

# DWARVES IN SPACE

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FIRST IN SERIES

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### **A Moment of Thanks**

I'd like to take this blank space to thank my husband for putting up with me losing months creating this tale, and all my awesome beta readers: Adam, Grapeman, Dawn, and Mandaray.

Please forward all complaints to them.

Candy is hidden inside this book.

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# PROLOGUE



Sulfur winds tossed vestiges of the colony across barren soil. After canceling the distress call, only two of the scouting party remained. With the rest of the team back on the ship, the rescue operation quickly turned to salvage. A man's armored boot kicked into a teetering gate, the plastic of the pre-fab homes grimy from the continual sandstorms of a planet that should never have been colonized.

*Gods, what was anyone even doing here? Aside from dying.*

The Knight-Captain smacked her fist against his hazmat suit. Even the bright orange rubber bore the crest of the enraged Bear lest anyone confuse them for common scavengers. He turned to face her and shrugged, not bothering to offer an apology over the partially functioning comm line. Terrwyn would have reprimanded him, but the little shit must have deep connections to rise this far up the ranks. If it weren't for the war, she'd probably be stuck saluting him.

"We make one final sweep, then arm the detonator," she ordered, staggering from another burst of wind. Her rubbery arm rose above her facemask as she stared into the horizon, the red giant of a sun slipping behind a set of MGC rich mountain ranges. The only reason anyone would bother putting down roots in soil that couldn't support a sapling was to mine all the MGC before the Corps got their connected tendrils in. And everyone, young men and women with gold in their eyes as well as the older ones selling the shovels, paid for it with their lives.

Purchase up the colonizing rights on some dust ball a salesman assures is full of energy-rich compounds and fail to pay the extra coin for a proper detox scan. A tale written across gravestones and in report footnotes that no one ever learned from. Normally, they'd find a few people clinging to life before someone wised up and sent out a distress signal, lack of nutrition or clean water being the major culprits. Once there was a pernicious strain of strangling vines that did not take kindly to being hacked away for the sake of a jousting court.

But this was quick. A virus or some alien virus simulacrum hidden deep in the soil, virulent enough to knock back every colonist within twelve hours. By the time the ship arrived, most of the skeletons were sand blasted clean of flesh from the tumultuous weather. The ship's resident field doctor poked his head out at the carnage, declared them "Dead, Jim," and hustled back inside the shuttle before anyone could argue.

It'd have been left as a warning for anyone trying to colonize planet P3-507, a few images encoded in a buoy, had it not been for the ministry official "accompanying" them on a final sweep through this backwater half of the galaxy before a necessary furlough. She ordered samples, evidence, data, all things that take time and risk other officers to whatever alien bug ate through these dead colonists. Knight-Captain Terrwyn Yates was thanked for her input, the best way of saying "fuck you" to someone who spent her life heavily armed, and sent back to the planet with one final order; destroy everything left.

She picked Lieutenant Dacre as her second, and blamed her choice on exhaustion the moment the atmoshuttle sunk deep into the shifting sands. He savored in the dead's final moments, poking and prodding about their hopeful homes like a child stumbling upon an ant to torment. A final sweep for any survivors, those were the regs, and a second to sign off on the lack of life.

"Dacre," her voice reverberated across the echo in her hood, "search through the few standing walls to the compound's west edge."

"Why bother?" His voice lilted with each vowel, a thick accent he'd have to smooth out before getting any higher up the chain unless his mommy or daddy paid for it.

"Because I gave you an order." Her voice didn't tremble, didn't hold any anger or rage. It was as immobile as stone.

Anyone without connections would have slunk back, maybe saluted, but Dacre merely shrugged again, "Very 'ell," and he slunk off towards the few standing walls. Terrwyn lifted a downed pipe from a stack, never inserted into the sewage system before disaster struck. Using the pipe as a walking stick, she measured her footsteps. The dying could not have made it far out of the compound; but there'd be a dump, close enough to make the trek easy, yet distant enough to hide the smell of human existence. Possibly, someone could have run before the bug got to her.

Her feet left half tracks in the shifting sands dancing in a mixture of gases their sensors assured them was breathable. She refused to believe a person could live in this; if the buffeting winds of sand didn't scourge your skin, the rising sulfur and ammonia levels would burn the lungs. Even implants wouldn't salve it all. Dacre's voice momentarily flared through her helmet, but the planet's high MGC levels wreaked havoc on their communications. She shut off the line rather than face endless static punctuated by "can you....me now?"

She paused before a crater, dug either by the colonists or a lost asteroid millennia ago. Their refuse only coated the bottom layer. They hadn't been living here long before the virus came a'calling. The walls lying upon the ground most likely were never even raised. A pathetic example of the entrepreneurially human spirit.

The Knight-Captain turned to leave, nothing could be hiding amongst the thin layer of garbage, when a light flared in the distance. She wiped off the film coating her helmet and stared across the crater at a dark figure. Its skin was thick as a cliffside with broken fissures that

flared as if intermittent fires roared inside its guts. "Who are you?" she called out into the alien world, but the figure either didn't understand or couldn't hear. It raised its own arm slowly and placed a hand overtop its eyes as if to spy back upon the invader of its planet. Turning to look behind, two more lumbering rock monsters rose beside it, one far shorter than the others.

Terrwyn clicked open her comm, "Dacre, abort. Abort the mission. There's still life here. Dacre? Damn it!"

