capacitors exploded, nearly splitting the asteroid in two. Most of Reap's team was killed instantly. The others were peppered with shrapnel and thrown into the void of space. The other frigates didn't suffer the same fate and were able to track their emergency recovery beacons and get them on the way back to the city-ship before we pulled out completely," Konu said.

"But how did he - they - survive?"

"It was their vacuum suits," Jok interjected, "You see, Hanuu and Zus have quite tough, thick skin, which is

resistant to pressure and temperature variance. This means that to be able to operate in low-pressure environments, they can use relatively minimalistic constriction harnesses. It keeps a controlled, consistent pressure on the joints, chest, throat and head and major blood channelways. These contact points also apply selective heating and cooling as well. What this means is Zus and Hanuu can operate in vacuum, or near vacuum, environments for a decent length of time with limited constriction harnesses to keep their body running relatively normally. In the Zus' case this allows them to utilize their natural camouflage on operations like that. The amount of time they can actually spend in a full vacuum isn't particularly long - radiation exposure is the biggest problem - but far longer than many other species.

"Lour, on the other hand, are much more akin to humans biologically. Soft flesh and pliable skin means that they must wear full coverage vacuum-ready suits. Lour suits are based on similar technology to what we outfit the Zus with, but it covers the entire body. It selectively applies pressure, temperature control and more to allow the user to operate in those environments safely. In the case of our General, they also have one other important feature," Jok continued to explain.

"And that is?"

"In the event of damage to the suit skin, it locally constricts, acting akin to a tourniquet. This is to prevent internal pressure changes to the body, causing the blood to rapidly boil out and leave the body, which would very quickly kill the wearer. It was obvious that it was better to risk the loss of an entire limb by cutting off the blood flow, than almost certainly losing the entire individual due to a small pinhole puncture in the foot - for example."

“So when they took all that shrapnel, the suit by design applied itself like a bunch of localized tourniquets?”

“Correct. Unfortunately, due to the Zus’ minimalist harness design, the 3 that were picked up along with the general died of their wounds or extended vacuum exposure shortly after they were recovered from space. The general’s full body suit prevented egregious blood loss and prevented him from succumbing to the vacuum before pickup. And the explosion had knocked him unconscious entirely. Between both of those events happening almost instantly, his body never collapsed into unrecoverable shock.”

“That’s incredible,” Alan remarked.

“His recovery, however, was a long process and almost certainly partially driven by his determination and willpower. His scars alone aren’t what make him an unusual specimen,” Konu noted.

“Would also explain the nightmares,” Alan said.

“Indeed. While we were able to save his body, there has only been so much we have been able to do to alleviate the trauma to his mind. Still, he has coped well and has become a fierce, nearly legendary defender of the Coalition. You have likely noticed, but he’s quite stubborn and prideful, even for a Lour,” Manus added.

Alan laughed.

“Yeah, I may have noticed that too.”

They continued to while the time away, making small talk and discussing interesting events and escapades of the Coalition as they travelled from place to place. It was entering the early hours of the morning when Alan got a notice of a secure message transmission arriving.

Odd.

Alan processed the multi-step authentication chain and opened the message. It was from Tabitha. Even odder.

Alan quickly parsed through the message contents, and then reread it again. And again. Normally his processing time for something like a message was on the order of microseconds, but the contents of it threw his logic heuristics for a loop.

Alan waited for a pause in the idle chatter before interjecting.

"So bringing it back around to before," Alan piped in.

"Before?" Manus asked.

"Yeah, with the General's mission. The sabotage of the capacitors caused a massive explosion. Big enough to nearly crack the asteroid in half and, I would imagine, killing all the pirates in the end."

"I believe we caught scattered distress signals and some escape vessels, but their base - and the mass driver - was thoroughly neutralized, yes," Konu replied.

"Did anything come from that in the end?"

"For the pirates? I am unsure. We left the system shortly thereafter and haven't returned."

"Even though explosions are illegal according to galactic law?"

There was a heavy pause in the room.

"Wait, what?" one of the human guards, Kitt Meier asked.

"Ah, I see where this inquiry is going," Konu said.

"Is it? Manus?" Alan asked, turning to the little black sphere.

"It is, yes."

"And this didn't come up at all during the summit...why? It wasn't mentioned once."

“Because it doesn’t matter, Alan,” Manus said.

“How do you figure that?” Alan said, annoyance entering his voice.

“Alan. Humanity’s militaries have, based on our research, been using explosive weapons for hundreds of years, correct?”

