

The Enemy Within

The Enemy Within

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Prelude

Something blinked on the overlay-viewer in front of him. It showed a diagram of the internal systems of his small high-speed fighter.

The automated computer voice came to life and filled the speakers: "Malfunction in the secondary power distribution couplings of Section 5-Alpha." "Reroute power through 6-Delta on Level 4." was the answer the electronic female received. A second later, the blinking disappeared as if it had never existed.

"Course projector", his voice dominated the command section of the small fighter.

The 'viewer which was showing space as it hurtled by at enormous speed, created again an overlay, this time it was a three-dimensional schematic of the course he was flying, with all the hazards and specifics added to it.

"Reaching checkpoint 16 in 45 seconds at current velocity. Recommend engaging auto-piloting sequence upon entering the asteroid field."

"Baby, baby, this is a Race, not a sightseeing tour. Let's show those overconfident cargo flyers how to maneuver for real! Manual piloting stays in place." was his response, followed by a little chuckle as he knew what was to come next: the female computer voice responded with a slight hint of an aggravated sigh in her tone: "Yes Commander". Once again he mentally expressed his complete satisfaction with the decision that Fighter Command had made ten years ago: installing artificial intelligence on all its fighters. The presence of an A.I. made missions so much more fun, literally any mission, not to mention the reduced amounts of crew that were needed to effectively man a fighter.

He brought his weapons online in case some asteroids had the utterly brilliant insight to drift into his flight path and would prolong his stay in the field.

With the push of a button the M.M.C., the Manual Maneuvering Controls, which his fellow fighter pilots had lovingly christened "the Shaking Sally Setting", were activated.

As he lifted his finger off the button, two joysticks emerged out of his control panel, and the two foot pedals that were normally stashed away in the floor, lifted themselves and made contact with the soles of his standard issue officer shoes.

"Jenny, send some extra juice to the maneuvering thrusters." "Thrusters now operating at one hundred-twenty per cent efficiency Joe" came the artificial response which he had long ago affectionately named "Jenny", much to the aggravation of his numerous romantic encounters over the years. In his opinion though, no woman of flesh and blood, not even that gorgeous redhead he met at Outpost B-15 Alpha-5 on Holios in the Böotes system upon a practice run could ever make him love her as Jenny had always been able to.

Many people found it strange how Joe could talk about Jenny, a 'G-66' Eliminator, his pride and joy and his only true love in life, as if she was a real woman, but the moment they saw him fly the ship, they understood.

Commander Joe Delgato strapped himself in as the asteroid field was coming closer. "Joe, we have..." A shockwave threw the light ship a little off course and all the sudden Joe was looking at the stern of a Tashak-Ma, a Union built fighter that was quite similar to his own G-66. "Khor'mat" he mumbled to nobody in particular. "It's always that crazy scale bag. One of these days the Union will be scraping his reckless scales off a planet instead of decorating him with another pointless medal!" He said while shaking his head as one would do if witnessing something beyond stupidity. With that, and noticing that the others weren't far behind, he pushed his engines to their limit, trying to gain territory on his immediate opponent.

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As he closed on the asteroid belt at full speed, his short range sensor grid filled up with obstacles, asteroids and debris.

He used the joysticks and pedals to maneuver, adjust his speed and heading. A skilled pilot like him could perform some serious acrobatics with these, and that was exactly what was expected of him and his opponents.

A sharp tug to starboard. “Jenny, operate the guns!” Then the joysticks were slammed to the port-side of the ship, and it made the ship turn as if it was spinning on a coin, banking so violently that the wings of the fighter stood upright in the midst of the turn. He barely managed to avoid a collision with an asteroid, but had to adjust his heading again. Joe took a steep dive at full speed and made the fighter roll on its horizontal axis so that the small debris he suddenly encountered was hit and thrown out of its original course away from the fighter. Meanwhile the ship A.I. was blasting away at the larger objects closing in on the fighter. The Distortion Cannons unleashed their hellish loads upon the closing targets, reducing them to dust and smaller debris that they already were.

Joe worked his controls with near to perfect coordination and was fully focused on getting his fighter out of the asteroid belt in one piece. Bit by bit the course projectory which was still active showed that his opponents were closing in, fast. The Federation Valiant-class vessel “Pride of Padeen” was closing in fast, as was the Brood-built Venom.

After Jenny cleared the way, the Commander “put the pedal to the metal”, as the old Terran saying goes.

The G-66 was brutally abused, being forced into descent angles up to eighty-nine degrees from a fully horizontal position within seconds, only to roll itself starboard at the same time, soaring past the larger asteroids, barely avoiding collision. From time to time small asteroids collided with the hull of the ship, leaving nasty marks on the painting or actually damaging the ship, while shattering at impact.

The entire time through the asteroid belt, Brian found himself admiring the handiwork of Khor’mat right in front of him, but he knew that on the last part of the racecourse, which spanned open space and tested the speed of the pilots and their ships, he could beat the Slah’ke.

As the end of the asteroid field came closer, the Brood contestant – a young, overconfident and proud pilot whose mouth more than made up for his lack of experience – tried to pass Jenny, squeezing his agile craft through the narrow space between a he asteroid and his Terran opponent while having rolled the horizontal axis of his Venom ninety degrees to port, so that he could look – if he took the time to look up – right into the face of his opponent. So he did, he looked up and smiled, or something that Joe assumed had to resemble a smile, at his Terran opponent.

Then, as the Brood was about to overtake Joe, flames poured out of the side of the Venom and the craft crashed violently into the surface of the asteroid. Joe, assuming it was a piloting error, didn’t stop to worry, and perused his Union adversary again.

Khor’mat had gained sufficient ground to have cleared Jenny’s short range sensors. “Jenny, shut down weapons and all secondary systems. Reroute all available power to the engines.” A bleeping sound signaled Commander Delgato that the order had been received and had been processed: the engines were ready.

In the engine bay, the engines started to roar in ecstasy as Joe forced them to surrender to his will and desire to go faster than the ship was designed to go.

Everyone following the Race on their sensors and the specially rigged tactical arrays

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through the system suddenly saw Jenny accelerate as if the hounds of the Devil himself were on her tail.

Joe was instantly thrown backwards in his seat by the enormous G-forces created by the sudden acceleration. Space was swooshing past at incredible speed, and he was closing in on the Tashak-Ma fast. But at the same time, the length of the course that was still to travel for both was reducing at an equal rate, and the opposition was not eliminated yet either, the Pride of Padeen was preying upon the two battling speedsters as a hawk upon his next meal.

