

Maeve gets on with life. She will be known as Merchant Karma later on.

[The Hammers arc] [7] [Maeve] [9613]

Rev 1.3 (Last modified on Jan 20, 2020)

Prerequisite stories

[Milky way arc] [4] [An end to many] [9613]

Related stories

[Cecil arc] [6] [Project Marat] [8961]

[Ashuta arc] [6] [MMD incident] [9614]

Maeve was taking a hot bath. She was in an old fashioned bathtub cast out of iron and had bubbles all over the tub where she was pleasantly enjoying her peace.

A hot bubble bath like this could only be done under natural gravity and it needed a certain level of gravity for the bubbles to stick. If she was on Moon or Pluto, a gentle wiggling would cause bubbles to fly all over, thus creating a mess.

She was finally back on Venus after escaping successfully from the claws of the Nebula pirates. Sslien had a part in her successful escape. If it wasn't for her,

Maeve's escape would have been a lot trickier although she would have made it back to Venus either way.

Maeve did not have parents. At least, she did not recall having the pair. Her earliest recognizable memory was a garbage can which she scavenged for scraps of food. She hung out with the Gypsies on Freedom colony in her earliest days and the Gypsies took care of her, giving her extra food if needed.

Her favorite place to hang out as she entered her pre-teen period was the Clarity Park. It was a famous park on the colony. It was also a recognizable landmark. The park was on a high ground in a dish-shape platform connected to the ground by a thousand stairs.

The park itself had strange fog which allowed its visitors to enter a trance. In other words, it was a place one could get high without the aid of drugs. It was also where she often hung out and the park was where she met Cecil for the first time.

Getting out of her bathtub finally after an hour of hot bath, she took a quick shower and came out.

"A hot bath in ... a decade," She said to herself with a smile.

Ever since she left Venus for a mission, she hardly came back here. She did come back few times for quick visits but this was the first time she'd be staying on Venus for an extended period.

Exiting the bathroom, there was Kisia in the small living room who was sitting by a transparent wall. There was a cup of tea on a small round table in front of her.

"Had fun?" Kisia asked her with glee.

"It was a hot bath in a decade," Maeve replied with a giggle. "Any woman would be overjoyed." S was completely naked and Kisia didn't seem to mind although she did mention that it was perhaps a better idea to wrap herself with a bath towel at least.

"Nah," Maeve refused, looking down on her own body briefly. "I have nothing to be ashamed of."

Grinning, Kisia turned her attention away from her bare body and went back to enjoying the scenery outside while telling her jokingly, "I am not a les."

Snickering, Maeve walked toward the wall and sat on an empty stool. "Neither am I," She responded while leaning against the wall and looking down. "I am beat. I guess I can stay here for a bit."

"I never understood the purpose of your mission to begin with," Kisia said to which Maeve didn't respond and continued to stare down through the transparent wall.

Aside from Gair, Maeve was the second eldest member of the Hammers and, although Gair was the eldest, Maeve was the one who spent most of time with Cecil prior year 9599. For some reasons, Gair's education was fully entrusted to Illy O'ren while Maeve's education was handled by Cecil himself. Kisia's education was handled similarly as they often had the same lesson together in backyard of Illy O'ren's villa.

Cecil's lessons were nothing more than simple story telling. He'd tell them bits of stories and so on. Such lessons lasted no more than half an hour and rest of days were free after then.

"The biggest crooks in the universe are charity foundations," Cecil declared as he stood firm on grass, and Maeve was dressed in a cute dress which Illy O'ren had forced it on her.

They were in backyard of Illy O'ren villa which was located on edge of Fallen crater.

"I thought politicians were the biggest crooks," Maeve replied casually with a giggle.

Cecil started to walk around at a very slow pace and spoke, "Politicians are expected to be crooks. They have to be since they need to make empty promises in order to earn votes. And they need huge financial backings for campaigns. But charity foundations, they are crooks disguised as good people."

The look on Maeve's face indicated that she wasn't convinced by Cecil's literal preaching. "What is exactly wrong with them?" She eventually asked.

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"Mind if I ask a question?" To which Kisia nodded and Maeve continued, "Did Cecil do anything to charity foundations after he took over Venus?"

