

The Bound Curse and the Lost Maria

By: Dustin Swede

"It will be an easy job you said!"

The thick metal door vibrated as it was slammed from the other side.

A reasonably tall, red headed woman pressed all her weight against door. Her normally vibrant clothing was stained with grim. The door vibrated again.

The other person holding his weight against the door grunted. His large frame certainly contributed more to keeping the door sealed than the smaller woman. He was bordering on seven feet tall and wore a crisp gray coat and an archaic but fashionable top hat, both of which had managed to remain remarkably clean despite all that had happened.

His clothing made many people double take however because the person inside the clothing was not what was expected. His face had a long green reptilian snout, not unlike a crocodile. His hands were the same scaled green which ended with sharp nails that could be thought of as talons.

"No need to rub it in. I am aware of my mistake. Although I'll remind you again that the Esteemed Mister Murphy was a Human not a Rexian. My culture does not have the assumption that everything will immediately go south." Despite his sharp teeth his words were remarkably precise. He even managed to perfectly emulate an old British accent.

"Yeah, sure, blame the human." Said the woman.

The thumping on the door grew more frequent.

The woman shouted across the room, "Lily! How much longer until you are done?"

"Do not rush me." It was a soft, very methodical voice with a very crisp halt after each of the words. A grate had been pulled off the floor and the strange insectoid creature kneeling down among the cables was the one that responded.

Lily could generously be described as having similar anatomy as a human. She

has four arms instead of the normal human number and her entire body was covered in an exoskeleton. It was mostly an light black color. Her clothing had been ripped into mostly tattered pink and purple shreds, had she been a human woman she would have been completely indecent but it didn't seem to bother her in the slightest. Formians didn't have a culture of wearing much clothing, Lily was an exception but still only really wore clothing for the sake of fashion.

The door rattled again. This time the two holding it shut were pushed back almost an inch as the door almost opened. They scrambled to regain their footing and push their bulk once more against the door.

"You know, it really would be nice if you rushed." Said the woman.

"Something about us all dying a horrible death if you don't."

"Now, now" said the crocodile looking man, "Lily might managed to make it back to the ship in one piece, she is rather resilient. And we could make a dramatic last stand, something to give the bards to sing about for eons to come."

"I really don't think they will sing about this." The door rattled again. "And while you might have those claws of yours, I'm afraid I lost my gun. I'll have to leave the dramatic last stand to you."

"Hmm... A pity."

Despite the incoming death on the other side of the door, they bantered. Death might come for them this day but nothing would keep them acting like old friends, or maybe old rivals.

"Ah, there we go." Came the collected voice of Lily. She turned something deep in the nest of cables. There was an zenourmas hissing sound as the emergency seals on the door began shifting inside the frame, closing the door and sealing it tight.

There was another bang of the door but the door did not shift this time. The thick emergency bolts had been inserted into the metal of the door, preventing it from being pushed open anymore.

Lily rose up out of the hole in the floor, and clambered onto the floor properly.

"Phew." She said, making a motion to wipe sweat off her brow, a useless gesture since Formians don't sweat. "That was exciting." She then glanced around at her two companions.

“Ummm.... Were is Strix?”

The other two had partial slide to the ground. The fear and excitement had just begun to fade from them when Lily asked the question. They looked at each other for a moment, then back at Lily, and then around the room. Strix was not there.

“I’m sure he will show up.” Said the red haired woman, although she was beginning to look worried. “We always disappears at the strangest times and then reappears sometime when you least expect it. He might even reappear right now.”

There was a long moment of silent where Strix distinctly did not appear. She let out a soft nervous laugh.

The rexian stood up, casually smoothing out his ruffled clothing, and then looked back at the sealed door.

“So we are going to be back in there to find him?” He asked.

“Of course”

“No way”

Lily and the Rexian both turned looked over at the woman. Lily spoke, “Come on Yana, we can’t leave him behind. I wouldn’t have anybody to tease if he is gone.” Lily’s voice had changed, whenever things got desperate and dangerous Lily spoke precisely, like she was emotionless. But now it was clear that the opposite was true, there was little clicks between each of her words with her strange mandible-like jaws clacking together.

Yana raised her arms in surrender, “Alright, alright. We will find that idiot and bring him back. We can’t very well leave without the esteemed captain of our ship anyways. Besides, if we leave now without completing the job then we won’t be paid. And I refuse to be humiliated like this without at least a good paycheck to look forward too.

There was a strange clicking sound from Lily before she said the word, “Tsuuunnnn”

“Shut up. Augustus, if we are going to head back in, I’m going to need a new gun. Do you still have your’s on you.”

There was a strange smile on the Rexian’s face that made him look dangerous

and vicious, "Of course my lady." He reached up underneath his coat and brought out the gun that he kept there. It was very unlike the posh clothing he was wearing. A very sleek and dangerous weapon.

Yana took the gun from him and her own smile began to dance across her face. "Well then, I guess it is time to start the payback. If they think the crew of the Bound Curse is going back down now then they are sorely mistaken."

She began to laugh menacingly. It was joined by a chittering sound combined with a hissing.

The laughter of fools and heroes.

"It will be an easy job." Said Augustus.

The four of them were crowded around the table. Blaring music made it hard for them to hear each other so the other three of them had to lean in to hear what Augustus.

The bar was packed with all manor of people, mostly humans but also others. A couple of other rexians like Augustus were across the room enjoying drinks. Some silent but exuberantly moving cephians with there long boneless bulbs faces were dancing on the main floor. Practically all of the members of the crossworld treaties where here in some form.

"Easy? That doesn't sound easy... it sounds like trouble." Said Yana. She was dressed practically, if a bit colorfully. She had violet shorts that were probably a bit too short. Combined with a matching jacket and her red hair she was easily notifiable.

Although that was probably true of their entire table. Augustus was wearing the same black suit with top hat that he always wore with his gray coat hung carefully over his chair. It would look out of place with his rexian face if he didn't manage to look absolutely perfect it it.

"We will just need to find the ship, locate the missing person, and return with him."

Yana looked coolly across the table at Augustus, "You mean 'locate the missing pleasure cruise ship that mysteriously vanished and then locate somebody who was performing industrial espionage and is trying not to be found'. What part of

that sounds easy to you?"

"Ooohhhh.... Missing ghost ship." Came the chittering sounds of excitement from Lily. She was probably the only Formian in the entire bar, that usually didn't do nonsense like that. But Lily was special, she was totally into nonsense like that. She was wearing a sleek and beautiful red dress. On a human it would have seductive and alluring, on her it was... bizarre.

Yana sighed, "Ghosts aren't real..." She trailed off and then coughed, "Either way that doesn't sound like an easy job... more like doomed impossible mission."

"Impossible? Doomed?" The voice was dark and quiet yet somehow through the loud bar the other three heard it. Strix was leaning forward in his chair with his arms on the table, propped together in a contemplative symbol.

His hair was black, his clothing black except where it was accented with red. At first glance he be confused with a human like Yana but there was something different about him. His ears were pointed, his teeth sharper than a humans, his skin unnaturally pale. There weren't any species in the crossworld treaties that looked like that. Yana had once asked him where he had come from Strix had refused to answer.

"The darkness of the void calls to me. A ghost ship on the far edge of fate. An agent of shadows hiding in the depths of the abyss. There is no better job for the members of the Bound Curse." During his speech he had raised one of his hands in front of his face. Clutched like he was trying to hold in some dark power.

"Oh no.... We have lost him again." Said Yana. She sigh and leaned back in her chair.

There was a chittering laughter from Lily.

"Then we are all in agreement to take the job?" Asked Augustus.

Yana just shrugged in resignation. Strix was continuing to clutch his hand like he was stopping it from strangling himself. Lily was nodding excitedly.

'Very well then. I will inform the client that we will be accepting the job."

"When the moon next rises we shall depart on a journey through the long forgotten forest." Came the voice of Strix once again.

"Alright, alright. We will leave on the moonrise or whenever. Everybody

make sure to make any preparations you need for dealing with a haunted ship. Augustus, try to get whatever information you can from the client about the person we are expected to find and the last location of the missing ship.”

“Of course.” Nodded Augustus. He and Yana shared a knowing glance. Strix and Lily might be good at what they were experts at but keeping a mercenary crew employed and all the minutia that involved was not their expertise. It was up to the two of them to make sure the ship sail, so to speak.

They left the bar as a group. Augustus separated from them to go off and speak with the client. For a rexian he had an awful lot of contacts and made sure the four of them stayed healthily employed, even if most of the job they took were far from easy.

Yana sighed, who knows, maybe this would be the mythical unicorn known as an easy job.

They were hardly out of the alley that the bar was in when Yana looked back and saw that only Lily was still accompanying her. Strix was gone, again. Disappeared somewhere. She was sure she would see him again when they departed.

She look up to the glass ceiling a fair bit above them and out at the twinkling stars. It was still the middle of the night, or the equivalent here. There was still plenty of light from the neon signs, stations like this one rarely truly slept even if the rotation of the station itself provided an artificial day night cycle.

“Oh how come I’m the straight man in this group?” It was Lily speaking nearby with his chittering amused voice. She was waving her four arms back and forth in dramatic manner.

“Are you trying to imitate me?” Said Yana in an annoyed tone.

“Perhaps. You are fun to tease. Although if you want me to play the straight man for a while then I can do it, you are just so skilled at it that I wouldn’t want to take that from you.”

“No, that would just make me uncomfortable. If I found you acting serious all a sudden I would think we were in a life and death struggle.”

Lily nodded, “Alright then, I’ll remain my encouragable self. So what are you

planning on getting as supplies? I'm planning on getting some ghost hunting gear, wouldn't want to let this opportunity slip through my fingers."

"Really, I'm now expecting you to actual do that. As long as you spend your own personal funds on unless things like ghost hunting gear and not the preparation funds. Our funds are tight enough as is without you wasting the money. As for what we need, if we are going to locate a missing ship we will have to finally repair the damage to the long distance scanners, I trust you will be able to install the required pasts."

"Ooooo" said Lily with some extra clicks, "Repairing our scanner are we? That should be fun. The thing hasn't properly worked since it got nicked while we were flying through that astroid belt escaping from the pirates, didn't they want to eat Augustus?"

"He is usually so calm and collected but something about those pirates wanting to eat him really set him off."

"He he he... eat him... he he he..."

Yana smacked Lily on the back of her head as they continued, if you let Lily get distracted like that then who knows when she would return to reality again.

"Enough of that. We also need to repair the lock and frame of the extra room. If we need to capture this industrial spy then we need to make sure he can't escape. Hopefully he won't be a species that can break through our locks like last time.

"Good times."

"That was not good times..." Yana paused, Lily was looking at her with that look again, "Alright, alright, maybe it was good times."

"Lying to yourself will only lead to trouble in the long term. You know if your heart that you are one of us." There was a buzzing humming sound coming from Lily as she took the lead walking through the streets. They have moved onto one of the main streets so they could no longer speak freely to each other without disturbing all the other people walking by.

There Taumu was a crossroads for all manner crossworld people. While technically in human controlled space the large space station worked as a trade hub and refueling station, mostly between the humans and the rexians.

Lily and Yana had both been here many times before. While neither of them would call the place home it was a familiar and comfortable place. Which is why they pretty quickly felt the unusual presence.

Lily clicked her jaws and Yana nodded in understanding. They were being followed. At the next intersection they turned off the main street and onto one of the side streets. Both of them began to pick up their pace. Yana might be able to outrun their pursuers but Lily was not a runner. Her carapace just couldn't take that kind of stress for very long.

They might not be able to shake their pursuers but they could lead them to a preferable location. The back allys of the station were mostly just back business access or places that not many people needed to go. Plus it will be easier to catch their pursuers if they decide to turn tail and flee.

Then Lily and Yana arrived at the end of an alleyway. A dead-end or close enough. There were doors along the various walls but the road stopped here.

They turned to let the pursuers finally catch up to them. It was six men, humans all of them. Each of them was wearing plain clothes, simple pants, shirts and baggy coats but there was unusual skin-tight under clothing that could be seen peaking out from under their normal clothing.

As they drew near they began to draw out weapons that they had been hiding in their coats. A variety of long dangerous knives mostly, although one had some spiked knuckles, and another a long metal bar with a heavy knob on the end.

"Those are some nasty looking weapons you got there. How did you get them past security?" Said Yana as she took in all the men. She was beginning to have an idea of who they might be.

The leader of the group stepped forward. He didn't seem to be carrying any weapons but was a good half a foot taller than the other men.

"Now, now, now, these are just tools, important tools... For recapturing a rogue scientist. Now come along quietly Miss Levi and we won't have to introduce you to these tools."

Yana shook her head, "I'm afraid you have the wrong person. I'm definitely not this Miss Levi you are looking for. I've got an ID and everything to prove it."

"You might be able to fool the Taumu authorities with that junk but we know

who we are looking for, so Miss Levi or whoever you are pretending to be now, you will come along with us. Either the easy way or the way of the hard way." The nearby goon with the metal bat made a very clearly threatening motion.

There was the chittering laughter of Lily, "Wow..... This is probably the most cliché scene I've seen. Do you make you go through a course to be the most generic thug you can be or are you just naturally good at it." Lily began to step forward from Yana. "If you want to get to my friend here then you are going to have to get through me. And I don't think those toothpicks are going to be very useful."

Several of the humans stepped backward. Lily wasn't particularly tall for a formian and she was shorter than more of the men surrounding them but a formian was not an opponent you wanted to fight in melee combat, especially with a knife.

"Boss, what should we do? Nobody said anything about a formian interfering."

"Don't worry. That is why we brought him." He pointed toward the man carrying the metal bat, knives might not be effective against formian but blunt weapons like that could certainly work. Breaking the carapace of a formian was about as difficult as breaking human bones and heavy metal weapons were more than capable of that.

"An ant in a dress huh." Said the man as he stepped forward, "Should be that hard to make it squeal."

"Yana. Are you ready?" Lily's voice has changed in tone. Her voice was not crisp with spaces rather than clacking between words.

"Oh yes.... Very ready." Yana has drawn a pair of gloves out of her back pockets while the conversation has happened and had just finished putting them on. Yana had a big grin on her face. She had been holding back recently, now would be a good time to let loose for a bit. "Now then, I guess it is our turn to make an offer to you. Turn around and me and my friend won't kick in your teeth."

"Not likely, get them. Keep Miss Levi alive although feel free to give her some painful reminders of what it means to resist."

The man with the club stepped forward to meet Lily obviously confident that he could beat her with her being unarmed. Lily was just casually walking forward toward the man. Then the man swung his metal club at her with an astounding amount of force.

Lily simply raised her arm to block the attack. There was a mighty crashing sound and the man had a look of excitement on his face as he expected to see her limb broken. However it was his weapon that was thrown backward.

Lily made a clicking sound, "Is that the best that you have got? Aren't you supposed to snap make me squeal."

The man raised the metal club again to bring it down with the greatest force he could muster. However Lily raised her arm again to block as it bounced off once again.

"Impossible, how?" Shouted the man as he stepped backward, beginning to become afraid.

"He he he, Clearly you have not fought any real Formian soldiers before if you think what I'm doing is anything special." Her voice had changed back from the crisp voice to the one with clicks in between her words. "It is just angles and force after all. Accept the attack at an angle and the force is.... Oh... sorry but this explanation is going to be too technical for you isn't it?"

The man began to swing wildly at Lily while stepping backward. However each strike was parried by her arms as she got closer and closer.

"Maybe I should explain it to you in easy words. You suck. An untrained goon who thinks that might is all that makes a good soldier. Now drop your weapon and run away like the weakling you are before I twist that tiny metal pipe around your head."

The man made a squeaking sound, dropped his weapon, turned heel, and ran away.

Meanwhile Yana was being surrounded by four of the men, all of them with knives. With their superior numbers it was easy for them to come at her from all directions. However that barely seemed to matter.

They came in with their knives, practically ignoring the instructions not to kill

her. She didn't even seem to look at them as she moved gracefully around each of their attacks dodging and weaving like it was effortless.

Then in a moment of disorientation as they were confused as to why she had avoided them, she balled up her fist and slammed it into one of their guts. There was a *zirt* sound and sparks of electricity crackled from her fist. He collapsed to the ground next to her.

It was now her versus three of them. Apparently just a single defeat wasn't enough to make them fall back so they came at her again. However just like the first time she effortlessly dodge their attacks, although they seemed to have accepted it this time and followed up with more wild slashing trying to keep her away from them.

Her movements were agile and graceful, slipping behind another one of them before grabbing him by his neck. There was another *zirt* and he fell as well. The remaining two glanced at each other, realizing that it was not going their way, and turned and fled.

With her foes also dispatched she stepped forward to stand near Lily, the two of them facing the leader of the group who was still standing his ground.

"Don't come any closer." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a glistening silver gun.

"Guns are illegal on space stations... no amount of excuses can justify have that here." Said Yana. There was something off about Yana now, a wide frenzied grin had appeared across her face during the fight and it was still there.

Neither her nor Lily seemed particularly worried.

"If you think that will protect you then you are wrong. We are far enough away from the dome and I don't have to worry about it and nobody will ever catch me with it. And this beauty will be sure to break through even a Formian's armor, even if yours is harder than normal."

Lily and Yana shared a look and then stared back at the man.

Clicking sound from Lily, "While that is interesting and all I don't think it is us you need to worry about. You might want to look behind you."

"You don't think I will really for for such a foolish....." Then the man went slack, his gun fell to the floor with a clatter, and then he slumped over.

Behind him was a man dressed all in black.

"Your time has not yet come my companions."

"Strix.... How long have you been following us?" Asked Yana as her smile began to fade although it didn't completely disappear and instead transformed into a relaxed grin.

"The villainous eyes observed the departure of heroes from the gathering hub. Their foul presence could not be tolerated."

"So you noticed them when you were leaving the bar and decided to stalk them and us? We really didn't need your help but the sentiment is appreciated."

Lily looked down at one of the goons who was still writhing on the ground, trying to recovered from the shock that Yana had given him.

"You know who this people are Yana? Your rabid fans?"

"Hardly, these guys are too green to be professionals so I doubt they were hired personally by the people that are hunting me, plus they wouldn't dare break Taumu law openly. More likely there is a bounty up for me. Gets the goon working and they don't have to pay a penny unless I'm successfully brought in. And as an extra they can skirt local law and play coy if I'm apprehended illegally."

"A bounty huh? Your being a proper mercenary now." Chittered Lily, "Can't rightly call yourself a mercenary unless you have at least one bounty kicky around. That is how you know they are a professional."

"Are you saying you have a bounty on your head?" Asked Yana skeptically. She could imagine people finding Lily aggravating but it takes more than that to get a bounty placed on your head.

"A lady had to have their secrets." Lily did a perfect curtsy.

"A dark secret hides behind each of our shadows."

"Poetic as usual. But we also have a job to do so let's get back on track for planning on our one work. And Strix, since you are here you might as well join us, no running off this time."

"The void is calling me." Strix began to turn to flee but Lily stepped forward and grabbed Strix on is shoulder, stopping him dead.

"The void can call you later." She chittered, "Now we are shopping for upgrades to the ship. Your ship. So join us."

"Alas poor void.... Our rendezvous had not yet come to pass." He struggled against Lily but he did not have the strength to resist the formian.

After a bit Strix stopped resisting and just followed after the two woman as they returned to the main street.

"Do you think the corp is going to raise the stakes? I thought that they had just let you go."

"Oh corps don't just let valuable assets go. I've just made it too expensive to reclaim me."

"You sure you want to do this job? In all likelihood we aren't that different from the people who came after us today. Mercenaries hired to track down somebody probably not unlike you."

"It is fine. A job is a job. If we turned down every job that was morally questionable then we wouldn't have any jobs to take."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"Alright." Lily nodded and they walked in silence. While Lily could be annoying and personally invasive about many things she knew where to draw the line. If Yana wanted to leave her skeletons in her closet then it was her right to do that.

There were high class shops in the station with modern versions of everything you might possibly need. Fancy new improvements to your ship that would make any pilot swoon. But that wasn't where the crew of the Bound Curse

They were going to the open markets. Where practically anything was sold by the venders. Mostly used or broken things. Parts and pieces that could be used to repair their long distance sensor. Lily was a genius with a wrench and some spare parts.

A good sensor was hard to find though. Luckily the black box for their sensor survived so they could repair it by adding regular parts to it.

When they arrived at the market Lily went through various shops looking for the different parts that they needed. Several of the things Lily could pick out for

herself but there were several pieces that Yana needed to find.

If it was a ghost ship that somehow disappeared then regular sensors probably would do that job. The brief that she had received from Augustus was that the ship was last seen near an astroid belt. Most likely some kind of damage disabled the ship's engines and then it drifted into the astroid belt.

Astroids and astroid dust was the most likely cause of sensor malfunction. If it was just that then the things that Lily was buying would be enough to find the ship. Yana suspected however that it would not be enough, if it was just that then any rescue attempts would have found the ship. So Yana had to think outside the box, figure out other possible ways of finding the ship.

One possibility was that there was a subspace tow. The ship was captured by a bigger ship and then brought into a different system. Possible but unlikely. You would need a pretty big ship to do a subspace tow of that nature and the Bound Curse was not big enough to handle whoever would have been capable of having a ship that big. Government, Corps, Pirate Kings. It was a short list of suspects if that was the case. Aside from that it be far too late to detect any subspace fluctuations and begin a tracking effort.

So Yana had to assume that wasn't the case and the ship was still in the system, otherwise the job was already out of their league and their hands. Another option was cloaking, black box cloakers were expensive but certainly a possibility. Really there could be any sort of protection against sensors..... although probably something reasonably easy to bypass.

Yana sighed again. Hopefully the ship has just collided with an astroid and exploded. That would make everything easy. They could just find the wreckage, hopefully find the corpse, and then get paid for confirming that the industrial spy had been dealt with.

Relying on enemies being as cheap as you are forced to be is a bad plan. So Yana needed to be smarter than them, better at finding ways around unknown black box cloaking technology. After much searching she found an unusual shop ran by cephan.

The strange green hue of the cephan slight illuminated the small alcove that it had as a shop. Shelves of boxes lined the walls. Various circuits and other

electronic gizmos. Old gaming consoles were in one of the boxes while another have old hand-made circuit boards.

Yana was looking through the boxes when she asked the cephan, "I'm looking for unusual sensor arrays, do you have anything like that here?"

The cephan just turned its head a bit to the side and waved its arms back and forth.

"Ah, thanks, I'll check there then." Nodded Yana.

The cephan did some strange flashing different colors and waved its hands some more.

"Yeah, I speak cephan. I used to have a co-worker cephan so I spent the time to learn their language." There was some more tentacle waving. "Yeah, I'm aware that learning cephan is pretty uncommon. But it wasn't that hard to figure out, humans have a sign language that some people know although it isn't quite as complex as cephan."

Pause.

"Yeah, they were a pretty funny individual. Unfortunately I think they are still stuck working for a corp so it is unlikely that I will see them."

Pause.

"Oh, thanks. Yeah, I'll take a look around then. You have been more helpful."

Yana went into the back where the cephan has recommended that she look. There were some larger pieces back there. After looking through several boxes of things she found one particular piece that interested her. She pulled it out and examined the sensor dish. This might be exactly what she could use.

She brought it up to this front and asked the shopkeeper, "Is this what I think it is?"

Yana nodded as the shopkeeper waved their tentacles.

"Excellent this is exactly what I am looking for. Do you know what kind of power requirements it has?" Yana listened. "Thanks. This material scanner will be exactly what I needed. How much do I owe you for it?"

"Really? Are you sure?"

Yana pulled out her bank card and handed it over to the shopkeeper. There was some the standard spending of money, Yana had a local bank account just for

these purchases.

After purchases the scanner Yana did some hand waving, her best attempt to actually speak cephan. Humans really didn't have the arm mobility to properly speak cephan but she did her best and the shopkeeper seemed to appreciate it.

With her purchase in tow she returned to the other parts of the market to find Lily and Strix. It seems that Strix managed to escape off somewhere, not terribly surprising, and Lily was carrying several bags of stuff, most of which looks like the various components needed to repair the sensor array and then...

"Is that a ouija board you purchased there?" Asked Yana skeptically.

"Yeah!" Chittered Lily excitedly, "it is what you humans use to talk with ghosts isn't it?"

"Yeah..... sure we do. Although I'm pretty sure it won't actually do anything. Seeing as how ghosts aren't real."

"How can you be sure? Have you ever seen ghosts not be real?"

"... .. That... fine, whatever." Yana threw up her hand, "We can play ghost detectives. Are you also bringing formian ghost detecting tools? Won't want to accidentally miss those ghosts." The sarcasm was practically dripping off Yana as she spoke.

"Nah, formians doesn't believe in ghosts. But I'll have to check with Augustus about about what the rexian beliefs about ghosts are. They have a whole system of ancestor worship right?"

"... don't believe in ghosts...." Yana shook her head, remembering that this was Lily she was speaking to. Lily was not your standard fomian, practically exiled from her people for being too eccentric. "Um, I'm pretty sure that is ancient rexian culture, not modern rexian culture."

"Close enough, Augustus will know just the thing I'm sure. I asked Strix about what he thought about ghosts but he was as cryptic as ever and then practically disappeared.

"Were you expecting anything else?"

"Maybe a dark grimoire of untold secrets that man was not meant to know?"

"You really don't want to see Corp tax records."

Lily chittered madly for a second, "Good one, good one. But corps wouldn't

be good with ghosts. They would just work them to death.... Again.”

“Do you need anything else or do you have enough ghost hunting tools for now? I’m figuring it is time to meet back up with Augustus and learn what he managed to find out about the job. We have some of the basics already but knowing more the details is important. I have a plan for locating the lost ship but there are still so many unknowns. I won’t be able to start designing a sensor scanning algorithm until I know exactly where we are planning on going.

“Just a couple more things. We can’t leave without getting some extra food supplies. If I leave the food to Strix then who knows if we will eat at all and Augustus would just get various forms of meat. Would it kill him to have more vegetables or fruit in his diet.”

“It would actually do that.” Rexians are need to have a pretty meat centered diet. Of course Lily knew that. But Lily was also right, Augustus would do his job properly if he was in charge of foodstuffs but it will also not be a very varied diet. Strix really would just let them all starve or forget about it but getting freeze dried package meals wasn’t exactly what anybody wanted.

After visiting several more stores they began to return to the ship. Lily had all four of her arms full and Yana was also carrying practically as much as she could hold. They arrived back at the port without being interrupted by bounty hunters.

The ship, the Bound Curse, was not exactly what you would expect. Strix claimed the ship looked like a coffin. Yana could kinda see that. It was sort of that shape but but the top and bottom were slightly curved inward.

Over all not a particularly uncommon ship design. Still it was painted black according to Strix’s preferences which did make it look more intimidating. It wasn’t a very big ship, big enough for a small crew plus a little bit extra.

For a ship that would be used in combat like the Bound Curse ship size was important. So there wasn’t a bunch of extra free space since it would just make the ship more vulnerable against attacks. Cargo ships and other civilian ships could get much much larger with basically not additional issues assuming that attached warp drive could transport that much matter.

They began to load up the supplies they had picked up into the various rooms

of the space ship. Each of the crew members had their own quarters, cramped but serviceable. Then there was the rec-room which also functioned as the kitchen. Probably the room with the most free space. The cockpit and the engineering room were also cramped.

