

## Unwanted

What had been a suspicion at first had been confirmed with the findings behind a supply crate pushed to the side.

Zekra was staring at the droppings on the floor, the picture of identically-looking droppings displayed on her recently-acquired wrist computer identifying them unmistakably as those of rikks.



This kind of pest would be eating through their food rations and other organic goods stored on their ship unless taken care of, but at least they would keep to the food rations alone, unlike...

“Shit.”

Pushing a different crate to the side revealed more droppings, this time of a different kind. The cylinder shape with longitudinal furrows left no doubt, those came from kirrts, small animals that liked to hide in tight holes and if they didn't find any, were more than ready to gnaw them into hard substrate themselves with little regards to what they passed. Which included ships' interiors, making them a danger by damaging cables, pipes and other vital systems.

Zekra cursed again, drawing the attention of the other inhabitant of the *Sciara*.

“What is it?” came a monotonous electronic voice from Arqeez' translator speaking over his own that was deep and rumbling.

“We have an infestation,” Zekra replied, still looking at the dried dung. Then he turned around to face the Idrath's massive shape looming over her. An instinct told her to put some distance between him as fast as possible, making the muscles in her legs briefly twitch. Despite her owing her life to this individual, she didn't trust him – it had been in the depth of space when she had fully realized what kind of associate she was really spending time with inside a glorified conserving can.

“What is that?”

“Unwanted animals. They eat the stored food and damage the ship. I need to get rid of them as soon as possible or else there will be more and more.”

Now the Idrath seemed to understand, tilting his head and briefly flicking his antennae. “I could catch and eat them.”

Zekra gave him a slightly exasperated look. “No you *will not*. Besides, you can't reach them in all the nooks and crannies where they are hiding without taking the ship apart. There are specialists for that on quarantine space ports, one of which will be our next stop.”

Arqeez stepped out of the spaceship's door onto its ramp on slightly shaky legs. He was glad the contraption wasn't moving now, like it did just minutes before. Luckily, he had the option of using retractable thethers called safety belts to affix himself to the ship's walls and even then, the sudden and violent jerking into random directions, the rattling and the trembling had him holding onto the tethers like they were the only thing between him and certain death. Even if this particular landing wasn't the worst he had to experience so far.

The steadily-blowing wind felt moist and the air it carried had a slightly stinky smell to it, the light was shining reddish from an oddly-large sun and it appeared to him as if he was lighter now than before on the ship. Those were strange observations, but it seemed every time he stepped outside in a different place, those factors he had taken for unchanging on Idrath did seem to vary quite a lot between the places visited.



Zekra headed straight down the ramp and closed the *Sciara's* door with a remote once both were off it. Taking a few moments to orient herself, she got off the runways and searched for the building holding the decontamination services.

As expected for a quarantine space port, it was small and well-contained, with the building in question being prominent and a bright flag on a pole making it visible from anywhere on the port. To her luck, it was also currently unoccupied by other customers, allowing her to approach the decontaminator without delay. It was one single, shielded counter, like she knew from hospital wings handling infectious disease. Fitting, considering it wasn't just spaceships with rick infestations landing here. Behind the transparent shielding, the bored face of a Pomunian awaited them.



Arqeez warily eyed the individual, emitting a threatening rumble. Despite this individual looking different, he knew the species – the last time he had met one had been back on Idrath, as one of the weapon traders that had followed Zekra to the planet to finish her off. He still remembered the foul taste of his blood when he had bitten his neck open.

A tail whipping across his side brought him out of his memories and had his attention back on his associate, who was giving him a stern look.

“Stop acting up! I have important business to do with him, so stay quiet and wait until I'm finished,” she quietly hissed at him, then stepped forwards.

“You are the ship with the identification tag SC1-26B-AI25, I presume?” the Pomunian asked, his voice as bored as his face expression and thick with an accent.

“Yes. We are here to request a fumigation to remove rikks and kirrts.”

“How long did you have them on your ship?”

“The first signs of their presence have been discovered one quaternary UTU ago, in the form of droppings found in the ship's storage department.”

