Hail to the Jewels in the Lotus

by Anendda_Rysden

Summary

The Tenno were awake, they who had journeyed beyond the boundaries of reality and returned from the place the Orokin called Hell. Who can say how many they’ve saved from a life of darkness, and how many they’ve cast into the abyss. Every story is a piece of the puzzle, surah... and the universe is full of stories. [Anthology. See inside for Masterlist/Individual Synopsis.]
Masterlist

When I first was introduced to Warframe, I didn't expect much in terms of story content. I was mistaken. Again and again, the folks down at Digital Extremes have surprised me with the depth and quality of their plot. No matter where you travel, every personality is unique in their own way, the in-game lore is richer than you'd think, and the ambiance of the locations, from the neon-soaked grunge of Fortuna to the windswept Plains of Eidolon, inevitably became more than I could resist.

What follows is an anthology collection of stories, quests and incidents scattered across the Origin System.

Because reasons.

Enjoy!

Silent Night

Tyre considered himself moderately intelligent. He knew mechanisms well enough not to stick a coolant cell in backwards, and could clean and maintain his rifle without discharging the power pack into the floor, unlike so many of his tube brothers. He also liked shiny things, things like gemstones and distant, twinkling stars. When the rest of the station is slaughtered by the personification of the night itself, what’s a single, unarmed Grineer to do?

Hiding was a good start.

Son of the Sun

While Baro Ki’Teer tended to exude the aura of some exquisite glass thing, there was steel in his spine and cunning in his fluttering fingers. He could not have repeatedly entered the Void and returned unscathed by mere luck. Why, then, would he require the services of a bodyguard? Perhaps because he couldn’t bear to face the sands of Mars alone…
**Spit and Hope**

The Tenno had one more delivery to make. This time, however, his services hadn’t been bought. There was no contract, verbal or otherwise, that had compelled him visit the hazardous jungles of Old Earth. He’d undertaken this one simply because the scrappy little Grineer had asked.

A deadly shotgun. A luminous flower.

The gifts of spit and hope.

[Jump to Memory Fragment]

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**Fata Morgana**

A frozen, desolate moon. An elite Corpus squad sent to capture a mirage flickering between shards of ice. Director Harr had canceled a shochu tasting and two second-quarter audits for this, a front-row seat into the depths of Alad V’s insanity. As the body cams went dark one by one, he was regretting that decision more than ever.

[Jump to Memory Fragment]

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**The Weight of What We Owe**

Ain’t no victims on these lists, Stardust. Every one of them workin’ against the impossible to make things right for them and theirs. Makes them a hero in Ticker's eyes. Still... like the man said... show me a hero and I'll write you a Void-damned tragedy.

[Jump to Memory Fragment]

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**Into the Void**

To the surprise of many, Baro Ki’Teer was an audacious man, a collector of rare antiquities and lover of the exotic. Self-styled master of the Void – and of the myriad of dangerous things contained within. Site 4 was meant to be an expedition like any other. After all, he’d peered into the abyss more times than he could count.

What he didn’t expect was for the abyss to blink.

[Jump to Memory Fragment]

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**The Burning Cold**

Winter itself seemed to emanate from the Warframe’s presence; neither the crystalline needle of ice nor the chill grip of space, but something else entirely… almost indescribable… as if the frozen,
fathomless dark between the stars could somehow burn.

**Morituri Te Salutamus**

Prosecutor Shiv had faced every opponent the Origin System had to offer, from Corpus machines to leathery Ostron warriors, as he humped the front lines from Earth to Saturn to Phobos. None had given him a challenge worth remembering. That was about to change.

**Jar of Greed**

My name is Canto Denarii. Whether this account serves to condemn or exonerate me, I will catalog the incident as faithfully as am I able to recall. I have already been judged, not in any court of my peers, but by a remnant of the Orokin Empire-that-was... and have been found wanting. I think it knew that even as it saved me.
Tyre considered himself moderately intelligent. He knew his numbers and could count to a sum of eighty – ninety, if he’d been keeping track with his fingers. He knew mechanisms well enough not to stick a coolant cell in backwards, and could clean and maintain his rifle without discharging the power pack into the floor, unlike so many of his tube brothers. As such, Tyre been given a greater share of responsibilities aboard the cargo barge 

*Scarab*, responsibilities like seeing that the cargo was properly loaded and making sure that the aft loading doors were sealed *before* they launched into the hard vacuum of space. Gedge had held the job before him. Gedge had gone floating out in
the belt along with last quarter’s payload. Tyre was determined not to make the same mistake.

Beneath his feet, the _Scarab’s_ engines were decelerating. They’d passed the fourth planet and were heading into the belt, slowing thrusters, making sure they were on course for Eunomia Station. It was an old word, Tyre mused, leftover from the time of the Creators and as alien to his tongue as the terms the bridge crew spoke amongst themselves. Words like _trajectory_ and _gimbals_ and _synchronous orbit_. These things were not for him, but he liked to hear them anyway. He would often come up to the bridge when not on duty and simply stand near the back, watching the stars flicker by. And as long as he stayed out of the way, Jea would not throw him out. They’d been birthed from the same batch, he and her, deep in the watery womb of the eighth planet. When she’d been given the _Scarab_ to command, Tyre had followed her. When he’d proven himself marginally less likely to space the crew by confusing the decompression lever for the docking handle, he’d gotten a good position, too.

And now Tyre watched the stars, trying to expand his mind enough to contemplate them properly. It never worked – they were too abstract a concept, and the distances involved too great – but he kept on staring. The stars were pretty things, untouched by the grease which often smeared his hands and coated the _Scarab_ in a thin, oily film that no amount of mopping could scrub away. Tyre liked shiny things, and so he liked the stars most of all. His hand absently strayed into his pocket.

“Eunomia Station ahead, ma’am,” the navigator announced in a gruff cough.

“Open a channel. Let’s see if they remembered the schedule this time,” Jea responded, standing behind the navigator’s chair with one hand on the headrest. She insisted on being addressed by the archaic title, eschewing the more common “Captain” for any and all shreds of dignity she could pick from the bones of a forgotten empire. As always, there was irritation in her voice, irritation at having been sent to haul ore instead of being sent to the front lines. Tyre had never understood the problem. The _Scarab_ was a simple ship with a simple job. And simple things were good.

“Eunomia Station, this is the cargo barge _Scarab_ requesting clearance to dock,” the navigator complied, keying up the comms with a heavy burst of static. Tyre was impressed; the man had pronounced the station’s name not once, but twice in as many minutes. He rolled the syllables across his own tongue, silently trying to mouth them, but as always they tangled in his lips and burbled forth as gibberish. The language of the Golden Lords was too hard for him to speak, so Tyre made do with listening to others pronounce it instead.

“Eunomia Station, I repeat: this is the cargo barge _Scarab_ requesting clearance to dock,” the navigator repeated when the silence from the comms began to stretch, but there was no response that time, either.

A deep pucker appeared on the sagging flesh of Jea’s brow. Her skin there was pale and mottled, the Decay setting in at an early age, but not yet advanced enough to steal the lucid sparkle of her eyes. Her lips twisted, showing far too many brown, crooked teeth for the motion to be an entirely unhappy one. Tyre knew why. If the station had forgotten the pickup schedule again, Jea would enjoy slacking her own frustrations by ordering the docking crew whipped. If they’d forgotten to prepare the cargo on top of forgetting the schedule, she’d toss a few out into the black for her gunnery crew to take potshots at. No doubt it would almost make up for the delay.

“Barge _Scarab_, this Eunomia Station,” the comms squelched. “You cleared for dock.”

Jea leaned back, disappointed. The _Scarab_ angled slightly as they came around, slowing thrusters even further. Eunomia Station was built inside an asteroid, tunneling through its iron-rich guts in search of ferrite and other mineral wealth, hollowing out the center and leaving behind a thick carapace of rock to serve as both protection and camouflage. Tyre saw the docking bay up ahead, a
warm square of light against the comparative blackness of space. A rusted gun boat chugged by to
starboard, turrets swiveling like eye stalks. Jea saluted it mockingly.

The orange forcefield parted over the Scarab’s nose as they edged into the docking bay, engines
chuffing noisily, and settled into the drab, painted square designating their usual space. They were
facing the wrong way for Tyre to see much of the hanger, but there wasn’t much to see. He
trumped down to the cargo hanger and shouted to a few of his fellow tube brothers because that’s
what important people did; they shouted at other, less important people. He walked to the aft
loading doors and opened them wide, hydraulics grinding. Tyre frowned at them. They weren’t
supposed to sound like that. He thought of Gedge and the spaced cargo, of the airlock failing to
seal. Maybe it was grime or space dust. He resolved to lubricate them before they left – before Jea
was taking potshots at him.

Outside on the docking concourse, lift loaders rumbled past hauling trailers of pale, dirty ore, no
doubt on their way to the mills and primitive refineries located deep in the belly of the facility. Yes,
that was the word, Tyre decided, and was proud of his vocabulary. Grineer things were primitive –
not the gleaming, golden things left behind by the Creators. Tyre wondered about them just as he
wondered about the stars, at least until his poor head began to hurt. They had lived so long ago,
further back than Tyre had the numbers to reckon. They made shiny things, he thought. Not like
Grineer.

Just outside the Scarab, crates had been piled on the docking floor to await loading. It was a big
shipment this time, Tyre noted. Thirty to forty crates at least. Jea would be happy. As happy as she
ever got, anyway. Tyre sidestepped a lift loader as it thundered past on a cushion of air. His tube
brothers swarmed over the crates like bees, slinging them onto the loader with a crash. Tyre
checked the manifest, but decided it would be a waste of time trying to count while everything was
moving around and before it had been properly stowed. He lifted his voice to shout over the noise,
ordering the others to put the crates against the back wall of the Scarab. Yes, you could pile them
up, but no more than three high – Tyre held as many fingers up to illustrate, repeating the gesture
several times – and no, the middle of the floor wouldn’t work, they had to go inside the lines he’d
so painstakingly chalked out on the floor.

Though he never touched any of the crates, it was exhausting work getting them into place. By the
time all of them had been stowed, Tyre was thinking of his pod and a mug of hot grog, if the galley
cook was in a mood to be generous. He tested the straps holding down their cargo and grunted,
satisfied. Forty crates had been logged on the manifest, but only thirty two had made it onto the
Scarab. Jea was nowhere to be found, no doubt wringing the foreman’s neck over the whereabouts
of the missing eight. An error in the numbers was an error on her record, and that simply would not
do – not if she wanted to captain a galleon at some point. Tyre suspected that his ambitious tube
sister would be awhile. “Business negotiations” were always a fun distraction, or so she’d told him
once, fondling the scaling knife she’d acquired from a dead Ostron. The thin, flexible blade was
meant for pulling the bones from fish. Imagine what else it can do, she’d said, grinning at him.

Tyre grimaced internally. Blood was shiny, but it was not pretty. And it left a nasty mess.

He checked the crates one more time, then decided there was ample time to oil the loading door,
too. Tyre didn’t bother checking the maintenance lockers onboard the Scarab. Jea was a decent
captain, but she was also cheap; the lubricants on hand were thin and poorly refined, filled with
nearly as much grit as the oil sands from which they’d been sucked. Eunomia Station had better
supplies, and no one was going to mind if he helped himself to an unattended canister. He
wandered the concourse, dodging an incoming skiff whose mush-brained pilot almost smeared him
against the wall, and angling his course towards the far end of the docking bay, where the grease
jockeys kept their tools kits and heaps of spare parts. Five minutes later, Tyre found the half empty
can of 30-weight exactly where he’d figured.

He didn’t pick it up right away, however. Finding himself alone, he put his hand into his pocket again. He’d picked up the small, flinty chunk of Azurite during a stopover on the Plains of Eidolon some cycles back. Jea had been arguing with someone whose name he’d forgotten, if indeed he ever known it to begin with, and Tyre had slipped outside. After the oily, humid air of the Scarab, the crisp wind had entered his lungs like crystalline shards of glass. Far in the distance, he could hear the mournful, unnatural howls of the Lost One carried to him on the wind, and so he was mindful not to stray too far. The vein had been exposed halfway up a rocky knoll, gleaming softly in the moonlight – moonlight that had not always been there, but now shone bright and cold and pale, casting woolly shadows across the Plains.

On Eunomia Station, Tyre fingered the lumpy geode in his palm, angling it so that the dingy light shone through the rock and caught, scintillating, somewhere deep inside. There was an iridescent blue flash spackled with pinpricks of silver. Tyre moved the gemstone back and forth, enchanted by the play of light and thinking of stars. Shiny, shiny stars.

He was so distracted, he almost didn’t notice the change in the air. Almost. A prickle ran the length of Tyre spine and bunched between his shoulder blades, a primeval warning that he was being watched, that something was not quite right. Clamping the gemstone in his fist, he whirled to face the threat, expecting Jea to be creeping towards him with that misshapen grin on her face. The docking bay was not empty… but it was too still. Too quiet. Tyre looked around, unable to shake the feeling on the back of his neck. The ham-fisted pilot, the skin of his face uneven and sagging with advanced Decay, was standing near his skiff and a knot of dock workers were clumped by the Scarab. There were more, but none of them seemed to be reacting to the danger Tyre felt.

Tyre squinted, watching them. His tube brothers had gone unnaturally still. Not talking, not moving. Not doing anything but standing in place, slumping forward over their rifles and loaders, even slumped on each other. A nasally snore erupted from the skiff pilot, his hands swaying limply at his sides, and Tyre gawped at him in confusion. They were all asleep, he realized. But that didn’t seem possible. One or two certainly, but the whole docking bay? At the same time? What was more confusing is that they all seemed to be doing so upright. Tyre looked closer and thought he saw thin, glistening filaments propping up their bodies, each one the color of spilled blood.

Tyre was about to shout, but then he saw it drop from an overhead vent. It was tall, slender, and quite obviously female – but that was about all Tyre was certain of. He couldn’t tell if the fleshy sleeves and skirt were the clothes it was wearing or if they were part of the thing itself. Dark horns crowned its visored head, like the wild beasts that stalked the overgrown jungles of old Earth, or the demons that prowled at the edges of nightmares. Quiet as a shadow, it straightened and moved towards the nearest of the sleepers. In one hand, it held a long blade.

In one quick motion, it – she, Tyre’s brain babbled senselessly – flicked the sharpened tip across the pilot’s neck. Blood spurted silently, fountaining from his open jugular, and he collapsed without ever waking up. No screams, no startled cry. Nothing. The only sound in the entire hanger was the solid flump of his body going to the floor. Tyre clapped both hands over his mouth to muffle the noise of his scream, nearly breaking his teeth against the azurite clutched tightly in his fist. The horned devil swept towards the Scarab and the cluster of his tube mates, all of them woefully oblivious to the peril they were in. The sword arced, a prismatic curving moon, and the sleepers went tumbling to the floor.

Tyre wanted to cry out, but the noise stayed glued in his throat. He was unarmed; he’d left his rifle atop some crates inside the Scarab’s cargo bay. And even if he hadn’t, it was doubtful he’d be able to unsling it. Fear drenched his senses like a cold bath. He couldn’t move. He could barely breathe
past the moist, greasy press of his hands. Above on the gantry, Tyre saw movement. A group of soldiers came into the docking bay, chatting in guttural voices. The dark thing went very still. Tyre was certain they were going to see it, certain they were going to snap their rifles to their shoulders and-

-the dark thing lifted a hand and waved it, almost as if caressing the air. Blood-red sparks cascaded softly from her fingertips, expanding around her hand like a cloud of dancing, alien fireflies. The soldiers came slowly to a halt. Their chins drooped, their eyes closed. In seconds they were asleep as well, their shoulders propped together for support. The demon gathered herself and leapt up onto the gantry, easily clearing the ten-meter distance. Tyre’s squeal of dismay suffocated in his palms as two more of his tube brothers went tumbling to the floor. Blood pattered rhythmically to the floor, dripping from the metal lattice of the gantry as the demon hurried through the door and out of sight, heading deeper into Eunomia Station.

For a long moment, Tyre did not move. Grineer were grown and birthed from their tubes fully developed, and did not experience childhood in the literal sense of the term, but Tyre remembered stories from his first few years of life – when his older tube siblings would taunt and bully, keeping him awake and sweating in his pod long after the rest of the galleon had gone to sleep. They’d told stories of the Void, that dreaded place beyond reality, and exotic ships where feral, starving Kavats roamed the empty halls. They’d told stories of the Lost Ones, wisps of pale evil that floated about the Plains at night, desperately searching.

When Tyre’s body finally jerked into action, it was only to open the nearby maintenance locker and hurl himself inside. His breath filled the damp interior, inhaling the thick odor of rust, oil and spilled fuel. There was no light and no slats to peer through. Tyre’s heart pounded against his ribs, counting out the seconds. He’d hadn’t thought himself a coward, but the idea of the dark thing slinking through the station, slaughtering the inhabitants while they dozed in a sudden, unnatural sleep was too much. He could not face it. To face it would be to die. And so Tyre clutched his precious fragment of ore and waited.

He did not move, not even when it returned ten minutes later and opened the locker where he hid. A breathless noise of fear escaped Tyre’s lips when he saw it standing there, that bloodied, darkly prismatic blade held loosely in one hand. Its tall, curving horns framed the yellow light of the hanger bay, giving it an almost otherworldly halo. And it was otherworldly. Black and shiny as obsidian with thin, winding insets of bone white, Tyre could feel it staring at him thought the polarized lenses of its helmet. He stared back, mesmerized. Every curve of its armor was weirdly organic, the dark, deadly, fleshy thing. A word danced through the cold morass of his mind, a word in the language of the Golden Lords, a statement of both reverence and fear. He reached for it, but it skittered away. It didn’t matter what the thing was called, Tyre decided. It was going to kill him and that was all there was to it. He hoped it would put him to sleep, too, so he didn’t feel the pain.

The thing moved slightly. Its hands, Tyre noticed, were the deep blue of a moonless night and as the fireflies began to gather, he thought again of the stars. The blade tilted, shedding droplets of blood onto the dirty floor, and Tyre held out his hand, fingers uncurling to reveal the lump of azurite.

“Shiny,” he said simply. “Like you.”

The dark thing paused. Its horned head tilted, regarding him in silence. The moment stretched. The fireflies winked out of existence. Tyre did not move as it- as she reached out with her empty hand and held it over his, not touching the gemstone, merely hovering over it. Their fingertips brushed. Hers were cold, but not frozen. Not cruel. The underside of her palm was shot through with gold, the gilding of a forgotten age.
The word came to him clearly then.

Teno.

The dark thing mutely turned away. Tyre watched her go, watched her walk through the forcefield at the far end of the docking bay and simply float out into the vacuum, where she was picked up by an odd looking little ship. After that, he was left alone in Eunomia Station with only the dead for company. He did not bother looking for survivors, knowing there wouldn’t be any. Tyre sat down on the floor of the locker and held the piece of azurite to his chest. Exhausted and shaking with adrenaline, he tried to ponder what was left for him to do. He could not pilot the Scarab. The words and numbers needed to run the navigation consoles were beyond his ken. The neatly stacked crates of ferrite seemed so pointless now. He dozed and woke, and waited for something to change.

When the small, beetle-like skiff pulled into the dock an hour or so later, Tyre did not move from his seat. The ship was unmarked; he wondered if its crew would beat him, either to test his fortitude before accepting him as one of their own, or to extract whatever information they needed from the station’s lone survivor. Tyre wondered what he would tell them either way.

The Grineer female approached him slowly, a pistol at her hip, obviously wondering if he was dead, too. When Tyre blinked at her, the female walked straight up to him and looked down into his face. Her pewter-colored lips were edged with the mottled brown of Decay, but her one good eye sparkled with good humor. She cracked a grin and stuck out her hand.

“Hey, there,” she said cheerfully. “A friend of mine said you might be lookin’ fer a lift?”
Son of the Sun

Chapter Notes

Inspired by the *Sands of Inaros*. Basically a retelling/novelization of the quest, because how could I resist both ancient "Egypt" and a day trip with Baro Ki'Teer? Set after *The War Within*.

**Spoilers**
The Second Dream - MODERATE
The War Within - MODERATE
The Sands of Inaros - MAJOR

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Operator, you have a message in your Inbox,” Cephalon Ordis reported cheerfully.
Bobbing with his legs crossed in meditation about a foot off the floor, Nezha did not open his eyes. If he’d had another name before the Second Dream, the memory of it had not returned to him, and so Nezha he remained – after the Warframe standing at his back, a still and silent protector.

“It is important?” he asked quietly.

“Ordis does not know,” the Cephalon responded. “I do not read them.”

Nezha doubted this very much. He had no proof, of course, but he suspected that Ordis surfed through his Inbox on a regular basis – not out of malice, Nezha knew his dear companion better than that – but out of an almost comical sense of anxiety, searching for that elusive bill of sale indicating that he’d been sold to Maroo for a handful of endo. Nezha repressed a silent little smile.

“I’m not going to sell you, you know.”

Ordis let out a burst of static that almost sounded like a guilty splutter. “What makes you think I’m look- erm, worrying about that?!” the Cephalon yawped, his waveform dancing. There was a long pause. Then, mournfully, “…You’re not going to, are you? Sell me?”

“Never.”

“Not even for Ducats? The Void Trader’s prices are exorbitantly high…”

“It that who the message is from?”

“Yes,” Ordis replied miserably. After a moment, he added, “I would fetch you a good price.”

Nezha opened his eyes, pale Void-light shining deep in the back of his pupils. His physical form may have sat in the Liset, holding steady just outside of Saturn’s first lagrange point, but he was not there, his consciousness expanded far beyond the five mundane senses. Half a kilometer away, the ringed planet orbited slowly, attended by an entourage of twinkling ice chips and gleaming, cosmic dust.

Nezha could feel the planet against his thoughts, aware of the pressure its immense gravity exerted on the fabric of space. The vacuum was not dark, it was not still, and it was not quiet. Storms of electrically charged particles billowed past the Liset in waves, every mote bristling with the jagged scrape of radiation. Not deadly, not dangerous, but present all the same. He could hear it, too, the sound of the great planet howling like a perpetual wind, infinitely chaotic and at times eerily high pitched. And below it all was a rhythmic pulse, so regular as to be almost artificial, the presence of the Void tapping away at the very edge of reality.

Nezha took a deep breath, savoring the simple act of drawing the Liset’s cool, metallic air into his own, living lungs. The physicality of the act grounded him, allowing him to pull his mind back from the Void. He unfolded his legs and stood.

“Not even for Ducats,” he said to Ordis. “You are worth far more to me than that.”

Ordis’ waveform brightened and took on a slightly deeper shade of blue. The Cephalon was preening. The sincerity of his relief was so intense, that Nezha couldn’t help but place a reassuring hand on the console. With his other, he activated the holo-projector above his palm, scrolled to his Inbox, and opened the latest message. As he’d already gleaned, it came from Baro Ki’Teer. He couldn’t decide if that boded well or not. The man had been helpful during their struggle with the Formorians, but that “help” had come with a rather annoying price tag. Nezha wondered what favor was on sale today.
A prerecorded transmission opened above his palm and began to play.

“I have a rare opportunity for you, Tenno,” said Baro, wasting no time with his usual, unconscious arrogance. “It’s come to my attention that there may actually be a tomb on that forsaken little rock you call Mars – and tombs mean treasure.”

Nezha lifted an eyebrow. There was a barely concealed sneer in Baro’s voice, but Nezha couldn’t tell what or who it was directed at. It was usually quite easy to locate the object of the man’s derision, whether it was a generic Warframe or second-rate gear. This time, however, Baro was making a conscious effort to keep such conceit to himself – and all but failing at it anyway.

“Unfortunately, my usual relic hunters are superstitious idiots who refuse to disturb this so-called “sacred” place,” Baro continued, fingertips flaring apart, then lightly pressing together again. “You, Tenno, are far more pragmatic… especially when it comes to Ducats, am I right? I would like to solicit your services in this matter.”

That much had been expected. What came next, however, took Nezha by surprise.

“I will be accompanying you, of course. I can’t expect you to know the different between treasure and mere rubbish,” Baro sniffed. His fingertips drifted apart again. “I’m sending you the coordinates for a rendezvous. Do try to respond in a timely matter, Tenno, whatever your decision.”

The transmission collapsed back into his Inbox. In the stillness that followed, Nezha found himself thinking. He had awoken twice in his life, once to his Warframe, and once to himself. Thousands of years after the Downfall, the world around him had been strange, alien and unfamiliar. He and the other Tenno had banded together to face it. They’d constructed their own relays, their own conclaves and places of refuge, building alliances with some, making enemies of far more. Mercenary work was not new to the Tenno and Baro’s request was not an unusual one. It was, however, odd in some way that Nezha couldn’t place. While Baro tended to exude the aura of some exquisite glass thing, there was steel in his spine and cunning in his fluttering fingers. He could not have repeatedly entered the Void and returned unscathed by mere luck. Why, then, would he require the services of a bodyguard?

“Well, Operator? Will you begin this mission?”

Mars filled the viewscreen as the Liset made its approach, a great rusted orb streaked with coal and crowned with smears of pale, powdery ice. The Ostrons sometimes referred to it as Angaraka, the Burning Coal. For the planet’s twin moons, however, they usually deferred to the names given to them by the Orokin, Phobos and Deimos. Fear and Dread. The Corpus would occasionally attempt to scratch a meager profit out of the poles, but these days the planet was largely unoccupied save for the invasive presence of the Grineer and their machinery, chugging on day and night as they gouged the dusty surface for minerals. There had been a civilization here once, but no longer, their massive habitations barren of everything but the desolate sigh of the wind. It many places the
It was not the first time Nezha had visited the planet, and he suspected it would be far from the last. Ordis plotted the Liset on an intercept course, its advanced stealth systems making it easy to slip past the dozen or so galleons hanging in orbit like fat, bloated flies. The Grineer had all but shattered Deimos with their mining operations, but they’d left Phobos mostly untouched. Mostly, but not entirely. Open pits pockmarked its surface like cancerous sores.

The Liset’s vectoring thrusters flared, opening its starboard flaps as Ordis expertly steered them into the atmosphere, crossing the Tharis Rise and angling towards the edge of the southern highlands. Settled in the blinking dark of the docking cradle, Nezha did not see the last few minutes of their flight, but he could imagine the deeply cratered terrain passing below him. A victim of a tortured past, the scars of the red planet were a bleak reminder of its struggle. During the Old War, its surface had been blue with shallow oceans. Now all that remained were empty basins. The atmosphere thinned; the days grew slowly colder. In only a handful of centuries, Mars would die just as the civilization upon it had died, leaving nothing behind but a great stone tomb.

“Make ready, Operator,” said Ordis. “We are nearing the rendezvous.”

The coordinates Baro had provided lay at the very edge of the highlands, where the deeply fretted landscape dropped several kilometers to the vast desert which dominated the planet’s northern hemisphere. More precisely, he’d indicated a particular spot along the rim of the Isidis Basin, a 4-billion-year-old impact crater splashed between the two opposing geographies.

Nezha sank into the somatic link and waited, feeling the Liset began to decelerate. A moment later, the docking cradle spun open, exposing him to a wall of shimmering heat and grit tossed up by the lander’s engines. There were no hostiles in sight. His HUD darkened, compensating for the intense glare, and Nezha demagnetized the cradle. For half a second, he was in freefall. Half a second after that, he tucked his knees to his chest and somersaulted, landing in an easy crouch as the Liset arced away into the hot blue sky.

Nezha stood up. The wind snagged at the long sugrata flowing from his helmet, their weighed ends clattering softly against his Warframe. To his front, the rocky ground cleaved away from him, revealing knobby minarets of sandstone and a sunbaked vista looking out over the basin. He was alone but for the furtive skitter of a desert skate.

Nezha opened his HUD and rechecked the coordinates he’d been given. Horizontally, he was right where he should be. Vertically, he was still one hundred and eight meters too high. Nezha walked to the edge of the plateau and peered down into the shadowed depths of the canyon. A moment later he jumped, landing with an enormously heavy thud that belied the size of his Warframe. When he rose from all fours, he found Baro Ki’Teer staring at him and looking unimpressed. A reprogrammed Osprey unit hovered placidly at his side.

“I do hope you checked to see where I standing before you leapt down here,” he remarked.

Nezha regarded the man in silence. Baro had kept the pointed helmet concealing all but the lower half of his face, but the restrictive, high metal collar had been replaced with a loosely wrapped viridian cape that’d been pulled up in the facsimile of a hood, shielding his neck from the hot Martian sunlight. Gone was the bulky ensemble he typically sported during his visits to the relays. He now wore something dark and tight, not unlike the Transference suit to which Nezha had grown accustomed. Angular chest and shoulder plates sparkled blue-green in the heat, and there were several expensive-looking rings on Baro’s fingers. He had not, Nezha was dully amused to note, sacrificed much in terms of style.
Baro turned on his heel. If he was perturbed by the Tenno’s habitual lack of response, he didn’t show it. “Well, come on, then,” he said shortly. “I don’t want to spend any more time on this desolate rock than I have to. I can feel the filth and grit in every breath.”

There it was again, the disparaging sneer. Nezha’s sharp eyes watched him. Baro’s center of gravity had changed ever so slightly, unconsciously aware of some new weight low in the small of his back. The Tenno trailed after him without a word. It was not difficult to see where the man intended to go.

The temple façade was about half as high as the cliff into which it was carved, and Nezha realized he’d been standing atop it only moments before. A palisade of columns lined the dusty walkway leading to the open mouth of the temple, the cobbles nearly obscured by windblown piles of sand. An enormous blue banner hung to one side of the entrance, ratty and sunbleached with age. Another lay crumbled on the ground directly opposite. Imposing though it was, the temple projected an air of sadness and neglect, of something that had once been important, but now lay forgotten.

Ahead of him by about five paces, Baro turned his boot on a loose cobble, not enough to take his balance, but enough to make him reach for a nearby column. Blocks of stones shifted, and a cascade of loose sand tumbled over his fingers. Disgusted by its dry, slithering touch, Baro’s plush lips began to curl.

There, there. That’s right, shake out the sand, but remember, not all of it…

The voice was soft and consoling. A mother’s voice, Nezha reflected with an ache. Baro snapped his hand away from the column as though it’d bitten him. He stared at his open palm for a moment, then dusted the grains from his skin with an abruptness that almost bordered on frantic.

“Tenno, that voice... did you-” Baro cut himself off. “No, nevermind. Come.”

He turned away quickly and resumed his course down the walkway. Nezha stood still in the middle of the columns, looking up at the temple facade. He’d heard the woman’s voice, too, but could not fathom where it had come from, unable to discern if it’d been a rogue transmission picked up by his comms… or something else entirely. They were alone in this desolate place; his radar and motion trackers confirmed as much. Nezha tipped his head to the side. There had been something odd about that voice. Something deep and distant, reverberating softly as though he was hearing it from someplace far away – if indeed he’d “heard” it at all, for the words had seemed to come directly into his mind.

Ten meters ahead, a gelid wind sighed from the mouth of the temple, beckoning them inside.

The doorway opened unto blackness, thick and heavy, as if it were a physical thing that crouched just inside the temple. Blue light poured over the walls as Nezha stepped inside. Baro flicked him a look.
“Oh, my. You’re even good as a nightlight.”

The words were openly mocking, but lacked the sharpness of malice. Nezha let them pass, slowly rotating his head to look around the dusty antechamber. Gauzy spiderwebs hung from the ceiling like curtains, stirring in the gravelly sigh of wind that rushed out of the darkness to meet them, so shriveled and hoarse, it took very little imagination to fancy it being exhaled from desiccated lungs. If Baro had been struck by a similar thought, he did nothing to show it. His snapped his fingers at the Osprey and it flared its lights, forcing the darkness to retreat. They pressed deeper into the temple. The floor was made of the same neatly cut, sandstone cobbles as the promenade, but in most places the sand was heaped so thickly that it scarcely mattered. Here and there, entire sections of the walls had collapsed – or had been left unfinished.

Nezha pushed his consciousness out ahead of them, filling the corners and extending his awareness beyond what was available to him via Warframe’s expansive sensor suite. It was easier now, this newfound power, and it strengthened with each passing day. All around he could sense the pale touch of memory, the hopes and fears and desires left upon the Void like soft fingerprints.

“This place…” he began quietly. “It is drenched in the shadows of remorse.”

Baro jumped at the sound of his voice, swiftly turning the motion into a scoff. “I should think so,” he said tartly. “This desolate rock is the former home of a colony of backwards-thinking sun worshipers worth about as much as the sand around you. Nothing. The Grineer took pity on their miserable existence long ago.”

Nezha turned his helmet towards the man. *That shadow is upon you, too,* he thought. It was as if the blackness of the temple corridor had reached out from its slumber, worming beneath Baro’s flesh like the purulent tendrils of the Infested. In his chest, a seething knot pulsed like a tumor. *You are sick with it.*

“Oh!” said Baro, brimming with false enthusiasm. “Now that’s what I came to see.”

Nezha swung his implacable gaze back to the temple. Ahead of them the corridor was choked with thick curtains of webbing, but beyond that was the gleam of precious gemstones, of electrum and lapis lazuli and deep, deep gold. Baro slowed to a halt, eyeing the webs, and Nezha choked back a laugh. Chubby spiders lounged on the strands, each one easily as big as his fist, with eight bright pink toes The Biz would have thought them adorable. Nezha could easily see the big man stowing one of the creatures in an apron pocket.

In one smooth motion, Nezha stepped forward and hooked one hand through the webs, parting them with a visceral tearing sound. One of the spiders fell on his shoulder and sluggishly moved up the back of his neck. Baro made a high-pitched noise of protest.

“Tenno, it’s on your shoulder. Oh, my stars, it’s moving… k-kill it!”

Nezha said nothing, letting the arachnid crawl up the side of his helmet without disturbing its progress. Baro shuddered visibly and tucked his arms and elbows close, apparently trying to make himself a small a target as possible as Nezha swiped and clawed at the webs, clearing the passageway. More spiders dropped onto the sand. Baro anxiously danced aside. “Disgusting, horrible creatures… You let any of them touch me and I’m docking your fee!” He said in a shrill voice.

With a grand gesture, Nezha indicated the path he’d made.

After another agonizing moment of indecision, the Void Trader darted through the gap, swatting at
imaginary things on his clothes. Nezha followed him with the slow, deliberate steps of a predator stalking oblivious prey.

The corridor ahead split around a large block of stone. Here the ground was relatively free of sand, making it easy to discern the wealth of artifacts heaped against the wall. Baro knelt and immediately began sorting through the hoard. Standing over him, Nezha watched in silence. The air here was thick with the scent of dust and dried flowers, of precious myrrh and black, sticky incense. Nezha's head tilted, observing the trinkets that Baro was picking up and sorting into haphazard little piles. Some were obviously quite valuable, like the golden circlet hung with crimson lobes of jasper, but most were conspicuously plain: handmade carvings in the shape of scarabs and sandskates, bundles of flowers clumsily tied with string. Shriveled husks that had been once sweet, succulent fruit. There were also several large urns.

“Burial vessels!” Baro exclaimed. “They will contain precious relics.”

The pile of artifacts toppled, withered petals crumpling to dust beneath Baro’s questing fingers, and Nezha felt a disturbing stab of unease. The Void Trader laughed. “There, there,” he chided the Tenno, amused. “You’re not defiling a tomb – you’re helping create wealth!”

The Warframe gave him a look that didn’t even require a face. Baro merely smiled his condescending smile and went back to his plunder, ordering the Osprey to unfold a large cargo net. As it did so, Baro popped the cap on a tube of balm and applied it to his lips, then started piling gold and other valuables into the center of the net.

“Well, there was more than one way to skin a kavat.

Nezha reached up, pinched the spider crouched at his nape, and gently lifted it off his Warframe. Moving with exaggerated slowness, so that Baro would think any disturbance merely the touch of the wind, he lowered the creature until its lurid pink feet latched onto the Void Trader’s cape – then released it and went back to studying the wall. It was obvious the glyphs were meant to convey some kind of story, but Nezha did not recognize the language any more than he recognized the kneeling figures.

“What do these letters say?”

Baro looked up from his rummaging. “Hmm? Oh… those.” The Void Trader gave the wall a flat look. “They’re nothing but a bunch of nonsense about their so-called God King, Inaros. I assure you, Tenno, the only thing “heaven-sent” here will be the price these relics fetch at auction.”

He lobbed a heavy golden bangle atop the rest of the valuables – then erupted into a startled shriek as he finally noticed the tarantula pawing at his shoulder. Baro surged to his feet, swatting frantically at his person as the alarmed spider scuttled down his cape and attempted to huddle between the folds, causing the Void Trader to go into epileptic spasms. He clawed and hopped and jerked until finally, having no luck at flushing the monster out of his cape, he resorting to hauling it off over his head and flinging it away. The shimmery garment landed with a plop. A moment later, the spider darted out from under it and raced into a gap in the wall. Baro’s hand twitched at the small of his back.

“Tenno!” he shrieked accusingly.

Nezha gave him an innocent look. He didn’t actually say ‘Who? Me?’ but it was written all over his posture. Baro swatted at his neck again, presumably where something furry may or may not have brushed his skin. The air around them stirred.
Baro went stiff. He shot Nezha a reproving glare. “Tenno, what is this? How are you doing that?”

Nezha looked deeper into the tomb. Despite the close proximity of the voice, they were still very much alone. The cobwebs stirred and fluttered. Long ago, the sands of our colony were cursed, soaked in fear, the woman continued. The Golden Skymen would come and take our children away. Young and old alike coverered before them, afraid to lose their most beloved.

Nezha cocked his head to the side. It was very little to go on, but somehow, in an instant, he knew. The Golden Skymen. The Orokin that were. Frightened children brought before the withered and diseased. Nezha grit his teeth, feeling acid in his stomach. He was Ten Zero; he had not needed to face the mountaintop theater, but Teshin’s words – and the vision of that lonely place – haunted him still.

But then he came, the Fear Eater, the skykiller! He was called… Inaros!

Baro seized hold of Nezha's wrist. “Tenno, stop this!” he ordered sharply.

His grip was tight.

He was shaking.

“I am not doing anything,” Nezha answered softly.

A dark wind sighed through the tomb, so deep it was almost a growl. The brazier at Nezha’s back suddenly flared to life, filling the corridor with fire. Baro’s grip tightened even further, swallowing what might have been scream. Nezha eyed the crackling flames with a preternatural sort of calm, observing how they danced on the sandstone walls, shadows twisting and leaping, until the glyphs almost seemed to move.

Inaros began not as our King, but as our enemy, a warrior of the Golden Skymen. But for each child the Skymen took away, Inaros grew ever more angry – until one fateful night.

More braziers ignited further down the passageway.

The invitation was an obvious one.

Nezha appraised the corridor in silence, weighing his curiosity against whatever it was he was likely to find deeper in. After a moment, curiosity won out. He took a step forward. Baro clamped down on his arm. “We came here for relics,” the Void Trader hissed, “not your Tenno soma-void-resonance… ‘thing’!”