Then there where the four storage room or maybe spare crew rooms. The rooms could be repurposed for either use as they needed. That really pretty much covered what the ship contains. The design was initially made for small crew transportation with a cheap to run warp drive. Ships of this size had mostly been phased out for larger ships but there was always a new amount mercenaries for ships like this so similar ships tended to get made, although the particular design was pretty unusual.

The food was unloaded into the fridge and all the spare parts into the engine room which Lily promptly began to work on. Yana had pulled out her small tablet and had taken over the rec-room. She was sketching maps and drawing trying to figure out where the ship might have been lost at.

When Augustus arrive not long after Yana waved him over, "Alright, what do you have?"

"The ship is the Last Maria. As I mentioned previously it disappeared in the Agenlia system."

"Yeah.... According my maps that system isn't really used for me. Is there a reason it was pictured for the Last Maria to travel through?"

"Apparently the Agenlia has very picturesque views. At least that is the official stance. It probably also matters that the system is basically unclaimed territory. Technically controlled by humans but that is just borders on maps."

Yana nodded, "Yeah, things do sound fishy about this job, so many things are weird. Do you think this is really just a pleasure cruiser?"

"Perhaps, or perhaps not. Another potentially reason is the large amounts of solar radiation in the system. This makes communications difficult in the system and disrupt long sensors. Combined with a particularly large astroid field the system is a perfect for concealing a missing ship."

"Any information about whether this was a normal stop on the ship's journey or something unexpected?"

"As far as I can find out it is a normal routing for the ship. Rich people ride around enjoying themselves and making business deals. Lasts around two weeks, then it returns safe and sound to the various core worlds."

"Are nobody has reported all these rich people missing? Just this one job to find somebody? You trust we are going to get paid for this?"

"It has the official support of Taumu."

"Really? That makes it stink even harder."

"I agree but the pay is good."

"True enough, what information do we have about this industrial spy?"

"A picture." He slide the picture across the table toward Yana. "Beyond that I have his name, Jeramy Nester. As for anything else about him, practically nothing."

"And we need to recover him. Baring that destroy or recover any of his information?"

"Pretty much."

"And we we supposed to just guess on this information?"

"From what I discovered the information would be kept in a specially sealed case."

"A sealed case.... why does this seem to be getting worse as we get deeper into this."

Augustus shrugged his large shoulders, "Because your instincts good. Yes, there is likely something fishy going on, but that is why people like us are hired and not somebody valuable."

"Expendable, yup that is us. I'll right, I'll see what I can do about looking through this data and see if I can find anything useful."

"Thanks, if anybody can find out hidden information then it is you. I'll ask some more of my contacts and get back to you before we leave. There might be some tidbits, information about why nobody else seems to care about this missing ship."

Yana nodded, "Yeah, that seems to be the most odd part. Is there an official story about what happened?"

"Mysterious disappearance, still under investigation."

“Great.... I’ll see what I can dig up on the network.” Yana waved goodbye to Augustus as he left the ship.

As the night began to wain Yana practically collapsed at the table looking at her practically unreadable pile of notes. At some point during the night she had converted writing her notes in sivalise, a language known for its information density. Also know for its obscure grammar rules, horrible about of knowledge needed to write even the simplest of sentences, and the horrifyingly large and specific vocabulary. Those issues really never bothered Yana and she liked to be able to keep her notes concise, something sivalise was good at doing.

Yana accepted a cup of coffee that had been gratefully brewed by Lily.

“How did fixing the sensor array go?”

“Everything is looking good captain.” Said Lily with a salute. Yana was not the captain but Lily was just being Lily.

“Sounds good. Have you seen any sign of Strix?”

Lily shook her head, “Nah, but I expect him to show up exactly as it is time to leave. Augustus sent a message and said that he would be back soon. Apparently he hasn’t had much luck finding out anything useful.”

“Me either. Honestly I’m not certain if this ship even exists. Sure there are official records of it but any specific details? There doesn’t seem to be any. It is like the entire ship and all of its details were forged out of whole cloth.”

“You think this is a trap for us?”

“Nah, not likely for us. More likely this is some secret research lab or experimental facility and all this was just to keep it hidden. But then something happened to the facility and we have been hired to clean up. Although that is just speculation, nothing concrete.”

Lily nodded, “Makes enough sense. We will just have to show up to figure it out. You’ve done all you can to figure this out. Time to take a break. Enjoy your time before we leave. It is likely going to be a long journey.”

“Fair enough.” Yana sipped at her coffee. Lily made a surprising good cup of coffee.

The cup calmed Yana considerable. She would often get too much into her work, a trait that caused her to overwork herself when she was working for the

corp. Now at least she got long breaks between her work and there weren't any bigwigs looking down her neck trying to make sure she continued to overwork herself.

So she took the opportunity to put her feet up on the table. It scattered her notes practically everywhere but really she could do whatever she wants now as a mostly independent mercenary. Sure she was part of a team but they were equals not boss and subordinate. Strix might own the ship but that didn't really matter. They stuck together because they could accept each other, something that she couldn't really say about her previous job.

When Augustus arrived back Yana gave him a way. "Anything new?"

"Not anything useful. Just more circle chasing. Is that coffee I smell? Truthfully I'd prefer some tea but a hot drink would do me well so I'll made due."

"Well, worship me as a god!" Chittered Lily happily, "Because I have also made tea."

"You are a saint." Said Augustus accepting the cup that Lily handed him.

"Good enough for me."

"My greatness desires a cup dark as pitch." Came a voice from the shadowed doorway behind Augustus.

"Oh, Strix, you are here too." Said Lily, "There is plenty of coffee for you too and I'll make sure it is black just like you like it."

The team had finally gotten back together. They gathered around the table in the rec room. It was a crowded room with all four of them in it but it didn't feel too bad. They spend some time laughing over their foolishness to take this job and other minor matters. For now there really wasn't anything for them to do but relax.

Coffee, tea, and a bag of snacks that Lily managed to pull out storage.

As the space ship turned the sun began to pour in from the glass roof at the top of the station.

The party ended and Augustus took the helm of the ship. They received permission to leave the station and then the ship moved out through the force wall that kept the air inside that station.

Then they were out into the great vastness of space. In the cockpit you could see through the window into the glittering void. Strix waxed poetically about the darkness and the void and for once people listened.

No matter how many times they went out into space there was something special about looking out into the darkness and knowing that you have the freedom to travel it however you want. It was something kept mercenaries coming back again and again. Working for themselves and truly being free.

It was something Yana had struggled with all her life and not felt exhilarated by. She didn't know how all the others felt but there were likely similar feelings among all of them. After several minutes of just staring at a starry sky they began to return to the rec-room. Augustus stayed at the helm for a while. While the autopilot could do most of the work during normal operation he liked to do things personally, at least for a while.

The journey to the system the ship was supposedly lost in would take several days. Getting out of the gravity well of the sun and then traveling through deep space in subspace could take a while.

During the journey there was not much to do. Just relax, enjoy the voyage. Or in Yana's case, quickly forget about relaxing and return to filing pages full of complex notes about lost ships and potential ways of getting through cloaking devices.

Eventually Lily had to practically brain Yana with a wrench to get her away from the work and to sleep before the ship arrived in the system. Making during to get a good night's sleep before potentially dangerous missions was of critical importance. Who knows when the next time they would properly be able to rest was.

That and a good morning's breakfast. There wasn't really a proper morning and night in deep space but arrival times made them know how long until they entered the gravity well of the system. It would still be a few hours and eating was the secondary importance after sleep.

Just like the coffee, Lily knew how to make good food. She strangely dressed up in a human maid outfit while cooking. She had all sorts of strange outfits hidden away in the boxes in her room.

When the food was finally finished and put away they returned to the bridge. As the ship dropped out of subspace they took a look at what the system had in store for them.

"Hmm..." There was some muttering as they looked out the viewport and at the various sensors the ship provided.

"Well, the solar view is quite impressive." Said Yana as she looked out into the space. The system nearby must have had a solar explosion and that section of the sky was a kaleidoscope of colors.

"But there seems to be nothing special on the sensors." Lily was looking over the sensor readout. Things were pretty far apart in a system so sensors like this were important to detect things at much longer range than normal eyesight could provide.

Augustus was leaning over with Lily looking over the sensor data. "Yes, and it might be a bit of searching. The reports really unstated how much astroid dust there is in this system. It can be difficult to sense a ship in all that mess, especially if it isn't moving.

Yana reached out and softly rapped on the screen. "Don't worry about that. I made some upgrades to the software to help better detect our missing ship. We just need to fly around to likely locations and the system will do the rest of the work and inform us when it discovers something.

"You sure?" Asked Augustus skeptically, "Last time..."

"Hey, that was a flook, I was operating on false information with faulty equipment. This time I've have Lily look over the equipment. If there is anything out there the system will find it. I didn't spend our trip here wasting my time.

"Belief is as dangerous as it is powerful." Came the cryptic words of Strix.

Yana elbowed Strix. "Enough of that. The most likely location is somewhere in the astroid belt. Move us around it trying to get as close as possible. While my system is prefect, it still needs accurate data. The closer we are the more likely it will be able to detect unusual signs.

"What did you setup here?" Asked Lily. "I know you had me attach that material sensor but I'm not certain exactly what you are looking for. Isn't this

ship cloaked or something?"

"Maybe, maybe not. If it isn't cloaked we will eventually find it even without my system. But my setup was designed to detect cloaking ships."

"Isn't that some kind of mythical system? Something that can see through cloaking systems?" Asked Augustus.

"Well... yes... and I won't say that this is prefect. There is a variety of tiers of cloaking systems. This solution won't work against expensive military grade cloaking but it seems unlikely that is what is happening here. Figure that if the job is that far out of our league then we are better not finding it."

"Fair enough. So how does this system of your work."

"It is based off the assumption that they will be hiding in the astroid belt which is better for covering whatever weaknesses the cloaking system has. So there is ambient mineral dust throughout the astroid belt. Most sensors are tuned to ignore that kind of ambient stardust but I did the opposite. Rather than detecting big things, it is tuned to sense small things, and more importantly the lack of them."

"So.... You are attempting to detect the lack of stardust?"

"Precisely. A low quality cloaking system won't compensate for that, probably high end cloaking systems wouldn't either but those systems wouldn't need to use an astroid field to cover their other weaknesses."

"And you have a backup plan for when the sensor explodes?" Chittered Lily.

"I already said to forget about that."

Lily just clicked a few more times but didn't say anything else. Yana continued to glare at Lily for a moment then returned to looking at Augustus.

"There are of course extra precautions in cause the cloaking system is particularly weak or they aren't actually using one. There are some other potential ways of detecting a cloaked ship but those required equipment beyond the funds our little band has. Like if we had a giant reflector array we could sent out bright light in all directions and measure any returning reflections and compare them to what is expected. But we will just have to deal with detecting space dust."

"So I'll just need to fly around, preferably through the astroid belt."

Yana nodded, "Yup. While it shouldn't be necessary I'll keep my eye on sensor readouts just in case."

Loading Augustus at the bridge, Yana and the others returned to the rec-room. Strix disappeared into his room while Lily went to the engine room to ensure that everything was working smoothly.

Yana kept an eye on the tablet she had, watching the numbers go by. It was mostly noise, just astroids and dust as far as the sensors could reach. It was several hours of scanning and Yana was about to step away to grab a snack when her tablet began to flash and make alarm sounds. She sat back down and looked over it.

Average space dust be area was particularly low.... Unusually low.

She rushed to the bridge, "Augustus, are you seeing this too?"

"Your little app is triggering but I can't make heads or tails of what is it telling me. What language is this supposed to be reporting in?"

"Oh... oops. I was so deep in that I didn't realize that I had set the language for sivalise. Yeah, it is sensing a particularly low density of stardust. It is probably within this second the astroid belt. Get in closer so that I can get more accurate readings."

"Sure but pause for a moment. Did you say sivalise.... I know your notes always looked weird but not you are telling me you are writing them in sivalise."

"Yeah, it has good information density."

"And has driven scholars insane... You really have a way with languages."

Yana just shrugged. It wasn't that hard but she didn't feel the need to explain why.

"A little more starward. There, there between those larger astroids. The stardust is particularly low in that area. Yup, that is certainly a cloaking device if I have ever seen one. Pretty much perfect optical camouflage. Too perfect."

"Indeed, it looks just like empty space to me."

"Empty is relatively. Especially in an astroid belt."

"I'll keep our distance. We would not want to crash into an invisible ship. Go and get the others. It is time to gather our forces."

Yana went back through the ship, knocking on Strix's door and getting Lily

out of the engine room. As they met up back at the bridge they looked out at the empty space where the ship likely dwelt.

“Do we hail it or what?” Asked Lily.

Strix stared at the emptiness and then strangely said, “The void is calling me. It speaks, tells me that inside is only darknessness. No reply will answer us. Truly a ship of ghosts.”

“But it is still cloaked, surely there must still be crew on board that continue to keep it running?”

“Not if it has a black box power core. If that is the case it could keep the cloaking up forever without anybody interfering.” Contemplated Yana. “Besides it looks like there is no point hailing it. According to what the senses are telling me even infrared and UV radiation is being properly cloaking. I’m not certain it could reaching a hail even if we sent one.”

“A conundrum certainly.” Said Augustus. “There was the basic spec of the ship in the details we were given. Of course that didn’t include any information about cloaking or a power system but I could use that to attempt a docking procedure.”

“We must be careful in case the ship attempts something strange.”

“The spec also didn’t have any armaments but I understand. Without a way to signal them there is little more we could do, except maybe attack it.”

“Aren’t we like, looking for somebody? Destroying the ship, sounds like a bad idea.” Said Lily as she looked into the blank space.

“Alright. I’ll begin the docking. But be prepared for it to be very slow. Without sensors to help guide me I’m going to do the entire docking procedure by hand.” Augustus said as he moved his hands over the controls.

The ship moved in closer to the spot in space they were all watching. Everybody took their own seats and strapped themselves in just in case. It was an odd scene, everything holding on in case something happened but moving through what looked like empty space.

Then the ship shuttered slightly. There was a flicking of scattered color from apparently empty space. The light disappeared. Augustus did some additional movement of the ship. Then there was another shutter and scattered light. Then

hissing sounds.

"The docking was accepted." Augustus took his hands off the controls.

They all unstrapped themselves and turned to look toward the back of the ship. There the airlock which could be used to go into the mysterious ghost ship.

"Arm thyself with implements of destruction." Said Strix, giving the order to the crew of the Bound Curse. They nodded and each quickly stopped at their own quarter's gearing up.

Lily had a large bag on his shoulder, full of her tools. She wore clothing akin to overalls. In her case they were mostly purple with pink stripes. Truly an gaudy outfit but seemed to match the unusual formian.

Augustus carried practically nothing other than his suit and topcoat. But under his coat he had a gun hidden. A dangerous weapon to use inside a space station or space ship but a very effective one. Not that he needed it very much with his dangerous claws.

Strix had a long black trench coat. Under the depths of his coat was a large series of daggers that he could use to defend himself if needed. He also had a series of tools that he could use to break into places that he should go.

Yana herself was wearing practically but brightly colored shorts in a nice orange color. She paired it with a nice white jacket with short sleeves. She had her tablet tucked away in one of her pockets along with her electric gloves. She also had a small gun strapped to the inside of her jacket. It was a different style than Augustus' but equally as deadly.

They gathered around the airlock leading into the ship. Just in case they had masks over their faces. Not full life support but enough to keep them alive if the ship was actually vented. It would give them long enough to seal the ship back up.

Augustus pressed the button. There was a hiss and then the door began to swing open. There was no particular special moment as the door. It simply swung open and beyond the door was just the entry hall.

Lit with soft illuminated lights. It was lavishly appointing with wooden paneling, expensive. Thick lush carpeting. They stepped through the doorway into the ship, nothing happened. The place was silent, and cool like the heat was

barely working.

The four of them moved down the hallway. There were several junctions that lead to other docks but those were all sealed. Beyond with was a small entry room. A place to be greeted by the staff and fill out any necessary paperwork. It looked like the entrance room of a metal. Nice chairs, a little bar which the receptionist could stand behind.

Yet there was nobody there. It was dangerous, conspicuously empty. They hesitated to say anything as they slightly separated and looked around there room. There was really nothing there. Like everybody had just stepped outside for the night. Unfortunately outside would have been into the depths of lethal space.

"Nobody is here." Said Lily as she glanced under one of the chairs, where clearly there nobody would be able to hide under.

"Maybe it really is a ghost ship." Lily had moved to checking behind the counter. "Should I go get my ouija board so that we can talking with them?"

"No, there have been people here." Said Augustus as he and crouched down and looked deeply at the floor. It was thick carpet, the kind that is almost impossible to properly clean without industrial carpet washers. "I can smell them in the air."

"Well I certain don't see them." Said Lily as she looked through a glass ball that had been set on a little stand on the counter.

"The scent is faint. They might not be nearby, perhaps the scent is transferring through the ventilation system. And.... Hm... there are odd smells in the air. Blood... acrid chemicals. I can't distinguish much more." Augustus shook his head While his sense of smell was much better than the other members of the team it was still uncertain and fallible.

"The I guess we have to just find the people then." Said Yana "No point staying around here in reception. Remember, we need to stick together, and that means you too Strix. If there is the scent of blood in the air then who knows what happened here."

There was agreement among the crew, this job had been fishy from the

beginning and it didn't seem like things were going to get more normal from here on out. They gathered around the door out of receiving and pushed the door open. There was a large entrance hall, with a fancy staircase leading up and down.

"How big was this place again?" Asked Lily. "I remember the spec being pretty big."

"Large, it has a freight ship engine." Said Yana, "At least a hundred people could live here comfortably, maybe two hundred. Although, from the looks about how this place is designed the lower estimate is probably more likely."

Still there was nobody as they stepped out into the floor that circled the stairway. There were several signs pointing in different directions. Offering restaurants, pools, a casino, and the residential area. The place really was a pleasure cruise liner or close enough.

"Any ideas of where to check first?" Asked Yana.

"Crew quarters or food" Said Lily, "Is there are people still here that is where they would be."

"There is a sign right there for dining." Pointed out Yana. It was pointing up into the higher reaches of the ship. There was a circle of nodding and then they began to creep up the stairs. It felt strange being so careful and alert it just bright and cheerful surroundings. It was actually kinda comforting that the place was eerily quiet, a place like this would normally have simple but enjoyable background music going on to help keep everybody happy.

At the top of the stairs the sign pointed down the hall toward where the dining room should be. They followed the sign to a fancy double set of doors. They listened for a moment but still didn't hear anything. Then Augustus pushed open the door and they looked into the dining room.

There were rows and rows of cushioned booths. It was larger than pretty much all the restaurants that they had seen in Taumu. As the stepped into the restaurant there was something different about the environment. There was a smell in the air, that of cooked food. It was then that they encountered the first person since they had entered the strange ship.

A well dressed man in simple black servers clothes was standing a fair bit into

the restaurant. He was just standing there, at attention like he was waiting. As the door opened more his gaze turned toward the door and then as his eyes alighted on the group his face broke out into a smile. He looked young and he was a human that could be easily misplaced with how generic he looked.

He stepped forward and said in a welcoming tone.

"Welcome to the dinning room. Please, have a seat. I can take your coats if you desire."

There was confusion as the Bound Curse crew looked at each other.

"I apologize young man but we are not here to eat. We have recently arrived here at the Last Maria and we were looking for somebody to help us. There wasn't anybody at reception so I wanted to know if you could help us?"

"But of course. The crew of the Last Maria are always wanting to help. I apologize that nobody was there to greet you upon your arrival. But please, your journey must have been long. Have a seat and I'll get you something to eat."

He motioned toward one of the booths. Lily began to move toward it but Augustus raised his hand slightly to stop her from going, "We appreciate the offer but perhaps you could instead tell us where everybody is, we haven't seen any other guests and you are the first person we have seen. Something odd is going on here and I would like it if you were honest with us and tell us what is happening here."

"Odd?" The man looked back and forth but didn't seem to understand what Augustus was getting at. "I don't see anything odd. There are plenty of other guests staying here, they just must be asleep or doing other things. People can have such strange schedules on ships so it must be that. Now please, have a seat."

"Knell only to yourself. We shall not bow to a false ruler." It was Strix who spoke after being silent for so long.

"As my friend said. We will not be stopping to eat. We just need you to speak the truth to us. Otherwise, well, I would prefer not to bring harm to you but we really need to have some answers." Augustus made a show of raising his clawed hand and examining the very sharp claws he had.

The human twitched his eyes a few times. "But sir, I really don't know what

you are talking about.”

Augustus took a few more steps closer. “I really think you do. This ship is cloaked after all. Just tell us what you know and everything will be simple. I like things that are simple.”

The man’s eyes twitched some more. Like he was having trouble keeping his eyes open.

Yana called out, “Augustus, watch out, something is wrong with him.”

The man began to twitch and move like some terribly controlled flesh robot. He reached out toward Augustus, a mix of both frenzy and confusion on the man’s face. Augustus was stronger than your average human and had better reflexes as well. He quickly responded, grabbing the man’s outstretched arm and then moving behind the man, tripping him as he went.

Augustus pushed the man to the ground, forcing him down with his armed pinned behind him.

“Now speak, tell us the truth.” Said Augustus calmly as he pushed his knee into the back of the man, pinning him in place.

“GAHHHAHA” was all the sound that the man could make. He shrugged against Augustus, flailing wildly to try and escape the pin but it was to no avail. He could not move at all beyond swinging his own free hand back and forth.

Yana made sure her gloves were properly snug on her hand then she said, “It looks like we won’t be able to get anything out of him. Pull back and I’ll make sure that he won’t be an issue.”

Augustus nodded and then released and backed up quickly from the man. He began pulling himself to his feet but Yana quickly placed her hand on the man’s back. There was a zirt of electricity and the man collapses to the ground.

The man went slack, his flailing limbs finally coming to a stop.

“Now then... what was that?” Asked Yana as she looked down at the collapsed man in front of her. “I was expecting something weird, but I was not expecting that.” She began to pat down the man, check whether he had anything on his person or anything that could explain his unexpected behavior.

“He just attacked us. I know Augustus kinda threatened him but that was a bit of an overreaction if I do say so myself.” Said Lily.

"He was not of his own mind." Said Augustus, "Normally anger and confusion and separated somewhat. He didn't really understand why he was angry or even why he was attacking us. Yana, does he have a head chip?"

"Not that I can tell, he seems to be just a plain human as far as I can tell. Although without putting him on an operating table there isn't much else I can say about him." She pulled out her tablet and checked it. "Maybe there is something though, my network readings are all over the place. Plenty of communication happening here, although it is all encrypted so I can't make heads or tails of it. But there is a lot of it, more than I would expect.

"Let us hope it is that and not a biological agent. This man is human so if it is that then you would be susceptible."

Yana nodded grimly, "Yeah, I probably would be. If needed don't hesitate to knock me out if I begin to do anything weird."

"Corruption of the body is fleeting. This night your purity will remain intact." Came the cryptic words of Strix.

"Phrasing!" Called out Lily. Yana glared at both of them. She wasn't the type to be embarrassed about comments like that but she could be annoyed by her friend's silly antics.

"Concentrate people." Said Yana. "Strix, go into the kitchen and see if there is anybody else. Lily, keep a watch at the door to the restoration. Augustus you stay with Lily and keep an eye on this guy. I'll go with Strix and see if I can find anything to tie this man up.

They split up. Strix and Yana headed to the back of the kitchen. Strix went first with Yana keeping quiet and following afterward once Strix motioned that it was safe to continue. Yana could be stealthy and silent but nobody was as good at it as Strix was.

The back of the kitchen looked remarkably ordinary. There were refrigerators and stoves and everything that you would imagine in a fancy kitchen. Strix began to check out the other rooms while Yana began to look through the various cabinets.

"There is still a lot of food here. Has this place really been lost in space? More like 'lost' in space." Mused Yana as she continued to check through the rooms.

Eventually she found the larger storage facility. Long cords to tie tied crates and keep things stable during ship acceleration could be found in the room.

"Anybody?"

"Only lost memories, gone forever."

"If that means something then please help me. For now let's return to the others. I got what I needed." They returned to the main restaurant room. Augustus was still keeping an eye out on the captured crew members.

Yana handed over some of the ropes, she had brought extra in case there were going to be more people like this throughout the ship.

"There are also some good rooms that we could lock him up in."

Augustus nodded as he began to tie up the man.

"Lily, notice anybody?"

"Nope, silent as the grave. Frankly it is giving me the creeps. Danger I can deal with but a tense uncertainty of what might happen is harder to manage. Gives me the crawlies under my carapace."

"That was not an image I wanted, thanks."

"You are most welcome."

With the man tied up they drug him back into the back rooms, found a good storage closet to shut him into with some heavy cooking equipment to keep the door closed.

"Alright? Where next?" Asked Lily questioningly.

"It seems to be crew members that are strange... not that we have much references." Said Yana.

"To the crew quarters then?" Asked Augustus.

They left the restaurant, keeping an eye out for any other potentially crazy crew members. They had moved maybe half way down the hall when there was a shift and everybody got practically thrown into the wall. Without the artificial gravity of the ship they would have probably be thrown much more violently.

"What was that?" Yelled Yana.

"The ship, it moved." Said Lily very calmly. "And violently."

Augustus said, "An acceleration.... but there wasn't a deceleration... so we

are currently moving."

They all looked at each other, then practically shouted at the same time, "The Bound Curse." Their ship, what had happened about it. Rather than checking out the crew quarters they all rushed to the entrance hall where the ship had been docked.

Their fear was well warranted. When they arrived the place where they had left here ship was closed, the airlock sealed again.

Yana had been pulling out her tablet as they ran, she was punching things into it frantically. She frowned, punched in some more things. Finally she sighed. "Well, I managed to make contact with the ship and enable the autopilot. It looks like the damage on our ship is minimal, life support, engines, everything intact. At least I think so, the cloaking interference is extremely high so the network connection cut out pretty quickly. The acceleration through the astroid field messed up the cloaking field just enough that I was able get the signal out."

"Then we are stuck here." Said Augustus grimly.

"At least until I can disable the engines on this hunk of junk." Said Lily sliding her wrench out of her satchel menacingly.

"And the cloaking system. Without that disabled I doubt our ship can navigate to us, or even find us, or receive any signal from us. Unless this ship does another acceleration I don't think I'll be able to send more message to the ship."

"The hunter has become the hunted." Strix muttered.

"Indeed.... This could only have had done this in response to us." Said Yana. "I'm sure there are surveillance cameras throughout this place. Whoever is watching us has decided to lock us in here."

"They will find that we are more dangerous than they thought." Said Augustus as he flexed one of his claws. "We are not locked in here with them, they are locked in here with us."

Yana had a bright grin, "Indeed, it looks like things are getting more dangerous."

"Yana.... Your grinning again."

"Am not." Said Yana with an annoyed tone but her grin didn't fade.

“And this is why you escape the corps and joined us. Crazy as the rest of us.” Said Lily shaking her head, although the chittering tone she used implied that she was amused as well.

“While amusing, I believe it is time that we go to the captains chambers. As interesting as tracking down potentially dangerous crew members is, it is best to go to the source of our issues.” Said Augustus.