Kisia let out of a short laugh. "Why do you even ask that? It's almost as if you knew the answer."

Maeve responded with a chuckle as well. "I have a feeling that I know the answer. Mind telling me though?"

According to Kisia, not long after Cecil took over Venus from Illy O'ren, he literally barged into one of the biggest charity foundations in Fallen Crater and demanded an audit. The targeted charity foundation complied reluctantly and it was when the hell broke loose. Within minutes after Cecil took a look at their ledger, he started to massacre people at the foundation headquarters.

At this point, Maeve chuckled once again. "What did he find out?"

Kisia explained, "I was actually on a comm line with him at the very event. The ledger read total donations of 1.6 billion credits and 1.5 billion was claimed to have been used to charity and 0.1 billion for operation expenses."

A curious smile emerged on Maeve's face. "And?"

“I had to ask Kasper to hack a bit but the chairman of the foundation had a secret, private, account that had 72 billion credits. Cecil demanded to know where that came from.”

Maeve started to laugh loudly. Kisia waited her to quiet down and continued.

“The chairman had no answer and was subsequently killed. So were the entire board of directors of the foundation. He did spare low-chain workers and volunteers.”

Maeve was wiping off tears off her eyes. “God, I haven’t laughed like this for a long time,” She remarked.

“Well,” Kisia sighed as she continued, “After that incident, Cecil demanded other charity foundations to surrender their ill-gotten credits and dissolve. They all complied without a single complaint.”

“So, I assume charity foundations have become illegal on Venus?”

“Not exactly illegal but there is currently no charity foundation on Venus at the moment.”

After a brief moment of silence, Maeve stood up and went back to dress finally. After she was done dressing up, she came back and sit down on the stool and asked Kisia who was still enjoying her tea while looking outside.

“What happened to all the credits?”

“The total confiscated credits was 170 billion,” Kisia answered, “Cecil used the credits to found a drug dealing team.”

“A drug dealing team?”

Kisia explained a few changes in medical care laws since he took over. Venus medical care used to be completely free for all. However, Cecil added exceptions which were met with a lot of criticisms. Namely, health issues caused by drug addictions and smoking were no longer covered. Drugs, such as cocaine, had always been illegal on Venus but a sizable black market existed still. Cecil chose to employ government-backed drug dealers to squeeze profit out of the black market.

“We also train spies from this operation, so it has been proven to be a win-win situation for us. We earn good money while training agents.”

She added further that the local Venus police wasn't aware of the fact that the major drug dealers in Venus black market were in fact government agents.

“Doh, kinky, that's like playing a double agent with your own police,” Maeve remarked with a wicked grin and quickly added, “And what a bold move about the medicare. I bet that didn't go down too well.”

Grinning with a mild pout, Kisia shrugged. “Do you think Cecil would care?”

Indeed, he did not care and threatened to put down those who contested his decision, and he did put down those who did protest.

“Bloody iron fist and all,” Maeve said indifferently, “I am surprised that there are still people left on this planet.”

Kisia answered after a long sigh, “The initial reactions were pretty bad. Many decided that it was better to leave the planet with such a dictator in charge.”

“Did he put them down as well?”

Kisia replied instantly, “Nope, he let them leave.”

“With a catch, I assume.” A sneaky smile emerged on Maeve’s face as she said so.

“Well, yes, they weren’t aware but there was a catch.”

When over ten millions of people were extremely unhappy with Cecil’s dictatorship and how he handled thing, they voiced that they wanted to leave the planet. Even for Cecil, putting down ten millions was a stretch. Therefore, he allowed them to leave on express immigration package he permitted. It was free of charge to those who wished to depart the planet.

Kisia explained in detail, “The first wave of immigrants, ten thousands of people, left the planet as express immigrants. We slipped in a few spies among them while at it. United Sol did not take them kindly.”

The Ark, or the Bau to be frank, concluded that Cecil was up to something by sending the immigrants. They weren’t sure what it was which added more in a fear factor. Therefore, while United Sol did accept the immigrants initially, they swiftly changed their stance on them and deported them to Pluto and Freedom colony.

The deported immigrants plead for innocence which fell onto deaf ears. The Ark simply did not have any intention to accept them.