Forth and fifth places were being occupied at this stage by the Orfine warrior Gakh Botil in his Savage class fighter and the contestant for the Hive Collective of Betelgeux: Quix'Tooygh, who was trying his best to keep the cloaking device of his small Warrior-fighter from drawing much needed power away from his Kylon Drive. The Kolari were represented by a pilot mostly known as Lahi Cisu Roh, and his Photon class ship. Due to severe damage inflicted by an asteroid which had believed that his right of crossing the path of the Kolari outweighed the right to free passage of the Kolari, thereby causing into a near-collision, which had damaged the engines of the small cloak-capable fighter. However, because of excellent mastery of the art of high speed piloting, the Kolari was for the time being at sixth place.

The Matrix contestant, the Preserver #4-Alpha5K, and its Prism were perusing at a speed both Joe and Khor'mat could only dream of achieving in their own fighters. Luckily for them, the Preserver had sustained damage early in the Race and had lost a lot of valuable time because of much needed repairs, but was gaining on the number six fast.

The finish was closing fast, and Joe was slowly overtaking the Slah'ke. The last miles before the finish were brutal: both fighters went head to head, closely followed by the fiercely stubborn, but nonetheless amazing Plexxan contestant. Everyone watching this spectacle held their breath as the three fighters hurled towards the final checkpoint: the finish line. The excited tension among the spectators could be felt all around at the moment the finish line was crossed by the first craft. Yet, it was not clear which one of the two crafts that seemed merge into one on the regular camera recordings had actually won this Race, this endeavor.

In the end a multi-spectral analysis of all the recorded data: video logs, flight logs, impartial timing and a thorough all-angle-investigation of the finishing gave the final outcome of the mystery of who had won the 40th Annual Va'Tal Honorary Invitational Fighter Challenge of Naos.

By as it seemed mere molecules there was a humanoid winner: Commander Joe Delgato of the Terran Empire and his formidable 'G-66' Eliminator fighter: Jenny.

Chapter 1 – Encounter thy enemy

Crowds were cheering as the contestants entered the hangar of the huge Va'Tal Mothership that even seemed to dwarf the mighty Estip'bar, the greatest of Va'Tal warships. The enormous docking bay was filled with people, so much, that it was a small miracle that all seven surviving fighters were able to find a spot to touch down. As the pilots exited their crafts, the crowds gathered around them seemed to reach a new level of utter ecstasy; the cheering was close to deafening as the winner made his way out of his craft.

Quickly and efficiently the Va'Tal guards escorted their guests through the docking bay, on their way to the central room of the ship: the huge botanic garden which was located in the lower part of the massive ship.

As they arrived there, the pilots were all amazed by the view which they encountered. The botanic garden spanned a surface that equaled the docking bay where they had parked their fighters just a while before. The height of the room was quite impressive; it seemed to span several decks of the ship. It was obviously an integral part of its entire structure.

Cilya Dahrcu, the pilot who had entered the Race on behalf of the Federation slowly walked through the garden, amazed by its incredible beauty. She had spent most of her childhood on smaller starships or on starbases after her parents had died, and never really had the pleasure of knowing how it feels to walk through such an incredible display of beauty that a garden could be, and that this garden most definitely was. The strangest of plants surrounded the tall, slender built woman. Her dark hair flowed down her back like a velvet blanket, shining vividly in the softened lighting in which the garden bathed. Joe could not help but notice her beauty. She seemed more at home here in the middle of such a small natural paradise than in a fighter.

As she was strolling through the designated paths, she noticed Joe catching up with her. She had heard of this Terran, this womanizer, and was curious about him.

Plexxan men were much more reserved and did not treat women as if they were a form of prey, they revered them, courting them in the most romantic of ways, and therefore Plexxan women were known to be more than willing to get involved with someone more “exiting” when they had the chance, even if it was just a short-lived relationship and not a bonding for life.

“Hello miss, mind if I join you for a moment?” asked the Terran in a strong solid almost baritone voice. “Be my guest, I was just admiring this amazing garden.” Her voice was soft in its intonation, a soothing and peaceful, even serene characteristic in it. Delgato was pleasantly surprised by the voice of this stunning Plexxan female, yet it suited her well in his opinion.

“Yes it is quite a remarkable place we are standing in here right now. I wonder why the Va'Tal brought us here for the ceremony instead of a more appropriate room.”
“Yes, this crossed my mind as well. I still have to congratulate you on your victory” she hesitated, and her eyes were asking him for his name. Joe froze up as he peered into those two deep brown eyes. They seemed to have cast a spell on him the moment he gazed into them, and the more intriguing part of this all was that this was a different kind of spell than usual, this was something he hadn't felt in a long time, something he almost had forgotten about.

Noticing his hesitation, she smiled, her lips curling upwards. “Joe..., Joe Delgato, Commander of the...” His memory seemed to fail here for a moment; it was on the tip of his tongue. He thought he was transpiring, and was a bit embarrassed. “The Terran Empire”, she completed his attempt, still smiling, with a small twinkle in her eyes.

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“My name is Cilya Dahrcu.” She said still smiling and at the same time attempting to force herself not to stare back into his emerald green eyes.

“It is a pleasure Cilya, to meet you in person. I admire your performance today, that was some very remarkable flying.” He truly meant that, as he had only briefly checked out the camera footage of the Race, and he had been very impressed by her skill, and was eager to exchange tips and tricks with her, as all good fighter pilots are supposed to be when they meet another pilot that matches their skill.

As Joe and Cilya were about to compare fighters, exchange tips and brag about their tricks, they heard shouting noises. Quickly they walked into the direction of the voices, only to find the Orfine and Hive pilots practically trying to tear each other apart. The only thing that keeps from actually doing so was the giant Preserver pilot standing in between them and holding them apart with his cybernetic arms, making sure both were just out of reach of each other.

“I will gut you like a fish you foul and lowly excuse for a sentient!!” the barking growl of the strong built Orfine was answered by the clicking and buzzing of the insectoid voice of the Hive pilot.

Joe had forgotten to set his Translator to the correct setting. He reached to his neck and adjusted the setting to include the Hive language, and suddenly he understood what the insectoid was saying: “... you touch me, you foul and disgusting bipedal dog and I will skin you alive before I will kill you!!!” And he added: “Slowly.”

The Orfine stood just under two meters tall, while the Hive was shorter than Joe, only reaching one hundred seventy four centimeters, and seemed to be blessed with a lot less muscle. However, as he was an insectoid, this could be just the appearance of things, as it was well known among the biologists of all races that studied that part of the sciences that insectoids tend to possess remarkable strength for creatures of their size. Among the Terran relatives of the Hive are species known to be able to lift and carry up to sixty times their own bodyweight.

Gakh Botil growled at his mortal enemy and tightened his grip on the Battleclaws he was holding. In return Quix’Tooygh held up his Borer high, threatening to fire it at the Orfine.

“Why don’t we all calm down a bit and remember that this Race is a sports-event, not a place to fight out your wars.” Joe’s voice almost seemed to demand the attention it got. Both the Orfine and the Hive hesitated for a moment, but eventually both lowered their weapons and backed away slowly, never taking their eyes off each other.