“Do we know what that is?” Asked Lily.

“Top floor according to the signs.” Said Augustus.

They agreed and left the room. The ship was still absolutely quiet, although things were no longer quite as neatly organized. The sudden acceleration had caused many things on the reception tables to slide off and fall to the floor.

The main staircase was the same as well and they headed up to the top floor where the sign for the bridge was placed. The doors to the bridge were particularly fabulous looking, metal but with gold filigree.

Augustus did not knock or politely check with whoever would be on the other side. He just quickly checked to the door to see if it was locked, then finding that it was not, kicked the door open with a resounding thud.

The bridge was more like a meeting room than an actual bridge. A picturesque window into the sparkling blackness of space, or at least it would have that but due to the cloaking it was just a black window with nothing that you could see on the other side.

An old fashion captain’s wheel was near the window and next to it a chair. A long table with chairs along side it would let the captain host guests here with the added bar to help keep them entertained.

Sitting in the chair, wearing a crisp and professional captains uniform was a woman. She was older and had the strong features of somebody who was used to taking charge of things. The crew of the Bound Curse reached for their weapons but the woman barely responded to them entering.

She looked up from the table. Then she looked back down, lifting a bottle that was sitting on the table next to her and poured herself another glass of some kind of golden liquid.

“Are you the one?” Asked Augustus. His voice sounded calm, threateningly

calm.

"Which one?" Came the slushed voice of the captain, "The captain? Aye, I'm the captain, little that will do for you. For I no longer control this vessel."

"You aren't going to go crazy and try and kill us?" Asked Lily as they got closer to the woman. None of them released their weapons, still prepared to fight if needed.

"Who knows... perhaps I will but I'm certainly not planning on doing that. The other crew have accepted their fate but for now, I believe I'm still in control of myself."

Yana eyed the captain as she took a long drink from the cup and then began to pour another glass. "You know what has happened here?"

"No clue. One day rich people are enjoying themselves on their cruise, the next day... the next day people are disappearing. My control over the ship has been revoked and the entrance to engineering had been sealed off." She took another sip, or more precisely another chug. "Some of use tried to break into engineering but the engineers, something was wrong with them. They fought like they meant to kill us to keep us out of engineering. We tried sending out a message for aid but our communications were all dead."

She moved her cup back and forth watching the liquid inside. "Then more and more of the crew members and guests began to act weird. Saying and doing weird things. Any time we tried to do anything about it another one of them acted like he was going to kill us. Eventually we had all just given up, who knows if there is anybody else sane here."

She looked blearily up at them. "And then strangers appear. Docking with our ship I suppose? Had I known when you arrived I would have tried to get you to leave, to take me with you ... but now, it is too late isn't it. With the tossing of the ship, your ship is gone too and you are stuck here with us."

Yana nodded, "Yes, that is true. But we aren't the type to be intimidated by people who are trying to kill us. So if there is anything you know about what is happening then that would be appreciated."

"Also... also..." Interjected Lily, "We are looking for somebody called Jeramy Nester, they were a guest here some time before this happened?"

"Jeramy?" She narrowed her eyes, "Why are you looked for him?"

Yana glared at Lily before turning back to the captain, "We are here because we were hired to track him down. Right now making sure we are capable of leaving is more important but if you have heard of him then we would like to know about it."

"Don't know where he is now. Energetic man, tried to solve this things when they happened. I had basically given up when he said he would find something, anything to help solve this issue. But then I haven't seen him since then."

"How long ago was that?" Asked Yana.

"Who knows as this point, days? Really I haven't been keeping track. Enjoying the bottle while I still have time too."

Augustus shook his head in disgust, "To see somebody like you fall so far." He turned away from her, "I think we have heard enough, she does not know anything of value. We would be better spent breaking into engineering, that sound like where the issues all stem from."

Yana nodded, "Alright, well take care. If you think of anything else then tell us the next time that we stop by. We are going to try to stop whatever is happening. Then you can leave and go home, or whatever."

The captain hiccuped and said, "Pointless." Before returning to her drink.

They left the captain's chambers. "Well, at least this Jeramy was here. That is something." Said Yana. "We could probably check the quarters and see if we can find his room before going down to engineering. It might be too late to check that out if we attempt to do it after checking engineering."

"Yeah, I feel like the whole ship will explode if we go down to engineering." Lily looked between her companions before amending, "Metaphorically speaking. From what I can tell the ship is structurally sound and all the emergency systems still appearing to work."

"Any really objections?" Asked Yana. They shook their heads. "Alright. First the guest rooms, then engineering. But keep your eyes out, who knows if there are any more crazy crew members. And if we do find them it would probably be best not to set them off, the one in the restaurant seemed mostly pleasant until we pushed him too hard."

“Unless they seem to be acting normally. Maybe we can still find some more people like the captain who are more likely to give us information. Assuming they haven’t mentally resigned like the captain.” Said Augustus with a tinge of tragic disappointment in his voice. Having people with strong resolve give up hurt him.

They the rooms for the guests was on the second floor, on the other side from the docks. They moved through the hallways looking for the room that Jeramy would have been staying in. Before going through the hallways Yana had Strix help her open the door into the back of reception. There she got into the computer and looked through it to find where Jeramy would have been staying. It took her a few moments before she nodded.

“Room 14. Although very little information is kept about the various guests. Only the first name is recorded for each of the rooms. Probably for the privacy of the guests.”

“The rich guests.” Said Augustus.

“Yes, discretion is the first step is getting money from rich clients.” Said Lily chittering. “That an the ability too...” She was about to say something weird so Yana elbowed her in the thorax.

They returned to the rooms and tracked down room 14. When they arrived Yana politely knocked on the door. There was no response so Strix quickly broke into the room be sliding something between the door and the fame.

Inside the room it was mostly barren. There was a small suitcase with clothing, some minor grooming equipment in the bathroom. But no person, no secret suitcase, nothing.

“Hidden from sight but not from the first sight.” Strix however was not satisfied. There was a ripping sound as he took a knife to the suitcase. From between the layers of fabric he pulled out a thin suitcase, clearly the one that they were meant to locate.

“Well... that was easier than I expected.” Said Yana.

“Ooohh... are we going to open it?” Said Lily

“We are specifically not supposed to open it.” Said Augustus.

“No, we shouldn’t open it. Any not because it is against the rules. Because

these things have security measures on them. Open it wrong and boom, everything inside is on fire. Trust me, I've seen it happen before."

"What about Strix, he is good at this. Do you think you could open it?" Asked Lily.

"Mystical tools unlock sealed doors."

"So you can.... But the tools you need to open it are on the Bound Curse?" Guessed Yana.

"Your third eye reveals truths."

"Right.... Then we will just need to hold onto it until then. Pity we don't have anyplace safe to store it. Give it to Strix he can make sure that it stays safe."

Augustus handed the briefcase over the Strix who took it with purely grim acceptance. They double checked the room to ensure that nothing else was there. Not finding anything else of importance it was time to head down to engineering.

As they left the room they all paused. Down the hallway, deeper into the guest quarters was somebody standing holding a broom. There was a cart of cleaning supplies next to him. He was staring at the group as they left the room.

Augustus made sure to properly shut the door behind them. They shared a stare for a moment with the janitor. The janitor broke the stare first, returning to sweeping with his broom. Although there wasn't really anything to sweep because it was carpeted floor.

The four of them turned away from the janitor and headed back to the main stairs. However Lily kept in the back with an eye out toward janitor to make sure that nothing happened. The janitor disappeared as they moved around the corner with nothing happening.

Back in the main stair room the team looked back at the hallway where the janitor would come from.

"Did you see his eyes.... It was like nothing was there." Said Lily with a chill chitter.

"Yeah, I feel like he was even more gone than the man in the restaurant." Said Yana.

“What do you think is causing this?”

“Still hard to tell. Brain implants is probably the easiest method. Kidnap somebody, install the implant and then you can force them to do all kinds of strange things. Maybe they are using defective chips or they aren’t good at installing them which is why people are going berserk. There are plenty of other ways to do this so this is just a guess.”

“They do seem pretty unstable. And why wasn’t the captain taken?”

“Don’t know... maybe she was and her chip just didn’t work or she is just old enough that it was harder to override all her thought and feeling.”

“Or maybe there aren’t enough spooky ghosts to possess her.” Said Lily with a chitter that was intended to be frightening but she really couldn’t imitate that particular fake spooky sound that humans did.

“Yeah.... Ghosts.... I guess that is an option too.” Said Yana with dry sarcasm. “Now keep your eyes open folks, we are going into the bowels of the ship, whatever is causing this is certainly going to have its cause in the basement. There will likely be crew members who are going to try and stop us so do what you need to protect yourself. If possible try not to kill them but your safety is more important than theirs.”

There was a circle of nodding agreement and they went down the fancy stairs. They past a floor that looks like it was devoted to entertainment, a casino, a bar, a swimming area, and an exercise room. Plus some other rooms. The place seemed eerie since there weren’t any sounds coming from that area.

The stairs down again were more reserved, less designed for the guests and more used by the crew and servants. There was even a little rope with a sign that said “crew only”. That wasn’t about to stop a group of mercenaries so they stepped over the rope and went down the stairs.

When they reached the floor things were very different. Rather than the open and luxurious floors that the guests were intended to visit, the crew area was much tighter and was plain metal walls. Utilitarian and practical.

There also were no longer signs about where to go so they had to make their own way through the crew area.

“Where do you think the engine would be Lily?”

She placed one of her fingers on her chin thinking about it. "Given the angle of acceleration when we got thrown to the side it would be in this direction." She pointing down one of the hallways.

Yana nodded, Lily would be trusted with that kind of determination. They passed through by several doors. These were bigger, more reinforced varieties than the ones above.

"Funny." Said Yana as they moved deeper into the ship. "If something terrible happened to the ship then the crew would be much more protected than all the guests. These doors can automatically lock in case of emergency while the ones above would just get you killed."

"Take care of the guests but when danger happens protect your own." Said Augustus. He showed his teeth, "I like that as least."

They finally came to a door that likely had the engine room behind it. They surrounded the door just in case. Then Lily pushed open the door slowly.

"Are you sure this is the right room?" Ask Augustus. "This looks like a storeroom, not an engine room." He was right. There were boxes in the room, strapped to the wall to avoid movement. It was plain and there certainly wasn't any heavy machinery in the room.

"Odd... I could have sworn that this was the direction that the engines would be in. Maybe one of the adjacent rooms?"

They checked those rooms too but there were no engines there either.

Yana began to feel shivers. "Umm.... What if we are thinking about this wrong?"

"Hmm... what do you mean?" Asked Lily.

"We have been thinking that this ship, the Last Maria, that it was the cause."

"You will need to explain your logic a bit more than that." Said Augustus.

"Not yet.... I'm still trying to find the logical connection. But if I'm right..." She glanced around. "The next hallway over. That is where we should go."

"You think there is another route to the engine room?" Asked Lily.

"No... yes... let's just go. Although, if I am right, there are going to be the crew members there to stop us."

They backtracked through the hallways to another intersection. Going a

different way into what was likely the crew quarters. It was a pretty bit area, big enough that they really should have seen more crew in their journey if there were were this many crew in the ship.

"This would probably be going toward where the crew took their meals." Said Lily, "not a likely location for a engine room."

"Just give it a minute." They opened up the door into the cafeteria and were surprised by the number of people that were there. As they stepped in a good half dozen people turned to look at them. They were eating, or at least doing a reenactment of the act of eating. They were all clustered around a single table but the utter silence was more disturbing.

Yana held up her hand and pointed, not at the people eating but at the door beyond them. It would have likely lead into some private dining chamber for the more important crew members but it was odd, different.

The room they could barely see beyond the group of people was covered in a thick black substance, like tar.

"Pull back, I'll explain." They stepped back out, leaving the eaters eating.

"What was that? Tar? Oil?" Asked Lily.

"Boarding adhesive." Said Yana although she was beginning to grin again. "The Last Maria was invaded. I still don't know by who or why but it seems that the Last Maria is the victim."

"Boarding adhesive?" Asked Augustus.

"You spray it on an enemy ship, preferably an unarmed cargo ship. Then you knock your ship into their ship and the adhesive binds the two ships together. Then you can use your boarding exit to cut a whole into the opposing ship and invade. The adhesive also functions as a pseudo airlock so you don't lose any air when breaking into the other ship."

"So there is another ship that shipnapped the Last Maria?" Asked Lily "And that other ship must be the one that started their engines."

"Precisely. It must also be where all the extra people are.... Somewhere in the other ship."

"Then we will need to get past those people in there to get to it. I don't think they will just let us walk past them." Said Augustus.

"The guardians of evil will be vanquished." Strix was being Strix.

With their decision made they moved back into the cafeteria. The people who were previously silently eating had all stood up. They weren't doing anything but just standing there, watching them.

"Excuse me good sirs and madams." Said Augustus as they moved toward the group. "I don't suppose you would let us past. We have urgent business in the neighboring room."

"Guests should remain in the guest quarters. Please return." The woman sounded almost pleasant... normal.. although her eyes were strange and bloodshot.

"We are not guests, instead we are contractors that have been hired to ensure that the repairs happen smoothly." Said Augustus, easily moving into a lie he had decided on at the moment.

"No, you must return upstairs and remaining there." The group began stepping closer to Augustus and his companions.

"A pity, I would have hoped we could resolve this peacefully." Then quiet creepiness changed into violent motion in moments. Both the crew member of the Last Maria and the members of the Bound Curse sprung into action. Augustus and Lily took the lead, using brute force to fight off the crew. Augustus had more pure strength but Lily had the advantage of additional limbs and the human crew was basically useless against them.

Yana had her electric gloves and even if the mad crew members moved quickly and without hesitation they did their movements without thought and Yana was easily able to outmaneuver them. Strix basically didn't have to do anything other than follow in Yana's shadow and left her quickly dispatch two foes.

With each of them hanging two crew it was a simple enough situation and they were victorious in only a few seconds. With that Yana quickly began to bind up each of the individuals who were still struggling against Lily and Augustus despite the continued uselessness of their struggles.

Once the six crew members had been dealt with they returned to looking through the door into the room beyond.

“Well... you certainly got this right. That is defiantly a cracked open wall.” Said Augustus as they examined what was in front of them. The side meal room had a wide hole in the wall with black slime covering basically everything around it.

Beyond the hole however was a shadowed interior of a ship with a very different design. The cruise ship was for human use but the area beyond was clearly for a species of a different sizes. A extremely low room with various breaching tools was on the other side.

“Ixnarians.... Must be.” Said Yana. Although there weren’t any of the said creature near the whole. “Normally ceilings this low wouldn’t be used by the members of the treaties but Ixnarians are a different issue.”

Ixnarians were usually pirates, mercenaries. Not too unlike the Bound Curse but they didn’t deal as much with the civilized people of the treaties, instead you hired Ixnarians when what you were doing was definitely illegal and you didn’t want anybody to learn what you were doing.

The small hairless mouse-like species had outliers of course, members living on the planets like other people, but most of them had grown up in their bloody war-strewn world where it was kill or be killed and many of those that then went into space took on the same mentality, doing whatever they could to fight and win. Generally not pleasant people.

“Are we paided enough to deal with Ixnarians?” Asked Lily, “I dislike them, not enough television shows produced by them. And they practically don’t write any books either.”

“While that is A reason to dislike them.” Said Yana, “I don’t think we really have much of an option at this point.... Remember the whole can’t get to our ship think?”

“We could just seal up this entrance to the Last Maria and then live a peaceful life with just a few crazy staff members. I image in would be quite pleasant.”

Yana rolled her eyes.

Their tensions raised as they moved into through the hole in the wall. Augustus has to practically hunch over to get in at all while the others still felt

cramped and had to bend over slightly to get into the other ship.

Just as they were all in the cramped quarters, in the Ixnarian ship, the ambush started. Ixnarians that had been hidden behind corners and in behind objects in the room began leaping forward. There were also ones streaming out from the door into the main section of the invading ship.

More than a dozen of them were attack, all with various sharp weapons.

But surprises are surprises only if they work. While there was a few moments while everybody adjusted to the enemies and their attack angle but they had been expecting an attack like this since the beginning.

Strix had already drawn his knives and several of them were flying through the air at the attackers before the enemies even reached them. One of the attackers was coming directly at him, large sharp metal claws attached to his hands. Strix however had already begun to leap backward into the shadows of one of the machines that was used to punch a hole in the ship hull.

The ixnarian followed after Strix, chasing Strix around the edge of the machine, then they stopped, confused, Strix has disappeared. Although not really, Strix has concealed himself in the small crevasse between the machine and the ceiling. So Strix descended silently behind the ixnarian and with a gliding movement slit the ixnarian's throat. They collapses with a gurgling gush as their blue blood poured out of their neck.

Strix turned was about to disappear again when another one of the ixnarians rounded the corner. This was one holding the equivalent of a nail gun, a weapon dangerous enough to puncture flesh but without enough penetrating power to be able to puncture ship walls. It wouldn't do much good against Lily and Augustus would probably just find it incredibly painful but against Strix or Yana it would be lethal.

But Strix threw a knife at the ixnarian just as they were unable to unload on him. The ixnarian needed a juke to avoid the knife which gave Strix enough time to begin running to one side. The ixnarian tried to track Strix but the speed at which Strix moved was beyond the normal limits of humans, and instead most species. The ixnarian decided to just start firing anyways but it did no good with the nails shooting into the places that Strix just was rather than the place he was

going to be.

As the nailgun clicked empty Strix was already onto of the ixnarian his knife puncturing their chest. He knocked their nailgun away to prevent any attempt at retaliation and then stepped backward a few paces getting out of range of any final attacks of the ixnarian as they collapsed to the ground.

Meanwhile Lily and Augustus were doing well. Lily was completely unharmed by an attempts to attack her, the ixnarian had clearly not fought a formian before and didn't know how to attack her. Although her clothing had been cut up pretty badly due to her bad habit of not doing anything to defend herself against attacks she deemed worthless.

Augustus was dodging, while his scales would help protect him against the attacks it wasn't nearly as effective as Lily's carapace. More importantly he clothes would be damaged if he just let them hit him and that would be unacceptable. Instead he meet their attacks with his own claws, using his superior strength to rip weapons out of hands and throw Ixnarians across the room.

Yana was really the only one moving at normal human speeds and strength. Although that was true her movements were anything but normal. She was just standing where it was safe to stand, avoiding attacks practically before the attack was made.

A knife came in to gut her but she was already to the side of the Ixnarian, moving as little as possible to dodge the knife. She was still incredibly close to the ixnarian and pressed her hand against their chest. The zirt of electricity knocked the ixnarian back as they collapse. There was another ixnarian coming at Yana from behind but it was like she already know they were there.

She avoided the incoming attack with a simple spin, facing her opponent and pushing the hand out of the way. There was another zirt from her gloves and the ixnarian screaming in pain and dropped the knife they were using. It wasn't a solid enough shock to knock the ixnarian unconscious but the attack pain them enough that Yana was capable of shifting to their side and landing a sold strike against their flank with the glove. There was another zirt and they collapse to one side.

Yana had a bright grin on her face during the entire fight. She turned to join Augustus and Lily with their fight but her smile dimmed as she realized that they had already disposed of their foes. Lily had pulled out her wrench and had walloped several ixarians to the ground with it while Augustus had torn several of them into shreds.

The ambush had been defeated in only minutes. The ixarians all either dead or down for the count. Yana brushed off her hands, "So, that ambush was a bit underwhelming. I expected it to be a bit more intense. Are any of them in a good enough state to speak with?"

"And you speak ixarian as well?" Asked Augustus skeptically.

"Unfortunately not... I had it on my list as some point but other things just got in the way and it never felt important enough to learn. I mean I can probably threaten them with death but I don't know if it will be of much help. Perhaps they speak another another?"

"The ambushers like this? Unlikely. Besides, I think we were a bit too efficiency." Augustus glanced over the scattered forms of the ixarians, "Perhaps one of the ones Lily beat with her wrench still has enough sense to speak."

Lily tried to look innocent as she wiped her wrench clean with one of the scraps of her clothing that managed to survive the fight. "I don't know what you are talking about. I played nice with them. I'm sure they are just sleepy or something." She then began to whistle. It was more like the sound of a flute than the sounds a human made.

"Hmmm.... These ixarians would certainly be capable enough to kidnap people from the Last Maria but what happened to them after that is still something that needs to be discovered." Said Yana.

"Alright, fighting here is inconvenient. If I have to keep crouching then I will be grumpy in the morning." Said Augustus who had to do the fighting mostly hunched over. Sure he could continue to do that but his back would not appreciate it in the morning.

"No complaining while our lives are on the line. Once we are back in Taumu in a tavern then you can complain as much as you want." Chided Yana.

"And I certainly will. For now I will hold my tongue. But I would ask that we

hurry.” Said Augustus in his most hurt tone.

“Children.... You are both pretty.” Said Lily with a chitter. “And if we keep chatting like this then more ixarians will ambush us again. We had better push forward now.”

They both glared at Lily but nodded and progressed through the ship. Out of the breaching room and into the hallway of the ixarian ship.

“This ship also looks pretty big too. How many ixarian do you think can fit within this?” Asked Lily. They poked their heads into the nearest room which was a barracks that the ixarians had been using. It was a cramped room where 10 or so ixarians could all bunk together.

“Plenty. But we are looking for some kind of prison or medical laboratory. While this is an ixarian ship there is clearly somebody bigger at play. The ixarians are unlikely to want to make people go crazy. Somebody else is doing the mad scientist routine that the ixarians are working for. I’m guessing there are easily another dozen, maybe two dozen. Quite the invasion force.”

They moved through the hallways checking the rooms along the way, there were no more ixarians that they could find on this floor but the additional barracks did imply that there were more ixarians like Yana had suggested.

In the next room they were able to open up a door and find the room that had initially been searching for. The engine room. There was a large block of metal which must be their engine.

Lily whistles, “Now this is an engine. These block engines are usually used on cargo ships. They can accelerate even large masses quickly which explains the quick acceleration we experienced previously. Although they aren’t the best subspace drives. Mostly they are used for intersystem hauling, towing ships, that kind of thing.”

“Can you shut it down from here?” Asked Yana.

Lily nodded, “Yeah, sure I could.” She moved up to the engine and examined several of the panels that had been attached to it. “Lets see what this beauty can tell me. First...” She opened up one of the panels and looked through the wires. “We need to make sure that any commands that the bridge would send the engine don’t come to it.”

She clipped some wires and pulled out several circuit boards. "Then I just need to adjust the acceleration, hmm.... Wouldn't want to crash into anything unusual." She futzed with some of the controls on one of the boxes. "Alright, everybody hold on."

They all grabbed something and then Lily caused the entire ship to turn in the opposite direction of they had all turned before. When the acceleration was over Lily nodded to herself, "Alright, that should cover it... well probably. We could be careening toward an asteroid that will destroy us all but as long as the ship is cloaked I can't give us a proper heading. What do you think Augustus?"

"Yes, that sounds correct. There aren't any planets in this area and the speeds are minor enough that any asteroid that we collide with will only be minor damage. Hopefully the shields will hold against that."

Lily nodded, "Yup, that was what I decided. Now..." She reached her hand into the cables and pulled out a large handful of cables. "And this will prevent anybody from changing my course. Hopefully we won't need to change it again since fixing this is going to be a chore."

The mangled tangle of cables would certainly be difficult to repair even for an expert engineer like Lily. Certainly nobody would be giving the engine commands anytime soon.

"Alright then. Finding the labs next then?" Asked Lily with a smug look on her face. "I can't wait to ruin that as well. Lily, the destroyer of electronics is here."

"Alright great master of destruction. Let's go before somebody comes and tries to punish us for ruining their expensive ship. I'm sure we had just made somebody very very unhappy and I don't want to be around for when they come to cash in on that anger." Said Lily.

"Yes captain, let's go."

While they had an idea of where the engine room was from the acceleration of the ship, the same could not be said for the medical or cell block. They would need to search the entire ship until they found the appropriate location. They had already checked out several of the rooms on this floor but so far they hadn't seen

those rooms.

There were a few more rooms that they still needed to check on this floor. However there was nothing of interest in those rooms. Storage rooms, although with the amount of supplies in them the ship was clearly planning to stay like this for a long time.

Nothing was left to do but take some winding stairs up to the second floor. There were creaking sounds of the metal stairs as they walked up them. They braced themselves for another ambush but nothing happened. There were sounds here, while previously most of both ships were eerie silence now there was background sound a sloshing chugging sound.

They followed the sound deeper into the ship. They paused at the metal door with the thumping sloshing sounds grew louder. Lily pushed open the door into the room which has full of tubes and cables. Water or something else sloshing in the piles and there were large vats with door on their side, large enough for somebody to be put into.

Through one of the glass portholes in the vats they could see a face of a human.

"So this is the machine behind everything." Said Yana and she moved up to the porthole. "This is him isn't it... the person that we are looking for. Jeramy."

"Looks like it." Augustus stared at the face and then around the room, "What do you suppose all this is for. I understand it must be about weirdness of the Last Maria but I can't figure out exactly what it is supposed to do."

Yana shivered as she looked over the various machinery. "Yes... I know what this is. Something I had dreaded and feared. All my ideas had just been trying to point away from the idea that this was what was here."

"Mirrors of your Soul." Said Strix.

"Indeed.... Indeed." Yana had a grim look on her face, the lack of her smile made it more disconcerting.

"Soo...." Said Lily.

"Uhh... fine. I know what this system does because I was one of the people who designed it. Is that good enough of an explanation?"

"We are friends here, you don't need to worry about us judging you for what

you did.” Said Lily who kept the solemn mood for a moments and then she chattered, “Now spill your beans and dark secrets. I’m dying to know.”

“You are incorrigible. Alright, I’ll tell the story. This machine.... Think of it as a brainwashing device. There are all kinds of things in the liquid that break down the will of the individual. Then you can implant suggestions into the person locked in the chamber, give them face personalities, originally designed to create sleeper agents.”

“Sounds terrifying. But why is it all the way out here?” Asked Augustus.

“I can only hazard a guess. The system is incomplete. After all I escape and abandoned the project taking with all the critical information to get it working. My guess is that this is an experiment, somebody taking what notes remaining and attempting to finish the design. Of course those whole machine is completely flawed. But even a flawed version of the device could cause untold damage. Now, I’ll explain more but we need to get him out of there. The longer he stays in there the worse it will be for him.”

Yana motioned toward several of the pipes and valves on the side of them. “Lily, turn those to disable the flow of mental solvent. And Augustus, those valves on the floor. Turn them once Lily is done to empty the chamber. I’m going to check the console to see if what kind of progress has been done on Jeramy.”

The valves were turned and the sloshing of the drained from the device. “Alright, according to this the process was still in the early stage for Jeramy. Although, this is more sophisticated then I expected.... One idea I just had. All the previous subjects were probably testing to break into Jeramy and ensure that he would still function afterward.”

“Huh? Why?” Asked Lily.

“Haven’t you been paying attention. Because he participated in industrial espionage. So in a way he is like me, knows too much. And this device is intended to break down his personality, to make he plient willing to talk. If this thing was working properly he probably wouldn’t even realize he was brainwashing, instead thinking that him escaping with the knowledge and turning it over to these people was the plan the entire time. Although... this imperfect so he would probably speak about it but the strain on his mind would

probably eventually make him go crazy.

Yana moved up to the vault and worked the handle on the front. There was a hiss of released air and an unfortunate amount of liquid slashed out covering most of Yana. She curses and stepped back as the rest of the liquid pours out. She looked at Augustus who raised his hands and motioned that he did indeed do what she had asked of him.

After the liquid finished draining Yana stepped forward and opening door into the vat. The slack body of Jeramy fell out of the vat. Yana caught him but was pushed backward as she tried to keep him grabbed. His weight was difficult for her to hold up so she staggered a few steps and handed him off to Lily who graciously accepting him and lifted him up into a princess carry. Although she did still have an additional pair of arms that she could use to still do tasks.

“So.... We got the guy and did the engine thing. What is next, figuring out the cloaking device?” Asked Lily as she held him, he was turning his head back and forth but did not seem to show much consciousness.

“Yeah, that is all that is left. Unfortunately that cloaking device could be anywhere on the ship. And by anywhere I mean it would have to be on the edge of the ship somewhere, like how force field projectors need to be on the outside of ships.” Said Yana.

Lily shrugged, “So maybe where the engines were but on this floor instead?”

There was agreement and then they left the room to search more of the ship. They kept their guard up as they moved through the ship there were still more ixnarians around somewhere. However nothing jumped out at them as they continued to move through the hallways. After checking several other room they found the room looked like the bridge.

Consoles and other terminals sat throughout the room. Yana moved forward to check them out, “Darn, of course they re using ixnarian on the terminals as well. Unfortunately I don’t think I’ll be able to get any useful information from them but I should at least be able to turn off the cloaking.” The began tapping on one of the terminals trying to move through screens where she didn’t understand what was being said. But the interface was intuitive enough, at least for Yana.

There was some flashes and beep and then she pulled out her tablet checking

that she was receiving communication from their ship. She nodded to the others. "That did it folks. Goals achieved. Unfortunately I couldn't figure out how to disengage the ship from the Last Maria, I feel that lasers from the Bound Curse is the correct answer for that. Now Lily, if you would do the honors?"

"I would love to." And then Lily took her wrench to the consoles, disabling them. Broken electronics sparked and then died.

"Now lets go folks. We have already overstayed our welcome." As she left the bridge there was thumping sounds coming from above them, in the floor above that they hadn't yet explored. "Looks like they are coming, hurry up." And everybody began booking it through the cramped hallways.

As they got to the stairs Yana looked over her shoulder and saw the ixnarians coming after them... and many of the missing crew... A lot of the missing crew members.

"Uh.... Not to distract people but we are being followed. Hurry." But hurrying was hard, the ixnarians clearly have the advantage with the low ceiling which made it hard for everybody else to run. And these ixnarians were much better armed... and armored than the previous set.

They managed to book it down the stairs and were running (mostly) down the hallway to the breach hole. Lily fumbled at her bags with her two free hands, pulled out a small ball from the bag and threw it backward down the hall.

Everybody closed their eyes just long enough that the bright flash of light did not completely blind them. However most of the ixnarians were not as well informed and there a crashing tumble as the ixnarians tripped and fell into each other.

That gave them enough time that they made it through the door into the breach room.

"Augustus, grab the door with me." Yelled Yana. "Lily, get this door sealed."

The thick metal door vibrated as it was slammed from the other side.

"It will be an easy job you said!" Yelled Yana at Augustus.

"Strix, that idiot. He is going to pay for our next bar bill." Said Yana as she checked Augustus' gun to make sure everything was in order. "Lily get this door

back open.”

“Umm... not to disturb this moment of pure tsundere but what are we going to do with this guy.” She pointed to the unconscious form of Jeramy that she had unceremoniously dumped next to the hole that she was standing in. “We do kinda need to make sure he doesn’t get recaptured by the ixnarians.”

Yana ground her teeth, “alright you are right. But if we spend the time putting him somewhere safe then who knows what will happen to Strix. Just find a closet somewhere in the cafeteria and throw him in there and force the door closed. That should do right?”

“Good enough for me.” Lily heaved him over her shoulder and she ran out the hole in the wall back to the Last Maria. A couple of minutes later, just when Yana was getting annoyed that it was taking so long Lily returned. “I shoved somewhere they are unlikely to find him unless they turn the entire place upside down. Now let’s go save Strix.”

Lily slide back into the hole in the ground. “Everybody get ready, I’m about to unlock the doors.” She messed with the cables again and the grating of the airlock bolts turning out began again. She pulled herself out of the hole and joined Yana and Augustus near the door.

There hadn’t been any sounds on the other side of the door for a while now so they didn’t know what to expect. When the bolts were retracted they braced themselves to be under assault again but the eerie quiet had returned once more.

Augustus pushed the door open gently, then peered forward to look through the door. “Nothing, they are gone.”

“These ixnarians are really becoming a pain in my ixnar.” Said Lily with a chitter. “Guess we have to go flush them out. Anybody remember where we last saw Strix?”

“I remember him in the laboratory. After that.... I can’t remember whether I saw him or not. He usually guards the rear so I guess we just kinda missed him when he disappeared.” Said Yana.

“Where do you think he went off to?”

“Maybe he tried to find the mastermind, deal with the enemy swiftly and silently.”

“And since he isn’t here waiting for us to open the door I can only assume it didn’t work.”

“Yeah...” Said Yana.

They had their planned destination. The bottom floor where they currently were and the floor above where the bridge and laboratory were were not likely locations. Instead the best location was probably the floor above that, where the horde of ixnarians came from.

“So...” Said Lily as they crept through the ship toward the stairs, “Where do you think the ixnarians are?”

“My guess is that they have been brought to wherever Strix ended up, called back to ensure that he is captured correctly. That is assuming Strix is still alive.”

“Ha, he wishes he died, then he could haunt us as a ghost. Then this ghost ship really would be haunted.” Chittered Lily although there was a hint of nervousness in her words.

As they got to the stairs they began to quiet down, they needed all their senses to detect potential ambushes. They took the cramped winding staircase up. As they got to the next set of stairs they strained to try and hear anything. But there was nothing.

“Does this villain have an obscene love for silence? Couldn’t they instead have lovely background music. In the horror tv shows the dramatic creepy music is great. Why can’t we have any of that?” Asked Lily as they all gathered up their nerves to climb another set of stairs.

Much to Lily’s excitement and Yana’s annoyance there was an ominous metallic creaking sound as they walked up the thin metal stairs to the next floor. The floor above was different, while it still had the same bleak metal style the room was a bit higher, like it was designed to house people larger than ixnarians.

“And that creepy door isn’t ominous at all.” Said Lily as they saw the large metallic door which was flanked on either side of the hall by more metallic doors. There was the hiss of hydraulics and the main door began to open slightly into a room as dark as pitch. “At it looks like we are on the reaction, are you ready.”

Yana sighed then drew herself up, straightening her back. Then she stepped forward to the edge of the darkness and called out into it. "Restor, I know it is you in there. Your attempts are horror are boring and useless just like you."

There was a clicking sound and then one by one lights turned on revealing ixnarians in armor standing at attention. Then as the last light clicked on a large throne at the end of the room was revealed with an older man sitting on it. He was perhaps in his early fifties with tinges of gray in his hair although he white lab coat was flawless.

"Levi, Levi, Levi," Came the voice from the man on the throne. "Your lack of politeness has not changed at all. I would think that you should at least grovel at my feet and beg for forgiveness. If you surrender now I'll let you rejoin me as my assistant again."

Yana began to smile, "Rejoin you as your assistant? Ha, don't make me laugh. You are a useless third rate hack that couldn't even properly replicate my project. Although let me guess, they cut your budget after I left which is why things failed and that it absolutely wasn't your fault things went wrong."

"Do not mock me. I am the one with all the cards here. I outnumber you ten to one and here." He motioned his hand to one side. Another light flicked one dramatically and revealed Strix. He had been chained to the wall and he looked bruised and beaten with blood dripping from his lower lip. "Make any move and my servants here will kill him."

"Not to interject but you actually outnumber us eight and two thirds to one. At least assuming you are counting yourself. If you had said nine to one I would have granted you that." Said Lily. Helpfully pointing out that there were only twenty five ixnarians in attendance.

"Don' tease him Lily." Chided Yana, "That will only remind him about how bad at math he is."

"Silence!" Shouted Restor. "Now you will listen to me and follow my every order or I WILL kill this man. You are to return the person you stole to me. Then, if I am feeling generous and you are acting subservient then I will let out live."

Yana looked around in mock confusion, "Oh yes, that man, we can certainly get him for you... but... if you are trying to finish my project..."

"My Project."

"Of course... your project. If you are trying to finish your project then where is Silasilan?"

"Who?" Said Restor annoyed.

"Silasilan... the other person who worked on the project. The three of us were the project leads."

"That useless squid... hah, I threw it to the curb as soon as I was put in charge. Who needs useless garbage like that."

"You really are a fool. No wonder you failed to complete anything. Really corps truly are absolutely perfect at wasting talent and promoting fools. It is a miracle that you even managed to get the alpha prototype working without our help."

A pulsing vein of anger had appeared on Restor's forehead. "Appologize. Now! This is your last change."

"Was that enough time Strix?"

"The soothing passage of time breaks even the mightiest shackles." The voice was pained and croaking but he managed the words. And just as he did his shackles broken open. The pick in his mouth dropped to the floor and began to rise like an awakened demon.

Restor was stunned and had stood up about to order his minions to attack. However Yana had not given him the time. She had already drawn the gun that Augustus had given her. Just as Restor opened him mouth to speak she pulled the trigger.

The violent noise of the gunshot broke the oppressive silence. Restor clutched at his chest and began to wobble. The ixnarian's however knew the score and as soon as the gun fired were rushing in, screaming and warbling unknown warcries.

Chaos began to ensue. Augustus and Lily took the front and fought off the incoming wave with claw and carapace. Yana took a step back and fired off a few more rounds from the gun, making sure to like up each shot precisely. She only had so much ammo and if a miss broke through the wrong wall then it could vent the room. Strix had somehow melted into the shadows, Yana was pretty

sure it was figuratively, and had appeared by their side. He was holding his side with one of his arms and had his teeth tightly clenched. Blood could be seen seeping through his black trenchcoat.

But he wouldn't complain, not now. He still had one good arm as he reached Yana's side she passed over the gun for him to use. She at least had her gloves to fight. While Restor might have been foolish he wasn't foolish enough to leave Strix armed with his knives.

Strix made the gun look almost elegant. He could spin and shoot practically without aiming and still his shot would hit his target perfectly. His unnatural reflexes let him track and shoot targets that normal shooters wouldn't even be able to see.

Augustus and Lily were doing excellent at keeping back the horde and even doing some damage back. Although there were just so many of them that they could not properly finish anybody off in the confusion. There was only so many ixnarians that could attack at the same time. One of those were injured they fell back and a new ixnarian took their place.

This kept the pressure on them constantly without letting them have reprieve. With six or so ixnarians for each member of Bound Curse (now counting Strix) they could make enough headway against the ixnarians.

To make matters worse Restor gasped, still alive and reached up to press a button on his throne. The two menacing doors on either side of the main door began to slide open. Human hands began to spit through the cracks and crazed eyes of maddened Last Maria crew members could be seen through the slit.

Restor laughed with a horrible gurgling sound, "Now you will all die."

Yana had a dangerous grin on her face. "Us? Die.... You poor failure of a scientist. If you had done your own work then what you said might be true. But you are a copy and a hack which is why it is us who will survive."

She turned toward the doors and with a confident voice she said, "Follow the truth before your eyes. Seek the knowledge in your heart. Beware the demon's offered hand."

The crazed crew members froze, stopped immediately in a perfect instant.

Then Yana turned dramatically toward Restor and the ixnarians and pointed

at him. Then she said, "Those are the ones that have harmed you. Do with them as you please."

The horde of crew members all joined together in a scream of anguish and then squeezed through the crack in the door that was just now large enough to fit them and began rushing toward Restor. They moved peacefully past Lily and Augustus and in a terrifying scream crashing into the ixnarians. What they lacked in skill, strength, and speed compared to the ixnarians they made up for in pure ferocious anger.

Now with numbers on their side the crew of the Bound Curse followed behind the horde, catching ixnarians and weakening or compromised dispatching them. With each ixnarian defeated their ranks grew more feeble and had more and more difficulty keeping up with the conflict.

At the half way mark they became desperate and worried. A couple threw down their weapons and pleaded surrender. While Yana and the other might have taken that surrender, the mad horde of crew members could only see red and the ixnarians that surrender were broken and thrown to the ground.

"No... how? What witchcraft is this?" Coughed the wounded Restor as he pushed himself backward, closer to the wall.

"I thought it was obviously. Who makes a mind control system without putting in safe words, release valves to prevent the mind controlled people from being used against them. That is just common sense."

Restor sputtered, blood foaming at his lips, "Impossible."

"Impossible? It is a scientist's job to destroy the impossible. You always failed at that job. Goodbye Restor. It was a pity that I ever knew you."

The horde pressed against the last defense of the ixnarians. There was one last final defense but that was not enough and they shattered, broken against the wall. Restor screamed as the horde fell upon him.

Yana, Lily, Augustus, and Strix just watched from afar, their job here was over.

Lily chittered, "That key phrase. It was.."

"Don't"

"One of us. One of us." Chanted Lily before Yana smacked her.

"Enough, Strix, how are you doing?"

"My fable does not end this day."

"That is great and all but... Augustus, do you think you can do something to patch him up?"

"Yes." He pulled out from his coat a small medical kit. He opened up Strix's trench coat and looked inside. He grimaced and then lifted up the back shirt that Strix wore.

"This is bad, we need to get you to a medical bay, not just a patch job." He pulled out a square patch and slapped it over the wound. "This will keep you from bleeding out and help prevent an infection but you need to get proper treatment."

Strix only nodded grimly.

Augustus turned and looked over at the crowd of crazed crew members. With their enemies gone they just stood there, dazed, like they had completely lost their train of thought.

"What about them? Is there something we should do about them?"

Yana scratched her head, "Yeah, probably find a good therapist and hope they can find good health care. Unfortunately with them this badly mentally damaged, I can't really help them."

Yana looked over them with sadness in her eyes. While she wasn't the one who had done this to them directly, it was her technology that caused them this damage. "I'll try to find some people that can help them. And we should probably get them back into the Last Maria. Wouldn't want them to be trapped on this invading vessel."

She stepped forward and waved at them, "Come on folks. You don't want to be here. Lets get you back to the Last Maria. You remember the Last Maria don't you. It is the nice cruise ship you all worked on. It has some soft beds and good food. Follow me and I'll lead you there."

They reluctantly looked at each other like they could not properly understand her words then eventually one by one they nodded and began to follow her. Augustus gave Strix a shoulder and they began to make their way back through the ship.

"You were co-workers with that man then?" Asked Augustus. "You really gave it no holds bared on your critiques of him."

"Yeah, we did work together. Me, him and a cephan named Silasilan. It was good and bad times. At the time I didn't really consider what my technology could be used for so I just followed orders and reveled in pushing the boundaries of science." She sighed, "There were so many fond memories but those are all tainted by my regret for much of what I did."

"But you did get out."

"True enough, true enough. Although I had to leave bot Silaslan and Restor."

"You regret leaving Restor behind?" He asked quizzically.

"He wasn't always as bad as he was there. Once I thought I could call him a friend. It was me and Silasilan who were the geniuses and Restor was just a regular scientist compared to us but he was critical to the team. He was much more practical than either of us, kept us in line, made sure our eyes were on the target and not some far off horizon. That was probably why he got the attention of our superiors. That is when things began to go down hill."

They had reached the stairs and were guiding all the people down the into the lower level of the ship. Give their numbers this was not particularly easy with Lily at the bottom helping keeping them moving, one by one over toward the next set of stairs.

Yana continued her story, "Once he got his taste of power though things changed about him."

"Pride is the darkest sin." Said Strix although he coughed a little after he spoke. He had been able to hold on during the fight but afterward his body had mostly been slack, all the energy had been lost. He was also looking pretty pale, more pale than usual.

"So he changed, became more controlling. Thought that his contributions were more important than they actually were. It was a slow process. Still that didn't really matter to me at the time so I still considered him a comrade. It was only after I left that I did the inner reflection to realize what type of person he had become. Still... maybe he wouldn't have been like that if I had taken him with me."

“And maybe he would have just been the same as he was here. I’ve seen plenty of mercenaries who let the freedom go to their head.”

“Your encouragement is nice but regrets don’t simply go away because we try and convince ourselves that they don’t matter.”

“Sure enough and we all have regrets.”

They went down the last set of stairs and then through the broken door into the Last Maria. “Augustus, bring Strix to the medbay and see that he is taken care of.” Said Yana while Lily made a slicing motion across her neck, “Not that taken care of. Me and Lily will bring down the industrial spy and see if he had regain consciousness.”

Lily and Yana went into the cafeteria.

“So where did you put him?”

“Cupboard.” She said as they went into the back of the cooking area. Lily kneeled down to open one of the tiny cupboards that could no possibly hold a full sized human. However when she opened it there he was, with the neighboring wall broken open and him shoved in in the space of both the cupboards.

He was tied up and gagged and seemed to have started to regain consciousness.

“Oh, hello there. What are you doing in a cupboard?” Asked Lily innocently.

Yana played along, “Are you ok Jeramy? Here let me get you out of there.” She reached in and ungaged him.

“Who... who are you?” Asked the groggy man whose eyes still rolled around and he had difficulty focusing on her.

“Mercenaries. It looks like you managed to get yourself into quite the pickle here.”

“You....” Then he seemed to deflate in the cupboard he was stick it.

“Yup. Lily pull him out of there.” Said Yana and Lily reached in and pulled the man out.

She held him up in her arms. “The briefcase is behind him.”

Yana reached in and took the briefcase. “So Jeramy.... What is it that you have in here?”

"You were hired by them weren't you to bring be back?"

"Looks like you have got things pretty understood. Although we didn't really expect you to be kidnapped by agents of another corp. What sort of secrets managed to get that to happen?"

"Is there any point in telling you?"

"It depends. Depends on what this information is and what you were planning on doing with it? If you were just running off to another corp then I'd rather turn you into the devil that pays me." Yana was serious as she stared at him, "But if you have a different plan then I'll heard it and then we will make our decision."

The man tried to groggily say something but Yana held up her hand, "Just think about it. You have plenty of time. There is still some stuff I need to deal with here on the Last Maria before we leave. Lily, lets go see how Strix is doing."

Lily carried the man through the ship and up the stairs back to the luxurious guest area. That was where the fancy med-bay was located. Lily pushed her way through the door to see Augustus tending Strix. Lily played Jeramy on one of the other beds before going over to check on Strix.

"Is he going to be a ghost?" Asked Lily.

"No, this place does have proper medical tools. It doesn't looks like there is any internal injuries, mostly just his large stomach gash plus some other minor injuries. Mostly he has just lost a lot of blood. We stopped the bleed out so he will make a full recovery. Although I do need to sew some more things closed so if you would step back that would be appreciated."

Lily nodded and give Augustus some space to finish taking care of Strix. A few minutes later Augustus stepped back and gave a confirming nod. "That should do it. As long as he doesn't strain himself too much that will be enough." He ave Strix a solomn look, "And no disappearing into the shadows and returning half a day later with no explanation. I'm going to need to check on you several times a day to make sure nothing gets infected."

Strix didn't have any glib or cryptic remark for that so he just nodded in acceptance.

"Now is everybody else alright?" Asked Augustus.

"I'm good. I didn't get filleted." Chittered Lily.

"Just a few minor scratches and cuts." Said Yana.

Augustus nodded and pulled out some antiseptic and small bandages. The covered up several of her injuries with bandages. After he was done with her, he turned to see Jeramy. "And then we have our new friend here. How is he doing.

"Still woozy from the medication. Likely had some of his brain scrambled but he wasn't in there long enough for long-term mind rewiring. Let him have a few nights sleep and he will probably be right as right. Maybe have nightmares for a few months but other than that."

"Sounds like you are underpaying how bad he was effective."

"I'm comparing him to the mad crew members who will probably never be the same person again and might take years or decades to return to being a normal person again. Jeramy is practically unharmed compared to them."

Augustus grimaced, "Yes, I suppose he is. Should I give him any medication? You probably know more about his condition."

"Not right night. It will probably be best to give him a sleep aid when he tried to go to bed but other than that it is better to keep him off other drugs. Restor's concoction seems to be altered from what I would use so I don't know that strange reactions he might have to medication."

Augustus stepped up to Jeramy. "How are you feeling my good sir? You received the initial stages of a mind controlling procedure so if you feel back it is likely due to that."

"My head aches, I feel nauseous, I can't focus on anything. And I'm pretty certain you are going to turn me over to the corp. I don't think I'm feeling very well."

Augustus glanced over at Yana with a questioning look in his eyes. She just shrugged. "Well, your fate has yet to be determined." Said Augustus. "But for now you are safe in our hands. Do you have any other pain, injuries that aren't obvious?"

"I don't think so."

"Excellent. Now please lay back and try to relax. It should keep the nausea down. If things get too unpleasant tell me and I will get you something." Said

Augustus. Jeramy nodded and leaned back on the bed. "Yana, can you watch over him. Me and Lily are going to go re-dock our ship. I'm also going to make sure that Lily's random acceleration isn't sending the ship anywhere weird. It wouldn't do to crash into something unexpectedly"

Yana nodded and let the two of them leave. Strix had decided that pain was beneath him and had gone to sleep. This left her alone with Jeramy.

"Do you mean it that you might do something else if I tell you what I plan on doing?" Asked Jeramy after a while.

"Yes, after all, I'm a corp run-away myself. I've had mercenaries attempt to come after me to recover my secrets too. Seems only fair to at least hear you out."

Jeramy attempted to lean up again, looking over at Yana, staring at her. Yana return the stare.

"I see, you know what it is like too." He leaned back down on the bed. "I was an accountant."

Yana got it. Accountants were people corp's couldn't let go, much like scientists. They knew too much. "And the briefcase contains accounting records. No wonder the corp wants it tracked down even if you mysteriously disappeared. They wouldn't want their dirty laundry to be set out to dry."

Jeramy nodded, "Yes. There are plenty of things they don't want to be made public."

"So why did you do it? Leave the corp?"

He shook his head, "I don't properly know myself. It just sort of built up. I didn't think I would do something like this. I've been watching them do plenty of corrupt things over the years, hiding their little secrets away. Was there something specific that broke the camels back... not any one thing. I remember seeing their rejection of a termination severance. It was a pittance and was no reason for them not to pay it... but they didn't. A small thing really, the final straw. I kinda just felt for the employee you know, thought maybe that could have been me. So I fixed it, made him get his money. Then I packed up my suitcase for the evening.... And never went back. Strange how life goes sometimes."

"For me it was something pretty minor. The corp was doing one of it's publicity stunt. It was all about their legacy. They had a bunch of employees do some of their own presentations about their contributions and what they were most proud of, really it wasn't that unusual. There was only one problem, I actually thought about it."

"That sounds dangerous."

"Indeed. It wasn't something I had put much thought into but I put effort into figuring out what my legal would be. Really put my all into it, just like the corp suggested I do. And after all my work I came to one unfortunate conclusion, that I didn't like my legacy. I didn't like what people would think about what I had and was doing.

"So I left, abandoned the corp. Destroyed what research I could and disappeared. Changed my name and moved off to distant worlds. Eventually I joined up with my friends here and now I work as a mercenary."

"That is a pretty different job."

"Scientist to mercenary is a pretty big job shift. I'm still not certain about my legacy but I feel a bit more confident that I'm not ruining countless other people's lives."

"Yet you still do work for corps."

Yana shrugged with a frown on her face, "True enough. A hard truth is that you need money to live and corps have a lot of money. We take work where we can and when a job seems sketchy then we turn it down and go somewhere else."

"But you took the job to capture me."

"Indeed, helping corps fight each other is good pay. But I've thought a bit about your situation. While we would certainly get better paid if we turned you over." She reached down and picked up the briefcase. "This is probably enough. We can just claim that you did not survive and hand over what we found."

Jeremy sighed in relief, "You think that will be enough to stop them from coming after me?"

"Only if you disappear and change your identity. As long as the corp never finds out that you are still alive and you don't get into too much trouble then you

can go off to live a normal life.”

“I never really wanted to do anything other than live a normal life. But when I saw something wrong, I just didn’t feel like it was right to just stand idly by and approve it.”

Yana grinned, “Sounds like you are going to get into trouble. I’ll introduce you to some people when we return to Taumu.” Yana stood up and turned away from Jeramy, “But there are still some things I need to do here so rest up.” She shot a glance over at Strix then said, “And if Strix tried to get out of bed yell at him.”

Yana left the room, shutting the door to the med-bay. She released her breath, hopefully the rest of the crew would accept her decision to let Jeramy go. She went to check in on Lily and Augustus to see how they were doing.

When she arrived at the dock she found that the Bound Curse has successfully docked with the Last Maria. “How is everything going here?” Asked Lily as she arrived. “No ship heading toward a collision course with anything?”

“Ah, yup, we are on a crash course for the local sun. Eta in 0 seconds.” Chittered Lily.

“Alas it is our end. I did my talk with Jeramy. I hope you don’t mind but I promised him to hide his identity and just turn off the briefcase to the corp. It will probably reduce our profits for the job so I’m sorry.”

Lily and Augustus shared a look then Augustus finally said, “Do not worry about it. We both kinda expected that to be the case. So don’t worry about it when we are starving in the streets unable to feed ourselves because we were missing out on today’s payday.”

“Haha... but thanks. I really appreciate it. I’ll work extra on our next job to make up for it.”

Augustus chuckled, “Thanks but I think you work yourself too much anyways. So just keep up your normal work ethic and that will be sufficient.”

Yana handed the briefcase over to Augustus, “Well, take this and make sure to keep it safe. That should at least convince the corp that we more or less did the job. I’ll go find any recordings that the Last Maria might have been keeping and delete anything that might compromise us. There are the crazy crew members

but I'm not too worried about them turning us in to the corp and their testimonies are not likely to be useful."

"Sounds good. Take care." Augustus waved off Yana as she began to head off to security. Maybe this would also give more understanding of the state of affairs in the Last Maria. For good or for ill it looked like the ixnarians disabled the security system soon after the ship was breached and there were not any records about what happened to Jeramy and the ship in general. So there were also no records of the Bound Curse.

Yana then proceeded to visit the other ship, to make sure everything had been properly dealt with. The ship was pretty big but not as large as the Last Maria. It also wasn't as high tech and it didn't look like there any security in that ship either. She also made sure to properly destroy all the facilities that could be used for mind control.

She also searched through the ship to see if there any more crazy crew members or ixnarians hiding in holes. There were a couple of the crew members that had managed to get lost in the exodus and she lead them back to the Last Maria.

There were also a fair amount of things they could scrounge from the ship and Yana took some notes about what was on the ship that they could take with them. There was only so much industrial equipment that they could store on the Bound Curse but things like weapons and electronics could be reasonable easily sold even if it wasn't for a very high price.

She returned with a full notebook of potential loot.

When she got to the breach hole she examined it. They would need to make sure this didn't cause a vent of the ship if the other ship got detached. It was not actually pretty convenient. It looked like the entire cafeteria would have to be abandoned. She made sure that the door into the cafeteria still worked, and it did indeed.

That was good at least. Yana went and rounded up a few of the dazed crew members and managed to convince them to work as laborers. Those that she got to join here were mostly the less crazy ones that had remained in the Last Maria. She had them help her move all the supplies from the kitchen of the cafeteria into

the kitchen in the restaurant that was supposed to be for the guests.

When that was done she practically collapsed at one of the restaurant tables. Eventually Lily came to join her. "Looks like you have already started working yourself silly." Said Lily as she passed over a soothing cup of coffee.

"Thanks. I thought being a mercenary was supposed to be easy. Instead here I am organizing people and carrying heavy objects."

"Such is the difficult life of a mercenary. We get all the worst and hardest jobs. There are no free meals and much hard labor. Should have thought of that before leaving your easy corp job." Chittered Lily.

"Yeah, sure, tell me that now when it is too late to change my mind."

"Opps." Lily shrugged, "But at least you have coffee."

"Coffee will never betray me."

They took a moment to relax at the table. Despite the coffee Yana yawned and began to rest her head on the table. As she drifted off to sleep Lily slipped the notebook out from Yana's hands.

"You fool." She chittered soft enough that Yana would not wake up, "Betrayed by the coffee you love so much. It was caffeine free with a sleeping drug in it to ensure you take a break." She left it with that, with nobody to hear her jokes there wasn't much reason to make them other than her own amusement.

She went into the enemy ship and began collecting the stuff that Yana had selected. She filled out her arms with all the valuable parts that she could carry. After all waste not want not with what some humans said long ago.

When she brought them back to the Bound Curse she found Augustus taking a few moments to relax himself.

"Aren't you supposed to be taking a break too?" Asked Augustus as Lily came in with her hands full of electronic components.

"If only I could" She said, "But you know formians. We get unusually anxious when we don't have anything to do. If you want me to fill my time with some of my hobbies then I can do that too but I'm trying to give Yana an excuse to take her own break. Although," she tapped her chin, "We could drug me too."

"That is hard to do too. Formians unfortunately have pretty different biologies

so our supplies of drugs that effect you are very limited. Wasting them on making you take a break is a poor use of them. At least for Yana we could raid the Lost Maria medical room."

"Darn" Lily snapped several fingers, "And here I was hoping for an exciting drug trip. Guess I'll have to make up for that with more work."

"A pity." Augustus didn't play the straight man well enough and just returned to his book.

Lily was disappointed but that was as expected of Augustus. "Well, I'm off to tease Strix so take care of the place until I am back." She waved goodbye to Augustus who waved back.

When she arrived at the med bay she found that Strix was still asleep. She took out a marker and drew on his face, it was the only proper and reasonable thing to do. When she put the marker away she looked over at Jeramy and said, "What? Have a problem?" Although her tone was teasing.

"Your group are a collection of oddballs aren't you?" He commented.

Lily drew up a chair and sat next to Jeramy. "Yeah, pretty much. There are groups of more serious mercenaries but that isn't really us. I suppose you could say that we are the weird ones or that weird attracts weird. Honestly I'm surprised anybody can put up with me."

"You do seem pretty odd for a formian. Most of them do not wear maid uniforms."

Lily had changed into her maid uniform once everything had seemed safe. It was better than the tattered remnants of the clothing she had lost in the fighting.

"Well they are a bunch of boring old fools. Or maybe I'm just eccentric. And I like maid outfits, they are practical and stylish. I made this one myself. Do you like it master?" She stood and did a very proper curtsy.

"Ha, a regular comedian too. All the formian's I've met before were all extremely focused hard workers with practically no interest in things like maid outfits."

"Well, I can't deny that I'm also an extremely focused hard worker but at least I understand the majesty that is culture. Better than the dusty historical old records that are kept on the formian home world. Not an ounce of entertainment

in all of them combined. So I left to become a mercenary.”

“It sounds like there is more to it than that.”

“Could be, could be but a lady has to have her secrets.” She had the tone of chattering amusement.

Lily stood up from her chair and prepared to leave, “Do you need anything before I leave? Perhaps I can go and grab you something to eat? I’m going to go grab something and then bring something back for Strix. You were in that tank for a bit so I’m not certain how you are feeling.”

Jeremy relaxed and leaned back in the bed. “Yeah, maybe bring me something back. But make it something mild because I’m still feeling a bit nauseous. Maybe some toast of something.”

“Got it. Spicy food coming right up.” Jeremy just flapped his mouth not really saying anything as Lily waved goodbye to him and headed back up to the cafeteria. She arrived to check in on Yana who was still snoozing on the table where she had left her.

She passed by Yana and headed into the kitchen to perform the proper duties of any maid formian. The place was still remarkably well stocked, considering the situation the place must have ridiculously overstocked for taking care of guests.

But Lily was not going to complain about that. She threw together a series of sandwiches. Take what is free now, raid the fridges, good life advice.

Several hours later when Yana began to yawn and stretch she found a small platter of sandwiches on the table in front of her. She gratefully accepted and ate them before moving back through the ship to find her companions once more.

When she visited the med-bay she found the reverse of what it had been like the last time she was there. Strix had awoken and Jeremy had fallen sleep.

“How are you doing?” Asked Yana as she took a seat next to him.

“Pain is my constant companion.”

“Poetic I suppose but you will get better. Augustus did good work. Oh, it looks like Lily made some sandwiches for you too. We really would fall apart without her taking care of us.”

“Our bonds are as strong as uranium.”

“Are you implying that we are also radioactive?” Asked Yana skeptically. Strix simply pointed to the drawings on his face. “So you noticed them did you. Lily must have gotten an inspiration to do something interesting. I’m going to blame you for getting yourself injured though, how did it happen? You are usually pretty good at avoiding getting caught.”

“Pride is the fall of all great men. Infrared sensors grant sight beyond sight.”

“Ah the classic not enough security so you start worrying less about it and then bam something high-tech and hard to avoid without you expecting it.”

“Wisdom granted by the gods. Failure begets future success.”

“Hmmm, I think that is you trying to pass your failure off as a learning experience. Fine, but do try to avoid getting yourself hurt like this again. We all worried when we found that you weren’t with us. You might be insufferably cryptic but you are part of the team.... And I...” Yana began to trail off as she tried to find words to say.

Chitter chitter, “kiss”

Yana spun around to see Lily poking her head around the doorway. Yana immediately picked up the small metal trash can next to her and threw it at Lily. It bounced harmlessly off Lily’s carapace.

“Oh, don’t mind me... keep going. I’m not going to stop you.” She chattered from the doorway.

“Uhhhh..... whatever.” Yana turned back toward Strix, “It isn’t like that. Tell her Strix.”

“Clouds of mist conceal a great turbulence. The fearful do not disturb the dragon.”

Yana threw up her hand, “Idiots, both of you.”

She was about to yell at them some more when Augustus rapped on the door. “Ahum.... excuse me.” He stepped it, clearly pretending that nothing was happening, despite the fact that he must have been outside the door with Lily before Lily interrupted.

“Strix, I hope you are feeling well enough to move. The long range scanners are detecting disturbances in subspace. It is about time for us to pack our things

and get out of here. It is probably best of leave the cleanup to governments and corps while we do what mercenaries do best and silently disappear."

He went over the the side of the room and pulled out the wheelchair for Strix. He might have been able to walk but this would be better for preventing his injuries from getting worse.

"I'll carry Jeramy then since he isn't likely to burst into a fountain of blood. Although Strix, I would like to see a fountain a blood so do you best entertaining me!" Chittered Lily as she stepped in and went over to the unconscious Jeramy.

Augustus helped Strix into the wheelchair while Lily lifted Jeramy up.

"Yana, if there is any more instructions you want to give to the crew members before we leave now is the time to do it."

"Right, I'll go track them down. I'll be at the ship to leave in less than 30 minutes. Is that short enough?"

Augustus nodded, "Yes, that should give us plenty of time to make our get away."

Lily and Augustus left the room with their wards leaving Yana alone in the room. She looked down at her feet after they were gone.

"Idiot."

She then turned to leave. Finding the crew members scattered throughout the ship was pretty easy. As she found each of them she gave them one last instruction, the one that she had been given.... And the one she had been given.

"Seek your legacy. Remember those whose lives you have touched."

With that done she returned to the dock and stepped off the Last Maria for the last time. Back onto the Bound Curse, the place where she belonged.

"Alright folk" She said as she got on board. "Let us hit the proverbial space road and forget about this place." The door closed behind her and they all grabbed onto fixed parts of the ship as Augustus disconnected the ship and begun driving them off into open space.

Yana went up to look at the stars from the cockpit with Augustus. She just stood there and watched them move out of the astroid belt.

"Whew.... Things were more difficult than I thought it would be there."

"Mister Murphy did decide to make things difficult for us." Said Augustus.

"Well at least we get a short break as we head back to Taumu."

"You anticipate something happening when we try to turn the job in?"

"See Mister Murphy. I can't be disappointed if I anticipate the worst."

"Hopefully Mister Murphy does not decided to live up to your anticipation and try and improve on it."

"We can only dread. Well, I'm going to go attempt to relax."

Augustus gave Yana a blank stare.

"Yeah, I know, I know. I'll probably not actually relax but one can hope." Yana returned to her room with the plan to relax but after only about an hour she had pulled out a note pad and a pen. When Lily checked in on her later she found Yana lying on her bed covered in reams of notes.

Lily took the blanket off the floor and covered Yana with it.

When Yana finally woke it was near the time they were arriving at Taumu. She stepped out of her room, and stretched. She took advantage of the tiny shower they had crammed into one of the back rooms. Recycled water wasn't the most refreshing shower but it felt nice. Once she was clean and clothed again she found her way into the rec room.

Jeremy was there reading something on a tablet.

"So, how have you enjoyed the trip?" Asked Yana.

"The room is pretty cramped. Lily had to move several boxes to make enough space to lower the bed into position and I'm afraid things will fall on me if Augustus makes a weird turn while flying. But better than a small capsule filled with numbing agent."

"True enough, sorry about that."

"What are you apologizing for? Didn't you rescue me from it?"

"Yeah... while that might be true... the person who put you in it was an old co-worker of mine and the design for the mind control device might have originally come from my mine."

Jeremy put down his tablet and then blinked several times. "It was your design?"

Yana looked ashamed, "Yes, unfortunately. I thought I had destroyed enough of the research that it wouldn't be able to be replicated but one of the people

working on the project with me was able to reproduce it anyways, or at least a partially functional version of it.”

He mouth gapped for a moment, “You told me that you were a scientist working for a corp but you neglected to mention that you are The Levi Lancer. I had heard that you were dead.”

“Levi IS dead. I’m Yana now.”

“But you.... You were a black box reverse engineer. There are entire fields of technology that exist only because of your work.”

“Nah, I wasn’t the only one working on all of those projects. I was just following after people who came before me. I just had the budget that they didn’t have.”

Jeremy shook his head and laughed, “If you say so. To think that you.... That you just left the corp. I bet they tried extremely hard to get you back.”

“Still are. I’m pretty certain there is an open bounty to recover me. Although officially I’m a different person now so the corps have a hard time doing anything legally to me. Not that that stops them it just makes them have to go after me in roundabout ways.”

“Are you companions equally as illustrious? Lily is a pretty odd duck for a formian but she decided to keep her story secret from me.”

“Mercenaries are a secretive lot. We all have our own past and I wouldn’t call me own particularly special. You’ll see once we get to Taumu.”

He shook his head, she really didn’t understand how odd and special either her or her team was. Maybe it was part of her genius that she never realized it.

“Is there anything I need to do in advance to change my identity?”

“The first and most important thing is a new name. Get yourself a new name and practically everything falls together after that. Corps don’t like sharing identifying information about their former employees in case some other corp tracks you down. Their greatest weakness is other corps. I know some people that can get you a new id, Taumu is pretty supportive of that kind of thing, it was practically built on the back of refugees that wanted to leave their old past behind. As long as you don’t bring your past with you they will accept you.”

“You think I’ll be able to find a new job there then? I’ve only really been an

accountant so that really is my old skill.”

“Now who is being humble. You managed to escape from a corp, that in and of itself is special. Lots of people can’t even do that part. How did you managed to do that anyways?”

“I just chartered a escape ship under a false name, then I planned to use the Last Maria to escape to one of the other locations that it visited on its return trip. I routing the money through several of the shell companies so it would be hard to track the money back directly to me, it could have been any number of corp executive doing secret meetings and you wouldn’t want to bother them.”

“Although the corp did manage to figure it out.”

“Sure, eventually, but had the Last Maria been on schedule and not kidnapped then I would already be on another far off planet outside of the corp’s influence. Or at least that was the plan, I’m not certain what I would have done there when I arrived. I kinda didn’t plan that far ahead.”

“Sounds like you have useful skills, handling money is always a needed skills. The people in Taumu will also not be put off by their new employee having a conscience so that won’t be an issue either. Or if you want to be safer there are farther afield places you can go that will make it harder for the corp to track you. But for now enjoy the time you have, once we get to Taumu your life will be busy again.”

“Although, this book on the tablet here... I’ve never heard of it before. Where did you find it?”

“Oh, you mean one of Lily’s books?”

“Lily’s book? You mean this is her tablet?”

“Nah, Lily is part of a bunch of fan authors that publish a bunch of independent books. I generally don’t read them because many of the characters and adventures are copied straight from my real life but I hear they are popular.”

“She wrote them... but they are good.”

“Are you implying something about Lily there? Lily has trouble keeping still, always having to be doing something. Much like me in that way. She had an unfortunately large list of interests which I guess translates into writing good

books.”

“She could be an author with this skill, does she publish the books?”

“Not that I know of, they spread around and she just kind of gives them away. Publishing books and publishing royalties is a big pain when your a mercenary and Lily likes to say that...”

Lily interrupted them by yelling out from another room, “Culture is life! Life should be free!”

Yana motioned back toward the engineering room, “As you can hear. Not that that stops Lily from spending all her personal savings on the very same things. Plus a bunch of her works are kinda illegal sequels to novels made by other people. She couldn’t make money on those even if she wanted to.”

Jeremy looked down at the tablet looking over the large list of novels, it was a pretty intense collection. “Do you think I can get a copy of this?”

Yana laughed, “Sure, Lily is always happy to share them.”

The peeking head of Lily could be seen out of the door into the engineering room. “I hear I have a new convert. Excellent.” She chittered. “Do not worry. I will take good care of you.”

Yana raise her hands and began to back away, “You are on your own now Jeremy. The dark Lily has been released and it is now in your hands.” Yana turned and fled. She thought she heard the scream of Jeremy as Lily devoured him.... Although that was purely metaphorical and exaggerated. At worse Jeremy would be corrupted to Lily’s weird lifestyle.

There weren’t many places for Yana to escape to so she found herself in the cockpit with Augustus.

“It sounds like you were having fun back there.”

Yana grinned, “We were teasing Jeremy and I left him in the care of Lily.”

“Poor soul.” Said Augustus grimly.

“How long until Taumu?” She asked. The sparkling streaks outside the ship showed that they were in subspace.

Augustus glanced down at the console, “Around two more hours. We will be dropping out of subspace is 15 minutes.”

Yana nodded and took one of the other seats in the cockpit. “How is Strix

doing?"

"He has been locked away in his room most of the voyage. Beyond my checkup on him I haven't seen him. I think he doesn't like showing weakness to us, he feels like he needs to be look strong. The encounter at Last Maria hurt his pride."

"So he has been depressed recently. I'll go check in on him before we dock."

Augustus nodded, "Yes, do that. I'll do with all the tasks needed to dock. Although make sure Jeramy has a new name for me to give to the Taumu authorities."

Yana nodded but she stayed in the chair watching the stars stream by.

Eventually Augustus spoke, "What are you planning on doing?"

"Hmm... what do you mean?" Asked Yana innocently.

"You are planning something, This job has caused you to remember things you didn't want to remember but it has also given you new resolve. You are planning something stupid." He turned to stare into her eyes. The slit eyes of the rexian bored into her.

Yana turned away still not saying anything.

Augustus shook his head and looked back at the stars. "Whatever you decide to do, make sure that you include us. At this point we are family."

Yana coughed, "Thanks Augustus.... But this really isn't your problem. It is mine."

"It is our problem. So include us in it. If you try to do anything foolish without us then I'll track you down and force you to make us join you."

Yana sat there quiet for a few minutes. "Then thanks. Give me a bit, I'll tell you what I'm planning once we arrive at Taumu. I still need time to figure myself out."

She stood and left Augustus behind in the cockpit.

At the entrance to the rec-room she stopped dead. Looked between Lily and Jeramy, then promptly walked across the room opened the door to the corridor leading to the crew rooms.

"Save me." Said Jeramy who had been forced into a maid outfit. Yana didn't say anything and left him to his fate. Lily just chattered like an evil villain.

Yana moved down the hallway to the room that belonged to Strix. She knocked on the door.

"Your presence is allowed." Came the voice from inside.

Yana pushed open the door and stepped inside the room. It was draped with black and red clothes hiding most of the room from sight. Normally Strix would stand there imposingly but instead he was lying on the bed with his arms crossed, looking like a corpse.

"How are you doing?" Asked Yana as she stepped in.

He rose up sharply like a zombie raising from the dead.

This dramatic enactment however was short lived as he turned to one side and began coughing breaking the illusion of grim darkness. Yana politely turned her head away to avoid seeing it.

"My curse is breaking through this fragile mortal shell." Said Strix seriously once he had finished his coughing.

"Sounds like a tragic background." She looked back at him. "We are arriving at Taumu in a few hours. Augustus is being flying so he wanted me to check in on you."

Strix said, "Concern is waste of my dark impulses."

"Whatever that means. Glad to see you are at least talking like yourself. I don't know what I would do if you somehow started talking normally. But I am here to check in on you so if you want to share something with me then do so. Also please do share something, Lily is being weird again and I need an excuse to stay out of the rec-room."

"Your lingering presence is but a ghost. Oblivion will consume me by the flow of time. Soon there will be nothing left."

"So you are going to sleep but don't mind if I stay here with you? Little Strix is scared of the dark is he." Yana winked. Strix however did not respond to the bait and laid back down on the bed, this time without attempting anything dramatic.

They were there in silence, Yana wasn't sure when Strix fell asleep but after a time a short snore disturbed her. She almost fell out of her chair as the sound but managed to grab herself before she made a clatter.

The sound was very un-Strix-like. He had his own pride and kept up his dramatic act even when his life was on the line. But it seemed there was a crack in his perfect defense, his sleeping form had shown a weakness that he never would will awake.

Yana gave a small grin before quietly slipping out of her chair and moving to the door. She locked the back of the door before passing through it and shutting it behind her. It wouldn't do to let Lily see him like that. Yana could keep a secret but Lily would be happy to embarrass Strix for all time if she saw him like that.

Rather than attempt to visit the rec-room and whatever crimes Lily might be commit there to the poor and helpless Jeramy, Yana went into her own room. She searched through her room to find the thing she was looking for, a small red booklet. Inside there was handwritten chicken scratch.

The notebook would look to be written in sivalise to an outside viewer but it was actually sivalise that had been encoded. Her secret codebook for writing down things that she needed to remember but couldn't let anybody else decipher if they came across it. It was as robust a security that she was able to put it through.

However she was able to read its contents are quickly and fluently as a native. After going through several of the pages she nodded, that should be enough, at least she hoped it was. She pocketed the little notebook. Then she returned to the notes strewn around the ground and began picking them up, they hadn't including Augustus, Lily or Strix in them but now...could she really include them in her madness, it could easily result in all of them getting killed but maybe with all four of them it could be accomplished.

"Nextcorp...." she muttered under her breath, "I never expected to go back voluntarily. Still... regrets... I do not think I can let them fester any longer." She shoved the pile of notes into the trash. If the team didn't accept whatever plan she came up with she promised herself that would be it. It she couldn't convince them to join her than the plan wasn't worth doing.

So she starting writing up a new plan, one that involved the entirety of the Bound Curse. Her little red book was also going to be a critical element in the plan. It had been six years since she had left Nextcorp, six long years that were

some of the most enjoyable and terrifying years in her life. Now perhaps, she had an answer to the question she had been given six years ago.

By the time the ship began to come to a halt at Taumu station she had filled pages full of tightly written notes. Most of those pages had been carelessly discarded across the floor and the ream she held in her hands was particularly short. After all the plotting the actual plan had turned out to be short, not easy, not simple but short. Now she just had to convince the others to accept it.

She left the room with her plan and arrived at the rec room to see Jeramy collapsed in one of the chair. He was rumped and weary but back to wearing his own clothes again.

"So, how did it go?" Yana asked casually.

"She gave me her complete collection of books. Although I do not think it was worth the cost."

Yana chuckled, "Think of it as a beautiful memory. Lily is a good person but she can be a bit over-enthusiastic about things. I hope you can forgive her for it."

"Crazily obsessive might be a better phrasing... still... you are right that she is a good person. I don't think I would be able to keep up with that though. She didn't stop chattering the whole time, I could barely keep up."

"We can't keep up with her at times and there are three of us and we have been acclimatized to her. You should have seen her attempt at making a maid cafe back before this crew got together. Strix probably saved the world by preventing that from becoming a reality."

Jeramy shuttered, "I dread to think of what that place would have been like."

"Oh, one thing, Augustus asked that you to think about choosing a new name so that we can provide it to the Taumu authorities. You don't need to worry too much about making a final decision here, this is something you can change pretty easily if you need to."

"A new name huh.... Give me a few minutes and I'll give it to Augustus."

"Ok, now I need to go help Lily finish getting a list of cargo. We can some electronics from the other ship and plan on selling those off. Also while you might not have a lot of stuff you should collect what you can... hmmm...."

Yana searched through her pockets and pulled out a small card. "While there are some people I plan on introducing you to this should help hold you over until you can find a job." She tossed the card over to him.

"Are you sure? Don't you need the money?"

Yana shrugged, "It isn't that much, just some left over cash. Plus we are going to get paid for 'recovering' your data. It is also my person funds I'm aiding you with not team funds. So don't worry about it. Now start working on your name, you are going to need it soon."

She left to go check in on Lily who was in one of the spare rooms doing her best to organize things, "Lily, how is figuring out our customs going?"

"Well enough, we got a good haul of electronics. It should cover most of our expenses in doing this job. Hopefully the pay will make this job actually worth doing. You think they are going to properly pay?"

"We can hope. Although, we do have the briefcase so they are likely to pay just to get that handed over to them. They wouldn't want us to hand the briefcase over to another corp now would they?"

Lily chattered, "Blackmail to ensure that we get paid. I'm sure that they will be super happy about that."

"When are corps ever happy? Do you have the list of things that I can bring up to Augustus?"

Lily handed over the manifesto. Yana took it to Augustus and handed it over.

"Our fifth member is still deciding on a name but I have the cargo manifest. Perhaps you can distract the port officials with that until he makes up his mind." Augustus accepted the paper and turned back to the console where he began passing the information over the port authorities.

Just as he was about finishing, the totally unnamed man ducked in from the rec-room. "I'm made a decision. For now I'll go by Ream."

Augustus quickly finished passing on the information and their docking request was accepted. Augustus flew the ship into the station and the docking gantry locked. They all gathered their things before pouring out of the Bound Curse. Everybody except for Strix at least, he stayed behind to recover more.

The sights and sounds of Taumu were a relief. A familiar place that they all

knew well. Ream, previously Jeramy, looked wide-eyed at all the different places in the station as they walked through the main streets.

Lily split off with the pile of bags to go sell the stuff they salvaged. Augustus went off to negotiate their actual pay, obviously leaving the briefcase in the ship in case the corp decided to make dangerous decisions.

Yana lead Ream through the station to the main offices of Taumu where they would register him and a new visitor. Get some official documentation on him would be easy. Although there was plenty of comings and goings in Taumu finding one particular person especially one under a new identity as difficult.

When they arrived at the office Yana called out to one of the agents there by name and pulled him aside. She spoke some quite words to him where he nodded a few times before moving off to gather some paperwork.

A few minutes later he came back with a pile of documents. It was brought before Ream who glanced over the papers. He frowned as then said, "The date on this document..."

Yana gave a short grin, "Plenty of people live here and you have been living in Taumu for a while." She winked. The document was clearly back-dated and not the actual date. The man smiled conspiratorially.

"Glad to have you back Ream. I hope your voyage has been enjoyable."

Ream nodded and signed the paper.

With that signed Yana nodded, "Thanks."

"Don't know what you are talking about." Said the man as he took the contract off the table and bundled it away into the back of the building.

"Alright, with that bundled up let's go see some recruiters." Said Yana as she brought Ream out of the office and back onto the streets of Taumu.

"Was that safe?"

"Plenty safe. Taumu basically plays a game with regulations. They pretend to do things properly and when things turn out bad they just claim it is corruption, shuffle an employee around, and then keep going as normal. The place used to be a den of pirate, although that is a pretty out story and might actually be apocryphal."

"Are you sure it isn't actually corruption?"

Yana shrugged, "This is a city of outcast and mercenaries. You keep the gears spinning and nobody it too much in charge. It isn't like a corp so the government, such as it is, can't really control the people very much. I'm pretty certain there are people who would shank the Taumu authorities if they tried to raise taxes."

"Like with a knife?"

"More like a katana. There are some interesting people here."

"And I'm going to try and get a job here?" Said Ream with a shiver.

"They are mostly good people. But I can recommend some good self defense classes and there are some good places to get electric gloves like the ones I use."

"Uhh.... I think I'll pass."

"Suit yourself." Said Yana with a grin. She let him through the alleyways and streets of Taumu until she finally came across a small building with a glowing neon sign that said, "E's Jobs"

"This place looks sketchy." Said Ream with a flat voice.

"E has a lot of contacts, helped the Bound Curse to get a few jobs when we couldn't find anything good. Plus he owes me some favors." She motioned and they moved into the building. It was cool inside and the place had a weird moist feeling in the air.

A green skinned man with a very wide stature looked up from the counter to see them enter. "Yana." croaked the man, "Haven't seen you around recently. You looked for a job or something? Strix ain't paying you enough?"

"Nah E, I'm good, but I go a friend here. Landed in the city a few weeks ago if you catch my drift. He's looked for some work, temp work is fine."

E turned to sized Ream up. "Doesn't look like much. What you capable of?"

"Math mostly. I used to be an accountant."

Yana snickered, "At least he was until his moral got the better of him. Tragic story really but I think he's good at his job."

"An accountant huh? One with moral fiber." E turned to the small terminal on the desk, typed in some words. They waited as he clattered away at the terminal before finally he said, "There are some options I can see here. You willing to travel?"

"Uh... I guess." Said Ream.

Yana interjected, "It is probably a good idea. It is a good way to lie low."

"I got a cargo ship who needs a stock manager. Not exactly accounting but might be close enough. Normally they would want somebody with a history of being trustworthy but if Yana will vouch for you that will be enough."

"Aye, he will be fine. Is it the Gordians then?" She guessed, "I thought they were doing well?"

"Yup," E nodded, "Their regular ate something weird and is done for a few weeks at least. They need a replacement. This would only be a temporary job but it pays good enough and will get you some rep."

Ream looked back and forth between E and Yana before he nodded, "Sure, I'll do it." Yana rapped him on the head with her knuckles.

"He will consider it. Don't let the first opportunity but the one you always accept. He will make a decision within the quarter-turn. Is that good enough?" Asked Yana.

