

Note: to get access to the full novel, if you are interested in reviewing it, please review these chapters (constructive criticism, parts that work, parts that should be reworked, ...), and/or find the answer to the riddle that appears at the end of these chapters using the Star Map found on the arpia.be gallery (in the "General" section).

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Chapter One

The lights went out, the crowd was still. The main stadium of planet Spiciam was silent, but murmurs arose as the platform in the centre was bathed in pale blue light. The platform quadrants slid apart to reveal a rocket ship. A 'Vostok I' model, Vastor noted. He remembered it from the many space travel history courses and exhibitions he had been forced to endure in his youth.

The large screens on all sides of the platform lit up and started counting down the seconds. Eight hundred thousand voices spoke as one; Vastor preferred to look around him, to let his attention wander elsewhere.

"Ten."

There were people of all ages and appearances. But most were like Vastor: of average height and olive-skinned. After forty years, he was still just another face in the crowd.

Blast it, he thought as he uttered "six", this was a time for partying, not sulking.

After all, the event was organised throughout the Absolem Constitutor. Even the two other main groups of star systems were celebrating. Of course, Earth was the place to be, but it couldn't accommodate everyone. Anyway, the Terran shows cost too much for normal space traders. A normal space trader, that was who he was, and he was proud of it.

"One."

Maybe he'd die unnoticed, but maybe he'd change the world.

"Lift off!"

The engines drowned the roars of the crowd, and the rocket broke through the bonds of gravity. It flew up into the sky, leaving the whole stadium illuminated by blue light. In the silence of expectation, everyone craned their necks to see the little dot in the sky disappear in a shower of fireworks; among the cheers that followed, Vastor discerned murmurs of awe. Funny how such a simple thing as fireworks, even packed inside a rocket, still captured man's imagination.

The inner ring of the stadium became active once again as a deejay pumped up the sound and announced the heavily packed programme: break-dancing on hover boards, a game of spaceball between Spiciam's three greatest teams. But Vastor didn't listen to the rest. After all, it had nothing to do with the celebrated event: two thousand years beforehand, a man called Yuri Alekseyevich Gagarin had been the first to fly in space. Two millennia of exploration, discovery and colonisation. As if Gagarin could ever have imagined people playing spaceball in his honour.

Vastor smiled at his friends, the Szarnus, locked in an airtight embrace, only slightly deformed by Karakal's bulging baby bump. Simon had bought tickets for the three of them some six months ago. Karakal and Simon seemed to know their lives in advance: even then, they had known their baby would be due in the weeks following the show and not before. Young Parmil would be pleased to have a little brother. Vastor hoped his two-year-old goddaughter was fast asleep and not annoying the baby-sitter again.

Turning around, he eyed the drunks around him with disgust. Half were wasted, smiling like monkeys and singing "Yuri Yuri Loves Me" out of tune, the other half were getting high on NOI. He heard Karakal breathe heavily, and saw Simon put his hand on her tummy.

“Home,” she muttered after half a minute, and her husband nodded, brushing back his long hazel hair. He took his wife’s hand, and led her through the crowd.

“Coming, Vastor?” Simon asked without looking back.

“Right behind you.”

In his rush to the exit, Vastor crashed into someone. As he turned to apologise, a punch caught him on the jaw and sent him reeling. Head spinning, his legs gave way under him and he fell, his nose crashing into the ground. His vision blurred; his ears were numb; consciousness drifted away.

Vastor opened his eyes with a start. He had just dreamt of being drowned by a wave in the open sea, and found to his surprise that he was wet. After realising his mattress was made out of concrete, he twisted his head and spotted two Wellington boots belonging to two legs. He followed them up to hands holding a bucket and reached a face bearing a nonchalant expression. In the morning light, it looked very ugly.

“Awake for good?” the man spat, making Vastor blink.

“Es, anku,” he replied slowly, putting his jaw back in place. He realised it didn’t mean anything in Absol; the man, however, seemed to understand, and walked over to the next motionless body in the stadium.

The stadium!

As memories began to fall back into place, Vastor found the washrooms, ignoring the drunks on the way. In front of a mirror, he spotted a nice bruise beginning to show to the right of his mouth. On the tip of his nose, his olive skin had been replaced by bare red tissue, and it didn’t look good. He cursed despite himself. Must have been a NOI addict: violence was one of the drug’s after-effects, especially among those used to seeing those yellow rivers and purple hills.

Oh well, it would heal. He wouldn’t file in a report; he didn’t like hanging around the cops anyway.

As Vastor hopped off the bus, he noticed purple lights flashing from the Szarnus’ road. The old lady next door often called the emergency numbers for all sorts of nonsense. What had she done now, tripped on her mangy cat? It wasn’t that he didn’t like her; she did have a certain charm. But old folks had never been his cup of tea. If anything, he hoped he would die before the age of ninety: if he became a vegetable fifty years from now, he’d be dependent. He shivered at the idea.

There they were: two police constables, talking to a distressed teenage girl. Vastor recognised Parmil’s baby-sitter. Something was wrong, and it didn’t concern the old woman.

“Mr Iouchtchine!”

The girl had cried out his name in relief, and one of the constables turned to greet him while the other one put an arm around the baby-sitter and ushered her away.

“You are Vastor Iouchtchine, Parmil Szarnu’s godfather?” the policeman asked, eyebrows raised.

“Indeed.” He swallowed and massaged his jaw. “Is there a problem? Do you mind telling me what this is about?”

“Please come inside, sir.”

As he walked through the front door, Vastor distinctly heard the constable saying “we have the suspect” in his radio. He didn’t like it, not one little bit.

The Szarnus were nowhere to be seen. As Vastor sat down by the living room table, he heard noise come from Parmil’s bedroom upstairs, but that was all. The police constable settled down opposite, and pursed his lips.

“Mr Iouchtchine, would you mind telling me what you did in the past twelve hours?”

“Why? What happened?”

“Just answer the question, sir.”

The policeman's stern look calmed Vastor's urge to ask, but a deep worry grew inside as he related the facts.

After hearing the whole tale, the constable asked whether he had any people who could vouch for his story.

"Of course: Simon and Karakal were with me the whole time, the maintenance man will recognise me, ..."

"You see, sir, there is a slight problem," the cop said.

Vastor looked at him with bored eyes. He felt like yelling a big "duh!" at him. Of course there was a problem. But what was it?

"Mr and Mrs Szarnu seem to have had an accident."

"What?"

Vastor's eyes were wide open, his bushy eyebrows raised in shock.

"Their vehicle was found in a terrible state off the A40Q road."

He felt his heart sink. The bus had driven by, of course: flashing lights were huddled up against the edge of the road. There was a ditch beyond.

He covered his mouth with his left hand, and stayed motionless for a while, staring in mid-air.

"Are they..."

The constable looked at him with eyes full of compassion.

"I'm afraid we couldn't find anything but a few scorched bits and pieces. The vehicle blew up after falling down a ditch."

Vastor looked around, searching for his two good friends, eyes swelling with tears. This had to be a bad dream. It couldn't be.

"You see, sir," the cop said, apparently annoyed by yet another problem, "you were seen entering that car with them."

Vastor stared at him, and shook his head slowly.

"We have witnesses who distinctly saw a man of your description enter the Szarnus' vehicle."

"But I was in the stadium all night," he protested, sorrow drowning his surprise. "Go ask those still present at the Planetary!"

"Just a minute, sir."

The policeman put his hand to his ear, and nodded. "Yes, madam, it shall be done. Right away, your honour."

Looking at Vastor, he raised his eyebrows and breathed deeply before calling his colleague.

