

## **First Glimpse of Darkness**

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*In Star Assault, I wouldn't be having this problem...* thought Tauverius Ulkhorii as he glumly stared at the mirror. Again, he stuffed a chunk of his silky - *too damn silky!* -if one had asked at that moment – blue-black hair behind a long pointy kaffir ear only to have it flop back into his face. He sighed in resignation. *Hang in there... all you have to do is get to captain or the Third Tier – either one – and no one will be able to tell you to go get a damned hair cut ever again.*

He realized that “captain” was probably the closer of the two, seeing that he was already a lieutenant in the Imperial Corps of Space Marines. Without a doubt in his mind, he could simply fuck his way to his next rank; every officer in his unit made off-color remarks about his body when they assumed him out of ear shot. Major Glyarnin had openly asked him to model for her for the Academy Annual... out of uniform, of course.

*If I chose vain aesthetics over true achievements and a sense of honest satisfaction in my work, what kind of kaffa would I be?* He shook out the raven bob with a determined countenance. The voice of Kazi, his best friend, popped into his head as if the boy were sitting on his shoulders, reading his thoughts.

“A Ryzaan?” laughed Kazi’s angular Ryzaan face in Tauv’s mind.

Shaking his head out again, uttering aloud, “Dammit, Kazi”, Tauverius left the washroom and made his way down the hall. The Akkahara was a well-aged invasion cruiser, probably slated for decommission in the next few years, but still large enough for two units of Marines, a unit or two of Ground Forces including an Exo Armor division, a contingent of Star Assault pilots, and the usual scads of Intergalaxy crew required to run it. Unlike more recent, larger ships close to her long-defunct class, the Akkahara had next to no civilian facilities. Even the two full-service cantinas, school, and hospital were fully military-staffed. There was no superfluous, overpaid research department, although the school had a decent library, mini-museum, and even a cryogenic freezer connected to its laboratories. More importantly to the scholarly gentleman officer, she was a genuine old-school Archon bio-vessel; she had not been sanitized for uncomfortable off-worlders and humans.

Tauverius had adored every human he had ever met, even the ones who had spat right on his nobly radiant body, who had run in terror from his aura; he was a staunch advocate for human rights. He would not have admitted it around his mother, but he had even voted New Civility Party a few times, when their occasional desire to squelch history had not been so blatant.

Another long sigh escaped him as he stopped in the hall, letting his muscles droop a little. So absorbed in his thoughts he was that he lost his usual environmental awareness, causing a serious collision for a young technician carrying a box of damaged slates up to her workshop. Some flew, some floated down slowly, but in spite of the lower gravity of the vessel, it was still a mess.

“Oh, damn, crap, I’m sorry...” he trailed as he hurried to help her corral them.

She was not making eye contact. Clearly, the frazzled little lady was in a big hurry. “No, it’s nothing, nothing, no no I’ve got it. I –“ The tech’s crouching body stiffened and her head shot up. “Oh, great ocean of the stars!”

Tauverius cringed but he managed a smile as he gently placed the slates he picked up into the fleshy basket that had originally housed them. “Hello.”

“I wish I had some time! Oh, man. My friends are never going to believe this!” Her pale face went bright pink all the way to the tips of her quivering triangular ears. She rushed the pick up and ran off, not looking back.

He sighed again before standing, doing his level best not to roll his eyes. *You need to get used to that, not be annoyed by it. What would your Illuminated Master say?* Tauverius swallowed his self-admonitions and approached a nearby door – his goal this whole time – which was tattooed with the awkward title, “Inter-Branch Recruiting and Official Requests Department”. Beneath this, in a smaller, more recent font style, it reported, “and Dispute Resolution”.

Laughing, wishing he did not know exactly why that needed to be there, Tauv pressed his palm over the star-shaped fob on the middle left of the door. It slid back in its effortless, membranous way, admitting him into the office.

A man about his age sat, oddly-angled, at the desk, armored boots up on it, reading a lurid looking periodical and eating something by the handful from a decorative but large bowl. He had long black mudlocks woven with strands of something bright green along with another color that was off the “human” spectrum but to Tauverius was painfully obnoxious. To top off his absolutely clear disregard for protocol, he wore a wide-brimmed hat of inert material, probably an expensive – or commandeered - human-made piece from somewhere outside the colonies. The man did not look up and did not bother swallowing his snack. “Have a seat.”

*Gods, Tauverius thought, checking the chair before settling his posterior upon it. I come in full Marine officers uniform the one day they’ve got a Star Assault guy at the front. I knew I should have changed.*

“I’m here to see Corporal Lieshlyn. Is she in?”