E smiled, "You got somebody with smarts looking out for you newbie. I'm not trying to cheat you but other will so you got to consider your options before making a decision." Then he whispered softly, "Wouldn't want Yana to kill me after all." Then back in his louder voice, "Yeah, that will be fine. The ship still has a little bit of time in dock before they leave again. Just send me a message by then if you want it."

He pressed a button and a printout of the job got deposited in a little tray. He handed it over the Ream. "And Yana, if you ever decide this mercenary gig is not right for you then remember to check it."

"Unlikely but thanks. Though I owe you now. I'm going to be working on something big soon but after that I'll let you hire me for one of your risky jobs. That sound good."

E smiled very, very widely, "You know how to please a man. Nobody wants to do those jobs. While I wouldn't debate who owes who, I'd say it is too late to take back that offer. Try not to get yourself killed with whatever it is your are planning."

"Thanks E." Then Yana and Ream stepped out of the building.

“Are there other places I should go see then for jobs?”

“Nah, E’s offer is good and you should accept it but the advice still stands. Next step is to get you some new clothing, if you keep walking around looking like that people might think you are a corp drone or something.”

He looked down at his plain clothing and the out of the vibrant and strange crowd of Taumu. She did make a good point. He stood out because he didn’t stand out. He followed after her as they went through the streets again before finding a selection of clothing stores. He balked looking at them and looked to Yana.

“Don’t be a coward. Lily prepared you for this moment.”

“I didn’t think that is why she did it.” He said hesitantly.

Yana signed, “Fine, we will do it the boring way.” She lead him over a street and pointed, “You can go there instead. Strix practically only ever buys stuff here.” The place sold black clothing, any kind of grim gritty dark clothing you could imagine. Not really Yana’s preference though.

Ream released his breath and accepted the store. When he finished shopping he was wearing something closer to spiky goth clothing. Yana nodded, “Not what I expected you to choose but you pull it off surprisingly well. The metal accountant, could be a good brand image.”

“Brand image?”

“You are your own man now. You got to cultivate your identity. You don’t get hired by being forgettable. Right, one more place and you are free.”

Yana let him through the corridor again before they arrived old looking apartment building. “Short term stay, less like an motel though. Plenty of people here use this while staying in Taumu, usually bigger than whatever tiny room you have on a ship. You might only be staying here a few nights but it is good to get aquatinted.”

She let him through the door. At the receptionist desk was a young looking girl, maybe into her mid teens. “Welcome” she said with a bright voice. Then, “Oh, Yana! How have you been?”

“Alive. Managed to survive an encounter with ixnarians.”

"Ixnarians?" Said the girl with a gasp, "Aren't they dangerous?"

"Yup and there were a lot of them too. We had to fight them off ten to one."

Yana began to tell an exaggerated version of the tale to the girl. Although she did keep it short and left out an inclusion of Ream as well as particulars of Restor.

The girl practically had sparkles in her eyes as she listened. The story was a quick explanation but still inspired wonder in the girl. When the story finished the girl said, "Wow... amazing! I wish I could do anything like that!"

Yana grinned, "While it is nice to have dreams remember that mercenary work is tough and dangerous. Have you been keeping up your training?"

"Uhh..." The girl glanced away, "Yeah... mostly...."

Yana could tell that the girl had been slacking, "Well just keep up your training and I'm sure you will be able to be a mercenary too." The girl puffed up her chest in resolution to keep working on it.

"But on to your job." Said Yana. "I have a new guest who needs a room for the night and maybe more in the future. So if you could help him."

"Oh! Right sorry." The girl turned to face Ream, "Welcome to the Lonely Bunk, would you like a room?"

"Oh, yes, I would. Although I don't know for how long. Thanks to Yana here I had a planned job soon and that will take me away from the station."

"Will you want to be holding things over here while you are gone?"

"Uh... what?"

"We have many guests who are going in and out, sometimes staying for weeks and then leaving for weeks. Often they have stuff that they don't want to take with them. So we offer storage for those people. If you are stuff you don't want to take with you on your job then we can hold onto it."

"Oh, no, I won't be needing that. I don't have enough stuff to need such a service."

"Well, it looks like everything is going to work out then." Said Yana with several nods, "Alright Joy, take care of Ream here."

"Wait... wait... is that all?" Said Ream with worry in his voice.

"You got to start caring for yourself at this point. I've given you everything you need to get started with your new life. Is there something else that you are

missing?”

He stared at her for a minute then finally and tightened his hands into determined fists, “No, you have given me everything I need. Thank you Yana for everything that you have done for me”

“Great. I’ll be at the Bound Curse until tomorrow if you have something else but try to solve things yourself first.”

“And I’ll take care of him.” Joy waved goodbye to Yana as she left the apartment.

She went back through the station. There were a couple of personal stops she needed to make. She pulled out her little red book and went to the address that she had written down there. It took her a couple of hours to speak with the people at those locations and get their cooperation.

She had a bunch of extra data on her table when she finally returned to the Bound Curse. Lily was relaxing in the rec-room drinking a multi-colored cup of something when Yana arrived. And by relaxing, what was actually meant was that two of her hand were relaxing and drinking while her other two hands were writing something on a tablet.

“Started writing already?” Asked Yana as she moved in and took up residence on the couch.

Lily looked up, “Ah, Yana, good to see you back. Managed to get Ream situated? Didn’t get into a mysterious love triangle did you?”

“No, and why would you think that?”

“Pity. But glad to know that he has a new place for himself. The selling of the various components went pretty well, some ups and downs but I managed to get us some good prices. So we at least managed to keep the ship in business. I haven’t heard back from Augustus though so hopefully we will get a good payout for that.”

“We can only hope. Has Strix tried to escape?” Yana look toward the door leading to the bedrooms.

“I checked in on him when I got back and he gave me a cryptic assurance through the door. Although he could have had a recorder set to automatically play his voice and he did manage to sneak out.”

"What did you watch recently where that happened? Actually don't bother, I'm sure it is some old movie or something."

"But it was a good one. I can show you it and I'm sure you will agree."

"Maybe later but now there are more important things."

Lily chittered a little and lowered her tablet. "So.... What are we going to be doing?"

Yana stiffened on the couch. "It seems that everybody knows then..."

"Likely, you have been pretty cagey recently."

"Currently I only have plans. Once Augustus comes back then I'll tell people what I want to do. Once I've explained it you can decide if you want to do it or not."

"Sure, I'll join you."

Yana coughed, "But I haven't even explained the plan to you yet."

"Then you had better make it good so I don't make fun of you. The answer is still yes though."

"Your an idiot." Said Yana although she was looking down with an embarrassed flush in her cheeks.

"That is what you keep telling me but we stick together. If you want to feel embarrassed about something then I'm more than happy to make a dirty joke. Maybe something about you and..."

"Alright, shove it."

"That is the spirit." Chittered Lily.

"But thanks." Whispered Yana very quietly.

Lily returned to her writing while Yana lay on the chair thinking. If she was going to bring her friends into this mess then she did need to make the best plan, something that wouldn't get any of them killed.

So she had her notes that she needed to make sure was perfect.

When Augustus finally returned she looked up at him. He bore an incredibly threatening alligator grin. "I hope everybody is excited to receive some good news."

"Puppies?" Asked Lily.

"Better, money." He pulled out a splay of cards. "We got the payment. Sure

the cards won't be active for one more cycle when the Taumu authorities confirm that we turn over the suitcase but still I got us a good payment."

"Whew" said Yana with a relieved smile. "I was worried that it might actually be puppies. Or some other meager consolation prize. So they bought our story about what happened?"

"They seemed pretty eager to get their hands on the suitcase and all that it contained. Must be some pretty spicy secrets that they don't want getting revealed." He tossed the cards out to each of them in turn. "Let me go give Strix his and retrieve the briefcase."

"And these are going to stay good? No secret cancellation?"

"Authorized by Taumu. Good a promise as we can get. That would be too big a bridge to burn just to stop payment to small set of mercenaries."

"Good enough for me." Said Yana as she slide the card into her pocket. "And the extra card is for the ship?"

"Yes, standard five way split." He stepped into the back and a minute later was back with the briefcase. "I'll make the delivery and then I will be right back." He left.

Lily was holding her card up with sparkling excitement.

"Want me to hold onto some of your money so you don't spend it all immediately?" Asked Yana.

"Me? Irresponsible with money?" Asked Lily in a falsely offended tone. "Yes, that would be appreciated." She tossed her cards over to Yana who added it to her own. Lily could be trusted with other people's money, she was responsible enough to not hurt other people with her expenditures but when it was her own money she could lose all sense of reason. She once spent an entire paycheck on a single limited edition figurine and then had to eat cheap noodles until they finished their next job.

As they waited for Augustus to come back there was a clatter at the store and Strix pushed his way through into the rec-room. He could walk but it was clear that his movements were still pained. But when the door opened he stood straight, did a dramatic motion with one of his arms and said, "A curtain falls on the first act and raises on the second. Prepare yourself for the drama that is about

to unfold.”

“Glad to see you are in high spirits again.” Said Yana, pretending not to notice his weakness.

He took a seat in the chair in the one darkened corner of the room. Less impressive when you knew that the lighting of the room had been specifically calibrated to leave that part of the room always covered in shadows.

Lily got up to fiddle with the coffee machine and in practically no time brought out a coffee cup and filled it with nice hot coffee. Strix drunk his coffee black, obviously and accepted his cup graciously. Lily through in some creamer and sugars before getting Yana a cup. Her own cup was practically made of sugar and creamer rather than coffee.

Just as they were about finished with their cup Augustus returned. Lily picked up the cup of tea that had just finished seeping and passed it over. Augustus gratefully took it as well as a seat at the table.

“So, with that resolved....” He said. Everybody turned their attention to Yana who stiffened up. “Yana, can you please elaborate about what it is you plan on doing? You have been secretive up until now but it is time to come clean.”

“Purge the darkness of your sin.” Said Strix.

Yana took a deep breath and then said, “Alright. The goal is pretty simple. When I left Nextcorp I left behind a friend of mind, a fellow scientist named Silasilan. After what happened with Restor I feel that I owe it to her and myself to make an attempt to find her and save her from the corp.”

“I assume you have a bit more to work on then you used to work together?” Asked Augustus. “It has been many years since you left Nextcorp. Do you have any idea of where she might be. It sounded like Restor tossed her to the curb.”

“You would be right. But I cashed in several favors that were owed to me to get some modern information. While I wasn’t able to get an absolute perfect conformation about where she is I have the best guess that I’ll be able to get. Nextcorp is holding a symposium soon, showing off the new things to executives. Without a doubt if Silasilan is still at the company she will be there to assist in fixing any issues that might arise in demonstration.”

“So what? Break into the symposium and cause a ruckus?” Asked Lily with

some excitement in her voice.

“Now that truly would be crazy.” Said Yana. “No, I’m wanting to do something a bit more subtle. Infiltrate the symposium to locate Silasilan. Then when the symposium ends we intercept her flight to leave and instead rescue her and bring her away from the corp.”

Augustus nodded at the plan but then asked the hard question, “And what if she doesn’t want to leave the corp?”

Yana grimaced, that was definitely a possibility. Before she decided to leave herself she might have balked as being kidnapped by somebody, even somebody she knew. “That is unfortunately a possibility. But I need to give her and myself a chance. If she wants to stay with Nextcorp.... Well... I won’t force her to come with me. I can only hope that she will accept my offered hand.”

“Directions can be received by others but the road must be chosen oneself.” Said Strix.

“That is a good brief outline of what you plan to do.” Said Augustus. “It sounds like a decent idea over all, avoid direct confrontation with the corp and sneak her own when she would leave the symposium. That gives us a good opportunity but we will still need to locate where she will be and where she will be leaving.”

“Indeed, the plan is to arrive near when the symposium starts and we can use the time the symposium is happening to locate Silasilan and learn what we need to about her plans.” Yana pulled out her notebook of plans and began to elaborate on all the ideas she had about how to get into and out of the symposium.

They listened and nodded as she explained the finer details of her plan.

As she finished her long winded explanation Augustus spoke up again, “Your plan sounds solid. There is only one last detail I’m curious about, how are you planning on concealing your identity. The rest of up are wanted by Nextcorp so it will be reasonably easy for us to slip in but you are wanted so you will need more than just a simple disguise to get in. Not to mention that due to the previous encounter with mercenaries the corp is clearly aware of your current

profession.”

“You are correct that I need to do something to disguise myself but I have a plan for that too. I have something that they will really not expect me to do” Yana then proceeded to explain that portion of her plan as well.

Lily burst into uproarious laughter. “Yeah.... They won’t expect that. I can’t believe you would do that. I’ll make sure to get what you need ready by the time we arrive at the symposium.” The chittering grew louder as Lily began to grow excited about her job.

“So... what do you all say? I wanted to leave it up to you to decide if we do the job. If you don’t want to do it then I will leave this here and abandoned my attempt. Without your aid it would be a foolish endeavor and I’d rather swallow my regrets then throw my life away uselessly.”

“Foolishness.” Exclaimed Strix, “Where you go, your companions will follow.”

“Here here!” Cheered Lily.

“Your plan is sufficiently detailed that I think we have a good chance of success. So I believe I too will throw my hat in the ring. So there you have it. We have all agreed to your plan.”

Yana did a small bow. “Thank you all.”

Lily chittered while Augustus gave a toothy grin. Strix just did over the top hand movements like he was posing.

Before they got too emotional Augustus clapped his hands, “Alright everybody. Yana made the plan and now we need to go forward with it. Does everybody know what preparations that they need to do?”

There was a series of nods.

“Alright then.” Said Augustus. “Do and do what you need to do. Accounting to the symposium timeline we had not quite two days remaining in Taumu so get what you need to get, relax while you still can, and get ready for another adventure. And after this we are going to need to lay low for a while so make sure to take any preparations need for that too.”

“Lying low? Do I need a mustache?” Asked Lily.

“No.” Said Yana in an exasperated tone, “That would just make you more

noticeable.”

Yana and Lily shared a laugh. Then they all finished their drinks which had mostly grown lukewarm during the conversation. They had a timeline and things to do.

Strix was still not feeling well but he managed to disappear out of the ship, off to do who knows what preparations. Augustus had contacts, people what could get them to the symposium without being identified, they needed false identifications too. Ids that would at least survive casual scrutiny.

Lily had a very particular job she needed to accomplish, the of disguising Yana. So she practically skipped her way to one of her favorite hangouts, a cloth store that she used to make her various costumes including her own maid outfit.

Yana had more people in her red book to contact. She had already gone through the ones that could provide her with information but now that everything was approved she needed to meet with the rest of them to get the actual aid that they would need.

One of the most important things she needed could be found in one of the more ritzy upscale tech shops in Taumu. While normally Yana would have made due with repurposing older tools with the help of Lily this needed a high tech touch. Yana was greeted by a cheerful young woman when she entered the store.

“Welcome to Wild Sky Electronics. Where we will help you blast past the sky! How may I help you today?”

Yana glanced around the store briefly but did not see what she needed, not that she expected to, the thing she wanted wouldn’t be out in plain view for anybody to see.

“Yes, there is something specific I am looking for and I would like to speak with your manager about it.”

“No need to speak with my manager, I am more than capable of helping you locate anything that you might desire.”

Yana stared at the woman who had an annoying infectious level of cheeriness. “Alright, I am looking for a spaceship console adaptor capable of interfering with levin systems without causing integration system errors plus I want to have automatic self-error corrections when it has near radiometric fluctuations happen

near it.”

The woman froze. She looked like a panicked animal. After a few moments Yana offered, “Or you can get your manager and I’ll speak with them.”

“Yes, yes, I think I will go do that. I will be back in a minute.” The woman quickly disappeared into the back. Yana shook her head, he really should train his employees better, if he had then they would have been able to see through her bullshit technobabble. Still if it could get a hold of him easier then she would lie as she needed.

Not much longer a largely set man with a bushy mustache came out from the back accompanied by the woman. He looked around, saw Yana, paled a little bit, then she broke into a fake smile. He shoed the woman away and then went up to Yana.

“Why, Yana, how good it is too see you. I didn’t expect you to come around like this, if I had know then I would have come out to meet you immediately.”

“It is good to see you too Preston. Now if we could find somewhere quiet to talk I have something I need form you.”

“Need from me....” He said hesitantly.

“You can consider it a closure of the debt you own me.”

“Alright, follow me.” He lead her through the door into the back area and then into his office. It was a nice room but remarkably plain and practical compared to the pretty lavish shop. “Is this going to get me into a lot of trouble?” He said hesitantly.

“Not if we don’t get caught. Now I need something to hack into a corp spaceship.”

Preston paled. “You are going after a corp? Oh dear, oh dear, that does not sound safe, not safe at all. If they find out about me helping you then I’ll be doomed, doomed.”

“You will be fine. If anybody comes after you just throw me under the bus. I plan on doing to ground after this for a while so you don’t need to worry about me.”

He shook his head, “You can take care of yourself, I’m not worried about you. I’m worried about me.”

"You do owe me the favor." Said Yana leaning with a dangerous looking smile, "Unless you want to default on that favor. I'm sure nobody would complain if you abandoned that obligation."

Preston winced, "You know I can't abandon the favor...." He sighed deeply, "Alright, alright, I'll get you what you need. But then we are even. Right?"

Yana nodded, "Yes, indeed, we will be even."

Preston leaned back in his chair is defeated, "A corp you say? And you need to hack the ship? What do you plan on doing with the ship? Capture it and bring it elsewhere?"

"No, I just need to disable the ship long enough to board it. Disable the security, hide the fact that it has been boarded. Something that can keep the corp quiet for an hour or so."

"You need to hide the fact that you are boarding? You much be doing this somewhere very risky. Which corp are you lookin to mess with?"

"Nextcorp."

"Nextcorp.... I'm going to die. I'm going to be murdered and die." He sunk his head in his face. "What horrible thing are you planning."

"A secret. But I do need to be able to hack their ship."

"How long do I have?"

"We are leaving in a cycle."

"Uggg... you just love making me suffer. I'll put it together, I'll make sure you get it in time. Then I expect never to see you again."

Yana grinned, "Sure, no problem. But you know where to find me the next time you have an impossible problem that needs solving."

Preston deflated even more. They both knew that he wouldn't have many other options if he needed something like the aid of the Bound Curse. He had some money at his disposal as the manager of the store but mercenaries were expensive and he was pressed for money at the time. So the Yana got a valuable favor that she was now cashing in.

She waved goodbye to the deflated Preston as she left. That was the most important issue. Corp ships had good security systems, you needed something special to override those systems. Yana could potentially break in but without

specialized hardware it would be time consuming.

After visiting several other people that owed her favors she returned to the Bound Curse. Lily had returned first but she had secluded herself into her room. She had started the disguise project. Not long after Yana arrived Augustus joined them. He revealed the set of illegal ids that they would be using.

Yana examined them and they looked pretty flawless to her, they might be missing some of the more difficult to reproduce security features and likely databases would have contradictory data from the card if examined but good enough for passing casual scrutiny.

They were worried that Strix had completely disappeared for the evening without notice but he returned just as the evening had started.

"Come companions, paradise awaits."

They looked at each other in confusion but Strix immediately turned, beckoned, and then left the ship. Everybody followed him as he left the port and went into the heart of Taumu station. After a few minutes of walking they found themselves in front of the Frond Grill, a reasonably fancy restaurant that had strange performances as different times throughout the night.

It was a place that they had seen before but none of them had eaten at. They were kinda surprised once inside that Strix has gotten a reservation and they were lead to one of the best table for watching the performance.

As Strix took his seat at what might be considered the head of the table he said, "Eat, drink, make merry, for tomorrow things explode."

"I don't think that is how the phrase goes." Said Lily chittered as she took a seat as well.

"You have learned well at how to take care of your employees." Said Augustus as he also took a seat.

"You know, I'm actually kinda impressed." Said Yana, "Who knew that you could do something simple like make a reservation as a restaurant. I thought other people found you practically impossible to understand."

"Do not underestimate the true depths of my capabilities. For you shall find them bottomless." Said Strix.

"Ah, so you make the reservation using a console. Got it." Joked Yana.

Everybody laughed and soon enough they were given menus. They ordered more than they could reasonably eat and drink but it was a celebration so there was no need to hold back. Strix even produced a few bottles of a mysterious unlabeled wine that they got to enjoy at the table.

Out of all the people there they were probably the loudest and probably most annoying to the other customers but they didn't care. They ate and joked with each other until deep into the night. Eventually they were gracefully told that it was time for them to leave and Lily helped lift Yana up out of the chair that she had flopped into.

"Ii... Cnnn wlk..." Mumbled Yana who tried to break free from Lily but she didn't have the strength and likely couldn't have gotten very far even if she did. Augustus was also inebriated but not badly enough that he couldn't do his own walking. Strix seemed completely unaffected by the alcohol, at least at a surface look. He had a grinning look and nothing he had been saying recently made any sense... less sense than normal.

Even Lily wasn't completely immune to the effects. Formians didn't really get drunk, at least not like humans did but Strix had found a weird bottle of something fizzy that seemed to do weird things to Lily's metabolism. So even she occasionally stumble and have to adjust her pace to avoid tripping and dropping Lily.

They managed to stumble through the city without an incident. It was the equivalent of late at night so the streets were slightly emptier than normal. When they arrived at the Bound Curse their energy for returning seemed to evaporate and they collapsed at various places throughout the ship.

When Yana finally woke up she had a horribly aching head. She blearily looked around and found herself in the res-room laying on the couch. She clutched her head as she pulled herself to her feet, stumbled over to the kitchen section and poured herself a cup of water. That helped her recovered slightly although she still felt mostly pain.

She glanced around but there was nobody else around. She checked the front of the ship to find that Augustus was asleep in the cockpit. The ship had

been started and had begun its trip through the sea of stars. Yana could see the streaming of stars showing that they were in subspace.

The console nearby showed that everything was good for their journey to the symposium. Nothing looked wrong but Yana still had enough pain in her head that she couldn't be absolutely certain. It looked good enough so she left Augustus sleep and returned to the back of the ship. She found Lily curled up in the engine room.

Yana grabbed a blanket and threw it over Lily. The engine room could sometimes get cold and while that generally wasn't an issue for Lily, Yana should it could help keep her comfortable. Yana found Strix in his room, he had left the door open without realizing it. She after making sure that he too had his blanket over. Him she shut the door to his room.

Then she returned to the rec-room. Yana took a seat back down at the couch. She tried to bring up her notes and work more on improving the plan but her head just hurt too much at this point. The trip to the symposium was going to take several days so she didn't have to do the work now so she gave up and throw the notebook on the nearby table. If she could do back to sleep she would have but now she was awake.

Instead she put together a homemade hangover cure. She couldn't say it was exceptionally effective or anything. It was mostly just a protein shake with some frozen fruit but she could do it even with the pain in her head and it helped her keep busy. She even made enough for the other three when they work up, although she couldn't remember if they drank as much as she had. Honestly she couldn't remember how much she drank last night but it must have been a lot given the state of her head.

When it was done she took a nice big cup of it with her back to the couch. She sipped softly at the drink tried to focus. Over the course of an hour she managed to gather most of her thoughts and drink most of her drink. By the time it was over she felt a bit better. Her head still hurt but it was minor enough that she could concentrate again.

Augustus stumbled into the room from the cockpit, doing an undignified groan. He stopped when he saw Yana and straightened to compose himself. Yana

lifted the remains of her drink and said, "I made enough to share. There is a picture of it in the fridge.

"Thanks." He poured himself a cup as tell before taking a seat at he table nearby. "You managed to wake up first huh. Here I thought you would be sleeping throughout the entire trip. You were pretty inebriated when we left the restaurant."

"What can I say. I am a lightweight. I get drunk quickly and then recover quickly." She shrugged, "You seem to be alright though. I beat you managed to avoid the worst of the headaches."

"Perhaps but I'll likely keep feeling it for a while. Rexian's can't filter alcohol as well as humans since it wasn't a mainstay in our diet. So I deliberately went easy last night because I knew how long it can keep affecting me. The worst seems to be over but I'll likely stumble around a little until we arrive at the symposium."

"Although you managed to send us out of the port at an appropriate time."

"Mostly I just engaged the autopilot. Unless we are in dangerous flighting conditions or going off a weird course then the autopilot can handle it just fine. Besides I made sure to input our flight path before we left so I didn't have to do much as all."

"Good thinking."

He nodded as he began to slowly sip at the drink that Yana had made. It wasn't tea but it did help him too, keeping other ingredients in his blood stream to alleviate the alcohol.

Yana had begun to make refinements to her plans. More time passed before Lily came into the room. She stretched and you could hear pops as her exo-joints adjusted. It sounded odd and dangerous but it was apparently the equivalent of a human popping their knuckles.

"That was fun." She said, "No idea how Strix managed to get some formian nectar but that stuff was pretty high quality."

"I didn't think the formians went for enjoyment like that so I'm surprised they have something like that." Said Yana.

"Ah, they might be joyless hurumphs in general but that doesn't mean they

are entirely free from recreation. One of those things is nectar. I guess you could say that it is equivalent to Mead although a bit different."

Augustus joined it, "At least that sounds better than the blood wine that is a historical rexian drink. Made using actual blood. It is simply barbaric if you ask me."

"Ohhh..... I've heard about that." Exclaimed Lily, "You make it out of the blood of your enemies."

"Not for many hundreds of years." Corrected Augustus, "And even then that wasn't the common form of it." Lily commonly latched onto extremely old cultural ideas of people and then stuck with it because it made a good story, "Previously it was made from the blood of hunted game and then eventually made from livestock. Originally it was made as a way of extending the shelf life of bottled blood since it doesn't keep very long. Much like human alcohol it was a common drink to avoid unclean water."

"Alright, enough history lessons about drinking blood." Said Yana, "The very thought of it is making me queasy. Or maybe that is just hangover but still."

"But blood... the rexians are like vampires!"

"Oh shut up." Said Yana throwing a balled up piece of paper at Lily who exaggeratedly collapsed when hit by it.

They all laughed but were interrupted by an exaggerated creaking of the door to the cabins. "Suffering. A close companion." Whispered Strix as he stepped into the room. He had slightly bloodshot eyes and clearly looked a bit pained but didn't stumble.

"Well.... If you want another companion I have a hangover recovery shake in the fridge. Lily there is some for you too." Yana had been distracted enough by the talk of blood that she had forgotten to mention it to Lily.

Lily produced the pitcher and poured both of them a cup. They relaxed through the table for a few minutes letting everybody start to recover from last night. After those few minutes had passed Lily clapped her hands together, "Alright, I need to finish my task, I'll be able to get it done before we arrive but I need to start working soon so we don't worry about it being late." Lily stood and left, returning this time to her personal room.

"Oh, Augustus. Was there anything waiting for us at the ship before we left? There was something that I was expecting to arrive." Said Yana.

"Yes, I think there was. Let me grab that." He headed toward the airlock and came back with an unlabeled package. "It just had your name and the ship name written on it."

Yana took it, "Excellent." She opened it up and looked inside at the device, "Looks like he managed it, this should make the job easier."

Augustus did the equivalent of raising an eyebrow but since rexians did not have eyebrows and instead scales it was his nostrils shifting slightly.

"Oh, it is a one-time overrider for nextcorp ship navigation and communications."