She turned from her new friend and raced back to the compound, unaware she was being followed. "Dacre! I swear if you don't pick up this comm line I'll strap you to the hood of the ship and parade your ass past the next station's embassy deck."

Her limbs grew weary with each step, the suit's scrubbers failing against the challenge of the environment. *Cheap pieces of shit*. That's military cutbacks for you. If they didn't get to the last shuttle soon, they may not get back at all. As her line of sight crested above the fallen scraps of what the colonists dubbed "New Avar," she spotted the Lieutenant hunched overtop the incendiary device. Burn everything to over a thousand degrees and scrap what remains for someone else's failed colony, those were the orders.

The Knight-Captain waved her arms, trying to catch Dacre's attention. He momentarily glanced up from his number punching and rose unsteadily. Patches of his voice clipped across the comm line, "Couldn't find...getting too hard...gonna blow it now before we lose sterility."

"Stand down, Lieutenant," she said, finally falling into comm range, "the orders have changed."

His weasel eyes slipped down to the bomb happily blinking away, and back to his commanding officer, "Sir?"

"There's people alive on this rock."

Dacre snorted, "I find that high'y doubtful. I get it, you'd prefer to find someone a'ive and play the big hero again, but your weary eyes are playing tricks upon you...Sir."

"You little, sniveling shit," Terrwyn cursed, her anger punctuating through the military fog.

A hissing sound, like water poured over burning coals, broke through their fight, and Dacre glanced past his fuming commanding officer to the rock monster breaking into the compound. His side arm slipped into his fumbling hands as he aimed upon its chest. Luckily, the bastard was a terrible shot. The quartermaster kept all of Dacre's weapons at a half charge just in case he accidentally shot at their side.

"There are more," the Knight-Captain said calmly, her mind flipping through the list of recognized aliens. This definitely fell into the miscellaneous category, but she was certain she'd seen something like this before. An alien with fire for veins and a suit of rocks...Gods she was terrible at this diplomacy shit.

"How many more?!" Dacre panicked, as if the little xenophobe never saw an alien before. Then again, the Crests did draw upon both the professional bigoted and terrified as much as those who wanted someone else to pay for their education or give them a bed at night.

"Enough."

Dacre's teeth chattered as he weighed his options, his gun waving about like a sapling twisting in the wind, "No one else knows they're here. We set the timer, head back to the shuttle, and let the planet blow."

"Let the planet blow? What are you talking about?" Regs were strict, they were to detonate the colony, not the entire rock.

Dacre rolled his eyes so hard the helmet slipped over his face. He took his balancing hand off his gun to try and get the rock monster back in his line of sight, "This planet is lined with MGC, the bomb's a fuel catalyst, not some old fashioned inferno. It starts a chain reaction and the entire planet blows. Sir."

"Then the plans have changed. There are clearly life forms, sentient and intelligent, living upon this rock. Setting off that bomb would be against the Accord of the Twelve Stars."

Dacre snorted again, "No offense, Sir, but if that Ministry official went to that much trouble to get a catalyst bomb drilled into the veins of this rock, she's not gonna give a shit about some musty old Accord and a walking island statue."

Terrwyn gritted her teeth and looked back at her new friend, the holes where eyes would be burned a staggering red. It seemed to know what was being discussed despite not responding. "Stand down, Lieutenant."

"Sir?" Dacre asked, uncertain. Surely she wasn't stupid enough to go against Ministry orders. They could make entire systems disappear.

"You heard me, stand down. I'll not destroy these people because some fat arsehole in Antilla says so."

"Those fat arsholes could toss both of us in the dungeon for the rest of our lives without anyone the wiser," Dacre's weapon shifted over to his commanding officer.

Terrwyn didn't flinch, her fingers slipping the catch upon her gun loose and arming in a single beat, "I said, stand down, Lieutenant. I will not say it again."

Dacre's gun bobbed, the barrel bouncing from her head then to her navel, but he wouldn't back down. He spent his life butting up close to the Ministry, rubbing elbows with people who'd keep things in their basements that would make most warlords vomit in disgust. He wasn't about to wind up like them. "No, Sir."

Terrwyn blinked once, "Fine," and she opened fire. The bullets smashed into the bomb's outer casing, kicking up sparks as the number pad crumpled into debris.

"You fucking moro..." was as far as Dacre got before the sparks caught and the bomb casing exploded, tossing the Lieutenant into the no longer standing walls and Terrwyn and the rock monster down the colony's hill.

High above orbit, the ship acknowledged the bomb's fire and slipped through the waiting wyrmpinch before it'd be caught in the planet's explosion. It did not care that one shuttle failed to return.

# CHAPTER ONE

FIVE YEARS LATER....

"Station Eclipse 5... Eclipse 5, come in." as if someone pushed on the respond button *Amateurs*. "Coming in is code for you forgot. If you can hear me, respond paused for a moment before smugly sliding "Good, glad that's all settled."



The line popped and hissed before closing his side. answering the line, in case with absolute silence." Orn open the comm line,

Orn leaned back into his chair, a highly sought after lower lumbar support system that could tip to nearly 105° before you'd find dwarf all across the bulkheads. Pilots were notorious sticklers when it came to *their* chairs and only *their* chairs, some even turning down vaunted positions on the most luxurious star cruisers because the chairs weren't customizable.