“Want some candy?” the mudlocked man asked in a dirty, mixed, possibly off-world accent, tipping the bowl toward his guest. “No? OK, more for me!” He shrugged. “No, she ain’t. Something something delay, something something Pachar, something something your rank and clearance ain’t high enough, famous mother or not, Lieutenant Tauverius, ‘sir’.” The final word was uttered with toxic sarcasm, indicating the man was fully aware that, in circles where rank was less important than social class, he might have been forced to pay some respect. Respect, as it happens, that made the egalitarian young heir twitch.

*Dammit! Don’t you judge me!* “There isn’t any need to be rude to me, ah – “ Tauv looked for a name tag. “Captain Samsvyrgyr.”

“Good show on the pronunciation. Most people shit the second syllable around here. By the by, you can call me ‘Sam’ like they all do.” He finally laid the tabloid – ‘True Tales of Deep Space’ – on the desk and held out his hand. “Anything else I can do for you while you’re here?”

Tauv reached and shook. “Tauverius Ulkhorri, Lieutenant, 83<sup>rd</sup> Marines. Pleasure to meet you, captain.” His eyes caught the glittery gold and violet collar and his eyebrows went up. “You’re in Armored?”

Garish mudlocks flopped as Samsvyrgyr shrugged again. “Mostly repair and admin right now, but at least they haven’t cut my whole unit with the budget.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m envious.”

Samsvyrgyr regarded him with smug amusement. “Yeah, we get that a lot.” He swung his feet down and leaned forward. “They’re cutting all the reserve divisions, though; it’s not the best place to be anymore. They don’t just let people fuck around with giant robots and shit, you know?”

“I wouldn’t mind serving on the front. I think it’s a fine way for a young kaffa to give his life, on the behalf of his people...” Tauv noticed the dubiously cocked brow of his host. “And, yeah, I’d like to stomp around in a giant armored exoskeleton.”

“Well you could, you know,” Captain Sam gestured emphatically, “join up, or something, you know. I bet with your credentials they’d boot someone close to retirement just to get you in.”

Shiny black bob flopped into his eyes as Tauv angled his face at the floor. “My ‘famous mother’ has a habit of pulling strings to keep me out of the frontline units. I tried already. I’m barred from GFO and from Star Assault.” He made a sharply wicked face as he looked back at his host. “I even considered doing something court-martial-worthy to get sent to the 89<sup>th</sup>. Caught en route to the act by Corporal Lieshlyn. Not sure if that was lucky or not.”

“Whoa.”

“Yeah, I know, someone like me, busting the law just to switch branches...”

“Ffft. No. No, not that.” Sam shook his locks. “You know what the 89<sup>th</sup> is! You’re a GC2. How the fuck you wing that, huh?”

“I was gathering that this request to meet the Corporal here was to adjust that without a big deal back in the Corps, actually.” The men exchanged grimaces. “How long is she going to be delayed? Vaguely, you don’t have to give me any details. I just need to know what kind of a bending of the truth I have to report to my seniors.”

Samsvyrgyr squinted, thoughtfully wiggling his ears, which sent the various shiny rings embedded in them a-jingling. “You know, lieutenant...” Tapping his lips, closing one eye, Sam stunk of mischief. And candy. Mostly candy. “The Marines do have an exo division...”

“Really?”

“It’s small, fairly new, part of the Fangs, but to become a Fang, you have to cross-train with SA and Armor, learn to pilot, the whole deal. If you’re real good, they issue you a special Marine Corps exoskeleton, pretty nice. You can skip some or all of the drugs, though; sterilization is recommended but not absolutely essential.” He shrugged again. “It’s like Star Assault, for fat guys.”

*I cannot believe you just said that. I’d think he was making fun of my heritage except that he looks pretty damn Shandrian, too.* “Sounds fantastic. Where do I sign up?”

Sam had already opened a faintly glowing panel in the top of the desk, revealing a touch-screen with a bony back plate that slid out with an odd little hiss. “Let’s see if Lady Tauverius beat us to it, since she knew to keep you out of SA... and...bingo.”

“Bingo?”

“Don’t worry about it. But you’re good, if you want to apply, nothing’s stopping you but your own aptitude. If you want to talk to the lady in charge, she’s here... and I’ll shoot an email to your division head saying you’ve been requested for an interview.”