His voice was thin and upset. Nezha gazed at him without speaking. Most of Baro’s expression was hidden behind his helmet, but his tanned skin had gone pale and his lips were flattened into a thin, bloodless line. He was not far off in his assessment. The Void was strong here, filling the tomb with its latent presence, and the voice was merely an echo, a record of past events imprinted on the Void like the mass shadow of a distant moon. That explained how Nezha could hear it, but lent nothing towards an explanation of Baro’s distress – or how he even heard that voice at all, as it should have been far beyond his ability to sense. It was possible that Baro’s repeated exposure to the Void had opened certain neural pathways, just as it had the cursed children of the Zariman, but even so… it was obvious something else awaited them in the depths of the tomb.

Nezha waited another beat before resolutely striding forward.
Baro’s clutching fingers reluctantly slid off his arm, but he stayed close behind Nezha as he walked, alert for any sound or movement that might indicate the prelude to an attack. Sand slithered. Nezha flicked it a cautious look. Had something moved above the roof of the tomb? Baro crouched, retrieved his cape, and quickly wound it about his body again, almost as if the airy garment would serve him as a shield – if a purely psychological one.

The corridor turned, then opened into a massive antechamber. Nezha tipped his head back until his gaze was finally able to meet the ceiling, vaulting nearly eighty meters above their heads. The cavern was a natural formation, but here and there were signs of human hands, like the worn sandstone steps climbing a hill in the center of the grotto. More grubby blue banners were draped from the ceiling, shielding potential visitors from the daggers of sunlight stabbing through a gap in the roof. Beneath those tattered awnings stood a massive statue, one arm raised towards the ceiling, but Nezha was still too far to make out any detail. A low, guttural tone resonated through the tomb.

Another child had been taken and the villagers gathered in a mourning circle, weeping... until they heard a small voice, the woman’s gentle voice continued. With her came the ghostly imprint of lilies, of sweet varnish and the warm glow of an alabaster lamp. It was the child, returned! As he approached, the people gasped, for they saw he was drenched in blood. His father rushed to the boy and embraced him – and saw that he had no wounds. “Whose blood is this?” the father asked, and the boy replied, “This is the blood of the Skymen. This is the work of Inaros.”

Ah, thought Nezha. The Yuvan child had stood before the mirror, naked save for the gold dust on his skin – and the crimson blood of the Golden Lords, beings of peerless beauty inhabited by rotten souls. Nezha climbed the stairs, lost in the echo of memories not his to remember. Baro’s shoulder brushed his as the Void Trader crowded close.

“That story… it’s more than just a myth, isn’t it?” he murmured. He gazed up at the statue. They were close enough to be in its shadow now, close enough to see something familiar in the planes and angles of its body. “Tenno, do you think… do you think the story of Inaros was drawn from an actual Warframe?”

“Yes,” Nezha replied softly, his deep voice resonating in the stillness.

Baro licked his lips, looking shaken.

The woman’s voice continued on. By the sand and stars, the Skymen raged. They set upon Inaros with their armies, but none could prevail, for he commanded the sand. He commanded Death. And so they left us and took with them our fear. On that day, Inaros became our King, ascending into the sky in a whirlwind of sand to watch over us from his throne in the sky.

Baro let out an angry scoff, but the sound was oddly muffled, as if he’d tried to smother it in his throat. He was looking up at Inaros with a pained expression on his face. Nezha knew that look. It was betrayal. A sigh of wind gusted into the chamber, rippling the shabby awnings. There were no tomb offerings here, no burial urns hoping to share the afterlife with their God King; his worshipers had been too leery of penetrating the sanctity of the inner chamber. There was, however, a massive stone sarcophagus at the statue’s feet. Nezha approached it slowly. It was a magnificent work of craftsmanship, inlaid with gleaming tiles of gold and carnelian. The suggestion of physical form was only a vague one, but it was there, visible in the wide shoulders and folded arms.

And so for years we lived without fear, said the woman, but the sands of peace are ever shifting. Years later, a plague came to the desert. The Infested. With all lost, our people gathered in the mourning circle to prepare for the end, when suddenly a storm rose about them! A colossal, spiral
Nezha trailed his fingers across the splendid lid of the sarcophagus.

“These desert people… were they a wealthy civilization?” He asked Baro quietly.

The Void Trader swallowed. “No,” he said at last, looking at the vast wealth of gold and precious gemstones, the labor of hundreds of hours. “No, they were not. For some elusive reason, their artifacts have only recently become fashionable.”

Nezha waited for the rest, darkly certain he knew what was to come.

Our people called out to the sky: Inaros! And as they huddled in the eye of the storm, the plague was swept away… never to be seen again. Our people went out into the desert, hoping to catch a glimpse of their beloved Inaros, but all they found was his glorious metal body, broken and still, lying in the sand.

Nezha bowed his head. Even though it had occurred centuries in the past, the knowledge was like a fresh wound. It was a rare thing, the death of a Tenno. His brothers and sisters were few, and the loss of one of their own was always deeply felt. Had the Lotus mourned this child? Was she even with them yet? Perhaps it didn’t matter. In her stead, the people of Mars had laid their savior to rest with every honor they could muster.

They gathered his body to keep it safe from thieves and raiders, and entombed it… knowing that one day, Inaros would rise again. Our people had no need for fear, my sweet little dune, and neither do you. Take these grains and keep them under your pillow. Inaros will watch over you.

“Lies,” Baro choked. “Nothing but lies!”

The statue of Inaros shifted with a desiccated creak.

Nezha jumped back. Grains of sand poured from the ceiling. Cracks daggered through the sandstone and with an unsteady jerk, like a machine grinding on dirty servos, the statue stepped down from its dais. But it was no machine. Deep within its core, Nezha could sense a condensed bead of Void energy. Not alive, not in the traditional sense of the word, but sentient all the same. In one hand it held a polearm carved from the same sandstone as the chamber. Not sharp, but heavy and deadly. Nezha’s hand swept behind his back and grasped the hilt of his Orthos, drawing the double-bladed staff over his shoulder.

“Ki’Teer! Get back!” he ordered loudly.

The statue swept at Baro with a growl. Nezha expected the Void Trader to be knocked flat, but Baro neatly pirouetted to the side, avoiding the swipe that would have knocked him ass-over-ankles down the stairs. The statue took a step after him, casually allowing the polearm to slide through its hand, lengthening his grip on the weapon. Nezha leapt into the air just Baro’s hand went beneath his cape and drew a primed Lex from the holster in the small of his back.

Nezha brought the Orthos down on the statue’s head and expected it to crack. Instead, the rubidium blade turned aside with a sharp chink. The statue reached for him. Nezha kicked off with both feet, arching clear of the danger. He was in the air when Baro opened fire. Bullets smashed into the statue’s head with unerring accuracy, but ultimately had no more effect than the Orthos. The Void Trader began backing up. He slapped his gauntlet with his free hand and there was an answering chime. Nezha landed on the banister of the stairs.

The thirteen-foot statue pivoted towards him with alarming speed, swinging the polearm so hard
the air around it seemed to split open. Nezha leapt again, narrowly avoiding the heavy blade as it crashed into the banister, breaking off great chunks of stone. He slashed the Orthos’ primary blade across the statue’s wrist as he tumbled to safer ground, but even with his Warframe’s unnatural strength, the weapon only left an ineffectual scratch. The effigy of Inaros was more than just stone, more than just the sum of its parts.

Baro’s reprogrammed Osprey whizzed into the room, rotors angled for maximum velocity, and loosed a barrage of laser fire into the statue’s back. Inaros turned with a roar. Nezha stabbed his Orthos into the sand and reached around to unhook his chakram. The band of light around its circumference flared. Half a second later, it ignited in a conflagration of lazuline flame. Nezha hurled it across the chamber, the deadly ring orbiting so fast it seemed a solid, burning comet. It struck Inaros in the side and kept flying, opening a deep gouge in the effigies’ insectoid waist.

The chakram arced around the chamber and returned to Nezha’s hand, drawn by the will of his mind. There was gunfire from somewhere near the stairs. Nezha watched as several rounds hammered into the wound he’d just opened, splintering the cracked and broken stone. The Osprey circled around to target the same area. Inaros whirled after it. Fire blazed in the center of its helmet and a lethal shaft of energy spiked through the Osprey’s core, setting its components ablaze. The rotors locked, then shredded apart. It spiraled into the side of the chamber and exploded in a burst of melted shrapnel.

The effigy slowly turned back to face them.

Nezha hurled the chakram again.

This time, the whirling disc slashed through Inaros’ neck. The statue took a few staggering steps, then the helmet completely separated from its body. Inaros keeled over onto the sand and was still. Nezha caught his chakram as it whirled back towards him, not taking his eyes from the pile of crumbled rock. A moment passed. Then another.

Behind him, the sarcophagus split open with a brittle crack.

Nezha cautiously shifted his gaze to look. A seam opened down the length of the casket and the two halves slid apart, moving on unseen hinges. Seconds later, everything had gone still. Nezha straightened, his stance slowly becoming more relaxed. The chakram continued to hum against his palm. He regarded the tomb protector with a wary eye. The battle had been easily won, but only by the grace of the Void. Whatever had compelled the thing to move, it had also rendered it impervious to normal weaponry. Neither blade nor bullet had even made a dent in that sandstone carapace. A common intruder would have found himself lying dead upon the sand, reverencing Inaros with blood.

But not a Tenno.

Such an outcome must have been deliberate, but even still…

Danger weighed heavily on Nezha’s thoughts, dragging cold talons through his mind. In the distance, he could hear the dirty chugging of an engine. Footsteps shimmered against the Void, heavy and bruising.

“Ket klem!”

Nezha turned around. To his surprise, a ragged deployment of Grineer heavy gunners, lancers and bombards were pouring into the chamber, numbering a score or more at least. He wondered how and when the Grineer had picked up on their scent. It was doubtful that the Liset had been detected
on approach, and Nezha didn’t have enough information on Baro’s personal craft to make a judgment regarding its stealth systems – or the relative skill of its pilot. The Grineer could just as easily have detected them on a routine sensor sweep, drawn by the tell-tale signature of Void energy. Either way, it mattered little. Nezha calmly moved his center of gravity into his naval, cold blue flames licking between his fingers. Thirty feet to his right, Baro whirled to face the sound of the Grineer.

“No!”

To Nezha’s shock, the Void Trader immediately stumbled back. Gone was the controlled, economic sense of grace he’d possessed earlier in the fight. Half a second later, Baro tangled his boots together and fell. He frantically pointed the Lex at the intruders. “You won’t take me! You won’t! Tenno, do something!”

He clumsily opened fire. Most of the rounds went wide. Only a few opened the Grineer’s suits with a hiss of escaping air. Baro scrambled back on all fours. The latent pressure of the Void darkened, stealing the heat of the sun and becoming a maelstrom that licked at Nezha’s mind in short, jagged barbs. The abrupt sting of fear was so potent, he could do little else but act. He sent the chakram hurtling into the Grineer and broke into a run, seizing his Orthos as he passed. Two lancers went down in a fountain of blood. The chakram curved, beginning its return arc. Nezha caught it one-handed as he plunged into the Grineer. Limbs flopped to the desert sand, shot through with violet tongues of radiation.

The Void spasmed. The woman’s voice returned, no longer consoling. No longer gentle. This time her voice was full of terror. They’re coming. Quickly, in here! Don’t make a sound, Baro. Here – hold these grains tight. Inaros will protect you.

The impression of a dark, cramped cupboard slashed across the Void, but there was no time to succumb to the visions pressing at the edge of reality. Nezha twirled the Orthos, peeling flesh and severing bone. Gunfire chattered. He knocked the bullets aside. In his stomach, there was a hollow pit of pure knowing. The Void darkened even further, reacting to the union between past and present. Behind him, Baro screamed out a curse, his voice thinning, echoing alongside the tremulous prayer of a frightened boy stumbling over the name of his god.

The sound of his mother’s voice rose to match.

*What do you want? No! You have no right!*

Grineer butchers growled a response in their mushy, discordant tongue.

Nezha shifted his grip on the Orthos and swung behind him, opening the belly of a nearby gunner. Ropy intestines sluiced out at his feet. The woman had possessed no weapons capable of doing the same, nor the training required to make use of them if she had.

There was the snap of a mechanized bolt. Nezha pivoted to face the sound and found himself staring down the barrel of a Ogris rocket launcher. He sprang into the air to avoid its fire. Missing him completely, the cluster of missiles slammed into the sandstone wall of the chamber and exploded. There was a blast of heat as the expanding pressure wave caught him in the back, hurling him unceremoniously to the ground. Nezha skidded, putting one hand out to control his tumble. Chunks of rock, some large, some small bounced off the skin of his Warframe as the wall collapsed. His shields flared, liquid bright against the dust, as a slab of sandstone the half the size of a Dargyn clipped his shoulder and slammed his right half into the ground, pinning everything below the hip.
There was no pain, only knowledge of the impact. The perverse legacy of Orokin hubris felt nothing so mundane. Both within and without, however, Nezha’s ears rang with the agony of the woman’s voice.

No – no, it’s just me. There’s no one else!

The chatter of gunfire tore through the Void-

-and everything grew terribly still.

Somewhere in the distance, the sound of Baro’s Lex continued to hammer away at the silence, desperate and defiant. Four shots later, Nezha heard the slide blow back and lock. He wrenched against the debris, the Warframe’s enhanced visual suite piercing the smog of dust. Still on his back, Baro had retreated against the side of the chamber. The butcher standing over him fell aside, a hollow-point round lodged in his throat. Another eagerly jumped in to fill his place. Widely regarded as suicide troops, butchers did not carry any weapons beside their trademark cleavers and this one was no different – save for the streak of malice that compelled him to abandon the blade in favor of wrapping both hands around Baro’s throat. The Void Trader choked as hard, knotted fingers closed over his windpipe. He dropped the empty Lex, clawing uselessly at the Grineer’s armored wrists, but the butcher was twice his weight and half again as strong.

There wasn’t enough air in his lungs to scream.

Nezha dug his fingers into the boulder, splintering everything directly beneath his fingertips, but the bulk of the stone remained intact. The angle was too awkward to gather the force required, not in time to make a difference. His Warframe was strong, but not all-powerful. Panic seeped through the discipline and rooted in his chest like poison.

In the back of Nezha’s mind, he felt the touch of sand.

Warm sunshine falling on cold stone.

All at once, he understood.

He flung himself from his Warframe, dropping the empty vessel in a heap and hurtling his consciousness up the stairs. The sarcophagus lay open at the top of the hill. As Nezha rushed forward, moving between the folds of the world, he saw glorious bronze Warframe lying in repose, arms crossed over its chest. It was badly damaged, wounded by the struggle that’d taken the life of its Operator, but still mostly intact, a gleaming carapace of bronze and dark, glossy obsidian. Inaros, the Protector. Nezha pushed his consciousness into the Warframe, a broken, empty shell-

-and brought it back to life.

Images flashed through his mind.

The Infested.

The Plague.

Liquid forma dribbling between fingers that’d once carried a bloodied child home unharmed.

The stench of tears as beautiful children were bartered, appraised and turned to empty vessels. All the innocent who’d suffered from stubbornness and pride. The Golden Skymen had sent him to enforce their will. Once, he’d been their sword. Now he was their scourge.
The desert sands were his to command.

With them, he would scour flesh from bone.

With them, the unworthy would be forced to kneel.

Nezha lurched from the sarcophagus; the Transference circuit had been damaged, but the Warframe still functioned. And besides, he didn’t need the circuit any more. At first the unfamiliar limbs felt alien to him. Somatic rejection spiked for a moment, but they were not so different, he and the Tenno who’d given his life to protect the innocent. What was the desert sun if not a burning halo?

**Transference at 95%

>97%

>99%

>Somatic control established.

>Selenic lensing locked.

>WAR PLATFORM ONLINE.

In a hurricane of sand, Nezha tore across the chamber, the Inaros frame channeling his Void energy into new forms, into patterns he’d never visualized. The nerves burned with the intensity of connection – yet once again, there was no pain. Only knowing. He could feel every grain of sand that surrounded him, sense the lifebeat of every insect sleeping, feeding, or scuttling in the walls of the chamber. Nezha called to them, and felt them answer.

In less than a second, he was upon the Grineer strangling the life from Baro Ki’Teer. With Inaros’ strong hands, Nezha seized the butcher’s head and twisted, wrenching bone and cartilage with a muffled crack. The butcher’s gnarled hands fell slack and Baro sucked a ragged breath into his lungs, convulsing in a moment of pure, desperate instinct. Blood and spittle ran from the corner of his mouth, and bruises were already swelling on his throat. His helmet had been knocked askew. He lifted trembling eyes to the Warframe standing protectively over him, its metallic skin glistering in the hot sunlight.

“In- Inaros?”

Scarabs erupted from the walls. They swarmed over the Grineer troops, chewing holes through their suits and burrowing inside, seeking mouthfuls of tender flesh. Screams shook the sand from the ceiling. Nezha took that sand and shaped it, weaving it around him in a deadly, spiraling storm. By the handful, he sent it forth to devour. The terrified Grineer broke into a run, but in a moment, the remainder of their number had been culled, leaving Baro and the Warframe alone on an altar of bloody sand.

Nezha looked down and stretched out a gleaming hand.

Dazed, Baro slid his fingers into the Tenno’s grip, his lacquered nails chipped and broken from clawing at his attacker, and let himself to be pulled up to stand. He wobbled unsteadily, lightheaded and weak from lack of oxygen. Nezha touched a finger to Baro’s jaw and pushed, gently tilting his head. There was a thin stream of blood oozing from one of his ears.
“You need a medic,” said Nezha.

Baro looked up at the towering Warframe, biting his lip to keep it from trembling. Capillaries had burst in his eyes, stippling them with spots of blood, but the malachite orbs were staring at him in astonishment.

“Tenno…” he croaked, one hand fluttering to his wounded throat.

He swayed on his feet.

Nezha silently moved his hand to the Void Trader’s arm.

“Tenno, I…” Baro swallowed painfully. He tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling, looking at the cerulean banners and the blistering glow of the sun beyond them. “I tried so hard to forget.”

His voice was thick with emotion. Nezha couldn’t even tell if the admission had been meant for him at all. He gazed Baro without speaking, sensing his anguish and inner turmoil. “Inaros never came that day,” the Void Trader continued in a cracked whisper.

He closed his eyes.

Tears flushed from the corners and down his cheeks.

Nezha found he had nothing at all to say. The wound was too deep, and had festered too long to be soothed by something as banal as mere words. Baro’s entire world had been shaken to its very core and the pieces were lying about him in ruin. Nezha understood that feeling. Understood it very well. He looked around at the empty tomb, feeling the echo of those who’d come there to pray, as Baro had once done in vain. Inaros couldn’t have saved his mother; he hadn’t been there to listen. But things were different now. In the end, the protector of Mars had saved its last son. Struck by a sudden moment of inspiration, Nezha slowly went to one knee and pulled his fingers through the sand, gathering a fistful of it into his palm.

Baro watched him mutely as Nezha stood up-and offered him that handful of golden sand.

Pain knifed through Baro’s eyes, then melted into pure gratitude. Another flush of tears rolled down his face as he held out a hand and allowed the Tenno to gently pour the grains into his palm. Much of it trickled through his fingers, but at the last, Void Trader closed his fist and held tightly to the rest.

“We’re done here, Tenno,” said Baro huskily. “Let’s go home.”

All at once, it was clear to Nezha why the Void Trader had requested his services. He hadn’t needed a bodyguard; he’d wanted someone along to ensure he didn’t have to face the past alone, even if he could never have planned for the way that particular dagger had been unearthed and shoved into his gut. That was what Baro had really been searching for among the shifting sands. Not riches. Closure. He’d needed it for a very long time.

They walked out of the tomb. Pausing at the rockfall, Nezha did not abandon the Warframe destiny had bequeathed him, did not break the dream he sensed that Baro needed so very desperately. Touching each of the boulders, he dissolved them into sand and gathered his previous vessel into his arms. Baro had recovered enough strength to walk unassisted, though his knees shook with every step. Together, they left the antechamber the way they had entered it. In the corridor beyond, the braziers were still burning. Firelight gleamed on gold, and despite the distasteful task, Nezha
had never failed to satisfy the terms of his employers.

Shifting the weight of his usual vessel, Nezha went to gather the net – and its valuable cargo – into his fist. Baro stopped him with a hand on his arm. “Leave them,” he said hoarsely. “I don’t care about the money anymore. These few grains of sand are all the treasure I need.”

They left the offerings at the mouth of the tomb. Baro did not speak to the Tenno again, not even as they boarded the Liset and left the Red Planet behind. He sat in utter silence, bruised and trailing sand from the folds of his clothes, as Ordis hastily piloted them to the nearest relay. He did not say goodbye and Nezha did not press him for conversation, silently escorting him through the concourse and into the care of a waiting medical team.

For months, that was the last he saw of Baro Ki’Teer.

In due time, however, Nezha found himself at the Larunda Relay. Today, he’d eschewed his original vessel for the one entrusted to him on Mars. He had a particular destination in mind, a particular purpose for wearing the gleaming bronze Warframe. There was no trace of impairment in his stride. Inaros had been fully repaired and Ordis had made absolutely certain that the Warframe’s deep bronze skin had been polished to a mirror-like shine, reflecting every nuance of the flames burning to either side of the concourse. Today, he bore the mantle of the desert.

He found the Void Trader at his kiosk on the 2nd floor, surrounded by the usual knot of eager customers and financially challenged onlookers. A rig jockey from Fortuna was nearest to the kiosk, his heavy augments scratched and battered from labor, grasping a leather purse as though it contained his every worldly possession – which, given circumstances, was probably exactly what it was. Nezha loitered at the back of the crowd, listening to the haughty tenor of Baro’s voice as he conducted business with the man. The Void Trader was only short with lookie loos and people who couldn’t pay, after all. Moments later, the rig jockey moved away clutching his purchase. Nezha slipped through the crowd. Seeing him approach, Baro abruptly smiled, not a condescending twitch of his lips, but a genuine expression of warmth.

“Tenno, you honor my people with your Warframe,” he said, his chin dipping forward. There was a note of fondness in his voice, a sincerity that had been absent during their previous interactions. He beckoned to Nezha. “Come! I think you’ll appreciate what I have today.”

There was a golden chain around Baro’s neck, supporting a tiny glass vial filled with Martian sand.

Nezha smiled.

He stepped forward to have a look at the Void Trader’s current inventory.

“Operator... are you certain you can afford those prices without putting me up for sale?”

Chapter End Notes

-o- Story/chapter title comes from the Egyptian-themed Therion song of the same name, specifically the fourth line of the chorus: “Son of the Sun, your God will let you down.”

-o- Audio descriptions of the Saturn are based on actual radio emissions as detected/recorded by the Casini spacecraft between 2002-2004. Have a listen on the
-o- The Isidis Basin (also known as the Isis Region) is a real geographic feature on Mars. Isis, of course, being the Egyptian goddess of magic, fertility and motherhood.

- o- Baro is wearing pieces of the “Foros” armor set occasionally available in his inventory.

- o- Inaros is wearing the “Ramses” deluxe skin.
My brother’s primary weapon is the Vaykor Hek and Steel Meridian was the first syndicate he maxed out. This blurb was inspired by that – and also because Clem’s pillow fort down at Iron Wake was the cutest damn thing ever! ^_^  

Nezha is our Warframe/Operator Prime, meaning he’s the persona that went through every mainline quest and accompanying cinematic, including our first visit to Fortuna. We’ve grown very fond of him, LOL, so that’s why he’ll keep popping up in this anthology. More on this later.

Set after the Second Dream but before The War Within.

Spoilers
The Second Dream - MODERATE
We can’t build a relay on spit and hope alone.

That’s what Cressa Tal had said to him once. And yet, as far as the Grineer commander was concerned, there was no problem in the universe that couldn’t be overcome with enough of those two ingredients. Push until your bones cracked, then get up and push a little more. The Tenno had sought no special favors when they’d accepted the ragtag band of defectors into their relays; these Grineer had been different, and the Lotus had only desired to preserve the flower struggling to bloom from a mire of filth and decay.

Cressa Tal had repaid that gesture with loyalty, vowed unto Death. Not that death would be an impediment to her. More likely, the female Grineer would simply roll up her sleeves and drag her own carcass back from Hell, carving the way with a knife clamped in her teeth.

Nezha was dwelling on that image as he made his way through the concourse to the elevator at the far end. Unlike the handful of other relays made solely by Tenno hands, the Larunda Relay had been built in conjunction with Steel Meridian, who had supervised most if not all of the actual construction. Everything gleamed in the blazing orange hues of pyrus, a metallic alloy prized for its durability, though the defectors seemed to have a special love for it beyond its material strength. Fires burned in every niche and alcove, and the ornamental trees favored by the Tenno blazed in rich autumnal hues. Here and there, open vents pumped shimmering columns of heat into the concourse. It was not an unwelcome sensation. Nezha wished he could feel it with his actual skin. Skin he hadn’t even known had existed until a mere two weeks ago.

Not for the first time in recent days, Nezha pushed back a surge of vicious annoyance. He was here on business, and it would not do to dwell on what couldn’t be changed.

The East Wing was as crowded as ever. Beings from across the Origin System thronged the corridors: orbital miners, Ostron merchants, Grineer defectors, even a select handful of Corpus Traders who’d been granted special permission to conduct business on the Relays, all under the watchful eye of the Tenno. Like Cetus, all were welcome – so long as they obeyed the peace. Blood would be repaid in blood, but as of yet, none had dared test the limits of the Tenno’s silent, eerie tolerance.

The gathering parted as Nezha walked. Some rubbernecked at him, others bowed in respect. Most dropped their gazes to the floor and kept them there until he’d passed. Nezha knew what they were thinking, what left the touch of fear on their skin. Were he and the others noble warriors fighting against cruelty and injustice, or opportunistic mercenaries exploiting their superiority for wealth? Nezha saw no reason to fragment the two; shadow and light did not exist independently from each other. For some, the Tenno were a beacon of hope. For others, they were harbinger of destruction. Nobility alone did not pay for the resources necessary for existence, nor could mercenary work fully honor the legacy they’d wrested from the grasping, golden fingers of the Orokin.

Never again would they stoop to the beck and command of another.

From now on, the Tenno forged their own path.

What that meant was up to others to judge.

A moment later, Nezha arrived at his destination. Steel Meridian had appropriated a large storage room as their enclave, part base of operations, part embassy to any who wished to speak or do business with their leadership. The door slid open with a whoosh, and Nezha stepped inside. The
chamber was comparatively dim and shabby compared to the rest of the Relay, filled with disorganized piles of scrap, cylinders of fuel, and squat banks of machinery connected by heavy cables. The air smelled of fire-hardened steel and rusted iron, burnt wires and thick lubricating oils. The Warframe did not breathe; its “lungs” were shriveled pouches filled with pustules and Infested neurodes enhanced with a network of Orokin sensors that interpreted chemical particles as scent… but Nezha had never been so profoundly aware of them before. Somewhere in the back of his consciousness, he felt his Operator try to draw the scent into his own, living lungs.

The somatic link barked a warning.

Nezha slammed his drifting consciousness back into his Warframe, fingers tightening on the handle of the case he was holding. For a beat, he was perfectly, utterly still – then he slowly resumed his path through the enclave, drawing more than a few looks. A rift had opened in his consciousness, a schism between his Warframe and its Operator, and it was getting harder and harder to reconcile the two.

The Lotus had known.

Ordis had certainly known.

And yet they had withheld that knowledge from him.

Resentment surged in him, and again he forced it back down. Decades of discipline made the struggle easy to compartmentalize; the vainglorious Dax soldiers who had trained him would be pleased.

He found Cressa Tal at the very end on the room. She was typing into a console, but turned at the sound of his approach. “Ah, Tenno!” she greeted him, her face splitting into a grin. “What do you have for me today?”

Nezha held out the case by way of an answer.

“Oh, hoho! I’m impressed – but then again, maybe I shouldn’t be. Here, hand it over.”

She took the case from him and sat it on the console, popping the clasps that held it shut. Inside was a wealth of irregular, crystalline cubes of ore nestled between protective layers of foam. Cressa Tal lifted one up and whistled.

“Damn, Tenno. Them’s the good stuff and no mistake. This would’ve taken months for my people ta’ to scratch it outta Phobos! How’d you get your hands on it so quick? Nah, don’t answer that. Better I don’t know in case somebody comes sniffing.”

There wasn’t much danger of that. The valuable haul of rubedo had been liberated from the blackened guts of an Orokin derelict and Nezha doubted anybody was going to come looking for it anytime soon.

Cressa Tal carefully put the ore back in its case and closed the lid, sealing off the radiant, vermilion glow. She turned back to Nezha, but the Tenno wasn’t looking in her direction. He had one more delivery to make. This time, however, his services hadn’t been bought. There was no contract, verbal or otherwise, that had compelled him visit the hazardous jungles of Old Earth. He’d undertaken this one simply because he’d been asked.

Stepping down from the platform, Nezha retraced his footsteps, angling his course to the side of the room. Cressa Tal went to call after him, then closed her mouth and decided to watch instead, her gaze deceptively sharp. Tucked between another console and a Dargyn engine that was being
gutted for scrap was a pillow fort of inflated blunts, with another thrown on top in lieu of a roof. A pair of glowing yellow eyes inspected Nezha as he approached.

“Clem,” said the eyes.

The scrappy little Grineer had ensconced himself in makeshift pillbox filled with ration packs, boxes of ammunition, posters and assorted knickknacks. It was, in essence, a thriving mini-mart over which Clem was the sole proprietor, trading his collection of items for other, more interesting items. A smile tugged at Nezha’s lips. His real lips, not the taut, shriveled mounds of skin clinging to a mouth filled with too many teeth, the perverse reality secreted beneath an eyeless helmet.

“Clem clem!”

Nezha could not translate the Grineer’s limited vocabulary as easily as Darvo, but he could read Clem’s tone well enough to know he was being greeted. Quite enthusiastically, in fact. His secret smile grew a little wider as Clem picked up bundle of maprico-flavored ration bars – a perennial favorite of the Ostron traders that frequented the relay – and offered it to him through the slot in his pillbox.

“Clem?”

That one had been a question, accompanied by a small tilt of the Grineer’s head.

Would the Tenno like to trade for something?

Nezha reached into the bag at his hip. Made of the hide of a takin, a goat-like creature that inhabited the foothills of the Plains, Nezha had acquired the buckled pouch from a vendor in Cetus – his first of many purchases, once the people there had grown accustomed to his presence. He primarily used it for lugging the ore and precious gemstones Ordis required for his foundry, but it also served him well as a credit purse when certain purchases required him to bring large sums to the Relay. It did not happen often, but when it did it was usually the Void Trader’s fault, his rare and exotic inventory far from being sold on the cheap.

Finding what he wanted, Nezha held out a flowering plant, its muddy, tuberous roots swaddled in a wet scrap of cloth to keep them hydrated. Clem’s yellow eyes brightened like headlamps. He reached out and eagerly took the flowers. It had not always been so, but centuries of evolution in the dark, mutant jungles of Earth had given the orchid a phosphorescent glow. Not rare, not valuable, but hard to acquire due to the perils of the surrounding environment. Clem snatched a cracked beverage mug from somewhere in his fort, the bottom already filled with a handful of soil. After the flower had been planted, the Grineer proudly sat the mug on his “windowsill”.

“Clem!” he announced happily, tearing the neck off a H2O bulb and gently watering his prize. Watching Clem perform the simple task, his chunky fingers moving with surprising care, Nezha felt something tighten in the back of his throat. Even with Grineer, evil was not born. It’d been created.

“I was wrong about you, Tenno,” said Cressa Tal softly.

Nezha rose from where he’d been crouched on the floor, regarding the female Grineer in silence. He did not ask what her opinion of him had been before this moment. He suspected he already knew. Cressa Tal hollowed her cheek, sucking on a tooth. “Ya know,” she began slowly, a grin forming on her lips, “I know we discussed credits for that shipment, but I think I got something better.”
She turned to a pile of crates in the corner and dug around for a moment, littering the floor with dried bits of straw – an effective, if primitive alternative for those that couldn’t afford kinetic packing gel. “My people have been workin’ on this for a while now. Took us a while to get the firing system down, but anyway…”

She withdrew a bulky weapon from the crate, ceramic parts gleaming like polished bone.

“Here,” she lobbed it at Nezha. “Check it out!”

Nezha caught the weapon one-handed. It was enormously heavy for its size. A mere footsoldier would be hard-pressed to even lift the beefy shotgun, let alone handle the immense recoil generated by its deadly quad of barrels. Nezha regarded it for a moment, then wrapped his fingers around the stock and lifted it to his shoulder. Despite the weight, it was surprisingly well-balanced. He curled a finger against the trigger.

“We took the original Hek and polished the loading ramp to make it smoother, then shifted the breechblock waaay back,” said Cressa Tal, jaunty as the best of Ostron hucksters. She clapped a hand on the cylinder jutting from the underside of the barrel.

“Just pop a gas cylinder in there – standard mix, nothin’ fancy – pull the trigger and BANG! This thing will spew hot shrapnel up to ten meters! The prototypes were shreddin’ through bursas at half that range, so it’ll do great at tearing Corpus thugs a new asshole. Give that trigger a squeeze!”

Nezha remained motionless.

Cressa Tal smirked at him. “Don’t worry, Tenno. It ain’t loaded. Ain’t no chance of you poppin’ holes in this goofy little idiot.” She flicked a thumb at the pillbox.

“Clem!” said Clem indignantly, clutching his plant.

Nezha flexed his finger. The trigger was stiff, but had only a short amount of play, depressing only half an inch before there was a subtle tick deep within the mechanism. Nezha held it there for a moment. Feeling it. Memorizing it. He pulled the trigger back the rest of the way. The shotgun gave a weighty click.

“Smooth as butter, am I right?” said Cressa Tal. “My people are calling it the Vaykor Hek.”

Vaykor Hek.

Glorious Inferno.

“There’s only one right now, but I want you to have it, Tenno,” Cressa Tal continued. “I know you’ll put it to good use. This war’s chewin’ up the weak and defenseless, and we’re the only ones standing in the way.”

Nezha lowered the shotgun to waist-height, switching his attention to the Grineer commander. She did not flinch, holding his sightless gaze without fear. Nezha felt his throat began to tighten again, strangling the emotions trying to clamber out of his chest. The shotgun was a tool of death, and yet, something about it was fundamentally different than the bulbous, greasy instruments of suffering usually made by the Grineer. The Vaykor had been created for a new purpose, a new creed.

Over Cressa Tal’s shoulder, Clem had grown bored with the gun show and was fussing with his plant. There were brown patches on his ungloved hands, the same deep, festering rot beginning to encircle Cressa’s roguish grin. It would be years before the Decay affected more than just skin cells, but even so, these Grineer – born with a glitch that allowed them to disobey – who were
capable of self-sacrifice, of kindness, mercy and humor, were doomed to a host of degenerative diseases that would ultimately take their life. The cloning process was failing; the original blanks had been flawed, artisanally crafted to be obedient and dull-witted, sterile laborers robbed of the right to procreate life. Struggle as they might, they could never escape the yoke the Orokin had tightened around their necks, any more than the Tenno could escape theirs.

Nezha moved the shotgun over his shoulder, the magnetic nodes embedded in his back taking over and clamping the weapon to his back. He pressed his palms together and bowed deeply at the waist.

“Thank you,” he said.

Cressa Tal smiled at him, the dingy, overhead lighting reflecting in her good eye. Somehow, her gaze seemed inexplicably warmer. “You can thank me by fetching some more of that rubedo,” she said. “I’ve got an operative that won’t say no to your help, if you’re still offering it.”

Clem sprinkled his flowers with water, releasing their milky, indolic scent into the air. Nezha let it wash the bitterness from his heart. Maybe they couldn’t escape the yoke, but with enough spit and hope, they sure as hell could elope with the plow.

“Give me the coordinates,” said Nezha.

Clem poked him in the thigh with the maprico bars, offering him a little snack for the road.
Director Harr Igan hated space travel.

He’d never been able to stomach that moment when the rail churned to life, when the electromagnetic fields descended over the skin of the ship and sent them hurtling into the black, magnitudes faster than the speed of light. Frozen acceleration, elongated into infinity.
Harr’s stomach always reached his destination lightyears ahead of him. At best it meant an appalling bout of nausea. At worst, it meant vomiting his guts onto the deck. None of Harr’s colleagues experienced rail sickness to such an extent; his own daughter was blissfully unaffected by it and often made four or five jumps a day, depending on her calendar. Harr couldn’t even imagine it. He preferred using the slower wyrm drives whenever possible, even if it meant adding extra hours to his schedule – but an extra two weeks? That kind of delay would have been as ridiculous as it was unacceptable, and so he’d reluctantly given his pilot leave to take them through the Venustus Rail.

Even now, in his twilight years, he’d never quite gotten over how big they were.

A full 13 kilometers from end to end, the Orokin-era construction hung in space like a golden sword, unaffected by solar winds or gravity, or even the passage of time. The forma electroplated onto its hull was as deep and glossy as the day it’d been forged. A handful of Stanchion-class cruisers and rail tractors were clustered nearby, but none were queued to jump. The solar rail was wide open. Harr took a deep breath, mentally preparing himself. At the very least, travel via the Orokin rails was smoother and less discomforting than the jagged pop he experienced when using the smaller, less efficient models built by the Corpus or – Profit forbid – the chugging scrapyards banged together by the Grineer.

In any case, the matter was an academic one. Orokin technology had been studied, dissected and lusted after for generations, but none of the newer constructions could match the Golden Rails for speed and distance, regardless of how many billions of credits the Company poured into them on a yearly basis. Whatever sorcerous technology gave them their immense power, it had died with the Orokin.

“Ready, sir?”

“Spare me the stupid questions, Rhys.”

The pale tongues of energy leaping between the rail’s arms began to glow, building up a charge. Gyros started to clock, dynamos began to spin; an ayatan sculpture in everything but name and function, monuments to an empire of dead immortals. Harr planted himself in his chair and clutched at his armrests. He didn’t close his eyes. Closing them always made it worse. A moment later, the yacht surged forward on a cosmic jet of light, the rail producing more energy in a single moment than the sun did in a day.

Harr felt that familiar moment of weightlessness, of his brain floating inside his skull, of the atoms in his fingertips slowly drifting apart. As always, his anxiety did nothing to help the rising discomfort. He’d heard stories of overclocked, poorly maintained rail tractors. He’d even witnessed the grisly results for himself on one occasion. Musculoskeletal damage. Cerebral hypoxia. Retinal hemorrhaging. Acceleration trauma was a killer, and it could happen aboard even the most luxurious of pleasure barges. Harr clamped his back teeth against the emerging nausea, cursing the Board, the solar rails, and that doddering old fool Alad V most of all. He’d had to cancel a shochu tasting and two second quarter audits – one with the head of Anyo Corporation – to make this trip.

His soft fingers tightened on his armrests-

-and just like that, the blaze of light dropped away as though it’d never been there at all. The jolt of deceleration was very slight, but it was still more than enough to hurl Harr’s stomach up to shake hands with his tonsils. He swallowed it back down with a mouthful of watery bile.

A few hundreds kilometers ahead of his yacht, Jupiter loomed huge, its surface banded with clouds and eternal, whirling storms. Here the sun was pale and dim. Harr could see it at the very edge of
his viewscreen, barely larger than a marble. He forced his fingers to unclench, breathing to calm the dangerous squeeze in the back of his throat. The scopolamine patch he’d slapped behind his ear was starting to itch. Harr gave it a quick scratch, then forced himself to leave it be. Long experience had taught him that peeling it off so soon after a jump, let alone with another looming on the horizon, was never a good idea.