"That was the Instruction Judge. Mr Vastor Iouchtchine, you are under arrest for the murder of Karakal and Simon Szarnu."

Vastor felt his jaw drop, but could not move. The policeman moved outside his scope of vision, and Vastor's arms were pulled behind him. After what seemed an eternity, he was pushed forwards. The living room moved away from him, the doorway passed over him and the police car wrapped itself around him before speeding away.

Chapter Two

The galaxy wouldn't mark it as special, but this was an important day for the young lady who strolled into the spaceport with a proud smile.

"Good-bye planet Spiciam," she said to the dark customs offices as she skipped ahead of them. Nothing could hold her back here anymore: no more studies at the Prospera School of Space, no more visits to the orphanage of her childhood, no more family.

Family.

She broke her pace, and tears came to her eyes. Why had her godfather gone on that last trip, a month before her graduation?

It was useless: Vastor was dead, and she couldn't bring him back.

She suppressed her sorrow, and marched on. She was about to leave the planet for the first time; her godfather would have been proud of her.

Dead ahead was a sleek v-shaped spaceship, the Astraponta vessel Vastor had bought for her last birthday: the Karakal, christened after a woman of whom she had no memories.

After saying good-bye to the few who had come to see her off, she embarked on the Karakal, and waved one last time. Outside on Spiciam lay her past: Ma Muriel, her orphanage tutor, sobbing uncontrollably; Fra Hollaban, the Yaofskei priest, smiling gently and wishing her the help of the gods, the curved 'Y' symbol on his left hand shining like the sun. A group of people the rest of her crew knew. She turned to confront the future the Karakal would bring her to, away from them, away from the demons of the past.

Inside the ship, she found the twins, Tara and Sam, cross-checking the supplies list one very last time, and they both acknowledged her with a bright "Hullo, captain". Rikar's dark fingers were playing with the buttons on the control panel, making sure everything was fully operational.

She went to the command bridge, and found her best friend, Borreli, patiently waiting inside his co-pilot seat in front of the radar and navigation screens.

"All set?"

"Aye aye, cap'n," he answered with a smile. As he studied her, concern showed on his face. "Are you sure about this?"

She breathed deeply and nodded with her lips pursed.

"All right then, just give the order," he said, but she knew Borreli had said it half-heartedly. He was right, of course: she didn't feel quite ready. But if they didn't leave now, they probably never would.

"Start the engines."

The young woman stared at the small crowd of friends quickly moving away from the ship. There she was, twenty-six years old in Earth's so-called "Terran years", about to leave Spiciam and the Rablaor Kan star system at last, in February 1106. It was a dream come true, to lead a life that would reach far beyond the confines of this system, to live among the stars and visit the galaxy. One she would have liked Vastor to witness. She sighed.

"Something wrong?" Borreli asked.

She shook her head, and cleared her throat.

"To all the crew of the Karakal, this is your captain speaking. We shall lift off in thirty seconds. Please find the nearest available seat, and let it activate the security field around you."

A few people clapped and cheered inside the ship.

Rikar's voice came through the hallway. "About time!"

"Show 'em what you're capable of, muchacha," Sam shouted from the cargo bay.

Borreli swivelled on his chair, ready to plot a course.

"What is our destination?"

“Solar system, planet Earth. Let’s start by seeing what we can find at the capital of the Absolium Constitutor.”

“Sure? You don’t wait to wait a tiny weenie bit?” he asked with a chuckle.

“No, take her up. For Vastor.”

“For Vastor,” he smiled.

The rest of the crew joined in, and Parmil brightened up. Her crew was there for her, and young Parmil Szarnu was embarking on her greatest journey yet.

Here they were, Parmil thought as she joined the others in contemplating the beauty of the space that unfolded before them. Five friends yearning for adventure, sick and tired of the world of learning in which they had been immersed. They had known each other for so many years she had trouble remembering exactly how they had met.

Easter ‘98, first year at Prospera, right before the end of year exams. It had been a long, tedious morning of studying for Parmil and Borreli, who had become friends right from the start of uni. They couldn’t fully understand the practical side, that was all. So, as usual, she had called upon her wise and experienced godfather for help.

“I’m already helping out a few kids your age here. I can’t help you two now, unless you’re ready to learn with them.”

Vastor’s experience and kindness had led him to giving private lessons to the failing sons and daughters of his many friends. This meant that most of the time, the students Parmil saw at Vastor’s were aspiring pilots without any skill and packed with money. On the plus side, it meant Parmil’s education was financed by that of others.

Borreli, with his inhuman patience and understanding, had no problem whatsoever breaking the ice with them, but she was so introverted by nature she barely acknowledged them most of the time.

Some things never changed, Parmil told herself. The stars seemed to have no effect on Borreli: he just smiled at the scenery, and concentrated on keeping the Karakal on course.

She tried to go back to that Easter memory.

Yes, this time was different. The young people they had found at Vastor’s were not dumb aspiring pilots. Sure, they were rich kids, but these had both a conscience and a brain. The black one studied Electro, so on the way to becoming either an electrician or an electronics genius, and he was pretty much both nowadays.

The twins were “hoping to maybe make it into the Absol Navy”, as the girl had said with her Hispanic accent.

Parmil’s memory skipped a few years until the Students’ Association of Prospera (SAP) held their bi-decennial elections. Borreli was a popular guy and already a favourite for the Presidential title thanks to his smiles, warmth, charm and well-thought decisions. Since Parmil held the leadership and organisation cards, they considered setting up a team of SAPpers, and that was when they entered in contact with Sam, Tara and Rikar once more. Sam amused the crowds with his jester attitude (often caused by his drunkenness, Parmil thought as she saw him take a gulp of beer and sink down into a comfy chair while admiring the view), Tara was an active figure of student life, and Rikar was the backstage man, DJ and lighting controller during parties and meetings. The team lost the election by a handful of votes to the good competition, but became fast friends. Very close, she thought with a smile, watching Tara rest on Rikar’s lap on some sort of sofa she had never seen before. Maybe Tara had brought it along from her old flat.

So yes, due to their different strengths and weaknesses, they had finally decided two years ago how they would operate as a crew, and had been working at it since then, preparing for graduation.

Let’s hope this team works well, Parmil told herself as they left the gravitational field of Spiciam.

As the Karakal blasted off the Europa moon, Parmil logged into the e-banking service to check her crew's joint account, and bit her lip. She turned to Borreli, who shook his head after seeing her face. "How bad?" he asked, concentrating again on his piloting.

"If it weren't for the twins, we'd be sinking."

"Tonterías," Sam shouted from where the kettle was hissing. "We're plummeting down towards the black hole of poverty as we speak."

Rikar chuckled and Tara joined in the discussion, but Parmil sighed and stopped listening. In the past seven months, they hadn't found any easy and profitable trade routes. Passenger ferrying only brought in a meagre cash flow. Not many courier jobs to do, delivery jobs always underpaid.

And if getting along normally wasn't hard enough, there were ships that would suddenly start attacking traders if they happened to be alone in uninhabited systems, and the Absol government didn't even seem to care. They'd complained once, but to no avail.

Parmil clenched her fists. Space pirates, the worst kind of scum. They weren't just robbers, they were also murderers, killers without conscience.

Eyes closed, she breathed deeply and recomposed herself.

A warm hand touched her bare neck. Opening her eyes, she saw a small hand moving up and down in the air, and followed the arm up to kind, feminine eyes.

"Hey there, princess. Are you meditating or something?"

"Sorry, Tara," Parmil smiled. "What did I miss?"

"As I said, freight companies like Universal Shipping and Tectonic Corp are safe bets." Sam seemed to have settled in a comfy chair.