The Preserver still stood as if he was holding back an entire pack of Orfine on the one side and a small hive of insectoids on the other.

“What’s your designation Preserver?” asked Cilya. An artificial monotone voice answered the question: “Designation #4-Alpha5K present and operating at full capacity. Request input.” “Alright Hex, you can stand down now, the war is over.” Said Joe with a small chuckle. If it was possible for a Preserver to hesitate, then that was what it did, otherwise he was just computing the input he had just received.

Either way, after a few moments, the giant construction slowly started to lower its arms. As the Orfine backed away from Yu’koq, he growled something in his native language: “Your time will come, just like the others.” Quix’Tooygh answered this threat with some very eerie sounds.

Until that moment the Kolari pilot had kept himself out of the situation and had kept to himself, as the race was usually known so very well to do. However, now he stepped out of the corner where he had been standing. The soles of his Encounter-suit made a heavy metallic, yet somewhat muffled noise with every step he made. It sounded as if a solid block of steel fell three stories down, onto a concrete floor, every

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time he set a step. He activated the artificial voice, so that he could communicate with the others in a fashion they were accustomed to, after all, it was generally known among the Kolari that most organic life forms were either not capable (yet) of telepathic forms of communication, or were just absolutely and utterly unwilling to keep the possibility of its existence of such forms of communication. And as far as telepathic communication goes in combination with a Preserver, one would have more success in attempting to grow and sustain a plankton colony in the middle of a Class V desert, compared to which the Terran Sahara is more of a glass of water than an over-enlarged heap of sand.

Slowly but clearly the words of Lahi Cisu Roh formed and reached the ears and hearing devices of the others present: "Inner struggles are not only the result of outward aggression, they are equally its cause. The one capable of solving his inner struggles will be the one to achieve a complete state of peace and serenity." "Kaáh bguo kir ti'mokl hukam mog'ba?" was the response of the large bipedal canine, which would translate into "What is this battery pack on about?"

"What I am "on about" is this. The Hive and the Orfine have been enemies for, in the perspective of an organic, many years, and the hostility between your races is increasing due to the propaganda both sides have been preaching for the duration of this conflict. This propaganda is the inner struggle. Both the people of the Hive and the people of the Alliance have been indoctrinated, which limits their ability to search for the actual truth behind this entire situation. Thereby this propaganda causes both your peoples to continue with aggressive actions of the one towards the other. In its own turn, the propaganda is a result of the earlier hostilities between Arcturus and Betelgeux." Cilya interrupted: "Cause and result." "Very correct lady of honor," the being of pure energy continued his explanation: "The fight you fight, my dear organics," the entity encased in the metal contraption turned to Gal and Quix'Tooygh, "cannot be fought without fighting your inner struggle first. Your own struggles are your true enemies at this moment. Once you conquer them, you will be able to assess whether or not you truly have reasons to fight each other."

The other pilots had somewhat of a gaze in their eyes after he had finished. Even the Preserver seemed to need to compute all this complicated input.

"Or, as the Terrans put it so eloquently: this is a typical case of the pot calling the kettle black."

Gal Sath was the first to respond, and didn't exactly bother to phrase his thoughts in a more enlightened manner: a growl that more or less sounded like "Garrhk gah!!"

However, the speech of the enlightened creature seemed to have worked, Neither the Hive or the Orfine pilots expressed any further hostilities towards each other.

After this incident, the pilots went on discussing the Race, exchanging technical specifications, over-exaggerated stories of their competence and accomplishments. It was not before twenty minutes after this that Khor'mat, the Slah'ke contestant walked into the botanic garden. Naturally this attracted some attention, most likely more than what the reptilian creature had hoped for.

Khor'mat found himself being the subject of a staring contest: a pair of compound eyes, three pair of eyeballs, a dual visual sensor array, and whatever the Kolari qualified as their eyes.

He mumbled something that sounded like an apology for being late, and tried to make his way to a distant corner. He was dressed in his regular battle-gear: shoulder protection that seemed to be manufactured out of a carbon-titanium composite, chain mail of unknown manufacturing origin decorated with the Slah'ke holy symbols for

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the Divine Shak'Ma, Battle and the upward four digit green fist that represents the United Slah'ke People. His lower body was equally scarcely protected, apart from a few strategically placed patches of very tough leather. All armor seemed to be connected to each other with straps of that same tough leather. The characteristic Ka'Mak Sword was strapped on his scaly back, and reached down almost far enough to touch the base of the equally characteristic tail.

Slah'ke were by nature not only cold blooded – literally – fighting machines, some of them also seemed to possess an amazing ability to sneak around almost undetected. That isn't so surprising, considering the pleasant situation back home in Proxima most of the time: an inquisition here, an overly violent and bloody sect-war based upon a dispute about the correct interpretation of Verse 4:8:12 of the Sacred Writings of Shak'Ma.

Survival for a Slah'ke didn't always depend on his understanding of the game of war, his abilities as warrior, or the blunt force of his muscles. Instead, at home his cunning and his ability to move undetected were the tools of the trade. Often warriors were not only used on the battlefield as cannon fodder, or to make a statement of the righteous claim of a sect, the most skilled of warriors were often also employed as assassins during conflicts.

Sometimes it just was not possible for the leaders of the various sects, or less effective, to just slaughter each other while they were discussing the matters that concerned the Council. After all, it is not always helpful for your cause to have the entire Union know you have murdered that particular sect leader.

Therefore, assassins were used. If a warrior was entrusted with a mission that involved such 'ritual cleansing', it was considered a great honor, a great service in the name of the one true leader of the Slah'ke: their god Shak'Ma.

As they silently watched the cold-blooded alien walk by, making his way to a dark corner of the garden – which was hard to find in the first place – some of them got a good look at his face. His snout was lengthy, and somewhat pointed, and was filled with extremely sharp teeth, up to a point where they made Gal's canines look blunt. A flattened forehead, covered in greenish scales, like the rest of his body, no visible ears, another characteristic feature of nearly all reptilian species in the galaxy, sentient or not.

What scared the spectators most, were his blood-red eyes, seemingly cut in two by vertically slitted pupils which were seemingly aware of anything happening in their surroundings, or at least for as far that he could see. Slah'ke have virtually no long distance sight.

"Khor'mat! How unfortunate that you couldn't call that bluff out there just now. Truly a shame. I would have loved to really put you and your ship to the test." Joe's mocking tone could have triggered a personal desire for starting a crusade within the Slah'ke, and maybe it did. If it did, then Khor'mat did not give into the temptation to act on it. Instead he answered in Terran: "Anytime monkey brains, anytime." His hissing accent made him sound as if he was short on breath after running longer and harder than he was physically capable of.. "What was that about?" whispered Cilya close to his ear as Khor'mat continued on his way to the dark corner he had just spotted.