“Bring us around to Valefor – and do it slowly,” he said sourly. “I need a minute.”

“Should I radio ahead?”

“Don’t bother. The imbecile knows we’re coming.”

Of Jupiter’s seventy nine moons, only four were large enough to be spherical, and of those Europa was by the far the smallest, a desolate ball of water-ice and patchy brown silicate. Harr took a cautious sip of water as they descended through the moon’s thin atmosphere. Below them, the glacial plains and pressure ridges were the color of almond marzipan basking under a cold sunset. Here the glaciers were dotted with the shattered wreckage of an Obelisk cruiser, an embarrassing testament to several billion credits in lost equipment and personnel. Salvage operations had been in full swing for months, but so far the Company had only recouped a quarter of the loss, with returns decreasing every day. In addition to the fragmented infrastructure, seared electronics and difficult surface conditions, outgoing salaries were taking a hefty bite out of their profit margins. Harr made a mental note to speak with the Board about using labor out of Fortuna, especially those about to go into repo. More than likely, they’d take an 82% wage decrease in return for a postponement – maybe 90%, if they were smart.

“Personal Log: remember Fortuna at next week’s meeting.”

They flew over the broken Obelisk and a handful of Grineer galleons partially buried beneath the snow. Eventually they, too, would be picked apart for resale, but for now the vomit-yellow carapaces lay untouched, the husks of giant beetles that’d crawled into the wastes to die. In moments they were no longer visible. Darkness closed in around the yacht as they passed Europa’s terminator and flew into the deep black of night. Harr watched the temperature gauges fall even lower.

“Balmy night,” Rhys commented.

The kid’s idea of “balmy” was a deadly -170 degrees centigrade. Harr suppressed a snort. He was feeling marginally better now, and not a moment too soon. He took another, larger sip of water and recapped the bottle. He couldn’t imagine why Alad had sequestered himself in the absolute middle of nowhere, but the Valefor Mare was where the Board had told him to go. Looking out into the darkness, Harr hoped he hadn’t been too flippant when he’d said that Alad was expecting them. The man was twitchy enough in broad daylight and being shot down by a pack of trigger-happy ambulas’ was not as remote a possibility as Harr would have liked.

“Get on the comms and find out where we’re supposed to land,” he said.

Rhys flashed him a sly look. “Change your mind?”

“Just do it, Rhys. I don’t pay you to be a smartass.”

Technically he didn’t pay the kid at all. While he himself was unmodded, Rhys was still paying off the debt his father had accrued working out of Proteus Orbital Mining Company: zero-G hazmat upgrades, class-5 hydraulics. The full package. Harr didn’t know if the old man had been brain-shelved or not, nor did he particularly care. Rhys was a solid pilot and a semi-decent valet. The boy
would work it off eventually – if he could lean to keep his mouth shut.

The comms chimed and a message began scrolling by. On a coded channel, no less.

“They’re telling us to break off and turn around,” said Ryhs.

*Nice try, Alad.*

“And you can tell them you’re just going to fly around in circles into they give us a landing coordinate,” Harr told him shortly, folding his arms. There’d been ample opportunities for Alad to schedule his calendar, and Harr was utterly out of patience with him.

Ryhs forwarded the message. Less than fifteen seconds later, he got a response – far quicker than Harr had anticipated, having expected Alad to leave him out to dry for as long as the prick thought he could get away with. Ryhs squinted at the line of code, then shrugged. “Better suit up, sir,” he said, dimming the yacht’s lights. “You’re going to be walking a bit.”

After a few minutes of careful maneuvering, Rhys set the craft down in a patch of snow. Standing in the yacht’s small airlock, Harr lowered the boxy helmet over his head and felt it pressurize, adding the universe and everything in it to his list of profanities.

*“Need any help?”* Rhys asked him over the comm.

“Boy, I’ve been putting these suits on longer than you’ve even been alive,” Harr spat, double-checking the huge metal cuffs. The metallic taste of recycled air had already begun to coat his tongue. “Open the damn door.”

*“Remember, they said to follow the beacons.”*

The hatch popped open with a rush of displaced air, and Harr stepped out into the darkness of the second moon. There was no wind, no weather, only the icy dark of oblivion. Snow and methane ice crunched beneath the EVA-suit’s chunky, ill-fitting boots. Harr furiously keyed the helmet’s enhanced visual suite and watched as more beacons flickered to life, their glow invisible to the naked eye – and nearly everything else, too. He tracked them up the ridge until they disappeared.

Murder would be too good for Alad V, he decided.

Slow torture would be far better.

Stepping carefully, Harr set out along the path. Jupiter’s largest moon, Ganymede, was just coming up on the horizon, bathing the ground in ashen grey light. There were no clouds in the sky. Europa’s atmosphere was too minimal to support them and the vacuum of space seemed to hug unusually close as a result, the brutal cold turning the stars into crystalline daggers. Harr could already feel the blistering temperature against the skin of his suit. Life support was keeping it at bay, but only for a short time. A few hours, at most. Harr unconsciously walked a little faster.

The jumbled ridge climbed several meters, a fresh layer of powder disguising the deadly slick of ice just inches below. Harr stumbled twice before finally reaching the dark, folded opening of a cave. Five meters inside he found a heavy blast door. It was obviously of Grineer design, looking as though it’d been pried from the belly of a galleon and fitted into the passageway with a sloppy combination of solder and brute force. Before Harr could dwell on the oddity, however, the hatch burst open. Two military spooks and a handful of MOAs were waiting for him.

“This way,” the larger one told him shortly.
Harr was vaguely certain he knew the man, but couldn’t put a name to that thin, furrowed expression.

Beyond the door was a pressurized habitation bubble and Harr was urged to remove his helmet and EVA-suit before proceeding deeper inside. The air around him was as tepid as bathwater. Survivable, but not entirely comfortable. Harr shivered as he raked stayed wisps of hair back into his cowl. Beyond the grungy, prefab walls, the icy cold of Europa pressed in.

“I’ve come to speak with Alad V on behalf of the Board,” he stated crisply.

“So I’ve heard.”

The words was harsh and gravely, shimmering with the feedback of a replaced larynx. Harr remembered the voice better than the face, but still couldn’t recall his name. Either way, he didn’t like the man’s tone, or his utter lack of deference towards his betters. He held his tongue, however, leery of the potential for further delay. He wanted to rake Alad over the coals and be off this icy little pucker of a moon.

They descended into the warren of passageways. Everywhere was a combination of Grineer salvage and Corpus technology, the latter looking as though it’d been welded overtop in order to make the former functional. The gelid air tasted recycled. The scrubbers needed changed two weeks ago. Harr’s boots scuffed on length of plastic tarpaulin. Half the facility looks as though it’d been prepped for surgery. Thankfully his eyes had already adjusted to Europa’s gloom, otherwise he might have been feeling around like a blind man. The lights had been set to red, crimson as burning blood.

Harr was lead through several narrow, pressurized doorways into a long room cramped to capacity with banks of monitoring equipment and technicians. There was barely enough room to turn around, let alone work. Less than two meters ahead, his escort laid his hand on someone’s shoulder. The other man swiveled quickly; he’d been so engrossed in whatever he’d been doing, the gesture seemed to have startled him.

“Director Igan, sir.”

The smaller man’s lip curled. “I told the Board this little, uh, welfare check could wait!” His voice was a duality of contradictions, the syllables oddly enunciated, modulating between irritably high-pitched and unusually bass, like electricity thrumming through a downed wire. He turned furiously in Harr’s direction. “Do you have any idea what you could have ruined by coming here? Why tonight of all nights?!”

Harr affixed a polite look to his face. “You know it wasn’t my decision,” he answered in an equitable tone. “You’ve been putting the Board off for months. Half a million credits in men and resources? They’re very interested in where your funding is going, Alad.”

“None of their business, that’s where,” said Alad V tartly. Beneath the heavy coat of interlocking blue tiles, he was stooped and frail, and it took him a moment to dodder into Harr’s personal space. Harr resisted the urge to lean away from the viscous cloud of scent that clung to Alad’s skin; warm vinyl and white, florid poison. The back of Harr’s throat watered with fresh nausea.

“I’m on the cusp of a new venture here,” Alad continued loudly. “The last thing I need is you mucking up months of work! You’ve seen enough to satisfy the rest of the Board, yes? Go on now – shoo! I’m very busy at the moment!” He made a nervous fluttering motion with his hands.

As if it was going to be that easy.
“So far I haven’t seen anything except an abundance of plastic sheeting,” Harr countered.

“A domicile of convenience,” said Alad, waving him off. He wasn’t even looking at Harr, much to the Director’s private annoyance, and kept glancing at the monitor feeds, absently tugging and wringing his fingers.

“I take it the Grineer stench doesn’t bother you then?” Harr asked him. “No, I supposed it wouldn’t, considering your line of work. But surely there are better accommodations elsewhere in the system – for whatever it is you’re doing down here, exactly…”

Harr trailed off deliberately, knowing Alad was smart enough to fill in the blanks. Instead the vexing sonuvabitch actually chuckled at him.

“Mmmm, yes… you’d like to know, wouldn’t you, Director?”

Well, at least he was paying attention now.

“I would, actually,” said Harr firmly. “And since I’ve flown all the way out here, maybe you’d be willing to indulge me? You know the Board’s getting impatient with all the secrecy. I assume you’ve made a good deal of progress in this venture? Shame for you to have come so far, only to lose their backing now.”

Alad’s pale eyes flashed. “Well, then… I wouldn’t want to seem an ungracious host,” he said, clasping his hands together with a moist, rubbery little sound. “May I offer you a cup of kahve? You must be parched after traveling out here. I’m certain you skipped breakfast, too. Wouldn’t want any, hm, unfortunate accidents.”

Harr smiled a cold, plastic smile. “No, thank you.”

Alad almost smirked at him. Almost, but not quite. He gestured magnanimously at the computers. “Ah, well,” he said softly. “In any case, if it’s progress you want, Director, I’ve got something you might find interesting. Have a look at this.”

He tapped the console and a carousel of images resolved between them. Harr resigned himself to a long evening. He’d shared the Board with Alad long enough to know the man was only acquiescing to demands because he’d been boxed into a corner. Now that he was there, however, Harr expected he’d have to put up with Alad’s usual dog-and-pony show, which didn’t bode well for the headache starting to eat through his temples. For a moment, he sorely regretted declining that kahve. He took a step forward.

“And what am I looking at?” he asked.

“A demonstration of my, hm, ‘line of work’.”

Dog-and-pony show it was, then. Harr leaned closer to examine the jumble of images, many of them culled from grainy security camera footage. There were also several tables of sensor data; forma, rubidium, null energy emissions – things Harr didn’t understand or couldn’t make use of. He focused on the images instead. It was a grisly presentation, and much of it didn’t make sense. He saw Grineer piked on glowing shafts of light and Corpus taxmen crushed into mutilated tangles of bone and twisted, bloody vinyl, as if a black hole had simply opened inside them.

“Wonderful, isn’t it,” Alad chortled, “how efficiently they kill?”

“They?”
Harr’s voice was steady, much to his relief, but the annoyance he’d been hoping to inject fell utterly flat. Alad lazily rotated the images by way of an answer, one side of his mouth lifted into a smirk. This time the hologram showed a collection of beings unlike anything Harr had ever seen before. Each bore the opulence of Orokin forma, of technology not so much built, as grown.

Harr carefully, oh, so carefully, kept the shock from reaching his face. There’d been rumors of late, of the hollow soldiers in twisted frames, so beautiful that even the stars wept, but to be honest, he hadn’t given them much credence. It wasn’t as if such things concerned him, anyway. He was the head of Solaris Industrial Management, herding the wretched droves of rig jockeys and laborers to where they’d be of the most use. His sphere of influence did not include resurrected Orokin bogeymen.

Speaking of which, one stood at least seven feet tall, shoulders like a tank, arms and legs like ancient trees. In his fist, he held the pulverized remains of a Grineer skull. Another walked on rivers of lazuline flame. A third stood in a field of corpses, the air around her thick with toxins. Her victims had not died well, pierced by worming, questing vines that’d burrowed through their flesh and bloomed from the pulpy ruin of their eyes, each tendril crowned by a flower dripping with deadly golden nectar. Harr fought his rising bile, aware that Alad was observing him through the hologram, watching him with the same colorless, glinting eyes that’d so methodically dissected the carnage, jotting his disturbing observations down in the margins.

Harr tried to gather his wits for a comeback.

“Are these-”

“Real?” Alad cut in smoothly. “Or were you going to ask if they’re recent? I assure you they are. Did you forget to keep your ear to the ground – or did you simply prefer to, hmm, not notice? I’ve identified four of the Betrayers so far, including the little, ah, blossom that’s drawn your eye. She’s quite the spectacle, isn’t she?”

Alad gave the footage a long look. “They’ve been sighted all across the System,” he continued. “Their ‘loyalties’, shall we say, are questionable at best. They seem to attack indiscriminately regardless of faction, but one thing’s for certain.”

He brought up a chart showing the various planets and their nodes. Many were blinking a deep, dangerous crimson.

“Ara, Mars. Phobos. Europa,” said Alad, pointing to each one in turn. “These, ah- what were they called? – “Tenno”, yes, are drawn by strife and conflict. It seems that even Orokin blood was not enough to sate their palettes.”

He said it in a tone of amusement, as if the concept were some fascinating curio. Harr moistened his lips with his tongue. Beneath his cowl, his skin suddenly felt too small for his scalp. Hundreds of questions tumbled through his head, but he could not voice them, would not give Alad the satisfaction of knowing he’d been caught off-guard. He took a surreptitious look around the room, at the banks of monitors and camera feeds.

“Is that what you’re doing? Monitoring their activities?” Harr asked in a would-be casual tone.

One of the computers suddenly began emitting the sharp, repetitive tone of an alarm. Several of Alad’s technicians, who’d otherwise been studiously ignoring the conversation going on around them, abruptly sprang to life, wheeling chairs into stations and pulling up sensor feeds, fluttering the loose papers tacked to the walls. Alad whirled through the hologram, scattering pixels like luminescent confetti.
“Is it her?” he demanded excitedly. “Keyz, is it her?!”

At some point, Harr’s impertinent minder had slid into one of the chairs and put on a headset. Harr remembered him now: Garmen Keyz, belligerent son of salvage operator Tudk Keyz, ex-taxman and former security guard, infamous throughout the Corpus for never holding the same position for more than a year.

“Unknown, sir,” he responded. “We’re picking up activity in sector 4.”

A three-dimensional map blinked to life on the monitor, showing a craggy, twisting warren of what Harr assumed to be underground tunnels. A red dot briefly flashed into existence, then disappeared. A moment later, it appeared further down the passageway.

“Target’s moving,” Keyz confirmed. “We’re reading positive for Void energy.”

Alad elatedly clapped the back of the man’s chair as Keyz opened up the comms. “Attention all units: Target 1 has just entered Sector 4, moving west through Sectors 5 and 6. Power up all systems on my mark… 3… 2… 1… Mark.”

At least half of the surrounding monitors switched views. There were twelve in all, each displaying a shaky helmet cam and heart-rate monitor. Harr watched a team of men in silver EVA-suits go through an obvious systems check, all of them hefting Deras and blocky weapons painted in danger yellow. Harr recognized them for what they were. Spark shots, as they were colloquially known, were capable of delivering over two thousand amps via propelled needles. He’d seen men use them on the Orb Vallis for subduing the massive brindled kubrodons that roamed that snowy landscape.

“Comms check,” said a gruff voice, heavily modulated by his helmet vocoder.

“Comms show green,” Keyz replied, leaning past Alad to toggle something on the control board. A dozen cold, blue triangles appeared on the map, each of them tagged with a serial number. “Descend to the lower levels. Target’s still moving, heading towards the number 2 junction.”

Harr felt the tension in the air like a hand across the back of his neck.

This wasn’t a sudden, panicked scramble; these men had been waiting.

Alad had been waiting.

“What’s all this?” Harr asked tightly.

“This? This is history,” said Alad. “Come, come!”

He beckoned to Harr without looking at him, his reedy tenor grating on the Director’s slowly fraying nerves. Harr tentatively took a step in.

“It’s taken us nearly two months to learn her patterns,” Alad breathed. He’d gone back to anxiously wringing his hands, making his lurid yellow gloves squeak constantly from the movement. “This, ah, this place—” he gestured at the rusted, peeling walls, “—was a mining hub for the Grineer, right up until our little visitor chased them off. Their tunnels penetrate several kilometers into the ice, right down to the ocean. She returns here every two weeks to collect nitain.”

Alad tracked the blinking dot as it descended deeper into the tunnels. His men were taking a more circumferential route, moving parallel to the Tenno’s path and descending at a much slower rate, using what looked like a network of elevators, stopes and winzes to make up the difference.
they attempting to cut the thing off, or simply shadowing it? At the bottom of the map, Europa’s dark, subterranean ocean beckoned to them both. Harr fought for something to say, but words had escaped him. He glanced at Alad out of the corner of his eye, saw the gleam of sweat on the man’s pasty forehead.

“Punch up three,” Alad whispered.

Keyz moved a toggle on the console, seemingly unperturbed by the moist exhalations on the back of his neck. One of the monitors switched over from a sensor feed to a grainy shot of an empty tunnel. The glacial walls looked perfectly smooth, almost slick to the touch, the ancient ice squeezed into fantastic shapes by the daily tug of Jupiter’s gravity. Harr was inexplicably reminded of Orokin coolant – if that viscous fluid could somehow have been rendered inert.

The silence began to stretch, broken only by the low, rhythmic beeping of the computers. Something moved at the edge of the camera and Alad leaned in, breathless with anticipation. In the pitch darkness of the moon’s interior, the camera saw only in shades of pastel, but that was more than enough to see it.

Undeniably feminine, with curvaceous thighs and a svelte, narrow waist. Alive, but not living. Humanoid, but not human. If anything, it was a relic of an era long snuffed from existence. How could something so flawless, so beautiful even exist? And how much would it be worth, Harr wondered? A billion credits? Two billion? He tried to wet his lips with his tongue, but it was like rasping them with sandpaper. Beside him, Alad was scribbling frantically into a data HUD, so fast the hologram could barely keep up.

The monitors fuzzed, momentarily dissolving into static.

Alad glanced at them sharply. “What’s this interference?” he demanded.

“Ion storms from Ganymede. Correcting the problem now, sir,” said Keyz.

The Tenno disappeared from the camera, but not before Harr noticed that she’d brought a small hoverlift with several stout, cylindrical containers rattling around on top. “You said it comes to harvest nitain?” he managed, trying to regain some traction.

Alad nodded distractedly. He tapped Keyz with the back of his hand.

“Bring up everything at the harvest site,” he said.

The monitors switched over to multiple views of to an underground grotto filled with abandoned machinery. Everything shimmered with a layer of crystalline ice, safety rails dripping with icicles as thick around as Harr’s wrist. Two thousand feet beneath the surface, and the Grineer had yet to reach the moon’s rocky crust. At the far end of the cavern lay Europa’s subsurface ocean, a dark, slushy mix of liquid hydrogen and salt water. There was no light in that deep place and against the starkness of the ice, the ocean itself was pure black, depthless as the fathomless dark that lay between the stars.

The Tenno emerged from the east side of the chamber, pushing the hoverlift ahead of her. She wasn’t in a hurry. That much was readily apparent. She moved with an easy, deadly grace, full hips swaying, crossing her tiny feet in front of her with every step. Harr leaned in to get a better look. No images of the Betrayers existed; even hard evidence of their existence was scare, with everything but their legend having faded from living memory. Harr had expected them to be larger, fiercer, something spawned from the hellish nightmares his daughter had awoken from as a child, not this exquisite doll.
“Overwatch, please confirm: sensors show the target has reached the harvest zone,” the comms squelched. Harr took a deep breath through his nose and tried to keep his heart rate down. The sudden noise hadn’t startled him. Definitely not.

“Overwatch confirms,” Keyz replied. He checked the three-dimensional grid on the monitor, where the dozen blinking triangles were about to coverage on the cavern. “Capture Team, slow your progress. Target has yet to enter the water.”

“Capture?” Harr whispered. “Are you out of your mind? It’s a Tenno!”

Alad gave him a lurid smile. “I know what the word means, Director.” He bent his face towards Harr, his eyes maddeningly intent and the sharp, sour sting of menthol on his breath. “I also know of devices with the power to transform a blast furnace into a tundra, to bring dead species back from extinction! Think of what the Tenno can- can give us: a new era of technology! No more picking at the scraps like dogs. No- no more wasting profits trying to piece together broken remnants!”

Harr desperately wanted to lean back, regretting ever having gotten this close.

“The Tenno- these, ah, these Warframes were the pinnacle of Orokin technology, a legacy so powerful it brought them to their knees! I’ve waited over a year for this moment and I’m not going to miss the chance!”

Harr regarded him with a kind of mute horror as Alad switched his attention back to the monitors. The Tenno had stopped at the edge of the ocean. Derricks and heavy winches stood mutely in the darkness, creating a tangled forest of metal and thick, blue-gray ice. The wharf, if Harr could still call it that, had been partially reclaimed by the water and much of the machinery stood in Europa’s shallow tide. The Tenno stopped at the water’s edge and lifted both arms over her head, lithe as a dancer, her body arcing away from them as she stretched.

Harr felt an uneasy pang in his stomach. The motion was so utterly, unbearably human – but the Tenno couldn’t be something so mundane, could they? Over the years there had been much speculation that the Betrayers were nothing living at all, but rather an enclave of thinking machines little different from the Sentients. Harr wondered which it was, watching as the Tenno bent at the waist and lifted several canisters from the hoverlift. Empty nitain capsules, just as Alad had said.

“What could it possibly want with those?” Harr demanded.

“The same thing we all want, I suspect,” Alad rasped. “Either they’re selling to anyone with enough, heh, stones to deal with them – or they’re manufacturing products of their own. And that isn’t good for anybody, now is it?”

Ignorant of being watched, the Tenno plunged into the icy waters and disappeared. Keyz touched his comm. “Target has just entered the water. Approximately t-minus five minutes until reemergence,” he announced. “Safeties off. Offensive formation Rita.”

Harr tried not to imagine the Tenno stroking through the icy, Stygian waters, her supple body whipping back and forth like some exotic servofish. Nitain was farmed at the mouth of hydrothermal vents, where blind tubeworms and pale, eyeless crabs lived in utter darkness, under pressures that would crush an armored vault. Nitain mining had to be done via remote, typically with the aid of robotic proxies and several kilometers of fiber optic cabling, yet the Tenno intended to swim down there like an Ostron free-diving for pearls? Harr’s stomach churned, unable to break that kind of power into a number he could quantify.
In the upper left of the monitors, Alad’s capture team swept into the grotto, fanning out into a loose semi-circle. Harr barked a laugh. “You expect to take that thing unawares standing right in front of her?” he jeered.

Alad flicked him a coy, sidelong little glance.

His men shimmered out of existence.

Harr felt his face redden in anger. Alad was a member of the Board, same as him, but even so, he hadn’t expected the man to have that kind of clout. Even one of those cloaking devices cost a small fortune.

“I’m certain the Betrayers see in only two spectrums of light: visible and infrared,” Alad explained smugly. “I’ve studied security footage of a Tenno penetrating several, ah, data vaults inside one of our manufacturing plants. No alarms were tripped. Nobody even knew it was there until long after the fact. Those vaults were guarded by automated laser grids – invisible to the naked eye, but quite, ah, distinct, yes, when viewed in infrared.”

Harr directed a pointed look at Alad’s team, specifically their shoulder-mounted searchlights.

“Ultraviolet light,” said Alad simply. “Invisible to the Betrayer.”

“So you think,” Harr told him flatly, hoping he sounded unimpressed.

“So I know,” Alad replied. That coy little smile was back again. “Each camera is equipped with an ultraviolet emitter, and despite two months of surveillance, the Betrayer has remained blissfully unaware of them. Unlike the infrared cameras employed by those Grineer dogs.”

“Sir,” Keyz warned urgently.

The Tenno had emerged from the water, rivulets of waters cascading down her body and dripping from the twin tails of her helmet. Every segment of her was trimmed in Orokin forma; with her delicate, slippered feet and softly glowing eyes, she looked more suited to one of Ki’Teer’s extravagant parties.

The Betrayer carefully deposited her cargo onto the hoverlift, the phosphorescence of nitain visible through the canister’s small round portholes. She squatted down to reattach the webbing holding her prizes in place. Out of the corner of his eye, Harr saw something move on another monitor. Snow crunched. A cascade of ice slithered from a low-hanging pipe.

The Tenno’s head snapped around, golden dangles swaying with the movement. In the darkness, her eyes glowed like open pits. A moment passed, then another. The Betrayer tilted her head to the side, peering into the empty darkness. Searching, or perhaps sensing.

Alad’s hands knotted together, his gloves pulled tight with the strain.

The Tenno swiveled on the balls of her feet, squatting with one elbow propped casually on her knee. Her head rotated slowly, sweeping the hub from right to left, then back again. The only other thing that moved was the frosted purple fingers of her right hand, absently tapping a rhythm on the surface of the nitain canister. Harr tried to measure the distance, but found he’d completely lost track of the team. They could have advanced by inches or meters. He tried desperately to remember what that grimy conservationist had said regarding the operational range of a spark shot. Three, maybe four meters?

The Tenno’s eyes flashed a pale blue, sweeping from left to right, then back to deep amethyst.
Two seconds later, it happened again.

Still the Betrayer didn’t move.

Orange light blazed in the Tenno’s eyes and for a brief moment, Harr thought he saw a mask of pixelated trapezoids, searing through the darkness like fire. The Betrayer gave a sharp twitch, canting her upper body away from them. She rose from her crouch and stood, leaning into a hip and folding her arms across her sizable chest.

Laughter splintered through the grotto, audible even over the monitors. Gooseflesh raced over Harr’s scalp and down his back in a gush of cold sweat. It was no ordinary laughter, the sound doubling and tripling, echoing in the darkness as though many forms were laughing at once, each slightly out of sync with one another, so that the whole was jagged and discordant, like a tumble of crystalline shards.

Harr seized Alad’s frail shoulder. “She sees them, Alad! Get them out. GET THEM OUT!”

The Betrayer arched both arms over her head, fingers leaving a comet trail of purple sparks. Suddenly, she wasn’t altogether there, as though the penumbra of an eclipse had simply slid over her. Still there, but blurry now, part of the deep shadows that surrounded her. She laughed again and something formed between the shadow of her hands, something prismatic and dazzling. She hurled it ahead of her like a meteor, so bright Harr thought it would burn even the ice itself, radial spikes of light stabbing in all directions. A moment later, it exploded.

Alad threw both hands up in front of his eyes. For a few seconds, the sudden brilliance and twinkling reflections blinded them all, the comms lit up with a chorus of startled oaths. Harr was the first to blink the sting out of his eyes. The Betrayer was gone, but a frantic search of the monitors revealed movement near the roof of the cavern. The Tenno had jumped nearly ten meters into the air, tossing her legs up and over her head. The motion was difficult for Harr to see, like tracking a mote at the corner of his vision. His eyes just didn’t want to look.

Arching her body, the Tenno landed on her feet with a sound like breaking glass. Colors burst and splintered, and suddenly there were five Betrayers were once there had been only one. Moving together, each a mirror image of the other, the deadly carousel of images pinwheeled to the side and opened fire with guns that simply hadn’t been there before. Screams filled the cavern. Two of Alad’s men dropped, their cloaks sputtering out of existence as dozens of heavy-bore flechettes tore through their equipment. The quintuplet pinwheeled again, this time to the left. Another soldier fell down dead, his helmet cam reeling in a fountain of blood. The shrill tones of flatlines stabbed through the monitor room.

“Open fire!”

Somewhere deep in the bowels of the moon, someone had recovered enough wits to realize they were under attack. Rifle fire seared the air between Alad’s men and the Tenno, passing through most of the illusions without harm.

“No!” Alad screeched. “I said I want her alive!”

It was doubtful any of the men heard him, or even cared if they did. Exotic gunfire chattered again; hard and metallic sharp, letting fly another barrage of bolts. Harr watched as the ultraviolet lights mounted to each man’s shoulder – the ones the Betrayer shouldn’t have been able to see – exploded in a rain of shrapnel. Laughter crackled through the frozen air as the Tenno pirouetted away into the dark.
Alad’s men bunched into a circle. Something gold flickered on the other side of grotto. One of the men opened fire at it, splintering the ancient stalagmite into dust. The golden thing darted away, its image refracting oddly, a kaleidoscope of illusions flickering between translucent planes of ice. Harr was inexplicably reminded of a hall of mirrors. He anxiously dug his fingers into the cold, segmented tiles of Alad’s coat. The older man viciously shrugged him off, seizing a spare comm unit from the console.

“She’s beneath the catwalk! Right there!” he shouted, watching the pulsing red dot on the map.

“Where? Dammit, I can’t see her! Give me a coordinate!”

Someone pointed his spark shot in the direction of the derricks and squeezed the trigger, launching both prongs and their insulated copper wires. The passed through the mirage without harm and stuck in the side of a piece of machinery. Sparks exploded from the contact point as hundreds of amps of electricity throbbed through the wires. In the sudden burst of light, Harr saw the Betrayer launch out of the shadows, embers dancing on her chitinous hide, and slam both feet into the man’s chest, throwing him back with the force of speeding coil drive. He was shot dead before his corpse had even hit the floor, a trio of sharpened bolts – no longer than the span of Harr’s palm – embedded the middle of his chest, hitting him such force that his body was carried into the wall and pinned there like a butterfly to a collection card.

Dera fire lit up the darkness as another man went full auto, chipping ice from the derelict machinery as the Betrayed tucked her knees and threw herself into a perfectly controlled slide. The man tried to turn – only to catch the needles of spark shot directly in the back, his body convulsing as the deadly amperage fried his nerves to a crisp. His inadvertent killer frantically tried to disengage, snapping the filaments trailing from the weapon and pumping it for another shot, but not fast enough. On tiptoe, the Tenno twirled herself upright behind him and pressed both tiny, gun-wielding hands to either side of his helmet. A quick wrench – the wet, fibrous crunch of twisted bone clearly audible over the comms – and suddenly the only thing keeping the man’s head from sitting backwards on his shoulders was the crooked helmet itself, leaking air from a pressure breach.

Harr reeled away, one hand against his stomach, and vomited onto the floor, his guts heaving and twisting to expel a sad mixture of water and thin, ropy strings of bile. The spatter was a distant thing, submerged under the chatter of gunfire and breaking ice. Another monitor flatlined, then another. And another. Harr balled his hand into a fist and shoved it into his mouth, unable to keep from lifting his eyes back to the carnage.

The Tenno darted forward, shooting another man through the narrow slit of his helmet, then pivoting to sweep the legs out from beneath a second. The motion was blindingly fast, and so powerful the man actually twirled midair before she brought her heel down across the small of his back, driving him face first into the snow. His helmet cam whirled drunkenly, then showed a jagged spiderweb of gore dappled glass. The comms picked up one last wretched, bloody gasp – then all was silent.

Dead. They’re all dead, thought Harr hysterically.

The Tenno rose from her partial crouch, effortlessly poised on one leg, the other held so that the sole of her foot hovered against her inner thigh. A gilded heron standing in a marsh of bloody snow. Her head turned slowly in Harr’s direction, eyes gleaming, and the Director let out a ragged sort of whimper – as if somehow that terrible, elegant thing could see him, as if she was now pondering how to dispose of him next: blunt-force trauma or evisceration?

She twirled the weapons in her hands and laughed, terrible and crystalline, the fool who fiddled on
the rooftop as the Orokin empire burned. Panic surged in Harr’s throat again. *We- we should leave. It’s coming for us- for me next!* That’s what he wanted to say, but the words got lost in his throat and the only thing that emerged was a moan.

“Sweet profit, would you get ahold of yourself before you piss the floor next?” Alad snapped at him. Except for his dilated pupils, so huge that his iris was only a thin, grey ring nearly indistinguishable from the white of his eye, the older man was disturbingly apathetic towards the slaughter.

Laughter again.

Clapping one of those massive guns to her thigh, the Tenno blew them a kiss before lifting her remaining weapon and shooting the camera out in a blast of static. One by one, the monitors went dark. Alad made a disgusted face. “Well,” he deadpanned. “That went to shit in a hurry.”

He irritably flung the comms unit back onto the console. It skipped off and landed on the floor with a clatter, narrowly missing the puddle of vomit at Harr’s foot. The Director gave it a blank look, unable to grasp Alad’s cavalier outlook on the situation. Had he even been watching that—*that massacre*?

“Ensure all that data is uploaded off-site,” said Alad. “I want another team ready to go down into those tunnels. Whatever she was using for ammunition, I must, mmm, study it, yes. Make sure you watch the sensors for that ship of hers!” He was typing furiously into his codex, adding to his notations.

He’d been watching, all right – with an intensity that was downright disturbing. Harr’s knees felt like jelly. He thought he might add a little more to that puddle, if there’d been anything left in his stomach to give. The noises around him seemed far away, or at the bottom of a deep well. Half a million in credits and resources. That’s what he’d told Alad.

Suddenly it seemed too small a sum.

It was over forty-five minutes before Harr was allowed to make the trip back to his yacht. He stumbled into the airlock, leaving pieces of his EVA-suit on the floor as he made his way to the cabin. Ryhs hastily took his feet off the console, trying to hide a clove cigarette behind his back, the spicy-sweet stench of it heavy in the cabin. Harr didn’t bother to scold him, ordering the kid to take them off the moon and out of the system altogether. He’d been expecting Alad to be neck-deep in weapon’s development – something akin to Glast’s animo project, something he was desperate to keep from the Board until all the patents were secured. But this?

He didn’t know what madness turned the cogs in Alad’s head, but if he could capture even one of the Betrayers, the man’s influence and financial clout would outstrip the other members of the Board by more than half! But that wasn’t the worst of it. The worst was the images that had followed Harr into the plush luxury of his yacht, the sounds he kept hearing over the finely-tuned pulse of the engines. Again and again and again.

He’d believed in the Tenno, but he’d never thought to believe in their resurrection. To him, to the galaxy at large, they’d been specters relegated to the murk of a distant past. He shouldn’t have been surprised, though. Species long since thought dead had reappeared on the Orb Vallis. If those stupid pobbers had managed to hibernate these long centuries, why not the Betrayers, themselves little more than stainless steel rats gnawing at the wealth of better society?

Harr clutched at the back of his neck, thinking of that dull and gory snap. She’d done it so easily – and why not? She and others like her had once hunted the Seven to their gleaming judicial halls
and opened their throats like common criminals, humiliating them in their last moments of life. They’d carved their way through ranks of Dax soldiers for the pleasure of that moment, men more perfect and better trained than Alad’s mercenaries could ever hope to be. The Corpus were not Orokin; even the long years had not seen them rise to the level of their predecessors.

What hope would there be for them when the Betrayers decided they wanted more than just nitain?

The yacht accelerated towards the Jovian Rail and disappeared into its glowing white heart. It was too much for Harr. By the time they’d reemerged at the edge of Mars, he’d fainted to the ground in a graceless heap, face-down in a glistening pool of bile.

There’d been something left in his stomach after all.

Chapter End Notes

-o- “A Fata Morgana is an unusual and complex form of superior mirage that is seen in the narrow band right above the horizon. It is the Italian name for the Arthurian sorceress Morgan le Fay, from a belief that these mirages, often seen in the Strait of Messina, were fairy castles in the air or false land created by her witchcraft to lure sailors to their deaths.”

-o- Alad’s moist, “poisonous” lotion smells like lily-of-the-valley.

When I was about 16 or 17, I had to make a trip with an elderly neighbor who wouldn’t shut up about her family’s individual medical problems, like they were the hottest topic since sliced bread. Trapped next to her for over two hours round trip, I was forced to suffer this riveting conversation in silence, abhorrently carsick and huffing the overwhelming stank of lily-of-the-valley oozing from her pores. That was years ago, and I still can’t smell it without getting nauseated.

Additionally, lily-of-the-valley is a pretty, but extremely toxic plant that can be fatal to anyone who consumes its flowers, leaves, berries or roots. Within hours, symptoms can include rash and hives, blurry vision, dilated pupils, vomiting, seizures, and abnormal heart rhythm – ultimately leading to death. It is especially poisonous to children.

-o- Our word “coffee” originates from the Italian caffè, which in turn comes from the original Turkish pronunciation of kahve or kahveh. Alad literally offered the Director a cup of coffee.

-o- Description of Saryn’s unfortunate victims comes from Rotaken’s gory, unsettlingly beautiful picture of her on Deviant Art.
https://www.deviantart.com/rotaken/art/Warframe-Saryn-412175287
Chapter Notes

**Spoilers**
Reaching Fortuna Standing "Old Mate" - MAJOR

See the end of the chapter for more notes
O Fortuna

Oh Fortune

Velut luna, statu variabilis

Like the moon, you are changeable

Semper crescis, aut decrescis

Ever waxing and waning

Nunc obdurate, et tunc curat

First oppresses and then soothes

Ludo mentis aciem
As fancy takes it

_Egestatem Potestatem_

Poverty and Power

_Dissolvit ut glaciem_

You melt them like ice.

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Case#DS3252019

24h 28m 24s

102,189c

Coolant Maintenance F-23

Married – 2 Dependents

Industrious and hardworking – Military history: Pluto

Discharged for the physical assault of a superior.

10 years hard labor Fortuna sumps.

Full-body repossession; debt passed to dependents.

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It was cold in the sumps.

It was _always_ cold in the sumps.

Not the bone-cracking cold of the Orb Vallis, that eternal tundra with its forests of diseased fungi, nor the empty chill of fathomless space. The cold that lurked in the bowels of Fortuna was the kind that slowly filled your respirators with moisture, until every intake was through a coolant-soaked
filter. The kind that crawled into every system and left your parts aching, flesh-bits slowly turning paler than the eyeless worms they sometimes pulled outta the coffers.

“I swear, mold’ll grow down the crack of me ass if I ain’t careful,” Kade announced.

It was a good joke. Should’ve been funny, really, but Deric couldn’t find the energy to laugh. He pressed against the back of the lift as the big man crammed in beside him, trying not to clock someone with the massive motherwrench he’d propped on one shoulder.

“Oh! Watch it there, mate,” Tyche complained, giving Kade a shove – and accidentally popping Deric in the nether regions as she did so. She apologized immediately, but there were no hard feelings. The lift was cramped; Deric was glad his twig-and-berries had been removed after his last upgrade, otherwise he’d have spent more than one descent moaning it out in the fetal position. Kade hooked his fingers into the scissor gate and shut it with a clang, fastening the decrepit clamp. He punched the button for Deck 23 and the lift gave a sharp jolt, descending on shabby cables.

They weren’t even halfway down and Deric could feel the condensation starting to gather on his rig. He took a deep, dry breath through his intakes – the last he was going to get until the end of his shift. Once, as he stood at the end of the hab trying to sneak a smoke, he’d thought the ice floes of Pluto had been cold. Now they sounded like a tropical vacation. It was all in his head, of course. Even with that icy, arcane sludge flowing through the pipes, the mercury in the sumps never dropped below the freezing mark, but it just felt colder somehow, even if he couldn’t sort out why.

