

[Alien arc] [5] [The Nebula pirates] [12329]

Rev 2.0 (Last updated April 5 2018)

"Gallo...."

He was hearing voices... No, it was rather a series of echo.

"Boss...."

"Wake up...."

"Wake up!"

His eyes opened instantly from the shouting. He realized he was on his bed and was taking a nap apparently.

"Finally, geez, boss, you wouldn't wake up," Embrek complained.

Gallo was gazing at ceiling vacantly for a moment before his eyes regained focus.

"How long have I slept?" Sweeping cold sweats off his forehead, he asked Embrek.

He began to count his fingers. "About four hours, boss. You are late for the gathering."

That reminded him. "Oh, shit!" He jumped off his bed and grabbed his red coat off his chair on his way out.

"Have fun, boss," Embrek waved briefly at Gallo who had just left the room.

'The gathering' was a conference between the six leaders of the Gray Mist. It was held perhaps once every year. It was a rather important part of activities among leaders. He made every effort to rush.

"Am I late?!"

Darkan glanced at him. "Well, by six minutes. I wouldn't say you are late. Come on in. We were about to start."

Gallo quickly rearranged his clothes and donned his coat. Clearing his throat, he joined at a round table where the other leaders gathered.

Making sure that Gallo was ready, Darkan spoke.

"Well, let's begin. Unfortunately, I do not have good news this time," said Darkan.

"As you know, the aliens have been harassing trade routes and small fleets for some time. Recently, there has been a report that a very large number of them were detected in the neutral zone."

The neutral zone sat between Sol system and Andromeda cluster. It acted as a buffer zone for the two factions and was a lawless zone. Freedom colony sat in heart of the zone and provided a place to live peacefully for those who didn't wish to tie themselves to any either faction.

"How many are we talking about?" Kazimir inquired. He was the second leader of the Gray mist.

"Well...," Darkan scratched his chin. "Reports say their sensors were unable to count their number. So, I guess over billions."

Uneasy silence struck at the table.

"O..., over a billion?" Kazimir became pale and so did others except Darkan.

"It's been confirmed," Darkan said firmly, stating that there was no lie. It was hard to even comprehend how large a fleet would be in billions. "Thankfully, for some reason, the aliens have not entered the Nebula at all. Maybe, we are luckier ones."

Calvin, who was the fourth leader of the Gray mist, was sweating hard on his forehead. Having a hard time understanding the size of a possible opponent, he wiped his forehead and cleared his throat before speaking. "What are we going to do?"

"What can we do anyway," Yudai talked back at Calvin before Darkan could. "The Nebula pirates have no strong leader. We are shattered."

Darkan nodded in agreement. "Yudai is quite right. There is nothing much we can do. Thankfully, we are protected by the Nebula. So, we won't at least have to worry about them."

For the moment, that was.

Finally, there was Pikkal who didn't speak at all during the meeting. He was the fifth leader of the Gray mist.

The meeting ended soon enough. It was held to let others know of the situation outside, not to find a solution to help others. As Yudai pointed out, the Nebula was heavily divided and was certainly in no condition to help others, especially those outside of their comfort zone.

Regardless, For Gallo, he simply couldn't care less. Having grown up within the Gallo mist all his life, the outside world was a faraway world to him. Just as he turned away from the table to leave, Darkan caught him.

"Gallo, the old man has a mission for you," He said.

Nodding along, he left the conference room.

"You called me, sir?" Gallo entered the old man's chamber with a mask.

"Gallo, my child. I've got a mission for you," The old man, as usual, sounded passively cheerful. "This mission for ourselves," He added.

Gallo narrowed his eyes. "I see. How many are we talking about?"

"A little more than one hundred," The old man shrugged as he continued. "But who knows."

The Gray mist did not reproduce by themselves. And, being mercenaries, their numbers slowly decreased over time. Therefore, they adopted orphans. This was also how Gallo joined the Gray mist.

"We received a distress call from Cyan. An orphanage is looking to release some of their children," He said.

"Why a distress call?"

The old man scratched his chin slowly as if he was accessing his memory. "I believe Cyan is currently ruled by Karma the third. He's known to be ruthless and cruel. Perhaps, that has something to do with it. Alas, I do not know the full story, child."

"I see."

"My assumption is that they are overloaded. After all Cyan is receiving a large number of refugees due to the aliens."

People wouldn't dare to enter the nebula without a guide. And, even with a guide, there was a high chance of being killed in middle of nowhere by pirates. Therefore, they chose Cyan, a planet that was located on edge of nebula.