“Sure.”

“The human military utilizes rocket propelled explosives, gravity-dropped explosives, explosives to propel projectiles, which sometimes also explode. Explosions top to bottom in your military technology. From what we’ve read, and what some shared information from the human militaries provided, mass drivers are in place for large-scale equipment like ships, but not for individual weapons. Correct?”

“That’d be accurate, yes.”

“Ergo, to make humanity compliant with galactic law would mean that humanity would need to throw out nearly all of their military technology and effectively start from scratch. Do you think they’d do this? By the time our joint exercise takes place?”

“...No. That’s completely infeasible,” Alan answered reluctantly.

“Indeed. We are freshly allies, and new arrivals to the Solar System. I understand humanity has a broad history of new arrivals coming in and bringing with them foreign rules and laws, but I cannot imagine it was accepted gracefully then. And certainly would not be now, from us.”

“Probably not, no.”

“So if humanity is already disinclined to change to comply to laws that they’re only just now to be made aware of, and the complete infeasibility of forcing compliance on

them, then what is to be gained by bringing it up at a joint effort summit in one of the first large displays of cooperation our peoples have had?"

"Ok, that's a fair point, but still. If literally our entire military philosophy violates galactic law, isn't that still a problem?"

"Not really, no."

"Again, how do you figure that, Manus?" Alan repeated.

"It's quite simple, really," Konu said, "Humanity isn't under the purview of galactic law."

"It...isn't?" Alan repeated, tilting his head in confusion.

"It is not, no. How many star systems - outside of your own - has humanity traversed?"

"Uh, none."

"How many colony ships or long-term people transports has humanity launched out into the galaxy?"

"None."

"So then humanity doesn't exist on the galactic stage. The Coalition knew of humanity's existence by fragmented radio messages shot out into space we happened to pick up and trace back here. But humanity as an existence is unknown and undocumented at a galactic level. You cannot be subject to galactic law because as far as galactic governance is concerned, humanity quite literally doesn't exist."

"So we're good as long as we don't go travelling to other stars?" Kitt asked.

"Correct. In the same way that most of humanity's laws are jurisdiction based, humanity does not exist in a jurisdiction that the galaxy would concern itself with. If we were to provide humanity the ability to traverse the stars, then your behavior would be relevant. But as you are now,

what you do and how you behave is irrelevant to the galaxy.”

“Ah. So the Coalition stays compliant by keeping to acceptable technology, while conveniently having a powerhouse military with highly illegal weapons as a friend on technicality to protect against possible threats,” Alan concluded.

“Exactly. Obviously the Coalition cannot utilize any of humanity’s weapons technology or face violations ourselves, but humanity is a separate entity and until such a time as humanity is ready to move beyond the Solar system, you are all free to use all your terrifying, horrifying equipment of war as you see fit. Which is why it behooves us to not...how did the saying go? ‘Rock the boat?’” Manus said.

Alan smirked and shook his head.

“Ever the ruthlessly practical people. Still, I got a message from Ambassador Winters and they’re having a bit of a crisis back on the city-ships. Some Councilors stirring the pot about galactic law violations, and our leadership being in the dark about that until they got threats of protests is not a great look either. Would you agree?”

“Protests? Hm. Yes, I would agree. There has been some discussion about the topic at the last council meeting before we came to the summit, and while there were some dissenting voices, most of the complaints were easily handled. The topic was to be further discussed at the next meeting after the summit finalized the details, but it sounds like some have taken to press on the issue of their own volition.”

“Not quite as easily as you’d thought, apparently,” Alan said with a hand wave.

“Indeed. That some of our Councilors feel the need to

move on such matters on their own apart from the council is a problem. Usually such concerns are aired easily and readily during council sessions, but it could be that they fear we would accept human weapon technology for the practical advantages. If this were to happen, then as noted, we would indeed be in violation of galactic law."

"So it sounds like, then, the path forward is to come clean about it so everyone is on the same page. And if there are any other such considerations that could cause either party problems on the galactic stage, then as allies we need to know."

"I agree with Alan," Jok said, "We discussed it among ourselves first, and then with the Council. And while we easily formed a consensus on the topic, it appears we failed to ensure all grievances and concerns were given due attention. That humanity was also in the dark on it no doubt only exacerbated the topic with the Councilors. Even if it causes minor difficulties in the short term, the long term payoffs will be worth it."

Manus was quiet for a moment, then bobbed in the air as if to give an affirmative.