“Did you ‘ere? Jed got back from one of them asteroids out in the Kuiper,” said Tyche. “Says the Corpus mercmercs done given up on the ships out there, says they’re crammed to the ceiling with zits! He said some other stuff, too, like voices comin’ over the comms – Cephalons rambling on about bein’ stranded out there in the black. Gives me the shivers just thinking about it!”

Kade leaned in, showing interest. Deric simply listened. He’d once stood at the edge of the known system, looked out into that endless, abyssal space, home to nothing save dwarf planets and drifting comets, and it’d frightened him. Not because he believed in the stories of monsters the size of asteroids plotting under the light of an alien star – even the Orokin weren’t that advanced. Sentient machines; could you actually imagine such a ridiculous thing? Even antique Cephalons, the ones left over from the before the Downfall, couldn’t actually think for themselves.

The few Ostrons that visited Fortuna brought tales to the contrary, but those folk, while certainly nice enough, were also a little too given to fancy, living on the fringe as they did. Cholesterol of the brain, maybe; all that fish oil couldn’t possibly be healthy.

No, Deric had hated the edge of space because it’d been so unbearably empty. An entire system full of life, of conflict and struggle and things striving for the right to exist, and then suddenly… nothing. Just nothing. Even with the latest wyrm drives, it would take years just to reach the nearest star, and there were no rails that went beyond the outer terminus. You’d be completely and utterly alone out there, with nothing but the sound of your own pleading voice for company. Deric reckoned even a Cephalon might go mad from that. Gave him the shivers, too, quite honestly. He tried not to make comparisons between it and his near future.

You are behind on your premium.

To avoid repossession and/or brain-shelving, please pay the amount listed above in full. Need quick credits to cover that sudden emergency or a stint of bad luck? The Order of Profit provides fast loans to the faithful. You work hard and deserve better! Our installment plans can keep you on your shift.
Deric shook himself, trying and failing not to think about the message that’d appeared in his inbox yesterday morning, read to him in that terrible, would-be pleasant voice. He’d found an old fashioned hard-copy pinned to the door of their hab, too, but he’d hastily peeled that one off before Merrit could discover it and arranged an early shift with his floor boss; better to get outta the hab instead of lying around feeling sorry for himself. At the very least, the mite bit of extra cred wouldn’t go to waste. Buy a little extra dinner for the kids some night, or fix that busted regulator that kept taking the furnace offline.

“You’re awful quiet today, mate. Somethin’ a matter?”

Kade was looking at him in concern. Deric flapped a hand at him. “Naw,” he lied. “Just trying to clear the cobwebs outta me wetware. Couldn’t sleep at all last night. Mucking brats an’ their skeg.”

That did the trick. Kade muttered something uncomplimentary and went back to his conversation with Tyche, who looked mighty tickled by the audience. Deric absently wondered how long it was going to take before she figured out that Kade was sweet on her. The big man was boisterous and loud, but not really one for long talks – especially if they didn’t concern the latest bout televised from the Index, that off-world gambling arena where outworlders and Corpus executives got all shined up in zodian jewelry and virmink coats, payin’ top cred to lounge in heated viewing boxes and watch folk from all over the system tear each other apart.

The lift reached the bottom of the shaft with a clang. Kade hauled the gate open and stepped out onto the dock, hoisting Tyche’s toolbelt despite her halfhearted protests as she jogged to keep up with his massive stride. Even at this early hour, the sumps were packed with rigs, filling the air with a deafening cacophony of sound. Someone had a plasma cutter going high in the ductworks, throwing a kavat-tail of sparks that jumped and sizzled on the damp floor. Kade made it halfway across the dock before he turned around.

“Ding!” he shouted. “Deck 23: ladies’ underpants, rusty pipes and assorted Orokin rubbish!”

Deric shuttered his optics a couple of times. “Right,” he answered slowly. “Right, o’ course. Sorry.”

The Memcor system failed that afternoon.

It was a decrepit piece of mucking crap, dating back some fifteen years to when the Corpus had first powered up the Orokin towers, inflating a pop-up tundra in the middle of a sulfuric firestorm. Even now it was hard to believe such a thing were possible. Deric had only a basic understanding of how the god-like technology worked – even the Corpus brainboxes didn’t have much more to add, just a bunch of technical jargon to make themselves look smart – but it was plenty enough to know why the entire deck was imploding: some blockhead had cranked a valve shut at the end of the system, forcing hundreds of cubic tons of fluid to suddenly change direction. The resulting
pressure wave had propagated through the system like a constipated shit, rattling the surge tanks and blowing every slip joint from there to Deck 30.

“Talk to me, Savuka!” Jericho’s nasally voice buzzed in his comm. “Pressures are red-lining again.”

“Muckit, I know! Give me five minutes!” Deric hollered back, his rig dripping with a combination of vaporized coolant and H2O. Crouched in a narrow trench deeper than he was tall, he barely had the room to extend both elbows, let alone wrestle the length of poly-pipe he was trying to reconnect. He swabbed one end with the gunky mixture of hot sealant, not caring about being neat. Gobs of it dripped into the icy water, swirling in psychedelic patterns as the endothermic reaction kicked in, driving its own little convection currents. Deric crammed the sealant dauber back into the jar, seized hold of the pipe, and heaved, trying to get the mucking thing to seat before the sealant dried.

Three scraped knuckles later, he’d crammed the pipe into its new collar. It was a tight fit; half an inch shorter or longer, and it never would’ve seated. Deric was good at his job. He’d adapted quickly to it after the fiasco on Pluto. Had to, otherwise the repo men would’ve come a helluva lot sooner. Deric slapped his comms, his hand a rainbow slurry of blood, purple primer and warm, blue sealant.

“It’s together,” he panted. “Give it a couple minutes, then turn it on slowly. You do anythin’ more than creep that valve open and it’s gonna blow.”

“Head down the junction box three. There’s another burst.”

The man signed off without further acknowledgment. Deric ground his teeth, then stopped when he reminded himself he didn’t have the creds to fix ‘em when they cracked. Jericho could be a real prick, not the sort that did it deliberately mind you, but the daft sort who lived so deep in the vacuum chamber of his own ass that he usually couldn’t tell when he was steppin’ on the folks beneath him. Nothing to be done about that, unfortunately. There were worse bosses in Fortuna after all, and come tomorrow, none of them were going to be a problem.

Deric hauled himself out of the trench, his posterior hydraulics giving a painful howl that tugged on the flesh-bits they were still attached to. It would a tab of zydrate for him tonight. Didn’t like taking the stuff; the mucking crap was highly addictive, though that didn’t stop the Corpus bigwigs from doin’ lines like it was going out of style. Life on the trading floor was stressful work, apparently. At least they didn’t have to pay for it, Deric reflectively bitterly. Merrit got most of it from a friend.

He screwed the lid back onto his sealant can, gathered up his tools, and headed off in the direction of junction 3. In a way, the chaos was a good thing. Kept his mind off other, worse things – at least partially. Assuming this little sideshow didn’t put them into overtime, he had another five hours left on shift, which gave him a little less than two hours after that to set his affairs in order. Either way his clock was running down, the repo notice circling his head like a hellish data-frag on loop. He forced it back with a mantra of his own.

He had a plan. A stupid mucking plan, but he had it, and he was going to get through this or die trying.
It was late when they were finally let out.

Fortuna had no windows; even the uppermost levels, where huge industrial elevators opened onto the Vallis, had only one small, square aperture for ventilation and a few stray flakes of snow. During his previous visits, Deric had thought of that aperture as Fortuna’s own miniature sun, so high and distant that its contours were almost lost in the neon-soaked gloom of the ceiling. That sun had gone dark when Deric hauled his aching body from the lift, carrying his tools in a sodden canvas bag. Venus was 58 days into its night-cycle and the orbital mirror wouldn’t be in a position to catch the sunlight for another 12 hours.

The overhead displays let out a disruptive buzz, alerting the entire deck to lift their heads for a prerecorded message. Nobody did. Deric didn’t see a single rig so much as glance in Nef Anyo’s direction. Man thought he was inspirational. What a load of guts. The volume did seem to be turned down a notch, though, and the sound coming to Deric’s audials was muddier than he was used to on Deck 14. Somebody’s idea of petty rebellion, most like. Deric had heard stories about the floor-boss up here. Word was that she and Anyo had some real bad blood between ‘em.

He also noticed it was warmer up here than in the sumps. Smelled better, too, on account of not being a collection box for the sludge that came oozing outta the towers. Byproducts of the terraforming process, they called it. Smelled like the insides of an infected cyst. Deric was glad he could turn his sniffers off when the time came to work with the awful stuff. The upgrade had cost him a pile of creds he didn’t have, but it was the only way he could take on shifts in the lower levels. They’d needed the extension, and Jericho had needed another monkey.

Deric swiveled in place for a moment, scanning the concourse for some type of signage or indication on where to go. Having heard of the vendor only through hearsay, he’d expected her shop to be difficult to find. It wasn’t. The grungy yellow billboard was more than a sufficient beacon – as was the racket emanating from it.

“GUNS GUNS GUNS! Kitguns! Get your mucking Kitguns here, better than you ding-dongs deserve! Wot? Zip it you! I ain’t gotta be nice. KITGUNS, guaranteed to murder them’s that need murdering!”

O-kay.

Deric cautiously approached the stall. The woman pacing agitatedly in front of her wares – presumably Zuud of Zuud’s Murdererizers, as per the grimy billboard – was a battered Ricoh-Theta model, series 3 by the look of it. Cheap rig, bad struts, but otherwise stable. A good investment if you weren’t doing any hard labor or facing down vaporized coolant. She looked up as Deric got closer, absentmindedly fretting with her hands as if she didn’t have a clue on what to actually do with them. On second thought, “pacing” didn’t really describe the motion. *Twitching*, on the other hand, took care of it quite nicely.

“You!” she barked. “Ain’t seen you around here before. Come to buy a kitgun?”
Deric took a deep intake, then closed the remaining distance. “Yeah, that’s right.”

His optics roved over the rack of parts displayed on a nearby shelf. It was obviously meant to be a modular system, with the buyer choosing from a set number of individual parts, but Deric only knew how to fire a gun, not assemble one from a dozen mismatched components. His gaze quickly moved to another rack and its collection of preassembled wares. It was… a motley offering to be sure, with many having more in common with a welding iron than an actual weapon.

Deric fought back a surge of anxiety. His tour had taught him how to handle Deras and Lankas; he’d even had the opportunity to use an Arca Plasmor once – and once had been quite enough. The casing had been hot to the touch, warmed by the chunk of radioactive plutonium tucked deep into the weapon’s guts. Couple years of that and even his cancer would’ve gotten cancer, but long story short, he’d been taught to handle real weapons, not a mishmash of weaponized components.

“Look, matey,” Zuud interrupted gruffly. “If you’re gonna stand there and stare in’ta space, take a mucking picture and do it back in your hab. I gotta close me shop ’ere!”

Deric was both chastised and annoyed. It wasn’t his fault his shift had run long, and while he appreciated that everybody wanted to go home at the end of the day, there was a line between hurrying things along and being downright rude. Actively fighting the urge to use the woman’s attitude as an excuse to call the whole mucking thing off, Deric squared his shoulders, putting a hand into the pocket of his coat. Payday was next week, and his credit chit didn’t have much on it, but he was going to have to make it work.

“I need a semi-automatic. Something sturdy and...” he hesitated, then added, “and cheap.”

“My guns ain’t cheap!”

A loud burst of static emanated from Zuud’s processors.

“I know what he meant- no, you shaddup. Fine, fine! You putting her together yourself?”

“Um… no?” Deric answered warily.

“Didn’t think so. Here. Feel this one. Good firepower, decent accuracy. Whatcha think?”

She picked up one of the kitguns and shoved it at him. Deric quickly took it with both hands, wincing as the scabs across his knuckles opened again. Despite its length and relatively thin construction, the weapon was much heavier than it looked and bore every indication of being handcrafted, its surface sloppily painted and pockmarked with the telltale divots of ball-peen hammer. Deric got a good grip and lifted it to his shoulder, giving the weapon a good shake. It rattled, but didn’t shiver. Despite their shoddy appearance, the components were good and tight.

“Good magazine capacity,” Zuud continued, picking grease out from beneath a coral fingernail. “Pull the trigger fast as you can and she’ll keep up, I guarantee ya.”

Deric eyed the clouds of blue paint splattered across the weapon. “How much?”

“2,000 cred.”

Deric all but choked. “2,000,” he mouthed slowly. “That… that’s a lot.”

“An’ it takes a lot of my time,” Zuud countered. “I ain’t running a second-hand shop here, matey. These are premium-crafted kitguns, not toys fer your sprogs to run around with playin’ Tenno! Buy it or shuffle on.”
Deric felt his systems heat with embarrassment, his intakes whirring to compensate for the spike in temperature. 2,000 cred would pay for a month of food for Corbin and Elli, or half that number in hab rent. Torn by the indecision, Deric could only stand in silence, trying to haul air through coolant-soaked filters. In them, he could taste the hot iron of solder. That would be his o-rings breaking down again, he reckoned. 2,000 cred would go a long way towards repairing them, too.

_You’re gonna get repossessed tomorrow afternoon_, he reminded himself desperately. _You go and that 2,000 cred ain’t gonna amount to more than a spit in the bucket. You got one last chance to get out from under here, take everybody outta this hellhole._

There was another audial-piercing blast of static from Zuud. To Deric’s extreme discomfort, the woman reached up and roughly smacked an open palm against the side of her head. “I know it’s a big decision,” she hissed, canting her body away as if holding council with an invisible adviser, “but we all gotta make decisions, now don’t we? What? Oh, that’s rich comin’ from you!”

The static hissed and chattered. Zuud clocked herself in the head again.

“Oh, very well, very well. If only so I can pack up and get some muckin’ sleep! You, stranger-1,800 cred for the kitgun. That’s as low as this puckered arse’s gonna talk me down, so take it or leave it. And be quick about it, eh?”

“Oh, very well, very well. If only so I can pack up and get some muckin’ sleep! You, stranger-1,800 cred for the kitgun. That’s as low as this puckered arse’s gonna talk me down, so take it or leave it. And be quick about it, eh?”


Zuud stuck out her hand. “Chit?”

Deric passed her the corrugated square of metal and waited while she swiped it through an antiquated reader, cussing and thumping on it about as much as she did her own rig. She obviously had a short somewhere in her wetware, Deric concluded uncomfortably. After a minute, Zuud returned the chit and snatched the kitgun, taking it aside to a workbench where she began to wrap it in damp brown paper. Deric dropped his hands back down to his sides, forcibly reminding himself that she wasn’t going to elope into the vents with it.

“Guess what just came in,” a new voice called, the singsong words accompanied by the bright, glassy rattle of someone shaking a bottle of nail lacquer. “Night Drive; just the color you’ve been looking for, or so I’ve been told. What are you doing still cooped up down here?”

“Tryin’ ta get rid of me last customer, that’s what,” Zuud grumbled, fighting a tangled ball of twine. “Believe me, I know what time it is, so go an’ buzz off! And tell that Eudico I don’t need a muckin’ fashion adviser, ‘specially not from the likes a you. You’re a mucking distraction, what you are!”

“You know Ticker’s the best kind of distraction, luvvie,” the man laughed, not in the least bit put off by Zuud’s lack of manners. He was an Eos-V50 model with a dark blue paint job, his voice a wonderfully fruity drawl. Deric awkwardly twitched his head at the newcomer, not wanting to seem rude. There seemed to be enough of that in the air right now. After another moment of battling a pair of dull shears, Zuud shoved a messily wrapped package into Deric’s chest. He hastily clamped both arms over it to keep it from dropping to the floor.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

He could feel the V50’s eyes – Ticker’s eyes – upon him, and he didn’t like the feeling. For one insane moment, it was if the man could see straight through his carapace and look at all the worries keeping him up at night, fluttering around his wetware like moths trapped under a bell jar.
“Been fancying a bit of mercenary work?” Ticker asked.

“Uh, no. Not really,” Deric answered. Knee-jerk reaction, that. What else was he supposed to say?

He could almost feel Ticker squint at him. When he spoke again, his voice had gone terribly soft.

“Listen to me, stranger,” he said quietly. “Whatever you’re plannin’ to do with that, don’t go through with it. Ticker’s seen folks like you, standing ‘round with that look in their eye – then Ticker never sees ‘em again. Trust me when I say it never works out, not the way you want it to.”

Deric bristled, his momentary embarrassment disappearing under an indignant surge of anger. “Stay outta me affairs,” he snapped. “I didn’t ask for your advice, and it’s none of your mucking business! Next you’ll be telling me ta take out another loan from the Order, or- or sell one of me sprogs. Tell Nef Anyo he can wrap his lips around me twig!”

The words blurted from his mic before he had a chance to catch them. Honestly, he didn’t know why so much had come out of him in such a short time – it was far more than he’d wanted to say, and leagues from the terse “go bugger yourself” he’d wanted to deliver. Gathering up his tool bag, Deric turned on his heel and walked away as quickly as he could, his systems burning with suppressed fury. He was a good father and a good husband. He didn’t need some smooth-talking ambidexter telling him how to take care of them.

If he’d been in a more observant mood, or had bothered to turn around and chastise Zuud’s inappropriate snort of laughter, he might have noticed the figure crouched high in the baffles, occasionally illuminated by the rain of sparks trickling down from above.

It was a long walk back to Deck 14.

The lift had broken down weeks ago and so far, nobody had cared enough to fix it, leaving the flow of rigs to circle around through the emergency stairwells. They were lucky they had those. Couple of the lower decks didn’t have any such accouterments, and it’d cost more than a few folks their lives when fire had broken out down there a couple of years ago.

Two floors down, and Deric pushed his way out of the stairwell. He and his fam had lived on Deck 14 since they’d come to Fortuna, and he knew the cramped streets well. Crisscrossing wires had been strung between the three-story habs, strung with sodden work tunics and puffy, padded jackets that stirred in the lukewarm air chugging out of the vents. Deric’s sniffers could barely detect anything through the clammy pleats of his filters, but that didn’t include the ammonia of stale piss. Some of the habs didn’t have running waste disposal units, so a few occupants simply urinated in the gutters that ran parallel to the concourse, sending their morning gifts down to the sumps where Deric would, inevitably, come into contact with one or two molecules of it.
Still, the place was home – and a far better one than some. In the thirty minutes since he’d left the kitgun vendor, Deric’s anger had cooled. It simply wasn’t worth hanging on to, and he certainly wasn’t about to let his family’s last memory of him be a picture of sour, impotent rage. He turned left at the end of the corridor and headed down a side passage. He knew he was home when he came to the hab with the plastid flower potted outside in an empty lubricant can. Deric tapped his wrist against the lock, let it read his ink, then stepped through the open door, every hydraulic bracing, every aching flesh-bit coiling into readiness.

“Dada!”

He dropped the tool bag just in time to catch the speeding toddler that came powering at his legs, picking her up by the back of her coveralls. “Arggh, you got me again! I can’t sneak past you! Come’ere – spaceport control, this Savuka Rail requesting permission to depart. Pshhhhhhhhh!”

He blew a long raspberry in mimicry of an engine as he hoisted the squealing girl into the air, bobbing and weaving her through the narrow hallway towards the kitchen, careful not to clock either of her outstretched arms against the door frame.

“Oh, no! Asteroids!” He started to lightly judder his sprog by her suspenders. “Daddy to bridge, she can’t take much of this, Captain! We’re going down! Mayday, mayday!”

Swooping her past the nutrient preserver, he plonked Elli down in her highchair and planted a kiss on her giggling head. “Evening, munchkin,” he said as she tried to wind sticky fingers into his hydraulics.

“Evening,” said his wife’s voice.

Deric untangled Elli’s tiny hands from his lines and turned to find Merrit standing by the oven, her tired face illuminated by the same warm smile she always wore when he joshed with the kids. She opened her arms for him, and Deric made his way over to give her a hug. The argument about his filthy clothes was an ancient battle, and one that he’d had been routed from on numerous occasions. Tonight it wasn’t worth raising the flag.

“You’re late,” Merrit commented softly. “They make you do overtime?”

“Ain’t even the half of it,” Deric groaned. “Some useless bugger cranked a valve shut and sprung the whole damn system! I had coolant raining on me head like we was on Earth!”

Merrit planted a kiss on his rig. “Go get changed. I’ll warm up dinner.”

Deric obediently headed towards the wash-rack. Elli’s stuffed bear, the one Merrit had painstakingly sewn out of one of Deric’s old jackets, was on the floor where the precocious toddler had dropped it on her way to the door. Deric picked it up and sat it on the table.

“Hey, dad,” Corbin mumbled without looking up from his numbers. He was nine, and anything his father did was viewed as mortal embarrassment. It made for endless hours of entertainment, far as Deric was concerned. He dropped a hand onto the boy’s head and scuffed, earning a scrunched face and an attempt to wiggle elsewhere. Deric let his hand linger, however, feeling the boy’s fine hair stick to the grime on his fingers. Corbin had been he and Merrit’s first. His first breath had been the clean, scrubbed air in the medbays of Thanatos Station, not damp pollution rich with the stench of coolant, as Elli’s had been. Unfortunately, that discrepancy in good fortune was beginning to show. Ellie was an energetic child, but woefully small for her age, and as pale as the snow on the Orb Vallis.
“Daaaad,” Corbin whined, trying to shrug him off. “Your hand stinks.”

Deric huffed a laugh, and let his hand fall.

He cleaned up in the narrow wash-rack in the back of the hab, allowing the grease and filth from the day to wash away down the drain – returning to the sumps for him to deal with in the morning. No, he corrected himself, scrubbing his bare arms with a pad. There would be no more days in the sumps. One way or another, he was never going to see that place again.

He switched his filters out for dry ones and inhaled the familiar scent of the hab, of powdered cleanser and the oily char of grilled tralok wafting in from the kitchen. Actual meat, especially from distant Earth, was grievously expensive in Fortuna, but he and his wife were glad to make the sacrifice at least once a month. Corbin and Elli were still growing, and any meat harvested from the Vallis was just... off, somehow. It was certainly affordable, but Deric had taken one look at the strange, golden veins snaking through that slab of pobber and decided there and then, he wouldn’t be feeding it to either of his sprogs. Period.

Deric changed into a thin pair of pants and made his way back into the kitchen, where Merrit was cutting the tralok into small pieces and putting them into a plastic bowl. Elli was old enough to eat without having to be bribed by a motor-boating spoon, but it was essential that she didn’t choke. Corbin was already halfway through his filet, eating with a gusto that simultaneously made Deric both proud and a little worried, hoping the boy was getting enough calories. Nutrient pills could only make up so much of his diet.

He sat down at the small table and made small talk with a reluctant Corbin as he noisily chewed on his fish and complained about the difficulty of his numbers. Merrit set a warm can of nutrient paste in front of him and Deric gratefully hooked it to his systems, sighing a little as the nourishing sludge trickled through his rig. Heating it was completely unnecessary, as was whipping it for several minutes with a fork, but Merrit did it every time.

“So, the pipes blew up?” Merrit prompted, sitting down next to him. There was a plate of nutrient paste in front of her, too, but with her body intact, including all the digestive bits, she had the option of mashing it with grease from the empty tralok skillet.

“So high,” said Deric, trying to get Elli to hold a spoon.

He could smell something else now; the rich aroma of cardamom and nutmeg, filtering like warm autumn sunlight through a forest of rosewood and black mountain teak. Deric’s entire body tightened with heartache. Might even have got his twig to stir, too, if that particular flesh-bit had still been there. Merrit had worn the rare, expensive scent when he’d first met her on Thanatos Station, a perfectly pressed, Corpus accountant in turquoise stilettos. When the good times had come crashing down in flames, she’d brought the tiny, half-empty bottle to Fortuna wrapped in a pair of socks, wearing it only on special occasions such as New Years and Void Day.

Deric wondered why she was wearing it now.

The evening wore on, filled with laughter and small talk, and the sound of Elli trying to babble new words that Deric tentatively translated as fishy and blue. He helped Corbin with his numbers, and regaled them all with Tales from the Sumps and the hordes of alligators that lived there. He was stalling, waiting for the sprogs to start to fall asleep, and Merrit knew it. She pulled Elli out of her highchair and rocked her until she dropped off, drooling onto her mother’s shoulder. Corbin took a little longer, but eventually, when he was told to pack up his datapads and crawl into his cot, the boy offered only a token argument.
Taking Elli, Deric carried her and the bear into the back room she shared with her brother, tucked
them both in, and shut the door behind him when he left. When he returned to the kitchen, Merrit
had lit a cheap tobacco stick.

“And how was your day, Miss Dahl?” he teased, wearily sitting down next to her.

“Pack it up and move on, Savuka,” she responded in kind, smiling at him. It was a tired joke,
something worn shabby through repeated use, but neither of them felt like tossing it out. Its
threadbare familiarity was too much of a comfort.

They talked for a while, keeping their voices low as not to wake the kids. More stalling, and the
both of them knew it. When the act stretched too thin, the Deric took a deep intake, his guts tangled
up in his vents. “I got a repo notice yesterday morning,” he managed finally, the words utterly
devoid of emotion.

Merrit snubbed her cigarette into the oily basin of her plate.

“I know,” she said quietly. “I saw the one on the door.”

Oh.

They sat in silence for a long moment, each submerged under the weight of their own thoughts. “I
comm’d industrial management before I left this morning,” Merrit continued. “They’re still taking
people for Europa. I downloaded you a form.”

She trailed off, her intonation rising into an obvious question. Deric shook his head. “Why?” he
asked shortly. “So I can bust me hump for a couple more months, have them garnish whatever
wages I do earn, then get shipped off to repo anyway? Naw.”

He shook his head again, as if to reinforce the decision. Getting up from the table, he went to his
tool bag in the hall and took out the wrapped kitgun, bringing back to the kitchen.

“I bought this today,” he explained, striping the paper off and setting the weapon on the table,
where its burnished silver parts gleamed in the smoky air.

Merrit’s eyes widened. “Deric, no,” she protested in a horrified whisper. “You can’t fight the
taxmen!”

“Ain’t gonna fight the taxman,” he reassured her softly, sitting back down with the gun between
them. He took another deep intake. “I’m going to enter the Index.”

There was a terrible, protracted silence. Merrit’s brown eyes were tired, Deric noticed, and deep,
careworn lines were starting to carve their way into her face. Fortuna had little work for those that
didn’t have a rig, and being unmodded save for a few somatic implants that let her interface with
the Corpus datanet, Merrit had been forced to scrounge for whatever odd jobs were available, such
as cleaning habs and babysitting other people’s sprogs. The hours were small, and the pay even
more terrible than what he got working in the sumps.

Deric reached across the table for her hand. “Merrit…” he began quietly, but she cut him off with a
desperate flutter of her hand.

“You can’t,” she objected weakly. “The Index, it- it’s full of killers, mucking buggers who train
to rip people apart! You know the type of thugs Anyo throws in there. You wouldn’t last a single
round!”
“I know how to fight,” Deric reminded. He patted the kitgun with his other hand. “It don’t look like much, I know, but it’s a good gun. I’ve shot down Grineer with worse.”

Merrit shook her head frantically, her cloud of dark hair floating with the movement. “You had other men with you. With shields and better equipment! That’s a different story that some—some pit filled with murderers!”

“I don’t have another option, Merrit,” said Deric. “The repo men are coming tomorrow night. Whether I die in the Index or get brain-shelved, it’s the same thing. I’m gone either way, and you and the kids are stuck picking up me debt.”

“We can get you back from brain-shelving!” Merrit burst out, her voice rising. There was a soft noise from the back room and they both froze, listening hard for the patter of tiny feet, but after several moments, there was nothing but silence. Merrit took a shaking breath.

“We can get you back,” she repeated desperately.

“Hon, you know that’s never gonna happen,” Deric countered gently. “How many people do you know that got pulled back from shelving? Even if I get outta there, it’ll be to say hello to me grand-sprogs – and that’s assuming they don’t tear the kids apart before they get a chance to have any. They’re taking organics now, too. Hearts, kidneys, the whole mucking bag.”

Merrit let out a thin moan and dropped her face into her heads. Deric gently put his arms around her quivering body, lifting his shutter so he could look at her with his own eyes. “If I win in the Index, it’ll be more than enough to clear me debt,” he told her encouragingly. “Even a win in the first round will keep me outta repo, and we’ll have a nice chunk of creds. I can do this! You don’t deserve to get hauled down with me anymore.”

“I hauled myself,” she choked, reminding him of the fact that when the court martial had come down, she’d packed her bags, picked Corbin up in her arms, and left a life a luxury to follow her disgraced husband to the armpit of the system. Deric had begged her not to, but she wouldn't be convinced.

“That you did,” he relented tenderly. “Me time’s up, Merrit. Either I try the Index, or I sit on the stoop an’ wait for the repo men. And ya know what? I’d rather take me chances in the Index, maybe take one or two of them corporate buggers out with me, yeah?”

Merrit nodded into his carapace and he stroked her hair with a one hand, savoring the mélange of spice that wafted into his filters. “Thanks for wearing your perfume tonight,” he croaked, his voice cracking despite doing his damnedest to prevent it.

“You’re welcome,” she sniffled, then collapsed into gentle sobs.

Later, they lay together on the narrow bunk they shared adjacent to the kitchen, Merrit curled low so she could rest her face next to his open hatch, a ratty blanket folded around her to soften the edges of his carapace. She’d finally gone to sleep, but Deric was still wide awake, staring the pattern of water damage on the dark grey ceiling. He was glad his arms were still living flesh, so that he could feel the steady rise and fall of her breath. She told him constantly that his carapace was quote “absurdly comfortable” despite the hard, jutting planes of it, but Deric suspected that she only said it to make him feel better.

Long ago, it’d just been a couple of hydraulic actuators in his back and shoulders to help him heft a gun. The debt had been trivial, nothing he couldn’t pay off with a military man’s salary – but all that had changed the night Captain Irohn had cornered his wife in an empty cubicle. She’d been
waiting for Deric to pick her up after his shift, but the captain hadn’t known that, assuming she was completely alone. After the trial, Deric had been lucky to escape Pluto with his discharge papers and a sentence to Fortuna.

He tucked a hand into the small of Merrit's back, fingers between her waistband and skin, feeling the lassitude of zydrate stealing over his aching body. Tonight he had to sleep, because tomorrow he needed every scrap of energy to save his own life.

He’d been lying to Merrit about his chances in the Index. Anyo’s pit fighters were some of the meakest bastards in the system, specially picked to be without a conscience and eager to turn a profit for the corporation – because Anyo turned a big profit out on that distant, frozen world. Blood-sport was a lucrative business, and the lure of a big payday attracted every sort the system had to offer: ex-convicts, debt slaves, scarred Ostron veterans who’d won a dozen campaigns against the Grineer. Sign-up was open to all, even those about to go into repo. Especially those about to go into repo. Anyo loved the desperate ones most of all, even gave them extra incentive to enter. Some had gone in with the best of equipment, the deadliest zaws...

And only a handful ever survived to collect their prize.

Deric pinched his eyes shut, tears rolling silently down his face. After a long time, he drifted to sleep alongside his wife, listening to the muffled clamor of skeg echoing down the vents. He’d told Kade the sound kept him up at night. That’d been a lie, too.

He liked the homemade music, because it reminded him that even the unluckiest folk of all, the sprogs with nobody to care for them in the entire system, were determined to make the best of things.

Deric awoke early and dressed without a word. There was enough left in in their shared cred account to buy him a tractor ticket to Neptune, which he purchased over the net while Merrit silently warmed a tube of nutrient paste. They ate in silence, too, out of words and little platitudes of comfort to offer each other. Deric put the kitgun in a dingy tote, then went into the back room to kiss his children goodbye. The stuffed bear had fallen to the floor again. Deric picked it up and put it back under Elli’s blankets.

"If I don’t come back, scrape together whatever you can and get you and the kids on a tractor for Earth," he instructed Merrit. “Them Ostrons are good people. Little weird, but good, and it’ll be a better life for you than Fortuna. Anyo won’t come after me debt until Corbin turns sixteen, and by then he might have a good job – fishing or smithing, or whatnot. Don’t you let him get any upgrades.”

Merrit nodded mutely. Her eyes were swollen and red, but there were no more tears. She’d used them all up the previous night. “I won’t have to worry about that. You’ll be coming back,
remember?” she told him.

“Course I will! But ya know… might be a while.” He opened his front shutter. “Give me a kiss, yeah?”

Merrit bent and kissed him full on the lips. “I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

He opened the hab door into the street and stepped on something hard, foreign and wholly unexpected sitting on his mat. Cursing and flailing his arms, thinking he’d narrowly avoided squirting a pobber’s guts out its ears, Deric staggered until he could right his balance, then stared at the offending artifact. It was a flat envelope sealed with a daub of golden wax, its surface deeply embossed with some nameless flower. Beneath it was a line of brush-script so smooth and elegant, Deric almost mistook it for Orokin letters, like those he found stamped into their ancient machinery.

Deric Savuka

“Deric?”

Merrit put her head out the door. Wasn’t half a second before she noticed the envelope, too.

“What’s that?”

“Bugger me,” said Deric, easing his tote to the ground. Moving slowly, he picked up the envelope and held it up. It was made of thick parchment and fiendishly dense for its size. Inside, something metallic shifted and slithered. More confused than ever, Deric pushed a finger beneath the flap and slit it open, breaking the wax seal and dumping the contents out into his palm. Half a second later, he nearly fumbled them to the street.

“Deric?” Merrit prompted, seizing his arm. “Deric, what is it?”

He showed the thick, triangular chits to his wife. Each one of them had been laser-etched with his name and serial, and something else, too. A bold stamp across the red inner ring that read simply: VOID.

“Me debt bonds!” Deric exclaimed, his voice shaking, knowing then – as all the wretched of Fortuna knew – that there was no way to acquire the precious things unless the debt indicated had been paid in full. “Me mucking debt bonds! Everything we owe- they’re... it’s all… Merrit, our kids, they’re-”

“Free,” Merrit whispered tearfully.

Deric threw his free arm around his shaken wife. Inside his shutter he was laughing and crying at the same time. He glanced up and down the street, searching for a glimpse of whoever had forgotten the envelope, because surely it hadn’t actually been meant for him– but no. No, someone had to have written his name, but who could have done such an impossible thing? None of their friends or shift-mates, that’s for certain. The Temple preached against charity, but even if somebody had been so inclined, most couldn’t even pay off their own debts, let alone lift the burden from another. Here in Fortuna, nobody just gave. Sad fact of life was that not a single person breathin’ would let their own dependents go hungry payin’ off another’s debt.

Merrit went to her knees on the stoop and Deric sunk down with her, the enveloped bunched tight in his fist and the price of his life tumbling to the mat in a series of heavy thuds. Useless now, mere
symbols of debt once owed, scattered on the damp cement.

“Thank you,” Deric whispered to the gloom. “Aw, sweet Void. Thank you.”

He didn’t expect his gratitude to be heard, but once again, if he hadn’t been so distracted, a glance upwards might have revealed the shadow from Deck 9, partially hidden in the gloaming dusk, waiting to see if the envelope had been noticed by the proper recipients. Seeing that task accomplished, the figure turned and left, moving through little-used service elevators and dripping, narrow passageways until it’d made its way back to the upper floor. There it walked across the concourse without bothering to hide its gleaming skin, the blue light of the Void shining through the crevices in its armor.

High in his loft, Ticker was rolling out the day’s inventory, stopping to crack the knot that was starting to trouble his lower back these days. Out of the corner of his optics, he saw the lone figure walk into the cargo elevator without looking back, disappearing in a swirl of ice kicked up by the powerful doors. Somewhere below, Ticker knew there was happiness; the happiness of good people who’d just found out they were going to see another day.

Ticker had recognized the majesty and excruciating, unnatural beauty of the Warframe the minute it’d set foot in Fortuna, but to be honest, he’d never expected that beauty to encompass their soul as well – because Ticker had seen too much cruelty inflicted by the Corpus autocracy, heard too much of the suffering that’d soaked into the very bones of Fortuna, to believe in the tales of benevolent Orokin. They’d been gods in their own right, the proof of that was just outside, but that kind of wealth poisoned the soul, made it ugly and twisted, no matter how beautiful the carapace. The Tenno were not like the decayed, golden gods that’d created them.

They were better.

“You’re doin’ good, Stardust,” Ticker murmured softly. “You’re doin’ good.”

Above his head, enough hours had passed for the orbital mirror to finally catch the light of Sol, sending soft beams of light down to mingle with the neon. Ticker watched the drifting flakes of snow for a moment, seeing how the light gleamed and sparkled inside each one. Below his alcove, the day’s shift was just kicking into gear, filling the deck with new life: plasma cutters, hammer drills, the footfalls of a dozen rigs heading to their assigned tasks. Ticker hummed a little in the back of his throat. He usually didn’t sing along with those on the concourse below, preferring to listen to the familiar tunes that made the back-breaking labor a little more bearable. There was precious little to celebrate, but damn, Ticker felt like celebrating it anyway.

“Shadows fall, and hope has fled.

Steel your heart, the dawn will come…”

One level directly below, the Business was trying to coax a particularly strong and agitated virmink into a crate. Hearing the warm voice come floating down to him, the big man stopped and listened. Man had such a wonderful signing voice. Was a pity he didn’t use it more often. Biz hooked his thumbs over the controls on his rig, loosening his brawny shoulders. He knew that tune; an old one from… from a very long time ago. Clearing his intakes with a little cough, the Business absently began to follow along. His own singing voice was rusty and maybe a little lacking in melody, but perfection wasn’t the point.

“The night is long, and the path is dark.

Look to the sky, for one day soon.
The dawn will come.”

Eudico cocked her at the song drifting across the deck. Was that Biz? Certainly wasn’t one of their usuals, but it felt good to hear despite the way it pulled at her heart like a bad weld. Things were gonna be different this time, she told herself, and for the first time in a long time, she actually believed it. She sat down in her usual spot, aware that the sound was rising in volume. Couple of the jockeys bangin’ away on the concourse knew the words and had picked up the melody, adding the weight of their voices. Eudi scrounged her memory banks for the lyrics and decided to join in – because muckit, it would be better this time.

“Soare your blade, and raise it high.

Stand your ground, the dawn will come!”

The voices rose and rose, gaining in tempo and strength, until they drifted out of Fortuna and across the Orb Vallis, defying the lot they’d been given and promising hope for a better tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

-o- Fortuna was the Roman goddess/personification of Fortune, particularly the ever-shifting balance of prosperity and disaster. Similar to Lady Justice, she was often depicted as wearing a blindfold, but was usually sans scales. I added them back in because I liked the additional symbolism of “weight” – of the Corpus autocracy and their unfairly skewed values.

-o- Here, Fortuna is rendered as an Orokin, hence the asymmetrical arm. Asymmetry is a traditional Japanese art aesthetic known as hacho, or intentional unevenness, and I think the Orokin were visually (and culturally) designed to resemble a hybrid of Japanese nobility and Roman statesmen. And while Fortuna (the Venusian debt colony) is not Orokin, per say, I’ve always thought of the Corpus as wannabe Orokin – regarding the Golden Lords as the pinnacle of achievement and trying to model themselves after them. As revealed in Simaris’ data frags, they certainly didn’t appreciate the literal apocalypse brought on by the original Tenno rebellion, thus why they still refer to them as Betrayers.