"You will have our only freight vessel. Bring it to Cyan and receive the children kindly."

It was a long way to Cyan. It would take two weeks just to get there. That was if one did not lose his way.

Gallo sagged his shoulder and sighed. "Two weeks... We are going to be bored to death." He turned around and headed to exit.

"Gallo," The old man called him quietly.

"Yes, sir?" Without turning around, he answered.

"Do you want to help the others?" By 'the others', he meant those who were facing the aliens.

"I couldn't care less, sir. I simply don't care," he said. "I am just a simple man who hates big responsibilities."

"There are decisions that only a simple man can make, Gallo."

Simply nodding along, he left the chamber.

Gallo was at a docking bay. He made calls to his members to gather. Within ten minutes, everyone was there. He gave them a mission briefing.

"Maybe, we could install some entertainment machines on the freighter," Embrek suggested.

"We can't waste too much time for preparation, you know," Gallo replied.

"Three hours, boss. Just three hours." Despite of saying three, he stuck up four fingers of his.

Gallo, too, didn't want to have nothing to do for two weeks. And three hours sounded great for a nap.

"Okay, I will be back in three hours. See you guys soon then."

Embrek and the others had turned cargo bay of the freight vessel into a bar. They even took Jessamy. He was the only one in the station who knew the password for liquor vault.

Normally, Gallo would have prevented them from taking Jessamy. Alas, he didn't care to look into the bar and simply took off when he returned.

When he finally entered the bar, he had to give himself a facepalm. People of the Gray mist loved drinking. During most of their free time, they had drinks. He could only imagine the nightmare this was going to cause. But it was too late to go back because Gallo docked at the freight vessel two days after they departed from the station.

"Oh well," Gallo sighed and sat at a stool. "Jessamy, I guess you are with us for some time."

He quickly made a cocktail and skillfully slid it to Gallo. "You've got that, right."

Gallo's bracelet vibrated.

"Gallo, here."

"Boss," Zafir reported. "A small squadron is approaching."

Gallo and the others in the bar seized whatever they were doing at the moment. A silence filled the bar as result.

"They claim that they are from CoR. I am opening their communication channel through the bar," Zafir said.

After a short moment of buzzing, a voice sounded.

"Greetings, I am Dacre from the Claw of the Ra. What business do you have here, the Gray mist?"

Gallo raised his right wrist to his mouth where his communication bracelet was worn.

"This is Gallo of the Gray mist. We are on our way to a mission. Just let us go."

"Do you mind if we check out your cargo bay?"

A small vein appeared on Gallo's forehead. "Are you saying you don't believe your ally?"

"Well, whatever is going on in that freighter of yours, I'd like to join. We've been out here for four months. We are dying here of boredom."

Jessamy quietly looked at Gallo, giving a sign of approval. He was the master of the bar. He was the boss at the moment. Sighing, Gallo answered.

"Fine, dock and you will see."

Soon enough, Dacre's squadron docked at the freighter. As soon as Dacre and his men saw what was going on, joy filled their faces.

"Good God, a bar?" Dacre looked around and the members of the Gray Mist looked at them back with unseen hostility. "I mean no harm here. Just let us have some drinks." He quickly added his plea, "Please."

Gallo clapped his hands to gain attention. "Guys, give them a break for now." Dacre and his men filled Jessamy's counter. After quickly ordering drinks and having some, they howled in joy.

"God, I feel alive again!" Dacre screamed.

Gallo was apparently sitting next to him. He stuck out his hand for a hand shake.

"Gallo, here," He said.

Shaking his hand, "Dacre," He replied.

"So, four months in dark, eh?"

"Yes," He turned his stool around to face the crowd. They were minding their own business already. Some of Dacre's members already joined them.

"You've a nice bar going on here. Is this a part of your mission?"

"Hell, no," Gallo snickered. "We are on our way to pick up children at Cyan. Two weeks to get there and two weeks to get home. Four weeks, we had to do something."

"So, this was your idea?"

"Hah, no," Gallo chuckled.

Dacre loosened his figure to relax. "You sounded pretty hostile on the channel. I thought you might have had an illegal operation going on in here."

"Gallo is hostile to CoR," Jessamy replied.

Gallo pouted but said nothing in return.

"How come?" Dacre asked.

"That's because you guys treat us lowly like some kind of slave," Embrek approached. But his voice did not contain any offense. He was simply stating the truth.