He thudded his right boot upon the excessive glass console, missing partially vital controls. Whatever idiot thought people would love seeing all the wires, diodes, and other electronic doodads to keep them from flying straight into a sun hopefully was tossed into one himself. Orn tried painting sections, but the shit always scraped off or melted when they dropped through a pinch. To remedy that situation, he took to "borrowing" the old-timey posters for acts on whatever floating hunk of rock the ol' girl set herself down on. A session of "Gabbing with Godot" hovered over the impulse drive he was supposed to be watching, but the traffic around the station was calm for once. It was the perfect time to sit back and...

"What's the situation?"

In the old days, Orn would have sat straight up and pushed a few of the less important buttons to look busy, but he'd been on this bird for nearing three (or was it four?) years now. The cap'n would see straight through it anyway. Instead, he swiveled slowly to her, unraveling

the last of his stash of rope candy into a slightly stubbly mouth. "Not much," he slurped through the red goo.

The captain, as she hated being called, shifted back on her bare feet, more than likely roused from a nap by the proximity alarm. Orn preferred to do most of his dealings in the middle of the night. The graveyard shift asked few questions aside from "Where's the coffee and when will it be in me?" Her lip curled up, pulling with it the deep scar running down her right cheek; a landmark she refused to ruminare upon.

"Pull the other one, Orn. I can see the blighted station out the windows," Variel pointed out their too numerous windows at the orbiting waylay station, one of five above Samudra's ample coastlines.

Orn's excessive brows crocheted as he stared out the windows. They graced them with a near panoramic view of whatever existed outside the bridge; which for about 99.999% of the trip amounted to blackness, stars, then -- for a change of pace -- more stars and blackness. The things bothered him. Someone who spent more than a three hour cruise on a ship knew how easily a high powered nub of grit could shatter right through one...assuming the shields were down, backups were dead, and you smashed your noodle on the way to sealing the hole. Still, the mere possibility unnerved anyone with stardust in their veins.

"The station's out," the dwarf informed her, slurping down the last of his treat and reaching under his swivel chair for a drink of something other than thrice recycled "don't ask where it's been" water. His black gloves scattered around a few empty bottles of a drink decorated with fizzy bubbles.

Variel placed her hands upon a playbill about a dryad who thinks it's actually a man. She leaned out, staring into the carousel-like station rotating above the crystal blue planet. Most of the strip was dark, long since silenced for the families sleeping off their busy days ahead or behind them. Lights only burned on the lower maintenance deck and the top floors for those who think they're more important than maintenance.

"Flip the comm," the captain ordered, her voice all business despite the cottony pair of pajamas she'd waltzed onto the bridge in. Orn half expected to find an embroidered bunny.

"A'right, but it won't do you any good. They must have their gnomes in charge of docking." Despite his protesting, the dwarf pulled the switch, his right hand flickering momentarily over the blue tab covered in a fruit sticker.

"Eclipse 5, this is the *Elation-Cru* looking for a docking number. Please respond," Variel rolled her neck back, trying to blink away the last of her sleep. If this weren't the heart of "the safest ports in the galaxy" she'd probably be nervous about the quiet comms.

"Eclipse 5?" She continued before turning back to Orn, who lifted his massive shoulders and slipped another boot overtop his first. He'd pull out his PALM and start playing Spacecolony if the boss wasn't staring right at him. "I say, is anyone there?"

"We have coin?" Orn threw out.

The static popped and a voice, higher pitched than was typical for most organics, screeched across the flight deck, "This is Eclipse 5, oh bloody hell! Who let those little brats in here to dick with the controls?" some shuffling drifted across the space, a few pops answered back, and the voice returned much less like a rodent freebasing helium, "We have you on sensors, *Elation-Cru*."

"Sensors," Orn snorted, "look out a bleedin' window and we'll wave back at ya."

"Docking port 75-C is open. You'll be in the Happy Jellyfish lot," reported the man who was probably wiping sticky chocolate off his control panels.

"Joy of joys, we get to be a spineless blob of tentacles."

"Orn," Variel warned softly.

"Right, fine, uh," the dwarf flipped the switch back, "This is Elation-Cru, Ecstatic Jellyfish, got it."

"That's Happy Jellyfish," the weary voice stressed, "I see you're registered with the dwarven embassy. A proper customs officer shall be out in an hour."

"Right, Happy Jellyfish over and out," Orn mocked, flicking off the channel and punching in a few numbers. Docking was fully automated after one too many rich snots got wasted on Lavabombs while skittering about the galaxy in Leap-pods that somehow always wound up in the main director's lobby, the lady decals ripped to her nude waist. Pilots needn't bother with parking, but Orn liked to appear busy.

Variel sighed, this part of the galaxy made her itch. The surest way to snap was waking every day with forced joy and a shit eating grin. She laid a hand on the dwarf's shoulder as she leaned down to him, "Wake the others, I'm sure the twins have some unholy business they'll be getting to."

"What about *her*?" Orn asked, his eyes flickering to a smashed bulkhead that someone refused to repair on principle.

"Are you two...again? Fine, I'll talk to her. Gods know there's got to be something broken on this ship that'll cost all our money to repair."

Orn smiled, his overlarge eyes twinkling as he broke the comfortable silence of the ship by powering up the automated wake-up call. A charming cackle of a rooster bounded about the ship as bouts of twinkling music followed. The lilting, cheerful voice -- certain to have driven entire systems of people to utter madness -- chimed in, "Wake up sleepy heads! There's a big day ahead of you among the stars!"