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“That, Miss Cilya is a long story, one that I might tell you another time, but not now.” Said Joe with a bitter voice, while he watched the double doors that gave access to the botanic garden automatically opening themselves as someone entered.

The doors opened, and in walked the Va'Tal governor of the Naos Territories. The governor was a large man, clearly someone that preferred an extra meal over some well deserved exercise.

The rolls of fat on his body pulsed with every move, accentuating every movement while they crashed into the fabric of his brightly multi-colored robe, like waves in every sea on every world in the galaxy, rolling in perfect unison choreography towards the coast and crashing just as violently as merciless into the golden tranquility of the sunbathing beach, thereby amplifying every move his very space-demanding body made.

The governor had short stubby arms, a biological trait of his species, however his massive body size created the visual illusion of his arms being even shorter than they actually were.

Visual display was important to the people of the Va'Tal. It was the way they successfully distinguished themselves from the other, less capable negotiators in the Va'Tal Territories. Over the years it had become clear that although the Va'Tal were a people of traders, they lived completely without greed, unlike their Klakanid competition.

For the Va'Tal the process of negotiation was more important. They cared not about the gold at the end of the profit-calculation, but about the status their next big agreement or business contract would bring them.

Over the generations, their culture had evolved in such a way that the man was judged as a suitable mate by his success in not only the negotiations concerning the lifelong bonding – “Brjakaçèh” – which was a commitment not unlike the Terran concept of marriage. Contracts and successful negotiations had become such an obsession that instead of Historical Archives – there weren't any Va'Tal historians at all, there never were – there was an Archive of Agreement, Negotiation and Trade, and instead of art, one would frame their greatest achievements – the contracts on which that were negotiated the most – so that visitors could amaze themselves of the abilities of their host.

“Welcome my esteemed guests! I hope you all enjoyed our beautiful garden.” The rather enormous governor clapped his hands, and out of nowhere suddenly solid couches appeared. These couches soon turned out to be holographic, but with such a degree of detail, that they actually looked solid. The couches were – as it were to seem to those that saw the images of the couches – made out of an unknown type of leather, and sat quite comfortable.

As Joe sat down and allowed himself to be pleasantly surprised at the softness of the seating, Cilya gracefully sat next to him quite closely. The rest of the pilots took a seat on the other photonic seats.

“First of all I would like to congratulate you on completing the course. This year it has been designed to be especially challenging to the competitors. And off course my condolences to the friends and relatives to those that failed to cross the finish line.” His high-pitched voice was carried by a speaker system which had been installed just for this occasion.

“In just a moment the ceremony will begin in which we decorate the winner, which is according to my information” a slight hesitation in his voice as he ruffled through his

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documents “Joe Delgato, for the Terran Empire. Good, we will start in just a moment.”

“We are here live from the Va’Tal Mothership in the system of Naos, where just about an hour ago the 40th Annual Va’Tal Honorary Invitational Fighter Challenge of Naos ended in a quite spectacular finishing. Any moment now the Va’Tal governor of Naos will commence the ceremony in which the winner will be announced to the public and decorated.” The young female Terran took a breath of air while the viewers of the Imperial Galactic News Network were presented with a quick fact sheet on the Race itself, on which she would comment in just a few seconds.

Moments before the ceremony was to start in the botanic garden of the Mothership – which was filled with exotic plants from all over the galaxy but primarily functioned as a showcase of the flora of the Va’Tal Territories - in presence of practically the entire galactic press, the contenders got onto the – again holographic – stage which had been created only moments before.

Cilya, who sat right beside the speaking-console, overheard the governor and another official whispering to each other: “Brood....un-natural death no risks” and: “after ceremony.... guards... no contact...”. She was puzzled by this information, after all, who wouldn’t be. However, she did not share it with anyone, simply because of the lack of time: the ceremony was starting.

The events following that moment were all recorded and broadcasted live in pretty much every corner of the galaxy. All viewers, and that number was extremely high since the Race was a major sports-event, all saw a Terran dressed in a sturdy solid-woven black uniform with some gold colored lining across the sides and chest, as well as a golden Eagle right over where the top of his right lung should be, decorating the fabric, walk up to the governor and be presented with the medal representing the first place which he had managed to secure.

After that slowly, with much a due and off course plenty of display and ceremonial time consuming nonsense, the other contestants, apart from the Brood pilot who had tragically perished in the hazardous asteroid field, were presented with their medals.

After the lengthy ceremony – which was effectively hours later in Terran time – everyone was escorted off the stage and informed of what was to happen now:

“My dear contestants” again the high pitched voice of the governor was protruding the eardrums of the pilots, “I regret to inform you that we have started an investigation to the untimely death of your Genus colleague, therefore we would like to ask you all to go to your assigned quarters. There is a chance you will be asked to answer a few questions.”

Out of nowhere guards appeared and directed the seven pilots to separate rooms. All of them were separated, and would be unable to communicate with each other or the outside world without permission from the Va’Tal officials.

As Joe entered his quite spacious but to his taste poorly decorated room, he noticed that he didn’t hear the footsteps of the guards die away in the hallway next to his room, instead, they stopped as he walked into the room: he was now under guard, a feeling he didn’t like, however, he didn’t see what he could do to change the situation apart from cooperating with whatever was to come.

And so he sat down on the surprisingly comfortable bed, partly unbuttoned the shirt of his uniform and waited.

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Cilya was taken by two guards just a few rooms further down the same hall as the room Delgato had been assigned to. The situation in which she found herself was quite similar: the guards didn't leave when she closed her door, but instead stayed at their post, not moving one muscle. She as well was not lyrical about the design choices made when the room was decorated, however it was not so bad that she could not live with it.

She sat laid down on the bed, placed her lovely head on the soft pillow and crossed her long slender fingers with a worried look on her beautifully formed face, as she wondered what those officials had been whispering about just before the ceremony had started.

Hours passed, and slowly but surely as the pilots one by one fell into a deep sleep, the night fell on the Mothership.

Chapter 2 – Hospitality reconsidered

Rays of sunlight penetrated the glass of the window, casting a soft light into the room, and onto the floor where he was laying, formerly sound asleep. Groggily he opened his eyes, adjusting to the light. A low growl escaped his throat, as he flexed his fingers. His mind woke up finally too, immediately flooding his brain with all kinds of questions.

His thoughts were racing, question after question appeared, without finding anything close to an answer for any of them: “What happened? Where am I? Wait, yes, the ceremony. But... why do I remember guards forcing me away? They must have led me here, but..., but where is here?”

He moved his arms, slow but steady to the either sides of his chest, positioning his three-digit hands on the floor.