"I'm going to think you actually thought it through," his sister replied.

"Padre Espacio," he sighed, shaking his head rapidly. "Anyway, I copied the insurance policies and researched their standard pay rates when we were planet-side. Want a peek?"

Parmil dismissed the idea with her hand, and Rikar made a joke about lazy Spaniards in space.

She wondered what she could do.

"I have an idea."

The noise around her died down.

Borreli nodded without turning his head. "Go on."

"What if we fought back?"

There was a cough, followed by a splash and yet more coughing.

"Gravity generator de mierda," Sam said while patting his chest, earning the usual disdainful sneer from where Tara sat. "You serious?"

The liquid disappeared into the floor around the abandoned cup, and Parmil nodded.

"Raid the raiders, maraud the marauders. Steal what they have, return it to the owners."

"That song has been put aside since the Robin Hood of space was disbanded. There is no Society anymore, no use dreaming."

Sam swooped down, grabbed the cup and pointed it towards Rikar.

"Harr, my friend is missing a point, I am afraid. Whilst thine humble servant, my dear me, was looking at the job list, I spotted a few very, very interesting bounties."

Tara's eyes opened beyond their sockets.

"You mean *real* money is involved?"

Sam winked.

"We could make a profit doing this. But I see one major flaw: the ship."

"The Karakal? You doubt my ship? It's perfectly all right, Sam, and has enough weaponry for this kind of combat. We've already had to destroy a few ships so far, so we can add a couple more to the account."

She got up abruptly and moved towards where Rikar was monitoring space traffic.

“Rikar is right, the Society aren’t as present these days. No one fights back actively; no one heads out to find them. But that’s just it: they won’t expect it.”

She turned towards Tara. “It’s no longer a matter of the Free Trading Society having a ship in every system, open to distress signals, ready to stop fleets from entering Absol space like it did until twenty years ago. It’s a matter of attacking the pirates one by one, in these systems where they now terrorise every civilian ship.”

Silence followed, and Parmil looked at each one in turn.

Borreli chuckled and punched a few buttons, activating the autopilot. He took a long, amused look at Parmil.

“You are completely out of your mind, but stars forbid, I’m behind you a hundred percent. Come here, my girl,” he said and gave her a hug. “I believe in you,” he continued, hands on her shoulders. “We’ll show them, for Vastor’s sake. Plus, the lousy pay put aside, you are the best darned captain I’ve ever met and probably the best friend I’ll ever have.”

Parmil smiled and nodded gently.

“I shall do my best to help,” said Tara. “I, too, believe in you. I suppose it’s a bit thin, but it’s my reason.”

“Don’t worry, we know about you and your fixed ideas, my angel,” Sam said, patting his sister on the back of the head before turning to Parmil. “If you think it will work, then fine by me. As long as there’s more action involved than simple courier jobs, I’m all for it. And did I mention I hate to stay on the surface?”

“Sure you did. Thanks. And you, Rikar?”

The engineer looked to the stars, and stayed motionless for a while before returning Parmil’s gaze.

“Sorry to be such a party crasher,” he said, “but I believe it’s a really bad, rushed idea, and I think you should reconsider before we all end up dead.”

Borreli swallowed, Tara pursed her lips and Sam stared open-mouthed. Eyes darted back and forth from Rikar to Parmil, waiting to see what would happen.

Parmil slowly nodded after a while, eyes scanning the ground in shame.

“I’m sorry.” She sighed. “It was... I just feel like... What’s the point of trade, even space-faring if you’re not safe?”

“You get the government to act, that’s what you do. You let those with the necessary skills deal with these problems.”

“But Rikar, the government doesn’t act!”

Silence followed.

“All right. Just one try. But if it goes badly, I’m out of the game. Definitely.”

Parmil nodded and put her hand on his shoulder.

“Thanks Rikar. Borreli, set our course towards the nearest uninhabited system. That would be Proxima Centauri, if I’m not wrong. We’ll see what we’re capable of over there.”

Later on, Borreli found himself wondering about what had come over Parmil, and why he had joined her in her enthusiasm. She did have her moments of revelation and genius at times, a desire for adventure, but this time it could get them in serious danger. He trusted her enough to be fully confident they would make it through all right in the end, but what happened in between could go wrong.

After a while, he pushed his momentary doubts aside. He thought too much, and it was making him doubtful and sad. He just had to go with it, and act.

He pulled himself together and checked the navigation instruments were fully functional and the ship still on course. Parmil was a good captain. Was it his own feelings he feared?

After spending one day in hyperspace, the Karakal had covered the four light years separating Sol from Proxima Centauri.

It is such a wonder, Parmil thought, hyper-jump. The way scientists had managed to apply Alcubierre's theory in order to cut down jump time amazed her. When was it? Yes, it must have been around -280 EE that scientists managed to create large amounts of "exotic matter". Then came along the Ramiderc era, where Salima Ramiderc created the first "hyper-jump" capable reactor.

"Parmil," Borreli shouted. Forgetting her history recollections, Parmil rushed to meet the urgency in his voice.

"What?"

"We have a ship on the radar. A Sil at two thousand kilometres," he replied, eyes wide and inner brows lowered, before contracting his mouth.

Parmil blinked in surprise before fear got to her too. The Silgarith was a behemoth, with a dual ion cannon setup, electromagnetic pulse missiles and with a crew of more than a hundred. To cut a long description short, it was a big mean vessel made specifically to disable ships by shutting down the electronic systems and to plunder its victims.

"Get out of the system. Now!"

"We can't," Borreli said before his Adam's apple danced vertically, "we're stuck between the Sil and the star's gravitational field. If we try to jump now, we'll be hit and disabled for sure."

Parmil's eyes darted across the bridge, searching for a solution.

"Outrun it then." She turned on the intercom. "Tara, 50mm cannon. Sam, close range blasters. Rikar, I need full engine output."

The Karakal accelerated and Parmil piloted it along the star's no-go gravity well.

"EMP missile coming in fast," Borreli shouted after ten seconds. "Impact in five."

Parmil breathed deeply. The Silgarith knew what was going on.

"Leave it to the Conquistador," came Sam's deep and overconfident voice through the intercom.

She looked at the screen showing the rear view, and saw Sam's shots annihilate the missile after two seconds.

"Space debris," Borreli swore. "They've got reinforcements coming!"

Parmil blinked, both at the bad news and at hearing Borreli use a curse-word. Great, just great.

"I've got five small ships coming from Bernard's Star, and one medium-sized ship from Sol. By the time we are at a safe jumping distance, they'll be upon us."

"Right," Parmil said, sighing deeply. "We'll have to make a stand."

Tara shouted from the side of the ship.

"The 50mm cannon has greater medium-range precision than the Sil's ion cannon. Parmil, if you get the ship close enough, I can fire at will."

"Better yet if you hit the reactors, Taraniña," Sam said just as his shots destroyed another missile.

"Volley coming in," he gasped a moment later.

The void behind the Karakal lit up with fountains of sparks as Sam's shots met the metal-encased packets of disabling energy.

"Missed one," Sam yelled.

Parmil closed her eyes, breathed deeply and prepared for the missile's impact.

The Karakal shook violently, but the expected power surge did not follow. Parmil checked the rear-view screen, saw the remains of a destroyed missile float away from the ship. That was close.

"Well done, Sam," she shouted.

"I... I didn't do anything."

"What? Who did then?"

"Parmil," Borreli called out, "fighters ahead of us and soon in range. The medium ship..."

Parmil waited. "Yes?" she asked, shaking her head.