Dacre twisted his head in confusion. "We do?"

"Perhaps, not all of them," Gallo shrugged. "But most of them are."

Dacre groaned. "Hmm, thanks for pointing that out then."

Gallo sneered weakly in return.

Dacre clearly felt Gallo's hostility but nevertheless changed the subject. "So, how is Yudai doing?"

Gallo was surprised to hear her name from him. "You know her?"

"Not personally. When her parent escaped into the Nebula, I was their guide," He gazed into a distance. "Yes..., that's how I ended up here..."

"I never knew that. I thought she was just like the rest of the Gray mist," Gallo had a bitter smile on his face. Most of the Gray mist members simply did not know the concept of "parent" because they didn't have memories of having one or two.

"I, too, am from an orphanage," Dacre said.

"So, why did her parent have to flee? And why the Nebula?"

"Her father was a human treasure. He was a great swordsman. The government wanted him to be a trainer of their agents, but he refused. You know the deal."

"The government? I have no idea."

"Huh?" Dacre looked surprised. "How old are you?"

Gallo rolled up his eyes to count or remember his exact age.

"I think I am sixty two," He said reluctantly. "I think."

"Eh, you are pretty young. I am three hundred twenty one."

"Man, you ARE old. Should retire."

Dacre laughed casually. "If I could, I would. Hell is happening out there and you don't exactly retire as a Nebula pirate."

Gallo agreed. "True enough."

Yudai's father being a great swordsman reminded Gallo of the blade he recently acquired. He did play with it a little, but having no prior training as a swordsman, it simply felt awkward to swing it around. He preferred guns more.

"Hey, say, do you think Yudai knows some swordsmanship?"

"She may or may not. Who knows. I never got to know her too much."

"Um," Embrek meddled in the conversation. "I saw her carrying some kind of stick on her back sometimes."

"Stick?" Gallo twisted his head. "What stick?"

Embrek shrugged. "I don't know. But it could be a sword or something like that, you know. It looked similar to the stick you spend your saving on the last time."

An energy blade, it was. It used to be the signature of hyper humans. However, hyper humans of this era preferred guns over melee.

"Oh...." Dacre seemed to have recalled something. "How does she look like now?"

"Well..., I know her three size," Embrek grinned a little perversely. "Thirty one, twenty six, thirty four."

Dacre beamed grinned in his reply. "That's... not what I was asking. Though, thanks? Small boobs, she's got."

Embrek continued, "Her outfit is pretty cool, too. She has got this very long straight dark hair. Her hair isn't just dark. It's pure black. It's so black that it shines sometimes. And she always wears a short leather jacket and dark red hard leather

long skirt with gold laces. Pretty interesting outfit, I'd say. I mean she radiates some kind of..." He struggled to muster the exact vocabulary he wanted to use.

"Dignity," Dacre said with a firm voice.

"Yes! That's the word!" Embrek bellowed with excitement.

"I see," Dacre beamed a smile into air. "Then she knows swordsmanship."

"How can you be sure?" Gallo asked.

"Such dignity can only come from being in state of total awareness."

Gallo didn't understand and Dacre read his mind.

"We gun users can never understand it. I don't understand it, either. But I do know what I saw and felt. Ranged weaponry may have some advantage, but, if one is a true warrior, it's all about melee weapons," He said with gazing eyes. "Yes..., I saw it with my very own eyes..."

Gallo's heart began to race faster for some reason. He didn't really understand what Dacre was saying. He was, too, a gun user. Even though he bought a blade, he hadn't used it yet. No, he didn't know how to use a blade. But something warm was growing inside of him while listening.

"Thanks for the break. We won't go insane now," He said half-jokingly. "I will be getting a promotion after his mission. Come visit me by then. I will make sure you won't be mistreated."

Gallo beamed a smile at him. "Thanks and congratulations."

After roughly two weeks, Gallo and his members reached vicinity of Cyan as planned.

"Crap, they've been waiting for us," Gallo detected wings of fighters outside of Cyan.

"They shouldn't have detected us yet though. They are not using active sensors at least," said Zafir.

"Okay, guys, here is the plan. We divide our squadron into three large wings. Embrek, you take wing C and defend the freighter just in case."

"Roger, boss," Embrek replied firmly.

"Karesinda will take wing B and fight those jackasses. Hold them where they are. I and Zafir will take wing A and go down to the planet while Karesinda plays with them."

"I copy, boss," Karesinda responded promptly.