"We can pass the relevant information to humanity's leadership tomorrow. It will be emphasized, of course, that it ultimately is irrelevant to humanity's operation, but it is still wise to be clear. Would you be willing to pass the explanation back to Ambassador Winters?" Manus asked Alan.

"And I'll pass along back to the Council the assurances as well. That should simplify things on both ends. We'll ensure the matter is closed at the next Council meeting." Konu added.

"Sounds like a plan. And Manus?" Alan said.

"Yes?"

"This is definitely the sort of thing you can run past me to get an idea of how humanity would react. You've got friends and allies on this side of the fence too, you guys don't have to try and navigate this blind."

"I... yes," Manus answered.

Alan gave a nod, and the air in the room felt a little lighter.

Kitt glanced at his watch.

"Since it sounds like that's all sorted out, what's you guys' plans for the day?"

"Mostly touring the city. Check out some landmarks, try the food, normal touristy stuff," Alan answered.

"Nice. Hey, if you get a chance, there's this awesome hotdog stand off of main. Highly recommended," Kitt said, flashing a thumbs up.

"Gotcha," Alan replied, returning the gesture.

"Don't forget we were going to meet Ambassador Raam as well," Konu added.

"Ah yes, that should be delightful. I've been looking forward to seeing how she and the others have been doing here on Earth," Manus said.

"Yeah, should be fun," Alan nodded with a smile.

25

Kogo sat in the sun at a table on the patio area at the café and closed her eyes. As she sat in the warmth of the sun, she took a long, slow breath in and soaked in the environment. It was a habit she found herself doing all the time, now. On the cityships, there was a specific 'texture' to it. A reliable look, familiar scents. It all formed the home she was familiar with.

But, because it was an artificial construction, rigidly structured and controlled, there was an innate...flatness to it. By the time she was no longer a child, she had experienced the sights and the smells of it. While there were always unique experiences to be had in the people of the Coalition, the basic sense of "place" was relatively unchanging once one had traveled to the different districts a few times.

But on Earth - a living, breathing planet - it was different. The sun warmly shining down wasn't simply a spread of static lights that dimmed to simulate time of day. And the air wasn't conditioned to be at a stable flat

temperature. The sun shone, but was interrupted by passing clouds, and the wind further impacted how warm the air was moment to moment.

Another novelty a planet had over the city-ships was the construction. The ancient history of each world coalesced into what it was today, yielding different types of buildings, city layouts, curated living spaces and anything in between. In this city alone, walking down any given road she could see a dozen different architectural styles, from the most modern to buildings many decades old. And none were identical.

Another breeze cut down the road, and with it a new orchestra of scents.

As she breathed deep, she could pick up the smells of people walking. That strange “store smell” of boutiques along the street as people entered and exited them. A bunch of different foods nearby people were eating at the cafe, but also restaurants down the street. Including some small food carts further down the road, and a park further beyond.

Kogo could easily lose herself for hours just parsing and trying to recognize the different smells around her. However, this time there was one particular scent that caught her attention and brought her out of her reverie. One very familiar, close to home. Kogo’s eyes popped open and she sprung up onto her feet in excitement.

“She here?” Kristiansen asked, seeing her pop up.

Kristiansen leaned forward in his seat and turned his head, following her line of sight. A ways down the road, there was another Lour, with two humans on each side.

The Lour drew closer and Kristiansen gave an easy wave to Watson and Tremblay as the trio approached. To his side, Kogo could barely contain herself.

“Mother!” Kogo finally exclaimed in Common and

bounced forward to meet the older Lour.

"You look well, my love," she replied.

They gently bumped foreheads for a moment before backing apart.

"Now that you're here you can meet everyone," Kogo began, "This is Erik Kristiansen."

Kristiansen stood and bobbed his head in a short, professional acknowledgement.

"A pleasure to meet you ma'am," he said.

"This is Samuel Hills," Kogo said, with Hills staying seated, but still giving a nod.

"You've already met Matthew and Nico. There's a fifth, but he had personal matters to deal with today so unfortunately you'll have to meet him later. Please, sit, sit!" Kogo continued, gesturing with her snout at their table.

Kristiansen couldn't help but smile and stole a glance to Hills, who had a similar response. He walked over and slid one of the cafe chairs away from the table giving Kogo's mother a place to sit.

"Is the translator working alright?" Kristiansen asked, pointing at his ear.

Attached to one of her ears, Kogo's mother had a small device, much like Kogo herself. Kogo had requested it for her mother specifically, as its live-translation feature would parse any conversations for her into Common, making her time on Earth much easier.