"And here I thought we were just going to shoot the ship down. How did you get something like that."

Yana grinned, "The favor I managed to pry out of Preston after we helped him recover his missing shipment. He was hesitant to agree but I managed to get him to provide it."

"Well, let's hope that your friend isn't getting transported on a battleship or something equivalent since that would be trouble for more than one reason. I don't think the Bound Curse can be a battleship and that certainly won't disrupt a battleship for more than a moment."

"What did I tell you about invoking Murphy?" Asked Yana in an annoyed tone.

"My bad, my bad." Said Augustus guiltily.

"Well, now I need to make sure this has everything it needs to crack into a Nextcorp ship. While things will likely have changed a lot since I was there you can't just change out an entire fleet of ships and how they connect with each other just because one scientist flew the coop. What a pity for them, they really should have done that since I'm me." Yana laughed a little to herself.

Augustus watched her slip away into the back as well to work with the device. He then turned to Strix and asked, "Do you want to go help her? You don't really have anything better to do?"

Strix froze, "Sleep is medicine. My temple defiled,"

“Alright, well, your call.” Augustus shook his head, humans were idiots sometimes. “Remember then to take a shower and change your bandages. I’ll go grab some new ones. Do you think you will be able to do your part when we arrive? You aren’t too badly hurt.”

“Immortality shall overcome adversity.” Said Strix. Considering that he had practically been gutted not long ago his health seemed to have greatly improved. While he certainly looked more or less human there was something about him that was not. Augustus hadn’t been able to figure out exactly what Strix was but he was pretty certain that he was biologically engineered.

Or perhaps Strix had visited some more expensive doctor in Taumu to help him recover quicker. There were all kinds of treatments that could fix injuries at lightning speed but more of them were very expensive.

“Well, just don’t press yourself too hard. Things that seem to work now might break down if you try too hard and aren’t fully recovered.” Strix nodded but didn’t say anything and he returned to his own room to rest and recover more.

Augustus was the last one around. He didn’t really have anything else to do so he took his time finishing the drink he had been given before returning to the cockpit. The autopilot was doing its job just fine bringing them through subspace. He checked his own table to look over the star charts in the area that the symposium was being held. There were so many possible routes that he couldn’t really predict where ships would go. If he knew where Silasilan was coming from or going to he could make more of a plan but it looked like he would primarily need to wing things.

Augustus could plan well enough but not enough to take into every possible situation. Even Yana with her superior planning capability was not able to predict everything. There were always unpredictable elements that would require impossible levels of foresight. Rather than over planning Augustus planned what was needed and then left the rest for improvisation.

So he made sure to figure out several possible exit strategies and then where to do after that. This was far more under his control than figuring out the routing of unknown spaceships. So plan a few paths of escape than no matter what

happens they always will be able to jump ship and make it to safety.

The stars passed by and eventually Augustus was done and returned to the main rec-room. He placed his notes on the table for Yana to get access to.

Then he returned to the bridge and took his seat before pulling out his console to read. He enjoyed watching the stars stream by. It was relaxing, pleasant, calming. While most of his kin weren't into the same things he was they all enjoyed a good relaxation. As predators they enjoyed resting between hunts. So Augustus watched the stars go by in enjoyment.

Time passed slowly while they all worked in preparation in the symposium. When the time began to tick down they all gathered themselves in the rec-room again. Most of them were waking up again, sleeping early in preparation for the job.

In all seriousness they gathered around the table. It was time to begin their final preparations.

—

The Nextcorp Symposium was an incredibly busy place. It was on the planet of Verlment. A busy trade planet with plenty of ships coming and going. The Bound Curse, while painted black, was not particularly out of place among other ships coming and going. With false documentation there weren't obviously mercenaries either, just extra workers come to aid in the symposium like so many others.

Their docking was uneventful and they prepared to disembark on the planet. They had all prepared their disguises, mostly with the help of Lily. Augustus, Lily, and Stix were wearing simple worker outfits with plain colors. They all felt pretty odd in their outfits because none of them really would look like this normally.

They were pushing a large cart with several large barrels covered in warning symbols. Yana was nowhere to be seen. The port authority quickly glanced over their documents but with the large crowds and busy port they couldn't do a full inspection. Which was what they were counting on and they got to bring the barrels through the streets into the planet proper.

Once they were free of the port they went off to find a secluded alleyway

where Lily pried off the lid of one of the barrels and then helped pull Yana out of the barrel. It was a tight fit for Yana but she was small enough and flexible enough that she had managed it although it was pretty uncomfortable in the barrel.

Lily then pried open the other barrel and began pulling out the thing that Yana truly dreaded. The mascot outfit for Mister Next. It was an overly goofy outfit with a big foam head and baggy oversized clothing. Lily and Augustus helped Yana into the outfit. The outfit was a forgery made by Lily and specially designed to fit Yana. She had little stilts to let her walk in the outfit and the arms had supports to let her manipulate the outfit even though she was smaller than those who would normally wear the costume.

So Yana got the costume on. With it nobody would be able to identify who she was and she would blend in with the other Mister Next that were throughout the symposium. She also knew enough about the Mister Next that she could avoid getting noticed, or at least that is the plan.

At the bottom of the barrel under the costume was some more noticeable tools that the rest of them grabbed and hide in their overalls. Then Lily sealed back up the barrels and pushed them into an inconspicuous corner.

Lily, Augustus, and Strix gave Yana a wave goodbye. She needed to do her own reconnaissance using the “perfect” disguise. With her disguise she could go through the main portion of the symposium looking at the various displays. The others would do back end exploration, trying to find out which Nextcorp ships might be going where.

The entire place was a hectic cacophony of sights and sounds. People going everywhere between the different parts of the symposium. Yana had apprised the group about Silasilan’s scientific expertises so they had an initial set of places to search. The symposium would take place over three days so they had that long to locate Silasilan and figure out what ship she would be leaving on.

The first day the plan was not to do anything dangerous. It was scouting the area and learning everything that they could. The place was pretty big with a bunch different exhibitions. Yana wandered through the exhibitions. Her movement was slow however because she had to play the part of the mascot and

had to flop around looking excited and occasionally posing for various pictures.

But she did get a good look at many of the various displays. New technology of various types as well as simple informational stands. Nothing like mind control vats and the like were on display since these was a much more public display. Still Yana kept her eyes out for anything that might point to Silasilan. They had worked together for many years and Yana had a good feel for what kind of projects that she might have worked on.

Silasilan would not be out in the open. She was a cephan so she was not appropriate for showing anything off. It was possible that some of previous employees that worked with Yana would be around and in the off case that happened than Yana kept an eye out for them. Yana had to keep the notes in her head while searching around the symposium since she couldn't take the normal notes she would take. Occasionally she was able to hide away to take a break and jot down everything that she noticed. She had a good memory but the sooner she captured the details the better it would be.

As the sun began to set and the symposium began to wind down for the night. Yana slipped away from the main fields and began skulking in alleyways avoiding other people. She eventually returned to the place they had stashed the barrels and after ensuring that the place was empty she removed the costume and hide it in the barrel. Soon afterward Lily and Augustus arrived.

"No Strix?" Asked Yana.

Lily shrugged, "You know Strix, he disappeared a while ago and I think plans on doing his own investigation. We probably don't need to worry about him."

"That is probably true but because he was injured I do worry a bit. But this discussion can wait. Let us get somewhere safe first." With that Lily helped Yana back into the barrel. They swapped some icons on the barrel to help facilitate their lies and then they took the reverse path through the streets back to the Bound Curse.

While the symposium was beginning to quiet down the rest of the city was still busy. Everybody who was attending the symposium were now enjoying themselves. So they still had to native busy streets as they returned to the ship.

Once they were safely inside the ship and Yana had escaped from her barrel

they were able to share what they had learned.

"I'll go first." Said Augustus, "We checked around some of the shipping and attempting to find out what Nextcorp ships came and went. Security on this side was surprisingly lax, they are clearly expecting everything to just go smoothly. While there are a lot of ships coming and going I was able to learn which routes are the primary routes for Nextcorp."

He continued, "There are basically three different standard routes that Nextcorp uses when leaving Verlment. The first is their main route leading back to their HQ. This is expected to be a pretty packed route and if she is using that route we will need to delay her ship pretty significantly so that she isn't going to be surrounded by a host of other Nextcorp ships."

Yana nodded, "Indeed, that is the route that I told you about before. However I doubt that will be the route that she will be taking. Since we worked mostly in potentially illegal scientific processes and other top secret stuff it seems more likely she will be moved back to a more secret location than the main Nextcorp headquarters."

"Yes, and that comes to the next major route. Some of the ships are coming from farther abroad, they use the outer stream to help speed through subspace from all kinds of places. Nextcorp has a priority access pass through the outer stream and there were lots of ships that came in through that route."

"The outer stream huh? I guess they decided to pay for that, back when I was working for them they were trying to find another route and not have to pay another corp for that kind of quick access. I hadn't expected them to change course like that but it isn't completely unexpected. I believe the outer stream has limits on how many ships can go through at a time so those delays can give us time to ambush a ship."

"Yes, indeed that. The third path is that specifically for the symposium a Gateway has been rented to bring in all kinds of folks from the inner sector. That is why this symposium has been particularly packed. Nextcorp has a pretty large presence in the inner sector and they brought in a lot of workers from there as well."

"Inner sector employees... that explains a lot of the styles I saw today. I'm not

expecting Silasilan to be working in the inner sector but it could be possible depending on what she is doing. The outer stream seems the most likely route she will be taking.”

“There is another possible one as well.” Said Augustus, “There are also a handful of Nextcorp ships that arrived through non-standard channels are route. Just standard subspace routes but other through either of the previously stated thoroughfares. This is definitely a minority of Nextcorp ships but it is something to keep in mind. If it is one of those routes were are just going to have to make things up as we go along.”

“Normally I would say that Silasilan is too valuable to be sent through strange channels like that but after the encounter with Restor it is possible that she got demoted to a less important part of the company and would go that route. But your right, focus your planning on the outer stream route and the gateway. Those seem the most likely routes.”

Augustus nodded.

“And what juicy things did you learn while dressed in my lovely creation?” Asked Lily excitedly.

Yana gave Lily a big strong glare. “It managed to get a good look at a bunch of the exhibits. There were a bunch of interesting things there but nothing definitive about which one Silasilan is working with. There are several promising options however.”

Yana pulled out her notes so that she could describe the exhibits in question. “Alright, the first has to do with a new hydroponics farm setup. Not something I would normally associate with Silasilan but one of the people running the exhibition was previously one of your subordinates. The employee seemed the type to be loyal to those around her but that is just a post-assessment of her personality not something I considered at the time.”

“The second exhibition that I think is promising is the one related to dream therapy. It revolves around helping people through their trama using their dreams. That has some particular connections to the work that she and I did together when making the mind control vats. The main con against this is that

Restor said that kicking Silasilan out of the project. So having her back on a similar project seems less likely than some other options.”

Lily interrupted, “But she is an expert in that field?”

“Close enough, I could tell from looking over it that the dream therapy technique is, at least partially, based off the theories that we put together. Still that one seems less likely, or at least that is what my gut is telling me.”

Yana continued, “Then there is the third option. There is an artificial blackbox sensor which was being showed off. This isn’t really related to anything related to any project I previously worked on, but it is one of the most high-tech exhibitions. While there could be other people that could do that one I felt like it was more likely that Silasilan was involved than any of the other projects.”

“Anything else?” Asked Augustus.

“There are a few other potentials but nothing else that seems like a strong enough inclination that I would think it is more likely than the three I provided. A couple of potential aquatic projects could potentially be associated with an cephian. But nothing about those projects were particularly appropriate for Silasilan.”

“So three good options. But now we need to form a plan about which one to check into. What is your recommendation about that?”

“I think I should start by look into the dream therapy project. Since I am most familiar with that work I’ll be able to notice any changes of leadership that would show that Silasilan is not working on it. Lily and Augustus, you two can check out the artificial blackbox sensor. Try to figure out who the primary scientists working on that are. It is possible that even if she is involved her name might not be directly involved. So write down who you come up with and I’ll look over the list. There is only a short list of people in Nextcorp that would be capable of something like that and I’ll see if any of their names match.”

“What about the former employee?” Asked Lily.

“That is probably best left for Strix assuming he shows his face. If Silasilan is in that project she would likely be the direct superior of the employee. He can stealthily follow her around and see if they make contact. In case I don’t see him I’ll leave instructions about what to do and a description of the employee.”

“And remember.” Said Augustus, “An important part of this investigation is figuring out which route that took to get here. As part of your search if you discover whether the exhibits has their base of operations that would help us figure out the route.”

“Agreed” Said Yana.

They spent a bit longer going over the finer details of what they learned in case the details stuck out to anybody. Yana also passed out several of the details of the less likely targets in case investigation showed out sooner that one of the primary targets was wrong.

Then they made sure to go to bed easily to make sure they had plenty of time in the morning to do the investigation. When they woke they found that Strix had both returned and left in the middle of the night. He had taken the explanation of what to do and just left a short note of acknowledgement.

Yana was stuffed back into the barrel and got wheeled out. Once she was in her costume again they split up to do their respective searches. They had a plan to meet back up at around lunch to share what they learned and make more decisions about where to go. There was only one more day of the symposium so their time was running low.

Yana headed toward the sleep therapy exhibit. When she arrived she did the required posing and picture shoots as Mister Next while keeping an eye at the exhibit. She could read over what was written there but nothing really stood out to her. It explained the principles and showed a picture of a giant high-tech tube that was certainly more appealing than the industrial vat that was part of the mind control technique. With Yana got the principles behind the technology must have been used for other less nefarious uses.

When there was a good opportunity she ditched the costume in a closet so that she could sneak into the back of the exaction hall without it being plainly obvious that she didn't belong. While she didn't have the same ability to sneak around as Strix as long as the security wasn't too tight Yana could make due.

She got to one of the terminals in the back and broke into do look through the less polite parts of the exhibitions. It revealed what she had kinda expected. There were a series of emails sent between the employees. It looks like this

project had been headed by Restor until a few months ago when he disappeared for unknown reasons. They hadn't been able to locate him but had enough staff to continue with the exhibition. Assuming it went well they could get some new members and continue without Restor. No hint of Silasilan and if Restor had been in charge of this project than she definitely wouldn't have been involved. How the mighty sunk. No wonder Restor had been desperate after being put on the sideline for a project like this one.

After concealing her activity on the terminal she snuck back out and returned to her costume where she returned to the symposium main area. There was still a little time before the lunch meetup so she checked out one of the additional projects but after snooping around there to no avail she returned to the meeting point.

There she consulting with Augustus and Lily.

"The dream therapy is a bust. While it was certainly built off the technology than I worked on it was headed by Restor until he disappeared to do dangerous experiments. No chance that Silasilan is involved in that project. What did you discover?"

"Nothing concluding one way or the other." Said Augustus.

"We did some hobnobbing with some backstage hands to learn about the project. Discretely asked around about who is calling the shots for the project. We managed to come up with a list of the head scientists who are involved, although we aren't certain whether this is a full list. The project is quite valuable and they are doing some counter-espionage to keep things secret." Said Lily.

Augustus handed over the list to Yana for her to look over. She glanced over the various names. "Hmm.... This is peculiar. Some of the names are people I don't know which could mean many things. Some more of the names I recognize, although they wouldn't be skilled enough to do this project by themselves. The name that stuck out particularly strange is Alicia Straight, her name is here but she really should be."

"Hmm? Why not?" Asked Augustus.

"Alicia Straight is a pseudonym, an alias for a different scientist. One that was used to avoid associating the project with their actual name. But there is no way

that scientist is on this project.”

“Oh come on.” Said Lily, “Stop being secretive and just tell us.”

“Sure, the reason that Alicia Straight couldn’t be on this project is because it was one of my pseudonyms.”

“And your sure you aren’t still working for Nextcorp behind the scenes?” Chittered Lily.

“If I was then I wouldn’t be telling you this, obviously.” Said Yana.

“Ladies, focus.” Said Augustus, “Do you think it might be Silasilan using your alias?”

“Quite possibly.” Said Yana, “There aren’t many other people that would have reason to us it. If the name Levi Lancer had been put down then I could understand that, that is a name with a reputation one that could upgrade the importance of the project, but there isn’t much of a reason to use Alicia Straight as the name on the project.”

“Really they should have just put ‘Yana’ then people would have come flocking from lightyears around. You are pretty popular in Taumu after all.” Said Lily.

“Any idea of where this project is headquartered?” Asked Yana.

Augustus shrugged, “Not particularly. Not the main Nextcorp headquarters that is for certain. Several of the people we spoke to were from there and none of them had heard even a hint of this project before it showed up here as the symposium. I was also separately able to confirm many of the names on the list as not working in Nextcorp headquarters, or at least if they do it is an incredibly well kept secret.”

“But you were able to figure out if it was the outer stream or the inner sector?”

Augustus shook his head, “Both of those have a bunch of people from many original destinations. So it is a lot easier to not know other people who came from the same route.” He tapped one of the names on the list, “I do have some leads however. I meet a contact that knows something about this person and I’m going to go talk to them later today about it.”

“Augustus has a date.” Said Lily with a wink.

"It is a deception, nothing more." Correctly Augustus.

"Sure.... Sure." Chittered Lily clearly entertained. "With Augustus 'busy' do you want me to join you for the second half of today? We can try and track down the person who is using the Alicia alias. Unfortunately I don't know what Strix is doing but I could go figure that out instead."

"No, leave Strix doing Strix things. If he had found out anything important then he would have been here." Said Lily. "Lets look into some of these unknown names. I know some ways to look up previous projects people could have been on and that will get us some leads. See if any of these names are important."

With that they returned to their investigation, with the focus on the sensor black box project. The first step was for Yana to look over what information was available about the project. With Lily able to work as a spotter it was easier for her to get into places and break into computer systems.

"More people that don't matter." Muttered Yana to Lily after their most recent break-in. "The list of names that could be important is getting smaller and smaller. We have a bunch of productive scientists but for anybody that could reasonable replicate black box technology there isn't anybody."

"Isn't replicating black box technology impossible anyways?" Asked Lily. "That is kinda what makes it black box technology."

"Yes and no. First this technology isn't actually pure black box replication. It is merely a step, replication one part of a black box sensor but it was something that hadn't been done before so it is a breakthrough. Also replicating black box technology isn't impossible. If the technology was impossible then it wouldn't exist. Black box just means we don't yet know how to replicate it. Subspace communication is an example of previously black box technology that we can now replicate albeit less efficiently than true black box subspace communicators."

"Oh, yeah, those subspace communications aren't cheap if you want your message to get there quickly. I think they bundle up messages and send them over hour or so."

"As you say. And subspace communication black boxes are much rarer than

subspace drives so the prices used to be even higher. But either way black box reverse engineering is a difficult endeavor but the theoretical profits from doing that are unimaginable. The sensors that are being advertised as being black box exclusive aren't really that special in any case, while the statements are true it mostly is just detecting things beyond our normal sensors, while still impressive it won't break anything overnight."

"You don't sound particularly impressed?" Said Lily, "Didn't you also say that they needed incredibly skilled scientists to pull this off."

"I am impressed. Any progress of science is important." She paused for a moment then amended her statement, "Most progress of science is important, sometimes things are better left unexplored." She was reminder of her own progress into mind control. "But back on topic. Beyond the name Alicia there are still two other names left on the list."

"So you do think it is Silasilan that used that name."

"It is seeming more likely that is the case."

"Why do you think she used the name?"

"I know why the person who used the name used the name. I just don't know who used it or what the end goal is."

Lily turned her head questioning.

"There can only be one reason that somebody is using the name. That is to draw my attention."

"How would they know you are going to be here?" Asked Lily.

"You are looking at it from the wrong angle." Said Yana, "Me being here is just a coincidence. That name would likely be used in times before this and would be used in times after this. Eventually I would come across that name being used and know that it would have been me using it. Then what would I do?"

"Track down the impersonator!" Said Lily excitedly, "Then smash them to a pulp."

"I'll just assume that was a joke. But basically. With somebody using that name they must be trying to attract me. Silasilan would know that I used that name, as would Restor. There would probably be some middle management who

also knew. It could have been any of those, except Restor that is.”

“And you don’t know what the purpose is?”

“Yeah... maybe it is Silasilan trying to contact me even though I left. Maybe she too wants to escape and is signaling me in the only way that she can. Or maybe the middle management is using it to trap me and return me to the fold. Or maybe even both of them at the same time.”

“So we are going to walk into the trap?”

“Precisely.”

“Pull a reverse trap more likely, hopefully rescue the damsel in distress. Then you will kiss and ride off into the sunset together.” Chittered Lily.

“I told you to stop that. I am some kind of harem protagonist now?”

“I mean, you got Strix, me, and I’m sure we can get Augustus in here too.”

Yana waved her hands embarrassed, “What are you even talking about. I don’t have any of you. Stop being an idiot.”

“How sad.” Lily pouted but it wasn’t serious.

After the next stop Yana pulled Lily aside, “Alright, well there is good news after this time. I didn’t figure out more of the names but I did get the location that the team is staying at. One of the boxes still had return information on it for their hotel.”

“Are we going to sneak into the hotel today?”

“No... not today.” Said Yana. “The symposium is about to end for the day and getting interrupted while searching their rooms would be inconvenient. Also Mister Next isn’t going to be able to go room to room without it being suspicious. Hopefully Strix will be back at the ship tonight and he can aid us in the break-in.”

There were a couple more stops but they had pretty much exhausted all the places they could break into the symposium that they could think of that were connected to the black box sensor team. Unlike several of the other teams they had the scientists more secure so until Lily and Yana wanted to break through armed guards that the most that they could accomplish for the day. They returned to the barrels and this time Lily took Yana back to the ship alone.

They were kinda surprised to find Strix there waiting for them.

“Yo, you find anything interesting about the employee?”

“She has lost her path and is alone in the forest.”

“So that too is a dead end.” Said Yana, guessing as Strix’s translation. “Well, we have been making some progress on the Alicia team. We have the hotel that they are staying at. It will likely have high security during the night but we wanted your help breaking into it during the last day of the symposium. I don’t know if Silasilan will be there but the other employees likely won’t have security on their rooms. We can hopefully find out if she is there and maybe what route they came through.”

“But Augustus, the sly dog, has a date. There might also be a connection who could also know the origin of the Alicia team so something else might come of it.” Said Lily.

Strix nodded softly then said, “Tomorrow is tomorrow. Tonight I must disappear into the night.”

“What again?”

Strix just stood and left the ship practically without any word.

“What do you think that was about?” Asked Lily, “Did we want to interrupt Augustus’ date?”

“Perhaps he is, although I don’t think we will be able to help him with whatever it is he is doing. If we wanted us to join him he would have said it or at least looked over his shoulder waiting for us. Besides I am still potentially noticeable so I don’t want to just wander around.”

So Lily and Yana just waited around for Augustus and Strix to return.

Meanwhile across town Augustus vaulted over a chain fence and burst into a run. Things had been going well during his meeting with the new contact, and definitely not a date no matter what Lily had said. He had even learned a few useful tidbits, the woman in questions didn’t even catch on to Augustus’ deception. But somebody must have been alerted. Just as they were ordering dinner, four large men in black suits came into the restaurant.

He had immediately noticed that they were packing guns, something much more allowed on planets such as this one and their suits showed the signs of

being less fancy than normal, something common when wearing armor underneath.

Augustus didn't give them time to do anything. He was the only one they could be after. So he burst into movement before they identified where he was sitting. Knocked down his chair and running toward the kitchen. The woman yelled in surprise but just as Augustus got through the kitchen door the rat-tat-tat of gunfire echoed through the restaurant.

But the guns and ammo were low caliber and didn't puncture the walls. Augustus burst through the kitchen, nimbly avoiding the cooks and other restaurant staff. The far door got thrown open leading to the back of the restaurant. It was there that he vaulted over the chain fence.

They had come for him here.... Not at the ship.... That was good. He went over that chain of logic as he ran. That must mean that they didn't actually know which ship or crew he was connected to. What then had given him away.... It could only be that somebody managed to learn about who he was questioning and what those questions were. Somebody with enough paranoia that they sent hired muscle to off him.

There was the roar of an engine in front of him and a car pushed through the alleyway at him. A goon leaned out of the passenger side window and pointed a large gun at Augustus. He ducked and moved toward the other side of the car putting it between him and the gun. It kept him out of the line of fire. The car was going slowly through the alleyway so Augustus smashed his hand through the driver's side glass and right into the driver's face.

The glass had been harder than expected, bulletproof probably. Augustus grabbed the wheel through the window and spun it sharply before releasing and pulling back. The car spun out of control with the gunner having to grip the car making it hard to aim. Augustus used this time to run down the street and take a hard turn. There were several gunshots but none of them came even close to him.

They were prepared.... Maybe not for him but for somebody who actually knew what they were doing. The sounds of engines came from behind him. Not the heavier engine of a car but smaller lighter engine, like motorcycles. That would be a pain. He used his shoulder to break through on the alley side doors

and into a nearby building. If they had motorcycles he wouldn't be able to outrun them and as a rexian they would be able to easily pick him out from a crowd.

So he would need to make his own stand. He didn't have his own gun either, bringing that into the city as a worker would raise too many questions. But he still had his hands and enough strength to take out a goon singlehandedly. At least if they came one by one.

But they didn't. They gathered outside the front of the building. Augustus has found the stairs and was peeking at them through the blinds on the second floor. It was a tailoring shop that he had broken into. There weren't really any other exits other than the back door he had broken through and the front door of the shop. Both of those were guarded by half a dozen men, all with guns. This kind of force was absolute overkill, who did they think they were going to catch in this net.

The crocodile smile crossed Augustus' face. It was something that he wouldn't show to any of the others but deep in his reptilian heart he was a bit like Yana. He wanted things to go wrong, to watch the world spin around him. To be the gentleman hero of the tales of legend.

"A smile worthy of song my friend." Came a voice from the shadows.

If it had been any other voice Augustus would have immediately attempted to rip their throat out. But it was a voice he knew immediately. "Strix.... How in the world did you arrive here? I didn't even tell anybody where the meeting would happen at."

"Whispers of forgotten gods guided me to you."

That was all the explanation that Strix gave. Yana might have been able to translate but Augustus couldn't so instead he just had to be thankful for Strix's arrival, as strange as it was for him to be here.

"Well.... Two against all of them. Now that is practically unfair. They should have brought some more people." With just himself he had been worried that things might go badly but with Strix by his side, the world was his oyster and Augustus loved the taste of oysters.

The shadows grew long on the building when the goons finally decided to break into it. A good five of them watched the front of the store, standing behind

cars to give them cover. The remaining ten or so were coming through the back door.

Inside the building was darkness, the lights had all been turned off and when the man tried to flick the lights on nothing happened. In the time that they had spend gathering their forces and preparing Augustus had destroyed the circuit and the entire building didn't have power.

This didn't stop them however, several of them pulled out flashlights and they began to go through the rooms one at a time in an organize fashion. Neither Augustus nor Strix had a lot of time to prepare so they hadn't really been able to set up traps. But the darkness played to their advantage.

One of Strix's knives flew out of the darkness striking one of them precisely in the neck. They all turned an began to fire at the location that the knife came from.

That was exactly what Augustus had been waiting for. On the far side of the room he came out of the darkness silently. The goons who would have been watching that side had turned to fire in the direction of Strix.

The first of them didn't even have time to scream as Augustus wrapped his scaly fingers around the man's head and twisted. He collapsed in a soundless heap. That was enough for the next man to notice, just barely. He didn't manage to escape but did managed to scream out a shout of warning before Augustus' claws racked his throat.

The group began to turn to Augustus but another knife came out of a different section of darkness. This one only got the shoulder since the goon had been prepared to dodge the attack. The group shouted and they split up with half continuing after Strix and the other half concentrating on Augustus.

But Augustus had the advantage now. As the second goon fell Augustus grabbed the gun from his hands as it fell. He didn't have proper time to aim but he began to pull back into cover and fire off rounds to get the goons to fall back as well.

It was successful. Augustus managed to hide behind one of the clothing shelves. The goons had pulled back as well, lodging themselves in the corning guarding from both Augustus' and Strix's attacks. Augustus kept up some blind

fire against them while avoiding the same from them.

Initially this was a stalemate but then from Strix's direction came a small metal cylinder that clattered on the floor and slide into the group of goons. There was a shout of "Grenade" and the group reacted instantly, breaking their defensive position and scattering away from it. Augustus and Strix were prepared for that and unleashed a volley of bullets and knives as they scattered.

A couple of the goons fell as they tried to escape the incoming explosion. But their expectations betrayed them. The metal cylinder was nothing except that, a decoy to cause them to break their position. Several of them fell as they attempted to escape this time using the door outside as a cover. They had left the building and were now firing through the door into the room where Augustus was taking cover.

Augustus fired back a couple of times before ducking behind another rack where he fumbled at the body of one of the goons, grabbing a clip of ammo to continue the firefight. Alone he could only hold out for so long before he was flanked and surrounded. As a rexian he could probably take a bullet or two without being immediately downed but enough bullets would kill him and eventually blood loss would be his end. While he had done well in the fight so far a couple of the goons lucky shots had grazed him and he had already started to bleed.

But he was not alone. He shot at the doorway an waiting for Strix to pull off his next trick. With the goons using the doorway as cover they had left themselves open to a particularly attack. When Strix dropped from the window above them they were completely unprepared for it. Unlikely Augustus, Strix was basically completely silent. Two more goons dropped before anybody noticed that we was there. The third goon barely managed to gurgle a warning to the four who was the one to shout the alarm before he too died to Strix's knives.

This is when Augustus pressed forward, not allowing them to focus on Strix. He held one of his arms in front of his face as he ran forward while shooting with the other hand. While he could survive a shot to most of the rest of his body, if they got him in the head that could kill him.

There were only a small number of them still remaining after their losses

inside the building. Squeezed between Augustus and Strix a couple of the remaining ones fell before their assault. Then they broke, not wanting to fight any more the last few turned and ran. They threw down their weapons and bolted.

Strix and Augustus let them go. Augustus grunted and Strix caught him before he fell to his knees. There was blood seeping from several of Augustus' injuries. He had avoided taking a shot to anywhere critical but some of the reckless assaults he pulled off had left several injuries on him.

"Blood. River of Life. Dam the river of life." Said Strix concerned. He turned and helped pull Augustus to one of the cars that the goons had used. He pulled out a set of keys and opened the door. He got Augustus into the passenger side of the car before starting the car and beginning to drive away.

Augustus said "How did you managed to get the keys during all that confusion."

"Aim for the jewels you seek."

"Good enough for me." Augustus was grimacing, not from the pain per say but because he was ripping apart his clothing to bandage his wounds. He had liked this suit. He still needed some real medical attention but the bandages would help reduce the loss of blood. "Do you have a plan to get back to the ship and hopefully in a way that prevents people from following us."

"The future is foreseen."

"That sounds likes you do have a plan but hopefully it doesn't require me to understand it."

Strix drove the car through several streets getting nearer the port but avoiding it by a fair bit. He did some strange turns and routes, presumably to lose any tails that might be following them. Eventually Strix stopped and the two of them ditched the car. At this time of night, in this part of the city, the streets were practically abandoned.

Soon after Strix led him to a random residential house where Strix let Augustus into the building.

"Now how did you get this place?"

"A journey of a thousands miles begins with an safe house."

"A safe house? You can't possibly have a safe house in a random city.... How? No, I couldn't understand you even if you told me. This is good enough for me." Augustus let himself in. Although he made sure to keep his blood from dripping anywhere so that it was harder to track him. He was lead to the kitchen where Strix pulled out a heavy duty medical case, something that wouldn't normally be found in a house like this one.

Augustus grunted and with the aid of Strix began proper work on his wounds. Any of the bullets that penetrated his skin needed to be taken out, then the wound needed to be sanitized and stitched closed. It took several hours to get everything done and by the time it was over Augustus was exhausted. Still he took what little time he had left before sleeping to write down what he had learned from the contact.

He passed the note over to Strix before saying, "Bring this to Yana. That should be enough for her to put together the rest. I think I will be out of commission tomorrow so make sure you help them with everything." He looked around the place that looked just like a normal residential house. "Should I remain here then?"

"Suffer like I suffered. Close your eyes. Rescue will come before departure."

Augustus sighed, "Alright, but don't think to keep me out of this when we depart. I'm going to be on the Bound Curse when it departs even if it will kill me."

Strix grinned, "Glory before death. Until then."

And with that Strix turned and disappeared into the city again. Augustus shook his head, he never really understood how Strix did what Strix did. How in the world did he get a safe house like this, was it just an effectively abandoned house where he stashed a medical kit in case of emergency or was it something more.

Augustus didn't know but now he didn't have time to figure it out. With the injuries, the exhaustion, and the drugs he had recently taken for the pain he was beginning to fall sleep. He managed to stay awake just long enough to move to a more secure location, just in case things went bad again.

When Strix reappeared in the Bound Curse, Yana was their waiting for him. It was late in the night but she had stayed up. "Is Augustus alright?"

"A victorious hero." Was all that Strix said.

"Good enough for me." Said Yana before she turned to disappear to her bedroom, "Thanks Strix." Then she was gone leaving Strix alone.

He nodded to nobody before going to his own room.

When the morning came, it was Yana, Lily, and Strix gathering around the rec-room table.

"Alright, I looked over the documents that Strix passed onto me from Augustus. For now Augustus is well but it looks like there is somebody acting against us and there will likely be another conflict in the future. Especially since this is the last day of the symposium so everybody needs to be on top alert."

"Aye aye captain." Said Lily with a salute.

"The second piece of information is that Augustus did managed to figure out where the Alicia project is located. They took the outer stream to get here. That was basically what I expected but it is good to have conformation. Unfortunately there seem to be three ships that the team used to get here and he wasn't able to discover who is traveling in which ship."

Yana continued, "So, today's job is two fold. Confirm Silasilan's presence as a member of the team and discover which ship she will be using to leave. No direct confrontations. Even with what happened last night we need to avoid spooking them too much. If they change their plans out from under us then we won't be able to follow them properly."

"Discretion and Valor." Said Strix.

"Precisely. Valor will come later when we board the ship. As for the motel, the team has taken over the sixth and seven floor of the motel. Beyond that and the fact that security on those floors is tight there isn't anything I know for certain. Some or maybe all of the security will be guarding the booth so now, during the symposium is when the security will be the lightest. But there will be a contingent guarding Silasilan or whoever the main scientist actually is. Do not engage them, but we need need to confirm who that is. Does everybody

understand?”

Strix and Yana nodded in agreement. “Alright. Let’s go.”

“And more costume?” Asked Lily excitedly.

Yana shook her head. “Not today. We are still going to take the barrels but there wouldn’t be a lot of point in me disguising myself in the motel. Me and Strix and primarily going to be sneaking in. Lily, you will be working as backup and emergency distraction.”

“And I’m great at distractions.” Chittered Lily.

So they escaped from the ship yet again with Yana concealed in the barrel. They ditched the barrel in a different place today, one closer to the motel. Yana wore a mostly normal outfit although she wore sunglasses and a hat to help disguise herself. For now she kept away from people the best that she could until they got nearer to the motel.

Lily separated from Yana and Strix to go do her part. The primary back door was under security camera surveillance so going through that wasn’t a good plan but there were always alternatives. The fire escape door didn’t have a camera watching it but it didn’t open from the outside. That didn’t stop Strix though. He was able to split a small sheet of metal through the crack and push the latch open. It was almost as quick as opening the door normally and the two of the slipped inside the building without anybody noticing.

It was a high class hotel. While there was security it wasn’t particularly strong security. The fire escape stairs weren’t guarded or protected in any way and they were able to make their way up to the sixth floor. Still Strix went first and was on guard. Yana could be silent and follow his instructions but she was much less experienced with detecting security system or figuring out how to bypass them.

The real dangerous part would be getting into the sixth floor. Strix had brought a whole kit of tools with them to help them break-in. It started with a little bendable line with a camera on the end. He stuck it under the fire escape door on the sixth floor to look through and see what was on the other side.

Yana leaned down to look as well so that she would have to interpret less of Strix’s cryptic comments. She whispered what she say, “Looks like a corridor.

Nobody in sight but that turn in the corridor is a real blind spot, who knows who will be beyond that, people could also come around the corner at any time."

Strix nodded. "Door of deepest distance, falsely accused, is our destination."

"Uh..... sure. I'll just follow you then." Not even Yana could translate that mess.

Strix put away his tools. Barely cracked the door. Then with a motion then ran down the hallway. At the door on the left just before the intersection Strix used his metal sheet again to slide open the door. There was a moment where he pushed open the door very slightly to glance in, then he pushed it open and the two of them stepped in. The door closed silently. Then Strix moved through the room, silently checking each of the rooms to ensure that nobody was there.

"As a grave." He said ominously.

Yana nodded. "Alright. What next?"

"Be as Cerberus, guardian of the underworld."

"Watch the door? What are you planning?"

Then Strix stepped toward the glass door out onto the balcony. He slide it open and looked out to the nearby balconies. Then he said to Yana, "I travel as the wind."

"That.... Sounds like fun." The prospect of going being the different balconies with probably 50 or more feet of potential fall did not intimidate either of them, "It might now yield anything but I'll search through this place while you check that out. If the door is fully shut when you return it means something bad happened."

With that Strix disappeared through the door and onto another balcony.

Yana might be able to keep up some with Strix but letting him do the scouting and then letting her follow after later was better than trying to do it together. Plus he could be much more impressive acrobatic maneuvers than she could.

She looked around the room to examine what Strix had just quickly passed over. The room was clearly being used but nobody was here at the time. The room was reasonably big but based off the luggage only a single person was staying here. There was spare business clothes in the suitcase and the bathroom had a shaving kit.

Yana made sure when examining things to leave them in their previous location. She didn't worry too much about things like fingerprints or left behind genetic information though. Their whole plan hinged on what they were doing tomorrow, being identified afterward wouldn't be a big issue.

But the man had left a small terminal behind. Yana had learned how bad people were at handling their own security only after she had let Nextcorp. It turned out all the annoying security staff constantly bothering her about security had been right. And it looks like Nextcorp still let things be bad, good for Yana.

It was a simple matter to break into the terminal and scan through the information that it contained. Disappointingly the console seemed to be the staff member's personal console and didn't directly contain any company secrets. At least it didn't obviously contain company secrets, people had a nasty habit of mixing work and play, especially when email was concerned.

She scanned over the email looking through the various messages. Casual conversations between coworkers, not business stuff but a friendship made through work. Yana grinned, not really stuff the security team would be too happy with.

Then there was a clicking sound. Yana stopped moving immediately. Then in practically an instant closed the console, slide it back where she had found it. Then it was as she feared, the door to the room began to open. She fell down next to the bed, using her foot to close the glass door to the balcony.

Yana then pushed herself underneath the bed. She was small enough that she could reasonably fit under it.

"Leaving my tie behind. Geez, the management would have thought I was a slob." Came the voice as the man walked into motel room. "Now where did I put it." The man moved around the room, checking his suitcase.

Yana began to make her plan as she kept barely under the bed. She could see the tie on the other side of the bed, one the floor, just near her hiding place. As he got near it she moved a bit out of from under the bed. As he knelt down to retrieve it she bent like an acrobat to lift her body off the floor so that she couldn't been seen through the underneath of the bed while also keeping the bed between her and him.

She held her breath as he picked it up. "There you are." And as he stood back up she released her pose and moved silently back under the bed. She continued to hold her breath until he moved into the bathroom where he began to put on his tie. Even then she kept silent until he finished and left the room.

The continued to hold her position for about a minute. Then she left her cramped position and cracked the door to the balcony again. She practically jumped out of her skin as Strix pushed the door open some more and stepped into the room.

"You...." Whispered Yana in an annoyed tone, "You waited until then to do that."

"Unfathomable anger cuts the punctual." Said Strix. He had the look of somebody sarcastically wounded by her words, although that might have just been Yana hanging around Lily too much.

Yana sighed, "Alright then, what did you find out?" Then she held up a hand, "On second thought let me go first. I'll let you go when I'm a bit calmer. So I got into this man's personal console and he had some interesting information on it. Most importantly he had information about the ship he was using to arrive here with the team. They took Nextcorp's Levin Wind. He complained about the ridiculous security he had to go through to board so it must be the same ship the important scientists also rode on."

"The vault has been located. The hidden route to treasure must be followed." Said Strix.

"You found the room then? I assume it is properly guarded otherwise you wouldn't need my help learn something about it."

"Your zenith had arrived."

Yana followed Strix out of the window. There head let up across several gaps. The peaked into one room and then used that room as a temporary stop to switch to a different side of the building. After that back onto the balconies they went. After a few stops Strix lead her into another room. Nothing special was about this room, in fact this one looked like nobody was using it. He motioned her up to the front door of the room and put the camera beneath it.

Yana leaned down to look through the camera. "Guards. And those aren't just

your normal goons. Those are professional bodyguards. Looks like they are cybernetic ally enhanced too.” She considered whether they should try to break in and get Silasilan right now but there were several reasons that would be a bad idea.

The first was the they weren’t yet certain it was Silasilan behind that door and not a trap. The second was even if they could get Silasilan out of there they would then need to return to their ship, recover Augustus, and then escape off planet. Getting a corp employee off the planet like that would be difficult. One of the reasons Yana had planned on doing the kidnapping while Silasilan was on the ship was because it was easier to escape. Once they had her they could just escape and hopefully lose pursuers in subspace.

“Watch the incoming disaster.” Said Strix before he returned to the window and disappeared again through the balconies. So Yana stayed and watched. While the others could identify a cephan only she could determine if that cephan was actually Silasilan.

Just as she became worried that nothing was happening there was the screeching of the fire alarm. The bodyguards were alerted, looking up and down the hallway, seeing nothing. One of them knocked on the door and exchanged words with somebody inside. Yana couldn’t hear the over the sounds of the fire alarm.

As the alarm continued one of the bodyguards ran off toward the stairs. Not long after he returned and spoke again with the people inside. Yana guess that he was checking to ensure that nobody was there. Just as Yana was worried that they wouldn’t take the bait the door to the room opens. Another pair of bodyguards stepped outside, guarding the person coming through the hall.

Yana’s eyes narrowed as she watched the people coming out of the room. It was apparently a large suite. There were several of the scientists that were part of the project inside. Three, four scientists came out. Then... the last one, a cephan wearing a lab coat.

The colors of a cephan was one of the main ways of distinguishing them and even though it had been many years Yana recognized her, Silasilan. Yana could tell that the cephan was nervous, their very movements were part of their

language so even the slightest twitch revealed their words.

Bodyguards directed the scientists through the hallway and toward the fire escape, not the one Yana and Strix had used to get into the building but the other one of the other side of the building. That didn't matter because Yana had everything that she needed. As the bodyguards moved away from the suite Yana pulled back the spy tool and retreated to the window.

Strix had not yet returned so Yana got into a position just inside the room near the balcony to wait for Strix's return. She could escape the room if somebody arrived, but thankfully nobody did. Strix arrived soon afterward.

"I saw it." Said Yana. "Silasilan is there. Now let's get out of here."

Strix nodded and they moved quickly from balcony to balcony. They waiting at the room near the fire escape until the sounds of the fire alarm turned off. Wherever Strix and Lily had managed to trigger the fire alarm was not on the sixth floor so after waiting a bit longer they moved into the fire escape themselves. They went down to the bottom story. Strix secrecy checked outside and after a motion they exited the building, narrowly avoiding several members of the Verlment fire department.

A few blocks away Strix turned down the an alley and they met up with Lily.

"So what did you end up doing to turn on the fire alarm?" Asked Yana.

"He he." Chittered Lily, "We managed to trick some people into thinking there was a fire when it was just somebody breaking the smoking rules. I also may have tampered with the fire alarm to make it a bit more sensitive."

"Good job, while that was going on I managed to confirm Silasilan's presence and the ship they are planning on using. Now let's go get Augustus and then get off this planet before anything else happens. Strix, you are going to need to lead the way this time."

Strix motioned and they went through several alleyways. Unfortunately Yana wasn't able to go with Lily and Strix to get Augustus. She stayed back at the stashed barrels. Eventually Augustus, Strix, and Lily arrived.

"Are you ok Augustus? Do you think they are keeping an eye out for rexians?"

“Perhaps. Unfortunately I wouldn’t fit in the barrels so we just have to go anyways. Although everybody needs to be prepared to run if anybody shows up. I’ve concealed the injuries as much as I can so they should be able to pick me out of a line due to them.”

Yana nodded before getting inside the barrel. She couldn’t hear what happened as the cart rattled back through the city. The other three kept their eyes open as much as they could. As they got to the port Strix pointed out several people keeping an eye out on the main entrance. Augustus broke off from the other two and took a side entrance.

Lily filled out the various paperwork for their departure while Augustus kept away from anywhere that could be seen by the observers. He was worse at it than Yana but with Strix’s aid he could at least avoid the primary routes that were being watched. The port was big enough that not all of the entrances could be easily watched.

It was only once they were all safely aboard the ship that they could breath a sigh of relief. Yana could stretch her legs and Augustus went and laid down, at least he did after making sure the autopilot was programmed successfully.

Lily handled the remaining port procedures and the ship took off before it got too late in the evening. Once they were in orbit they had some time to relax. While the symposium was still running for a little bit longer the ship in question, the Levin Wind was not likely to leave the port until the morning.

For the moment they all to to rest up for the coming attempt at ship boarding.

The Bound Curse wasn’t really designed to incapacitate ships and board them so without the special device that Lily had acquired back in Taumu it would have been a useless attempt. The device would disable the ship temporary and allow Augustus to dock the ship in the normal manner. Then it would just require incapacitating the guards on the ship.

Lily had been working on a sleeping gas granade what would knock everybody in the other ship out, at least that was the hope. They were all prepared for if it didn’t work however, there would be an unknown amount of guards in the ship and since the disabling device could only work for so long they needed to be able to disable any guards quickly.

In the morning, at least based off the port they had left, Augustus called over the comms. "Alright. I'm sensing the departures beginning from Verlment. I'm going to move us into position."

The ship turned as it moved toward their planned interception point. It was about half way between the outer stream access point and Verlment, although a bit closer to the access point. Far enough that Verlment would take time to aid any aid if they detected anything but also far enough away from the access point that ships there would probably not notice anything on their sensors.

The reason for their chosen point also had to do with several astroids in the area that they could use to conceal their ship from normal sensors. A dedicated science ship could probably identify them or any ship actually doing a survey but a ship just going between two points would be unlikely to notice them.

Yana put on a spacesuit and took the special device to the outside of their ship where it got stuck to the side of it. It needed a good broadcasting position to properly disable the Levin Wind. With that all their preparations were complete. Inside the ship they were all wearing the mini-oxygen masks to prevent Lily's sleep grenade from affecting them.

Augustus stays at the helm and would until the ship finished docking. The other three had their positions around the airlock. Yana had her electric gloves, Lily her wrench and the gas grenade, and Strix had his knives. Yana had her terminal out for triggering the hacking tower as soon as Augustus said the ship was in range.

So they waited.

Augustus announced the ship as they passed. One by one ships from the symposium went by, all to take the outer stream. The outer stream was setup by another corp using some mysterious black box technology and it was a method for ships without their own subspace drive to go between systems. This was particularly useful for cargo ships and other larger ships which would require a larger subspace drive.

They were becoming worried that they were wrong about the Levin Wind and that it would be taking another route or that maybe things that happened on Verlment had spooked them. However their worry was for naught when

Augustus called over the intercom, "There it is, the Levin Wind. Everybody finish your final preparations."

They all confirmed their equipment one last time. Then Augustus called the countdown over the intercom. "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one." And at that last called Yana flipped the switch on the hacking device. At the same time they all held on as Augustus accelerated the ship. There was the silence of space and then Augustus called out, "Docking now."

Each of them held on as the ship pressed against the other. There was the click of the standardized airlocks connecting. Normally this would also need approval from the other side but with the hacking beacon it forced the other side to accept the docking.

"Hacking beacon at 90% power." Called Yana. It had only been a few minutes for the docking to happen at it had already lost that much power. They needed to do this very quickly. The airlock hissed as the lock disengaged. Lily only pulled it open a crack before throwing the grenade through the crack and pushing the airlock back closed.

There was muted yelling and coughing from the other side. They had apparently setup guards on the far side as well. But the team waited, they needed a moment for the gas to take effect.

"80% power" called out Yana. That was basically the signal for them to begin.

Lily swung open the airlock door and stepped through without spending too long analyzing the situation. Immediately several people attempted to stab her with knives that might better be described as short swords. Each of them were wearing a oxygen mask like the members of the Bound Curse were wearing.

However the knives bounced harmlessly off Lily as she kept moving and just slammed on of them in the chest with her wrench. These were definitely professional guards, although not to the same level as those cybernetically enhanced bodyguards that were at the motel. They were also clearly well trained enough to guard against a gas attack.

However Lily broke through their ranks flawlessly, followed by Yana and Strix guarding her flank. Augustus was just behind having barely arrived from the cockpit as the doors opened. The two remaining guards attempted to pivot

and attack Strix and Yana. Yana was already in their blind spots and as they attempted to turn to get her she had already punched them in the side with her electric glove.

The one going after Strix had an even worse time. Strix simply moved faster than the man who just couldn't keep up and Strix used his knives to down the man before he even managed to turn and face Strix. Augustus never even had a chance to join the fun. Beyond the three guards who had managed to wear the masks were several more guards who had failed to react in time and were unconscious on the floor.

"Six.... Be wary if there are any more of them. Everybody split up and look for Silasilan. We don't have much time. 75% already." The ship they had boarded wasn't too big, much smaller than either the Last Maria but bigger than the Bound Curse. There was enough space for a couple dozen cabins, some storage for carrying all the things needed for the symposium, and not much else. Even the fact that there were six guards was kinda surprising. Once they left the port there usually wasn't much use for guards like this.

Augustus headed toward the cockpit, they needed to disable the autopilot and communication before the hacking system was disabled to give them a better chance at escaping. Lily kept watch over the unconscious guards and the door into their ship.

Strix and Yana were the ones in charge of going forward and finding Silasilan.

Strix went after the storage room to make sure nothing was there and no extra guards were hiding there to surprise them. Yana had gone through the dining room which was filled with unconscious scientists who had tried to escape realizing what was happening but there was no escape by running.

None of those were Silasilan however.

She picked her way past them and into the hallway leading to a row of doors on either side, where the rooms for everybody would be. She froze and readied herself. There, on the far side of the room was a big man wearing an oxygen mask. Unlike the three that had been defeated at the entrance this one was cybernetically enhanced.

As he saw Yana he stood up from the chair at the end of the hall.

"It looks like some of the intelligence was right. It was you behind it this whole time Levi."

"Sorry but I'm afraid I don't know you. Did you work for Nextcorp when I did, sorry but I really didn't pay attention to the security before I left."

"Hmm.... That was foolish. I told them it was you doing this but middle management just ignored me." He cracked his knuckles and that caused old memories to resurface.

"Oh.... Yeah.... You were that security guy who kept sending all those annoying emails. Looks like people still don't listen to you."

"True enough, but with you captured I'll be able to retire happily." He stepped forward and Yana took a fighting pose. Yana had a grin on her face.

"You might have known me from before but don't think I am the same person I was then. Now I am Yana of the Bound Curse." Then she ran at him.

He casually unstrung a baton as she approached. She slammed her fist into his chest and there was the zirt sound of electricity. But he did not fall, instead he just slammed his baton down toward her. His speed was blinding, cybernetically enhanced body. Her attack had done absolutely nothing to him and he was a match, no maybe even faster, than Strix.

But Yana was ginning, even as she had made her attack her body was already moving, getting inside his guard, avoiding the attack by merely a hairsbreadth.

He was already turning to face her again, confident in his ability to beat her without harm. She ran her gloved fingers across his muscles as she went, the electricity arcing but he did not slow down. Still no matter how much he tried to catch her she was always one step ahead. He could not predict her movements, she stepped one way when he expected the other.

Then in a moment she jumped back several steps, getting out of his reach.

"Ha, giving up already. My defenses are unstoppable."

"Unstoppable? What do you mean?" Asked Yana with her blinding grin, "After all. I have already won." She reached up and removed her gloves before dropping them on the floor.

"Foolishness." He took a step forward.... His knee buckled, "What?" Then he took another step and with that movement fell completely over. His body

spasming and he did. "How?"

"It wasn't hard. I just overloading your cybernetics." She said with a mocking grin, "They make you so strong and fast but without them... you are nothing." She stepped over his but he couldn't even raise his hand to stop her from how wracked he was.

There was the door at the end of the hall, just beyond the chair. Yana kicked the chair out of the way and pushed the button to open the door.

On the other side of the door, lying sprawled on the floor was the form of Silasilan. She was wearing the lab coat. She was an off purple color through most of her smooth body with several of her tentacle sprawling randomly.

Yana carefully lifted Silasilan up in her arms. She struggled a little with the weight. She wasn't as strong as Lily or Augustus but she could managed. She carried Silasilan back through the hallway and back to the entrance where Lily was standing guard.

"Looks like you got the sleeping beauty." Said Lily.

"But we got to go. Only 25% of the power remaining."

"Augustus, Strix, goal accomplished!" Called out Lily loudly.

Moments later Augustus came out from the cockpit area. "Good I've disabled several system so hopefully it will stay out of our way until we leave the system."

Strix appeared basically at the same time. He was carrying a bag of several console. "Secrets kept by the lost dame."

Yana nodded, taking Silurian's personal tablet probably a good call.

The boarded with Bound Curse. Yana brought Silasilan back to one of the spare rooms that had been cleared mostly when Ream was on the ship. She lay Silasilan out on the bed and then took a nearby chair. She felt the ship undock and begin to fly away.

She waited there for a long time. But eventually the sleeping gas began to wear off. Silasilan began to move slightly, beginning to regain consciousness.

"Hey, good morning. It has been a while." Called out Yana.

Silasilan looked up and rubbed her eyes with one of the tentacles. Then she made some motions.

“Yup, it is me. Good to see you again. Sorry if it is inconvenient but I’ve kidnapped you.”

There was strange movements and then Silasilan reached out with one of the tentacles and Yana grabbed it.

“Good to see you too.”

The Bound Curse flew off through the starry skies and before Nextcorp of Verlment could detect them activated its subspace drive and was gone. Away... and free.