Communication channel started, unknown markings, declared an electronic voice based off Vastor's. *Accept?*

She joined Borreli and looked at the video feed of the ship, a vessel unlike anything she had seen before. It was firing, not at them, but at the Silgarith, drawing its attention away from the Karakal.

"Parmil?"

Borreli nudged her with his elbow.

"Accept, accept," she said, unsure of what was happening. Still, the ship was helping. She swallowed hard and regained confidence.

Transmission starting.

"Take the Wasp fighters. We will deal with the Silgarith," came a man's voice.

"Who are you?" Parmil asked sharply.

"Later. First, we need to get you out of here."

Chapter Three

If there ever was a safe harbour for traders, it was Europa. The dozens of battleships surrounding the moon made Parmil finally let go of the tension inside her. “Screw up, blow up” was the word around here. There wouldn’t be any Silgariths to avoid, no T-Racer Wasps to blast to smithereens. She stepped outside the ship to evaluate the damage. Blaster scorches here and there, a dent or two, but nothing major was missing. Fortunately, Wasps were small fighters with little armour plating, and her crew were good enough marksmen. They would need to replenish their ammo for the 50mm cannon though. Explosive shells were more dangerous than blasters, but stocking up on ammo was a bother.

But the other ship! She recollected her impressions as she walked towards the spaceport bar, where the stranger had said he would be.

Somewhat like a steel hawk, with two necks yet one head, with side-thrusters virtually everywhere behind the wings, it didn’t have the distinctive feel of the ship manufacturers she knew. A rich privateer? Or a government prototype?

She glanced around her, but the mystery ship was nowhere to be seen. The most impressive was the green laser beam it had used to destroy the Silgarith. The weapon seemed more controllable than the erratic ion cannon beams. Parmil wondered if she would get to try it out.

As she entered the bar, she felt the gaze of someone sitting in a corner. Once she had ordered a drink, she saw the hooded figure beckon to her. Hand on her pistol-handle, back straight and head high, she confidently made her way to the person’s table.

“You must be Parmil Szarnu, captain of the Karakal,” said a male voice, and Parmil recognised the voice from Proxima Centauri. “I am Haldora.”

She nodded.

“Thank you for-“

The man raised his hand. “No matter. Indeed, you proved yourself by destroying the fighters.”

Parmil smiled, wondering what the man was like without the hood. She could only see his eyes, a deep mix of brown and green, and she felt she could get lost in them.

“It is good Vastor Iouchtchine taught you a minimum.”

Parmil opened her mouth in shock.

“You... You knew my godfather?” She swallowed.

The man held her gaze silently, and his eyes flickered a moment.

“The Vastor you knew was no simple trader. Listen, my organisation is very interested in your case, and we would strongly appreciate your co-operation.”

“Who is ‘we’? What do you mean, Vastor was ‘no simple trader’?”

“You shall see. We want you to start by destroying two small but important pirate ships. That is all. It is a one-time offer. It will be of great advantage to both sides if you agree. I cannot say more at the moment. So, will you do it?”

Parmil pondered the matter before nodding. After all, the man had saved her life, and was offering her a job, and more knowledge on her godfather. Maybe he had led a secret life? Even if it was dangerous, it was worth the risk of finding out. Maybe Parmil could even avenge his death.

“Good. The ships in question are currently roaming Absol space, and the place where you should go will show on your ship’s map. After completion, go to Earth, Zaventem spaceport to get your reward. There, someone will tell you more about your new job.”

The man got up, extended his arm towards Parmil, and she gripped his wrist in return, as was the custom.

“Good-bye, Parmil, until we meet again.”

She watched the man leave, and wondered whom he worked for. Apparently not the polished Absol government, nor the barbaric Azzurdi Empire: the ship was not their make. It wasn't either one of the technologically superior Yolnui ships, and anyway the Yolnui lived in isolation in regards to the other two main ones, so it was unlikely this man had anything to do with them. It wasn't even like the sleek, half-physical, half-mental So-laon telepathic vessels.

So who? The Society? Was it preparing something big, ready to emerge from atrophy? Or was the man from somewhere else, something new? What the ruddy void did Vastor have to do with any of it?

She headed back for the Karakal, head clouded in thought, and met Borreli halfway, a holo-cube in his hand.

"This map transmission just came in," he said, activating the holo-cube. "What is there to see in Lalande 21185?"

"A few pirates to blow up, nothing more. We have a new mission to accomplish, hopefully a new job." She hesitated. "And something I could learn about Vastor."

Borreli stared back.

"What could you possibly learn about him?"

"Something he sure as anti-matter didn't tell me. I don't have any more answers yet. The Karakal lifts off as soon as possible. That is, if Rikar doesn't want out."

"Oh, he's already agreed to tag along," he replied, waving it off. "Turns out he's intrigued by the foreign ship, and wants to find out more about its strange technology."

Parmil raised her eyebrows and smiled. Things might turn out all right in the end.

Inside Lalande 21185, the Karakal came face to face with a Wasp and a Monsaigne, a large pirate version of the originally peaceful, flat, menhir-shaped Monseigneur freighter. The Wasp was no match for the 50mm cannon, but the Monsaigne proved a tough challenge: it used rail-guns to fire energy pellets from far away, and fired at close range with Damage Control missiles, the Azzurdi little brother of the EMP torpedoes. Damage Control missiles would lock on to the engines and release a small electromagnetic pulse and an explosive blast upon impact, rendering the Karakal's left engine useless in one particular case. Tara managed to hit the Monsaigne's reactor shortly afterwards, and the civilian Astraponta was spared the strain of being rained upon with short-range chain-gun shots.

After five minutes of the Karakal simply floating in space, Rikar had managed to fix the left engine, and Parmil plotted the necessary course to arrive back in Sol.

"We land on Earth," she said, relieved the fight was over.

Zaventem spaceport was the closest to Bruxelles, legislative and executive capital of Europe, Earth and the whole Absol Constitutor. From a distance, it was a clutter of age-old buildings clashing with the polished modern ones that surrounded them and with the glittering sea nearby. It seemed to Parmil like a city-sized museum of architecture.

"There's a reception party. Do you want me to come along?"

Parmil looked at Borreli, and smiled. She shook her head.

"Don't worry. I'll be fine. As usual."

Borreli's inner brows remained raised and his mouth pinched, but he nodded all the same.

"I know, I know."

Parmil smiled and patted him on the side of the head.

"Just make sure we have some fuel and provisions left, and get the others to check what needs repairing. I'll deal with these people."

She walked along the corridor to the hatch, opened it and stepped into the cool, pale afternoon.

There was a man, with five armed men and women standing guard nearby. But the man was white. It struck her because the Yolniun were the closest to the “black” and “white” extremes in skin pigmentation, while the third of humanity living in the Constitutor was metis or olive-skinned, and the greater half of mankind, in the Azzurdi Empire, was between yellow and black. Rikar’s family had come from Page Tear, near the Yolniui border. Was this man from around the same systems, or even a Yolniun?

“Hello, Parmil Szarnu, daughter by upbringing of the late Vastor Iouchtchine.” The voice was not old, though the short greyish hair seemed to indicate otherwise.

Parmil nodded, watching his deep, dark brown eyes. Not Yolniui, then: they all had shallow green eyes, no matter the skin.

“My name is Ekrid Malrow, and I represent the Anti-Raider and -Pirate Intelligence Agency, ARPIA for short.”

Lame full name, she thought.

“Sorry about the unabbreviated name, but we were younger, and idealistic.”

Parmil blinked. Either he could read people’s faces, or else everyone had the same reaction upon hearing the name.