-o- *scowls at various PS4 captures of Ballas.* “Argh, your skin is so perfect – you porcelain-faced Kabuki whore. Just what color is it, exactly? Lilac, pastel blue, muckin’ granite grey?!?” *tries all of the above just to be sure*

-o- I decided to spend much more time on this one, as compared the other chapter splash-panels I’ve been mass producing. In doing so it has come to my attention that hardly any of my pictures adhere to the same exact style. I’m always trying some new blending, shading or coloring technique, resulting in a variety of effects!
Inspired by a conversation with SoulStealer1987, in which we agreed that Baro Ki’Teer is basically Warframe’s version of Indiana Jones, quote “messing around in the Void like the fearless, occasionally endearing prick that he is” unquote. Her perfect words, not mine. And if you give a mouse a cookie…

*maniacal laughter from atop a pile of skulls*

Ahem. This episode started out as a silly crack revolving around that classic scene with the golden idol – and ended at over 12,000 words, my longest memory fragment to date. I honestly can’t tell you how much fun I’ve been having with these! Enjoy the descent into madness and remember: comments and kudos are greatly appreciated. Set after Son of the Sun and during/after The Chains of Harrow.

**Spoilers**
The Chains of Harrow – MAJOR!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“We have not done engine diagnostics since yesterday,” Cephalon Glitz declared morbidly. “I recommend we do so now, before we suffer a catastrophic failure that destroys this craft and renders its occupant lifeless.”

Baro Ki’Teer swept himself into the pilots’ chair, a faint smirk curled at the corners of his lips.

“Oh, my! Well, we have a schedule to keep, so we’ll just have to chance it,” he said, tapping at the console with one manicured hand. Screens flashed, nav systems came online, and the scimitar’s engines powered up with a well-tuned hum – potential explosions notwithstanding. Reaching overhead, Baro snapped a series of toggles into new positions.

“Nefer’Tem, you are cleared to depart,” said a voice on the comm. “Proceed to departure lane 3.”

“As you say, Strata Relay,” Baro responded lightly, watching the hanger rotate into view as the scimitar eased around, docking clamps demagnetizing with a series of weighty clunks that could be felt throughout the ship. There was a microsecond of drift before the ship’s Cephalon engaged her piloting precepts.

“There is a 2% chance we will suffer a hull breach today.”

“Perhaps,” said Baro as he brought up the star chart.

“Or an irreparable breakdown of life support systems.”

“That is a possibility,” Baro agreed, flicking through the system with his finger.

Earth shrank and fell away, followed by Lua and the restless sands of Mars. Baro smoothly pinched his thumb and forefinger together, widening the scopes past Phobos and focusing on a spot deep within the belt, where he input a string of coordinates. The scimitar banked, clearing the hanger and opening its starboard flaps to arc them away from the approach lanes. Baro toggled another series of switches, then reclined in his chair and took a sip from his vacuum flask, savoring
the rich, caramel taste of kopi luwak.

With production limited to only a few small clades that farmed the lethal edges of the Eurasian rainforest, a single pound of the roasted, fermented beans could easily fetch 500 credits or more in Ostron’s expansive floating marketplaces. Corpus attempts to replicate the unique process in their tropical greenhouses and sweaty, Venetian bio-domes had produced a variety of cheap imitations with a much greater margin for profit, but nothing compared to the true taste of kopi luwak, or that pleasing, mellow acidity made by roasting mere handfuls in scalding-hot iron pans.

Baro took another long sip, lulled by the comfortable vibration of the wyrm drive as Glitz piloted them towards Mars. She banked again, avoiding the knot of traffic queuing for nearby rail, and the motion sent a flash of sunlight slicing across the **Nefer’Tem**’s bladed wings, the ship’s prisma coating creating a dazzling cascade of iridescent, blue-green refractions that followed the ship into the black. Baro hid a smirk, aware that he’d been noticed, and glad of the fact.

Despite his lucrative business, he had no need to worry about being followed; prisma crystal was good for more than just ornamentation. It had a convenient tendency to bounce sensor-sweeps in a dozen different directions, making the **Nefer’Tem** seem like a mote of ionized gas or a localized fissure in the Void. Anything but a ship. And certainly not his ship, as Baro typically deactivated his ID beacon once he was beyond the rim of civilized space. Potential stalkers would have to get within visual range in order to track him, and Glitz’s superior instrumentation would prevent that from happening, or at least warn him he was being shadowed.

“What is our destination?” Glitz asked glumly.

“Site 4,” said Baro, crossing his legs and propping his ankle on the opposite knee.

He’d picked the Orokin tower up on deep scans about three days ago. Located roughly five klicks galactic north of Mot, the structure had not been marked on any of the charts Baro possessed, nor had its current location been predicted by the pattern of other nearby towers. It was alone in an empty region of the Void, likely displaced from its original location sometime in antiquity and kept hidden by the region’s unusually active storms. As far as Baro knew, Site 4 – as he’d previously labeled it – was unexplored and untouched. He licked his lips in anticipation.

The tower was a rare find, even for him, and well-worth the scramble to rejigger his schedule. The timetable was much sooner than he normally allowed, having just returned from his usual Void safari, but there was a sense of urgency that Baro simply couldn’t ignore. The tower had appeared suddenly, and could disappear just as quick. The thought of losing such a pristine claim had given him indigestion for days.

With the Origin System’s increased interest in the Void, he’d often been compelled to go over a site that’d been picked clean by some other faction. Much as Baro loathed sloppy seconds, there was always more to find, some secret alcove or hidden artifact those inept fools didn’t have the knowledge to uncover, but there was no challenge in it, no thrill of being the first to walk some shadowed hall since the Orokin had abandoned it a millennia ago. And there were other caveats, besides. Arriving late to the party meant that all of the best *hors d’oeuvres* had already been wolfed down, stashed in some secret Corpus lab or, in the case of the Grineer, melted down for their base components.

Baro suppressed a shudder.

He was going to pull some valuable finds on this trip, of that Baro was certain. And the timing couldn’t have been better. While he’d never lacked for customers, per se, business was positively booming ever since the Tenno had awakened from their slumber, all of them hungry for relics and
technology of the era they’d left behind. And they didn’t just window shop. They paid handsomely. Even his rarest items had been flying off the shelves almost as soon as he acquired them, particularly the data packets and combat precepts the Tenno used to modify their Warframes. Over time, Baro had even acquired a short list of requests – he refused to think of them as order forms, as it made the transaction sound so insipidly trite – to keep his eyes open for specific treasures.

Mars slipped past to starboard, the last bastion of civilized space for over 500 million kilometers. Darkness closed around the Nefer’Tem. Save for the rattletraps crewed by pirates, few ships traveled the belt, especially not with the intent to reach the Jovian planets on the other side, but Baro had another destination in mind, one that he marked on no charts, and stored only in his own thoughts. Even Glitz had been programmed to delete the location from her memory banks after every excursion. Baro sat up and wrapped his fingers around the control yoke, settling his boots on the pedals. He always preferred to pilot during this leg.

“Engage manual override,” he said aloud.

“This will result in a 19.2% decrease in overall ship’s safety.”

Baro answered with a noncommittal hum. He pushed the yoke forward, lowering the scimitar’s rear elevators and moving the ship along a downward vector, watching the instrumentation that measured his position in relation to the galactic plane. With the exception of the odd Void Gate located in some overgrown, mutant pocket of jungle, the system’s warring factions were acquainted with only four main entrances into the Void: the one just outside the orbit of Phobos, the one tucked into the mass shadow of Europa, and the twin gateways lined up between Neptune and dark, distant Sedna.

But the fabric of space-time was flexible, and like any fabric it warped and rippled and acquired small tears, little cracks in reality. There were other ways into the Void – and Baro Ki’Teer kept his own catalog of backdoors.

He leaned one foot into the pedals and opened the Nefer’Tem’s thrusters, moving his hand to a small toggle switch mounted directly overhead. He snapped it open and the ship’s Void Key came online with an arcane hum, encasing the hull in a wedge of dark energy that would allow him to pierce the nearby fissure. Baro felt his limbs fuzz as though his entire body had momentarily gone to sleep. The feeling was not entirely comfortable, but not wholly unpleasant, either.

“There is a .7% probability that this jump will fail.”

Baro heaved a sigh. “Maintenance Note,” he said. “On returning to the Relay, remind me to adjust your charming personality with something, shall we say, a little sunnier?”

“To date, you’ve made approximately 32 such logs.”

“Are you implying that I, Baro Ki’Teer, am procrastinating? How rude. I am always prompt!”

“I am implying that you need my capacity as ship’s Cephalon.”

“Mm-hmm. That capacity need not include your persistent gloom and doom.”

“I am not gloomy,” Glitz responded matter-of-factly. “I am not programmed for such an emotion and am merely stating facts. You do not seem to grasp the dangers of Void-travel and would surely have expired without me.”
“Glitz, your lack of confidence in me is positively depressing!” said Baro, amused.

The alien darkness of the Void grew stronger, closer, prying his neural pathways open like a tendril of thorns. Well-used to the sensation, Baro tilted his head back against the pilot’s chair. He was not Tenno, but the Void had left its mark on him, filling his mind with glowing filaments of scar tissue, not unlike the crystalline trees of which the Orokin had been so fond.

“Five seconds to Void Jump. Four… three… two… one.”

The *Nefer’Tem* surged forward and was gone, leaving only a trail of sparks.

Baro flew cautious circles around the watchtower, sweeping it with every sensor beam his ship possessed, but even then, the data he could gather on the structure was slim. Little made sense in the Void. Scanners showed rooms that’d never been built, radar shadows that didn’t exist, and often reported empty space where Baro could clearly see a physical structure. Several instruments had calculated dimensions so insane that the computer didn’t even possess the numbers to explain it, indicating that the tower was simultaneously both non-existent and as large as the infinite universe.

Baro was not concerned. Long years of practice had taught him to read the distortions.

His fingers waltzed across the console, often pressing multiple buttons at once.

“*Atmospheric readings are within breathable standard, Mr. Ki’Teer.*”

Baro nodded to himself. The day was proceeding as expected. He swung the *Nefer’Tem* around and slowed thrusters, angling them for approach. Unlike the glorious Lisets used by the Tenno, the scimitar was not Orokin-made and did not include a revolving docking cradle on the underside of the ship. As such, Baro was compelled to use the tower’s cavernous launch bay. He set the *Nefer’Tem* down in the exact center of it and began powering down his engines, keeping watch through the viewscreen. When his arrival appeared to have gone unnoticed, Baro slid from the pilot’s seat and left the bridge.

Most of the rear cabin was taken up by stacks of empty plastic crates and bags of kinetic packing gel, all of it secured to the sides of the craft by webs of nylon cargo straps. Aside from that, however, the cabin was lushly appointed, sporting several hand-woven rugs and rare ayatan sculptures that scintillated in the light. The smell of incense hung in the air, a blend of finely ground herbs and the purest, most luxurious of resins and oils. Baro inhaled appreciatively as he made his way to the folded Osprey unit hovering at the very back of the cabin, right next to the shuttered weapon’s locker.

“Power on and begin diagnostics,” he ordered, rapping it with his knuckle.

The Osprey obediently unfurled its wings, rotors whirring as it processed the command. Baro
opened the locker and reached in for his equipment, already shedding his bulky attire. Being of average height, neither strikingly tall nor short, and of relatively slim build, he used the heavy ensemble to project an aura of power and importance, but it was impractical for the upcoming task at hand, and Baro Ki’Teer preferred to remain amongst the living – not lumbering frantically down the corridor while something unsavory chased him back to his ship.

Choosing a garment not dissimilar to the padded glove-suits worn by Tenno operatives and syndicate agents, Baro tightened the series of straps and hidden zippers, and smoothed the skintight collar until it lay more easily. The helmet he would keep; it was his signature piece, after all.

There was a distant rumble, so deep it was almost ultrasonic, and the scimitar shuddered from cockpit to stern, hard enough to shiver the various artifacts Baro had artfully scattered about. He put his hand on the wall.

“Glitz?” he questioned firmly.

“Unusual disturbances in the Void,” the Cephalon reported. “Local currents appear to be unstable. I have just clocked them at over 50 kilometers per hour. Sir, I take the opportunity to remind you that this tower is partially submerged in an energy ribbon. If the Pendula registers even a 15.4% decrease in output, it may sink even deeper.”

Except for the smattering of dangerous magnatars and other infinitely dense, infinitely bright neutron stars, the Void contained no indigenous solid matter. It was a place of gas and dust, ablaze with fluid whorls of energy that swirled through the abyss like a comic oil slick. Even light behaved like an aberrant thing, lensing around gravitational anomalies that simply did not exist, save for the force they exerted on the space around them. These pockets of contortion occasionally grew so dense that an onlooker could see straight through the dimension itself and peer at distorted reflections on the other side. Planets, ships. Smears of unrecognizable color. They would move and shift and, more often than not, snap as the electromagnetic fields knotted back on themselves, creating unpredictable currents of ionically charged particles that could sweep objects hundreds of lightyears from their original location. Or tear said object in half.

Baro waited, but the shudder did not happen again. He took his hand from wall.

“Monitor the area and keep me informed,” he said, attaching a holster his lower back.

“Acknowledged. Why do you insist on subjecting yourself to such apparent danger?”

“Why, the ducats of course!” Baro exclaimed. He reached back into the locker to remove his Lex and a fully loaded magazine, his many rings clicking against them. “See if you can’t connect to the tower’s systems. A manifest would be most helpful.”

There was a long moment of silence.

“I believe I have finally made a diagnosis on you,” Glitz informed him gravely, as if she were about to inform him of stage 4 rectal cancer. “You, Baro Ki’Teer, are a materialist.”

Baro’s pealing laughter echoed off the walls.

He chambered the first round with a snap.
The launch bay itself was one of the largest the Void Trader had ever encountered, its luxury rivaled only by the massive crystal trees that had spent a millennia doing their damnedest to reach the vaulted contours of the ceiling. Despite centuries of neglect, the tower’s basic systems, including life support, atmospheric processing, and ambient lighting appeared virtually intact. If nothing else, the Orokin built for the eternity they’d expected to receive.

After thoroughly combing the launch bay, Baro moved into the outer corridors, tapping his heels to a selection of music he’d programmed into his Osprey unit. As always, the watchtower showed no signs of its previous occupants – or their hasty exodus. No blood, no bodies. No remains of any kind. And that suited Baro just fine. Humming to himself, he climbed a set of stairs and entered the galley at the top. The wide-open space was full of circular tables and low, cushioned chairs accompanied by more crystalline trees, their eerie, skeletal branches glowing in the light of the overhead atrium. As Baro probed deeper into the room, a shadow fluttered across the floor. He tipped his head back to the look at the ceiling.

Nearly a fifteen meters above, several interlocking rings, each wider than he was tall, orbited around each other, creating a hypnotic pattern of motion that glistened in the atrium’s light. Baro smirked.

“If only I could somehow retrieve that,” he lamented, thinking of several Corpus executives who would give their left nut and then some for such a relic, especially after he’d enticed them into a bidding war. Because nothing said “authority” than an over-sized Orokin ayatan in your corporate lobby.

“If you brought a bigger ship, perhaps a Stanchion cruiser, your average haul capacity would increase by 70%,” Glitz suggested via commlink. She was mocking him, and the Void Trader knew it.

“I don’t think you could handle a bigger ship,” Baro responded cheerily, moving across the gallery.

Static buzzed in his ear.

“My capacity for piloting far exceeds yours, Mr. Ki’Teer,” she reminded him tartly.

“You don’t say?”

“I do say. It is you who chooses to ignore facts.”

Boot heels clicking against the glossy floor, Baro entered a smaller side room. There was no mistaking the accoutrements of a kitchen, even an Orokin one. He opened a cupboard and felt his dagger-like smile grow wider. He beckoned for the Osprey to set the crate it was carrying on the floor.

Whipping on a pair of soft white gloves, Baro gently removed a tall, slender-necked bottle from the
cupboard and held it up to the light. Made of traditional Orokin bone ceramic, so thin he could
detect the shadow of his hand, the piece had been deliberately broken and joined back together with
golden lacquer, creating a fluid, almost organic web of cracks and softly rounded seams. Baro
caressed the lip of the bottle with his finger. There was a set of matching cups, each holding no
more than a mouthful.

“Late Orokin Void-era,” he commented softly. “Exquisite.”

There was more in the cupboard. Much, much more.

Baro’s lustful eyes traveled the gleaming stacks, lingering on every bowl, cup and plate. Judging
by the number, the kitchen had been meant to service 25, maybe 30 people on a given day. And to
think such a magnificent set had once been considered merely utilitarian, fit only for serving
breakfast in a public commissary. Baro moistened his plush lips with his tongue.

It was time to make an inventory. He knelt on the gleaming floor, music pulsing against the walls,
and wrapped each piece in its own individual square of parchment before lining them up in the
bottom of the crate, a thick layer of packing gel between each one. Everything was in pristine
condition and he intended them to stay that way. Maybe he’d keep a set for himself.

It took him a minute to notice the sound, a gentle, rap, tap, tapping in the far distance.

“Hmmm?”

Baro straightened from his work, moving to glance over one shoulder. Part of the galley was
visible through the open doorway, but nothing stirred besides the fluttering shadows of the rings.
Baro pressed one hand to his gauntlet. The music wasn’t loud, but he turned it down anyway,
listening for anything abnormal. A moment passed, then another, but the odd tapping noise did not
reappear. Baro heard nothing except the steady exhaust of the Osprey’s rotors. Still, there was no
such thing as being too cautious in the Void – and Baro was uncomfortably reminded of the faint,
dangerous little pings of a hull about to breach.

He touched the strap of his satchel just to reassure himself that he’d brought it. Aside from a
heavily padded interior and numerous zippered pockets rattling with lotions and lip balms, the
luxury satchel also contained an emergency breather mask and shield emitter. Enough to survive
hard vacuum for a little less than ten minutes.

Satisfied that nothing was amiss, Baro resumed what he’d been doing, casually sliding the music
back up to its original volume. The sound returned in the distance, softly at first, then more
pronounced as time went on, but it existed on a level below normal notice, like breathing or
blinking, and this time the Void Trader didn’t register he was hearing anything at all.

When Baro had packed everything in the kitchen, he checked the gallery one last time, brought the
crate back to the Nefer’Tem, and headed back out, mapping his route into his own personal data
HUD. Despite every attempt to modify his equipment, there were always staircases, cubbyholes, and eldritch switchbacks that didn’t appear on scans, and Baro was nothing if not meticulous. Osprey at his elbow, he moved higher into the tower, passing through several massive halls and narrow, hairpin corridors. The former had been complete devoid of anything useful. The latter led him to an enormous citadel larger than the Larunda concourse.

Without crossing the threshold, Baro took a glance around. The tower’s expansive networks of outlying corridors, including nonessential rooms, were rarely watched by surveillance, but that lackadaisical security did not extend very far. About five meters ahead of him was a short staircase flanked on either side by a pair of Orokin drones, each barely distinguishable from the architecture itself. Baro put his hand on the control panel alongside the door. There was a melodic chime. Without taking his eyes off the drones, Baro carefully rotated the cipher into the correct position. There was another chime. The quad of lights mounted in the center of each drone went from turquoise to a deep, dangerous red. Baro’s lip curled. His fingers moved a little faster.

“15 seconds before the system detects an intrusion,” said Glitz. “I suggest you hurry.”

Baro made no reply. Placed in strategic locations about the tower, the drones were linked to the automated defense system, the Arogya Medica or “Neural Sentry”, as it was colloquially known. Of all the dangers he faced in the Void, Baro liked that one least of all. The drones would launch first, their fiendish speed, heavy shielding and barrage of small-arms fires more than enough to keep potential intruders from recognizing the real danger. It started as a malevolent whisper at the back of the brain, an ultrasonic hum gone unheard by the ear, but felt like a cloud of static that itched and scraped and burrowed, until your thoughts were no longer your own. By the time the Medica’s flying apparatus had attached to the intruder’s face, they were usually too far gone to feel the filaments worming around their eyes and fusing to the tender, vulnerable nerves located at the front of the brain.

Usually, but not always.

The Neural Sentry could, and often did, take its victims by force.

“8 seconds.”

The panel gave a third chime and collapsed. The gleam of crimson light went dark.

“You wound me,” Baro scolded, letting his hand fall. “Have a little faith in my abilities!”

“What you call “faith” is merely an illogical belief in receiving a favorable outcome,” Glitz responded. “I am therefore unable to view your actions in any manner that incorrectly represents your chances of survival.”

“Glitz, you are positively dismal.”

“And you have just decreased your odds by a further 2.4%”

Baro swirled his flask and took a frothy sip of kahve, his gaze traveling around the cavernous space. Instinct told him he was the verge of something valuable – and anything valuable to the Orokin was bound to be guarded by more than just a simple pair of drones, Neural Sentry or no. He took a second, much deeper sip, partially hoping the caffeine would see to the annoying twinge of a developing headache, and set the flask on the rim of a nearby planter before advancing through the door one careful step at a time. At the top of the stairs, the Void Trader paused again, his keen eyes sweeping the walls and counting each of gleaming, golden discs set innocuously into the seams between the panels. The room also contained several large orbs.
“Oh, come now,” Baro laughed softly. “You can do better than that.”

There was an alcove at the far end of the room, framed by two curved reflecting pools and a phalanx of crystal trees. Baro crept closer, watching his footing. Pretentious as they were, the Orokin were not above basic pitfall traps, and it wouldn’t be the first time a section of floor had just collapsed beneath him. He stayed close to the balustrade, eyes constantly in motion. In addition to a handful of Orokin-era supply caches, the alcove also contained a circular dais displayed in a shaft of glistening, marzipan light. Baro’s clever hands twitched with excitement. Atop the dais was an ayatan sculpture.

The Void Trader took a deep breath. The ostentatious placement of the sculpture indicated that it was meant to irresistible. Why blight the architecture with bars and heavy doors when a honeyed Lunar Pitcher looked so much better? Baro cautiously made his way into the alcove, stepping only where he’d confirmed it was safe to do so, until he stood directly in front of the dais. Without touching it or the ayatan, Baro lowered himself into a crouch until the sculpture was at eye-level, so close he could hear the gentle whir of its sprockets.

Beautiful,” he murmured, gazing at it. “Beyond compare.”

A magnificent example of the Orokin aesthetic, Orta-class ayatan were among the system’s rarest – receptacles of harmony and sound, astonishing compositions played on instruments long forgotten, the music of the cosmos brought to life.

After a lengthy purview of their data, Baro typically sold any ayatans he came across to the hermits that inhabited the backalleys of Cetus, but in recent years, the Tenno had been anxious to pay more. Far more than the Corpus researchers plying at the Void Trader’s biweekly kiosk. Inventory was dispensed on a first come, first serve basis – and Baro Ki’Teer had a preferred customer list.

He eyed the raised, golden surface of the dais.

The trap was an obvious one. Lift the sculpture, and the now-empty pressure plate would activate the room’s deadly security apparatus. Baro rubbed thoughtfully at his chin. Ortas were the smallest of the ayatan family and very, very light. It wouldn’t take much to disturb the mechanism; a discrepancy of even a few ounces would be enough. Tapping one finger against the corner of his mouth, Baro considered his options. Linked to an insulted sub-circuit that ran beneath the floor, the dais itself wasn’t easily deactivated. He could leave the room and return with more specialized tools, but it would mean giving the Neural Sentry time to rearm. That was a mistake that’d cost many a Corpus salvage team their lives. Self-sustaining and intelligent, the Medica system would inevitably change the cipher he’d used and encode it at a much greater level of security, leaving him an uncomfortably narrow margin for error.

“Whatever you’re about to do, I advise against it,” said Glitz.

“Hush,” said Baro, moving to pick up a lump of argon from the nearby locker.

He lobbed the exotic mineral between his hands for a moment, testing its weight, and then moved closer to the ayatan, carefully pinching its delicate upper halo. He took a deep breath, then held it as he inched the mineral ingot onto the pressure plate while simultaneously sliding the ayatan off the other side. After a long moment, the sculpture was safely in Baro’s hand. His other nervously hovered over the argon, waiting to see if the mechanism had been fooled by the switch. Thirty seconds passed before he decided it had. Baro released the breath he’d been holding and grinned, holding the ayatan up for examination.

“Well, this will certainly be appreciated,” the Void Trader gloated, thinking of a flock of seagulls
crowding about for a morsel. He knew full-well that traffic on the Relays increased by a significant margin whenever he was paying it a visit.

The brief spike of adrenaline certainly hadn’t helped the growing discomfort in his temple, however. Now it had spread to encompass his right eye in a dull, vice-like grip. Baro rubbed at the area with two fingers, unable to do much through the leather cowl of his helmet.

Something dark moved out of his peripheral, glimpsed between the softness of his fingers. With a cold jolt of alarm, Baro instinctively twisted to follow it, aware that nothing besides him should be moving in the empty room. Half a second later, he found himself staring at his own reflection in the cupola of golden mirrors that wallpapered the alcove, one hand irritably pressed to his temple, the other curled protectively around the fluttering ayatan. Nothing appeared amiss—

- until the mirror smiled a familiar, dagger-like smile.

A golden shaft of energy abruptly cut across Baro’s line of sight.

With a startled yelp, the Void Trader dropped into a crouch just as an Orokin laser sliced overhead, passing through the empty space his throat had occupied not a moment before. The rest of the laser plates came on with a crackle.

Shit.

Baro sprang out of the alcove, narrowly missing the next laser and sent spinning on his heel by another. They weren’t especially fast, but they were numerous and disorienting, all of them rotating in opposite directions from each other. In two quick, smooth motions, Baro spun through a gap in the next circuit, then went prone to avoid the second. He was in decent physical condition, a fact he cultivated and maintained for exactly this purpose – and even so, he barely avoided losing his leg at the knee.

Spitting a curse, Baro planted his foot against a nearby locker and tipped it over, preventing two of the lasers from reaching him. He rolled through the breach and scrambled past the reflecting pools on all fours, ayatan clutched to his chest. There was a weighty clunk from the other side of the room. Baro looked up see the heavy door slowly coming to life.

“You must reach the exit before it closes.”

He never would have guessed.

Baro sprinted across the room, ducking and weaving through the murderous web. More laser plates were coming online, including the smattering of orbs spaced around the chamber. The door was only a meter above the floor. Taking the stairs in the single leap, Baro threw himself into a slide, furnishing himself with the perfect view of the array sparking to life on the ceiling. Glossy leather against smooth tile, he shot beneath the door and skated into the outer corridor just as the last few plates came fully online, dropping a gate of lasers just in front of the threshold. With a clatter of Orokin gears, the door locked shut behind him.

Baro flopped against the tiles, staring at the vaulted ceiling above. The ache in his temple had exploded to full-blown throbbing, pulsing to the frenetic beat of his heart. He dropped his head back with a grimace, happy to remain spread-eagled on the floor. The ayatan fluttered weakly against his palm. He lifted it up to look at it. It hadn’t been the pressure-plate; if he’d triggered the mechanism, the trap would have armed immediately.

“Glitz,” he panted. “Care to explain?”
“I have run diagnostic regressions on local systems,” the female Cephalon told him. “There appears to have been a minor decrease in power at the moment of activation. I also detected another tremor in the local current. Pendula are registering approximately 1.3% less output than before.”

His heart-rate slowing, Baro attempted to follow that information to its inevitable conclusion. He hadn’t felt a tremor, but the treasure room was better insulated than the outlying launch bay. It must have upset the delicate balance of the pressure-plate, he concluded. If he hadn’t turned around when he did, the laser might’ve sliced through the back of his neck. As for his smirking reflection, Void Sickness was a well-documented symptom of exposure to that alien domain, resulting in anything from minor confusion and disorientation, to full-blown audiovisual hallucinations and dangerous levels of paranoia. The Orokin had called it the “realm that watches”. The Grineer had a more descriptive moniker that Baro refused to dirty his tongue with.

Either way, he was surprised the Void’s adverse effects were setting in so soon. He’d developed a resistance to them over many years, and learned to gauge when it’d built up to levels that might impede his reason. He turned his wrist over and held it above his face. The numbers on his chrono read a little over six hours, less than half the time he normally allotted for personal safety. Baro rapped the bezel with one glitter-varnished fingernail.

“Time since my arrival?” he questioned aloud.

“Six hours, fifteen minutes, forty-six seconds, Mr. Ki’Teer.”

The chrono wasn’t malfunctioning, then. It was possible that the tower sat in an unusually strong pocket of Void energy, thus the increased timetable of symptoms. Baro slowly sat up. Setting the ayatan on the floor, he reached up to adjust his helmet, but as his questing fingers moved up the back of it, he felt a sharp, machined edge where there should have been a decorative ornament. His mouth puckered into a frown.

That was how close he’d come to that last array, apparently.

He gingerly climbed to his feet and was glad his satchel hadn’t been loaded with anything valuable, seeing as he’d all but fallen on top of it. A greater cause for concern was the fact that the tower’s Pendulas seemed to be malfunctioning, or at least trying to compensation for erratic changes in the Void. Baro now knew why the tower had suddenly been visible to scans. The storm hadn’t cleared; the tower had risen out of it, either in response to a system-wide glitch or as an act of self-preservation. As Glitz had already inferred, however, the whole structure could easily sink back down before he’d had a chance to thoroughly explore it, reemerging anywhere from next month to never. Baro made a sour face. If the ayatan was any indication, he’d be giving up on a treasure trove.

“Glitz, go over the tower’s schematics and mark all routes to the personnel cabins,” Baro ordered, tucking the ayatan into his satchel. A vial of painkillers rattled in the side pocket. He unzipped it and washed several of the vibrant green pills down with a swig of kahve. It’d gone unpleasantly cold.

The sound of the Void continued to pulse, unheard by the conscious mind, but lodged itself in the subconscious like a sliver of glass. Something echoed in the distance – something suspiciously like laughter – and Baro grimaced, unconsciously racking his neck back and forth to loosen the tension there.

“Also, put on another pot of kahve.”
After mentally writing off whatever else had been inside the treasure room, Baro returned the ayatan to his ship and refilled his flask with piping hot liquid. It would be some time before he could drink it, as Glitz had kept it simmering at a temperature normally used to eradicate deadly bacteria. Packing it into his satchel, Baro decided on a course that would take him past the commissary.

While significantly smaller than the upper galleries, the tower’s personnel cabins were no less opulent, especially given that they were occupied for no more than a week before their occupants were rotated out of the Void in order to prevent incidents of homicide and violent psychosis. Or at least, they would be opulent if Baro could see them. Looking into the dark corridor, where the light of the upper floor dissolved into inky black, the Void Trader suppressed a sigh. With a petulant click of his fingers, he ordered the Osprey to activate its lights.

“All sublevel faculties appear to be in a state of low power output,” said Glitz. “I can reroute, but this will redirect power from the reactors and decrease Pendula stability by a further 5.12%. Should I turn on the lights?”

“Obviously not!”

“That is the most sensible decision you’ve made all evening.”

Irritable and tired, Baro snapped at her in a dialect no longer spoken, of a desert people no longer amongst the living. When Glitz made no reply, he rolled his neck again and moved into the corridor. There was no music this time, only the steady, staccato click of his boots. Here and there, potted crystal trees cast pools of shimmering light, their branches unkempt and snarled, clawing at the walls like beasts in a cage. Baro frowned at them, unnerved for reasons he couldn’t quite name.

“You heartrate and cortisol levels indicate an unhealthy amount of stress,” Cephalon Glitz reported. “Accordingly, I added the appropriate measure of supplements to your beverage. Which you are not drinking.”

“I don’t recall giving you permission to tamper with my kahve, Glitz,” Baro growled, stopping in front of a door and tapping its recessed control panel. Thankfully, those particular systems were still very much online.

“You implied consent when you placed me in charge of your well-being,” the Cephalon rejoined.

The door popped open with a hiss, exhaling a sweetly scented gush of air that hadn’t been touched or contaminated since the room’s last occupant had sealed the door behind him. Baro leaned aside and let the Osprey go first, shining its light on the lightly curving walls. Everything was the color of gold or ivory bone. A fitting aesthetic for a dead empire, Baro thought, entering the room himself after a moment. There was a matching nightstand and bed, both very low to the ground, as
was common in Orokin culture, and a large desk inset with glistening, opalescent panels. Baro set his fingertips on it and found the polished surface unusually cold to the touch. He removed his hand.

There was a statuette in the wall-niche, a twisting, double-helix of rare red crystal, each arm terminating in a sharp point. Baro had a disturbing flash of his own hand driving it into someone’s throat, popping their esophagus with a warm, infinitely pleasant gush of blood. He shook his head, pushing the grisly thought away, and secured the sculpture in the bottom of the Osprey’s crate before setting off for the next room.

Despite their inherent grandeur, however, they were all very spartan in terms of paraphernalia. It took nearly an hour, and over a dozen cabins, before Baro found something that made the entire search worthwhile. It was propped in the corner next to the bed, a vision of glossy black lacquer over Martian cypress, its slender neck scintillating with gold inlay. It was enough to take Baro’s breath away despite his increasingly bad mood.

White gloves on, the thought of even a single fingerprint on that gleaming black surface making him shudder, he lifted the shawzin from its cradle and held it up like his firstborn child. “Well, now,” he crooned, turning it over to examine the back. There wasn’t a crack or blemish in sight. “How about that?”

There was a silver flute on the bedside table as well, right next to another fluttering Orta and several crystalline datapads. Baro caught his lower lip in his teeth, the sound escaping him anything but decent. He gestured for the Osprey to put down the crate and immediately lined its cluttered interior with the remainder of the packing gel. Nothing was going to damage that perfect, beautiful shawzin. Baro even snatched the silks from the bed and swaddled the instrument inside them, his hands achingly gentle despite the thumping knot in his temple. The painkillers had not helped at all.

“By my calculation, your beverage flask is not designed to maintain optimum temperature for more than 45 minutes,” Glitz pressed.

“You want to calculate something, calculate the Void-damned sound in the comms!” Baro hissed, giving his helmet a sharp, irritable smack. He’d been hearing it for a while now; that infernal tap, tapping from the galley. He wondered if it’d ever gone away at all, or if he’d simply been too distracted to notice. Either way, it had gotten louder, or at least more persistent, as if something was rapping on the side of his skull.

“There is no ambient noise present in any of the communication channels, Mr. Ki’Teer.”

“Check ultrasonic and electromagnetic frequencies.”

“I have already done so,” Glitz continued patiently. “Comms are clear of interference.”

“Glitz, don’t tell me nothing’s there! I can hear-”

Baro cut himself off, a cold prickle of unease going down his spine. His hand flashed across his gauntlet, bringing up the unit’s holographic display. A quick check of the tower’s systems revealed nothing in the way of silent alarms. But… of course there weren’t. Glitz would have warned him if she had detected any.

Despite his initial stab of fear, the sound and grating headache didn’t seem to be the work of a particularly sneaky Neural Sentry. Yet he was certain the two were connected. He was missing something. A tight knot formed in his gut.
Glitz would have warned him…

Wouldn’t she?

She had access to his personal HUD and could easily remove the pertinent information. Baro’s thoughts began to tumble. What reason would she have to conceal a potential situation from him? She was annoyingly prompt when it came to warning him of danger, up to and including a notice to watch his step when disembarking, because there was a quote “5% chance he could twist an ankle”.

The white gloves had suddenly turned hot and restrictive.

Baro tossed them inside the crate.

Cephalons were programmed to be trustworthy and reliable, but they’d also had been programmed to self-preserve. He’d threatened to overwrite her personality precepts. Not the first occasion he’d done so, admittedly, but this time had obviously been the straw that broke the kubrow’s back. If Glitz had interpreted his banter as a threat, then the quickest way to guarantee her own safety would be to cause a deficit in his. Baro swallowed, his eyes straying towards the door – a door she could easily lock via remote, trapping him in a ready-made tomb. If she cut life support, it would only be a matter of hours before the oxygen ran out.

Baro casually moved outside the cabin, his skin itchy and crawling with a sudden outbreak of sweat. Surely he was misreading the situation. Glitz had been his companion for over a decade.

“Your epinephrine levels have risen by 13% since my last report,” said Glitz. “I recommend you drink the kahve before you are once again complaining about its lack of palatable temperature.”

Ah, so that’s how she planned to do it. Not slow suffocation, but something she’d slipped into his flask. She didn’t have access to any poisons, not in the traditional sense of the word, but there were numerous substances aboard the Nefer’Tem that could be employed to the same effect, including pretty much anything in the ship’s onboard trauma kit. Baro swallowed hard. He’d given the Cephalon too much access to critical systems. He should have retained some sort of fail-safe.

He had to get back to his ship.

Taking a handheld light from his satchel, Baro hurried east along the personnel section, leaving the Osprey to hover in the last cabin. He had to keep his manner casual otherwise the Cephalon was bound to get wise and trigger another Pendula quake, or unleash the Neural Sentry she obviously had chomping at the bit. Open cabins leered at him from both sides like hungry, gaping maws, the occasional gleam of reflected light shining out from their depths.

“You’ve forgotten the Osprey.”

“I didn’t forget,” said Baro, keeping his voice level. “Merely a change of plans.”

Several moments passed in silence, broken only by the echo of his footsteps.

“If you intend to return to the upper floors, you are going the wrong way,” Glitz informed him smugly, which of course meant he was heading in the right direction. “Shall I mark a waypoint on your HUD?”

And lead him directly into some fiendish Orokin snare, no doubt. Baro set his jaw, feeling an icy
trickle of perspiration ooze from beneath his cowl. He kept walking. He was a veteran of over a hundred expeditions into the Void. He would not be outplayed by a Cephalon.

“What are you doing?”

Baro ignored her. He reached a T-junction at the end of the corridor, went to make the corner – and found that he couldn’t remember which direction he’d come from. The way into the personnel section had been straight and uninterrupted. There hadn’t even been a junction before… had there? Baro couldn’t remember. No matter. As always, he’d left the doors open on the cabins he’d already explored. It would be a simple matter to follow them back to the galley. He urgently panned his light back and forth, his breath coming quicker.

The rooms were sealed in both directions.

“Glitz, reopen the doors,” he hissed through clenched teeth.

“I have not closed any doors,” said Glitz. “I must ask that you cease all forward momentum and retrace your steps. The local current is becoming increasingly unstable. Another upset to the Pendula is inevitable, and you are without your Osprey.”

“Is that a threat?” Baro spat, taking a few steps down the left-hand passage.

There was a heavy pause.

“Why would you perceive it as such?” Glitz questioned slowly.

“Oh, don’t play coy with me,” Baro laughed without humor. There was a curving set of stairs in front of him. He didn’t remember any stairs except for his initial descent from the galley. These were not those, otherwise they’d be bathed in light pouring down from above. He must have come the other way.

“When I get back to the ship, I’ll do more than adjust your personality. I will completely deactivate you,” said Baro. He was tipping his hand, but he didn’t care. Glitz already knew he was onto her.

“That’s why you sealed the cabins, isn’t it? To keep me from finding my way back. Well, it’s going to take more than that, you hear me?”

“If you are referring to the doors in your immediate area, they are sealed because you have not yet explored in this sector. It is not like you to forget basic pathfinding, Mr. Ki’Teeer. This is very troubling. Please turn around. Void energy is increase-”

Her voice ended abruptly. A low-frequency rumble shuddered the tower, softly at first, then with growing intensity. Baro leaned his back against the wall, his mouth set in a hard line as the structure went through a slow, nauseating twirl felt mostly in his stomach and inner ear. The rap, tap, tapping had reached a crescendo, it’s terribly perfect rhythm driving fissures through his brain. Baro inhaled the stench of diesel fumes and charred flesh.