The fact that everyone despised the thing with enough furor to power the ship across twelve light years encouraged Orn all the more to use it every chance he got. As Variel turned to leave, most likely to put on something that wasn't wearing to the point of being see through, the dwarf cheerfully called out, "Captain off the bridge."

She flipped him off before the doors could close.



Freshly clothed, Variel slid down the hatch to her quarters and straight into the chief and only engineer on the ship. Ferru thrust a hunk of something black and slightly damaged into her face.

"Look at this!" the elf demanded, smudges from her latest discovery blacking the nearly triangular nose of her people.

Variel squinted at the oblong mass of what was not a piece off the back of a broken midden...probably. "It's bad?" she asked.

"The injector for the inertia deflector is half warped from SOMEONE throttling on the half burn while trying to impress star bunnies," her voice rose to a loud crescendo with each word.

"He can't hear you," Variel mumbled, wishing she wasn't caught in the middle of this.

"He damn well will when we're scraping bits of him off the forward windshields," Ferra screamed towards the bridge, locked off by two safety doors and a dwarf that was probably cranking up his music to drown her out.

"How much will this cost me?" Variel asked, turning the black pile of mutilated piping over in her hands. The elf was about to open her mouth when Variel cut her off, "Never mind, we're docking soon. Once we drop off the cargo, I'll forward the bits to the account."

The engineer finally noticed the leaking oil all over her icy pale hand and wiped it down her rubber apron. Just beneath it poked the pink frills of her blouse, unprotected from the hemorrhaging of a ship that should have been left to rust in its graveyard ages ago, as the engineer reminded Variel every time something snapped beyond repair. Not that the elf wouldn't curse out anyone who implied the same about her ship. Ferra was a continuous study in incongruity, usually in oil stained coveralls.

"It is my understanding we have reached our wayward point," this new voice was soft as silk, well honed to lull one into ease. It set Ferra's teeth on edge.

She turned from her boss to find the twins haunting around the edge of the galley, an area that was supposed to be off limits to passengers. Not that the elves qualified as passengers anymore. They'd been onboard for nearly six months now, always returning like vermin after they'd "disembarked" on "business."

Ferra tucked the injector into the crook of her arm and muttered an, "Excuse me," as she pushed past the other elves on the ship, not bothering to look up as the oil soaked part gently collided with the girl's overtly expensive dress. "And tell Orn, he best be getting his hairy ass down here soon. We have words to share," Ferra shot out as she disappeared back down the narrow hall.

Variel tried to run her fingers through still knotted hair, but only got snagged and gave up. As the only technically paying customers, the elven twins dangled her over a disconcerting precipice. A small PR part of her brain said she should look somewhat presentable around them even though she was unaware what a presentable captain looked like. "Yes, we'll be docking soon. Will you both be long?"

Brena, the more talkative of the two, glanced back to her brother. He was in his usual blacks and greys, blending into the shadows; only the curls of orangey brown and white highlighting the dark skin on his face gave away his position. The sister favored the high fashion of the season, long droopy sleeves done up in velvets of purples and greens, her midsection cinched up so tight it was a wonder the girl could digest more than a grape. Then again, she wasn't paid to eat.

"No more than a day," Taliesin said, probably the greatest speech he'd given all day.

"Not a lot of people need murdering on the happy sands of Samudra?" Variel muttered more to herself than the twin, even though elf ears pick up on everything.

But the elf either missed the sarcasm or chose to ignore it, "Everyone has troubles."

"We shall not be longer than twelve hours at our assignments," Brena rescued her brother, "this I swear." Her own face was painted to accentuate the calico nature of the high elf twins, her eyes coated in enough eyeliner to incite the amorous affections of a raccoon.

"Good," Variel waved her hands and the elves turned silently, both vanishing back into the darkened mess hall.

"Them two give me the creeps," Orn's voice slipped out behind her, "It's what they're not saying that rattles my beard." He touched his poorly shorn chin and added, "metaphorically."

"Elves," Variel muttered, "Speaking of which..."

"I heard 'er. You'd think I never do anything proper around here." The pilot was in no mood for another redressing by the petite engineer unless some undressing was involved first.

Variel started the familiar tread through her ship, her freshly booted feet stomping across the fading red carpet laid by the previous owners. It takes a special committee of morons to coat a ship's decks in wall to wall carpeting. Orn trailed behind, twirling a spanner in his fingers and singing off-key whatever blasted through his ear piece.

The galley, mostly stripped bare save a lone table half-covered in bits from the ship that probably shouldn't be kept near food, gave way from what was once a "family fun center" turned storage to the disembarking room. This was the fancy term for a small enclave with a large, interactive plaque asking customers to wave any and all rights to sue in case of unexpected decompression, accidental alien pregnancy, or wandering bowel syndrome. And, of course, WEST was there, though technically WEST was everywhere.

Variel smoothed down what passed for her traveling business clothes, a not entirely billowy tunic and pair of cotton trousers in her standard brown, and looked towards the dwarf, "Where's your cape?"

"The cleaners," Orn muttered, his right hand trying to knot up the drawstring dangling down the front of his crimson vest. He avoided anything with buttons, snaps, or zippers.

"Do I pay you to spout crap back at me?"

"Consider it a perk," Orn grinned up at her, "We won't need it anyway. Why's a graveyard shift gonna expect a cape?"