"Yes, it works quite well, thank you. And you are able to understand me?" she asked, in Common.

"Sure can," Kristiansen nodded and tapped his own earpiece, "Technology is pretty amazing, isn't it?"

"Indeed so. To properly introduce myself, I am Krina Grukaar of the Raam clan. I am pleased to finally meet you

all. Kogo has told me of you - when she remembers to send messages at all," the Lour said.

Kristiansen noted she spoke with a soothing, cooled pace. He wasn't an expert in Common by any stretch, but working with Kogo he'd picked up his share of words and phrases and noted that when Kogo lapsed into Common, she spoke with a similar inflection as her mother. The main difference is that her mother spoke in a steady, calm pace, like she was gingerly dancing word to word.

It was fascinatingly calming to listen to. It also likely explained Kogo's noted inclination towards clearer, concise speaking, which had proven very helpful in her diplomatic endeavours.

Looking the older Lour over, Kristiansen noted she shared a similar coloration and pattern of fur to Kogo, which also would make sense. In fact, at a passing glance, it'd likely be easy to mistake one for the other unless you were rather familiar with Lours - one having a prosthetic leg aside.

That specific notable difference between them was the one Krina spotted next, and she bowed her head to sniff at the prosthetic leg.

"You had mentioned having been injured in the fighting, but said nothing of the extent. Are you truly well?"

"Yes, Mother. My leg was lost in the fighting, but the human doctors took very good care of me. Before I came to earth, some human engineers designed and built this for me," Kogo said, pointing her front paw back towards the prosthetic, "Now it's like I never lost it at all."

Krina snorted in motherly disapproval, but took her seat at the table.

"I am to understand that these humans here keep you out of finding any more trouble? I can only imagine you work

them to the bone.”

Kristiansen managed to choke back a laugh, but Hills was unfortunate in taking a sip from his water when Krina delivered the playful jab at Kogo and started a coughing fit.

“Mother!” Kogo exclaimed.

“Not at all ma’am. Your daughter has been a model diplomat. Pretty much everyone that’s gotten face time with her loves her. There’s been a few minor incidents, but that’s just the way it goes with someone as notable as her,” Kristiansen answered.

“But I had heard that someone tried to attack her?”

“One person, yeah. But he was a nutjob and the attack failed. And there hasn’t been a peep of a problem since then. We’ve made sure of it,” Kristiansen said, with a commanding finality.

“I am glad to hear it. I cannot help but worry, you understand. My first hearing of you humans was our battle, and the whirlwind of rumors about how terrifying and dangerous you were. Then hear that Kogo was missing in action from the fighting, only to receive a letter some time later that she was fine and staying on your planet. She has given me a great many things to worry about.”

“Totally understandable, ma’am. But she’s been taking to living here like a fish to water. And between the lot of us, she’s had a pretty worry-free stay,” Watson interjected.

“I am pleased to hear it. As a child she was constantly running off to explore every nook and cranny of any space she could get access to. She would run from place to place as fast as she could until she would tire herself out and lay down to sleep where she was. It mattered not if it was in another clan’s home, the middle of a road, or halfway out of a window. She would lay herself out and sleep like the dead,”

her Mother reminisced.

The security detail all chuckled along with the story, and Kristiansen and Hills both sagely nodded, as if they understood an inside joke now. Kogo, meanwhile, ducked her head under the cafe table to hide her embarrassment.

“Mother...,” she whined.

“It’s a parental tradition for humans to embarrass their kids, sounds like that may be a universal constant after all,” Watson observed.

“An earned right,” Krina said with a commanding nod.

“How was the trip here?” Hills asked, shifting the topic to save Kogo further agony.

“The seats you humans built for Lour were remarkably comfortable on the shuttles. The ride itself was a little rough, but far from unpleasant. A few other humans at the terminal building stopped to stare, but most paid me no heed. I take this to mean that the others from the Coalition are around enough for the sight of a Lour to not be such a surprise,” Krina observed, casually looking around and soaking in the sights of the street around them.

“Yep, we’ve been having people from the Coalition visiting for a little while now, and I think the novelty - for people in town, at least - is beginning to wane. If anything, I’d say that’s a good thing. It means that you guys are... well, normal now. And normal is good,” Tremblay said, nodding to the waiter.

“As you say,” Krina replied, “I understand there is more we will do today, but what is it we are doing here? What I smell is... food?”

“Sure is. Not put Kogo back on the coals, but she’s turned into quite a foodie during her time on Earth so far,” Watson replied.