“Sprae oot. Traf ramn kle skoom!”

Baro’s head snapped around to look at the darkened stairs. The harsh, mushy syllables were unmistakable, the voices impossible to forget. Each and every Grineer shared the same malformed vocal cords, after all.

Stifling a cry, Baro moved sideways along the wall. If Cephalons had the ability to feel pain, he
would have sworn to start ripping out fingernails. Glitz knew better than to try and kill him with the
tower itself, he couldn’t help but note, a curl of self-assured arrogance winding through his chest.
He knew every Orokin defense system ever made; how to avoid them and, if there was no other
option, how to disable them – but he couldn’t deactivate a hail of bullets. She’d gotten someone
else to do her dirty work.

They were close. He could hear them.

Fear drenched Baro’s senses like a cold bath. He struggled to keep it down, struggled to think
rationally. He could activate the tower’s defenses and see how those Grineer dogs liked dealing
with the Neural Sentry. A smile sliced across the Void Trader’s face, but it was short-lived. There
were a lot of Grineer. Twenty, thirty – at least a hundred. Baro didn’t know why that number came
to him, only that it did. He fixated on it, turned the awful implication over and over in his aching
head, until it’d seared in place behind his retinas.

“Ran’s tet huh ket arai!”

Footsteps pounded on the stairs, and Baro did the only sensible thing left to do.

He ran.

Bolting down the corridor at a full sprint, he expected to feel a hail of bullets tunnel into his spine,
but the Grineer did not open fire. Maybe they wanted him alive. He would be a treasure trove of
information regarding Orokin sites they could strip for parts to rivet onto their chugging, clanking
ships.

Baro ran even faster, fighting his holster for his Lex. It took him three tries to release the safety,
only for his boot to catch on one of the corridor’s many recessed pylons. Baro flew forward, his
momentum hurling him at least another yard to land on his stomach, face cracking against the
slick, unyielding tile. His lip split open and a hot trickle of blood oozed down his chin. Grit dug
into his palms as he pushed himself back up, sticking to the sweat-damp skin of his cheek.

Red, rusted sand covered the floor -

-and the breeze that suddenly gusted into Baro’s face was dry with desert heat.

The Void Trader heaved himself up with a scream, blindly flinging a shot into the corridor behind
him. Something shattered with a tinkle of broken crystal. Baro didn’t wait to see what he’d hit.

Firing off another round, he fled into the hot, grasping darkness.

Baro lost all sense of time and direction.

He could have been running for hours or days, the endless, golden corridors stretching out before
him. His legs burned. His lungs filled with fire, laboring to drag in more air than they could hold.
And still, the Grineer horde was never more than a dozen paces behind. Why waste ammo when he’d eventually collapse? Blood from his split lip sprayed and foamed with every rasping breath. Whenever the Grineer were involved, the dead were the lucky ones. Captured prisoners were taken to labor camps or sold into slavery. Most didn’t last a year.

There was a faint glow in the corridor ahead. Baro put on another frantic burst of speed, hurtling through an elaborately tall, cylindrical doorway and into the massively empty space beyond. Shadows clung to the edges of the room, but Baro could tell it was vaguely circular in design, with enormous towers the size of ancient trees spaced evenly about the rim. The pattern was more or less repeated in the center of the room, with a raised dais surrounded by three organically curved pylons, their gilded crowns arching towards each other like a broken halo. Beneath them, floating lights shimmered and danced like disembodied eyes.

Stumbling with exhaustion, Baro made his way up the stairs leading to the dais. He was making himself more visible to the Grineer, but he didn’t have anywhere left to go – and not enough strength left to search the huge room. There was a hot ball of pain behind his left knee, most likely indicating a torn ligament. He’d run too far, too fast. Gritting his teeth, Baro limped into the center of the glow and let his shoulder thud against one of the pylons, his chest heaving. Something vaguely like a female voice scratched through his comms, all coherent meaning lost in thick static. Baro neither noticed nor cared.

With shaking hands, he dropped the empty magazine from his Lex and fumbled to slot another. Assuming perfect aim, he had enough left to score eight lethal hits against the Grineer – seven if he wanted to hold back a shot in order to avoid being taken alive.

All around him, sand trickled from unseen gaps in the ceiling. Baro could hardly breathe the thickness of the air, heavy with sweat and fear and death. Somewhere above him, surrounded by an entourage of wheeling eyes, the sun burned hot and fierce. Baro was shivering despite the feverish heat of it, his right eye a solid mass of pain so severe it was causing halos in his vision. He couldn’t line up the magazine. His hands were shaking too badly. The clammy squeeze of his collar was strangling him like thick, oily fingers.

With sudden, strange desperation, the Void Trader clawed at his glove-suit, desperate to get it away from his throat. Tearing his collar open with a little pop, Baro jerked it down past his collarbone. He also tore at the fine, expensive gold chain he wore around his neck. It bit into his skin but did not break, violently hoisting a tiny glass vial filled with Martian sand. It banged against his knuckles and the Void Trader instinctively grabbed at it, all other concerns submerged under the sudden, new fear that it would fall to the ground and shatter, spilling its precious contents. His hand closed around the vial-

-and all at once, the memory of it, the idea of it, pierced through the membrane suffocating his thoughts.

The Grineer came from the nightmares of a child. The footsteps pounding against the darkness, always circling but never drawing any nearer, were not the sloppy, disorganized beat of an Arid regiment, but the heartbeat of the Void itself. That rhythm… that terrible, relentless rhythm. Baro curled his knuckles against his temple and felt something burst in his sinuses, filling his nose with blood. A soft whimper of pain escaped his lips. He tilted his head back. The desert sun continued to wheel above him, but it… it wasn’t made of fire and heat, he realized, only pixels of holographic light.

“Void Sickness,” he croaked. “Oh, gods.”

The Orokin had not been unreasonable in their fear. The Void was a place where all laws inverted,
where even reality was a fluid, malleable thing. It fed on weakness, exposed every flaw, and turned ordinary thoughts into a hellscape of clutching, crawling paranoia. The Void didn’t just watch. It reached inside and twisted.

Baro slid down to sit at the base of the pylon. He’d heard sounds in the Void before: inhuman whispers and haunting cries of pain, a choir of Orokin voices lamenting their splendid house of gold. He’d also encountered apparitions of light and energy with no face, name or purpose, doomed to wander between consoles in an endless mimicry of life, and seen shadows out of the corner of his eye.

But not once had he been driven to the sorry state he was in now.

“Oh, you sorry, stupid fool,” the Void Trader moaned.

He’d known something was different today, that the Void was too strong, its insidious influence progressing too rapidly, and he’d willfully ignored what should have been an obvious warning. He should have known better. He did know better! His mental and emotional tolerances had built up over many years, but there was a reason he only spent fourteen hours in the Void at any one time, and only twenty-one in any given month.

This was his second trip in the same week.

His comms lit up with a burst of static.

“I have rerouted around the interference, Mr. Ki’Teer,” Glitz announced primly, startling him with the sudden volume and proximity of her voice. “These fluxes in the local current appear to be happening at semi-regular intervals, leaving you approximately 45 minutes until the next incident. Pendula now register an output of only 72% normal capacity. …Mr. Ki’Teer? Are you conscious?”

There was a long pause. Then, in an upsettingly small voice, “Sir, please answer me.”

“I’m here, Glitz,” Baro rasped, shame heating his face.

“Good. Your irrational behavior these past sixteen minutes is very concerning. I believe you are suffering from the detrimental effects of the Void and recommend immediate evacuation, before symptoms get any worse.” Her evaluation of him was clinical and pessimistic, and Baro’s eyes nearly went dim with tears. Inaros, what a fool he’d been.

“Mark a route on my HUD,” he mumbled, trying to gather himself.

“No. Your sense of direction is obviously malfunctioning,” said Glitz. “I have accessed your Osprey by remote and am piloting it towards your current location. You will follow the unit once it has arrived.”

Baro would have been offended if the Cephalon’s statement hadn’t been embarrassingly true. He acknowledged the order to wait and slouched against the pylon, trying to shift into a more comfortable position. His knee had already begun to stiffen and the ache in his head had not dissipated – merely ceased to cloud his mind. To distract himself, he watched the lights above his head. No, not just mere lights, the Void Trader realized, finally seeing the obvious.

Mercury… Venus… Earth… Mars… a hundred tiny, tumbling shards that made up the asteroid belt, and the Jovian Titans at the edge of known space: the Origin System rendered in exquisite
detail. Orokin script flickered in the hologram, and while Baro’s understanding of the spoken language amounted to that of a small child, he could read the calligraphy easily enough. He wondered what sorcery kept the information up to date.

In any other circumstances, the superb beauty and the slow, hypnotic tumble of light would have invited him to relax, but darkness lurked in the imitation cosmos, screaming faces and other anxious visions manifesting in the gaps between planets. Across the dais, the Void Trader’s own reflection watched him from a shiny panel of forma, alternating between smiling at him, laughing manically, and placing the Lex against his temple, right where the pain was the strongest.

Baro closed his eyes, quelling his harrowing urge to panic by reciting something familiar and comforting. He’d shunned his past, buried it in an unguent jar deep inside his heart, and convinced himself it no longer had any power over him. It’d been a lie, of course. He’d named his ship after the first sunlight of creation (a charm of protection and good-luck) and remembered the prayer his mother used to sing as that same sun disappeared below the western horizon. The only difference now was that he’d ceased to feel bitter, and the words no longer tasted like ash. Baro clutched the vial to his chest, unconsciously rocking back and forth, all but folded against his updrawn knee.

*I rise like the sun above the olive trees, like the moon above the date palms.*

*Where there is light, I shall be.*

Laughter sounded somewhere in the Void, giving birth to a distorted echo, a sinister cascade of whispers that included the Grineer, the Tenno, even that two-bit hustler Maroo – whom Baro regarded with quiet scorn. Voices skittered at the edge of his mind like hungry rats, waiting for him to succumb.

“Where there is darkness, there shall be none of me,” Baro continued firmly, voicing his next words aloud despite the thin, high tone of his voice. “I rise like the moon above the date palms. I am counted as one among the stars.”

Baro felt a new light against his eyelids and reluctantly cracked them open to see a bright, bobbing glow approaching from the corridor. A moment later his Osprey hovered into the room, spotted him, and swiftly made its way over, loaded crate swinging jauntily beneath. Baro’s anxiety flared. He couldn’t help it. The Osprey was armed. If he’d been wrong, if Glitz should decide-

“*Come with me, Mr. Ki’Teer.*”

Planting his feet, Baro shoved himself up using the pylon for support, teeth bared in a pained grimace. The Osprey moved in close, buffeting him with rotor-wash. “*I knew it. You are dying,*” Glitz observed morosely. “*I will contact Larunda and have them prepare the ICU.*”

“It’s just a twisted knee!” Baro squawked.

He hobbled after the Osprey, leaving the stellar observatory behind.

Ten minutes later, exhausted and drenched in sweat, he’d reached his ship unmolested. Of course he did. His feelings of persecution were only a symptom of the Void itself, and not the result of any real danger. Baro made his way into the hold and sealed the loading ramp behind him, grateful for the ship’s comparatively dim, fragrant interior.

“I have already gone through all pre-flight diagnostics,” said Glitz. “We are ready to depart.”

She engaged the *Nefer’Tem’s* maneuvering thrusters and the ship lifted smoothly into the air.
Wobbling his way to the cockpit, Baro dropped into the pilot’s seat as his Cephalon went through the necessary maneuvers, one eye squeezed shut against the relentless pressure in his head. The sound was still there, hovering on the fold between audible and ultrasound, and dancing the tarantella against his inflamed neurons.

Slanting and weaving through the currents, Glitz activated the ship’s Void Key without having to be told. As the electromagnetic bubble knit itself around the ship, an image skittered through Baro’s mind and followed him through the fissure, a vision of eyes staring into his skull, sclera gone utterly black, pupils like swirling golden galaxies spackled with the heat of dying stars. Baro inhaled sharply, and suddenly the Void was gone.

Outside the viewscreen, there was only the calm, limitless black of normal space.

“Void Jump successful. All systems nominal.”

Baro wilted in his chair with a little noise of relief. It was if someone had taken a nail out of his temple, leaving only the cold, clammy pressure of his cowl. He reached up and removed it, letting the ornate helmet plop to the floor next to his chair. The bridge was mercifully silent except for the distant vibration of the engines and the soft, nonintrusive beeping on the consoles. Baro reached up and raked both hands through his stark white hair, hiding his face in the blessed warmth of his palms. If the Neural Sentry had come upon him while he’d been out of his mind, or if his hysterical flight had triggered one the tower’s numerous traps...

“I nearly got myself killed,” he breathed.

Admitting the error took away some of its sting, but Glitz was not inclined to be merciful.

“That is an accurate statement. Did I not inform you that you take too many risks?” There was an irascible note of smugness in her otherwise monotone voice. “You are lucky to have me as ship’s Cephalon, seeing as you are unable to properly maintain yourself. Do you wish me to brew more of your caffeinated beverage?”

Baro huffed a laugh, but Glitz wasn’t done.

“You should know, however, that kahve – especially in the amounts you drink – is known to cause sleeplessness, acid reflux, arteriosclerosis, high blood pressure, and a .15% decrease in bone density,” the female Cephalon was quick to lecture him, rattling off a list of side-effects.

“It also yellows your teeth,” she added snidely.

Baro let out a gasp. “By the stars, not my teeth!” he bemoaned.

The pair lapsed into comfortable silence. It had been an appalling day, the Void Trader concluded wearily, but despite the nervous shivers still cascading down his arms, he’d escaped intact. Mostly. His knee felt like it was filled with broken glass, his face was covered in dried blood, and the sour stench of his body was starting to become apparent. Baro needed a long soak, an ice pack, and a massive glass of cabernet sauvignon – not necessarily in that order.

“Take us to Larunda. And as for the kahve,” he added, wagging a finger in the direction of one of the audio pickups, “you can brew another pot when you learn to do it properly. It doesn’t need boiled like you’re purifying a tank of Grineer sewage!”

“Considering the, ahem, “source” of the product, I do not think I am overacting,” Glitz sniffed.
Nezha was barely out of his Liset before he was almost plowed under by an eager mob of Corpus bankers and executives, not to mention a handful of well-to-do Ostrons on their way to the 2nd floor. He twitched a bemused smile, making his way through the Relay at a more sedate pace.

“Honestly, Operator,” Ordis complained. “What could he possibly be giving away today?”

“Baro Ki’Teer, give something away?” Nezha asked, his tone faintly amused.

“Ah, yes. You are correct, Operator, as always. Do you think a round of negotiations–brrrrzzz, paaaaainful torturer–will convince him to lower his prices? We could employ Valkyr for the task!”

“I doubt it.”

“We could try,” said Ordis encouragingly. “I know a few methods of my own!”

Nezha chuckled as he cut across the main concourse. He was not going to elbow his way through a mob in order to conduct his business with the Void Trader. He would wait until traffic had calmed down. Until then, he had several things to discuss with Cephalon Simaris. To either side of the corridor, heads turned to surreptitiously follow his progress, then just as quickly returned to the gleaming copper floor.

It was, however, quite impossible to escape Simaris’ pedantic clutches without engaging in a discourse worthy of the Orokin senate, and it was with great relief that Nezha briskly walked – he was Tenno and did not run from anything less than an imploding reactor – from the Cephalon’s chamber over an hour later. As he’d hoped, the flow of people and personnel had slowed to a more manageable level, and he was able to make his way to the Void Trader’s kiosk relatively unmolested.

“A little beyond your reach? Perhaps a Darvo Deal would be more your speed?” Baro was saying to an older woman with regretfully bright pink lips stretched over a hollow, skull-like grimace, giving her a mien not dissimilar to a taxidermied horse. She flashed Baro a disgusted look.

“Do you have any idea who I am?” she glowered.

“No, nor do I care to!” Baro laughed. “Do come again when you have the necessary funds.”

Glaring at the Void Trader as if hoping the force of her spite would flash cook his intestines, the woman startled violently as Nezha drew near, the lazuline glow of his Warframe puddling on the ground at his feet – neither of which stayed on the tile once he ceased moving, bobbing gently...
about a half meter above the floor. The woman’s faded blue eyes widened. She clutched her handbag and backed away as though he were the carrier of some disfiguring disease, hurrying away down the concourse as fast as her thin legs would take her.

“Mind you don’t break a hip, madam,” Baro muttered under his breath, switching his attention to Nezha. “What a pleasant surprise, Tenno. I thought you might have forgotten the communique I sent you.”

“The system is… very busy,” Nezha allowed softly, dipping his head in greeting.

“Not that I don’t appreciate the ostentatious display of your Void powers,” Baro added, one side of his mouth lifting into a clever smirk. “You do take assassination contracts, do you not? What would you charge to rid me of that… ahem, unfortunate creature?”

Nezha noiselessly put his feet back on the ground, directing a pointed look at the Void’s Trader’s wares.

“Now, now, Tenno. What kind of precedent would that set for my other customers?” Baro chided him warmly, turning around to rifle through the Orokin storage locker set into the back of his kiosk. Much harder to crack than any of the TITAN-class armored safes on the current market, but Nezha also suspected it had less to do with security and everything to do with aesthetic. The Tenno folded his arms to wait, his thoughts drifting.

He hadn’t been lying in regards to the delay. Despite the swath he and the other Tenno were carving through the system’s warring factions, there never seemed to be any lack of things that required their attention. And there were… other concerns, besides. Despite further discussions with the Red Veil, neither Palladino nor any of her acolytes could explain the connection between Rell’s breakdown and the outbreak of mass hysteria that’d compelled at least a quarter of the syndicate to commit murder, suicide, or both. Seven days later, Nezha was still coming across bloody scrawlings and Red Veil adherents who’d apparently beaten themselves to death with a length of chain, or driven a knife into the tender hollow of their right temple. It was nothing if not disturbing, even for a Tenno.

“Here you are,” said Baro, handing him a long, thin box. “You had better appreciate the work it took to acquire that. It’s not easy fulfilling custom requests, so I trust you recall the sum I attached to your communique?”

As if he could forget. If Ordis had possessed a jaw, Nezha was certain it’d dropped to the floor the previous morning as they both read the six-figure sum. And that hadn’t even included the ducats. Nezha reached into his pouch and withdrew the same amount, which Baro took with a winning smile.

“We should do this again sometime,” he said.

He sounded tired, and Nezha noticed that Baro’s smile – while entirely sincere – was pulled just a little too tight, showing off too many of the Void Trader’s dazzlingly white teeth. Nezha’s eyeless gaze looked him up and down, assessing the man’s body language, what he’d said and what he hadn’t. He was not so adept at reading auras as his Tenno sister, she of the kuva, who focused on healing and restoration rather than destruction, but Nezha’s powers had grown strong since his final awakening – and Baro’s life-force had grown muddy grey roots, poisoned by the deadly adularescence of Void energy coating his skin. Such energy had always been there in small, residual amounts, but never this dense. Never this obvious. Reaching out with his senses, Nezha discovered he could feel the jagged lick of it against his mind, echoing with an all-too familiar rhythm. He was glad the Void Trader couldn’t see the uneasy expression that flitted across his
“You’ve spent too much time in the Void,” said Nezha. “You should rest before it does you harm.”

Baro startled, then flashed him an uncomfortable look. Not angry, but certainly not happy either. “Didn’t your mother teach you that it’s rude to pry, Tenno?” he countered lightly, but with an underlying current of steel that warned against further questioning.

Nezha shifted the long package under his arm, sketched a bow, and moved away from the kiosk. When he was about two meters away, he turned around and looked back. Baro regarded him warily.

“If you have need of my assistance, you know how to reach me,” the Tenno intoned softly, the words heavy with things both obvious and implied. Baro’s mouth gave an unhappy twitch. He nodded once, and Nezha walked away without another word.

He returned to his Liset and sank into a meditative hover as Ordis set a rendezvous course with the Orbiter, carefully unwrapping the parchment from the padded case. With a click, he undid the catch and opened it on his lap. Before all other weapons, Tenno mastered the skana – and this one was a stunning example, its lightly curving blade enameled with energized prisma crystal. Nezha wrapped his fingers around the hilt and held it up. As expected, the weapon was exquisitely balanced, latent Void energy rippling down the blade in visible clouds. Nezha nodded to himself, satisfied. It had been well-worth the price.

After the incident with the Stalker and Hunhow, Demon of the Old War, Nezha had been unable to shake an uncomfortable sense of foreboding. The Sentients had not been extinguished. Like the dreaded Eidolons that roamed the plains of old Earth, they merely lay silent, waiting for the proper moment to awaken. The Tenno had defeated them once before, but only just. If the Sentients rose again, there would be no Orokin dreadnaughts with railguns powerful enough to crack a moon in two, no Dax soldiers to assist them in battle, even if such men had only served as harriers and decoys.

The Tenno would have to face them alone.

Brave as the Ostrons were, fishing spears and hand-forged zaws wouldn’t stand a chance against the enemy that the Orokin, in their infinite hubris, had failed to shackle, nor would the people of Solaris United. Their unbreakable spirit would only ensure they died on their feet, flashing an upraised middle finger rather than groveling on the blood-soaked earth. Their one weapon against the Sentients was the Void itself, the very thing that truly made them Tenno. Weapons like this skana were a second-hand countermeasure at best, but even so, Nezha would rather go into battle with a slight advantage versus none at all.

At his back, he sensed the noiseless stirring of a presence, the sudden weight of attention pressing between his shoulder blades like a bar of molten iron. Nezha resolutely did not turn. He pressed his eyes shut.

“Hey, kiddo.”

_Hey, kiddo._

_Hey, kiddo._
-o- In Egyptian mythology, the young god Nefertem (also spelled Nefertum or Nefer’Tem) represented both the first sunlight at the creation of the world and the scent of the Egyptian blue lotus. Some of his epitaphs were “He Who is Beautiful” and “Water-Lily of the Sun”. He was a symbol of fragrance and beauty and, as a minor protection deity, was commonly invoked as a good-luck charm.

-o- Go ahead and Google “kopi luwak”. I dare you.

-o- “Sprae oot. Traf ramn kle skoom!” – “Spread out. Track down the scum!”

-o- “Ran’s tet huh ket arai!” – “Don’t let him get away!”

-o- The idea for the beautiful Orokin “Stellar Chart Room” comes from unused Warframe concept art by Branislav Perkovic on ArtStation. https://www.artstation.com/artwork/vq1Na

-o- Baro’s prayer is from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Although it is certainly a funerary text, the actual title is closer to The Book of Spells for Going Forth by Day. A more apt translation to English would be the Egyptian Book of Life.

-o- Easter Egg Hunt! Can you find them? There are two plugs at a certain trilogy of psychological horror games, and several references which may or may not have compared Baro to a particular character from the Marvel Cinematic Universe. I think y’all know damn well which one, LOL. Headcannon has been established; it’s only a matter of time before the leopard-fur cape makes an appearance.

The Burning Cold

Chapter Summary

Winter itself seemed to emanate from the Warframe’s presence; neither the crystalline needle of ice nor the chill grip of space, but something else entirely… almost indescribable… as if the frozen, fathomless dark between the stars could somehow burn.

Chapter Notes

Swazdo-lah, Tenno! Today is the 1 year anniversary of *Hail to the Jewels in the Lotus* and we’ve got a new chapter to celebrate. There will be many more in the upcoming months, most of them linked in indirect (and not so indirect) ways. Without revealing too much, I can say that they’ll shed light on Nezha’s past – and include a return to Fortuna, where something hungers in the darkness of the vents. The events of *Rising Tide* and *Empyrean* will also feature prominently in several. In the meantime, enjoy our first visit to the Plains of Eidolon!

**UPDATE 8/8/2020**
Everyone, head on over to Rahetalius’ YouTube channel for an INCREDIBLE (and currently ongoing) series of Leverian-esque "Development Reports" on individual Warframes! Blending a nice narrative voice with plenty of fanlore and pseudoscientific specs on how frame Abilities/Syndicate modules actually function, I hereby announce this one as cannon. Go check it out: [Frost](#)

**Spoilers**

NONE

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Some say the world will end in fire. Others say in ice.
Batu left his village with the burgeoning dawn. Together with the sturdy woven basket on his back, he carried a small rockpick and a Sunpoint-class plasma drill, purchased second-hand from a smarmy Corpus trader who’d tried to boost the price well beyond what the tool had been worth. Batu considered it a worthwhile investment despite the aggravation. Sunpoint drills were far superior to the cheaper, less reliable Nosam cutters and had always helped him in locating some of the rarer things the Eidolon-Moh had to offer.

He reached Gara Toht within the hour, its eerie blue waters sparkling in the sunlight. The Sentient’s fallen crown threw a long shadow onto the opposite bank and Batu tried to contemplate – not for the first time in his sixty-some years of life – how big the whole monster must have been. Like all who grew up in the shadow of the Unum, Batu had been raised on stories of the Glass Warrior who’d brought the flying mountain to its knees. And though Gara was gone, others of her kind had reawakened, cladeless remnants of a once-golden empire. The mightiest that had ever been. Batu repressed a little shiver. He’d never seen one in the flesh, but his late brother claimed he had. A Warrior-God in shimmering grey, painted in lines of blood.

The morning was already hot. Batu adjusted the brim of his hat and continued past the lake, moving deeper into the steppes. Condros circled lazily overhead, waiting for him to flush out a kuaka or two. The Plains had moved on from the rapid, unpredictable weather that defined the springtime months, but clouds gathered in the direction of the sea, heavy with the promise of a rain. Batu thought he would be glad of it come late afternoon.

Several hours later – he was walking slowly, with no desire to rush – the patchy grassland gave way to low hills, and Batu arrived at a vein of exposed minerals he’d discovered halfway up the slope. He removed the dead maprico branches he’d used to cover the site and got to work testing his new drill against a nearby boulder. It worked fantastically and the afternoon heat found him squatting on his haunches in the brittle grass, excising a ribbon of auron from the ground.

It was a rich vein, and his basket was soon half-full of nuggets. Batu was already counting the small fortune they would bring him. With every sophisticated piece of technology in the System containing at least a speck of auron, the Corpus industrial complex was always in need of more and had paid him fairly for it in the past. Nowadays it was said the Tenno were also on the lookout for great quantities of the mineral in order to create the rare, shimmering alloy that’d given the Golden Lords their name. Batu suspected that might be true, but he had no idea how to arrange such a contract, and no inclination to find out.

The Tenno were a secretive bunch. It was impossible not to hear tales of their exploits, but they themselves were rarely seen. Very few knew how to contact them directly; everyone else was funneled through their expansive network of operatives and intel brokers. As was to be expected, rumors thrived in the resulting absence of information. Most people agreed that the Tenno had set up aboard the ancient Orokin Relays – derelict since the Downfall – but the stories coming out of there were some of the wildest Batu had ever heard, fantastical tales of archives that preserved living things in lieu of books and crimson maple trees flourishing in fields of snow that didn’t melt.
Batu suspected most of it to be a shameless exaggeration.

He sat back and wiped the sweat from his brow. The sunlight that’d warmed him all morning had disappeared behind a rising wall of clouds and the air was growing thick with humidity. Distant thunder rumbled over the Plains. Sore from hours of crouching, Batu shifted himself onto a boulder and unpacked his lunch of boiled dumplings and cold chimmurr.

He was still sipping it when the Grineer arrived.

They’d come up a game trail that bent a little northwards around the slope of the hill, so that it was screened from Batu’s sight as he toiled at his little quarry. That little quirk of geography, along with Batu’s deteriorating sense of hearing, now proved disastrous. He stood up quickly. The Grineer were still a little ways off, but they’d spotted him and were coming in too fast for an older man to outrun on foot. Even a young man would have been hard pressed to avoid them on the barren grassland without taking a slug in the back.

“Gar elik’draedre kuhl, de’mon.”

There were eight in total, a squad of Tusks out of the Seethe. One tipped his basket over and excitedly showed its contents to the others. His insides quaking, Batu slowly put a hand to the small bread knife tucked into his belt. His rockpick was too far away to grab, and he knew it wouldn’t prove much use against armored soldiers, but it was infinitely better to die bravely, as Gara had done, than prostrate for mercy the enemy was unlikely to give. When the foremost Grineer got within arm’s reach of him, Batu drew the knife and lunged.

He was immediately struck down with the butt of a rifle.

Blue light exploded behind Batu’s eyes. Next thing he knew he was on all fours, jagged stones boring into his knees. A dusty boot struck him in the wrist and the knife he’d been gamely struggling to hold onto jolted from nerveless fingers. The Grineer hooted and laughed. Batu lurched backwards, thinking to try and crawl away down the slope, but the Lancer stooped and hauled him back by the arm. The air left Batu’s lungs in a pained whoosh as he was shoved facedown in the prickling yellow grass. He lay there twitching while the other Grineer gathered up his heavy basket of auron, then began to debate who was going to carry it. Outraged, Batu tried to lift his head, only to have the side of his face slammed against the ground and held there, blood oozing from a stinging cut on his ear, while a heavy metal collar was clicked into place around his neck.

Batu went utterly still. Hands grabbed his arms and flipped him over, dragging his wrists together in front of his chest. In seconds, the Lancer had twisted a length of cord around his wrists and knotted it tight enough cut off the blood to his fingers. Batu stifled a cry, instinctively moving to grip the collar. The Lancer flashed him a crooked grin.

“It’s wired with enough explosives to blow your melon clean off, Cetus skoom, so here’s how you keep that from happening. You walk. You keep quiet. You make trouble—”

He held up a remote with a grimy yellow button.

“-and we use your head for a little game of kickball,” he finished. “If there’s anything left of it.”

He lifted Batu by the back of his wrappings, but Batu slumped back down, overwhelmed by a surge of vertigo emanating from his throbbing skull. The Lancer irritably hauled him back up again.

“Try sandbagging it and see what happens,” he added menacingly. “We’ve got other games that
won’t spoil your ability to talk.”

Batu forced his feet under him and stood. Not well, but being upright seemed to be all the Grineer wanted from him. For now, at least. Batu shuddered to think of it, but he could guess what this “talk” was likely to entail. He knew the Grineer had been establishing excavation sites all over the Plains, looking for any salvageable bit of old technology, but Batu could only point their ugly drilling machines in the direction of his quarries. He mined for auron and gemstones, not Orokin relics! In over fifty years he’d laid claim to only a few, useless handfuls of their detritus – shattered copernics and ceramic bio-material, discovered mostly by accident as he traversed the rolling steppes of the Eidolon-Moh. He wondered how long the torture would last before the Grineer finally decided he really didn’t know anything and put him out of his misery.

The thought was enough to make his gorge rise. Batu feebly twisted his wrists, but there wasn’t an inch of slack for him to work with and he quickly stopped trying, tears of pain peeking at the corners of his eyes. A sour-faced Grineer picked up the basket of auron and hiked it onto his shoulders, but not before Batu noticed him furtively slip a nugget into his many pouches. A little something for the drinking and gambling back at camp. Batu couldn’t help but feel a bitter surge of resentment. That auron was rightfully his. He’d walked the Plains for weeks in order to find the vein. He’d been the one bent over in the hot sun in order to extract it from the earth. He’d meant to use a portion of it to buy Koura – his brother’s daughter and Batu’s last remaining kin – a jug of temple kuva to celebrate the birth of her child, as was custom.

Now he’d never be able to see if the draught brought fortuitous visions of her daughter’s future, as it was occasionally wont to do. Like many families who called the area home, his kin would likely never know what had happened to him, save that he’d left the village and never came back. There were countless ways to die on the Plains, and his was shaping up to be one more the Ostron people had learned to live with.

Someone prodded Batu in the ribs and he fell into formation as they moved down the slope. Thunder rumbled and Batu felt the first stray drops of rain fall from the overcast sky. As the afternoon waned, the drizzle became a steady downpour. Wind rose and lashed at the pines, whipping their scraggy branches into a frenzy. Soon it was too dark to see anything else. Without the Shards of Lua and the brilliance of the stars, Batu’s only light came from the lamp-like optics of the Grineer themselves.

Once he caught the gleam of eyes watching them from the darkness, but the Grineer sent a few bullets after them and they scattered. Offworlders tended to equate being caught out after dark with a death sentence, but Plains’ natives like Batu had learned clever ways to mitigate the added risk, and nocturnal excursions were rarely fatal despite the packs of vasca kavats and deadly, glittering Vomvalstys that prowled the night. Even the mighty Eidolon was only seen once or twice a month, and seldom near settlements – which were never built near large bodies of water. Batu had always found it amusing how Offworlders would scurry inside at the first sign of dusk, but as his torment slowly transitioned into a nightmare, he found himself hoping to run straight into whatever dread, homicidal phantasm they imagined lived out on the Plains.

The Grineer didn’t march all that fast, but the terrain was folded and steep, and they kept a ruthless pace, their stench of sweat and festering skin stifling even in the rain. After going without rest for over an hour, Batu’s legs had begun to shake. He tried to free his hands again, but the cord had swollen even tighter in the rain and his aching fingers felt thick and clumsy. One of the Grineer shoved him with his rifle. Batu stumbled forward to the sound of their jeers.

Another 200 paces saw them at the bottom of the hill and at the mouth of the coastal lowlands. Batu came to a halt, struggling to catch his breath. The Grineer pushed him again and this time he
pitched headfirst onto the wet ground, the heavy bomb collar jolting painfully against his clavicle. His limbs felt like lead. A thin, oozing heat trickled from the gouge on his scalp. He didn’t have the strength left to walk anymore, so unless the Grineer changed their minds and decided to drag him along like a sack, he’d reached the end of his rope.

One of his captors kicked him in the leg, but Batu didn’t get up. He felt sick and lightheaded. After another bone-bruising kick, he heard the click of a safety catch being released. Batu hunched his back and waited to die, overcome with a grim sense of relief. Between his trembling arms, he watched his breath suddenly become a billowing white cloud. An unnatural cold rose on the squall and Batu felt the water on his skin freeze to a rime of ice. Patterns of hoarfrost traced themselves on the grass around him, a thing of slow motion sped up to mere seconds.

The Grineer fumbled with their weapons, shouting to one another in their own language as they turned and faced outwards into the night. Wind howled in the treetops, whipping streamers of ice along the ground and hurling the stinging pellets against Batu’s face. The rain turned to sleet, turned to heavy flakes of snow. Something hurtled past in the darkness, a flash of movement too quick for Batu to follow. One of the Grineer was flung off his feet, completing one full revolution before he tumbled to the frost-bitten ground, blood spraying from his throat only to freeze near instantly.

His comrades immediately opened fire. The yellow glow of their eyes had turned bouncing and frantic, and threw wild shadows onto the nearby trees as the bullets chewed up the Plains. Squinting against the blizzard, it seemed to Batu that the world around him had narrowed to the shape of a globe, its edges visible only as an icy fog. Windblown drifts of snow heaped against the base of nearby trees and lay a thick, glittering carpet over the grass, radiating a faint luminescence that eclipsed what little light had been provided by the Grineer. Everything had gone bitterly cold. The wind gusted again, parting the veil of sideways drifting snow-

-and Batu saw the Warframe.

He guessed it to be taller than him by at least half a meter, its body thickset and powerfully compact, heavy lines undeniably masculine, so that Batu’s first impression was that of a man wearing an armored, insulated robe – but it was a hasty description that could not truly illustrate what emerged from the edge of the storm. It was holding a katana out to one side, turquoise light winking along the killing edge, but Batu’s eyes cut to the empty fist the Warframe suddenly lifted over its head. Boulder-sized chunks of ice condensed out of thin air, held aloft with no visible means of support. The Warframe gave its hand a flick. The boulders hurtled towards the Grineer as though they’d been launched from a canon.

Several of the less situationally aware were hit in the back, the impact shattering both their armor and the calloused bone beneath. Frost erupted where the hailstones struck and the luckier ones leapt aside to avoid the danger. With slow, deliberate purpose, the Warframe advanced into the chaos. The closest Lancer perished before he’d made it three steps, Tenno steel inscribing a thin, dazzling blue arc that that seemed to linger in the air long after the bloody, bifurcated pieces of the corpse had slid to the ground. The rest of the Grineer scattered in a desperate bid to split the Warframe’s attention.

Bullets chattered. The Warframe casually batted them aside with its katana, its other hand sweeping past its leg, fingers hooked into claws. Icicles erupted from the ground like spears, ripping up the soil as a wave of them surged towards the remaining Grineer. Hampered by the thick layer of ice that’d built up on their armor, most were handily enveloped by the glacial advance. When the bodies fell, frozen in the useless act of covering their face with their hands, they shattered like glass statues.
The last surviving Grineer stumbled out of the blast zone, one leg dragging from a broken hip. He went to all fours in the snow and scrambled for several meters, his breath pulling harshly in the bitter air. The Warframe tilted its head to regard him. There was no malice in the eerie movement, no joy, but it held the promise of death all the same – levied with all the impartial severity of winter. It made a flinging motion with its hand, and a needle of ice punched through the Grineer’s back with enough force to stake the body to the ground.

Everything fell silent.

Something was beeping and flashing in the darkness, but its deadly significance was lost on Batu as he sat there shivering, unable to take his eyes off the frigid, regal thing towering above him in the gloom. Lifting the katana across its body, the Warframe silently wiped it across his opposite elbow, leaving a stark streak of blood across its gauntlet, and returned the blade to the sheath on its hip. Eye-level with the motion, some part of Batu registered that its guard had been fashioned in the shape of a flower – a lotus, perhaps – but his dazed inspection of weapon ended when the Warframe pivoted to look at him. It stood there for a moment, shadowed by the pale light of the snow, then lowered itself to one knee and extended its hand with the wrist facing up. A blade nearly as long as its forearm materialized in the cold light.

Batu stifled a sob. For all he knew, the Tenno didn’t like trespassers any more than the Grineer, and this one intended to dispatch him with a clean slash to the throat. The beeping was growing louder and faster, throwing a flickering crimson light onto the Warframe’s chest. With a horrible jolt of alarm, Batu realized it was coming from the collar around his neck. He grabbed at it with both hands and felt his skin stick to the frozen metal.

The knife moved closer to Batu’s throat and the Ostron watched it segment down the middle, revealing a thin, writhing filament that seemed to move with a life of its own. It slithered over the bomb collar and wormed into the lock with an unpleasantly organic squelch. Batu got the horrified impression that it wasn’t so much a probe as it was a part of the Warframe itself, some kind of living, organic extension. The beeping reached a crescendo. Batu squeezed his eyes shut.

With a weighty click, the collar broke apart and thudded to the ground. Emptying his lungs in a single, shaking gulp, Batu lifted his gaze to the Warframe’s face – or rather, where its face might have been, had one actually been visible. All the colors of the aurora borealis danced beneath the glassy dome of its helmet, the same feathery embellishments that adorned the front reaching around the sides to form an intricate double halo that pulsed with the same shimmering, moonstone light. Winter itself seemed to emanate from the Warframe’s presence; neither the crystalline needle of ice nor the chill grip of space, but something else entirely… almost indescribable… as if the frozen, fathomless dark between the stars could somehow burn.

The Warframe retracted its hand. The dagger closed like a flower bud, then slipped its winking, mono-filament edge between Batu’s hands. In one clean motion, it sliced through the swollen leather cords and the Ostron’s arms swung limply to his sides, his eyes watering from the sudden pain.


Seemingly out of nowhere, the Warframe produced a small vial of orange liquid. Uncorking the stopper, it poured a small amount onto each of Batu’s wrists. The unpleasant sensation that followed was comparable to hot wax being dripped into each of the various lacerations, but he endured the discomfort without complaint, and when he was offered the same liquid to drink, he did so without hesitation, fully trusting the Warframe’s intentions. The pleasant smell of sunlit jade leaves rose on the cold air, completely at odds with the bitter, rotten taste that coated Batu’s
tongue. He gagged but managed to hold it down, mortified by the image of throwing up all over the Warframe’s chest, as heat flushed into his limbs and the tips of his fingers.

Throughout it all, the Warframe didn’t utter a word – and Batu had no idea what to say to himself. After a moment it rose to its feet and pointed in a seemingly random direction, holding Batu’s gaze as it did so. The Ostron blinked, not comprehending the gesture, but the Warframe offered no further clarification. Putting a hand to its sword, it turned and walked away into the storm, icicles blooming from its footsteps. Batu continued to stare long after it had been swallowed by the squall.

The blizzard thinned, and something wet spattered against Batu’s shaven scalp. Tilting his gaze skyward, he was astonished to feel drops of rain pepper his face, coming faster and faster as the world unfroze around him. Agitated tongues of lightning lashed the underside of the clouds, and Batu counted several seconds before the answering roll of thunder echoed across the Plains. The snowfield was already melting in the warm air, leaving a grey mire of corpses and churned, bloody earth.

Batu staggered to his feet, his wrappings dripping with mud and other, far less pleasant things. His body ached horribly, but the pain was somehow a distant thing, submerged under the haze of whatever he’d been given to drink. Nothing special was visible in the direction the Warframe had pointed – but Batu shambled towards it regardless. It would be the height of stupidity to remain here; the scent of blood was bound to attract the attention of the vasca, and Batu refused to squander the second chance he’d been given.

Drought-stunted maprico trees scratched at his shins, and loose stones threatened to turn his wobbling ankles, but he dug deep and tapped his last reserve of strength. It wasn't easy, but the rolling terrain was relatively gentle and no large obstacles lay in his path. How long he walked, Batu couldn’t rightly say, but he guessed it to be a little over two kilometers before he saw the twinkling lights. Like most Ostron settlements, the main entrance was illuminated by strings of blue lanterns – a beacon to travelers and those late in returning home. Batu shaded his eyes against the drizzling rain, and almost wept when he recognized the lichen-covered piece of Orokin machinery that marked the approach to his home village. All this time, the Grineer had been retracing a different, but roughly parallel course to the one Batu had taken that morning.

Weak with relief, Batu staggered down the hill. At the bottom lay the modest Oro-kin-ka the villagers had set up at the base of the wreckage – an engine from some ancient, star-sailing vessel that’d fallen from the heavens during the Old War – and Batu sketched a rough obeisance as he passed, shaking with more than just exhaustion. He had no idea how late it was, but the streets were deserted as he made his way to his kinswoman’s home at the end of the row. The door opened for him almost immediately, spilling a wedge of yellow light into the street. Someone had been waiting at the window for him to return. Batu inhaled the warmth of cinnamon and cardamom, of anise and steamed vobi milk. A baby’s fussy cries drifted out to meet him. He wobbled on his feet and nearly fell as Koura’s husband came out onto stoop.

“How, Batu?”

The man looked alarmed and relieved at once, pulling Batu inside just as Koura she came racing out to meet them. Her face was grey with worry. Batu tried to offer her some reassurance of his health, but the words wouldn’t come, and as he reached for her with his bruised and swollen hands, Koura let out a little wail.

“Ai yo, your arms!” she cried. “Uncle, what has happened to you?!”

She led him to a seat and fetched clean wrappings from the laundry, then her husband helped Batu dress as though the elderly Ostron were his own father. Afterwards the couple conversed, debating
briefly on the matter of sending for a healer, while Koura brought a cup of steaming hot harpu. Batu slurped at the greasy liquid, glad to find that his fingers still flexed, that no permanent damage seemed to have been done. He was still in a decent amount of pain, but he was alive and enormously grateful for it. The pungent slash of herbs filled the air as Koura uncorked a jar of salve and applied it to Batu’s wrists, then to the multiple cuts on his scalp. She needn’t have bothered; the Tenno medicine he’d received had already repaired the worst of the damage, but Batu thought the womanly gesture might bring her some peace of mind, and so he said nothing.

When he’d recovered his strength, he told them of the Warframe.

His kin listened in stunned silence as he related how the Grineer had come up him at his quarry, how they’d nearly marched him to his death and how he’d been saved. He tried desperately to describe the otherworldliness of the encounter, but it seemed to Batu that his explanations fell short of the actual truth, like trying to describe color to a blind man. When he reached the part about the snow, Koura shook her head, not to deny the strange event, but to try and make sense of it. She did not say the obvious, that it was the height of midsummer and they were many months from the chill that would lock nearby Er-Phryah’s Vigil in a mosaic of glittering white. Batu looked past her shoulder, where heaps of fresh noodles, sugared mapricos and sticky crockery were piled in the couple’s tiny kitchen, the groundwork for their daughter’s Naming feast the next day.

Batu returned his gaze to Koura. “I know this may seem a strange request, and it’s within your right to refuse a silly old man his whims… but may I choose a name for your daughter?”

“Tonight?”

Koura hesitated for only a moment before answering, possibly due to her relief at seeing her uncle alive and not wishing to refuse him anything, or possibly because a strange, shivering weight still lay over the house and they all felt that tradition could be bent a little.

“Of course,” she said, nodding. “We would be honored.”

On stiff knees, Batu rose from his seat. His great niece dozed in a wicker basket just off her mother’s left, the interior padded with brightly colored silks. As Batu approached, she opened her eyes to look at him. Like many newborns, they were a stunning shade of pale blue, but Batu had a feeling that in her case, the color wouldn’t darken to the more common black or brown. Patting her tiny stomach, he gathered the appropriate words.

“Look to this day, little one.
Yesterday is but a memory,
And tomorrow is only a vision,
But today well-lived

Makes every yesterday a moment of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Look to this day, Hima.

The first of the rest of your life.”
To his surprise the baby laughed at him and kicked her chubby legs, her face glowing with some secret delight. Batu read her approval as a favorable omen. When he looked back to Hima’s parents, he saw tears in Koura’s eyes and knew she understood the significance of the name – a token of protection against a harsh and difficult world.

“It is a beautiful choice, Uncle,” she said quietly.

A sudden breeze gusted against the house, crisp with unseasonable, impossible cold. The windchimes danced, creating a soft jangle of music, and Batu thought he smelled dark branches edged in frost, frozen earth and cold roots, the raspberry char of deepest space. Not just winter on the Plains, but the glaciers of Europa and the polar caps of Mars, the artificial snows of the Orb Vallis and the cold at the end of all things, when the very universe had contracted and grown still.

Batu threw a soft look out the open window.

“Sho-lah, Tenno.”

Chapter End Notes

-o- Hima is the Sanskrit word for snow. You can see it as the root of the word Himalayas, literally “abode of the snow”. Hima (snow) + alaya (house/abode). “Snow” is the most common and recognizable definition of the word, but depending on context, it can also be taken to mean ice, frost, winter, the moon – and even a lotus.

-o- Auron is the Warframe equivalent to gold nuggets, being one letter removed from the actual Latin word for gold aurum. While this trash tier mineral has very little value in-game, if you consider the highly malleable, ductile and physio-electric properties which make actual gold invaluable to the manufacture of high technology, I’ve decided that despite the crafting requirements listed in the Foundry there’s no way in hell that the magical Orokin Play-Doh known as “forma” isn’t mostly comprised of auroxium alloy – which as you might recall is a mixture of:

Auron, i.e. gold
Oxium – “A rare, lighter than air alloy of Orokin origin.”
Morphics – “An amorphous solid. Possibly Orokin technology.”

I would even go so far as to say the golden architectural elements the Orokin slathered on with a paint roller are at least partially comprised of pure auron. Relatively speaking, they wouldn’t even need all that much if you consider a single gold nugget measuring 0.5 centimeters can be hammered into a sheet of gold leaf/foil measuring 5.4 square feet!

Excerpt from a publication by the California Division of Mines and Geology:

"Gold is one of the earliest metals known and used by humans. It resisted corrosion and chemical interaction. It will not disintegrate when exposed to oxygen, water, salt or any other naturally-occurring material. Gold’s durability is proven by the almost perfect conditions of coins and artifacts fashioned from it thousands of years ago. Gold’s most important use is in the computer, weapon, and aerospace industries. It is
Prosecutor Shiv had faced every opponent the Origin System had to offer, from Corpus machines to leathery Ostron warriors, as he humped the front lines from Earth to Saturn to Phobos. None had given him a challenge worth remembering. That was about to change.

Set on the cusp of *Tethra's Doom*, the event that introduced the "Hijack" tilesets way back in 2014.

The rain was coming down sideways, hammering on the corroded metal buildings, and roaring down the gutters with the carcasses of drowned pobbers. As far as the weather was concerned, it was a nice day down at Pisswash Station.

Technically the site was designated as the Emesh Shipyard on all the nav charts – but nobody called it that, not even the pilots. Located at the western edge of the lowlands known to the Orokin as the Vendimia Planitia (nobody called it that, either), Emesh Crater was an ancient pockmark about 20 kilometers across at its widest point. The shipyard itself was a rusting, slapdash assembly bloating over the crater rim like an infected sore, a warren of hallways, factories, and assembly lines thrown together with no regard to overall cohesion. Wherever it fit, it went. The auxiliary docking platforms had been plugged in so low, only a scant forty meters separated them from the toxic yellow lake that gave the shipyard its name – and it was getting deeper every year.

Some of the boys had gotten together one night, tied half a condroc to the end of a cable, and tossed it over the side. When they’d eagerly pulled it back up some ten seconds later, the only thing left was a ragged tatter of bone and oozing feathers. Afterwards it became tradition to menace new recruits still dripping wet from the vats with the threat of a little dip, should they fail to toe the line. Stories persisted of an incompetent drudge who’d been thrown out for a swim and had to have everything replaced below the hip.

Prosecutor Shiv took great pains to foster those stories. He’d only paid out enough slack for that
drudge to make it halfway down, just enough to get a chemical burn from the rising pall of fumes, but the threat of having your ass-cheeks melted together made for much better incentive — so that was the one he liked to cultivate. The drudge had made a bad weld; discipline had been necessary, but he looked down on brutality for brutality’s sake. A quick bob from the docking platforms had served the lesson well, feeding the zeitgeist of intimidation necessary for command, and the drudge had never performed poorly again. Shiv still saw her from time to time. They got drinks once in while.

Standing on that same landing pad with a full security complement at his back, Shiv tracked the Bolkor with his eyes as it circled overhead, engines belching. The craft was overloaded, thrusters straining as the pilot struggled against the weather. They should have sent a Glaistig, Shiv mused, but he understood the reason for the switch.

The big containerships could have carried several Bolkors with room to spare, but the drawback to being able to haul that much tonnage was that there was no more room for the cannons, forcing them to rely on an armed escort. Hiding the resulting flotilla was nigh impossible — and Vay Hek demanded secrecy above all else.

The Bolkor swiveled hard, coming down with thump that rocked the decrepit landing pad all the way to its struts. According to the daily manifests, there was nothing special about this particular drop. Even its cargo had been offputtingly marked as “sanitation supplies” in keeping with the Councilor’s usual brand of off-color humor. Shiv watched as the aft boarding ramp cracked open and several anxious-looking drudges disgorged onto the rainy platform, hurrying to activate the repulsors on a massive chunk of machinery squatting just inside the hold.

Blurg leaned in close.

“Why the cloak and dagger? Councilor afraid of ol’ Tengus getting the jump on him again?”

The Lancer chuckled at his own joke. Shiv didn’t bother dignifying it with a reply. The quip was in bad taste, but not necessarily off the mark. Vay Hek was afraid of someone interfering. Always the braggart, he’d been foolish boasting about the project on an open channel. Now it seemed as though he was trying to make up for past mistakes.

As far as Shiv was concerned it was too little, too late. There’d been too many rumors. Too many asteroid mines gone dark, too many comm stations carpeted in bodies, and it hadn’t been the Corpus. Alad V had brushed the Councilor’s ill-advised threats off with a laugh, and besides, the credit-grubbers killed with energy weapons, with electric batons and railguns — not cold steel. Shiv had seen the bodies.

They’d been killed with a blade.

It’d been clean work, too. Shiv had been impressed, even envious. Grineer soldiers weren’t trained on anything more impressive than a machete or cleaver. Swords took too long to master and most tube-born hadn’t the mental faculties necessary for such discipline, let alone the time. Crushing weapons – the hammer and the club – were easy to use, and much better suited the temperament of their wielders. Shiv fingered the haft of his polearm.

The amphis was a weapon meant to shatter bone, paralyze nerves and burst organs — but in the end, it was still a blunt instrument. He’d trained obsessively with it, balanced the poorly-manufactured shaft with modifications of his own, knew it better than his own body, yet it remained an itch that he couldn’t quite scratch. Blurg nudged him with an elbow.

“Word of advice: take your shit before the day starts.”
Shiv slanted him a deadpan look. He couldn’t see the big guy’s face, but he could feel the grin on his lips. “You are supposed to on duty,” he said, returning his gaze to the landing pad. “Pay attention.”

Blurg let out a short, barking laugh.

“On duty,” he snorted. On duty against what? Vermin chewing the wires?”

It was true to a point. Wedged deep in the belt on the lee side on Mars, a long-held bastion of Grineer supremacy, Ceres was quite heavily guarded. Shiv was not convinced it would remain so. He scanned the pollution-choked sky. Blurg rocked on the balls of his feet, absently checking the ejection port on his Grakata.

“Bet I could hit that drudge over there. The one with the- with the, uh… the hot stripes.”

Shiv directed a look to where the docking crew was connecting the Fomorian Core to the overhead rail, electricity snapping audibly against the rain. The foreman’s suit had been painted in bright, slashing lines the exact color of a gun barrel about to melt.


The first punch almost broke Shiv’s jaw.

Almost.

Unable to avoid it entirely, he rode it backwards instead, allowing it’s momentum to drive his upper body into a spin that carried him out of his adversary’s reach. Even so, he tasted blood. He spat a glut of it onto the deckplate. All around him, the pit shook with jeers. They’d all come out to watch; the ballistas and the lancers, the nervous drudges and the Drahk Master with his charges snarling and baying at the end of their leashes. This match had been a long time coming, and nobody at Pisswash Station was going to miss the show.

Shiv’s opponent was a hulking mountain of tube flesh taller than him by nearly half a meter and at least half again as broad in the shoulder. Rumor held that he’d spent time in the pens of Saturn Six, nobody knew what for, and the crudely notched tattoos that marched up and down his rot-mottled chest seemed to bear that out. Shiv circled to the right.

He didn’t need those rumors to tell him that Krass had been assigned the role of Shield Lancer. The first indication was in the man’s immense size, in those thick slabs of muscle over heavy, augmented bone. The second lay in the way he carried himself; one foot firmly forward, posture slightly hunched. He kept his left arm tight to his body, while the right had been mobile enough, and agile enough, to have come careening out of nowhere the moment the match had begun – nearly knocking the teeth from Shiv’s head.

Despite that, he is weakest on the right side, Shiv thought. He’s used to guarding his left, to
keeping an impenetrable barrier between him and his opponents. Approach from that angle will be impossible.

He sprang at Krass before the man could get too comfortable, launching a flurry of body blows designed to bruise ribs – but Krass kept his feet with solid determination. Ducking low, he rammed his shoulder into Shiv’s nose. The crowd roared their approval. Shiv skipped backwards and wiped his face with a sweat-slicked forearm. Like his opponent, he was barefoot and naked to the waist. There were no weapons in this arena.

So, he is not susceptible to pain.

Most large opponents were surprisingly delicate once a solid blow had been landed – but not this one. Punching him had been like hurling a slab of raw meat against concrete. Entirely ineffectual, and the pain throbbing across Shiv’s knuckles warned him of alloy ribs beneath the damp, glistening skin. He furtively shook out his hand. Krass grinned at him. He was missing one of his front teeth.

“Come on, kill him!” one of Ballistas screamed.

Emboldened, Krass lunged at him, his longer stride easily chewing up the distance. Shiv held himself motionless. Krass was surprisingly fast for his size, but he was no warrior. There was no follow-up to his strikes. He was used to overwhelming opponents with his brute strength, to knocking their lights out with either the first or second blows. The bloody nose had been a small price to pay for this information.

He let Krass hammer at him with a series of punches that would’ve concussed an Eidolon – had any of them actually landed. Feeling a max-power haymaker go past his ear, Shiv could have swept him right then, but held off. He faded back, not letting the blows drive him into the wall, but instead working his way in a circle. Krass followed him in mounting frustration. Sweat sheeted from his body, the sour, meaty odor rising to Shiv’s nostrils every time he drew close. He was punching too hard, expending his energy too fast. Most big fighters were like that. The inexperienced ones, anyway. Shiv countered with a sideways lunge, driving his knuckles into the side of his opponent’s trunk. Lower this time. Nearer to the kidney. Krass dropped to one knee. The crowd screamed.

Winded but undaunted, Krass tried to tackle Shiv’s legs out from under him. Probably a favorite tactic. Shiv backpedaled out of reach. Krass staggered and nearly tripped, underestimating the reflexes of his quarry. Shiv was getting bored. He’d been looking forward to this bout, but the fight was turning cheap, a game of Keep Away for Ostron brats. It was time to end it.

Krass lunged at him again, and Shiv slammed a fist into the vulnerable hollow beneath the brute’s right armpit. Fingers going sluggish, the big man’s arm dropped uselessly to the side. Shiv stepped into the gap. Knuckles pointed, he hammered a series of blows into his opponent’s unguarded torso, first to the throat, then to the heart, then back up to the throat. Krass let out an inarticulate gurgle of confusion, unable to comprehend the sudden power behind the blows, believing his much smaller opponent to be devoid of any real strength – just as the Prosecutor had trained him to think, pulling his punches and feathering his strikes until this crucial, final moment.

Krass went down on both knees this time, and Shiv dealt a punishing blow to his temple.

The big man flopped bonelessly to the floor.

There was a moment of perfect silence – then a roar broke out in the stands, followed by another and another, until the rusted ceiling shuddered with the cacophony of two dozen Grineer screaming.
and stamping as one. Shiv spread his arms, tilting his head back so that the dingy yellow light poured into his eyes. It was less a gesture of triumph and more a simple declaration of victory. As usual, the fight had not been hard-won. He felt no sense of accomplishment, and now that the adrenaline was fading, that persistent feeling of bitterness returned like a chronic ulcer.

He’d never been bested in a fight. Not even close.

With the exception of the beleaguered instructor who’d trained him, and whose skills he’d rapidly outpaced, none of Shiv’s opponents had been in any way memorable. He’d faced every threat the Origin System had to offer, from Corpus machines to leathery Ostron warriors, as he humped the front lines from Earth to Saturn to Phobos. All of them had been chaff. Reaped and forgotten, like the unconscious brute they were struggling to extricate from the pit.

Shiv strode to the edge and hoisted himself out. Several lancers glared daggers at him. Shiv knew they’d been betting heavily against him, eager to finally see him on the ground, and they’d lost in a great deal in the usual clamor to exchange credits, ration packs, and grubby flasks of homebrew grog. The commanding officers permitted it for the most part, even joined in on occasion, until every few months when they staged a crackdown, confiscated crates of one contraband or another, and made a pretty show of running a tight ship whenever the high-and-mighty came around. It was all theater and everyone knew it.

Shiv lifted a towel from an overhead pipe and wiped the blood and sweat from his face. He participated in these makeshift versions of Rathuum to keep his skills sharp – and for whatever meager enjoyment could be coerced from the fight itself. As the years dragged on, there was less and less of both. He believed the Corpus phrase was “diminishing returns”.

Thumping the floor to get his attention, Blurg waved him over. The Lancer was sitting on an empty crate, munching on greasy fistfuls of fried cockroaches. The dry-roasted kind, Shiv noticed, not the gelatinous protein bars rationed out by the mess.

“Nice fight,” Blurg complimented him between mouthfuls.

Shiv shrugged. It’d barely even been a fight.

Blurg gave him an annoyed look. “Are you ever going to be satisfied?”

“When there’s something to be satisfied about,” Shiv replied, toweling the back of his neck.

The grimy deckplate felt wet and rough beneath the calloused soles of his feet. Looking down, Shiv realized he’d torn his big toe at some point during the bout and a sluggish ooze of blood was seeping from the nail bed. He sat down next to his shift-mate and propped the injured foot on the opposite knee. Two more fighters were climbing down into the pit. Blurg reached behind the crate and picked up a flask. Unscrewing the cap, he sloshed half the contents into a dented tin cup and passed it to Shiv.

It smelled of sour fruit and grokdrul. The Prosecutor sniffed it appreciatively, trickling some on it on his foot before taking a deep swig, eyes streaming from the burn of it sliding down his throat.

“Good stuff. How much you blow on it?”

“Eh, couple of rounds. Skoom tried to cheap me, so I put one through his leg.”

Shiv grunted his approval. All around them, spectators roared as the second fight of the evening kicked into high gear. Two Scorpions from Raddick’s unit had been matched and blood had already been drawn. Shiv eyed the fighters. One of the women was much bigger, but her opponent
had been augmented below the hips, heavy metal pedes slamming the deckplate as she circled. It was going to be a close bout – but not a very spectacular one. The pair were better trained than most, but having been deprived of their trademark machetes, neither were impressive in a fistfight.

Blurg shoveled another fistful of roaches into his mouth. “I’ve got a thousand on Sloan.”

Shiv quietly sipped his booze.

The alarms sounded just before dawn.

Shiv was comfortably asleep in his bunk when everything flashed to red. Bypassing the ladder, he quickly swung himself down to the floor, narrowing avoiding landing on Blurg. The Lancer still had a ratty mylar blanket wrapped around his leg. He kicked it away with a curse.

“All stations report in! All stations report in!” The PA blared. “Intruder in the compound. Lockdown in effect. Main gate sealed.”

Shiv sprang into his combat suit, strapping his breastplate on with quick, practiced motions. Oxygen conduits hissed as the suit pressurized. Blurg lobbed a machine pistol at his head. He caught it one-handed and shoved it into a thigh holster before picking up his amphis, activating the weapon with sharp crack of electricity. Someone howled as they pinched a finger in the magazine well of their sidearm. Bullets chattered into the ceiling.

“Trigger discipline!” Shiv barked. He strode to a control console and punched up the comms. Frag was technically in command of the unit, but Frag had fallen into the trash incinerator three days ago, and a corpse couldn’t issue orders.

“Somebody talk to me,” he growled. “What’s going on?”

“There’s been breach in the lower levels,” the comm officer reported.

“The freight rail?”

Silence.

“I can’t see if you’re nodding!”

“A-affirmative, sir! Assembly Area 5.”

Situated between the blast furnaces, Assembly Area 5 sat at one end of an electrified freight rail. It was normally used for very large or very heavy pieces of machinery that couldn’t be moved any other way, usually gas turbines and Galleon hull plates. Or the Fomorian Core.

“All of you, with me!”

There were twelve of them in all. Armed and mostly awake, they spilled from the barracks with
Shiv in the lead. After a confusing series of switchbacks and internal staircases, they reached a wide, vaulted gallery on the south end of the shipyard. Air filtration systems with fans as big as Firbolgs cranked and rattled overhead, assuring that the atmosphere inside the facility was at least marginally less polluted than the toxic soup outside. The large bay doors at one end of the room were already open, the Core sliding noiselessly along the overhead rail. Shiv threw one arm towards the consoles.

“Alright, shut it down!” he ordered.

His eyes swept the room and the network of rusted pipes crisscrossing the ceiling. Nothing. Shiv wondered if it was some kind of mistake; it wouldn’t be the first time maintenance had decided to shuffle something around without notice – but somehow he doubted it, because every instinct he possessed screamed otherwise. The thing Vay Hek had feared, the intruder Shiv had expected, was here. Somewhere.

The rail powered down with an audible whine. Shiv scented the air, inhaling the stench of stale water and engine lubricant. A drop of moisture, warm and oily, splattered on the top of his cowl and slithered down his face. Shiv looked up. Everything exploded to white.

The flash was brighter than exploding magnesium, stabbing through his pupils and into his skull. His vision gone, Shiv howled and clapped both hands over his eyes, optic nerves popping with incandescent sparks. Something heavy landed a meter to his right. Big, but not clumsy. Metal scraped and sang, almost crystalline in its resonance. Not Grineer pig iron, but something much, much purer. Primal instinct skittered the length of Shiv’s spine.

He ducked.

Bright heat slashed across the bridge of his nose. Shiv hit the ground rolling, relying solely on his memory of the factory floor as the ground dropped out from under him and he toppled, limbs loose to avoid injury, into the deep channel that ran beneath the rail. Somewhere to his right, the sounds of his fellow Grineer transitioned to phlegmy, bronchial screams as body parts started thudding to the floor. Shiv swiped at his streaming eyes. His vision was starting to return in murky smears of yellow and dirty, metallic brown. The Core was moving again.

He staggered to his feet, the cut on his face already clotting. A grey shape was whirling in the midst of his unit, wielding a blade one-handed as it scythed through the crowd. Shiv grabbed his pistol and opened fire. The thing whirled behind another Grineer, seizing the man by the bulging collar of his suit, and hauled the body between them as a human shield. Shiv didn’t have time to contemplate the tube brother he’d just shot dead.

The thing – the Warframe – was on the move, jogging alongside the Core as it reached the second set of doors leading to the auxiliary dock. With lockdown in effect, they should have stayed closed – but to Shiv’s growing confusion, they juddered open to let the cargo through, moving swiftly along a plume of crackling energy attaching it to the Warframe itself. Shiv leaned over the control console and hammered on it with the side of his fist, but the Core continued to slide along the rail, completely autonomous from the system.

Leaving the dead and dying, Shiv raced after it. Ceres’ predawn sky was a gangrene shade of yellow, so thick that he could taste the pollutants on his tongue. Shiv squinted against the incessant rain. He’d never seen anything like the ship hovering at the end of the dock. Vaguely like a kite, closer to the massive horseshoe crabs scuttling the tropical shorelines of Old Earth, its ivory hull and glistening golden panels spoke of an era long dead. Water swirled and spattered as it dropped lower, spreading its vectoring thrusters. The Core was already levitating up to meet it.
Tractor beam. It means to take it in one piece.

At this point, such an observation was a given. If the Warframe had intended to rupture the containment field, the entire facility would’ve already gone to Hell in a handbasket – taking a good chunk of the sector along with it. Blinking away the last of his vestigial blindness, he spotted the Warframe jogging in the shadow of the Core, still connected to it by a tendril of energy. Shiv fired at it as it ran.

Amazingly, impossibly, the Warframe used its sword to deflect the barrage into the sky. Most of Shiv’s rounds never found their mark, while those that did vaporized against a solid film of energy. It was no surprise that the Warframe employed shields. There was also every reason to believe that the efficiency and output of those shields far exceeded those of Corpus, and Shiv had killed enough taxmen to know that his pistol would run dry long before they popped. If there was any hope of victory, however slim, he’d have to change tack.

Shiv switched his aim and drilled a line of bullets into a nearby pallet of fuel canisters.

Things could not have gone more perfectly. The containers shredded apart with a concussive thud, hurling shrapnel and flames up into the belly of the ship, and engulfing the Warframe in an expanding balloon of burning gas. The Tenno ship flared its thrusters, momentarily angling up, but it was only a reflexive twitch of caution. Shiv could see that it was completely undamaged. He’d expected as much. The sudden fireball had served another purpose.

Shiv dropped the empty pistol and took a better grip on his amphis, charging headlong into the oily heat. As he’d hoped, the Warframe burst forward to meet him. Shiv’s gaze knifed to the sword it was holding in a low, double-handed grip.

It’s first strike will come up from the ground.

Light flashed on the killing edge as it swept forward. Shiv met it halfway, batting Tenno blade aside and bringing the butt-end of his amphis up in a whistling arc meant to catch the thing in the stomach. The Warframe parried the upstroke easily, sparks peeling off with a harsh rasp. They traded blows once, twice. Shiv barely saw the sword as it hurtled around for a third, the Tenno expertly redirecting the momentum of its last strike, to angle at his hip. Had it connected, his guts would have sluiced out onto the floor. Shiv whirled his amphis to one side.

Tenno steel collided with Grineer iron, and skidded harmlessly off.

The Warframe hesitated, surprised. Shiv took advantage of its distraction. He spun the amphis fast enough to make it buzz, feinting to the right before launching a crushing, overhand blow from the left that the Warframe almost, but not quite evaded. The amphis cracked it alongside the ear, driving its head sideways with the force of the blow. The Warframe retreated a step. It gave its head a quick shake, maybe momentarily dazed, maybe rerouting whatever HUD it used for sight.

The Tenno craft sliced overhead, buffeting them in the downdraft. Aborting his follow-up lunge, Shiv shied away instead, shielding his eyes against the choppy splatter of water. The Warframe looked up, tracking the ship as it moved, then leapt straight up as it passed overhead, landing nimbly on the slope of the Core. Shiv’s mouth fell apart. Powerless to stop it and too stunned to make the attempt, he could only watch as the craft arced away into the clouds. The Warframe looked back to regard him, its sightless gaze fixed on Shiv, and the Prosecutor thought he read something in the tilt of its head. Not fear, he thought. Not wariness. Curiosity.

Seconds later, it was gone.
Left alone in a slick of burning fuel, Shiv let out a cheated howl of frustration.

The Core was flagged as stolen, most likely destroyed, and Shiv did not envy the commanding officer whose duty it was to report the loss to Vay Hek, but Pisswash Station quickly returned to its usual humdrum. There were quotas to be met, orders to be filled. Warships to be built. The Grineer machine stopped for nothing.

Hours stretched into long, agonizing days that Shiv attempted to fill with menial tasks, trying to drown his frustration under repetition. The Warframe was constantly on his mind, consuming his waking hours and leaving him awake in his bunk while everyone else snored and flatuated in the hot, grimy darkness of the barracks. His only means of relief was to slip away to an unused storage room and drill with his amphis long enough to work himself ragged, hoping the fatigue would quiet his agitated thoughts. Sometimes it even worked.

The Warframe had been unlike any opponent he’d ever faced. They’d only squared off for but a moment, but Shiv found himself reliving every detail, every second elongating into forever. It had intuited his every move, met his every strike. He’d not defeated it, only caught it off guard, and it seemed to Shiv that even the Warframe had been taken aback.

It underestimated me and I got lucky. It will not make the same mistake twice.

He slammed the lead-end of the amphis into the training dummy he’d built and ducked as the boom came careening around the other side, dealing another frustrated blow as it passed. The padding split, spewing moldy plant fibers and asbestos onto the floor. Shiv snarled and hit it again, tearing the dummy in half and sending a shower of rotten wood hurtling into the bulkhead. The remainder flopped to the ground with a sad whump of finality, leaving Shiv standing over the mess with his fists clenched so hard the knuckles turned white, trying not to scream.

“Go ahead. Tear your back out,” a voice reprimanded him. “When you can’t use that precious baton of yours, they’ll be shipping you off to the belt mines, or over to Ludi to strip rusty Bolkors for scrap.”

“Piss off,” Shiv responded testily.

He set one end of his amphis on the floor, slanting an annoyed look over one shoulder. Blurg glowered right back, his mismatched eyes only adding to the effect. The right was now a bulky orb of metal and circuitry glaring from a puckered seam of slow-healing flesh, courtesy of the sawbones down in medical. Shiv’s gaze trailed down, following the scar to the skeletal prosthetic replacing Blurg’s left arm. One clean slash, from armpit to opposite eye. He was lucky the Warframe hadn’t opened his throat, too.

Shiv’s ire softened marginally. “Is it healing alright?”

“It itches.”
They faced in other in silence for a moment. Blurg scratched at his eye.

“Why are you so obsessed with that thing?”

“I’m not obsessed.”

“Yeah, and my gonads actually produced a couple of brats.”

Silence again. Shiv rolled his aching shoulders, the sweat on his skin drying to a crusty lather. Blurg folded his arms with an angry creak of overtightened sprockets. The new arm needed a better lube job.

“Why don’t you go and join one of the units thumping on Cetus? I hear your new buddies have been spotted down there.”

It sounded like advice, but Blurg’s tone was sour. Shiv stared off into nothing. He’d already thought of that. Despite the blatant failure of last week, more Fomorian Cores were being shipped in. Pisswash Station was the only shipyard in the sector with the facilities to install them. Vay Hek was doubling security, doubling the workers. Doubling the timetable.

“The Councilor would never approve my transfer,” he said quietly.

“Because you’re needed here. Why is that not good enough for you?”

Shiv said nothing. There was no way he could explain it in terms Blurg could understand. After a long moment, the lancer heaved a sigh. “Put the club away and get your ass back to the barracks, Shiv. Me and Pock got a game of fuda going, and she’s anteed up some… some, uh- whatever it is those fish-gulpers chew. Fresh, too. You in?”

Shiv looked at the mess on the floor.

“Sure. I’m in.”

When the claxons ripped through the facility for the second time in as many weeks, Shiv’s heart almost burst with excitement. It made no sense for the Tenno to be back so soon. The new Cores hadn’t even been delivered yet – unless they’d had a palaver with their queen and decided to blow the facility sky-high in advance – and there was no reason to guarantee it would even be the same Warframe.

Despite all of this, however, Shiv hurtled down the passageway so fast the lancers puffing alongside him could barely keep up. Blurg had been right. It was an obsession, and Shiv was spurred on by an insane hope that he needed to see to fruition, or else sink slowly in madness. The alarms had been triggered from a console located on the auxiliary docks, and the tight, swelling ball in his chest clung to that fragile coincidence with all his being. One more door, he told himself. One more door and it would be there, planting charges on the fuel line or setting the
reactor to blow.

The bulkhead cracked apart, and Shiv lurched out into the storm. Silver flashed past his temples, and the lancers flew back like sacks of grain tossed into a storeroom. Shiv skidded to a halt. He looked back, he couldn’t help it, and realized both men were dead before they’d even hit the ground – gleaming silver kunai embedded in their throats. Shiv slowly rotated back the other way.

The Warframe was waiting for him in the middle of the platform.

It sat with its legs crossed, hands resting lightly on its knees with upturned palms cupped full of rainwater, a massive golden shotgun lying across its lap. It was also floating a half meter above the ground. Beneath it, blood sloshed in time with the rain. The dock was littered in bodies, radiating outward like a spiral galaxy with the Warframe at its center. Seeing Shiv, it casually unfolded its legs and stood. Looking at it, truly looking at it for the first time, the Prosecutor could only stare.

There were no golden adornments, no strange, protruding angles or decorative pseudo-clothing, just raw anatomical musculature, right down to the indented V of its pelvis. Even the suggestion of genitalia was contained in a low, sloping bulge. In an odd shimmer of insight, Shiv realized it was a tribute. A homage to the artistry of the human body.

The oldest stories told of gods, born of pure Thought, who’d fashioned the human race out of clay, leaving fingerprints on every dip and swell. Needless melodramatic in Shiv’s opinion, but not entirely untrue. Far from it. Orokin had created Grineer. Theirs was the hand that’d fashioned the molten yellow irises in every identical face, in the straight nose and lush mouth that a few lucky tube-born could see in the mirror for just a couple of short days before their skin began to sag, their teeth grew crooked, and those luminous eyes sunk into hollow pits.

The Orokin even fashioned themselves, or so it was said. It was not hard to imagine the hands of some Golden Lord, flawless in every physical way, molding the Warframe in the idolization of his own image. The perfect Warrior, cast in living steel.

It was still holding the shotgun.

Muscles so tense they hurt, Shiv gripped his amphis with both hands, getting ready to roll behind cover. The Warframe slowly moved its gleaming weapon off to the side, held it for a moment… and dropped it to the deck, where it fell with a heavy, splashing thud.

Shiv’s eyes cut to it, then back up. Lifting both hands now, the Warframe cupped one against the other, fingers curled around an invisible cylinder, and drew them apart. A blade of turquoise light emerged from its palm, its slightly curving length wreathed in oscillating skeins of energy that traveled up and down the blade in unsteady waves. Standing tall, the Warframe pivoted the incredible sword aside, its shields dying away with a crackle.

Waiting.

Shiv’s mouth went dry. Whether the thing was incapable of words, or had simply chosen not to utter any, made little difference. It’s meaning was clear. It was a challenge, an invitation with as much equality as could be arranged. No guns, no shields. Just natural talent. The cauldron of restless, bitter discontent that’d swamped the later years of Shiv’s life suddenly boiled over. He heard the door at his back slam shut and lock. There would be no interference. No running. Shiv wouldn’t have considered it even if the option had been open to him. He didn’t care why the Warframe had come back. All that mattered was that it was here.

Trembling with anticipation, he swiveled his amphis into a ready stance.
The Warframe nodded.

Then it attacked.

By the Queens it was fast, but Shiv had read the coiled power in the Warframe’s thighs, seen the artificial muscles tense in its calves, and knew it’d meant to lunge. He moved away at an angle and brought the butt-end of his amphis up in a crackling arc. The Warframe was ready for him. Grineer iron met unholy light as their weapons collided midway. Shiv felt the impact click his teeth together. He recoiled, sidestepped, and swung again. Again, the Warframe blocked. Glowing blue sparks showered into the puddles and were extinguished.

*That blade is very light, and very, very fast. It will attempt to out maneuver me.*

The Warframe revolved past him, their shoulders becoming a pivot, and directed a short chop to Shiv’s exposed back. Shiv rolled his amphis over one shoulder, parallel to his spine. The glowing sword bounced off with a reverberating *clang*. Shiv found time to be surprised. Something told him that blade should have been able to cleave through entire men, through armor and muscle and bone. Was it possible that the Warframe could modulate its strength somehow? The idea enraged him as much as it piqued his curiosity.

His limbs became a blur, launching blows with both ends of his amphis as he drove the Warframe around the edges of the dock. It let him come for a moment, then launched a disorienting cut into Shiv’s midsection, its sword a slashing flare of azure light. Shiv parried, drove it back, and lunged forward with a counterstrike of his own, amphis whistling in low. It was a blow meant to pulverize kneecaps, or failing that, to snap an opponent’s tibia. A fighter that couldn’t move, couldn’t win. The strike was his!

The Warframe cocked its leg and stepped on the polearm as it passed, driving it to the floor. For one incredible moment, Shiv faced the thing as it perched on the shaft of his weapon. Then he caught the Warframe’s heel across the temple as it delivered a roundhouse kick to the side of his head.

Flung sideways by the impact, Shiv accelerated through the puddles. He tumbled to all fours as his momentum played itself out, amphis clutched tightly in his fist. The Warframe regarded him silently, dark against the pustulent yellow floodlights. Shiv suddenly realized he’d been baited. He spat out a tooth, an insane laugh bubbling from his lips in a terrible, maniacal upwelling of delight.

He reared back to his feet and met the Warframe as it charged.