"Orn..."

She was about to insist he waddle back and get the damn thing when the latch popped as the airlock finished pressurizing. Both the human and dwarf opened their jaws, trying to adjust to the inflow of station barometrics. The final safety seal unlatched and the heaviest door on the ship swung open to allow a pair of humans into their little space.

They were each dressed in standard uniform whites and blues, brass buttons all along the chest at a Z angle, with matching pairs of flat caps to complete the look. If it weren't for the obvious age on the one, or the clipboard in the hands of the second, they'd have appeared identical clones to most other species and some humans.

"I am technician Partal of the spacial licensing and travel registration department. This is my intern, third technician Segundo. He shall not be allowed to touch anything upon, around, near, or in trans-dimensional proximity to this ship. Please nod your appendage of choice if you accept my terms."

The technician paused in his boilerplate and glanced towards the dwarf, who gulped a moment and then nodded. "Make a note the ambassador bobbed his head," he pointed to his intern's clipboard which flashed as his finger interrupted the data streaming from the kid's PALM. Something hidden in the unnecessary data struck a cord and he scrutinized the dwarven "ambassador."

"Sir, where is your cape?"

Orn grumbled, not looking towards his boss who could radiate smug annoyance at 10,000 lumens. "My pet rock ate it," he lied to the government official.

"Traditional garb consumed by sedimentary livestock," the technician pointed to an option in the scrolling list. It flared blue and disappeared into the mists of information. "This ship is listed as under the license of one Ms. Variel Tuffman. I assume that would be you?" He turned his tedious face upon the captain, who gritted at the last name but nodded.

"Sounds like a luggage brand. Make a note of that, Sec," he said to his intern, "No, not the luggage brand."

"Sir," Segundo spoke for the first time, his voice wobblier than Orn's attempts at hard boiled eggs, "it's flagged for immediate inspection."

"Don't be absurd," Variel pressed. "This is clearly an embassy sponsored ship. You dishonor our esteemed guest."

"Yes, I am very dishonored. If you do not rectify this dishonor we shall have to do battle in a pit of some type of sea creature. But not shrimp, I'm allergic," Orn rabble roused, shaking his falsely royal fist for emphasis.

"It's been over two years since a member of SPLITR has set foot upon this vessel," Segundo read off his report, afraid to make eye contact with the woman ready to tear his limbs off should he try.

Variel hoped to salvage what should have been a quick exchange. "The ambassador's been quite busy, meeting with various important galactic, uh..."

"Fusspots," Orn filled in, doing his best to not help. Was it too late for her to get an inflatable dwarf doll and fire the pilot?

"Eh?" a light flared in the first technician's ear. He tapped his own blinking PALM and spoke loudly to most likely not just himself, "Yes. Already? Very well."

He ended the call as quickly as it began and turned towards his intern, "Someone left the gnomes unmanned and the entire mermaid deck flooded with chocolate. This one's all yours. Try not to muck it up, cast off."

Before Segundo could argue, his mentor wandered back through the airlock, cursing about chocolate stains over his uniform. The technician gulped and stared down at the dwarven ambassador dressed in what appeared to be the ragged clothes pilgrims wore to show their devotion to a god by forsaking all manner of button. His PALM Board flashed over and over, the highlighted section in bright red font, "Inspection Required. Do not allow release without full Inspection."

"It says here," Segundo coughed into his fist, trying to lower his voice, "I cannot let you disembark until a full inspection is made of your vessel, ship, or domicile."

Variel cracked her knuckles, a move considered nonthreatening to most other species. The petrified human quivered, yet kept waving his official forms about as if they were a

magical shield. As she was about to lay into him, their engineer bounded into the embarkation closet, her apron tossed in favor of a pair of canvas overalls.

"What's this little shit doing here?" she asked, eyeing up the scrawny human shrinking before her mighty five foot size.

"Pissing on the floor, mostly," Orn muttered, earning a small nod from Variel, a small quiver of defiance from the floor wetter, and recalled rage from Ferra.

"Shut your mouth, Orn, or I'll do it for you." Hell hath no fury like a woman facing a night of fully reassembling an inertia injector.

"Yes, Ma'am," he muttered, cowed by the only person in the universe who could get to him.

"Why aren't we going? The shop's gonna close soon, and I ain't trekking the twelve elevator stops for the next one." Ferra memorized nearly every mechanic shop's schedule in the three years she'd been keeping the *Elation-Cru* mobile. A photographic memory came in handy at times.

"Yes, why aren't we moving?" Variel's snake eyes turned on the exposed belly of the underling.

Third Technician Segundo coughed into his fist, "I don't have the power to override anything. I'm sorry. I'd have to do an inspection before your ship can be released. Pleasdon'thitme!"

"Could you give us a moment, please?" the ambassador asked, yanking the elf and human slightly out of hearing range. "What's the problem?"

"I don't want any government grubworm poking about my ship," Ferra grumbled.

"What she said," Variel agreed. The thought of anyone digging through their lives unnerved her. It was why she burned so much coin getting the ship dwarf registered in the first place. They never asked any questions aside from, "How much money do you have, and where will you forward it from?"

"So one snot nosed brat wanders star struck about a spaceship, writes down a few notes about how clean the kitchen is, and then leaves a note for his superiors." Orn was trying to be the diplomatic one, which should have sent up red flags, but everyone was exhausted from a long flight.