For a few moments, he listened quietly, not moving a muscle. Focusing his senses on what happened outside the door, hoping that he could find a clue in the sounds he heard. In the hall he heard faint voices, speaking in a language he didn't understand. The conversation seemed to be one between friends; most likely covering various subjects related to their mutual interests, their personal lives, and the occasional joke, assuming that what he heard was actually laughter. However, there was no sign of movement through the hallway, just two guards softly speaking with each other while guarding his door.

It was safe. Slowly Khor'mat pushed his body up, careful not to make the slightest sound. Even his breathing was controlled, soft, silent, and almost undetectable for the hearing of the company he enjoyed just behind the door, at least which was what he hoped.

As his arm muscles flexed, and his scales almost soundlessly scraped the floor, he rose higher and higher. Soon he stood tall and strong as usual. Even when he was unarmed, like this very moment, his presence was impressive, and hard to ignore, even if there was nobody there to do so. He started to inspect his quarters, attempting to find something that could be of use.

Searching every inch of the room, turning over every proverbial leaf, even lifting the bed off the ground. This however, did not visually seem to lay any strain on him whatsoever. He worked fast and silently, being extremely determined to find something and make no sound to alarm his mandatory bodyguards in the process.

Just as he was about to dissect the cabinet against the wall across from the bed, he sniffed and smelled the air: new scents. Khor'mat stood with his snout in the air, his body standing still as if it was a granite statue, and sniffed to catch the scents out of the air: Va'Tal, approaching his position. He felt an urge to defend himself, stronger than before. He felt that there was danger, danger that had to be avoided.

Yet the desire to remain undetected was stronger, so instead of slamming the cabinet against the wall in order to get some sharp wood to use as a weapon, or redesign the metal legs of the bed into head-crushing clubs, he removed the sheets from the mattress, and tore them almost without sound to shreds with his teeth.

Then he examined the door quickly, noticing it opened to the inside, swinging to his left. Preparing the shreds of cloth, he stood in the corner on the right of the door, pressing his impressive body against the brick stone wall, which felt rough to the touch, even on his scaly hide.

Struggling to control his breathing, to remain calm and not just pick up the cabinet, attempt to smash the door with it and charge at the Va'Tal, he waited. Luckily, he didn't need to wait long.

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The metal surface of the lock met its matching key, and the sound accompanying the unlocking was a slow wrenching metal-on-metal scratch mixed together with some squeaks and shrieks, as if the key was a young maiden being tortured horribly by an evil dark villain. The hall, long and very empty, amplified this sound, making it somewhat eerie and certainly not less scary.

The lock gave in, and allowed the wielder of its counterpart to enter that what was its job to protect.

As the door opened, Khor'mat's mind geared into a different mode. In order to find out what was going on, why he was being held against his will, he needed to be able to apply psychological pressure upon these unholy fools.

At that moment, the creaking of an opening door filled the room, and the Slah'ke set aside all his thoughts tried to keep his adrenaline-level at a stable medically acceptable level, and concentrated on who was entering the room.

Two Va'Tal soldiers quickly followed each other into the room, and like all of their kind, they were tri-pedal. Their arms, although short were strong and muscled, muscled like their entire bodies were.

Uniforms were a perfect fit, a grayish dark green in color, made out of a fabric that looked more like woven rope than anything else. Being preoccupied with barging into the room, one of them carrying a plate of food, they failed to notice that the Slah'ke was nowhere to be seen until they were standing in the middle of the room and it was already too late.

He felt the air rushing past him as the guard duo waltzed into the room, not noticing at all that he wasn't in their line of sight. He jumped out of his hiding, swung the cloth shreds through the air, having both of them wrapping themselves around the thick necks of the guards. Before they realized what was happening, the enormous Slah'ke plunged forward, soaring through the air as if he was a dragon diving from high upon his prey, intending to crush it in his claws.

While he landed on the guards, forcing them both down to the floor, and most likely crushing a few bones here and there under his weight, he quickly tied up the various shreds around their ankles, wrists and necks, and so effectively tied the guards to each other. The result included two quite frightened and seriously stunned soldiers covered in cloth shreds and pieces of food that originated from a plate that just moments before had failed its first flying lesson.

Before the guards realized what happened, and their fear had been given a chance to manifest itself, it was over, and they were sitting on the floor, backs towards each other, and their limbs tied up.

Khor'mat suppressed his natural instinct to let out a growl of primal satisfaction as he looked upon the two guards sitting on the floor. He stood in the doorway, checking whether or not the hall was safe. For the moment it seemed to be deserted. After securing the area, the Slah'ke turned his attention once again to his newly acquired roommates and searched their bodies, knowing that he had to act quickly.

Without a word he ripped the belts of their uniforms, inspecting them and found they were carrying no actual weaponry, just a retractable, jet-black rod, that turned out to be quite flexible and some kind of short range communicators.

Having figured out how he most likely was to operate the device – it was remarkably similar to the Union version – he went on to investigate the rod. He accidentally swung it from left to right with a bit of force while studying it from all angles, making

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the rod extract slightly, so that it now doubled itself in size, stretching about five Goh, which equaled twenty five Terran centimeters. Further testing against various objects in the room revealed the rod to discharge an electro-magnetic pulse upon impact, varying the strength of the pulse based upon the force applied in its use.

Khor'mat was pleased, it wasn't what he had hoped to find, but it was certainly better than nothing.

After attaching the communicator to his own leather belt and hiding the two now retracted rods in convenient and easily accessible yet hardly detectable places in his remarkably scarce armor. Then he ripped a bar off the underside of the bed, after stripping away most of the construction, and with the use of some shreds and some well trained braiding- and knotting techniques he created a strong cloth rope with which he strapped his delightfully quiet company to the metal.

As he lifted the two Va'Tal on his shoulders as if they were nothing more than a few seriously overweight sacks filled with baking flower, he set off into the hall in order to locate the man responsible for the terrible quarters provided for him, a few answers and a nice, comfortable way back home.

"Please Mr. Roh; we would like you to come with us to answer a couple of questions." The guard commander waved his short arm towards the door, in the hope that the strange creature would comply while he tried his best to block out the thoughts about the upcoming interrogation, just in case the rumors about Lahi and his people were true, that the energy ball was probing his mind in order to find out the meaning of all this commotion around him.

Lahi, comfortable floating formlessly in the air of the room, which was an exact copy of the space where Khor'mat was being held, closely monitored what was going on around him.

Two guards in standard Va'Tal uniforms had entered the room and had attempted to take him with them without explaining where he would be taken, or why. Off course, when he didn't respond, they resorted like all of the less enlightened creatures roaming the galaxy, with force; specifically the use of their stun rods.

Those had been quite entertaining, since the discharge had merely had a slightly mood stimulating effect on the Kolari. After a while of futile prodding and swinging at the alien, resulting in a state of severe exhaustion, the guards had given up. Especially the swinging of the rods had proven to be ineffective as the rod simply passed right through the being as if it wasn't even there.