They went back and forth, gaining ground and loosing it again almost as quickly, their feet constantly in motion, spraying filthy water into the air as they moved. The rain was as warm as the blood flowing from Shiv’s grinning mouth. He threw his head back and howled in pure animal joy as he traded blows with the thing, accepting the white-hot agony of the slashes it left on his torso, savoring the impact of the blows he dealt to its joints. There was no pulling his punches this time. He needed all his strength to attack and riposte, every ounce of concentration to see when the thing unexpectedly changed the direction of its strikes.

They wheeled back to center, spiraling in a dance of false cuts and feinting thrusts. The Warframe’s hide was scorched black in places, epidermal layers sloughed back to ooze a brilliant molten gold. Energy flashed and leapt. One end of Shiv’s amphis died with a sudden pop of sputtering circuitry. He drove it into the Warframe’s belly anyway. It slap-parried his wrists with its free hand, blowing his arms wide. Too wide. He felt the Warframe’s knuckles collide with his sternum.

For a moment the world seemed to slow on its axis and Shiv found himself processing information...
in fragments, like a comm unit with a broken oscillator. He stared at the Warframe’s featureless visage, their faces only inches apart. Why hadn’t it moved? An eternity seemed to pass, then Shiv looked down at his own chest… impaled on an exalted Tenno blade.

“Ah.”

The amphis clattered to the floor as Shiv’s legs unhinged beneath him. The Warframe’s fingers clamped on the back on his neck, shielding that vulnerable place with the hard, solid plane of its hand as it sank with him, bearing Shiv’s weight as they knelt in a rapidly expanding lake of blood. The blade cutting through his aorta had the weight of a sunbeam – but Shiv was acutely aware of the power of it vibrating through his bones. He cupped a shaking hand over the fist that held it, his grip death-tight, his arm dragging, unable to move again.

His own heartbeat thundered in his ears. Stuttering. Slowing. Dying. There was something wrong with its echo, a slow, venous cadence of three instead of two. Repeated ad infinitum. The Warframe had its own heartbeat, Shiv realized, now that he was close enough to hear it. Some terrible, thumping thing that powered its limbs and bestowed its twisted immortality.

Shiv hacked a clot of blood onto the Warframe’s shoulder, slumped in its implacable grip. He didn’t thank it. Didn’t curse it, either. Simply acknowledged it with chuckle, thick and wet in his throat, and rode that hypnotizing sound into the black.

It had been a good fight.

At last.

He could not have known that long after his heart has ceased to beat, the Warframe had carried him away from the polluted shipyards, away from the grinders that would’ve recycled his flesh into the protein slurry from which new Grineer were born. He could not had known that on some distant spire of rock, a cairn was erected over his body and his amphis planted in the snow alongside it.
-o- Morituri Te Salutamus is roughly half of a Latin phrase commonly translated as "We who are about to die, salute you!" It is often associated with ancient Roman gladiators.
In the Infested Ship tileset on Eris, there is an infrequent room featuring a trapped Corpus Crewmen desperately trying to escape the biomass. He does not speak, and the player is unable to interact with him in any way – except to put a merciful end to his suffering.

This is his story.

My name is Canto Denarii.

I was navigator aboard the Juno Moneta, a Corpus freighter of the line.

And I was a fool.

I could make excuses, of course, but that’s all they would be. Excuses. Whether this account serves to condemn or exonerate me, I will catalog the incident as faithfully as am I able to recall. I have already been judged, not in any court of my peers, but by a remnant of the Orokin Empire-that-was... and I have been found wanting. I think it knew that even as it saved me.

These Tenno… their kindness is often an altogether different sort of cruelty.

In any case, it is my hope that these memoirs will shed some light on the fate on the Juno Moneta and her crew. Where I go from here remains uncertain, but at least my part in those events will be accounted for.

I will start at the beginning.

According to the Company Calendar, in keeping with Orokin Standard, these events took place between the 15th and 17th of the month of Martius in the year 10,191. By the Ostron Lua-Count,
which we were often compelled to use in our dealings with their floating markets, it was the 28th of Nagpa, Year of the Golden Mergoo.

I was stationed out of Valhalla Basin on Callisto, where the Company maintains the largest metropolitan colony in the sector. From the lowest prefab homes on the outermost trough zone to the great, glitter-glass manses located at its center, seeing it from low orbit is quite the sight. To those unfortunate masses that have neither the funds nor means to travel the System, I tell you that there are few things that compare the majesty of Jupiter hanging low in the midnight sky.

It is not impossible to mine a star. It is possible to mine anything if margins are profitable, and Jupiter was nothing if not profitable. Day and night, helium and metallic hydrogen is mined from the upper atmosphere of the planet, while rich silicate deposits and purple Gracilarian kelp are farmed from Callisto’s vast subsurface ocean. The former goes into everything there is to manufacture, while the latter is a favorite ingredient in salads and jellied condiments.

The Juno Moneta was a freighter by trade and not a particularly big one at that, running loads of commodities to the colonies out on Pluto, where we’d usually dock at Thanatos Station – by far the biggest speck of civilization on that tiny, misbegotten rock. I was standing second watch as we made the bimonthly trip, our holds stocked with routine supplies, when a flicker came across my board.

The signal was very faint, coming from well beyond the outer terminus. If we hadn’t adjusted trajectory to avoid a comet shower the previous afternoon, I doubt the Juno’s instrumentation would have picked it up at all. I managed to identify the garbled wavelength as an emergency transponder registered to a deep-ore mining hauler by the name of Lira. A subsequent review of the registry database told me that the vessel had been listed as MIA approximately four months previous.

It is rare that a man can track his downfall back to a single moment in time.

That moment on the Juno Moneta was mine.

Company protocol dictated that I report the distress beacon to the nearest military vessel or installation – in this case, Thanatos Station – and hand over all pertinent data, including any logs or transmissions that might have been acquired.

I did not.

There is a rich tradition of salvage rights within the Company. Dedicated salvage teams often make a hefty profit by stripping Grineer vessels, Orokin-era derelicts, and failed mining colonies for every copper wire their holds could carry. The returns on a Stanchion-class mining hauler, to say nothing of potential cargo, would double or even triple my current portfolio, far more than a ship’s navigator could hope to see in a year.

I downloaded the coordinates to a holotab and erased the logs. With the only copy in my hand, I then went to see the Juno Moneta’s captain, a man by the name of Zebedee Cassel. For the record, Cassel was close to six foot six and lanky as an Eidolon, with a neatly sculpted beard that hid a chin sharp enough to puncture a bulkhead. He was a fair man, and occasionally my friend.

It didn’t take much to convince him. We agreed to split the profit, he ordered the ship diverted to the coordinates I’d acquired. There are no Golden Rails beyond the Jovian system, as you well know, but with some clever bookkeeping to account for fuel costs, it took us approximately 32 hours to reach our destination.
The Kuiper Belt is an empty, desolate place filled with the icy corpses of stillborn planets. As I set a vector toward Eris, I wondered if the Lira had crash-landed on its surface. I am ashamed to admit that I hadn’t considered the possibility of survivors, but after a moment’s reflection, I concluded there weren’t likely to be any. At the time of our arrival, the tiny planetoid’s orbit had taken it so far from the sun that its atmosphere had frozen and was falling to the surface as snow.

We found the Lira in a decaying orbit around Eris’ solitary moon, Dysnomia. Structurally speaking the hauler looked perfectly intact, and sensor beams indicated that the engines still had power, but repeated hails elicited no response. We followed standard docking procedures.

As I’ve said, the Juno Moneta is not a particularly large ship, and I have never been aboard a military vessel for comparison, so I admit to being taken aback by the cavernous size of the Lira’s docking bay. It needed to be big to hold all that monstrous equipment, the earth-movers and stone-haulers with caterpillar tracks higher than my head. I remember how warm the air felt, how it tasted like metal and dirt, and smelled like the rotten mud they haul up on Callisto.

Fifteen of us boarded the Lira and split into three groups; one to check the medbays for the survivors I’d selfishly hoped we’d not find, another to check engineering, and one to investigate the bridge. Captain Cassel and I were amongst the latter, accompanied by Miri X, ship’s tactical officer, and Julian Verge, comms specialist. I don’t know if any my crewmates caught on to the real reason we’d come aboard the Lira, that under the pretense of searching for answers, the Captain and I only wanted to check the logs to see how much mineral wealth had already been stowed in the hold.

By the time our group had reached the bridge, the vacancy of the ship had become nerve-racking. Soon were we all sweating in the muggy air and Cassel was getting antsy. While Verge checked the logs, we checked the manifest. I was excited to find the holds brimming with several metric tons of ferrite, nickel-iron, and rare asterite crystals. The Lira had been just a few weeks short of surpassing their quota.

Given this information, we were all wondering the same thing. A ship this size would have retained a crew of nearly 200 Company men and women, so where in the hell was the crew? If there had been some kind of hostile boarding action, we would have seen blood or bodies, or the telltale punctures left by ramsleds. Instead we’d been greeted low lights, rancid odors, and empty corridors creaking against the hollow void of space. It was if the crew had vanished into thin air.

Down in the medbay, our CMO – a severe woman by the name of Lenora who, through every fault of her own, had the misfortune to remind me of the negligent mother I’d left as soon as I’d turned sixteen – described unidentified fungal growths that’d taken over the empty beds and biocapsules (a report echoed by our teams in engineering). Without any visual reference to fuel my imagination, I found myself thinking of the loathsome slime molds and mutant fungi that carpet the Orb Vallis. Disgusting, but ultimately harmless. None of us grasped the implications of the horror we’d unwittingly entered upon.
Neither had the *Lira*’s crew.

According to the logs, the *Lira* – having ranged much further than any commercial hauler in the sector – had discovered a rich seam of ore approximately five months ago. (*Her captain had stricken the exact location from the record.*) Subsequent mining operations had been immensely profitable, and they’d evidently thought to return several times before the seam played itself out. The promise of a massive payday had only increased with the discovery of an authentic Orokin derelict approximately seven klicks from their brand-new strip mine. The corvette’s disastrous planetfall, a perfectly straight avenue gouged deep into the icy surface of Dysnomia, had apparently exposed the vein of ferrite that’d drawn the *Lira*’s attention in the first place.

Golden detritus had splattered for kilometers in all directions, but the ship was reported as being largely intact – and the *Lira*’s hold contained more than just valuable minerals. The cargo manifests I read that day also listed Orokin computing devices, kesslers, fresnels, rare aboroflora trees and decorative knickknacks of every shape and kind.

I was going to be a very rich man.

Using the hoverlifts and maglev dollies normally used to offload our own cargo, we immediately delved into the *Lira*’s pregnant belly and began transferring everything she held onto the *Moneta*. We soon realized that even with our own shipments pushed out into the corridors to free up space, we could take less than a quarter of the *Lira*’s spoils. Naturally, we decided to start with the most valuable items.

We were in high spirits. The worst part was the growths.

As we worked, it became apparent that the pulsating mats of fungus weren’t merely growing on everything… but somehow growing *out* of it, as if they had fused directly to the metal and fiberplastic. Luminous orange pustules would burst as we worked, showering us in embered spores like cinders swept up from a fire. I wasn’t worried. My suit was atmospherically sealed. Everyone’s was.

But it got in anyway.

Symon was the first to show signs. Within a few hours he was mentally disoriented and, according to what news trickled up from Lenora’s tyrannical little kingdom, running an unusually high fever. He was sent back to his quarters with a medpatch slapped to his arm and orders to get some sleep. There’d been the usual hibernal outbreak of flu back on Callisto and nobody thought anything of it – other than to wonder if poor Symon had breathed on any of us before he’d turned symptomatic.

I remember resolving to take a handful of zinc supplements when I got off shift.

Meanwhile, the growths bedeviling our attempts at pillaging had become so thick that progress came to a standstill. Captain Cassel ordered several acetylene torches up from maintenance, and
with full tanks we turned those bright geysers of burning gas towards the tumors. The quivering mass convulsed as though we’d prodded a living thing and incandescent trails raced through the aggregate like electrical signals along exposed nerves. Something shuddered in the depths of the vessel. Not the cry of a beast or the shriek of anything human, but a subsonic rumble, like the grinding of gristle in an arthritic knee, whose sound almost contained the shape of words.

Within moments the first of the horrors appeared.

The *Lira’s* cargo hold was neither the deepest nor the lowest part of the ship; that designation belonged to the sumps, to the baffles and crowded spaces where the vessel stored the engines and machinery that propelled it through space. The creatures came up from there.

I say *creatures*, but a better term would have been monsters, twisted abominations that resembled living things only as a grotesque sum of parts. The first one I saw came at me along the ground, pulling itself along using two palpitating appendages which terminated in bloated hands.

It was human. Had been human. Beneath it’s sickly flesh I could see the outline of shoulders, the boxy and elongated helmet worn by all Corpus representatives. It had no legs, no lower body whatsoever – yet it came at me with a frightening speed. I was unarmed, but I grabbed my acetylene tank by the nozzle and swung it at the monster just as it reached me. I can’t say I killed the thing, for surely it must have been already dead… but I got it to stop, motionless in puddle of clotted orange fluid whose malodor reached my nose even through the seals. You cannot imagine such a smell. It spoke of rot and pulsating flesh, but also something seductively wet and infinitely harder to describe. If bees could somehow extract nectar from the fluids of a corpse, I imagine this is how their fecund honey might smell.

More came soon after the first, until there was no doubt what had befallen the *Lira’s* crew. Quadruped horrors arrived with tumors sprouting from chest cavities rotated so far from center, their ruptured sternum faced the ceiling while their lolling heads hung beneath like an udder or a single, swaying testicle. More often than not, they still showed a recognizable human face. Waxy skin and sunken eyes frozen in perpetual horror. The entire mass… the hive of growths that’d taken over the *Lira’s* bowels like intestinal worms… had awakened.

As they came loping towards us, these horrors birthed from reconstituted human flesh, something flitted across the back of my mind… stories of a handcrafted disease created long before the Old War. I denied it at first. Of course I did. In all my thirty eight years there had been only one, single, unsubstantiated rumor of an outbreak on some floating Ostron market, and even then, no one really believed it. Knowing those backwater yokels drink the fluids that seep from that techno-organic Tower they venerate like some kind of god, I couldn’t help but think that contracting some rare Orokin cancer seemed par for the course.

The Infestation is much worse. Somewhere in the depths of that golden derelict, broken against the barren surface of a moon drifting in an expanse of space so vast, even planets become grains of sand, the star-scourge of the Orokin had survived. And the *Lira’s* hapless crew had brought it back to life. Or perhaps they’d merely been its latest meal.

Armed with mother-wrenches and blazing acetylene torches, we tried to hold out against the onslaught, but we were not a military vessel. Our complement of weapons consisted of only a few Detron pulse rifles and personal sidearms. After numerous casualties were incurred, we eventually retreated to the *Moneta* and attempted to seal ourselves off, but it was too late. When two ships dock together, regardless of size, there is an exchange of oxygen via the airlock as the two vessels match pressure. Standard filtration procedures usually provide enough of a barrier to prevent the spread of mold or any of the usual illnesses. They weren’t designed to filter out a plague even the
Orokin had feared.

A glance out a starboard window revealed inky black tendrils, like the root system of rotten tree, snaking out from between the Lira’s hull plates and latching onto the Moneta via the umbilical, worming its way into critical mechanisms. Even now, it was not the speed at which the tendrils grew that alarmed me; it was how intelligently they’d seemed to do it.

Unable to decouple from the Lira, we could only drift along with her.

Naturally we tried to comm Thanatos Station for help, but our distress beacon went no further than that of the unfortunate Lira. Hysteria began to set in amongst the crew. Cassel dispatched a team onto the hull to try and cut us loose, but where us pitiful humans need oxygen to breathe and insulated suits to protect us against the merciless cold, the Infested have no such qualms. They attacked us in vacuum, claiming several more victims, including poor Mira X, before the group managed to retreat to the airlock. She and I were not the best of friends. In fact we often fought, but we were crewmates and I… recall her having two children somewhere in the colonies.

We brought the bodies inside, and I personally helped CMO Lenora zip them into storage bags. At that point the Moneta’s tiny morgue (four refrigerated drawers meant for transient use) was already full, so we had to pile them in the auxiliary airlock, close to the chill of the outer hull. Our respect for the dead only accelerated our downfall. We should have thrown the bodies out into space.

They did not… well, they did not come after us like the reanimated dead worn ragged by every holodrama in the System… but they did come back. Later, as I peered into the narrow window that afforded me a view of the airlock, it was if the bodies had melted… leaving their gore-smeared bags deflated and empty… while something of roughly equal mass writhed and pulsed in the corner between wall and ceiling. Patchwork horrors arose, and although we spaced the airlock, it did little to purge its contents.

You recall I mentioned Symon. After some hours had passed, and we collectively seemed to remember him (or rather, to finally recall the reason for his absence) someone was sent to rouse him from his bunk. She came back white and shaking, telling us how Infested growths had filled his quarters, while Symon himself – what was left of his half-assimilated body – hung from pulsating sinews and organic cordage, a gory picture she likened to that ancient, near-forgotten sect of religion where Divinity hung from a cruciform.

We sealed the door – sealed the entire section! The Moneta had escape pods, of course, and after 32 hours of trying to everything we could think of, anything we could do to save both ourselves and our cargo, Captain Cassel ordered us to abandon ship. But the pods did not deploy. I don’t know why. Maybe there hadn’t been enough reserve power. Maybe if we’d rebooted the OS… maybe then they would have deployed. Maybe the Infested had wormed its way into those systems, too. Hell, maybe it was even smart enough to plan it that way!

At that point, nightmare and reality blurred together in my head. I remember losing the Captain as we forced our way back to Deck 3. At that point, I hadn’t seen Verge in over two hours. I don’t know how or when he met his fate. I remember slipping in sticky-sweet, tar-like excretions as I scrambled towards the medbay. There I found Lenora dead next to an open bottle of Scotch, an eruption of blood painting the wall behind her in a dazzling rooster tail of crimson. My foot kicked at her Plinx as I staggered away, the telltales along the side of the weapon indicating that a single charge had been expelled from the battery. Of all those who perished onboard the Moneta, she was only one who’d done so on her own terms.

Alone and half-mad, I fled across the umbilical back into the Lira. In my panic I thought to try one of the hauler’s escape pods, or failing that, to attempt to open the hold and cast some piece of
mining equipment out into the black, a life raft without food or water, and only a low band emergency beacon meant to draw rescuers to the sight of cave-in, or other such disaster.

The main route was plugged by Infested, so I squeezed myself into the maintenance shafts – the latest in my series of stupid plans. I had only the vaguest idea of how these passageways fit together, and if some Infested spawn had come upon me while I was on my hands and knees, I’d have been eaten right there. As it was, however, I somehow made it down three decks before finding my way blocked by a clot of organic matter.

The tube I’d descended had been pushed up by the force of its growth, and there was a narrow gap at the bottom that I thought to squeeze through and escape. In my infinite wisdom, I removed my helmet and got down on my stomach, using fingers and toes to try and lever myself through the opening.

I’d pulled myself halfway out when the aperture closed against my hips. Perhaps the Infested tissue had swollen as I agitated it, or perhaps the damn thing was just sentient enough to be cruel.

I thrashed and contorted, but the pulsating tissue only seemed to engorge itself further, so I dug my fingers into everything I could reach and tried to twist myself out instead. I later found out that I had sprained my back and bruised both kidneys, but at the time my desperation to survive was so intense, I don’t recall even feeling the pain. Slowly I realized that the tissue wasn’t just swelling; it was winding around my legs. The movement was slow and thick. I might have held it off for hours had I conserved my energy.

Exhausted and drenched in several liters of my own sweat, I could barely kick either of my legs.

To make matters worse, I’d caught my ankle against some flange of exposed chitin buried inside the mass and a dull, writhing ache now pulsed up my calf in time with my heart. My lungs burned as though I’d inhaled thorns. Liquid heat pooled in my boot, squelching hot around my toes. Every so often I’d struggle for a moment, then lie forward on the deck with my weight braced against shaking arms. I didn’t scream. There was no one to scream for, and I was too afraid the sound would attract unwanted attention.

Certain that I was soon to die, I should have been thinking about home, about my pristine apartment back on Callisto with its view of the River Vimur – a magnificent artificial canal built not for traffic, but to be admired for the way it reflected the incandescent Jovian auras and glittering Company offices. I should have been thinking about a past lover, or my elder sister’s home-cooked meals. Sari had all but raised me while our mother was lying somewhere with a needle in her arm. I hadn’t seen her in years.

None of these things crossed my mind.

All I could think about was the undeniable certainty that the Moneta would never have come here if it hadn’t been for me. We never would have passed the Outer Terminus, beyond the reach of all help, if I’d just reported the Lira’s distress beacon to the proper authorities. The agony tunneling up my leg grew with the guilt and self-recriminating grief. My head filled with impulses that were almost words, urges that scratched and mingled with the ragged sob of my own breath, the suggestion of speech hidden in every malignant noise.

**Hunger/**

**Kill/**

**Feed/**
I couldn’t hear the words. I felt them.

We hunger/

We… expand. We absorb.

Hunger/HUNGER

The door across from me gave a thunderous bang. I swallowed a scream and raised myself to my elbows. The heavy door quaked again, bending inwards off its track as something powerful hammered on it from the other side. A hand punched through the seam between bulkheads. Fingers clenched hard enough to crumple alloyed steel, widening the gap enough for a second hand to join the first. Pneumatics hissed and burst as they levered the door apart. Infested spores dusted from the ceiling, fiery hot in the sudden, staccato flicker of light.

The thing on the other side of the door was no Infested, but it was a monstrosity. Two and half meters of restrained violence and armored plates trimmed in scintillating Orokin gold, it moved with remarkable grace for something so heavy and imposing. It stepped through the gap in the door, snapping bits of metal beneath its heel, and regarded me lying there – not with any eyes that I could see – but with a force of presence that nearly loosened my bowels.

I’d never laid eyes upon it in my life… but I knew what it was.

Nothing in this universe or the next, none but the vanished Orokin could have created something so marvelous… and so terrible. There was something gnarled about its body, something grown instead of built, like the contortions of some antediluvian bristlecone pine, and indeed its limbs were thick enough to have passed for tree trunks. Blast damage pockmarked its massive chest, leaving splintered craters that pulsed with metallic golden light. Our most advanced MOAs and Jackals and bipedal proxies were science fair novelties compared to the Tenno, those knights of a fallen empire.

It continued to stare me down without speaking, perhaps as surprised as I was. I reached for it with one hand. Please, I begged. Fervently. Desperately. Please. I was so mad with terror and exhaustion, my tongue glued inside my mouth like a desiccated slab of meat, I don’t even know if the sounds I uttered were identifiable as words. Heat coiled in my leg. Something in my head hissed with anger… and fear.

Flesh of our flesh/

Enemy/

/Get away. GetawaygetawaygetAWAY!

Movement twitched near the ceiling, and something leapt from the puckered opening of a vent. I’d been right not to scream before. The noise had attracted attention. The Tenno barely reacted. Its massive hand shot out and grabbed the thing midair, holding it out by the throat. Armored fingers tightened and its esophagus burst in a torrent of luminescent gore. The abomination continued to writhe and contort, trying to wrap itself around the Tenno’s arm.

With an echoing roar, the Tenno slammed the monster against the ground. The floor cratered. Chips of epoxy glaze flew into the air. The creature shrieked and hissed. The Tenno slammed it down again. And again. With a final crunch of bone the monster lay still, and the Tenno dropped the pulped remains as if ridding itself of dirty laundry.
It seemed to consider me again.

Seconds elongated into forever, but when the Tenno moved, it moved suddenly. Standing so near that I could have rested my cheek on its enormous gore-spattered boot, it made a fist and struck the conduit I’d wedged myself under. Hundreds of pebbled shards rained down on my back as it exploded. A hand fisted in the back of my suit, and I was tugged free with a grisly pop. The snare I’d exhausted myself against, loosened as easily as the lid of an annoying pickle jar.

Whatever had pierced my ankle must have been stoppering the wound, because as soon as it was gone, blood began oozing steadily. The Tenno dumped me onto my stomach, thick fingers probing at my ankle. Distracted by the slither in my skull, I felt rather than saw the blade. A moment later, I knew the razored heat of it.

I screamed obscenities mingled with the wordless screech of terror and betrayal.

I must have passed out because the next thing I remember, I was moving. I peeled my eyes open. Nausea clawed at my belly, but my head was empty. No slithering. No animal urges in the shape of words. It took me a long moment to realize that the waterfall of shifting color billowing against my face was actually the cloak falling from the Tenno’s wide shoulders, its ragged edge whipping over the deckplate a meter below.

The Tenno had thrown me over it’s shoulder like a disobedient child, one arm across the back of my knees, it’s every stride impacting my stomach as I bounced against its armored pauldron… hauling ass to wherever it was so hellbent to go.

I slipped unconscious again.

When my eyes opened again… oh, the things I saw.

I was surrounded by polished alloys, by curving panels and consoles and shimmering glass, a bubble of serenity drifting out in the black. The merciless clarity of space hung so close that for a moment I thought I’d been tossed from the airlock – but I was alive, viewing the scintillating ice of the Kuiper Belt through a viewscreen as big as the tiny room I occupied. The Tenno stood next to me, its big hand fisted in my utility belt. I was once again struck by how huge it was, easily reaching seven feet. I was an insect in its shadow.

I also got the feeling that it’d roused me for a purpose, slapped my cheeks like a fainting debutante and filled my spine with whatever sorcerous narcotic was keeping the pain at bay. Despite the febrile exhaustion, my senses were painfully clear. I swear that I knew colors for which there is no name.

I also knew that I had only one leg.

The other ended in a cauterized stump just below the knee.

Too overwhelmed to process the revelation as anything more than data, I straightened and swayed, and turned my gaze back out into space. Eris and Dysnomia hung below us in perpetual twilight. Some kilometers closer, I could see the Lira and the Moneta drifting along with them. Even I watched, fire bloomed in the Lira’s lower decks, bursting through viewports and hull-plates rapidly ballooning outward under the force of some internal explosion. The hauler shuddered and buckled as shockwaves tore it apart at the seams. Half the vessel cleaved away in a gout of flash-frozen oxygen, burning fuel, and chunks of organic matter. With a navigator’s trained eye, I saw it’s orbital trajectory wobble. The Moneta sank away with it, chained to the doomed hauler like a cancerous lover. Silhouetted against the stark white of the moon, I also saw half a dozen tiny,
tumbling specks that I suddenly realized were bodies.

Hot bile rose in my throat. I wondered if any of them were Lenora, with her sour face that reminded me of my mother and the drinking habit she tried to hide, or the mouthy Miri X, who often commed her sons and the long-suffering sister who took care of them with snapshots of Jupiter’s moons. Symon, Verge… the dozen or so other men and women who offloaded our cargo and scrubbed the grease from our engines. Our chief engineer had been a former debt-slave of Fortuna. As an enlisted navigator who’d graduated from the flight schools of Triton, I’d thought him so beneath me, I couldn’t even recall the man’s name.

The crew I’d murdered for my greed.

I tried to avert my gaze from the spectacle, but the Tenno – who had remained motionless up until this point – suddenly reached up and seized the back of my neck, preventing my head from turning. My heart was pounding so hard, I could feel my pulse hammering against the vise-like grip of his fingers. Almost as if he could read my thoughts, the Tenno flexed each of them in turn, slowly and one by one, so that I could feel them individually tighten against my spine. He gave me a little shake. The message was crystal clear.

WATCH.

I stared out the viewscreen as the pair of ships tumbled through Dysnomia’s thin atmosphere, ten billion tons of twisted metal slamming into the surface with enough force to hurl snow into orbit. A thin ring formed around the moon as gravity carried the particles along. I’ll never forget the words that husked from my mouth, not an apology, but a shameful desire to know how he’d been able to accuse me.

“How did you know?”

The Tenno held up a holotab, laughably small against its massive hand, and flicked it to land incriminatingly at my feet.

I stared at it for a long moment before I recognized it.

It was the holotab I’d loaded with the Lira’s coordinates and distress beacon. The holotab digitally signed with my name and rank the moment I’d inserted it into the computer. Even a mundane court could have sentenced me with such evidence.

I nodded bleakly.

After a long moment, the Tenno released his grip on my neck and deposited me into the corner. I was a nonentity to him, a scolded dog being ignored after it urinated on the carpet. I curled up as best I could and laid my blistering forehead against the glass of the viewscreen, where the cold of space formed delicate fractals of ice.

Possessing of a wyrm drive far in advance of our own, it only took the Tenno craft a mere handful of hours to reach the edge of civilized space. I was not allowed to descend the aft ramp into the rest of the ship – if indeed where was anything back there to explore – and stayed huddled in my corner, my downcast eyes on the floor. I did not try to look around, not wanting to test the boundaries of the Tenno’s patience by looking as though I was committing his secrets to memory. A female Cephalon once inquired after our destination. I deliberately forgot what was said.

He left me amidst a sea of rover tracks two klicks outside of Thanatos Station, next to an automated mining outpost that marked the outer limits of the settlement. I assume it must have
paged the station with a distress beacon, because within the hour, I was being hustled off by a team of surprised rescuers.

There was an inquiry, of course.

I told them what I knew, and what I decided to reveal about my involvement. I told them about the Tenno, but in those days their presence was much lesser-known, and many of my attending physicians thought I’d gone mad. I never told them the coordinates which mark the grave of the *Lira* and the *Moneta*, or the dreaded star-scourge that might still lie awake in their coffin.

It is now the 19th of Iunis.

Recovery has been slow. I’d been a fool to remove my helmet on the *Lira*. Irritated from exposure to the Infested spores, my lungs began to fill with fluid, becoming swollen and blocked. The medics couldn’t understand how I’d been breathing on my own, even for a few hours. The Tenno had been merciful – but the effects had long since worn off, and I was given two options. Tether myself to an oxygen bottle, or undergo partial augmentation. I opted for the latter. Now I resemble any other rig jockey out of Fortuna, or any of the Company’s orbital mining subsidiaries.

I’ve been fitted with a prosthetic leg, too, a very good Diane-Herbin model, but the stump aches fiercely, forcing me to walk with a twisting limp. I like it that way. I don’t want to forget. I petitioned the Company for partial access to Miri’s records, enough to wire half my portfolio to her sons.

I’ve been offered a navigator’s position aboard the hydrogen barge *Helios*, and at greatly increased pay, but I won’t take it. The Company reps treat me like a hero, a survivor. I refuse to be rewarded for what I’ve done. Instead I’ve used what was left in my account, got in touch with a few acquaintances, and set myself up as the middleman for a salvage and technology trader.

And so I came to Cetus instead.

Clutching a worn datapad close to his face, Canto Denarii had been writing for several hours in the flickering glow of an oil lamp. Electricity was scarce in Cetus, whose denizens preferred the gentle light of candles or Eidolon breath-globes. With the exception of small refrigeration units many households didn’t even possess appliances, preferring to cook and eat their meals in large communal kitchens.

It had been difficult to adjust at first.

When he’d steered freighters and dropships between planets, his domain had been numbers and parabolas and complex holographs etched over the viewscreen in realtime. Now the texture of Denarii’s world consisted of handmade ceramics, of silk and boiled wool overlaid with the musky, bloody scent of temple kuva wafting up from the flaying beaches, his Calisitian apartment traded for a modest hut on the outskirts of Cetus.
The locals had been welcoming of him, something that had surprised Denarii. He’d expected to be ostracized, or been at the receiving end of more than a few suspicious looks, but the Ostrons had shown him nothing but hospitality. A guarded kindness perhaps, but kindness nonetheless. Some days it made him feel irrepressibly guilty, knowing the dark secret he kept hidden from them.

Every morning he woke with the dawn and limped the short distance to the markets. Slowly he came to enjoy their alchemy of scent and sound, each voice trying to outdo their neighbor in volume. Everything in the System, be it people, news or goods, eventually made their way to Cetus. From the poorest colonist to those rich enough to own a moon – all felt the pull of the Unum. Even the Tenno.

Denarii saw them from time to time, always at a furtive distance and never face-to-face, but saw them he did. They came more often now, never making a spectacle of themselves, and he gradually came to recognize several individuals, the most frequent of which was the smaller one with the trailing red ribbons. They usually came to trade for information and occasionally for supplies – mostly auron and coprun, and sometimes the lotus silk made by clades of old women down by the shore. Despite their warrior’s code, the Tenno were also as vain and elegant as the Golden Lords they’d once served.

Or so the whispers said.

Denarii knew who he was really waiting for-

-but he never saw the one who’d rescued him from the Lira.

His fingers, which had grown strong and calloused from months of lifting salvage, hesitated over his datapad. He wondered if he should add something else to his memoir. To his confession. The subject of it haunted his nights, when the steady drone of manual labor could no longer crowd out his thoughts. He’d grown content here on Earth. There was even a woman – a rug-weaver by the name of Aidana, who manned her stall directly across from him in the market – who had begun to take an interest in him despite his physical deformities. Denarii couldn’t help but wonder. Who was he to deserve a good life, when he’d robbed over a dozen others of their chance at the same?

He turned the datapad over in his hands. Despair lapped the tired shores of his thoughts. He could always end his own life… atone for his crime once and for all… but something about it stuck in his craw. He thought of the Tenno again. If it’d found him so contemptible, why save him at all? Rumor insisted that the Tenno valued honor above all else… but what justice was there to be found in sparing a sinner like him? If it could not, would not, commit an act of deliberate cruelty by simply leaving him to his fate, a simple execution would not have violated their code. A quick death would still have been a mercy compared to the alternative. What was he missing?

A breeze sighed through his window, carrying a gale of laughter and phony squeals of pain. Denarii stood up and took his dark thoughts out onto the porch. Outside, the sun was just beginning to set. The fading light was warm on his skin. Earth’s sky was a translucent shade of carnelian banded with columns of gold. Rock shadows blended sensuously with the outflung silhouette of the Unum thrown across the water. Looking down from his hut, Denarii watched a group of children chase each other along the beach. Several tumbled to the kuva-soaked gravel, then picked themselves up with a laugh.

They were playing Tenno.

A game of wooden swords and papier-mâché masks in crude likeness of their heroes.

There was never an argument of who was to be Tenno, and who was to be Grineer. These children
had been born in Cetus, raised with the virtues of community. They took turns without fuss. Denarii sat down on a stool by the door, fingers absently massaging the half inch of intact flesh below his knee. A thin haze of smoke hung over the village, heavy with the scent of cardamom and grilled fish.

What was he missing?

It was important.

He watched Forgemaster Hok pause on his way somewhere else, listened to him holler at the children. Not for running, or for being too loud. As the little would-be Tenno raced past, Hok snagged her with a brawny hand, shoved the kid’s elbows tighter to her sides, lifted her sword out further, and pressed her into a partial squat. She gave the new stance a few experimental swings. Hok grunted in satisfaction. Denarii rubbed his aching joint.

The Ostron people had a strong warrior tradition, and protected their own with the strength of hand-forged blades. Ever since their mysterious awakening, the Tenno had become Cetus’ most stalwart defenders – but there were hundreds of Grineer, legions of Grineer, and even Warframes couldn’t be everywhere at once. Those who lived here dwelled on the brink, and Cetus never truly slept. Even when the markets were closed there were meals to cook, laundry to do, ointments to prepare, new warriors to train, old warriors to mend.

The breeze picked up, ruffling the placid inland sea. A flock of coastal Mergoos wheeled overhead with a screech. Many fisherman regularly fed them. The ridiculous-looking creatures were supposed to be lucky. But it was more than that… it was a cycle of kindness, of service to other living creatures.

Someone called his name, and Denarii looked up towards the village. Aidana was standing on the stairs leading down to the beach, a massive copper pot braced against one hip. It was her turn to help in the kitchen tonight, and Denarii knew it would be filled with tubers or slabs of Tower flesh. There was a smile on her tanned face. She beckoned to him with her free hand.

When he didn’t move right away, she affected an exaggerated pout, lips twisting into a frown meant to be visible at a distance. She beckoned more deliberately, this time using her finger in an obvious come-hither motion. The children laughed again and went pelting off down the shore. Voices drifted down from the market, hawking powdered dyes and half-priced jugs of kuva. Denarii’s heart gave a lurch so fierce it bordered on pain.

Suddenly he understood.

The Tenno had condemned him to live… to atone for his mistake every time he made someone laugh, every hungry Mergoo he fed on the back porch… every bloodied warrior he helped carry to the healer, because he was the only one who could get that ancient hoverlift to work. He was used to transporting delicate cargo, after all.

His penance was earned every time he helped Aidana set up her brightly colored rugs, and every time he helped someone free of charge, because an old man had once gifted a lost ex-navigator several dozen fresh persimmons (including the homespun wicker basket) when Denarii had first come to Cetus.

It was early in his relationship with the rug-weaver… but if it continued… if in some distant future he was blessed enough to father children with her… his redemption was earned in seeing them raised with the simple honor he’d been forced to learn the hard way.
Denarii stiffly got to his feet. Aidana waited patiently for him to shuffle his way to her, alternating between teasing and encouragement. She called him a crotchety old man, knowing perfectly well he was still years from middle-age, and he called her a withered old shrew, knowing perfectly well she was younger than him. He tried to take the pot from her. She swatted his hands away. They linked arms and set off towards the kitchen area at the rear of the market.

Weather permitting, meals were always an outdoor affair in Cetus, warmed by the glow of a central fire and surrounded by the smell of food and fragrant bundles of vetiver grass to keep the mosquitoes away. Denarii had not planned to come to Old Earth, but as he chopped lotus roots and added them to the peanuts and red dates browning at the bottom of the kettle, he was glad it’d turned out that way.

My name is Canto Denarii.

I am a merchant and huckster of Cetus, a settlement unique among the stars.

And I am going to live.

Chapter End Notes

-o- In Roman mythology, Juno Moneta was an epithet of Juno (the wife of Jupiter) in her aspect as the protectress of funds. Coins were minted in her temple, and the word moneta is where we get the words “money” and “monetize”. Her name also derives from the Latin monēre, which is taken to mean a warning or an admonishment.

-o- The Italian word canto (from the Latin cantus, meaning “song” or “singing”) is a long subdivision of a narration, usually an epic poem. Denarii is the plural form of denarius, an ancient Roman silver coin. It was in circulation for only a couple of decades, but its legacy continues in the Italian word for money: denaro.

Canto Denarii – Song of Silver and/or Money.

-o- Aidana is a Kazakh girl’s name meaning “Wise like the Moon” – because Cetus looks as though it is located on the north shore of the Caspian Sea in modern-day Kazakhstan.

-o- Before the adoption of the Euro in 2002, the lira was the standard unit of money in Italy. It remains so in Turkey, Lebanon, and Syria.

-o- Anyone catch the little Easter Egg from Dune? *chuckle* I cast the hairy eyeball in
the direction of the new remake. The book and the 1984 cult classic are my bedrock. Lots of fond memories. The Tenno are absolutely Bene Gesserit children like Alia! Do not get me started on the parallels with Requiem Mods (Fass, Vome, Lohk) and the Weirding Way as it was adapted for the movie.

“Some thoughts have a certain sound, that being the equivalent to a form. Through sound and motion, you will be able to paralyze nerves, shatter bones, set fires, suffocate an enemy or burst his organs…”

I will be exploring this in later fragments.

Carry on.

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