"And," the dwarf's brown quartz eyes sparkled, "we have the only partially illegal thing on us the whole time. Most he can accuse us of is failing to replace the tail light."

"He damn well better not," Ferra growled. Inspection notes were a source of pride for any engineer wandering her way into a smokey bar on the edge of nowhere.

"The dwarf's making sense. I hate it when he makes sense," Variel rubbed her head, already planning a long stopover on one of those pleasure stations that has real running water. "You," she called to the kid, "Tech whatever. We let you onto the ship, you make your sweep while we take care of business on the station, yes?"

Regulations maintained that all occupants were to remain well cloistered within their cabins until a stamp of approval was received, but the small part marked as common sense warned Segundo that this was the compromise. If he didn't accept it, the next one was tossing his body into space. "I will require assistance as I cannot touch anything."

A cruel smile overtook Variel's ragged features, "I've already thought of that." She leaned over to the only control panel in the room, an ancient standing terminal, and asked calmly, "WEST, can you send Gene up here? We have a guest who requires his assistance."

The computer grumbled something, but before it could form an actual argument, the captain cut him off, "Thank you, WEST."

"Gene is a registered crew member of this vessel, then?" Segundo asked.

"You could say that," Orn muttered, feeling oddly sorry for the kid.

"Excellent," Segundo turned from the others and began to flip through his notes, waiting for his escort.

"If you're done shoving your thumbs up each other's asses," Ferra said, pushing past the pair of humans and one lonely dwarf, "I have a ship to fix." She waltzed through the open airlock without a second glance, her narrow stride moving at a near run to beat Crazy Al's Althernators & More closing time.

"After you, ambassador," Variel bowed slightly to the dwarf, letting him take the lead. He shook his stocky head, but set out before her, trying to play the poorly cast part of dignified dignitary.

For a moment the captain paused, taking in the knock kneed, barely out of -- or still trapped in -- his teens kid and felt pity, "Good luck with your inspection. You're gonna need it."

Before Segundo looked up, she was gone, leaving him alone with his guide.



It'd have been more appropriate if a ring of men, swathed in the filth they peddled to others, graced the back room of the office complex on some rusted dock while gambling away a poor urchin's legs. Instead, a scrubbed man unwound his tie and poured a dribble of antacid into a glass, slugging it down while his partner jabbed at his hand with fervor.

"Those boars never saw me coming!" he shouted as his hand erupted in celebration sparks.

Variel coughed into her fist, "Gentlemen." When the pairs of eyes turned to her, she lifted high a briefcase, "I believe we have some business to settle."

One-Eyed Joe, as the kids called him, rose from his pristine desk. Only the obligatory eyepatch and false leg dotted its metallic landscape incase a VIP family wandered in. Always stay in character, even when one's climbing your leg while you're trying to take a piss. That was life orbiting the corporate owned Samudra; clear skies, clear seas, and teams of underlings stampeding to keep it that way. It was inevitable that all beloved vid characters and childhood idols turned to the seedier strings of life if only to dull the endless cloying sugar on the palate.

His partner clicked off his PALM and turned, the more menacing of the pair when it came to the criminals Joe dragged home. While Joe reenacted scenes of his favorite movies to guys with more tattoos than a walking billboard, Eric would almost dial up the security force in the event something finally went horribly wrong.

"Did you bring it?" Joe asked, skipping past the woman nearly half his age for the case dangling off her arm.

Variel smiled and turned to her partner in minor crime and passed him the case, "Orn, if you'd be so kind."

The dwarf flipped the switch causing the false lid to swing open. One-Eye groaned at the sight of an empty case, but Orn reached inside to push the hidden switch and the illusion broke. A pile of cloth replaced the emptiness.

Joe smiled wide, "Jolly good show!" He was clearly enjoying this part. Eric dialed up another number.

Orn glanced up at his boss. Most clients insisted on flipping the hidden switch themselves despite not having the proper biometrics to see the damn thing. It was a challenge of bravado that could take hours and once led to a permanent case of cross eye. No one ever approached it like a magic show.

Variel motioned him forward; he was the star at this part. She preferred the dirty work, Orn was there for the show. Rolling his mountainous shoulders, the dwarf lifted the sack of cloth hidden inside the briefcase and shook it once. The hidden seams popped and shifted into place, creating an open basket ready to gobble up anything that could be shoved inside a 12x12 inch fabric box. "The deluxe backpack of storing contains not one, but two handles," Orn's voice oozed oily charm as he motioned to the two strips dangling off the edge. "It can store up to three hundred items that do not stack," he said as he grabbed up One Eye's leg and slipped it into the black void, then reached for a desk lamp.

Eric jumped to his feet, throwing off Orn's concentration. The dwarf's sticky fingers paused, but Joe waved his partner off, "Let him be."

Orn gripped the lamp anew, but Eric made the "I'm watching you" motion with his fingers. It was a very threatening gesture on the dwarven home planet, as it implied you owed someone money. The dwarf shook it off and shoved the lamp into the knapsack along with a pile of rocks he kept in his coat pocket.

"Once you've finished storing whatever you need to cart, simply push down on the sides," Orn struggled, forcing all his weight onto the EZ-Snaps, when one finally unlatched. Half of the bag slipped under, while the other half remained stubbornly upright. The dwarf cursed under his tongue and fought before snagging half the room in an unstable gravity field. Without breaking a sweat, and holding his sigh of relief in, the other latch gave and the backpack curled up in on itself, creating another pile of uninteresting cloth. Orn lifted the backpack high and waved it about as if it was a towel.

"Amazin'!" Joe crowed, carefully taking the thin sheet that now held his entire life, "How does it work?"

Variel stepped in, "MGC is laced into the fabric which top research mages use to create a small wormhole to the storage facility."

Orn's eyes slid back to his boss but he didn't move his head. Joe was shaking his new toy like a dog with a rabbit, blathering about all the things he wanted to squirrel away inside his new bag. "Amazing. See Eric, simply amazing!"

"Yes, love, amazing. How much does this amazing bag cost?"

"Two fresh cat videos and a picture of a domesticated animal in clothing," Variel said smoothly.

"One cat video, a hedgehog playing badminton, and three goats standing atop a crashed orc ship," Eric argued back, mentally ticking over how many meals out this was going to cost them.

"The price is non-negotiable," Variel replied, her fingers plucking the fabric away from Joe's and folding it up to place back in the case.

"Eric..." the old man whined, upset at having lost his highly illegal toy.

"Fine, two new cat videos and a bird singing along with a hamster," Eric relented.

"Sold," the captain smiled, thrusting the dangerous fabric back into the buyer's hands. "We have an off-planet dwarven account to transfer the funds into."

"Of course you do," Eric muttered, wishing his love would get back into building bottles on ships or something that didn't dirty their tapestries with the unsavory type. "Wiring them now."

One-Eye placed the bag on the ground, snapped it open, and reached inside. "Look, it's me leg!" He struggled keeping out of character whenever he touched the damn prop.

"Would you like to read the safety manual?" Variel asked as she snapped the briefcase shut, a thick flyer resting between her fingers. Paper was much harder to trace.

"No, thank you," Eric clipped as his grandfather's lamp appeared and then vanished back inside the bag.

"Suit yourself," Variel muttered, still laying the book down upon the edge of the desk. When they accidentally invert the gravity in the room, they can figure out how to solve the problem themselves. "Come on, Orn," she said quietly to the dwarf trying to pilfer the man's eyepatch.

His fingers dropped the famous bit of elastic and they wandered back into his pockets, "Yes, Sir."

As Variel eased out of the back office, dragging her companion along, she called out behind, "Pleasure doing business with you."



"MGC woven into the fabric?" Orn's voice bounced around the mostly empty promenade as Variel reached across the counter of the only open food stand, "I had no idea you humans could pull that kind of shit out your orifice of choice."

The professional weaver of near truth was impressed. His notion of most humans was that they clustered in groups, coated furniture in moisture at the first sign of distress, and broke down into a trembling pile of flesh upon a moment's scrutiny. Of course, prior to this job, his only major interaction had been shuffling groups of missionaries to their holy site. Possibly not the best cross section of the species, but Orn didn't match up well to the preferred example of dwarves either.

Variel thanked the gargoyle manning the food cart, one of the few species to prefer the endless night of space, and lifted the horrendous concoction towards her mouth. The fat still sizzled from the fryer as clumps of excess batter dropped off the weaving blob of meat on a stick to the pristine grates. She ignored the disgusted look on her pilot's face while wrapping a napkin around the edge of her dinner and commented upon the job. "Not a good idea to go blathering about gravity wells and microblack holes. That makes the customer jumpy."

"What was he expecting? That thing's illegal nearly everywhere."

She gazed up at the blinking lights of a security camera stashed into the high walls of the glorified floating shopping mall, "The ownership is. The sale is perfectly legal. Provided no one catches you actually holding the damn thing." She spent a lot of her life skirting around the name of the law, sometimes by hiding for days in a frozen asteroid belt.

Orn curled up his lip and stared at the stomach churning image of the human chomping down on the wad of meat, "You're not gonna eat that are you? Orc food gives your intestines nightmares."

Variel shook her head. For being the people that took one look at the galaxy and said 'You're all welcome as long as you have the coin,' he was one xenophobic little turd, "There's nothing wrong with Orc food. It's quite nutritious and full of protein."

"And some guy named Ogg who didn't pass inspection," Orn grumbled.

"What would you want that isn't straight sugar?"

"Wolf, Bear, Jaguar, Snake? Anything that wasn't screaming about drinking my mother's blood before heading into the deep fryer," Orn shrugged, hunting around for a dwarf seat as his boss plopped the empty briefcase onto a rickety wrought iron table, scattering the triangles advertising the great fun they could have across the station.

Variel chomped down in the least ladylike way imaginable short of stuffing the entire thing down her throat and swallowing whole like a duck. Table manners were for something that didn't come on a stick. Orn drug over a hard won chair. He sat and pushed the "lift" lever to be about on eye level just as the last of Ogg vanished.

"I'm surprised you want all that human food," Variel said, clearing grease off her chin, "I figured you and Ferra'd go in for *haute elven cuisine*."

"Ha! She says it tastes like nothing but air and condescension with a wafer on top," Orn responded, dropping his hand to the table with a heavy thud. The thing was itching again.

Variel sighed, realizing the eternal story teller was gonna keep his mouth shut, "What was it this time?"

"Nothing. She just," Orn scratched at his bulbous nose and tried to find an untruth so he wasn't at fault for whatever repair bills Ferra was currently running up, "So, I maybe over-tweaked the last burn when we swung around the base."

"How 'over-tweaked?'"

"A few things caught on fire," Orn admitted sheepishly, "But nothing major, and it all went out like a light. We shouldn't need to test the fire alarm anytime soon."

Variel sighed, but any reprimand died on her tongue. It didn't matter much what she said to the dwarf, the elven engineer could dish it up tenfold and he actually had to listen to her. "I don't know how you two even got married, much less stay."

Orn stopped fiddling with his hand and brought it up to his lips, thinking. Slowly, he smiled and answered, "Angry sex. She gets that ship up and running after a long fight and...sweet ore. A pilot, an engineer, and a humming ship is the best kind of threeway."

"I do not need to hear this, or think about this," Variel muttered, wishing she could wipe her memory with something other than troll ale (along with her liver, spleen and lungs), "I'm never walking into engineering alone again."

"Probably for the best," the dwarf admitted. His last move wasn't the only time the fire systems had been prematurely checked.

The station fell silent as the two lapsed into a comfortable quiet. Only the soothing hum of "everything's still working" wormed up through the floor. It must be a deafening cacophony when the place was at capacity; boots trampling up and down the metal corridors, faces crying for food, water, those stupid sunglasses that give you "elven" eyes. Orn didn't do "family friendly." He could barely handle "friendly," and Variel seemed to keep the ship as far from the Pax sectors as she could. Peace and harmony didn't often call upon the likes of them.

A few spotlights bounded around the section below their outcropping, advertising for some show that wasn't to start for another three hours. If you have crowds of parents trying to find a place to sit down, you get a small stage filled with the kinds of people you'd normally never let your kid near. But, for five minutes the screaming stops as the kid watches wide eyed while a troll swallows bricks of flaming charcoal or a dwarf chops credit bits in half. It was one of those devil deals that leaves everyone soulless.

The station smelled of artificial baked goods, disinfectant, and the base note of urine. If it weren't for the occasional hurried run of someone in a drab uniform carrying a punctured hull repair kit, it was hard to believe you weren't actually trapped on a hell planet.

The gargoyle grunted, a low call of release, as it unsheathed its wings in the rare moment between shifts. Stretching long past its little stand, the thick stonehide that aided in gliding curled up and around the man's craggy head, bumping his carved curly locks. It was rare to find one this deep into shared territory. Permits weren't as easy to get for the lower species.

They weren't officially called that. Something like "Non-Organic Entities," which accounted for all the non-bipedal, greater than four limbed, occasionally non-corporeal beings that tried to carve a niche in the ever expanding universe. But everyone knew which way the solar winds blew. The only one lower on the pecking pole than the NOE's were the gnomes, but it's harder to get lower than dirt.

The gargoyle curled up his wings and tucked them back inside the apron decked with his stand's name, "Exotic Eats," and blinked his eyes rapidly. Orn slugged Variel on the shoulder and pointed excitedly, "He must have one of them new EyeScans."

"And..."

"No more lugging around a piece for the PALM to project onto when the imager loses cohesion, instant eye access, none of that scrolling through your hand," Orn sighed wistfully as if he was describing the perfect woman.

"And they drill straight into your brain to place it. No thanks."

"It's a one time installation. A one time, highly expensive installation." The dwarf dreamed of one ever since the big unveil Expo on Traltar, but coin was tighter with each passing month. If the cat market stayed the way it was, it could get much worse.

Variel shook her head, tapping her trusty hand and letting the screen wash over one of the PALM receptacles at every table, "It's one time, until there's a major hardware upgrade, then back into your skull they go taking gods know how many brains in the process." She tapped a few more numbers and, after exchanging their new riches into bank numbers, transferred it all over to Ferra. Almost all. The bird and hamster duet would go into the ship's lease pot.

Centuries back, when meeting someone who didn't look like, sound like, or act like you was a novel thing, a few people had the brilliant idea to try a universal currency. Credits they called it, which confused most everyone who thought they were paying on credit and would wake up to a depleted account and massive overdraft fees. Then the gnomes came into play. After the vultures got them to a 10,000% interest rate, there was such an epic economical collapse the galactic community talked of trying to sell their universe off to an alternate one for scrap.

Oddly, it was the ancient elven tradition of trading stories for goods that took hold. Sure, the humans came back with coins, now in the form of holographic projections. Dwarves had an incredibly complex system involving the maiden name of your great-grandmother's clan, and most orc colonies had their own denominations of pressed heavy metals. But anyone could transfer a story to heavy currency.

Eventually, the stories simplified when one needed an epically epic poem to purchase bread. Filtered down due to anti-inflation laws, the most highly guarded mint in the entire universe contained a single man, a cat, and a video camera. There hadn't been a major crash since.

A sign across from their vantage point lit up: "Loqual's Trinkets and Tricks." The mood lights set to simulate day began to rise. Dawn was coming to the station. Variel motioned to Orn it was time to be moving on, avoid all the sticky fingered children and sticky chinned adults poking into business they'd never understand.

As she passed the gargoyle, she dropped a few limericks into his tip jar and nodded, "That was the best fried klak I've had in ages." The gargoyle's eyes faded to a pink as he accepted the comment.

"You know what your problem is," Orn started, walking beside the human who learned to shorten her stride years ago.

"That I have a government official poking about my ship, a ship I'm still over 10% on the line for -- assuming it doesn't crumble to ash before then -- and a dwarf trying to psychoanalyze me?"

"I was gonna say you're too cynical, but that's good too."