"Ok, let's do this. Embrek, you stay here and turn off any powers. I don't want you and the freighter to be detected as long as possible."

"Got that, boss."

"Wing B, go now!"

Karesinda and her fighters accelerated and rushed forward Cyan. Cyan defense forces responded immediately and dog fights began.

"Okay, here we go!"

Gallo and his wings passed by the aerial warfare easily and began to descend into Cyan's light atmosphere. There were orbit batteries that were shooting at them.

But it was easy for Gallo and the others to dodge. They were seasoned pilots after all.

Cyan's surface resembled a rocky desert. Cyan was a barren planet. Dorms and underground cities were developed to hold life. However, Cyan had never received enough support to be fully developed. There was only one city on Cyan and it was apparently ruled by Karma the third. Although Cyan's atmosphere was almost non-existent, its surface temperature was acceptable within human standards. But there was barely any air. Therefore, oxygen tank was required to go out. Furthermore, there were many element that could destroy average human's skin. Regardless it was still possible to go out there without a spacesuit for an hour or so and still come back alive.

Gallo and his wings landed safely on the coordinates where they were supposed to meet up with the children. It wasn't far from the city, and one could clearly see the city dorm from a distance.

A woman with an air mask was with lots of children. The air mask was covering her entire face, protecting sensitive eyes also.

Gallo, Zafir and the others took off from their fighters and approached the woman.

"Are you from the Gray mist?" She asked.

Gallo nodded. "Yes, we are. These are the children?"

"Yes," Her breath was at neck. Her air mask must have been providing barely enough oxygen to keep up. "One hundred seventy two orphans. You must take them all."

Gallo gave a hand gesture to his men behind. His men quickly picked up the children one by one and moved back to their fighters. Some of the children began to cry but the men carried on regardless.

"It's all right," The woman began to comfort children around her. "You will be going to new home."

"We can only take two children in a fighter at a time. I have twelve men here, excluding me," Gallo began to count his fingers for math. "It's gonna take few tries to get all the children up there."

"You must hurry." She sounded desperate. "Karma the third is absent right now. But he could be back at any moment."

"How is the situation on this planet?" Gallo was just curious.

"It's been awful." She shook her head in complete hopelessness. "We are under severe starvation. Too much people coming in and little economy to support. There are two orphanages on Cyan. I run one of them. We are funded to support approximately two hundred children. But we have a little over one thousand children right now!"

'Ouch,' He thought.

"We can't distribute foods fairly to all the children we have...!" Her face became pale gradually due to lack of air. "But they are ... children! They need lots of nutrition... But I can't..."

"Hey, lady, get a hold of yourself," Gallo searched his pocket under his red coat.

"Here is my account card. It has a little over a half million in it. Use it."

For Gallo, credit or money meant nothing. He was being paid as a mercenary but had no way to spend it. He saved up to purchase the blade but that was the only object he never purchased in his name in his entire life.

Therefore, giving away the money was easy for him.

The woman seemed so grateful and stuck out her shaking hand to take it.

However, she soon withdrew her hand. "No, I mean, thank you. But that won't save the children. We need a more ... permanent solution." She bowed to Gallo deeply. "Thank you for the offer though... I've never seen anyone willing to donate his account card before."

Gallo narrowed his eyes as he heard her. He wasn't a smart person by any means. But he wasn't that of a fool, either.

"We, the Gray mist, cannot meddle in the political affair, lady, I am sure you know that," He said gravely.

"But... we need help!" She sounded more and more desperate by minutes.

"We are under CoR. Without them giving us any permission, we cannot meddle in any kind of political affairs," Gallo said gravely again.

"So, you are just going to watch hundreds of children die?!" She bellowed with anger.

"They are not dead yet. Besides, they are none of our concern. Why are there so many orphans anyway? Where are their parents?"

Tears were gathering in her eyes and was fogging up her mask. "Most of them are actually not orphans. It's just that their parents cannot afford to feed them. So, they either leave their children at the orphanage or simply abandon them on streets." She began to sob sadly. "It's awful here... We need help..."

Zafir approached Gallo from behind. "The first batch of children is loaded up. We will be back soon, boss," He whispered.

Gallo nodded.

"Lady, what's your name?" He asked gently this time.

"It's Eurne..." She was still sobbing slightly.

"Ok, lady Eurne," Gallo sighed. "I cannot help you. But the Gray mist will take as many children as needed."

But then he realized the Gray mist's station could only take one thousand people at once but he decided not to care for details for the time being.