"A... foodie?"

"A nickname for people who travel all over to try out new types of foods and cuisines. Earth has a long history with many cultures, and if there's one thing that humans adore universally, it's good food. So some people make it a hobby - or even a profession - to travel and try it all," Kristiansen clarified.

"Fascinating," Krina replied.

"This cafe is a favorite of hers. She recommended it, actually. I think she wanted you to try it out, and get a sense of human food yourself," Hills added.

"I do not know what would be good, I am embarrassed to say," she replied before Hills held up a hand.

"You needn't worry, ma'am. We took the liberty of putting in the order before you arrived, the waiter should be bringing it out shortly."

"I see, thank you," Krina replied.

A few quiet moments passed before the waiter reappeared.

"My apologies for the wait, here you go," he said as he gently deposited the plates and cups at the table.

"No worries," Hills replied.

Krina eyed the table quietly. The waiter brought her a small cup with a dark liquid complete with a straw, and a small plate with 3 brown puffy blobs with specks of blue and some sort of white sauce on top.

"That's tea, a common drink to go with breakfast. And those are blueberry scones. A relatively light but sweet baked good," Hills explained.

"Ah, thank you," Krina replied.

She paused to examine the others' offerings as well. Both Hills and Kristiansen had a strong smelling black drink -

though Hills poured small little packets of something into his. Hills had a small baked good of his own, but didn't resemble Krina's. Kristiansen, meanwhile, had some other type of food with a yellow filling and two brown slabs sandwiching it.

She noted that Kogo, however, had the same as hers. Tremblay had the black drink as well, but no food, while Watson had passed on having anything.

"Mother, there'll be time to try out everything, but focus on your own food first," Kogo encouraged, watching her mother before digging in herself.

"If you're really curious, we can also order you one of these egg bagel sandwiches too. Lours are definitely big enough that a bigger-than-usual breakfast isn't going to throw you off your game. If you wanted to try the coffee we'll have to order you decaf. Turns out higher caffeine dosages can mess with Lours. Your tea has a low enough amount to not be a problem though," Kristiansen offered.

"I see. That is good to know, thank you," Krina replied and returned her gaze to her own plate.

Kogo stared with barely contained excitement as her mother dipped her tongue out into the cup of tea. She sat for a few moments, savoring the flavor. Kogo knew exactly what was going through her mind at the time and watched with amusement.

Back on the city-ships, there was a variety of flavored drinks - mostly Zus in origin - but her people largely drank water because it was simple and refreshing. The Zus drinks tended towards some very strong flavors - often on the sweet side of the spectrum - and many Lour felt they were too intense. One could get a sufficient flavor from eating, so most were satisfied with that.

But on Earth, with their culinary expertise, humans had

so many options, many of which were rather palatable to Lour sensibilities. The tea had more mellow, but deep flavor. It was pleasant to smell, and it was pleasant to sip and savor.

After a moment, Kogo's mother left her reverie, and turned her attention to the scones. She opened her mouth and her long tongue quickly slipped around the scone and pulled it directly into her mouth.

Compared to the tea, the flavor of the scones was simpler, but sweeter forming a strong compliment. As Kogo watched her mother chew, she could practically hear the sparks going off in her head and she couldn't help but smile.

After soaking in the experience of that, Kogo's mother made quick work of the remainder. It only took her a moment to puzzle out how the straw worked, and after that powered through the rest of her breakfast. The others, similarly dug in. By the time Krina finished, the waiter was delivering an egg bagel sandwich and a refill on her tea. She looked to Kristiansen who offered a shrug.

"You looked like you wanted to try it."

"My thanks to you again," she said before attacking the sandwich as well.

A short while later, after everyone had polished off their food, and the check settled, Krina spoke again.

"I would have you all try a family recipe of mine some time. My family is known for our Sask stew, and in repayment of showing me your culinary world, I would return in kind," Krina said.

"I'd definitely be down for that," Hills said.

"Yup. But for today, we've got some other stuff on the itinerary. How do you feel about history, ma'am?" Kristiansen asked Krina.

"I have a fondness for it," she admitted.

"That's putting it mildly," Kogo snorted.

"Hush, child," Kirna playfully scolded, "I am to presume then that we will be going somewhere relating to human history?"

"That's the plan," Kristiansen said, checking his watch.

Watson's attention was drawn past him, and nodded his head to draw their attention.

"Ah, right on time, excellent," Kristiansen said, rising from his seat, "We were just waiting for the others to arrive."

"Others?" Krina said just before gasping slightly in surprise.

A short distance away, approaching them was another small group. In it were 2 Threespus, Alan, and 3 escorts. Kristiansen was certain that there was a sizable plainclothes contingent shadowing them beyond that for additional security.

Once the group grew closer, both Krina and Kogo deeply dipped their heads, nearly to the ground. Between their reaction, and the oddity of the floating black balls, a number of passerby's heads were turned to see what was going on.

"My Sovereigns," both of the Lour said in unison.

"Ladies, please, such deference is not needed. We are all here to simply enjoy ourselves today, yes?" Manus responded.

"It's an honor to meet you all," Kristiansen said, before turning to Alan and offering a hand, "Good to meet you in person too."

"Please, I'm hardly that special," Alan mused with a smile and handshake.

"Don't sell your efforts short, Alan. Without your efforts to speed along the negotiations process, we might still be in

conflict," Manus replied.

"Good to see you again, Kogo. We didn't get to talk much at the peace talks. I see you're doing fine though," Alan said, shooting a glance at Kogo, "Nice leg."

"Yes, the humans have been very supportive of me," she answered as both her and her mother left their bow.

"If we're quite done with the pleasantries, I would like to get on with things. There's so much to see while we're here and I would rather not waste time," Konu interjected.

"Yes, of course. Let us depart?" Manus relented.

Those seated rose, replaced the chairs, and then made their way down the road.

The Threespus' escort had encapsulated Kogo's own to provide a bubble of protection and deflection of foot traffic as they went.

As they walked, Kogo enjoyed watching the dynamics of everyone. Ahead of her, Kristiansen and Alan were hitting it off quite well. Tremblay and Watson seemed to enjoy talking with her mother. They were explaining that they were going to a museum, and Kogo could see her mother light up as they explained how it was a building to show off and explain human history or cultural artifacts like art.

Even when making smalltalk, she noted that her security were subtly keeping an eye on things as they continued their easy stroll. A quick glance at a passerby, or a sweeping glance through the windows of a nearby storefront as they passed. Their presentation was cavalier, but Kogo knew they were still on top of everything.

Even Hills was technically still off-duty, but had taken up a defensive flank to Kogo's side while making some small talk with the Threespus. Simple idle chat, but it affirmed her hopes that her Sovereigns were finding their time on Earth

pleasant so far. Which after a moment almost struck Kogo as odd.

She was concerned about how the Coalition leadership enjoyed humans and Earth. Certainly part of it was from her job being an Ambassador, so maintaining relations had become her way of life, but the instinctual reaction was more base. It felt closer to showing something to one's parents hoping for approval.

It was almost a year now since she was immersed into human society. At first by force, but then by choice. She'd spent about half a year operating as an Ambassador on Earth, and watched as her people and humanity came together from their initial conflict.

As she looked on the other side of the road, she saw a Hanuu and a Zus wave over a random human and, based on the arm gesturing pantomimes, were trying to ask directions. After a moment of this, the human did some strong arm gestures indicating they needed to go down the road and make a few turns to get to wherever their destination was.

And with that, the human and Zus waved at each other, and the Hanuu bobbed its head and they went their separate ways.

It had lasted maybe 20 seconds, but it made her incredibly happy. It was the culmination of everything she'd been wanting to see and working towards.

Kogo continued to ruminate on that moment in silence as they neared the massive building that was the museum and realized that, at the end of all of this, she wasn't going to be able to leave.

There was too much of humanity to see and experience to just 'go home' when she eventually finished her run of

being an Ambassador - however long that ended up lasting. She loved the Coalition. She adored her mother and the rest of her family, and had the utmost respect for her Sovereigns, some of whom were just behind her. But she finally happened upon a reality that was slowly brewing for her for a long time now.

Whatever the future held, she'd permanently move to Earth. The city-ships would always be her true home, and she would certainly have more time to travel and visit there once she was done with her job. But she couldn't see herself returning to live in the city-ships for the rest of her life. That much was now certain.

"How're you doing? You've been pretty quiet," Kristiansen whispered to her.

Kogo had been in her thoughts enough to not realize that Kristiansen and Alan's conversation had apparently faded off, and he'd taken to walking on her opposite flank to Hills. Alan, meanwhile, had joined Tremblay, Watson and her mom in talking about history.

"Just thinking," Kogo answered.

"About anything in particular?" Kristiansen asked as they began going up the steps to the museum entrance.

"How much I love it here," she answered with a smile.