“Anyway, Arpia has now existed for a dozen years, and we are ever recruiting these days. We are here for the protection of traders and other non-military people, against raiders and pirates, as the name suggests.”

Parmil smiled. “Isn’t the Free Trading Society already supposed to do that job?” she asked, remembering her thoughts on Haldora’s employer.

“Quick off the mark, are we? And not without education, I see. Vastor did well.” He smiled, and Parmil blinked. “I suppose you will then know that some twenty years ago, Rekar Achbal, the Society leader, was betrayed by Yiskvu Kand and killed in an ambush made by the Absols.”

The man looked elsewhere, and his eyebrows drew into a frown. “Kand took control of the Society, or at least those who wanted to follow him and become criminals of the worst kind.” His tone dropped, and Parmil saw fire in his eyes when he looked up. “And that, my dear, is when the Free Traders’ Guild was born.”

Parmil swallowed.

“I dare suppose you also know that Jef Mallik reluctantly tried to keep the Society together, but the old shipwright didn’t have Achbal’s touch or strength, and the Society is now barely alive. So we decided to set up a small organisation, of which Kand would have no knowledge. I can assure you it has grown since, even though you don’t encounter Arpian ships very often around here nor do you hear of Arpia much.”

Something in the man’s expression told Parmil that Malrow and Arpia had something in store for Kand in the years to come.

“Anyway, we thank you for dealing with those two pirates. As a reward, we have poured twenty thousand credits on your account,” he said, and without letting Parmil the time to respond, he continued. “If you want more, and if you want to find out what you didn’t know about Vastor, be at the spaceport bar, alone, in an hour’s time.”

He nodded, turned and walked away.

Parmil pursed her lips and looked at her ship. It needed a couple of repairs. Her eyes darted back to the man, then to the ground. What to do? She climbed back aboard the Karakal.

“Go meet him in the bar,” said Tara ten minutes later in the repair docks, speaking loudly to be heard above the noise the electricians and mechanics were making a hundred metres away. “Let’s face the facts: he’s already paid us enough to stay above water level for five weeks, and everyone of Arpia seems to know your godfather; so I’m sure it’s worth a try at least, seeing how much he earned in the last years.”

"I don't know: some secret society, doesn't seem very right to me," said Rikar.

"You would disagree, now wouldn't you?" remarked Sam with a smile. "Ever the pessimist. It's funny, how in ten years you haven't changed."

Rikar grimaced back, but Parmil knew it to be in a friendly, male roommate way.

"Still," he said, "it sounds like the kind of overdone idea you'd find in a bad story."

Tara shoved Rikar in the shoulder.

"It's not so much the premise as the adventure, Riki!"

She winked at him, and Parmil laughed.

"Bo," she yelled, "what do you say?"

Borreli cut the power to his welder and took off his repair glasses.

"I've been thinking," he said.

"Como siempre," Sam said with a sly smile, rolling his eyes.

Borreli continued, ignoring the remark. "Whatever you do now, pirates will know you're onto them. They are a lot more organised than people tend to think, and I'm sure the Karakal will have joined their list of wanted ships. If we drop out of this, we'll be attacked in any case. If we continue, we might end up contributing to their demise. Then there is the 'Vastor-factor'. I sure would like to find out about this 'secret life' of his."

He nodded sideways and smiled.

"If I were you, I'd go see this man in the bar, hear his proposition and decide. It's your call. I think we'll all respect your decision. You're the captain, don't ever forget it."

Parmil sat at an empty table with a cup of hot chocolate in her hands, and after a moment of near snoozing, she noticed the evening lighting had come on. She activated her headwatch. Not that the hologram displaying the time in front of her right eye had to be adjusted to the local time, since it did so automatically, but the clock on the counter seemed to have skipped an hour. No, after checking, it was correct: Malrow was late.

Parmil threw her head backwards and sighed. This new, interesting job was too good to be true.

"Losing hope already?"

She turned her head in a flash. The forty-, fifty-odd year-old man had a kind smile on his face.

"I didn't wish to wake you, that's all."

He walked around the table, and sat down opposite her.

"I take it you're still interested."

Parmil nodded, stifling a yawn and begging pardon.

"What's with Arpia and bars?" she asked after trying to blink the tiredness away.

The man chuckled and studied her.

"You're more curious than I would have thought. Secrecy, that's the reason."

"In a public place like this?"

"The best way to be noticed by the government is to meet in secret places. You'll learn that some time soon, hopefully. Anyway, next job. We've had word of two other pirates showing up around this system. According to our sources, you should be able to find them around Bernard's Star. Once they are destroyed, come find me in Matr Sache, central city of planet Chiju in Luyten's star system."

"I'm on it," she said, half-nodding, half-blinking, and earning her a grin from the man opposite.

"But tell me: my godfather, what does he have to do with you?"

Malrow sighed.

"Vastor Iouchtchine, also known by his code-name 'Burdedock', was one of the first ever to join Arpia, some ten years ago. Here is a little data-cube that might interest you, but it's all I can give to you right now. He was a great loss."

By the time Parmil left the bar, data-cube in hand, the Karakal was ready to roll. As the ship lifted off the ground, she linked the data-cube to a small reader, and Parmil took a look at the contents.

“Burdedock file, annex 6b – mail sent to Ekrid Malrow 22-04-1102,” she read, and Borreli craned his neck to see something from his pilot seat. “I’ll tell you afterwards.”

--- Message code decrypted by Arpia Cryptography Unit ---

Dear Ekrid,

Sorry I haven’t done anything for the firm [ACU Note: = Arpia] lately, I’ve been busy with my investigation. I’m writing this from Spiciam, as usual.

Something has come up, Ekrid. I was browsing through the Big-C data [ACU Note: = Constitutor encrypted database], by accident of course, you know how it goes. Well, I found a Kafka [ACU Note: = Defence Ministry] subdivision dossier concerning pests [ACU Note: = Constitutor government’s most trusted underground agents], and my double was in it. I know it’s him: his file contains a photo of me from twenty years ago.

I now know I’m on the right track. I’ve finally found the pest responsible for what happened back in ’82.

Last thing: from now on, things are getting risky, even dangerous. If anything happens, anything at all, I want Parmil to know. I think this letter might even be suitable for starters...

Anyway, see you at some point.

Yours truly,

Burdedock

--- End of message ---

Parmil felt her throat go dry. 1082, that was the year her parents died. Later on, aged six or so, she uncovered the facts and found out about the trial and acquittal. Even if she believed his side of the story, she had accused her godfather of killing them, to which Vastor had looked upon her with such anger that Parmil had burst into tears.

Now she understood her godfather’s anger: Vastor had seen it as murder, and had spent the rest of his life trying to find the killer. Killer who had taken Vastor’s life as well?

Something crashed on the floor. Borreli spun from his seat and looked at Parmil open-eyed. The data-cube she had brought back with her was on the floor, and Parmil’s fingers were unfurled and motionless.

“What is it?”

Borreli remembered to activate the autopilot, and picked up the data-cube.

Parmil stood up and covered her mouth with her hands. She lifted her head and looked at Borreli with pursed lips and eyes on the verge of tears. Borreli felt himself compelled to go to her. She closed her eyes and jerked her head away. She stumbled backwards, crashed into the wall, and slid down slowly to the ground, sobbing.

Borreli rushed over to her and helped her up.

“Tara! Guys! Pilot the ship!”

He put Parmil’s arm around his neck and guided her to her quarters, where he lay her down on her bed. She wasn’t crying anymore, but still her hands hid her face from his concerned gaze.

He stroked her hair gently.

At length, Parmil let Borreli pull her hands away.

“He was a hero. An unknown, strong and silent hero.” Parmil sighed, and sniffled. “Killed because he spent his life trying to avenge my parents. And I never... I never knew.”

Borreli glanced at the message, and swallowed hard. That was what it was about: death. It was the one thing Parmil could not face. Not since Vastor had died, at any rate. Still hadn't overcome her grief.

"Well, let's follow his example then, and whoever killed him and your parents won't stand a chance. Let us avenge them together."

He immediately regretted the thought, realising none of the crew had any experience when it came to hand-to-hand combat, and if it was the Absolom Constitutor behind all of this, they wouldn't survive a space confrontation either. Let us hope Arpia can teach and help us, he prayed silently.

Parmil rested her head on Borreli's shoulder, and closed her eyes to face her sorrow alone.

She needed time, but she would be fine. Borreli stared at the message one last time before erasing it. Best leave the dead in peace.

Chapter Four

Chiju was a pleasant sight to behold. The constant glittering of the bubble cities beneath its thin atmosphere drew a sigh of relief from Parmil. The fight with two pirate variants of the Astraponta had proven a challenge at first, but they were unorganised and the twins got lucky at shooting. Planet-side, Parmil felt safe. Safer, at any rate.

“Give me the coordinates for Matr Sache.”

She saw Borreli’s fingers dance on the navigation panel, adjusted her course and found what she was looking for: the biggest bubble of them all. It apparently maintained enough breathable air to support its forty million inhabitants and the ten million visitors it received every day. Matr Sache had become the home of the great Sachem Company, specialised in setting up bubble cities and atmosphere regulators, and though Parmil doubted she would ever start a colony on a planet with a thin atmosphere, she knew where to look even for family-sized houses.

The Karakal drifted through one of the entry “ship airlocks” of the Matr Sache bubble, and Parmil observed the inner structure of the dome. Some hundreds of metres thick, it was made of layers of transparent fibres and glass-like material, separated by electromagnetic fields. Asteroids and fleets of ships had tried to break through over the centuries, but the only weak points were the airlocks, littered with defence mechanisms, a tribute to the military government that ruled Chiju a millennium beforehand.

They landed in the repair docks, and Parmil left the ship in Borreli’s hands.

Ahead of her stood a hooded figure, and she saw no sign of her superior around. Her eyes darted to her pistol handle, and she moved her hand on top of it.

“Parmil,” someone whispered behind her, and her eyes met Borreli’s.

“Use the intercom if anything goes wrong,” he said, unsuccessful in trying to hide his concern, but Parmil smiled, touched by the kind thought. She nodded and stepped towards the stranger, who beckoned her to follow.

They seemed to be headed towards a small hangar with but a narrow doorway open. Parmil stiffened. She kept the same pace, but became aware of the slightest move of the person ahead of her. What was she thinking? Why did she leave the Karakal? And alone!

She heard the door close behind her. Parmil turned to open it, but found it was locked. Fear and bravery rushed to her mind in a headstrong clash. Spinning round, she grabbed her pistol. A gloved hand slashed through the air and struck her on the wrist. Her weapon leapt from her grip, and landed a few metres away.

Acting upon instinct, Parmil ducked to the left and, straightening up, shifted her elbows to accompany her left fist. No contact came; her punch hit empty air. The figure grabbed her arm and tugged; she lost balance. A strong arm caught her in the chest, and sent her flying, head down, across the room and onto a pile of clutter.

Parmil moaned. She pulled herself into a sitting position, and through half-open eyelids, saw broken flowerpots and open soil bags around her. She put her hand to her back and winced. At least, she could move her limbs.

A shadow crawled across her body, and Parmil turned in fright. The figure was towering above her, gun in hand.

A shiver ran across her back and dissipated on her arms. Her eyes began to water, and death’s representative growled deeply.

“Just a feeble space captain, with no knowledge of combat whatsoever, that’s what you are, Parmil Szarnu.”

She had heard the male voice before, but could not place a name on it.

“But I’m not here to kill you, or anything of the sort. Anyway, you don’t know anything interesting, not even about Arpia.” The voice rose in tone, and the armed hand folded inwards before presenting her the gun. “No, I’m here to congratulate you on your success.”

The other hand brushed the hood back, and the ambient light revealed eyes Parmil recognised even through the curtain of tears. Dark brown hair covered his ears and forehead in a disorderly fashion, and he seemed about thirty-five years old.

“Haldora?” she voiced. The turn of events had suspended the fear of doom.

“Indeed. Sorry about the reception, but it’s because Ekrid Malrow was needed somewhere else, and he also wanted me to test your abilities before-.”

There was a resounding blast, and Parmil’s crew rushed inside the room, aiming their weapons at Haldora.

“Hands where I can see them, Shaitan!”

“Borreli, no,” Parmil cried out. “It’s all right, it’s Haldora.”

Borreli looked at her, and glanced back at Haldora. Parmil saw him blink and look back at her. He lowered his pistol, and mumbled an apology.

“I was full of doubt, so we followed, and when we heard sounds of struggle-“

“It’s fine, young man,” Haldora said, amused. “No need to call me the Lord of Evil, but you did well.” He turned to Parmil. “It is good to see your crew-members care for your safety and well-being. Anyway, you’ve been paid a small amount of money for your latest mission. If you want your training and more missions, meet me in the cafeteria a few doors down.”

Parmil nodded slowly.

“Oh, and, get yourself presentable: I didn’t know it was so dusty on the floor here, but it sure shows on you. And your eyes look terrible. It’s almost as if you cry in the face of danger.”

An hour later, Parmil came out of the washrooms, refreshed. She would have preferred a Jhy Humm washing ointment, but had only been able to get her hands on a tube of “L’Oreole: Heaven From Rain”. Still, the nano-particles of the widely spread and overrated product had cleansed her from all the dust, sweat and tears. But it didn’t have the extra tinge of her home planet’s national product, and she felt she could have done with that little something.

She entered the cafeteria, ordered a warm drink and sat down at the nearest free table. She closed her eyes, and replayed the scene mentally. She was so embarrassed. How could she have cried in front of her superior? Overcome your fear, overcome your grief! She slammed her fist on the table.

“Coming, coming.”

It was the waitress, looking very frustrated. “Here you are. No need to be impatient now. There are other customers, you know.”

Parmil mumbled she had overreacted, and returned the waitress a very apologetic look.

She waited for a few minutes before Haldora appeared in the entrance. As he moved towards her, Parmil noticed a few women staring at him with appreciative glances. She quickly pushed away her ideas on the subject as he neared her table.

“So, I see you’re still in the game. Burdedock’s spirit might well live on through you.”

The kind tone was music to her ears. She gazed at him, smiling. Charmer, she thought. Surely taken. A bit old for her, too. She felt her heart drop, and blinked.

“... to intercept a couple of Lrithgow carrier vessels headed for the Babelsor system before they can cause too much havoc. Go to NN 3323 and destroy them there. To make your life easier, I’ve ordered two 90mm rail-guns for your ship, and the outfitting people should be working on it as we speak.”

“90mm?”

“You’ll need heavier weapons than you already have. With greater range, too. Anyway, once you’re done, go to Foundersport on Perdulieu in the Yubi Porra system. You’ll start your training there. And who knows, you might soon be given a ‘level one security clearance’.” He winked at her, and she smiled back.

“Thanks.”

“See you later then. Good luck.”

Something stirred in her as she saw him leave. Parmil realised she liked being part of this organisation. Or maybe it was because she was discovering a Vastor she hadn’t known. Or maybe it had something to do with the guy.

Four days later, the Karakal was in the empty NN 3323 system.