"No.., you've helped us greatly by just taking the children here. You've done enough," She said with a labored breath.

Gallo searched his pocket and threw her a new mask and told her, "Put that on. It should be better than yours."

She hesitantly changed her mask. Her labored breath soon disappeared.

"Thank you," She bowed again.

"Stop bowing to me. I am not a man who deserved to be bowed," Gallo grinned bitterly. Indeed, he was a pirate. He hunted down on freighters and pillaged. He murdered those who resisted them.

At the same time, he noticed a group of men were approaching to their location. He quickly held onto his pistol. On surface, his right hand was simply under his red trench coat. They seemed to be a patrol team.

"What's going on here?" One of the men asked. They were armed and armored with high quality masks on their faces.

Smiling, Gallo drew out his pistol with haste.

"Nothing, sirs," Then he began to shoot them in head one by one in quick succession. He was fast enough to have killed the whole group men in a matter of seconds.

Eurne screamed.

"Calm down, lady," Gallo approached the fallen men and made sure that each of them was dead then he began to loot their bodies.

"What in the world are you doing?" Eurne seemed disgusted by Gallo's actions.

"Looting their bodies," He said as if it was no big deal.

"Don't you have any respect for the dead?"

"Ha!" Gallo sneered. "I murdered them alright. Their loots are mine to take."

However, unlike ordinary pirates, he didn't loot credit cards and such. Instead, he picked up guns and pieces of equipment they had on them. After dumping a load into his fighter, he found Eurne gone. The children were still there however.

"I guess she really is desperate," He talked to himself and went to look more.

Within an hour, all the children were transferred to the freighter. Gallo and his wing also successfully left Cyan. Karesinda's wing also had no casualties. It was a very successful mission.

"Jessamy is taking care of the children right now, boss," Embrek reported. "He's cooking things for the kids."

"Good enough." said Gallo. "Let's head back."

"Men, they were no match for us. And I am sure they are being paid more than us. Haha!" Karesinda claimed with glee.

"My bar...!"

Jessamy's short, yet lingering, scream, resounded in the bar of the Gray mist station.

His liquor vault was blasted by guns, and people were taking liquor by bottles from the blasted vault.

"Sorry, we had to blast the liquor vault to get some liquor," Pikkal came by after he heard that Jessamy was back, then he left. Jessamy fell on his knees and hopelessly snickered like a madman with sagged shoulders.

Some leaders of the Gray mist were at the docking bay. The freighter docked properly and the station crew was ready to receive new members of the Gray mist.

As soon as Gallo took off from his fighters, Darkan greeted him.

"Yo, you are back. No casualties, eh, nicely done," He congratulated him on the successful mission.

"Thanks," Gallo replied promptly.

"The old man is looking for you by the way," Darkan said.

"Alright," Gallo dusted off his trench coat. "Have fun with kids. I am going to see the old man."

"Gallo, my child!" The old man opened his arms widely perhaps to receive his never-gonna-get Gallo's bug.

"Hello, sir, it's been roughly a month," Gallo, taking a step back, evaded the old man's crude attempt to bug him.

He reported his mission to the old man, including his deed on the surface of Cyan.

"I see. Good work as usual," The old man scratched his chin slowly. "Now, the problem is that who will look after the kids..."

Gallo became a little pale as he heard that. "Don't tell me that it is going to me, sir."

The old man laughed. "No, it is not going to be you. I am hoping Yudai will take this job. He is the only female leader after all."

He let out of relieved sigh. "Phew, you had me for a second, sir."

"Go back to the docking bay. Yudai should be there. Tell her that I am looking for her."

A mysterious grin surfaced on Gallo's face. Laughing, he said, "Haha! Good one, thank you for this one." Then he left.

Before heading to the docking bay to break the news for Yudai, he stopped by his quarter and checked on his email box. There were few messages but one message stood out from others.

The sender's address said : Dacre of the Claw of the Ra, unit #9552.

It was an invitation to his promotion party.

"Eh," Gallo whistled casually. "So, he has got his promotion."

The invitation also said to bring Yudai. Gallo had no reason not to. Although he had never been to a celebration party, he had a gut feeling that perhaps it was wiser to bring a gift. But then there wasn't really any place in the Gray mist station where one could buy a proper gift. In the he headed over to the bar.

"A party gift?" Jessamy raised his eye brow. "Now that's something that I haven't heard in a long time." He was cleaning the vault at the moment and there were several members of the Gray mist patching up the blasted vault.

"So, what should I bring?"

"Well, we are all pirates here. The best present would be a high quality bottle of liquor, such as ..." He began to look into the blasted liquor vault. "This one."

He took out a transparent red bottle. No, the bottle wasn't red. What's inside was crystal red.

"This is?" Gallo twisted his head while trying to identify it.

"It's red wine. I only have few. Supposedly, this is a good one," Jessamy smiled.

"It's made in 11192. So, it's very old."

"Nice."

"If the guy knows how to appreciate liquor, he will love it."

"Thanks, Jessamy. I owe you one."

As soon as he arrived at the docking bay, he went directly toward Yudai and held her hand forcefully, dragging her around.

"Hey?!" Yudai raised her voice. "What the hell do you think you are doing?!"

"Get into your fighter and follow me."

"What?" She tried to shake his hand off. But she was a mere class D hyper human.

As far as physical strength was concerned, she was no match.

"Just get into your fighter and follow me."

Pretty much everyone in the docking bay was watching them. Some whistled at them.

"Gallo! What the fuck are you doing?!" Darkan shouted at them.

"We will be back soon!" And he shouted back in reply. Of course, the "soon" would turn out to be days.

"You better have a good reason for this!" Yudai was getting all cranky.

"You won't regret it. We are going to CoR."

"The hell? Why are we going there?!"

Dacre and Yudai's eyes were fixed at each other for a moment.

"Haha..., how long has it been?" Dacre nervously smiled.

"It is really you..." Yudai took a step back and was clearly surprised.

In the meantime, there were several other people were in Dacre's apartment back in CoR's orbit ring. Gallo was able to recognize them all. He met them back in the mobile bar while he was on the last mission.

"Hey, guys, look what I've brought," He stuck out his hand with the red wine.

"Ohhhhh," Everyone marveled together, except Dacre and Yudai who were conversing elsewhere.

"That is red wine!" One of them exclaimed in awe. "I haven't seen one in ages!"

Gallo giggled proudly.

The party went on and Gallo became totally a part of the crowd. In the meantime, Dacre and Yudai were having a private conversation on balcony.

"Really long time no see," Dacre said.

Yudai let out of a short laugh.

"I didn't expect him to bring you this easily," Dacre glanced at Gallo who was in the living room with others.

Yudai swirled her glass of wine and tasted its aroma. "Good wine, I haven't had these in ages."

Dacre did the same as Yuudai. "Indeed."

"So..." Yudai kept swirling her glass of wine in a slow motion. "What did you want to see me for?"

The balcony had a direct and clear view to the planet of CoR. Dacre gazed into the view of the planet.

"Well, I just wanted to see you and how you are doing and to warn you," He said.

"To warn me?"

"You will hear this news eventually from the Gray mist. Something is happening."

He turned his head back to Yudai and narrowed his eyes.

"Few months back, we asked the Gray mist to launch an attack on the Bliss," said Dacre and Yudai nodded in response.

"The Nomads have finalized their setup in the area regardless. I do not know what they are up to. But there is a rumor floating around that the Nomads and the Blackbirds have formed an alliance."

Yudai stopped swirling her glass of wine.

"It is only a rumor." Dacre laughed weakly. "A very... sensitive rumor, I'd say. If it is true that they are allied, their goal seems too certain."

"... To take down the claw of the Ra," Yudai replied gravely.

Dacre turned a bit to face Gallo in the living room. "When I was in my last mission, I encountered that man. Gallo, isn't it?"

"Yes, he is one of the leaders, the youngest one and the latest one."

"He told me that people of CoR tend to look down on them. I haven't really thought about it. I guess one can't see their own shadow," He sighed. "When I came back, I reviewed various documents and recorded conversations if possible." He paused momentarily before he resumed.

"He was right. On surface, the Gray mist and the Osprey clan are supposed to support us and we support them back. But we've been only ordering them to do chores for us. And that concerns me."

Yudai suddenly changed the subject. "I was told that you were promoted. What rank are you now?"

Struck by the sudden change of topic, Dacre was unable to answer right away.

"Ah..., I am a warden now."

"Warden ...," Yudai raised her eyebrows. "You are very high."

"Ever since I came here, I've been working with CoR. I deserve such a rank," He smiled proudly but was yet a little embarrassed by his own words.

"I guess you could access those such records and documents with your rank....," Yudai mumbled.

"Your father's blade... Does it still ..." Dacre was clearly reluctant to ask the question.

"Exist?" It was Yudai who finished his sentence for him.

"Yes, the Moonlight blade... It was a beautiful blade."

"Yes, I still have it. It is the only legacy father has left after all."

"May I see it if you have it with you?"

Yuudai still had the mysterious smile on her face. "I've placed it in my vagina," she said at once.

Dacre, at first, did not get what she said. "What?" And then he realized what she meant. "Are you serious?"

"It's been there for pretty much ever since he had passed away. I disabled my own ovaries to stop the magic every month."

Dacre laughed very nervously, blushing at the same time.

"You are just as wacky as your father was," He said while laughing. "So, I guess I can't see it, eh."

"If you want to see it, I will show it to you."

Shaking his hands rapidly, he also shook his head. "No, no, no, thanks."

Yudai turned around and was about leave the balcony at which point Dacre made a quick but important comment.

"Yudai, if both of them initiate attack on us, the Gray mist will have to choose to either stick with CoR, who's slavers, or ally with the Nomads and the Blackbird.

The choice seems to be obvious."

"I am not the decision maker. The old man at the station is. Whatever decision he makes, we will follow."

"Speaking of which, who is the old man? We have nothing on his profile."

Yudai shrugged. "Nobody knows."

Few months passed. Everything seemed to be peaceful until one day when an emergency meeting was called within the Gray mist.

Everyone gathered in haste. Darkan usually began a meeting with smile on his face. But this time, it was different.

"The Osprey clan has closed their door," He declared gravely. "It was due to a fact that their last mission was a total failure and their numbers dwindled too greatly."

"Mind telling us what exactly happened?" said Pikkal.

"CoR asked them to launch a strike force on the Nomads in the bliss area. We did a mission like that before." He looked at Gallo. "Gallo led the mission."

Nodding, Gallo sighed. "And I failed, not completely though."

Darkan nodded in agreement and continued.

"Anyway, the Osprey clan brought exactly two hundred seventy six fighters."

"Hey, that's all of them," said Kazimir.

"And only twenty one returned."

A moment of shock waved through the room.

"They lost their clan leader as well as all other leaders. Their number is now twenty four total. They terminated and withdrew their support from CoR and closed their door until they reach their number high enough to be functional once again," Darkan said.

"Well, that sucks," Pikkal muttered.

"This is not all." Darkan cleared his throat. "CoR has asked us to investigate the bliss area once again." Then he looked at everyone slowly.

"This is a volunteer mission. Is anyone willing to take on this mission?"

The room was quiet and then, suddenly, the door was opened. Everyone's attention moved to the interruption. It was the old man.

"Sir...?"

Everyone was very surprised to see him outside of his chamber. He barely ever left his chamber.

"I see that everyone is here," The old man's low and husky voice calmed everyone in the room. He was wearing a dark robe and had a thick veil in front of his face, preventing anyone from seeing his face clearly.

"Sir, we were discussing the matter," Darkan reported.

The old man's head slowly moved where Yudai was standing.

"Yudai, my girl, why don't you tell them something else," He said slowly and quietly.

She narrowed her eyes at once and sighed.

"If you say so, sir," she said. "There is a rumor that the Nomads and the Blackbirds are now allied."

Darkan dropped his head a bit and closed his eyes. Pikkal laughed nervously. Gallo remained calm. Kazimir and Calvin were whispering to each other.

Kazimir pointed out once his whispering with Calvin was done. "If that is true, this mission could well be a trap."

"I agree. And the Osprey's case proves it," Calvin agreed.

"My dear children," said the old man. "If we do not take on this mission, that will mean we will be standing against the Claw of the Ra."

"I don't have a problem with that, sir," Gallo said with a firm voice.

"I don't have a problem with that, either," Pikkal followed.

"But we will be facing CoR before we could get help from either the Nomads or the Blackbird," Yudai pointed out.

"I assume...," The old man spoke, "CoR was aware that it was a trap.. Perhaps, they made the Osprey to launch an attack so that they'd take a serious damage and become too weak to betray them. Perhaps..., they are doing the same to us."

The old man's theory made sense. If they were going to lose supports from two small clans, they might as well destroy them.

The room became quiet again.

Refusing CoR's mission would jeopardize the relationship between CoR and the Gray mist. But then, taking their mission seemed to be suicidal.

"I will go," Darkan raised his hand. "I am the first leader of the Gray mist after all."

"Then I will go with you. This mission certainly calls for numbers," Kazimir volunteered.

The old man clapped once to gain attention.