After many futile attempts, and an almost unhealthy dose of humiliation later, they finally decided to call for their superior, who was now standing in the room, choosing his words carefully and desperately trying to calm his nerves. He was supposed to interrogate the pilot after he had been brought to him; therefore having to pick him up himself presented the danger of the Kolari finding out what was this was all about. After a while the floating being had considered all the available options, and had made his decision.

The commander was startled, even shocked by the sudden invasion of his mind. He had heard of the mental abilities of the people that came from the system of Deneb, but had never really believed. Until now.

His own mental voice suddenly was confronted by something strange and quite disturbing: company.

A soft and soothing voice suddenly appeared in his mind, telling him that all was fine, and this force of communication was only temporarily, mostly because his brain

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wouldn't be able to handle it. The Va'Tal, as it seemed, had still a lot to learn as a people and a long way to evolve before this degree of mental ability was within their grasp.

Lahi agreed to come with the guards, and providing they would treat him respectfully, he would comply with their wishes.

Commander Yig found he could answer the voice by mere thought, and informed Lahi he would be treated with the utmost of respect. The voice disappeared as sudden as it had come, and Roh started moving.

He was taken to a different room, where Yig foolishly, it being part of the routine involved with questioning people, offered him a seat.

The room was a bit more spacious than Lahi's former accommodations, but nonetheless more Spartan in its decoration. Only two seats and a table graced the space between the sturdy walls.

"Please wait here mister Roh, someone will be with you shortly." Was the calm request Yig provided with creating access to the room for Lahi, and as the door closed behind him, he noticed that the commander walked away, without doubt to inform his superiors.

The hallway slowly bent to the left, and as he focused his hearing, chatter could be heard coming from the other hallway, which merged with his.

"I do hope we're going for some coffee and hopefully a nice breakfast. It's early, and without coffee I'm no fun plus, fellas, I am starving!" The clear mocking tone of the voice was familiar to his sensitive ears, as was the baritone sound carrying its words. The chatter was accompanied by the rhythmic stomping of heavy boots, of which one pair had a louder and more distinct sound than the others. Both sounds together made him wonder about the identity of their source, even hope that his first guess was actually the right one.

Simultaneously the source of the sounds, himself and the respective Va'Tal entourage met up where the two hallways conversed into one.

The boots turned out to belong to Joe Delgado, as he had guessed. The sound of the boots was characteristic for standard issue Terran military boots.

"Morning Gakh! Out for an early morning stroll with your Va'Tal buddies? Isn't that funny, these guys suggested the same thing to me." Said Joe as soon as he laid eyes on the Orfine pilot, his voice filled with sarcasm the way a fruit basket lacks chocolate cookies.

A barking growl gave the answer a distinct sound: "You could say that Commander." As they came to walk together Gakh continued in a softer tone of voice, whispering to make sure their guards would not overhear what they wished to discuss: "Joe, do you have any idea what is going on? Why have we been held like this all night?" "I have no idea my furry friend, no idea whatsoever." While Joe said that, he wondered and feared: Orfine couldn't read minds and tell lies from truth, could they?

Very little was said from that point on. The two pilots accepted that they were being guided, and were unknowing of where the guided journey would eventually lead them. All they knew was that they saw hallway after hallway, the one as deserted as the other. Then they came to a double door, which opened upon the moment the group approached it, filling the silent halls with the soft sound of escaping air, releasing itself out of tiny valves, hidden in the construction.

As the doors opened, they were introduced to their next form of transportation. After regular, labor intensive, have-to-walk-through halls they were now stepping into a world of luxury: the elevator. As the last of the guards entered the small space, his

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stubby index finger made contact with one of the operating buttons, resulting into the doors closing, with once again the sound of escaping air, and the elevator set into motion. From the slight gravitational pull it was possible to deduct that they were moving down, at a velocity which was hard to pinpoint precisely.

Shortly after entering, the elevator came to a halt, and the doors opened once again, allowing the group to exit and proceed down the hall, where they found several unmarked doors, most likely all leading to separate rooms.

While he roamed the halls, looking for a way out, or at least a clue to the whereabouts of those responsible for his less than pleasurable accommodations, Khor'mat noticed that the strain on the cloth holding the guards attached to the metal rod on his shoulders was either increasing or just enough to be too much for the material to handle.

Slowing down, and thereby reducing the movement of his shoulders, Slah'ke move their entire upper body when moving fast, making them able to adapt to any situation they may encounter no matter what, as they are taught from childhood, he hoped to slow down the tearing process that was going on just behind his strong muscular and most of all scale covered back.

But the reality of bed sheets coping with the strain of the lumps of pure grade-A quality fat mixed up with a muscle density which would have been negative if it had been possible dictated gravity to pull harder than the braids could handle. And so soon one of the guards fell to the floor with the same grace and gliding effect a meteor the size of a Sinew-class transport ship on a crash course with a planet in the possession of a gravitational field strong enough to pulverize mature elephants the moment they put down their feet.

As the second guard gracefully came crashing down, following the good example set by his colleague, Khor'mat noticed that he was closing in on a door, which was situated on the right side of the hallway. The same sturdy, low cost, and seemingly built to survive a close encounter with an Invincible-class cruiser, the design was the same as the door that had been meant to hold him inside and failed at that miserably just a while ago.

For a quick moment he looked back, to ensure his cargo would not be able to reach its alternate destination on its own, and was quite amused to see the enormous guards continuously rolling over due to the effect of their less than comfortable re-acquaintance with firm ground. "Those are going nowhere", he whispered to himself with a big tooth grin marking his face.

Then he went to listen at the newly discovered door, eager to find out what was behind it. Quietly he lay his head at the door, and held his breath, cautious not to make a sound, in case that sound might disturb his ability to hear the noises coming from inside.

Soft crackling and something that sounded like buzzing hit his eardrums, followed by a louder and as it seemed to the large warrior, more agitated maybe even angry clicking sound. Puzzled by this, he focused even more, shutting out the annoying mumbling and groaning coming from the bound guards behind him, and after a while he thought he heard a scuffling sound: whatever was making those sounds, it was moving.

Then he heard a different noise, a scraping one. It was like someone was scraping the wall with a hard surface. Tired of waiting and trying to figure out what he was listening to, and afraid he might get detected; the Slah'ke grabbed the doorknob, gathered his strength and started pulling. Naturally the door was locked quite tightly,

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and there was very little movement. Noise was generated in excess however. Then, it seemed as if the door was suddenly cooperating, as if it had made the decision to let the scaled giant in, but only after serious effort.

Quite the opposite was true in fact, as soon became clear: as Khor'mat was pulling the knob, there was pushing from the inside, making the attempts to free the door from the confinement of its lock much more effective.

Soon the Slah'ke would be holding the door in his hands, as a trophy, and he peered into the room, filled with curiosity and a burning desire to know what was inside.

Stepping into the doorway after having grabbed his things when the door was just about to give away was Quix'Tooygh, the Hivian pilot who had been the cause of the Orfine losing his self control less than twenty-four hours ago.

Khor'mat saw the insectoid standing in front of him, talking – what seemed to him – utter gibberish in a language consisting out of clicks, buzzing and all kinds of strange unidentifiable other noises. Eying the strange creature, and recalling the events of the day before his mind came to a conclusion, resulting in a thought along the lines of: “It’s the bug.”

As “Quix” – that’s what his mother usually called him back home – kept on babbling in his own language, Khor'mat suddenly realized that the universal translator implanted just below his skin behind his ear hole was equipped with a translation program for the Hive languages, and quickly switched the program on. All the sudden, the ranting and babbling of the insectoid made a whole lot more sense.

As it turned out, neither of them really knew what was going on, why they had been locked away like cattle, or what was to come. Khor'mat informed the multi-limbed and in comparison vertically challenged creature that he intended to go home instead of sticking around to find out what the situation really was.

After a short but thorough explanation during which Khor'mat took a quick peek into the room of his colleague, finding that the scraping sound had been a spoon making contact with the wall – it seemed Quix'Tooygh had attempted to dig a hole through the wall in order to escape, which indicated that either he had a serious case of claustrophobia or he had serious issues with waiting – and that this particular species within the Hive slept in a cocoon like construction which was now hanging from the wall as a silent, the insectoid agreed to work with Khor'mat to find a way off the ship, and back home. Both grabbed one of the guards and went on their way, quietly and unmistakably faster than the Slah'ke had moved on his own. Amazed by the strength of the small and seemingly fragile creature, he could not help but wonder how strong Quix'Tooygh actually was. Not being a biologist, little did Khor'mat know that most insectoid species have the ability to lift, carry and generally manipulate loads exceeding many times their own weight. With the right training the Hive therefore also made excellent fighters, making good use of their natural born strength together with their exoskeleton which creates a natural armor, one that is tougher than even the toughest of Slah'ke hides or Brood skin mutations for that matter.

Roaming the halls, more and more desperately trying to find a way to either the location of something that resembled the bridge of the Mothership or the launch bay where their fighters had been stationed, the two fighter pilots got lost at some point. Unaware of their position in the ship, they stood still, transferring their loads for a moment from their backs to the floor, attempting to orient themselves.

As they stood quietly, searching for something that could give them a clue of where they were, Quix suddenly raised his right upper arm, gesturing silence, indicating he heard something.

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It soon became clear there were Va'Tal approaching. Both of them recognized the sound: guards in the same boots as their baggage wore. Naturally, in an attempt to attract attention, the guards they had been carrying around started to make as much noise as they could. This earned them the less than pleasant attention of one of their own stun rods as Khor'mat slammed the one he carried – he had given Quix the other one – into their bodies, sending a shock through their bodies that left them unconscious and a few burn marks upon impact.

Quix had been keeping watch and saw the guards moving past, unaware of what was going on right under their noses. In the middle of the guards who were following what appeared to be their commander, he noticed a bright light moving, floating without distinctive form. He knew it was the Kolari.

When the sound of the boots had almost died away, they found it safe to follow them, after all, following those guards at least gave them a direction to go in, a goal to achieve. Keeping their distance, and waiting a few minutes before using the elevator they had seen the group before them use, they eventually found themselves on a deck with several closed rooms of which the doors were marked in the Va'Tal language, which neither of them could read.

However, they could hear, and they heard the robotic voice of what they assumed to be the Preserver known as #4-Alpha5K coming from one of the rooms, every now and then interrupted by a Va'Tal voice which was asking questions.

Further investigation ended up in them locating what they believed was the Terran and – much to the dislike of Quix – Gakh, who as it turned out didn't appreciate being held like he was. The Va'Tal had considered him dangerous; because of the reputation Orfine warriors had in the galaxy, and had tied him down on the chair. Obviously this was not according to Gakh's wishes, and from the crashing of furniture against a wall, the snapping sound of what was presumed to be metal and the intense growls, moans and seriously abusive language directed at certain heavy boned individuals, Quix and Khor'mat assumed their canine colleague was not portraying model behavior for a subject of interrogation. Then they heard someone approaching, and quickly took cover to avoid being detected.

Thankful for their universal translators which allowed them to understand the conversation between what turned out two Va'Tal officers making their way to the labyrinth of rooms upon the two pilots had stumbled.

"Sir, I know it is unusual, but I do not believe we have another choice. We cannot risk the possibility that he has read my mind, my thoughts." Said one of the officers, and it was clear he was talking to his superior. "Didn't you shield your mind, attempt to block the information and thoughts about this like you were trained to do?" The plain but strong voice of the superior officer sounded harsh and accusing. "Yes I did, but it has never been proven to be a method without failure. There is no guarantee that I was..." "Fine Yig, I will interrogate that energy ball." With that the superior officer picked up his pace, which was remarkable to begin with considering his physical state, and entered one of the rooms, one of the few cases in which neither Khor'mat or Quix had been able to learn anything about who or what was inside without risking exposure.

They now had found Lahi too, and needed to make a decision. Should they leave the pilots they found behind and get themselves off the ship, or should they take the others with them and escape all together? A strong discussion followed, quiet but strong nonetheless.

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The officer entered the room and found the Kolari in question. His small eyes assessed the room: a table, two hard wooden chairs, all simple in design, a one way mirror with the reflecting side directed into the room, harsh uncompromisingly bright lighting and one floating being of light and pure energy, an enigma to every form of science and the comprehension of the minds of even the greatest Va'Tal thinkers. "Colonel. Thank you for joining me. Would you mind telling me why I am here, why that I am being held like this?" The voice penetrated his mind, occupying every corner. The being was not pleased, and let the colonel be aware of this more than he would want to.

In his outer appearance the Va'Tal officer attempted not to show the mental strain he was under, but nonetheless his stubby fingers grasped his clothing.

How Lahi could see, and if he even moved to see the colonel was absolutely unknown to anyone other than Kolari. His people were secretive about everything, from state secrets to their favorite color. If you didn't need to know, you didn't know, and ironically the Kolari considered everything about themselves to be information suiting that exact description. Therefore, absolutely nobody knew.

However, it was without doubt that Lahi saw the colonel and was studying him, not only his mind but also his corporeal appearance.

The colonel was dressed in a uniform; one much more distinguished and elaborately decorated than guard commander Yig wore. What was most different about this uniform in contrast to those of the lower officers and the regular soldiers, was the fact that his uniform had colorful pieces of cloth draped over it, giving the colonel a presence of importance to the Va'Tal people, but to anyone else it probably had a more comical effect, since the extra cloth combined with his already fascinating physique created not only an absurd and somewhat impossible appearance. Not to mention the serious practical problems is presented, since the cloth severely limited the colonel's ability to move about freely.

Although he was very frightened by the mental presence of the Kolari, who without doubt was probing his mind right there and then, he proceeded to the closest one of the two chairs. Lahi was at that moment hovering on the exact opposite side of the table, just behind the chair not chosen by his interrogator.

Again the voice took residence in the feebly protected mind: "You have questions colonel, ask them. Do not be frightened corporeal, I have no interest in mutilating your mind, however I will probe it for the questions you seek to be answered if you refuse to ask them yourself."

Hesitation and discomfort characterized his mental voice as the colonel found out that the only means of communication he had with the creature on the other side of the table was his mind, since his vocal chords were unwilling to respond to his attempts to speak: "Mister Roh..." he gathered all his strength and continued: "Yesterday, during the Race, one of the contestants had an accident, which unfortunately left the pilot in small pieces scattered around the crash site, together with the remains of his vessel." "You dare to speak about the violent end of a precious and unique life in such cold heartless words in my presence Va'Tal? Choose thy words carefully corporeal." The words of the Kolari were filled with disgust and a hint of agitation, which frightened the colonel even more. He had seriously underestimated this creature, and worse than that: he had overestimated his own ability to shield his mind from the powers that the being floating in this very room possessed, which was foolish to begin with since the Va'Tal understood no more of the Kolari than any other known and contacted civilization in the galaxy.

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“I need to know what you may have seen mister Roh, because my superiors suspect foul play. I need to know what your sensors picked up, what you witnessed yourself, everything.”

Silence followed in the mind of the large alien. Just when he thought Lahi had left his mind, the answer came: “My dear colonel.” A condescending tone governed the words filling his hostage taken mind as the colonel had no choice but to listen. “If you would have taken a mere moment of your time to review the data of yesterdays competition instead of indulging yourself in yet another absolutely and utterly redundant feasting to create yet another layer of fat upon your far from well-maintained body, you would have known that at the very moment that Venom crashed so tragically into that particular asteroid, my vessel practically collided with one of that asteroids brethren, which left the adversary from Tau Cyngi just outside the range of my damaged sensors.”

“But” began the seriously overweight creature while testing the limits of the chair he was sitting on. Lahi began to loose his patience, and while he decided to probe the inferior mind for the answers to his own questions despite of his promise made earlier he let his voice dominate the conversation with his interrogator again: “I have no information for you Va’Tal. Release me now and let me return to my home, and I may be able to persuade my government to be lenient upon your people for holding me as if I were a trophy, a prize, treating me as if I were a hostage.” As he found what he was looking for, he loosened the connection he had made with the large creature sitting on the chair at the table, to allow him to call out to his people.

“You are going nowhere Kolari, not until I know what I need to know. This conversation is over, enjoy your stay.” Furiously the colonel spat out remnants of his last still undigested meal as he raised his voice against Lahi. Off course, had the colonel known more about the Kolari, then he would have known that it is impossible to hold them against their will in conventional quarters, since they have the ability to move through solid matter. Had the colonel known that and built an energy-containment facility to house his energetic friend, he would have actually been able to keep his word on that, but he had not done any of that.

Therefore, unsurprisingly, the Kolari channeled his energy, inflicting some minor damage upon the Va’Tal to distract him, and not to harm him in such a way that permanent damage would be caused as that was against the beliefs of his people; and as if he had known or sensed it, he took advantage of the sudden outburst of noise and hysteria in the hallway behind the door, and floated with great speed towards that particular wall, in order to pass through it.

The matter was dense, strong and well crafted, but nonetheless not at all able to hold Lahi inside the space the colonel had intended to confine him to. As he passed through some of the ships conduits, which turned out to be the controls for the interrogation chambers, ironically the lock on the door that had separated him from the hallway fused solid with its electronic controls, due to the sudden surge of concentrated energy affecting it, thereby effectively locking the colonel inside.

In the mean time commander Yig had decided to interrogate the Orfine pilot, however, the moment he stood before the door were observing pilots had assumed with relative certainty Gakh Botil to be held, he seemed to reconsider, as if he valued his life more then getting the answers he needed. He summoned two guards to open the door for him and calm the Orfine down, at all cost so he could safely interrogate him.

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Both guards stood on the opposite sides of the door, with the commander at a safe distance. A quick affirmative nod from the one guard to the other, and the door was opened. Just as they were to enter the room to locate their target and finish their mission so Yig could start interrogating, something big and solid sailed through the air, directly at the first of the two guards. Before he had time to figure out what was piercing through the air on a crash course with his own bloated head and dive for safety, it hit. The result was a bloody mess: the guard was thrown back with quite some force, resulting in the almost impossible sight of a four hundred and fifty pound alien crashing into another alien of roughly the same weight, and the both of them sliding across the floor towards the opposite wall. The first guard was incapacitated due to what now became obvious to be a leg of one of the chairs sticking out of his eye, having penetrated his head quite deeply. Most likely he would, if he survived this at all, never have any depth perception again.

The guard who was thrown back by the force of his comrade crashing into him pushed the bloody body aside and got up remarkably fast. Drawing his stun rod, he rushed back into the room where Gakh stood beside himself in anger.

A growl that could make blood boil and muscle tense up with fear escaped his throat. His razor sharp canine teeth were shown, his lips pulled up, saliva dripping between his teeth forming long thin strands slowly being pulled towards the floor by the artificial gravity, and his eyes burning with what those that had fought cornered Orfine and miraculously survived had dubbed the eyes of fire, staring right into your soul, preparing it for – if your luck had just run out - a slow and agonizingly painful death, making your adrenal gland start pumping out its usual product in overdose. Yig, being horrified by what he saw, slammed the door shut in utter panic just after the guard had stepped inside.

An agonising scream, tearing through marrow and bone, was heard followed by something slamming into the door, slightly bending and testing its hinges, accompanied with an almost deafening roar. Then there was a deafening silence, only interrupted by an uncontrollable chatter of teeth, originating from the mouth of an utterly horrified guard commander, a silent envious mimicing of the words “Such a showoff.” coming from Quix and the soundless smirk from Khor’mat.

At that very moment, the hallway was engulfed with a bright all-embracing light that seemed to originate from one of its walls. Gakh Botil recognised it as his Kolari colleague, and invited the voice of the Kolari into his mind.

Having had a lot of contact with Kolari, Gakh was more experienced at the mental form of communication, and the conversation was quick and to the point. As Lahi made a simultaneous connection to all the pilots he could sense within a distance of ten to twenty metres – as that was the only effective range for him at the moment, seeing that he had just been required to focus all his ability to pass through a solid wall – a quick decision was made.

Their new mission was clear: pick up everyone and get off the ship!