“The second wave of another ten thousands reluctantly left Venus after Cecil promised them that they’d be treated better,” Kisia said and Maeve’s right cheek twitched.

“Please don’t tell me that they fell for that,” Maeve said.

“They did fall for it.”

Amused, Maeve uttered, “How can they be so naive?”

The second wave of immigrants fared worse and United Sol conducted torture on some of them to exact information. The rest were deported to Pluto.

Subsequently, the third wave refused to leave.

Disgusted, Maeve shook her head and sighed.

“I can’t believe how naive people can be...,” She commented. Apparently, she wasn’t disgusted at Cecil and his actions. Rather, her disappointment lied in the immigrants who blindly believed his words.

“Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me,” Kisia cited with glee and added, “It’s been a decade now. It’s all in the past and Venusians are now used to his methods.”

Maeve recalled the first time she met Cecil. It was at the clarity park. For her, it was just one of those days she hung out at the park. She was observing people getting high and do stupid things. Out of nowhere, she saw a figure coming down from above and fell into a group of elephant bushes. Nobody except Maeve was aware that someone did fall from the sky because they were all high.

She made a careful approach to the bushes and took a look into the bushes to see who had fallen into. And there was a person in a nice but ragged robe whose eyes

were open and were clearly gazing at her. His eyes seemed to be glowing which scared her and forced her to take few steps backwards.

“Who are you.” It was a cold, stoic, voice that gave her cold sweats on her back. She wanted to run away but stood on her ground and answered with a stammering and shaking voice.

“I, I, am M, Maeve...” She was already panting at this point but did continue. “A... A homeless, I guess...”

She could see some wounds through what appeared to be burnt holes on the person’s robe and she could also see the wounds quickly healing. “You... okay?”

The person answered cryptically, “I do wonder...”

It was how they met. Cecil took Maeve back to Venus.

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Year 9079

As Cecil entered his apartment on Venus, Maeve, who was cleaning a jar in Kitchen, turned around to see him. His robe was soaked with water and he was dripping water all over the place.

"Sir, you ran into rain again?"

As if it was normal, she wasn't surprised at all.

Without answering her, his wet robe was instantly dried with his power. Only slight steam could be seen as result.

"Sir, the media is badmouthing you right now."

"Is that so?" Cecil replied as if he doesn't care.

"Yes, because you gave up on President Mirren."

The reality was that he was silently cast out. However, the media interpreted the whole situation differently. ENN in particular was harsh on his departure. They claimed that he chose to leave Mirren in dark. His silence on the matter seemed to have reinforced their view.

At that time, Andromeda colonists waged a rebellion against the Ark, and the war never looked like a winnable one for the Ark and eventually Mirren attempted to call Cecil back to the Ark and place him in command of fleets to crush the rebellion. However, Cecil declined and even refused to step afoot on Earth which spurred ENN to heavily criticize him. Nevertheless, Cecil firmly refused to answer the call.

What the media was not aware of that Cecil did, in fact, do a favor for Mirren by invading Freedom colony and neutralized Aedy Freedom who Mirren saw as a legitimate threat to his authority. In truth, that was his last favor to Mirren.

And while Maeve wasn't aware of the full history between Mirren and Cecil, she always stood by him.

"Politics are getting on my nerve, sir," She finished what she was doing and stood next to Cecil who was watching the rain through a transparent wall in the living room.

After a long moment of silence, during which he simply gazed outside, he eventually replied Maeve who was also watching the rain vaguely.

"Politics are basically the same as any kind of affairs except it has too much shades."

"Are you saying you have a positive view about it?"

"A necessary evil, more or less. Somebody has to do it and some will love it. The motives are rather clear and, shall I say, sweet."

She narrowed her eyes. "One of motives, I assume, would be a taste of powers?"

"Perhaps."

"May I ask why you left president Mirren?"

Cecil replied firmly, "No comment."

"I see..."

Few weeks later, Cecil suddenly mentioned a planned journey to Maeve.

"I will be heading to Pluto tomorrow. If you want, you are welcome to accompany me. It will be a journey."

Maeve was surprised to hear. "Pluto, sir? And a journey?"

Pluto, at this time, was the poorest planet. No one would go there unless they have to. And their reasons for going were most like due to bankrupt of their business and such. And "a journey" meant that he would not use teleportation abilities to make quick travels.