“All right folks, strategy time.” Parmil clasped her lips with her fingers, and breathed deeply. “A Lrithgow can hold up to sixteen Wasps, and sometimes an additional six Stormer heavy fighters. If a Stormer gets near enough to the ship, its laser beam will tear the Karakal apart in less than twenty seconds. Our best chance is therefore to keep the fighters at bay, in a way,” she added after seeing Sam smirk. “We fire at them with the rail-guns and cannon as soon as they leave their hangar.”

She paused and looked at Borreli.

“You man the rail-guns. The weapon systems don’t suffer too much from lack of precision until you’re at a range beyond six megametres, and those six thousand kilometres should be plenty for you, I think. So as soon as they appear, you fire. Hopefully it will destroy some fighters, but as soon as you spot Stormers, target them instead.”

“So how far do we stay from the Lrithgows?” asked Rikar.

“We play ‘run, turn, fire’ until the fighters are down, and then we close in. In the meantime, I’ll try to dodge their rail-gun shots. Sam, don’t forget those EMP missiles have a really long range before they run out of fuel.”

“No worries, capitán muchacha. I can handle them.”

“To your positions then.”

Parmil thought of the size of the vessels, five hundred metres long, and almost as high. She even remembered studying the specs at flight school. Four massive Rostan Beta reactors could move the ship steadily enough for a ship that size. But the fighters it contained could accelerate very fast if they gave it all they had, and were capable of catching up with the Astraponta within no time at all. After five minutes or so, the first Lrithgow materialised less than five megametres away. Parmil saw rail-gun pellets race across the space separating the two ships, while the Lrithgow was preparing to hyper-jump. On the zooming cameras she saw the beast’s engines flare up. Then the first pellets rammed into its side, and a couple hit the reactor. She jumped with joy as she saw the rear of the ship light up with bursts of flame. Another shot hit the Lrithgow at the front, and a chain reaction followed. The only remains were a dozen small radar blips, black dots against the multicoloured background of explosions.

The fighters’ first answering shots sped by the Karakal. Parmil steered the ship away and set the engines to full blast. The second Lrithgow appeared on the radar, a little further away, and after twenty seconds its own fighters were on their way.

For a full minute, Parmil ignored the alternating yells of joy and fright of her crew and the enemy shots’ impact, and randomly zigzagged away from the Lrithgow. More space between them meant more time to dodge its firepower.

“Flock coming in,” Tara said, and Parmil’s brain registered the message. She glanced at the radar screen: four Stormers and a couple of Wasps.

Concentrating, she made the Karakal swerve around, and saw two explosions. A shadow swooped above the bridge, and a red message appeared on one of the screens as the Astraponta shuddered. It started spinning, and Parmil shut off the side thrusters as the other fighters flew beyond them.

“Rikar!”

“I’m on it, captain.”

She manoeuvred the Karakal to face its enemies, and noticed two other fighters had dropped of the screens. A Stormer was flying at them, and getting dangerously close.

“There’s no way it’s going to pull up,” Borreli yelled.

“And we can’t dodge it either.” Parmil bit her lip. “Sam, you’re in range.”

“But-“

“Do it, it’s in the others’ blind spot,” she yelled.

She saw a needle of light head towards the fighter, followed by another. The first missed. The second hit the light craft on a wing’s beam lance, and the resulting explosion ripped the Stormer’s hull apart, leaving in its place a cloud of debris flying in random directions.

“Thruster circuits online,” Rikar shouted, and Parmil manoeuvred carefully. Though ships were specifically designed to withstand their impact and a minimal anti-gravitational field surrounded each model, any one of those bits could severely damage the Karakal, given the right speed. Still, it wouldn’t breach the armour plating. That’s what weapons were there for.

Parmil saw another explosion out of the corner of her eye.

“K-O,” Tara cried out, and Rikar cheered.

“Mierda!”

Parmil blinked.

“Sam, what is it?”

“Missile volley closing in. Too many of them!”

“Got your back Sam,” Borreli said, and Tara seconded him.

Parmil checked the relevant screen. There were two-dozen pins of metal, the size of a full-grown Earth-native woman and packed with electromagnetic pulses. Twenty by the time they were in Borreli’s blind spot. A dozen later, only Sam could fire at them.

Yikes.

The impact wasn’t spectacular. Parmil barely even felt it. But she noticed its effects: the main lights went dead and left only the phosphorescent lighting to save them from the dark. All screens were blank, no controls responded anymore. She checked her headwatch, but that was dead too. No comms, no weapons, nothing. Except for the emergency brakes, reverse thrusters powered by some age-old, primitive ignition technique and slowing down the ship. Stupid Absol technology, still so dependent on electricity and electronics. The Yolnium, at least, had discovered organic technology, and nothing known could “disable” that. Parmil wondered if Arpia could have access to that technology.

In the meantime, she could only wait.

Or not.

“Rikar, when will we be back online?”

“I think I can revive the power in anything from one to ten minutes using manual-“

“I don’t care how you do it, just do it as fast as you can.”

She heard him mumble something, and a sigh came from Borreli’s side of the ship.

“Sam, fetch the grenade supplies. Tara, come with me to the bay. Borreli, be ready to get us out of here as soon as the electricity is back inside the engines. Do cheer up a little: the first time was far worse.”

“I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Then let’s hope for once you’re wrong.”

Through the cargo bay porthole she saw the dark hulk of the massive ship approach. An engine glow appeared in its centre: they were sending out a shuttle to dock with the Karakal, probably containing a few dozen men. It made sense, actually: they wouldn’t risk bringing a disabled ship in the Lrithgow’s gravitational field and therefore pulling it towards them if it were full of explosives, ready to blow up as soon as it reached the pirate carrier. And since they couldn’t be sure her Astraponta wasn’t rigged...

The shuttle’s airlock made contact with the cargo bay.

“Remember what to do.” The twins stood alongside her, and they waited for the other ship to settle in position. They would probably try laser cutting due to the thickness of the cargo doors.

She heard muffled sounds beyond the doors, and sparks flew from the side of the left door. Tara immediately lowered the lever in front of her, and the doors opened mechanically. Sam threw a grenade inside the gaping hole, and Parmil fired at the dumbstruck men with her dart gun.

By the time their weapons were pointing at the three civilians, the grenade exploded beyond the dozen of them and killed those who had not been shot. Parmil heard people running in the shuttle, another platoon probably. Sam sent off another grenade, and Tara closed the doors shut.

“Reactors working,” Rikar cried out, but only Borreli, sitting in the pilot’s chair, heard him clearly, for at the same moment the second grenade blew up and shook the cargo doors so much Parmil was sure they would fall.

The pilot brought the Karakal back to life and brought it behind the Lrithgow before the pirates could even realise what was going on. He then aimed the 90mm rail-guns at each reactor in turn, the explosions of which sent the whole pirate ship to dust and propelled the civilian Astraponta backwards in space. Borreli then took a deep breath, and waited for the others to join him in his happiness and relief.

Chapter Five

Acting upon instinct, Parmil's left hand rose and shielded her eyes from the bright sunlight filling Foundersport.

"Aye, me again. Not too much of a disappointment, I hope?" Haldora winked from a few metres away.

Parmil smiled as she shook her head.

"Don't worry though, I get the feeling you might soon be awarded a 'level one security clearance', and that's when you'll see Malrow again. I hear you've been cruising through the latest job."

His smile made her blush, and she hoped the shade on her face would hide it.