"It is ... decided then. Prepare to launch your teams," He then turned around slowly and told the room. "I am ... sorry."

A suicidal mission, it was. Everyone was certain. Darkan had a squadron of ninety three and Kazimir had a squadron of seventy two. No one knew how many would return from this mission. The docking bay was filled with negativity.

Even the old man was in the docking bay, fare-welling them. He sounded as if they would not return.

Still, they went because it was their job.

Two weeks passed. There had not been a word from Darkan and Kazimir. The whole station was down until seven fighters returned one day.

They literally crashed into the docking bay. Everyone in the docking bay waited them to come out. But there was no sign for such an action.

Yudai rushed into the docking bay and bellowed, "Don't just stand there! Open it manually!"

Everyone was dead in their fighters. There was no sign of external and internal wounds. Calvin, Pikkal and Gallo soon rushed into the bay as well.

"I don't fucking believe this!" Pikkal gritted his teeth. "Seven are all?!"

No one answered him. Darkan and Kazimir weren't among those seven people. They had to assume that those who did not return were killed.

"My children." The old man arrived at the bay and inspected the dead bodies.

"Gather around me."

"They are brain dead." He proclaimed. "Most likely killed by ESPs."

"The Nomads, motherfuckers...," Pikkal mumbled swearing words.

"It is safe to assume that..." The old man dropped his face. "Those who have not returned are dead."

People whispered to each other.

"What are we going to do now?" Yudai asked.

The old man's eyes filled with strange dimming light which could be barely seen through his thick veil. Nobody noticed it since he was facing down at the bodies.

"We will still support the claw of the Ra on surface for now," He declared gravely.

"I don't fuc..."

"Pikkal!" Yudai bellowed at him. He would stop swearing but ran out of the bay.

"Yudai, you are the chief leader now," The old man said. "Gallo, I have a mission for you."

"Yes, sir," Gallo replied firmly.

"I want you to head over to Cyan and take control of the planet."

Everyone was shocked to hear it. Gallo himself was more than surprised to hear such an order from the old man.

"Sir..., I thought we were..., " Gallo didn't finish his sentence.

"A minor clan, yes," The old man nodded weakly. "But desperate time calls for desperate measures. We must act normal on surface and still support the claw of the Ra. On surface, you will be just on a trade mission."

Gallo narrowed his eyes. "Are you absolutely certain about this, sir?"

"Why, Gallo, are you getting afraid now?" Yudai sneered at Gallo.

"Shut the hell up, bitch. That is not my concern."

"What did you just call me?!" Yudai drew out her pistol and, at the same time, Gallo drew out his rusty energy blade and activated it.

"Both of you, enough. This is no time for internal conflict," The old man stood between Yudai and Gallo.

"An..., an energy blade....," Yudai whispered to herself as she saw Gallo's energy blade activate. It had been such a long time since the last time she saw one activate.

Sighing, Gallo withdrew his blade and deactivated it. "Excuse me, sir, I need to get some fresh air." Having said so, he turned around to depart.

"Gallo," said the old man and he paused.

"Come to my chamber, I need to talk to you about the mission."

Without turning around, Gallo nodded and left the bay.

Yudai, on the other hand, had her hands on her waist and was in deep thoughts.

After about half an hour, Gallo entered the old man's chamber.

"I am here, sir," He, as usual, equipped a mask as he entered the place.

The old man was there and there was also a child next to him.

"Who's the kid?"

"There was an ESP among the orphans. I've taken him as my pupil. I've also renamed him to Sarbas," The old man patted the child's head.

He looked over the kid. "The future leader of the Gray mist, sir?"

"Perhaps," The old man beamed a grin at Gallo. "Let's get back to the topic."

The old man suggested Gallo to head over to Cyan as independent mercenaries.

"I will make it so that you resigned from the Gray mist. With the current situation, it should be convincing," The old man said. "When Karma hires you, do whatever is necessary to earn his trust. Also gather all information you can find about him and his officers. Wait for the perfect time to land a strike on Karma himself rather than his men."

The old man meant assassination.

"With the way Karma is governing the planet, it should be easy to get the community on your side once Karma is dead."

Gallo nodded repeatedly as the old man gave him his plans. All sounded reasonable.

"Don't count me, sir," Gallo declared. "But I will do what I can."

"Just be yourself and you will succeed this mission."

Gallo snickered. "If you say so, sir."

When Gallo left the old man's chamber, he spotted Yudai leaning next to door.

Ignoring her completely, he left.

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