"Yes, it will be good experience for you. I am going there to pick up a package."

"A package? From who?" She suddenly became curious after mentioning of "a package" To her knowledge, Cecil had always acted and traveled alone.

"Her name is Sae. I helped her out few years ago."

Few years ago was in fact few hundred years ago.

"Helped her out ...?" She quivered her eyebrows slightly. "Like how you helped me out?"

Cecil shook his head weakly. "No, she died and I resurrected her," He told her bluntly.

She attempted to get around the claim that Cecil brought someone from death.

"Resurrecting? Is that even possible via ESP?"

"Let us not go in there, shall we," He said stoically.

Shrugging, she agreed, "Fine."

The next day, they were at Venus international shuttleport.

“The only aspect I dislike about Venus is the weather,” Maeve grumbled as she opened her palm to receive some drops of rain. “It rains too frequently here.”

Of course, she was well aware of a fact that Cecil loved rain. Thus, she did not expect Cecil to agree with her.

The shuttleport structure had numerous billboards displaying Illy O’ren’s presidency campaign. It was to be her third straight terms and she was expected to win the election.

"What a waste of money...," She muttered. There was no reason to spend any credit on the campaign. Illy had no rival. She was backed by the O’ren and she was a popular figure on Venus.

"Let's go," Cecil told her firmly and then he noticed Maeve's outfit, which was basically skin tight mini dress of reflective texture. She was never someone who was afraid of displaying her feminine assets and it showed on her choice of outfit.

Cecil remarked, "I don't usually interfere you with your choice of outfit. But, for this journey, that outfit might not be ideal for you."

She knew that, whenever he gave her a warning or an advice, they were important. Thus, she showed no objection and bought a new suit that was more formal and less appealing from a shop nearby, using Cecil's credit card of course.

The ticket seller was pleasantly shocked to see Cecil’s ID which clearly said “Cecil Klisis”. The Klisis was a renowned last name on Venus and it was public knowledge that only a single member was living.

“Sir, you are entitled to an express, royal, transport,” The ticket seller promptly informed Cecil.

“No, just an ordinary ticket would be fine.”

Maeve whispered to Cecil from behind, “Sir, I’ve never been to a royal transport.”

The ticket seller looked somewhat troubled and informed Cecil, “Sir, we do not operate a ferry to Pluto because there is no demand. Now, if you do opt for the royal transport, we can take you there at no charge.”

Nevertheless, Cecil wasn’t interested which disappointed Maeve who wanted to see what a royal transport seats would be like. He opted for two tickets to Moon instead.

“If you insist, sir,” The ticket seller complied, gently.

When they arrived at Moon shuttle port, they were faced with a large scale of protest. There were approximately two thousand people gathered in front of the port and had flags up, saying anti-war.

"What the....," Maeve looked at them curiously. "I bet president Mirren is having a headache."

"No, he isn't. All he has to is not care. Their efforts are in vain," Cecil said as they passed around them.

The crowd were apparently protesting against the war with Andromeda rebellion. They were claiming that a talk should be held instead of a war.

Cecil and Maeve were a distance away from them when Maeve inquired Cecil.

“What do you think about their view?”

Cecil, as usual, replied stoically, “Does it matter?”

“I am just curious.”

“Wars are necessary evil. And talk is cheap. Peace built on blood lasts longer than peace built on diplomatic talks. That is my stance.”

“If you say so. I haven’t got an opinion.” She truly did not have a sided opinion. She couldn’t care less in fact.

Cecil proceeded to inquire about a route to Pluto but he did not have any luck. It was apparent that there was no demand for Pluto route.

"What are we going to do?" She asked.

It was this moment that several reporters from ENN noticed and quickly recognized Cecil. It wasn’t hard to recognize him. After all, not many wore a robe, let alone a crimson robe. A woman in a form suit, flanked by two camera men, walked swiftly toward Cecil and Maeve.

"Excuse me, you are Mr. Klisis." A female reporter gave a hand signal to the rest of her crew behind her. "Do you have any comment on this protest, please?"

Maeve immediately frowned. She knew that they were risking their lives by barging their questions onto him.

"Ma'am, please don't do this," She tried to stop the reporter.

"Just a comment or maybe two." the female reporter insisted and the two camera men raised their shoulder mounted camera toward Cecil who responded by turning around and walked away from them. The reporter and her crew were about to follow him. However, Maeve placed a barrier in front of them, preventing them from moving.

"You can't get away with your responsibility!" She shouted in desperation and anger.

Ignoring her, Cecil left the scene. No, he left the shuttleport through a side exit.

"Where are we going, if you don't mind me asking?"

"We are going to the downtown."

Maeve assumed that he had a plan of some sort.

Where Cecil ended up was a dark alley by a restaurant where there were a small group of gloomy people who were gathered together in shade. He approached them at once and spoke to them.

"I need to speak to your regional leader."

However, none of them was responsive.

"Sir, it reeks here." Maeve clipped her nose.

He spoke to them regardless. "Money is in wrong hands."

One of them slowly raised his head toward Cecil.

"Who are you?" He slowly and weakly asked.

"It's Cecil."

The man slowly stood up and lowered his ragged hood to further cover his face.

"Give me few minutes." Then He disappeared deeper into the ally. Maeve whispered to him. "What's going on?"

"Have you heard of the Gypsy's guild?"

"Nope."

"It is the largest organization in the clusters. They are consisted of hermits, homeless, and vagabonds."

"And you are trying to get a ride to Pluto from them?" She wasn't very confident about the whole deal with the idea of the Gypsy's guild. "I don't understand. In other words, they are a group of the poor. What can you expect from them?"

"They are not the poor. They've given up wealth voluntarily. They are pretty much everywhere and they can get you pretty much everywhere if you have a connection with them."

"How so? They don't have anything according to what you are saying."

"They don't." It was a firm answer from Cecil. "But, as I said, they can be found pretty much everywhere. They know ways to reach where people can't go under normal circumstances."

"That's just weird."

"Do remember the key phrase. It might come in handy in the future."

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Maeve beamed a bright smile. The key phrase, "Money is in wrong hands", certainly made her life a lot easier when attempting to escape from the Nebula pirates. She would have still made it even without the involvement of the Gypsies but it would have been a lot difficult.

"Thanks for the treat. I think I am going out."

Kisia stopped her. "Actually, are you settling down here now?"

"Why ask?"

"If you are, you should be talking to someone about a place to stay."

Maeve hadn't thought about settling down on Venus although it was a possibility.

Kisia continued, "I take that your mission, whatever it was, is complete with the recent development." She was referring to the Milky way to our home tragedy.

When it was decided that Cecil would take over Venus, the members of the Hammers were ordered to travel to Venus. Maeve, however, was soon sent out for

a mission that no one knew what it was about. On surface, she was to be a merchant. At least that was what the members of the Hammers were told. Kisia did not believe that she was sent out as a mere merchant. She believed that Maeve had a role in Milky way to our home tragedy and that Cecil was behind the event ultimately.

Of course, she had no proof to back her assumption up and she had no intention to dig into the matter.

“My task was to be a merchant,” Maeve replied with a crooked grin. “You and others may find it hard to believe but I am a merchant material.”

She always had a knack for the basic know-how of trading; buy low and sell high. She had a natural affinity with trading and Cecil let her do what she wanted and was good at.

“I am not exactly young,” Maeve added, “Not saying that I am godforsakenly old but, well, I am over 500 years old. Time to do what I want to do, no?”

Kisia still had an unconvinced look on her face.

“Well, no matter,” Maeve uttered with a sigh. “Talk to you later.”

While Maeve was unaware at the time of the little journey with Cecil, she later realized that the journey to Pluto was not for him but for herself. The reason he refused to use teleportation was to teach her the ways of life and useful tricks.

Once Cecil got in touch with the regional leader of the Gypsies, they were able to smuggle themselves to Saturn.

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“Arrrgggghhh,” Maeve groaned loudly as she and Cecil crawled out of a ventilation duct on a freighter into a docking bay. “My bones are cracking badly,” She continued to complain as she stretched and loud cracking of her bones emitted from her body.

“We are at Mist, the capital of Saturn,” Cecil said, as usual stoically.