Tauverius was dumbfounded. Not only was he being showered in good fortune, but he’d watched this strange man’s demeanor change from that of a crass, crude crab-jockey to that of a crisply-spoken and erudite professional. He delighted in the fact that bringing this story back to his master at the Trench would open him to a long night of wise parables rather than another brutal night of scraping at the sweaty, drug-reeking mattress while being lectured on humility and hierarchy. “I don’t know what to say, Sam; ‘thank you’ doesn’t seem like enough. You are, possibly quite literally, a life saver.”

“For a value of ‘life saver’ that sends ya rich limp dick to the front lines, sure, yeah, whatevs, buddy.” Samsvyrgyr laughed, the filthy exo pilot demeanor returned. “Hey, hey, Eumelje! I got a guy out here, wants to talk at ya!”

Grinning, hopeful for the first time in weeks, Tauv could not help but note that, even in the shift back to the atrocious accent, Sam had annunciated the Aurian name of his superior in perfect fluid form. *Armor... it’s not just what they drive, I guess... It’s what they are.*

A woman of some age, possibly even as old as Tauverius’ mother, stepped from a door near the desk. She was pretty in a subtle way, both majestic and reserved. She wore glasses, a fairly common occurrence among career soldiers; the devices she used in the service were wearing out her eyes, but she was waiting until she retired before bothering with surgery. His father kept the spectacle habit, even in retirement, claiming that his wife found him ‘most handsome’ in glasses. The lady smiled, holding out a closely-manicured hand. “General Eumelje Ylse, 44<sup>th</sup> Imperial Marine Special Forces. Nice to meet you, Lieutenant Tauverius Ulkhorri. Please, come into my office.”

Tauv followed, having a bit of difficulty imagining this soft-spoken woman raging over enemy troops in a powered bio-suit. He sat where she offered and watched as she retrieved a bottle from a concealed refrigeration unit.

“Why do you want to die, kid?” asked General Eumelje as she opened the bottle, deftly swapping the pop-top with a drinking device to avoid liquid dispersal. She sipped as she watched him.

*Is that de-gassed hard fruit cider? You’re drinking on the job ... and something that unappealing?* “General, I cannot say I wish to die, so much as that if I were to do so, I’d prefer to do so with honor and achievements, rather than being a heavily-armed attendant for brute daycare, sir.”

“I see.” The lady began to pace, evenly-cut chestnut hair swung as she did. “Did your parents teach you the function of Star Assault, then?”

“Yes, sir. To do otherwise would have been to neglect our heritage.”

“I see. Of course.” Eumelje regarded the cider as she stopped in a turn on her pacing route. “That explains why you rush to break up those little curb parties of which your unit has become so fond...” She fingered the label. “Does it frustrate you, never being able to explain it to them?”

“Yes and no, sir. I realize why keeping up that appearance is important for them, for now. What frustrates me is my inability to change the facts that surround it all, sir.”

“Would you like a cider?”

*Now, Tauv, don't offend her.* “No, thank you, sir. Quite appreciate the offer, though.” He managed a smile. “I would be very honored even to cross train with Star Assault, sir.”

“Well. There's more to it than being comfortable with bio-ware and infamy, of course. You can avoid drugs and sterilization, in the Fangs, but be aware that due to the rigors of training, most choose to take both...” Serious brown eyes regarded the lieutenant. “It's not easy. The young captain out there, he attempted a transfer, and found he couldn't handle the drugs... it happens. There's no shame in it.”

*She doesn't realize I've been taking drugs ceremonially since I was sixteen. Why would she? Would that be on my high-level records? I doubt it. Even if my religious affiliation is there, why would she know anything about the practices?* He cleared his throat and uttered, “Know the length of thy legs lest one leap too long a chasm', sir?”

Eumelje laughed. “Yes. Precisely.” Pacing back near the hidden fridge, she killed the first bottle, then retrieved and opened a second with the same precision as the first. “I think you are a fit for the unit, Tauverius. I just want to make sure you realize what you're getting into.”

“Understood.” He was thirsty. Flat cider almost sounded good. A few hours after cider trying to find an evacuation port on the Akkahara, however, sounded like a dreadfully uncivilized nightmare. “Do you have any water cubes in that thing, sir?”

Without a word, she handed him a drink container as she paced past. To his joy, the unmarked thing contained pure, clean, icy water.

She stopped and took a half-seat on the corner of her desk. “Tauverius, I'll be blunt with you. The Fangs, well, due to what we go through, how dangerous the unit is, not a lot of women join. And the women who do... well...” Eumelje drank, staring through him at something on the wall. “Well, you know what they say about Armor girls... elitist, power hungry, crueller than vacuum and harder than a dead star?”

Tauv did not want to say, “Of course, sir”, since he was sitting across from one, and she seemed easy-going and level-tempered enough. “I've certainly heard as much, sir.”

The general chugged her bottle as she stared, but this time the eyes went not past him, but into him. When the bottle was empty, she held it up in her right hand, eyes still fixed, and concentrated pulse into it until the semi-biological substance of it – some thin kind of clarithane, he guessed – melted and smoldered into foul globules.

He watched as the globules floated into a slow descent. “I should probably date outside the unit, is what I'm getting from this, sir.”

“You’re sharp, kid. I think you’ll do just fine. Our next group training starts in three weeks; the location is classified but we’ll email you where to meet our transport. The first meeting is mostly teamwork exercises and tests, but you get through that, which I have no doubt you’ll do, and you go into the first of several Armored cross training exercises.” She nodded along with him. “Star Assault cross training is done after you’ve got enough exo experience to not have their trainer instantly want to rifle-butt you into paste.”

Tauverius stood and saluted, a somewhat disconcerted look graced his face. “Sir. Yes, Sir.”

“You’re good to go, lieutenant. I look forward to pinning medals on your next jacket.”

“Sir! Thank you, sir.” Tauverius bowed and about-faced for the exit. He had his hand on the star-knob when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Kid, one more thing.”

He tensed a little. As early as the recruiting fair for his mandatory service, he had known the attentions of older and higher ranking women. This had occurred to a degree that he almost expected to be offered sport-fucking he would be an idiot to turn down, every time he met brass with breasts. Tauverius turned slowly, suppressing his breath. “Yes, sir?”

Eumelje had a new cider in her right hand. With her left, she gently rubbed a short-nailed finger against her temple. “Trench of Leviathan, right?”

It took him a second. Had he been older and either civilian or higher in the Tiers, the spot she indicated on herself might have been soft, fluffy sideburns on him. In his sect, that would indicate great prowess as well as adherence to tradition; facial hair in the service was generally limited to the highest-ranking members of warrior priest society. *OK, she knows what Tetrarchs are... I should have known...*

“That would be correct, sir.” Tauverius scrutinized her, trying to see past the false mousiness, the cute glasses, the understated, harmless everything that was so distinctly not the reality of this woman. “May I ask how you knew?”

“Several things clued me off... you don’t get to be my age in the Special Forces and not notice shit.” The laugh was more of a cackle this time. “Why are smart kids always so damned dumb, anyway?”

This time, he was most certainly offended. She spoke again before he could voice it.

“My eyes are modified. I can see all your tattoos, when I take off my glasses.” She slipped them off. “If your hair was longer, I would have missed them, but I’d still have known your family name for what it is. Don’t look so surprised, kid. You’ll be a GC3 before you leave this wing of the ship ...” Eumelje turned the frames toward him. “See that funny sheen? It normalizes my view so I don’t go nuts from all the tracers on everything... but with these off, I see like a gen.”

Her eyes no longer seemed brown. They were a peculiar shade of dark orange that flashed as she moved; the pupils were slightly wrong-shaped. They seemed to transform back, however, as she returned the spectacles to her nose.

“Amazing, sir. I had been told the technology was possible but quite uncommon and not something to worry about...” Her face indicated that he was half right; he chose not to continue.

The general let her cider go and set her palm on his shoulder. “Are you serious about your faith, about your studies?”

“Yes, sir. It is in my blood, it is my obligation...”

She shook her head, rolled her eyes, clearly dismayed. The gentle palm turned to a rock solid grip. “Fuck the origins of your surname. Do you care about your faith?”

Casting one eye to the hand, remembering the annihilated cider bottle, Tauverius emphatically stated, “Sir! Yes, sir!”

“Then pay attention, I won’t repeat this.” Eumelje released his shoulder and used her pulse to snap the bobbling bottle back to her. “General Johnesqua, of the 76<sup>th</sup> Armored, she is of the Sun. She is also a man-hater, especially pretty, young things in the Order of the Sea. She wants steam made of all of you, and she has a lot of ways for making it happen.”

The aspiring Tetrarch was so consumed by shock that he had no problem assuming an emotionless demeanor. Up until this very second, he had never even heard of a woman choosing to be a member of the Order of Maalek, much less one who was a general and a sect-specific murderer. His brain hurt, and he wanted to vomit, but the only feeling he could externally broadcast was the part where his veins were going glacial. “If such a person is known to exist, why is she in a position of power, sir?”

The general was turning away, checking her slate, drinking her cider with a sudden apparent lack of concern. Dismissively, she gestured with the bottle at a view screen. “See that star, out there, a couple light years from us? