

Charisma and leadership are different things.

And leadership is not a talent but a combination of various things.

[Alien arc] [11] [Path of creation] [12330]

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Everyone was gathered at what used to be Karma the third's office. The office wasn't big enough for everyone to sit, so they had to discuss matters while standing. Few even had to stand outside.

"We've got to get a place first," Karesindia muttered while trying to squeeze herself into the room.

"We will get a place. We are here to discuss that," Gallo replied from the back of the crowded room.

Naliss was by the table.

She spoke up. "Let's make this quick. The current status of Cyan is pitiful. Good news about that is that it cannot get any worse."

Gharyn added, "We will be constructing our own fortress underground. But I realize that there is no material for such a construction."

Naliss shrugged. "This planet has nothing. We have to import."

"The outside situation is not very good though because of the Aliens," Ormvor added.

"This planet has some basic minerals. We will set up few mining facilities and dig some up. And the Osprey can mine from the Nebula itself," Naliss said.

Vaelmnaal replied. "I will get the children to mine immediately. It won't be ideal but we have to use whatever we can get."

Everyone was in agreement.

"How is the public security?" Calvin asked Naliss.

She replied, "Well, while you guys were out there, I had tried to secure the city. Public security is pretty good, but that is only because no one has anything to be stolen." Having said that, she cleared her throat. "Furthermore, the dome needs a lot of repairs."

Gallo crossed his arms. "What of the dream?"

Naliss narrowed her eyes.

"We cannot begin the construction yet. We lack everything, fund, people, required minerals, and experience. Besides, we have bigger matters to deal with right now."

"How is the outside?" Gallo asked.

"Not good. The Sol system's been wiped out completely. Rumor says that people of Sol managed to escape in a large colony-sized ship. But it's just a rumor. The Andromeda union has been hammered down pretty badly. But they are holding their final defense line. Freebie's gone through."

"Is this planet safe?" Calvin asked.

"As far as I understand, yes," Naliss nodded weakly. "The aliens have not approached the Nebula. At least we are unaware of such a case."

The meeting was soon concluded. The bottom line was that a lot of works were ahead of them, but that wasn't unexpected.

When Gallo was leaving the castle, Sarbas was by the entrance. Though young, being an ESP, Sarbas was highly intelligence even at this point.

"Hello, Sarbas," Gallo hailed him casually.

"Hello, Gallo."

Gallo recalled that Sarbas was taught by the old man.

"Sarbas," He called out.

"Yes?"

"What do you know of the Crimson wizard?"

Sarbas replied promptly, "Perpetual darkness."

Gallo waited for him to continue. But the two words were all he said.

"That's it?"

"Yes."

"Hmmm -" Gallo exhaled deep breath. He looked up at thte fake sky. It was holographic image generated by the dome. The image had missing parts here and there. Thus giving away how fake it was easily. Like Naliss said, the dome needed repairs.

He walked around the city. It was a lifeless and gloomy city for certain. People were in rags, staring aimlessly.

He wondered what it'd be like in their position, where there were neither hope nor future. Though Gallo wasn't any better in that aspect. Hope and future were something of a mystery for him.

Where he ended up while wandering around was interesting. It was the orphanage run by Erune. He certainly did not mean to go there. He didn't even know where it was.

He stood before an old three story building. Its painting had degraded to beyond recognition. Its windows were mostly broken. It was more like looking at an abandoned building.

And there was Erune playing with children by entrance.

"Hello."

Gallo threw a casual greeting. Erune immediately noticed him and blushed a little bit.

"Kids, go back inside. I have a business with him," She said gently to the children who ran inside.

"I am glad that you've recovered."

It was awkward for either of them to look at each other's face after what happened to Erune.

"How are you doing?" Gallo asked casually.

"I've been doing fine. It took some time to recover though."

For her, it was a very, very embarrassing event.

"I am glad to hear that. And I am also glad that you've recovered."

Gallo was informed that some of women couldn't make it.

She scratched her head. "Yeah, well..." She tried to change subject. "So, you've taken Cyan completely, huh."

He laughed briefly. "Yep, it wasn't as hard as I thought. I've got to tell you this though..." He exhaled deeply before he continued.

"It wasn't as fun as I thought. I mean, all the responsibility... I fear this is not for me. I am just a simple man with a simple mind."

He had no idea why he was speaking what he had in mind to her. It was just... an impulse. He felt like he needed to speak his mind to someone and he felt no one around him was close enough to hear him rant.

She looked uncomfortable listening to Gallo's rant. With her eyes downcast, not wanting to look into his eyes, she replied, "Well, historically speaking, not many great man had intention to take such responsibility... It just happened to them and they had to carry on."

He laughed out loudly. "Are you implying that I am one of those great men in history?"

"I am just saying..."

"Yeah, yeah, I get your point."

Then there was a moment of uncomfortable silence between them. It was Erune who eventually broke it by changing the subject.

"You now have taken Cyan. What are you going to do with this planet?"

Gallo scratched his chine. "I don't know honestly... I am not the one who's pushing plans... There is someone else."

He felt embarrassed by what he had just said.

"Nevermind what I said. Well, it's good to see you. I should get going."

Turning around at once, he rushed to leave the area without giving a chance for Erune to react.

When he was back at the office at the castle, there was Naliss behind the only table in the room. She was busy looking over documents that she did not bother to see who was there. She was mumbling some words. A piercing ray of light that shone through the only window behind of her strengthened her lonely image.

"How can I help you, Gallo?" She asked quietly, eventually.

"How is it going?" He asked casually.

"Not going well," She sighed. "Good timing for asking though. I needed to speak to you sooner or later."

Cyan was an isolated place with no trade route or whatsoever. The planet needed materials imported from outside and there was no place to establish a trade route.

"Well," Naliss shrugged. "What you've done with the Nomads and the Blackbirds have pretty much destroyed any possibility of forming a friendly relationship with them, so those two are not even options."

That left only one choice, the Claw of the Ra, CoR.

"But then," She added to already bad situation. "You had some troubles with CoR as well, but as bad as what you've done with the other two clans though."

"What do you suggest then?"

"There hasn't been any refugees past few weeks. I fear the outside situation has become very, very bad, perhaps even beyond what I am imagining."

Gallo narrowed his eyes. The situation was dire, he understood clearly. However, he was unable to grasp how bad it actually was. The same applied to Naliss.

She explained, "If we can't open a trade route with CoR, our only choice will be find a source from outside of the Nebula. It is possible since Cyan is right on edge of the Nebula."

He turned around and said, "I will head to CoR right away."

She stood up from her desk and told him in rush, "No, you shouldn't go."

"Why not?"

"You are the leader. This is too risky to send our leader."

"But I believe, if anyone can make this happen, it'd be me."

"I think we have someone just as capable as you."

Gharyn entered the office.

"Did you call me?"

Gallo explained the situation to him briefly.

"I see," Gharyn nodded repeatedly and slowly. "She is right. You shouldn't go. I suppose I know why you called me."

Gharyn was fast when he had something to do. He immediately prepared to leave and, in an hour, he was already at the port of Cyan.

"You will have Karesindia's wing as your escort just in case. She's very capable," said Gallo.

"Thanks."

Like that, he left.

Once he saw off Gharyn's fighter craft, he looked around the port which was empty. Not a soul was around which wasn't a surprise at all.

Peace time proved to be way too boring for Gallo to take. In his entire life, he had actually never experienced peace. During his time on the Gray mist station, there was always something going on and there was always a sensation of danger no matter where he was and what he was doing.

No such a sensation existed on Cyan. It was way too peaceful.

Out of choices, he figured he'd pay a visit to Arnon.

As far as he knew, Arnon was doing something in the backward of the inn that Gallo was staying. The inn had literally turned into a temporary base of the Gray mist.

There was a small storage hut in the backyard. Dull and disturbing sound of heavy hammering could be heard from a distance.

He knocked a worn out wooden door. There was no response. Considering the hammering coming inside of the place, anyone would guess that knocking would be too small to hear. However, Gallo kept on knocking for few minutes. His knocking became gradually weaker and eventually he stopped knocking. Loud hammering as well as crashing sound exchanged their places in a strange rhythm. It was awkwardly charming that he just stood there and enjoyed it. And he eventually left him be without meeting him.

Weeks passed and a new wave of refugees arrived at Cyan. Much to Naliss' expectations, the worst for Cyan had happened. For Gallo though, the refugees were a welcome sight because there would be something to do at least.

"What did you just say?" Naliss was pale. "Tell me that I heard wrong."

She was talking to a group of refugees who just took off from their survival pod. A survival pod was a large-sized shuttle with basic equipment and lots of frozen food. The pod was meant to keep a hundred people alive for a year. Fourteen pods had landed on Cyan on that day.

"The freedom colony is really no more," One of refugees, shaking his head repeatedly in fear and exhaustion, cried out. "I don't know how many survived."

Naliss found what she had just heard hard to believe. Freedom colony was a fortress in the space. He was protected by a large fleet and its defenses were thought to be virtually impenetrable.

But she had to accept what was happening. If Freedom colony went down, the aliens would be able to take anything down constructed by humans.

From a distance, Gallo noticed her losing her balance. He quickly dashed to her and asked if she was alright.

She replied weakly with her palm on her face. "I..., I am alright. I just ... felt a bit dizzy."

Gasping for air, she pushed Gallo away with little strength she had left.

Unlike her, Gallo didn't react too hard to the news. He was pretty content about it. His whole life revolved around the Nebula and not once had he left the nebula. In other words, he failed to imagine what had happened.

"You are lucky that you made this far and found this planet," Gallo said.

"That is very true," The refugees agreed.

"So, what will you do now? You are free to leave this planet if you like."

"No, no," The refugees became as pale as Naliss. "Please don't kick us out."

"I am not," Gallo grinned. "I just gave you a choice. That is all."

All refugees agreed to stay on Cyan. They didn't want to risk their lives anymore by venturing deeper into the unknown nebula.

Naliss had been sitting on an aluminum crate while Gallo had a chat with the refugees. After the chat, he checked on her.

"How are you feeling?"

"I am fine," She insisted. However, she was still pale.

"What is bothering you so much?"

She frowned and looked at Gallo. "You mean you really don't know?"

He sagged his shoulders.

Sighing deeply and hopelessly, she shook her head.

"The freedom colony has been known to be the most fortified space construction."

"So?"

"So?" She repeated Gallo with an exclaim. "So? You say? If the colony could not hold against the aliens, what else could? I think it is only a matter of time that the entire mankind is wiped out entirely."

"But they don't approach the nebula."

Struck by Gallo's statement, Naliss remained silent for a while.

"Yes, that is true," She finally spoke. "Not yet anyway and I would really like to find out why."

"I don't know why," Gallo answered innocently.

"I know you don't know why!" Naliss yelled back at him. As soon as she did that, she apologized to him. "I am sorry."

"It's alright," He told her while patting her shoulder. Both of them would speak no more afterwards and simply watched the refugees taking whatever was left of

their pods outside, which were mostly foodstuffs. Not many had the luxury to bring any other kinds.

“Those refugees might be happy right now but they, too, will soon taste the reality here,” Naliss said weakly as she watched them.

Having nothing to add, he simply nodded along.

Because Gallo had too much spare time in his hands, he decided that he'd give another shot on the book that was given by Yudai. He did feel bitter as he opened the worn out book again. He was told that she was killed while defending the station. He personally never hated, let alone dislike, her. It was just that they didn't get along well. The book remained to be her last legacy.

Recalling Yudai inevitably made Gallo recall about the old man as well. He tried his best not to think of the issue. He opened the book and read through its table of contents page. The contents didn't look so ridiculous anymore.

Hours passed while reading the book. What grabbed his attention was what seemed to be personal messages written on edges of papers.

On a page, it said, "Men and women wield blades for different reasons. Men wield a blade for status and power. Women wield a blade for survival and fashion."

On another page, it said, "A sword is not an elegant weapon. The only purpose of a sword is to kill another being. Some idealists do tend to make swords art. They are wrong."

Reading through the messages, he eventually nodded off.

How many days passed more, Gallo had absolutely no idea. But, eventually, Gharyn had returned.

When he arrived at the port with Naliss, Gharyn casually greeted him. He looked and seemed fine. There was no sign of any torture.

"I am back," He said.

"Indeed, you are," Gallo replied with a grin.

"Can we go to the castle?"

Gallo glanced at Naliss and she gave him back a nod.

"I will call everyone," She replied.

It took roughly an hour for every vital members to be gathered in the office located on top of the castle.

"I have," Gharyn began to speak after inhaling a deep breath. "Good news and bad news. The good news is that they were willing to negotiate."

Naliss crossed her arms at this point, waiting to hear the bad news.

He continued, "The bad news is that they can't share anything at the moment."

"It's understandable really," Naliss responded with slight sarcasm. "They were beaten up pretty badly by the Nomads and the Blackbirds."

Gallo shrugged and everyone else was quiet.

"We have one choice left then," She continued. "We go outside."

As expected, everyone was surprised, even Gallo. For him though, it was excitement rather than a shock.

"It will be extremely dangerous," Gharyn responded firmly.

Licking lips, Gallo told the others, "Well, we don't have a choice, do we? We cannot cower forever."

"True," Naliss added. "I think all of us are feeling a little too safe at the moment. The urgency just isn't there. If so, we must create the urgency."

"None of us has been out there though," Gallo pointed out. "I am all for urgency but needless casualties is foolish."

"We don't have any other choice. We can't just sit here and wait forever," Naliss insisted and explained her plan. "We have some materials to work on. We will update and upgrade the Mystic and use it as our command ship."

The meeting was dismissed. Gallo, Karesindia, Gharyn, and few others decided to have a drink together at the inn.

"What do you think of Naliss?" Gharyn asked after they sat at a table. The inn was also running a small pub. Customers were scant but the pub was mainly run for the members of Gray Mist and its friends.

"What do you mean?" Gallo asked, innocently.

"Hey!" Jessamy exclaimed to hail them as he entered the pub. He was the only caretaker of the pub, so he did everything by himself in the pub. "Can I take your orders?"

"Hey, Jessamy, good to see you," Karesindia and Jessamy high-fived.

"Beer for me," She told him gleefully.

Nodding, "same for me," Gallo said.

"Do you have any brandy?" Gharyn asked and Jessamy nodded. "Brandy, it is."

Waran entered the pub and went straightly to Gallo and the others.

"I heard you guys were having a party. May I join?"

Gallo glanced at him. "You are still here?"

"Oh, come on, I said I am sorry for acting like a jerk."

He laughed out loud unpleasantly. "Fine, I am sorry. Join us."

"The usual for me, Jess."

"Jess?" Gallo twisted his head. "Who's Jess?"

"I call Jessamy Jess," Waran took a seat right next to Karesindia.

"Isn't Jess a female name though?" Karesindia said.

"Is it? I don't know," was Waran's answer.

"Guys, to the topic, what do you think of her?" Gharyn insisted getting an answer.

"Well? She's sexy," Gallo replied.

Gharyn's face twitched slightly. "I am not asking that kind of opinion, Gallo."

"What do you expect from me? I am just a simple man."

"But you are , at the same time, a leader of a planet."

"It's not like I wanted to be a leader. You guys made me."

Gharyn was about to talk back fiercely but Jessamy came back with two bottles of brandy and several beer tankards on a large plate which made everyone busy grabbing their shares. The commotion broke the conversation and Gharyn calmed down.

Karesindia finished a tankard of beer in no time and was taking up her second one.

"Well, don't expect much from me. I am just a simple man," Gallo muttered while drinking his first tankard.

"Alright then," Gharyn opened his bottle of brandy and drunk directly from the bottle. "I will give you my opinion. For one thing, she seems to boss around too much."

"Well, she doesn't belong to the Gray mist," Gallo replied," So, I can't really boss her around."

"She is not?"

"No."

"Whose side is she on then?"

"She's on Gallo's side," Kareindia explained, "She agreed to help Gallo and that was all."

"What are your thoughts about this, Gallo?" Gharyn asked.

"Well, as long as she helps me out, I've got no problem."

"How did she join you if you don't mind telling me the story."

It took Gallo five tankards to finish the story. He told Gharyn and Waran how he came to Cyan and how he ended Karma the third. By telling them Karma's story, he eventually told them about Naliss and Sae the little witch as well.

It was a long story, more like a tale perhaps, which everyone in the pub liked to listen to.

"Very interesting," Waran was tapping his finger on his glassware which was empty. "Sae the witch..., you said."

"The little witch."

"Excuse me?"

"It's not Sae the witch, but Sae the little witch."

"Yes.., yes," Gharyn responded with non-existence interest.

"So, she crafted the blade for you," He pointed out.

Gallo nodded.

"Can I have a look at it?"

Nodding again, Gallo took it off his belt and held it above the table. He could not have put it on the table as it'd crush the table.

Gharyn carefully inspected it without touching it. After some moments, he finally decided to touch it with a finger. The moment his index finger touched its surface, he felt as if he was being sucked into a wormhole. He tried to get out of whatever he was being sucked into. But every effort he had put was futile. When he was

about to give up, his dark surroundings became normal. Gallo had withdrawn his blade from him.

He had sweats all over his face and his breath was in labor.

"I saved your ass," Gallo said jokingly. However, Gharyn knew that his statement had a certain degree of truth in it. He wouldn't know what would have happened to his spirit if he was in such darkness for too long.

Whatever the blade was, it was clear that it was no ordinary blade. While he did not believe Gallo actually met the real witch, who logically would be thousands of years old at the least, it was clear that he did meet someone powerful.

Sweeping off his sweats off his forehead, Gharyn decided to rest the topic for the time being.

The party went quite plainly afterwards. Karesindia fell asleep after her ninth tankard. Waran, being an ESP, was capable of removing alcohol by force. Though he decided to enjoy the alcohol. Gharyn had left the pub a while ago.

Gallo had just finished his twelve beer tankard. The pub had some people and Jessamy was busy serving them. He decided that it was time for a nap.

After carrying Karesindia to her room, Gallo went to his and collapsed on his bed.

For the next few days, there was complete stillness around the city. The members of the Gray mist and the Mystic were fairly busy with upgrading what was going to be their flag vessel. Therefore, no one really wandered outside and the streets were virtually empty.

Meanwhile, they renamed the Mystic to the Hope. They were unaware of a fact that there was a colony vessel named "The Hope".

It was, then, transferred to Gallo's command.

"Impressive," Gallo said in slight awe. He and Gharyn were in a docking bay of the Osprey. The Hope was a spaceship and it would not survive in any gravity.

Therefore, the upgrade had to be done in space, in the Osprey's station.

"I didn't take a good look at it last time," Gallo remarked while looking over the ship, "Now I can see that it is one handsome vessel."

"I must inform you of something though," Gharyn's voice was sincere. "Do you remember that the younger ones could not start this ship when you were getting them out of the station in the Nomads' space?"

Gallo still remembered. He didn't give much thoughts about it though.

"The mainframe of this ship is password protected," He continued, "Not only that a certain part of the mainframe is encrypted."

"Isn't that normal?" Gallo asked innocently. He really didn't know about shipcraft.

"No, it is not. A ship's mainframe may be password protected but a master password should give full access to all portion of the mainframe. We do have the master password."

Gallo shrugged. "What does that mean?"

Gharyn paused for a moment before he continued.

"This ship's true name is Kal."

"Kal?"

"And the date this ship was created, at least according to the ship's core data, dates back to A.D. 9599."

Gallo frowned as he tried to do the math. He couldn't quite make out the exact number. What he did realize, however, was that it did not make sense.

"It doesn't make sense, does it," Gharyn laughed casually.

"Was that a joke?"

"No."

Sagging, Gallo scratched his head.

Gharyn continued, "According to some of the encrypted data we've managed to open over the years, the ship's creator was someone named Dr. Cezary. I did my share of researches on the man. But I couldn't find much except for few facts. What's interesting is that he was the inventor of the initial shielding technology as well as the A.C.M. reactor."

"So, what does that mean?" Gallo was really lost. "Spill it out, man."

"It doesn't mean much on its own. I thought you should know its history and secrets as the captain of it."

After telling Gallo the password, Gharyn strongly stated that Naliss was not trustworthy. Gallo nodded along. He wasn't going to argue. He didn't entirely trust Naliss, either. At the same time, he had no reason not to trust her.

A few days later, everything was prepared for Gallo to leave Cyan and the nebula. The Hope could hold fifteen fighters in its bay. The ship needed approximately forty people for optimal operations as well as manning the fighters. Ormvor was

assigned a second-in-command. Kareindia was not in the team as it was suggested that a veteran pilot was needed on Cyan. Waran was an unexpected addition to the ship.

The assigned crews gathered at the station and they were undergoing medical checks before being greenlit for the voyage.

"There will be enough food for years," Gharyn explained to Gallo. "Your task will be to establish any kind of contact with an outside civilization."

"I thought we needed to contact Andromeda union?" Gallo replied.

"Yes, but if you can, try to find out what exactly happened to Freedom colony as well as the solar system. Rumors are not something we can rely on."

Gallo nodded in agreement.

"I wish you luck now," Gharyn told him as he bid farewell.

Gallo slept on the Hope on that night to familiarize himself before take-off. He was given the captain's quarter which was a spacious room with luxurious items such as a builtin steam shower booth and a dedicated food storage.

"A captain, eh," He said to himself as he casually slacked his time off.

The Hope left Cyan the next day. It was whole new experience for Gallo not to travel the nebula in a fighter craft.

"Are you excited?" Gallo asked people on bridge. Apparently, they were pretty excited as well.

"Not once have we seen naked space. It's pretty existing," Ormvor replied and others agreed.

Only after six hours, they were approaching edge of the nebula.

Everyone on the bridge stayed dead silent as the constant thundering of the nebula was dying off: They were out of the nebula.

"The sensor readings are so clear. It's hard to believe. We could spot objects light years ahead of us," Ormvor reported.

Soon after the comment, bare space was being displayed on all possible screens on bridge. Words simply could not explain anything for the moment. Everyone was in awe. They stood still on bridge and looked up and down. Walls of whole bridge had been turned into a single holographic screen. The bridge crew were literally standing in middle of space. They were in awe for many minutes before finally someone spoke.

"Where to go?"

Everyone came to focus.

"Ah...," Gallo blinked his eyes to snap out of it. "Yes, we are going to Freebie."

"Roger."

Then he went into his quarter and fell into his chair. He closed eyes and recalled bare space he had just seen. He soon fell asleep in his chair.

The Hope was a fast vessel. It had taken them only four days to reach vicinity of Freebie. Meanwhile, crew moral was outstanding. Everyone was very much pleased to spend their time in the ship. The ship had advanced facilities that assisted in daily needs for people, which were not available on fighters of the nebula. Especially, existence of a cafeteria helped greatly for keeping moral up.

Gallo was asked to come to bridge when they finally arrived at their destination. "There is nothing but debris," Ormvor concluded, "I am afraid Freebie is really gone."

Gallo and others had never been out of the nebula. Thus, they had no attachment to other civilizations. Furthermore, being pirates, they were used to death. Therefore, no one on bridge was shocked to face the reality.

"Where to go now?" Ormvor asked Gallo who was casually sitting in his captain's chair.

"How long would it take to reach Freedom colony?"

"Aren't we supposed to contact Andromeda union?"

"Yes, but I would like to find out truth of few rumors we've encountered, just to clear up."

Ormvor didn't object. "I understand," He nodded. "Setting a course to Freedom colony. Estimated time is about fifteen days."

While on their way to Freedom colony, they had encountered countless “organic” debris. They insisted calling them "organic debris" rather than "frozen corpse".

"Hail, Gallo," Bartenders of cafeteria greeted him as he entered.

The cafeteria was quite crowded.

"Lively as usual, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have beer?"

A tankard of beer was served to him right away. Since it was zero gravity though, there was a cap on it with a straw.

"Thanks."

He noticed Waran at a table by window. He was having his "usual" and was looking into the space. Gallo approached him.

"Mind if I join?"

Without looking back at him, he simply nodded.

Tasting his beer, he joined Waran in looking at space activity.

“This is too peaceful,” Waran remarked.

"Do you not want peace?"

Waran remained silent to Gallo's question.

"I think everyone wants peace," Gallo said.

"But peace makes people weak," Waran answered with a sense of resentment.

Thinking about what Waran said, Gallo finished up his beer.

"You are probably right."

Waran scoffed. "You never put up a fight."

"Yeah, well, whatever."

Having said that, Gallo left the cafeteria.

Fifteen days were short for them. They were used to this kind of situation. Gallo spent his spare time reading Yudai's book.

At their destination, they were greeted with cruel reality.

"What the hell....," Gallo frowned as he looked at gigantic wracks floating in lifeless cold space.

"The sensor is counting few hundred wracks. The largest one is almost as large as Cyan in size and mass," Ormvor reported.

"So, the colony was indeed destroyed."

Suddenly, a beeping occurred.

"One of wracks is.... Life signatures are being detected in one of wracks! It's huge!" Ormvor exclaimed.

"Huge?"

"At least a thousand life signatures."

"Can you contact them?"

"Actually, they are trying to contact us."

"What are you waiting for then? Put them on screen."

A middle-aged man appeared on a screen. He did not seem to be in any visual distress on surface.

"My Goddess!" He shouted. "Are we dreaming?"

"We are the Nebula pirates," Gallo spoke to him.

The man rolled his eyes as if he was trying to understand what he had just said.

"The Nebula pirates?" He sounded as if he didn't know who the Nebula pirates were, and then he suddenly startled. "The Nebula pirates! We are doomed!"

Gallo attempted to calm him down. "No, no, we mean no harm. What the hell happened to here?"

The man covered his face. "The aliens.., we had been under siege by them for months!" He, then, shook his head repeatedly. "They finally managed to destroy the colony..."

"How did you manage to survive?"

The man became progressively disoriented. It took some time for him to answer Gallo's question.

"I am Egma, the chief engineer of the colony. We survived because the whole deck managed to disjoint in time before final explosion. But shockwaves damaged the whole deck severely."

Egma looked behind few times nervously.

"We... won't last long in here. Air is running out."

"How much air do you have?"

"Only about a month worth... Our oxygen generator is beyond repair."

"And food supply?"

"We have plenty... At least much more than how much air we have left."

Egma startled again and there was some sort of dull sound coming behind him.

"What is going on over there? You seem very nervous."

"Some of us.... have gone insane. It's... It's... the Hell in here. Please get us out of here!"

Ormvor quickly approached Gallo and whispered to him.

"We do not have the capacity to take one thousand people."

"How many can we take?" Gallo whispered back.

"...Twenty max... Remember, we are on a very small corvette."

Gallo sighed. "Listen," He said to Egma, "We can only take twenty."

Egma didn't seem to be surprised. "Yes..., I figured. Your ship's signature is very small. It's probably a corvette. I tell you what. Could you come back with means of getting us out of here?"

Gallo looked at Ormvor again who was calculating distances and days to Cyan.

"It takes us eighteen days to reach Cyan, thus thirty six days to come back here,"

Ormvor told him, "And this ship is the fastest ship we have. The freighters we have is a lot slower."

"How many days do you have exactly?" Gallo asked Egma.

"Thirty one days... unless something bad happens."

Gallo glanced at Ormvor again, and Ormvor returned with a shrug.

They didn't have enough time.

He didn't know what to say anymore. There was in fact nothing to say but to say sorry. However, he wasn't going to just say sorry. He just couldn't do it.

Egma, being a chief engineer, was no fool.

"Listen," He told Gallo, "I don't know who you are but you are our only chance of survival. I have a proposal to make."

"How many people can your ship take?"

Gallo glanced at Ormvor, and Ormvor quickly whispered.

"Twenty max."

"We can take thirty," Gallo replied.

"Gallo -" Ormvor tried to speak but was cut by him.

"We can take thirty five," Gallo said again to amend his previous statement.

Ormvor remained content.

"I have a sibling..., a sister," As if Egma was proud of his sibling, he smiled proudly.

"I am very glad that at least I can save her."

"I am sorry," Gallo dropped his head.

"Don't be, really," Egma shrugged softly. "It is not even your fault in the first place anyway... I -"

Some kind of violent bumping was heard from behind. Egma, at this time, did not startle and continued speaking.

"I will gather younger engineers, thirty five of them, including my sister. I will send them to your ship. Take them to safety. That is ... all I ask you."

Egma quickly pulled out a tablet and directed its screen to Gallo. A picture of a woman was displayed on its small screen.

"My sister looks like this. She won't know that we cannot be saved. I won't tell her. Make sure that... she won't find out anytime soon. I will tell her that you are going back to Cyan to bring a transport ship to save rest of us."

Gallo closed his eyes. "It may still be possible to save all of you."

"It is a very slim chance, but he is right," Ormvor spoke up. "Though It seems some kind of rampage is going on there."

Egma hesitated to admit but he eventually nodded.

"Yes, some of us have gone insane and killing each other. Rest of us who are still sane have locked ourselves up."

"Fight them," Gallo suggested.

"Excuse me?"

"Fight them. Kill them. The more you kill, the less oxygen will be consumed."

"You are serious," Egma said.

"I am," He replied firmly.

"I will... consider your idea..."

Meanwhile, back on Cyan, Gharyn and Naliss were having a debate in Naliss' office.

"Say what?"

Shocked by Naliss' idea, Gharyn frowned.

"You will make this only harder if you do push that," He added.

"I am only trying to make it easier for him," Naliss struck her upper body forward Gharyn. "You do not understand him at all."

"And I suppose you do?"

"Yes, I do."

He sighed. "What you are proposing basically will result political affairs. He is not a kind of man who favors politics."

"I am aware of that. However, if he aims to climb higher in command, it will be needed."

He paused for a moment and he saw Naliss' point, and she was right. He hadn't known Gallo for a long time. However, it was easy for him or anyone else to realize his characters. Gallo was a warrior, not a scholar.

He sighed and turned away from Naliss who was behind her desk in her office. Without saying another word, he left her office.

Gallo, Ormvor, and others were ready to receive them in a cargo bay. They were armed just in case.