The Pomunian's face tentacles wobbled as he emitted a hum while tapping an electronic device.

“All in all, that would be 1365 Ku.”

Zekra's eyes widened and antennae lowered. “Excuse me, but that is ridiculous!”

The Pomunian gave her a measuring look and slowly blinked before continuing. “Well, I can't do much about it myself. Due to various circumstances, I have to pay for all the equipment myself, which does include a number of hazardous chemicals and their appropriate containing measures. All bits and pieces that add up.”

Zekra heard a low growl from behind.

“And probably adding up more if I have to do my work in the presence of this exoskeletal. Don't take it personal, but with the way they keep staring at me, I'm simply not feeling safe to work in their presence. In that case, that would be 1486 Ku.”

It seemed like Zekra's expression told the Pomunian enough, so he continued without waiting for an answer. “However, considering this is just rikks and kirrts you are dealing with, I would recommend asking the resident Im Kpaz colony for help instead. They have to eat, too.”

“Thanks, you fucking idiot,” Zekra grumbled.

“What is it?”

Ge briefly turned around to glare at the Idrath walking behind her. “I did tell you, 'stay quiet'. And what did you do? Does growling at the decontaminator and scaring him enough to up the price count as 'staying quiet' in your mind?”



“He did say things that displeased you, did he not?”

“Things he was not directly responsible for! And haven't you gotten it into the excuse of a bedpan you call a head that when you are told to be quiet, you fucking should be?”

“I remember one of those attacking you on Idrath.”

“So what? The one on Idrath was a weapon-dealing criminal while this one takes care of of ship infestations, like the one the *Sciara* currently has.”

Zekra slowed down all of a sudden, having spotted a small, brown animal with blue accents standing on the ground ahead. Arqeez gave the creature a curious look, but was rather surprised when Zekra started to talk to it.

“Excuse me, do you understand Unicomlang? I need to have a talk with your colony about an extermination contract. Bring me to your translator if you’re interested.”

The creature tilted its head, its tail that stuck straight upwards briefly waving, then it emitted a series of chirps and ran ahead, stopping after several metres to look back.

“Good, I will follow you,” Zekra replied.

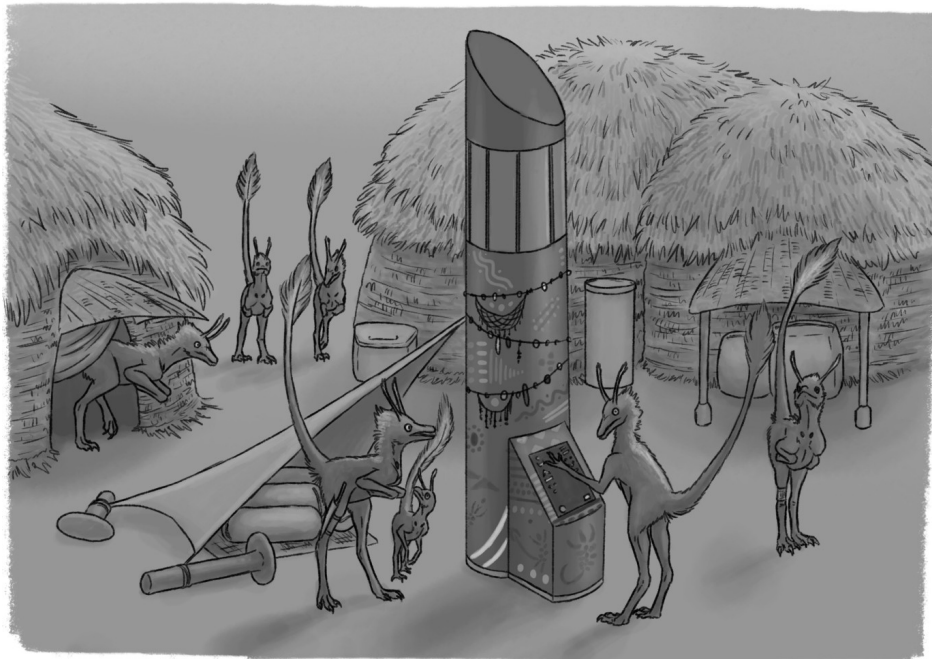
“What is that?” Arqeez asked, gesticulating at the small creature running ahead in between stops.

“Im Kpaz. The decontaminator suggested asking them for dealing with our lodgers.”

“They do look kind of tasty,” Arqeez commented, looking at the little creature’s upright, flagged tail wiggling from side to side as it ran.

“What the *fuck*, Arqeez. You will not eat any of them and if you try so, you are going to be locked up, so keep your hands and teeth off them. And now be quiet, we have arrived.”

Zekra had expected the colony to employ a living translator as most did, but this one had a stationary translation device for themselves right in front of their settlement, a once-grey metal pillar now covered in paint and a variety of colourful adornments. The Im Kpaz who had led them here had a chirping discussion with a number of conspecifics that were either already present near the translator or had come out of the low huts filling the harbour's dead end they called their home, before another pressed a number of buttons on the pillar.



“In the name of the Fire Iron clan, White Needle greets you two,” came from the pillar as it translated the series of chirps. “You did speak of an extermination contract to Swift Leaf. We like to know more.”

“I have a rikk and kirrt infestation on my spaceship and would like to have them removed.”

Several chirps and chitters broke out among the Im Kpaz surrounding the pillar after it had repeated Zekra's words in their own language.

“The rikks are appreciated,” White Needle replied. “Good meat to eat and good skins to use. The kirrts have us worried. Sharp teeth that bite, hiding in tight, dark places where they cannot be seen and they cannot be eaten. Some of our greatest warriors are willing to accept the challenge and have their teeth as trophies, but we fear some might be injured or even die. The Fire Iron clan wants suitable compensation for the kirrts.”

“What do you want in return?” Zekra asked. Ge didn't have to do much with Im Kpaz so far, but ge was still aware they had no use for currency – they always demanded some kind of object as payment.

The Im Kpaz were chirping among each other for a few moments again before White Needle forwarded the message. “We want a big block of dried shkrrini, as big as the big one can carry!” Lots of chirps and whistles joined the translation from all around the pillar, seemingly affirming White Needle's demand.

Zekra briefly looked up what ‘shkrrini’ meant on her wrist computer – apparently, it was a species of alga native to the Im Kpaz home planet.

“Are you sure shkrrini is sold in this city?”

White Needle affirmed it. “Several stores in the food district sell them, as I have seen them with my own eyes! But none is willing to trade with us, no matter what items we offer them in return.”

“Then I agree. A block of dried shkrrini in exchange for you getting the rikks and kirrts out.”

White Leaf looked at both Zekra and Arqeez. “You bring the block. Then we will agree.”

Zekra exhaled. “Fine.”

It was probably a safety measure since some subjects might prefer to have the Im Kpaz risk their lives to remove potentially dangerous infestations and then skimp on the compensation, but nothing ge took an issue with. Dried shkrrini shouldn't be too hard to acquire.

“What the flute-blowing *fuck*.” Having left the quarantine spaceport and entered the city proper, Zekra had looked up the locations of various food vendors and looked at the price of shkrrini blocks if they had it in stock. So far, the price had been way higher than ge had first assumed for something that was made out of dried algae, which likely meant that the species was one of the harder-to-cultivate types.

With the size the Im Kpaz had demanded, the infestation removal would eat a significant part of their current funds, even though it still came out cheaper than hiring the decontaminator. It was a massive inconvenience, especially considering the costs of having Arqeez' biochemical profile decoded and medical papers done, and the waste filter likely acting up, judging by the water's taste getting a distinct tinge of poorly-constructed sewer after a few days.

Arqeez took his eyes off the irregular, plant-coated forms of the buildings surrounding them to look at his associate. “What is it?”

“Looks like we need to have a detour to gather funds. That crap the Im Kpaz wanted is more expensive than what I had originally assumed.” Zekra looked up from her wrist computer to look at the street ahead.

The city of Bejei-Dun was an old settlement where buildings had been torn down and rebuilt numerous times; while there was the occasional building from older eras here and there, the majority had been grown from a local fungus that provided surprising strength and insulation at little weight once dried and imbued with resin, with the walls facing the sun being covered in plants to provide cleaner air. The plants were non-native, as evident by their bluish-green colour and lack of symmetry that was so common among the photoautotrophs evolving on tidelocked planets circling red dwarf stars, where sun and wind always came from the same direction.



The city's layout was like a maze, but at least the streets were rather empty at the moment, making it easier to see where they were going. There were no pubs or their hoardings available in the settlement due to local religion forbidding intoxication outside of designated rituals, hence the buildings' walls served as the preferred non-digital communication sites, with them being coated with notices as densely as their upper portions were coated with plants. A lot of them were written in the local native language, but Zekra assumed those were meant for the locals, looking for the notices he could read.

"What are you looking for?" Arqeez asked. For him, the scribbles on the sheets glued to the walls had no meaning.



"Whether there are quick job offers. It's better to know where we can make some money right away."

Jobs and money were one of the things Arqeez still didn't quite get. Sure, he understood rewarding niceties, but the way it was done outside of Idrath involved weird little sticks that seemed to transfer rewards between individuals that have never seen each other before. Still, sometimes the niceties they had to do for the funny sticks were a nice diversion.

“What kind of offers are there?”

Zekra briefly looked up, giving the Idrath a measuring look. “Nothing for you. Not with the way you acted around the decontaminator.”

“What about this one?” Arqeez pointed at a particularly large poster, depicting two creatures snarling at each other in front of some sort of a cage, with fire and more creatures in the background. He had seen this particular poster a few times on the walls before already.

“No. No, no, no. There is nothing that will get me into a fighting pit.”

The dark, four-legged creature struggled, screeching and sputtering, its front claws disabled by Arqeez’ strong grip and its tentacles out of reach. He lunged forwards, still holding the creature by its front limbs, the sudden movement toppling it over and letting it fall on its back. The crowd roared, whooped, screeched and made other noises to show its approval. The loudest cheers came from Zekra, who had climbed the cage that separated the pit from the bleachers to have a better view.



Arqeez continued by stepping on his opponent’s chest, who screeched and chittered again, only for a horn blaring to declare the fight over.

“And another win for the armoured stranger!” the announcer cried out, their voice nearly drowned out by the wild-going masses. “This was it for the next 24 terts, gather your bets and see you next time!”

The spectators were barely any quieter when Arqeez left the pit, a mixture of cheering and swearing blending into a cacophony his translator didn’t even bother to decipher. The output part had been taken off before he had entered the pit to prevent it from being damaged, but the smaller input piece was still attached to his head. Zekra ran up to him barely after the cage door had been closed behind him, eyes wide, antennae erect and the mouth corners tugged by a wide smile where the tooth plates were not visible, an expression Arqeez had learned to read as happiness. Ge was waving around a number of the currency sticks on a string. “Arqeez, that was awesome! You made enough Ku to have the ship’s maintenance covered for at least two planets! You might tone it down a little next time, the pit’s regular fighters probably won’t walk straight for the next quart.”

“Hm,” Arqeez replied with waving antennae, “I wouldn’t mind to make you not walk straight either, but not in a fight.”

A part of him found the interest strange himself, considering Zekra was quite the opposite of a female Idrath, but the part was not able to redirect the interest he had developed over the time they had spent so much time close together.

“I’m sure we could find a quiet alley between the-” Zekra’s tail struck over the armoured side of his head – not painful, but certainly a definite opinion of his suggestion. Ge ducked down a bit and stepped backwards, but ger face expression remained the same, save for ger lips opening to reveal ger jagged, blood-coloured teeth.

“I can also tell the pit owner that you would be thrilled to work here, while I fuck off and leave you to your own devices. You are fucking disgusting, Arqeez.”

Before the Idrath could say anything, a third entity joined them, announcing themselves with two thrills. Turning to the source of the sound, they saw an individual Zekra could easily identify as one of the native Heycariv. Their clothes were dark blue and embroidered, a stark contrast to the mostly brown and yellow clothing of the natives attending the pit fight.



“Your fighting skills are impressive, truly impressive. I could almost assume you are a professional. May I know your name?”

Arqeez just looked down at the odd individual, tripped up and not sure what to make out of them. Did they want to fight as well?

“He’s called Arqeez,” Zekra replied for the Idrath. “And I don’t think he gives autographs.”

The Heycariv chuckled, a high-pitched, whimpering sound. “No, I have something better to ask of him. I assume you are his manager?”

Zekra passed a glance at ger companion. “Not really. We are just travellers who took an opportunity to stock up our funds a bit.”

The Heycariv raised their neck, briefly opening the bright green flaps in surprise. “Even better!” Then they leaned their neck forward, shading their eyes with their antennae.

“You see, I was looking for exactly such a person. Someone big, intimidating and capable to hold their own in a fight. I do have a little problem I would like it to be taken care of, and would pay handsomely for it, that which you have earned in this hole in a wall being toilet money in comparison.”

“What makes you think we are thugs for hire?” Zekra asked the Heycariv, folding ger arms. Arqeez was scratching the scabs obtained in the fight and looking at the crowd instead, which was still cheering and swearing depending on which fighter they had been betting on.



A quick opening and closing of the neck flaps indicating surprise. “Oh, no no no. None such thing. You see, I am a busy individual and my success has made me enemies. One particularly nasty work partner has been uncooperative and threatening me for quite some time, and unfortunately I do have to deal with him lately. Last time he had let himself be accompanied by some rather unsavoury individuals to let the results turn out more in his favour through underhanded threats. This is why I wanted to simply hire myself a bodyguard who looks intimidating to deter my work partner from doing anything stupid, but is also capable in a fight should things go off course. A perfectly honourable job and nothing hard, just looking imposing, but when push comes to shove and he does have to fight, I would pay a bonus. In fact, you are welcome to join him. You see, you are not *quite* what I came looking for, but sometimes quantity beats quality.”

“I can fight myself,” Zekra replied matter-of-factly. “What sort of sum do you want to pay for us accompanying you to your business partner?”

The Heycariv leaned even more forward and narrowed their eyes. “3200 Ku at the least.”



Zekra was so surprised by that sum that Arqeez gave her a curious glance. “That is quite a lot!”

“Well, you see,” the Heycariv said with an expression even Arqeez was able to tell to be nothing but smugness, “I am a successful individual and do not shy away from giving those I hire what they deserve.”

“Well, Arqeez, I can't really say 'no' to this. Want to look all imposing for a bit?”

With them having decided on taking the job, it didn't take long for the Heycariv and their two new bodyguards to leave the pit arena for the business meeting. The Heycariv told them they had arranged a meeting with their business partner right away, apparently he was living close by as well. It was a ridiculously easy job to do, with Zekra thinking whether she should follow through with hiring the Im Kpaz or maybe pay the decontaminator instead, making sure he would remove the pests without anyone having to die, by accident or otherwise.

The business partner was indeed just a few short streets away, the red light of the sun was soon replaced with the white, gloomy light inside something that was probably a storage room, shelves loaded with packages, scrolls and pottery. The Heycariv walked through the building as if they were familiar with the layout, snatching a cushion from a pile stacked between two shelves.

The business partner, a grouchy-looking Eshkenian sorting through several scroll-filled pots, eyed the Heycariv and their two escorts with annoyance as the former settled on the cushion they had taken before in front of his workspace, the pair of spines rising on his head.



“You again, Bayrodo. I have told you often enough that I am not interested. You can find the door by yourself and take that street crud with you.”

“Now, now, my dear Me'chkin. No reason to be this hostile,” the Heycariv named Bayrodo told him with an amiable voice. “You see, Master Le has been exceptionally generous to you. She is still friendly to you, asking in a polite manner to join the guild rather than taking up more... convincing measures.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Me'chkin replied with venom in his voice, his eyes first facing Arqeez, then Zekra, both standing behind Bayrodo and observing the conversation. Zekra was having her first doubts about the job; maybe this was indeed a trader not following the local rules, but the fact this involved two random people hired directly from a fighting pit rather than official law enforcement reeked of illegal activity being conducted.

“I don't know how often I have to repeat that to you until it arrives in your brain, but I don't give a shit about the guild. It's nothing but parasites feeding off others' work.”

Bayrodo snorted in offence, but quickly caught themselves. “You clearly have a wrong impression of us, my dear Me'chkin. As I have explained to you, we do offer aid in cases of natural calamities, burglaries...”

Me'chkin rose from the cushions he was sitting on. “And I don't give a fuck! As if it's a secret the guild doesn't arrange those calamities and burglaries itself to scare the traders into joining it! Just fuck off already, I have work to do!”



Bayrodo shifted on the cushion. “Now, now, who goes around, telling such egregiously wrong slander about the guild? You see, Master Le-”

“If you love that Master Le so much, let me give you a large jar of Kishnit oil so you can slide up her twat and I’ll give your two catamites a jar each as well for them to drill her, too! Maybe then she will shut the fuck up at least and not bother me with your stupid face ever again! And now, be-gone!” Me'chkin snarled at the Heycarif, the air dense with the sweet smell his species exuded when agitated.

Bayrodo inhaled with a thrilling sound, then rose from the cushion themselves. “You... how *dare* you insult my mother like this? I have been trying to be nice and this is how you pay me?” He spun around, eyes wide and discoloured. “Arqeez, do beat some manners into this uncouth Eshkenian!” The Idrath stepped forward and Me'chkin already lifted his arms in response.

Zekra jumped in front of the Idrath, ger tail around the wrist of his upper left arm. “Arqeez, don't!” “What is the meaning of this?” Bayrodo shrieked.

“Call the contract cancelled, if there was anything not stinking like an overflowing latrine about this, you would have hired local law enforcement to deal with it,” Zekra told him, tooth plates exposed and antennae flat on ger head. Arqeez looked between ger and their employer in confusion. “Finally someone with reason,” Me'chkin commented the events from behind, his voice now calmer. Bayrodo meanwhile looked absolutely livid.

“You disgusting traitor! Get out of my way, you overgrown rikk!” the Heycariv shoved one of his hands into his garments to retrieve an elongate contraption Zekra had barely enough time to recognize as a gas-powered gun before the nozzle was pointed at ger head. Bayrodo had to reposition their hand on the trigger before they could push it, a few moments that allowed Zekra to lunge out of the way. Their aim was still way off, courtesy to Arqeez slamming his hand against the arm holding the weapon. The projectile shattered a pot, a sound no one cared about as Arqeez held onto the furious Heycariv's arm, twisting it until it broke.

“Arqeez, that's enough!”

Bayrodo cried out in pain, the gun falling from his now-limp hand. But Arqeez didn't even think of stopping. With a growl, he kicked the Heycariv into a shelf, shattering several more pots, before pulling them out of the shards by their healthy arm and grabbing them by their neck. Bayrodo's choked scream was muffled when another hand closed over his upper jaw.

“I said enough!” Zekra called the Idrath to stop, considering Bayrodo was not of danger any more.

Arqeez looked on at ger, then yanked the hand holding Bayrodo's head backwards, breaking their neck. Only then he dropped the Heycariv, their body twitching erratically.

Zekra stared at the broken heap for several seconds. “You fucking killed them!”



“They did point one of these tools that kill at you,” Arqeez explained himself.

“Yes, and dropped it after you broke their arm, where you could have just broke the weapon and be done, you moron!”

Arqeez felt confused. He did save ger life from the lethal contraption, yet ge was furious.

“Did you just one moment consider what gigantic vat of shit you have dragged us into this way?” Ge started to pace, looking at the place with the cushions and the scroll-filled pots which was abandoned by now, Me’chkin having left it sometime during the escalation. “Consider that killing has consequences? You are not on Idrath any more!”

Zekra’s pacing got more directed when ge headed for the door they had entered the storage room through, stepping outside into the unchanging, reddish light, Arqeez trailing behind.

“So, what do you plan to do?” the Idrath asked.

Zekra gave him a long look. Ge had calmed somewhat down by now, as Arqeez wasn’t greeted by the sight of exposed tooth plates, but the antennae were still held close to the head. “Leaving. I think you know where the fighting pit is, if the local law enforcement doesn’t decide that killing a member of an organized crime organisation isn’t worth being locked up, you can have a great career there.”

Arqeez put his antennae askew. “You mean you want to go without me? But why?”

“Have you still not understood?” ge shouted. “You are mangling and killing people as casually as scratching your head, don’t know when to stop... And then you are even asking ‘why’!” Then sadness crept into ger anger. “And who guarantees it won’t be me who will have your casual violence be directed at themselves? Farewell.”

Before Arqeez could reply, Zekra broke into a sprint, up a cable on a wall and vanished from sight on the building’s roof, leaving no scent trail on the ground for him to follow. The Idrath looked in the direction he had seen his companion go, then drew a few deep breaths.

The *Sciara*, still with its rikks and kirrts, stood in the quarantine harbour silent and unmoving. The only change was that its door was open and ramp lowered, a connection to the outside world currently unused – or used in a fashion it hadn’t been build for.

On the way back to the harbour over Bejei-Dun’s roofs, Zekra had plenty of time to think about the situation. Now, ge was sitting at the bottom of the ramp, outer space just a few steps and buttons away, but not nearly as sure about leaving as before.



Sure, Arqeez had messed up and there was no excuse for it. He did end the existence of an entity capable of suffering outside of necessity or explicit request, an act forbidden for sapient individuals. Yet, the only reason he had done it was because the Heycariv had threatened ger. A Heycariv involved in some kind of criminal enterprise. The Eshkenian badgered by them seemed to harbour nothing but animosity for the ‘guild’, so it might be quite possible he wouldn’t involve law enforce-

ment to have the reason for the corpse in his workplace punished, but he hadn't quite considered the guild taking the disappearance of one of its members into its own hands, which in turn would be a threat to Arqeez's life somewhere along the line.

He couldn't leave. Yet, what if the Idrath would lose his temper again, and kill someone who wasn't pointing weapons at either of them, possibly even an innocent he misinterpreted the body language of? Was that a risk worth taking? Or was the risk of him leaving behind, completely uncontrolled, more worth?

As Zekra was mulling over those questions, the *Sciara's* open door caught someone else's attention.

The smell was the first thing that drove her to the large structure. There were many others like this one in her territory, appearing and vanishing at random. Most were uninteresting. Some smelled tasty. She had examined a few of them, but didn't find anything of particular interest there. This one appeared no different at first glance, being big and elevated off the ground with few connection points. One of the connection points was different than the others, and with one of the many different animals frequenting her territory resting at the base. It gave off an acidic smell she didn't find particularly interesting. It seemed to be in a relaxed position, focussing on its own feet or the distance, unlikely to look for prey as her. Still, she crawled up the underside of the connection to stay out of focus, towards the alluring smell. Up she went until she couldn't get higher, from where she climbed on top of the connection, looking up at the gaping opening in front of her. The alluring smell was almost palpable, carrying the promise of tasty prey to eat. Without a second thought, she scurried inside, those thinking they were safe in there completely unaware of the threat about to feast on their bodies.

"So, you did come after all."

Arqeez walked slowly closer, to not set off the Serkanian sitting on the ship's ramp.

He knew where the fighting pit was, and wouldn't have minded a few more fights, especially after such a frustrating situation as Zekra wanting to abandon him. He had wanted confirmation first, that the strange alien who had saved his life purely by accident was gone, that the ship he had been living inside for many activity cycles after leaving Idrath had departed from the space harbour. Maybe catch a last glimpse of it flying up and away. A small part of him was still clinging on to the hope of the ship and its pilot waiting for him and a bigger part was surprised to see it to be true.

"You didn't leave?"

"I couldn't leave." Zekra looked back, no anger in her voice or expression. "I had a bit of time to think it over and it was stupid what I did. You are my problem and my responsibility. I cannot guarantee you not breaking more necks in my absence."

"Does it mean, you will take me with you again?"

"Yes," Zekra replied, "but under one circumstance. If I tell you to stop, you do, because you will get us in deeper shit than necessary that way. Promise me to kill nobody and nothing without permission unless absolutely necessary."

Arqeez looked at his companion for a few moments, her usually violet eyes appearing crimson in the large sun's red light. Then he reached up to his head and picked off the receiver part of the translator, followed by unstrapping the emitter part from his arm.



“I... promise not to kill unless you say so,” the Idrath said, letting his own voice speak instead of the translator. It was choppy, heavy with accent and a bit hard to adjust to due to the low frequency and rumbling undertones, but clear enough to be understood.

Zekra was so surprised he stood up from her sitting position on the base of the *Sciara*'s ramp. “You are speaking Unicomlang? But... how?”

Arqeez shrugged. “I listened to what you said. And what the translator said. And I was often bored in the ship. Said things into the translator just to hear what it sounded like in the language you speak.”

“That is incredible...” Zekra had assumed Arqeez to be a sapient of lesser intelligence, unable to progress to a level beyond the basic requirements of sapience, yet he was able to teach himself a foreign language with nothing but a translator to aid him. Well, he was still not the brightest, but intelligence was a finicky thing, being a combination of a myriad of traits rather than a singular value. He had massively underestimated his abilities. Another reason not to leave him behind, to see what the Idrath was truly capable of.

“Anyway, we don't have time to waste. That Eshkenian might be courteous enough not to call the law enforcement over the scoundrel you killed, but their family might disagree, so we better leave sooner than later.”

“But what about the... things on the ship you wanted to get rid of?”

“They are a problem for later.” Zekra walked up the ramp, looking back to make sure Arqeez was following. “There is worse vermin on this planet than a few small, syncultural animals in the food storages, vermin with gas-powered guns for example.”

The *Sciara*'s door closed and sealed shut, its white lights going on and making the two interstellar travellers see everything in a tinge of blue after the Heycariv home star's red light.

Arqeez noticed first they were not alone.

“Is that one of the things you do not want here?” he said in a low voice, pointing at an elongate animal with six limbs sitting in a corner. Its front limbs were closed around something brown and hairy, while its jaws dug into it, pulling equally brown, glistening entrails out of it.



“That’s...” Zekra looked at the creature, trying to remember what he had seen in the common syn-cultural species identification handbook. “That’s a karucat. Must have gotten inside while I had the ramp down. It’s a widely-distributed predator feeding on all kinds of- that’s the solution!”

Arqeez looked in confusion at his companion, who was smiling a genuine smile. “We did come here to get rid of the small creatures the karucat is eating. It entered by its own admission and being a more or less natural predator of our little problems, it’s taking care of them just like the Im Kpaz would have, except with it living in the ship, all future infestations with rikks and kirrts are taken care of in advantage. No more overpriced offers by decontaminators or having to find shkrrini for Im Kpaz colonies as work hazard compensation. This is much better than the other two options we had. Landing here was a good decision after all.”

The karucat looked at the two large creatures bickering, blinked once with her front, then hind eye pair before picking up the rikk carcass and scurrying into the back of the ship, in the direction of the storage room, where there was less disturbance and a smell promising more food to be around. She settled in a quiet, dark corner and finished the rikk there, licking the remains off her forelegs when the place started to roar and rattle. She briefly looked around, then resumed her cleaning activities. Roars and rattles weren’t uncommon in her territory, nothing to be afraid of. This part of her territory was one she liked, as there were plenty of dim spaces to hide in, food close by and the smell of those annoying, swift creatures stealing her food and poking her with long sharp needles was not present.

It was a good place to make herself a new lair. She stretched, then got up and scurried along the wall, a repeated rustling in the distance having caught her attention.