“For God’s sake, Cecil, let’s just use teleportation.”

“Again, it’s not a journey if you skip the hardship.”

Sighing, she muttered, “Whatever you say. What now?”

Cecil looked around briefly. Freighters were neatly arranged around the docking bay. People were scarce in the bay and did not seem to have noticed the sudden appearance of two people.

“To Uranus outpost obviously.”

“You know.” Maeve placed her hand on her waist. “Why didn’t we just smuggle ourselves to Pluto directly?” She sounded defiant as if she was getting fed up.

“That certainly was a possibility but as your body has just spoken out, it is not easy to smuggle yourself for a prolonged period of time.”

She narrowed her eyes and became silent for the moment because Cecil had a point. Soon enough, she asked another question. “Why did we even smuggle ourselves in the first place then?”

“It was an experience, wasn’t it?”

It indeed was. Having to squeeze oneself for weeks wasn’t just a good experience.

“It was not a good experience!” She exclaimed.

“Keep that experience in mind.”

Moon was a lively place to be. Streets were crowded and shops were flashy. Mist on Saturn was pretty much the opposite. The air was damp and streets were not crowded. Traffic was low. The whole city seemed like it was in hibernation.

“What a dull place,” Maeve remarked as she and Cecil walked on a street of supposedly downtown of Mist.

The sky was dark despite of being day. Normally, an environment system would be in place to mimic sky of Earth, but such a system did not exist on Saturn.

“This planet is a place for the damned,” Cecil explained. “They don’t want a paradise. They want this place to remind them that they aren’t on Earth.”

“Earth this, Earth that. It’s so boring,” She muttered. “What’s so great about Earth?”

It was something even Cecil couldn’t answer right away. He had always felt that Earth was tainted.

“Earth is the spiritual home to mankind after all,” He eventually came up with a logical answer.

Maeve pouted. She knew that much. “I suppose. Let’s just leave here ASAP. I don’t like here.”

It was true that Saturn wasn’t exactly a great place to be. There were better places to live. However, the inhabitants weren’t unhappy. They felt they had a purpose.

“Keep in mind,” Cecil stated, “These people have a purpose in their heart.”

“What would that be?”

When Saturn colonization program started, it started with glee. There were positive advertisements on TV and even experts agreed, at that time, that Saturn could be a great place to live. In general, colonists would have to give up everything on their home planet to settle down on the frontier. While it was hard to give up, there were certainly good incentives for such a big decision to relocate.

The first benefit was taxation, rather lack of. Pioneers weren’t taxed for life. Their children would be taxed normally however.

The second benefit was a greater chance of being able to climb in social ladder. A new government meant new opportunities as well as new seats to fill.

The third benefit was ...

“Dreams,” Cecil answered.

“What dreams?” And Maeve innocently asked back.

A very faint grin appeared on his face which Maeve failed to notice.

Their journey to Uranus outpost was noticeably smoother as Cecil simply purchased ferry tickets.

Uranus outpost was the largest outpost in clusters. The next bigger one was Freedom colony. Due to its purpose and importance of the outpost, the station was heavily reinforced and armed. It also had a small shipyard built-in.

“Here we are, almost there.” Maeve remarked as she casually walked around the visitor’s lobby. Meanwhile, Cecil was on a seat and was doing something with a holographic menu in front of him.

She liked the atmosphere of the station. It felt cozy and the view looked nice. “Can we stay here for a few days?”

It was this moment Cecil was done with playing with the holographic menu.

“Done,” He declared. “Two tickets to Pluto.”

“What?” Maeve frowned and exclaimed, “Sir?!”

“Relax. I heard you. The departure date is four days from now.”

Even from Uranus outpost, the demand for Pluto ferry was almost non-existent. In fact, there was no official ferry route. Therefore, Cecil had to use his connections to conjure a transport for the pair.

“Yay!” Regardless, she was happy to hear that they were staying on the station for a little while.

With Cecil choosing to stay in his hotel room, Maeve set out a little adventure into Uranus outpost business district which was more or less a small open market along with some shops on streets. The outpost was a major trade hub in the region and it was only normal to see some merchants trying to make extra credit while they take few days off during their long, and probably boring, space voyages.

The local inhabitants seemed very interested in goods they'd not normally be able to see. The district wasn't crowded but there were enough potential customers for the merchants to be excited about.

"Wowza." She was in awe as she took good looks at various items she never saw on Venus. In particular, her attention became fixed at a certain item.

"What are these?" She bended down to take a closer look at spools of thread.

"Just threads? Cotton?"

The merchant was sitting on a chair and there was a simple temporary table in front of him where there were numerous spools of different threads.

"Nope, lass, these are metal threads," The merchant proudly told her.

"Metal threads? You can make clothing out of metal threads?"

"Normally, you don't make clothes out of those, but for an example, like this spool." He picked up a shiny spool of thread. "This is titanium thread, extremely durable, can be used as an outer layer of outwears."

"Wow," She uttered in awe. "Never knew that."

“Not cheap, mind you,” The merchant beamed a crooked grin and picked up another spool of thread which had a dull glare. “A cheaper version is steel thread which won’t look as nice but gets the job done regardless.”

Maeve pointed at the titanium thread. “How much for one?”

“Two thousand ci for a spool.”

Maeve giggled. “Mister, you really think I have that much credits?”

The merchant froze a moment and soon smiled. “Very well, fifteen hundreds.”

“Mister, I am trying to haggle here,” She said with a giggle.

“Which is why I took a massive 25% off, lass. Can’t go lower.”

She beamed a grin at him. “No, mister, you took a massive 25% in one go which means you can go lower.”

The merchant fired back a crooked grin at her. “Fine, you win. 1,100 ci.”

She giggled. “Now you are talking, 900 credits.”

“Woah, hey, that IS low.”

“950.”

The merchant spit a sigh and agreed. “You win, girl. 950.” As soon as Maeve’s card was approved for 950 credits, he handed a spool of titanium thread over to her.

“Thank you for your business,” She told him which the merchant didn’t respond.

She went on to browse further and noticed a fist-size transparent orb with black dots crawling all over. Upon a closer inspect, it looked like insects.

Pointing at it, Maeve inquired gently, "What are those inside of the orb?"

"Ants." The merchant behind his table answered indifferently.

"Ants? Insects?"

"They are insects, yes. To be precise, it's formicidae."

Ants were found mostly on Earth. Therefore, not many were aware of their existence. Some ants were imported to other planets such as Venus and New Earth but even so they were hardly known to men in this space age.

"These ants are of Formica group, one of the easier ants to culture. These help you keep sane in long space voyages," He added.

She became very curious of them and looked at another orb with different kind of ants. They were light brown in color.

"And these?"

"Pogonomyrmex, or more known as red harvester ants. They consume seeds," The merchant explained indifferently.

"Wow, you sound like an ant professor."

"No, I am just a hobbyist."

"How much for one of these?"

“One fifty ci,” He answered indifferently. “You may want to buy their favored diet if you want to keep them healthy though.” And he pointed at a corner of his table where there were a variety of food for them.

“Thanks but no thanks. My parent will probably kill me if I get these.”

This time, the merchant grinned although his voice remained indifferent.

“Understood perfectly.”

The four days passed swiftly as Maeve enjoyed her time at the market. Eventually, they were on a transport ferry bound to Pluto.

“Looked like you had a good time,” Cecil remarked while she looked through a window next to her seat to watch Uranus outpost getting smaller as the ferry sailed away.

“Yeah, it was fun. A lot of stuff I haven’t even heard of were sold there.”

“I see.”

When the ferry reached Pluto, it did not actually land on the planet because there was no properly functioning shuttleport. Therefore, Cecil and Maeve, who were the only passengers dropping off at the planet, were sent down via a luxury shuttle which landed on what appeared to be half-destroyed shuttle landing pad.

“Sir, I have this sneaky feeling that you used your connections to get us a ferry,” Maeve remarked as she stepped out of the shuttle. Cecil was following behind her.

“So it seems,” He cryptically answered.

It didn’t take long for Maeve to realize the situation Pluto was under.

“Sir, this planet is literally a garbage site,” She commented. The landing pad was in tatters and so was everything else. All structures around them were battered and none of them had proper windows. The roads were in pieces. No streetlight was functioning. People were scarce.

“This planet is a garbage site as you say,” He confirmed. “Freighters dump waste onto this planet to save garbage disposal costs.”

It was illegal to dump any form of garbage into space or onto planets but Pluto was a place no one gave a damn.

“And we came here to pick up a package?”

“That is correct. She may be already here.”

Speaking of the devil, a pre-teen girl dressed in bright clothes approached them merrily. Color of her clothes was in stark contrast to what Pluto urban represented.

“Hey, mister ~.” A cheerful voice and a cheerful appearance greeted Cecil. “Long time no see.” Sae was cheerfully waving.

“The dagger,” Cecil demanded stoically.

“Will you ever smile? Grin? Hello?”

Ignoring her little complaint, he demanded again, “The dagger.”

“Yeah, yeah, fine.” Sae put her backpack down and searched its inside. “You know I could’ve sent it to you through a portal. We didn’t have to waste the time to meet up here. Unlike you, I don’t have an easy time getting into Sol system.”

“We didn’t exactly cruise to here, either,” Maeve talked back.

Sae glared at her and exclaimed, “Who asked you?”

“The dagger,” Cecil raised his voice which alerted both Maeve and Sae.

“Fine, fine.” Sae finally pulled a gray dagger out of the backpack. The whole thing was in matte gray and it did not appear to have sharp edge.

“What is that?” Maeve wondered. “A ceremonial dagger?”

Cecil took the dagger and inspected it by careful caressing.

“I believe I told you not to kill too many with this,” He remarked stoically.

“Um, well...” Rolling eyes, Sae scratched her head.

“Nevermind. It’s too tainted.” Cecil handed the dagger with its blade and threw it backwards. Thanks to its Moon-like gravity, the dagger made a long curve in the air and eventually disappeared into horizon.

“What a waste, it was a good dagger,” Sae muttered as her eyes tracked the dagger in the air to horizon.

Maeve had no idea what was going on, and therefore, she kept her mouth shut. It was something she had learned from Cecil; if you had no idea what's going on, remain silent.

"A good dagger maybe, but I did warn you not to kill too many with it."

Sae continued to whine, "I just killed a few with it!"

"That is more than enough."

Sighing, she inquired. "Fine, boss. Are we done?"

Cecil gave her a nod and she turned around quickly and dashed toward the ruins. Soon enough, she was gone from the sight.

"What was that about?" Once Maeve figured it was over, she inquired Cecil.

"I let her borrow a dagger I crafted. Apparently, she tainted it by killing too many with it."

"I didn't know you were a blacksmith."

Without answering her, he opened a swirling portal that was glimmering in many shades of purple. "Time to go home. The journey is over."

Shrugging, she complied.

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Maeve opened the doors to Cecil's library, AKA the imperial HQ.

“Imperial HQ,” She scoffed. “Yeah, right.”

The dark and gloomy place welcomed her presence as she navigated into the area. It didn’t take her long to find Cecil who was seemingly reading a book in near darkness.

“Sir.” She called him out gently and Cecil responded by closing his current book and placing it back into its antique shelf. The lack of light didn’t matter to both.

“I’ve come to say good bye,” She declared.

“I see. You do have your right to seek your own future.” His voice was stoic as usual. There was no emotion at all in his voice.

“I will probably visit once in a while, but yes, I will live as a free merchant.”

The decision was made a long time ago. It was just a matter of how she’d declare it. While she had little doubts that Cecil would refuse to let her go, it was still hard for her to leave him. For better or worse, Cecil was a parent to her.

“I shall not stop you from being who you are. Thus, you may go. But do also know that you are welcome back any time.”

Maeve showed some form of hesitation before she spoke.

“I do have a favor to ask, if you don’t mind.”

“Go on, speak your mind.”

“I know it may sound silly, I mean really silly but...,” She took a moment of uneasy and shy silence. “Can you smile for me before I go?”

For a brief moment, Cecil's face remained as still as usual. However, eventually, a faint grin appeared on his face which Maeve had to blink a few times to make sure what she was seeing was what she was indeed seeing.

"My daughter," Cecil softly spoke to her. "Go."

It wasn't a beautiful smile by any means, but the fact that Cecil put an effort into it meant a lot. Eventful tears formed in Maeve's eyes as she bowed out.

Fin