Finely dressed crew of thirty five soon entered the cargo bay through an anti-freeze rubber hose which was just large enough for a grown man to crawl through.

It was easy to distinguish Egma's sister fairly easily as she was rather uniquely dressed: a firm looking woman dressed in a dark blue uniform with a black bob hair style.

She looked around and noticed Gallo and others. She approached them at once and struck her hand for a handshake to Ormvor.

"You must be in charge. I am Egna."

"Eh....," Ormvor stepped back, evading Egna's handshake, and pointed at Gallo.

"No, I am not. This guy is."

"Oh....," Egna looked at Gallo. "Oh! Hello!"

Smiling bitterly, Gallo had a handshake with her.

Egna wasted no time and made a quick demand to depart immediately.

Furthermore, she asked to be in charge of the ship's engine room. While Ormvor was still skeptical about Egna's true intention, there wasn't any reason to reject her request as the Hope did not have any true engineers onboard.

One of her engineers, named Oleru, request a meeting with Gallo. He added that it was urgent.

His request was granted and he met with Gallo and Ormvor in the captain's quarter.

"I know the truth, the chief told me," Oleru said to them. "But Egna does not know. She will find out soon enough when she finishes calculating the ship's speed and distance we have to travel."

"Perhaps, I shouldn't have put her in engineering," Gallo lamented.

"If you refused her request, she could have gotten suspicious anyway. I say this was inevitable," Ormvor said.

"What do you suggest we do?" Gallo asked.

"I say...," Oleru had a certain hesitation in his voice. "We put her sleep as soon as she finds out until we reach your destination."

"That's harsh. Is that really necessary?" Gallo shrugged.

"You don't understand. They are not just a brother and a sister. They are lovers."

Ormvor narrowed his eyes while Gallo didn't seem to understand.

"Lovers? But they are siblings," Gallo replied. "Aren't they?"

Gallo was a pirate. He had never had anything to do with society and more importantly relationships. In other words, he was ignorant when it came to such issues.

"Gallo," Ormvor informed him. "It is called incest."

"Incest?" He brought up an electronic dictionary and searched for the word, and he soon found out what it means. "I see..."

"If you give us few tranquilizer guns... or even stun batons..."

"Are you absolutely sure about this?" Gallo asked firmly, and Oleru nodded.

"Ormvor, give him what he wants."

Ormvor nodded. "Follow me please." And they left the captain's quarter.

Once being left alone, he yawned big and sighed. He preferred being left alone to be honest.

He eventually fell asleep. When he woke up and entered the bridge, it was eight hours later and he was informed that Enga was put asleep after she literally rampaged.

"I see," was all he said.

Personally, he couldn't care less whatever happened to some woman he had just met. Nonetheless, he paid a visit to where she was being held.

Oleru and few others were in the room, and Enga seemed to be unconscious on a bed.

"Hello, Gallo," Oleru rubbed his eyes and greeted him. "It was a mess, a big mess."

"That bad?" Gallo casually replied.

"Yep, we plan to put her in a capsule and let her be unconscious until we arrive at your destination."

"I see."

Besides Eгна's event, they had a flawless trip back to Cyan.

After Gharyn received a long report from Ormvor, he proceeded to meet Eгна who was, by this time, released from a capsule. Eгна had lost her vigor ever since she came out of a capsule. Her eyes had also lost its focus as if she was drugged. Gharyn was asked to check on her.

He had placed his palm on her forehead.

"She's fine physically, but her mental integrity is shattered."

"Will she recover?" Oleru asked.

"Most likely with time being... I am not completely certain however."

Eгна was then placed back into a capsule for her own safety.

"So, you are engineers."

Oleru nodded. "Yes, we all are."

"There are a lot of works to be done in here if you don't mind."

"Yeah, I can see that. We will start working on it."

In the mean time, Gallo was preparing to take off again. This time, it was to save Eग्ma. It was a hopeless attempt, but he just had to go.

"It's a waste of time if you go," Gharyn said after visiting Gallo in his quarter on the ship.

Nevertheless, Gallo was already preparing to depart.

"But I gave them my word. I should go."

"You don't have to," Gharyn insisted. "And they will understand."

Gallo paused and had some thoughts. He believed that Gharyn was correct. No one would blame him for not going, but it had become something personal.

"I will go regardless."

Gharyn sighed deeply and realized there was no way to stop him.

"Very well. I wish you good luck."

The Hope went on the journey again. Some of the engineers agreed to come along since the ship lacked engineers. A steady trip, it was, until they reached vicinity of the destroyed colony.

Ormvor's face turned pale as he tried to understand what was going on with the ship's sensors. When Gallo realized something was going on, Ormvor's face was as white as a face could possibly be.

"Gallo..., it's them." Ormvor's voice was shaking vividly.

"Them? Who's them?" Gallo was in the captain's chair at the moment.

"Them..., the aliens. They are swarming the wreck!"

Gallo had never faced the aliens before. Therefore, he didn't quite grasp their destructive capabilities.

"How many are there?" Gallo asked Ormvor rather casually.

"Sensors are having a trouble counting, but I can tell you that there are more than ten thousands."

Gallo's easy-going face slowly turned into something ugly.

Ten thousands, it wasn't something to scoff at.

Gallo hastily stood up. "Turn around!" He then recalled what he came for. "Wait! Can you check the wreck? Any life signatures?"

"I am trying to scan the wreck, but there are just so many interference," Ormvor responded.

Gallo bit his lips.

"We've got to scan that wreck. Get closer!"

"Are you insane? Didn't I tell you that the aliens are swarming the wreck?"

Gallo ran to the exit. "I will lead a fighter squad. I will earn time. You scan."

"Wait, Gallo! You are the captain. You mustn't leave the bridge!"

"Ormvor!" Gallo bellowed back, and Ormvor startled by his roar. "It is better than doing nothing, remember that!"

Then he left the bridge.

As Gallo entered a fighter bay, Karesindia and others were waiting. Yes, Karesindia did tag along this time.

"We've been waiting for you," Karesinda smiled. "Let's go."

Gallo nodded firmly.

Gallo and his squadron were risking everything, for it was their first time battling in open and clear space. Their primary tactic in the Nebula had always been Hit & Run, but it wasn't a visible tactic in clear space.

And Karesinda was the one who brought this up.

"Gallo, how will we fight? We have never fought anything in clear space before."

True, their tactics were mainly, no, always hit & run. Even though Gallo as well as others were veteran pilots, it was uncertain how they'd perform in clear, open, space. Furthermore, they weren't fighting ordinary opponents. They were going to fight the unknown.

"We will manage, somehow," was Gallo's answer.

However, honestly, he also had no idea how he'd have to deal with them.

Gallo's squadron left the ship's fighter bay and spread out immediately.

Numerous unidentified objects were swarming the wreck seemed not to be bothered by Gallo's fighters at the moment.

Karesindia opened a secure channel to Gallo's fighter.

"Gallo, this is Karesindia."

Gallo narrowed his eyes as he noticed it was a secure channel.

"Go on," He replied.

"Gallo, I must say this is a suicide mission. There are thousands of them..."

"Better than doing nothing."

"But, Gallo, we may all die accomplishing nothing."

"Still better than nothing."

"Well, you are the leader."

Gallo frowned. "What are you trying to say?"

"Nothin', let's go."

He sighed and opened a channel to his squadron.

"Our mission is simple. We distract those things long enough for our ship to approach and do something."

"What will be our tactics?" A pilot asked.

"Draw as much attention as possible and initiate evasive maneuvers. We can't take them. We just need to buy time."

As his squadron loosely approached the swarm, it suddenly spread out from the wreck and started to attack Gallo's squadron.

It became quickly obvious that there were simply too many to handle. His squadron was consisted of only fifteen fighters.

Few pilots were instantly shot down as a battle commenced.

"They are way too fast! I can't catch them, they are catching us!" A pilot shouted desperately. "We have to get out of here!"

Gallo, too, was having a hard time dodging them. They appeared to be some sort of drones. No life was detected from them.

More pilots went down, and at some point, the squad channel became quiet. Gallo was too busy to check on the others, but after feeling something had awfully gone wrong, he asked if anyone was there. After a long silence, two pilots answered back saying that they retreated and keeping a safe distance from the swarm.

"Karesindia, are you there?"

There was no reply.

"Karesindia, do you copy?" Gallo said again, and there was no answer.

"Karesindia! Do you copy!"

There was no answer.

There was no window in the cockpit, and the ship's sensors were going mad with so many hostile objects to track. He had hoped that Karesindia was too busy to answer or perhaps too far away. He hoped so even though he feared for the worst.

"Everyone, if you hear me, retreat to the ship at once!"

There was no reply.

When Gallo had barely managed to returned to the ship, there were merely two fighters. Out of fifteen fighters, only three survived, including Gallo's fighter. What was more: There wasn't Karesindia's fighter craft.

Gallo stood vacantly before the empty fighter bay. It was a result of his decision.

'*You are the leader.*' He recalled what Karesindia told him.

He started to howl, out of anger and resentment.

Perhaps, doing nothing was better than trying to do something.

Perhaps, doing nothing was better than doing something.

His fists had made few dents on his fighter, and the last remaining two members of his squadron was trying to hold him back from hurting himself further.

Before he could hurt himself more, the vessel started to lose balance with countless loud sound of being hammered from outside. He didn't feel like it, but he went to the bridge anyway.

Ormvor was on the bridge, doing nothing, and neither was rest of the crew.

"You are back," Ormvor said hopelessly.

The ship was being attacked by the aliens and the ship stood no chance and was being torn apart.

"There is nothing we can do. This is it," Ormvor said to Gallo.

Perhaps, doing nothing was better than doing something.

Gallo walked toward a console and sent out a SOS signal.

"SOS? What for? It's not like there is anyone out there." Ormvor said, again, with a hopeless voice.

"Still better than doing nothing," Gallo said while realizing how ironic his statement was.

Ormvor said no more, and rest of crew also remained silent. Gallo simply stood and did nothing after sending out a SOS signal.

It could have been minutes or maybe an hour or so. Their ship remained intact still, but majority of ship's systems were destroyed including life support. They were simply waiting to die.

Despair hazed their mind. There was no hope.

At one point, to their surprise, their only functioning sensor started to pick up friendly signals.

"A fleet is heading this way, it looks like. I cannot tell clearly with the current situation though," Ormvor read the reading. There was no hope in his voice however.

In a matter of minutes, A voice sounded through the dark bridge of theirs. Power was lost a while ago.

"This is captain Cecilia. I've received your distress call."

"A small fleet of sixty two corvette class warships," A bridge crew who was reading the sensor said. "They are hunting down the aliens and they are doing it well."

However, none of them on the bridge felt like they were saved. No one cried of joy. No one else said anything after.

Gallo's ship was eventually towed into the wreck to be repaired. It was the only place large enough for the ship to be docked for manual repairs.

Once the ship was towed to the wreck and was docked, Gallo and his crew had a chance to see what really happened inside.

Few hundreds of people were dead by either gunshots or suffocation. Hunger didn't seem to be one of the causes as they found plenty of frozen food supplies. The wreck seemed to be a living quarter before it was detached from Freedom colony. The living environment was alright. It had artificial sun, trees, and grass. It was just that, being a wreck, it no longer had oxygen supply.

"Are you Gallo?"

An average, not too tall or too small, woman flanked by few officers stood before Gallo and his men.

"Yes, I am."

"As said, I am Captain Cecilia."

She wasn't a beautiful woman but she wasn't ugly, either. Her facial features were very distinctive and she was rather handsome than beautiful.

"Thank you for rescuing us." Gallo and his men bowed to her, sincerely.

"We will repair your ship to a usable state. You will be on your own from there."

"... I see."

Ormvor, who had been with Gallo to explore the wreck, stepped forward and asked Cecilia.

"How did you draw away the aliens?"

She slowly turned her attention to Ormvor. Everything about her seemed to be slow-paced, but her reaction was somehow... instant. It didn't make much sense. Gallo knew one thing for certain though. It was that he would have a hard time fighting such an opponent in melee; he was confident that the woman knew swordsmanship.

"We've developed fitting weapons for them. The aliens are a machine race and their means of offense is drones equipped with hybrid weapons dealing EM against humans and thermal against others or objects. They are fast and nimble. What we developed was basically a more revolved point defense lasers with much improved tracking."

One of her officers handed Ormvor a disk.

She explained, "It contains a schematic for the weapon, and blueprints of its components."

"... Who are 'we'?" Gallo, scratching his chin, asked.

Cecilia slowly, yet instantly, turned her attention to Gallo.

"There are forces who wish to repel the aliens. They were survivors from everywhere. We've constructed a base hidden from everyone."

"We are the Nebula pirates," Gallo said firmly. "We are seeking for friends in order to fight against them."

"If you need friends, I am not the one you should ask."

"Who should I ask then? I know no one."

"Seek out a colony vessel, the Hope. They are also looking for friends."

"The ... Hope?" Gallo and Ormvor said at the same time. It was also the name of their vessel.

"I have another question if you don't mind," Ormvor spoke.

Cecilia sighed indifferently. "Please make it the last."

"How did you get here so fast? We had nothing on our sensors, even not on long-range ones."

"Portal engine."

Ormvor twisted his head. "Pardon?"

"Portal engine."

"What is..."

Ormvor was soon cut by her explanation.

"We use portals to go from one spot to another. I suppose I should give you a disk about it as well."

The captain excused herself after handing another disk for the portal engine.

Neither Gallo nor Ormvor had proper knowledge to understand the disks. In the end, the disks went to the engineers who were originally rescued from the wreck. They were able to understand the disks although even they had little clues on the second disk containing the data for the portal engine.

"The turret is basically a heavily modified point-to-point defense system," They said about the first disk.

"The portal engine or whatever it is called, this one is weird. We don't understand how it works. It's very... surreal," was what they said about the second disk.

Regardless, they were given weapons and new means of transportation. They had to bring the disks to Cyan in order to fully understand it.

Gallo had some spare time while the ship was being repaired. Therefore, he decided to explore the wreck a little. Oxygen was back in place. The original residents passed away due to lack of oxygen, but the air supply system was in place. Power was not however. Without a central power source, it was only a matter of time before backup batteries would give up. With arrival of Cecilia's fleet, they had plugged in few backup batteries to get the place up and running.

He was looking for a certain corpse, Eгна's brother. It didn't take him long to find his body. His body was found on the command post of the wreck where he lied dead by his chair. His stiffened body was trying to grab something in air with his tongue sticking out.

"It must have been agonizing death," He mumbled.

His quiet morning was soon disturbed by Captain Cecilia and her crew.

"Excuse us," She said, and then her crew started to dismantle whatever they could in the vicinity.

Frowning, he inquired, "What do you think you are doing?"

"Salvaging," She replied indifferently.

"Are you going to disturb the dead?"

It was ironic because Gallo also looted the dead back on Pluto on his mission.

"Resources are hard to come by. I do not want to disturb the dead, but this must be done."

Sighing and sagging, he understood her point. Looking at the captain, she worked like a clockwork and her crews seemed very well drilled.

"Say..., how long have you been a leader?" He carefully asked her since she did not appear to like being talked to.

She replied eventually while overseeing the savage operations. "I'd say a long time. Why do you ask such a question?"

He said no more.

"Make sure you salvage the consoles. I will be back." She turned her attention to Gallo at last. "Let's go somewhere else."

They were having a walk around the area.

"I've lost lots of friends," Gallo confessed. It was something he'd never say to his people. Cecilia wasn't a part of his people and, thus, she was somehow easier to talk with sensitive topics.

"So have I," Cecilia replied firmly.

"What ... makes you keep going on?"

"What do you want me to say?"

It took a while for him to admit and say out loud. "My mistakes get people killed. I've lost my precious friends due to mistakes on my part."

There was a short moment of complete silence between them.

"Doing something is better than nothing," She answered at last, and her answer made him startle seemingly.

She continued, "There are three kind of leaders, one that fights on front, one that fights in middle, and one that fights behind his people. Which one are you?"

"I fight on front, I guess."

"Those who fight on front generally tend to have a temper issue."

"That is... Not what I wanted to know."

"You are afraid to make decisions due to having your friends dead by your mistake."

He startled, again.

"Blame yourself all you want. It won't change a fact that your comrades are dead, and it won't also change a fact that you are still their leader."

He remained silent.

"Do what you want. Whatever choices you make, you will have regrets. You will always question yourself if your decision was for the better."

When Gallo got back and was heading to enter the Hope, he spotted Waran by the entrance.

"Don't blame yourself." He told Gallo. "It could have been avoided," He said while shrugging. "But none of us could have known their capabilities."

Ormvor was on the bridge, talking to Captain Cecilia via a screen.

"We've repaired your ship barely enough to be able to sail again."

"Thank you."

"I've uploaded the last known location of the Hope. That is all I can do for you."

"How would we contact you?"

"You don't. We will meet again if fate allows."

Ormvor sighed. "I see."

"Spread the technology. Mankind needs them."

"I understand."

"Farewell."

Then main screen went back to displaying space.

"Where is Gallo?" Ormvor asked a crewman, and he shook his head.

Tired, he struck his back deeply into the captain's chair and closed his eyes for a nap.

Everyone was too quiet for their journey back to Cyan.

Gallo never said any words during the journey, and everyone left him alone.

He had lots of thoughts in his head.

What was required to be a leader.

What was needed to be a leader.

And what was to be like a proper leader

And what was like to feel his close friends die.

Gallo was in his quarter, quietly lying on his bed. He had his arms as pillow and was staring at the ceiling.

Although he remained calm, there was small tears dropping through his cheek.

"Embrek..., Karesinda..."

He started to frown. Then he was trying not to sob.

"My closest friends..."

But it was futile. He covered his face with his hand and started to cry out loud.

"My friends... !"

He cried out loud. He started to wail.

"I am sorry...! I am sorr... !"

Meanwhile..., Ormvor was looking at Gallo through a surveillance monitor. He didn't mean to spy on him. He was just worried. Looking at his suffering, he struck his back deeply into his chair and closed his eyes. Gallo's sorrow moaning started to get to him as well because he, too, lost friends.

From his closed eyelids, tears began to slip through and start to float around.

- Fin