"Anyway, for a job well done, we've transferred a bigger sum to your account. Turns out quite a few people wanted those ships taken out, even planetary governments within the Constitutor, and they all paid a little something to the anonymous someone who collects bounties for us." His eyes widened. "But I'll stop right there. No need to bore you to death with the inner workings of Arpia. Instead," and his thin lips joined in a wide smile, "we shall commence your training."

After leaving Borreli to deal with the Karakal, Parmil headed over to the "Perdulieu Main Training Sports Complex". Perdulieu MTSC was one of the Absolem's financial anomalies: built at great cost and barely making any profit, shutdown costs were so high it stayed open.

Inside a hall they had for themselves, Haldora taught her the basics of Martial Arts, forcing her to translate into actions the theory he fed to her brain using the common "virtual to real memory" wave-based system, from stances to moves, from defensive to offensive techniques, from use of noise to silent kills.

"Come on, just a few more goes at the silent kiai. Use it to strike, to accompany your chi."

Parmil closed her eyes, and felt her heart thump against her chest. When she opened her eyes, a water bottle appeared before them.

"Here, take a sip."

She poured liquid in her dry mouth, swallowed and felt a tingling sensation in her throat. The feeling spread to her head and limbs, and was like rain on bare skin combined with a rush of adrenaline. She straightened up and blinked. She tried to take another gulp, but Haldora tore the bottle away from her grip.

"That's enough. More than that, and you won't be able to sleep tonight."

"What is it?" Parmil felt more awake than usual. The strain on her muscles had gone, and her breath was coming back to a normal pace.

"Bordra Juice, a purely Arpian product with ingredients you'll never find in any mapped star system. It helps the brain quite a bit, but watch out for physical fatigue."

After leaving Haldora, she set off for the Karakal, feeling strong for once. The two thugs who tried to mug her in a dark alley ended up being just as surprised as she was.

After a good night's sleep, Parmil woke up in pain. "Aw," she muttered under her breath. Each muscle she moved hurt a different part of her body. She had never imagined a few hours of training could do so much. Should have done some more stretching.

Her body complained all the way to the spaceport patisserie where, her stomach as empty as the place, she ordered a pastry and chose a hot drink. A Starry Sun would do, with a taste somewhere between the standard hot chocolate and one's afternoon tea, and surrounded by a thin layer of yellow and orange biscuit that gave it the unique name.

She brought her empty plate to the customers' dishwasher, and turned to see Haldora sit down in front of where she had eaten.

Parmil winced as she sat down.

“Told you.”

She smiled half-heartedly.

“Well, it doesn’t truly matter. You’ll get better, and you’ve learnt your lesson. But for the time being, Dinn Iles is the planet you should think of.”

She blinked. “Why?”

“A little slow today? It’s your next destination. First, destroy a bunch of pirates that should be passing through Van Maanen’s system. Afterwards, go to the Uncrocau spaceport on Dinn Iles in the Lorecage system. Ekrid says you’re ready.

Parmil stopped nodding.

“Ready?”

Her eyes widened, and Haldora smiled.

Outside the Karakal, she broke the news to her friends.

“We’ll finally be a true part of Arpia? Great! Let’s celebrate this with champagne!” Rikar and Borreli approved gleefully of Sam’s enthusiasm.

“Not yet,” Tara said. “You men want the reward right here, right now. Stop behaving like kids and grow up a little, for all our sakes. We have a serious job to complete.”

Parmil tried to stifle her laughter, but the words’ effect on the boys’ faces defeated her efforts.

“Ask for the Srikky Cark company building. Once you have found it, enter through the maintenance door.”

The cryptic message from Malrow puzzled Parmil when she read it, landing on Dinn Iles. This was no public place anymore. What was so important about this security clearance that required a higher level of secrecy?

She left the others and wandered through the spaceport. She tackled every person who looked local in order to find the building, but her attempts were unsuccessful.

Beyond the customs offices, Parmil studied a man with a grey suitcase. Something had drawn her eye towards him, and as she followed him, she saw it again: a green logo with S and C entwined inside.

After asking him, she saw his naïve grin stretch beyond anything Parmil had ever seen, and his frog-like eyes opened so much she feared they would pop out.

“Yes, sure I do, doll! I even work there. Amazing, no?”

His seal giggle frightened her. Great, a freak. Lucky day.

As the mentally disturbed and physically unfortunate workaholic showed her the way, telling the sad and dull story of his life, Parmil could not help wondering what in the universe had pushed her to ask the guy when she could have simply followed him around.

“Sorry, Mr Jeebus,” she interrupted him upon noticing the building, “but I need to take a few still and video shots of the surroundings.”

“Ah, I see. Support needed for the stagiaire project, right?”

“Indeed,” she replied to his giggle. “Do go on, I’ll join you inside when I’m done.”

Once he had disappeared, Parmil sighed and blinked. What a strange man.

She found the maintenance door and entered a dark corridor.

Lights came on, and a tall figure with shoulders twice the size of Parmil’s beckoned her to be silent and invited her inside an open doorway beside him.

From the depths of a large comfy chair, Malrow dismissed the guard with a kind nod and talked in a casual tone.

“Miss Szarnu, please sit down. It is good to see you again.” The other chair squeaked as Parmil settled down. “No worries,” he replied to her apologetic look.

“I am glad to announce that we have decided to grant you the title of Member of Arpia. Once bestowed, it entitles you to a small salary on top of the mission pay, and gives access to our own technology. It also means we will have more varied jobs to assign you to, including courier jobs and more dangerous missions than the ones you have been given so far. But the general type of assignment depends entirely on the collective choice of you and your crew.”

His mouth twitched.

“There is, however, a...” He paused and bit his lip. “A catch, though I don’t like the word. It is a final test, but it doesn’t involve combat capabilities. We don’t want you to be a mindless warrior. No, that’s what governmental armies are there for,” he said, and Parmil chuckled nervously. “Some find this test easy, others not, and others yet are discouraged and forget about us.”

She frowned. A task involving diplomacy? A quiz?

“Take this holo-cube. Once activated, you have one minute to memorise the message. Do not write it down or record it: we value our secrecy more than you could imagine. After sixty seconds, the cube will dissolve itself. The answer to the riddle will lead you to a certain system, and the two last lines will tell you what to do there.”

She nodded. A riddle, of course. Well, not “of course”. Riddles were a nightmare.

“A word of advice: use your general culture and a star map. Proceed one step at a time, though you must always look for clues in the rest of the riddle. Each step is as important as the next one. Do not ignore any words.”

Malrow stood up and laid his right hand on her left shoulder.

“Think ‘different’, and you will succeed.”

Alone in the room, Parmil took a deep breath. No matter how slim her chances of success, she had to try. For Vastor. For herself.

She pressed the activation button. The holo-cube beeped as the message appeared, and sixty seconds began ticking away on a counter below the holographic text.

“Of all the stars, see the Untouched One.

From its kind’s favourite companion, follow the shortest, empty path to a great island.

The island’s three parts separated, combine their value, and visit the only similar place in space whose combined value is worth the double.

For that which you have found is the door in which you will find the keyhole to the freedom fighters you seek.

Do not look back, just walk the path laid ahead of you.”

She read it twice, and then started rehearsing the lines.

Her eyes darted to the counter.

Ten.

-

beep - Five

-

beep

-

beep

-

beep

-

beep

-

She heard a low hiss, and the words disappeared. Soon, the holo-cube was no more. Parmil sighed, and repeated the riddle out loud.

Good, it worked, but needed figuring out. She would do like her godfather had taught her, and try. By herself, too. By believing in herself. By proving she was strong. If it failed, she would swallow her pride and ask Borreli. Until then, she was alone.

She swore she would succeed. For Vastor. For herself.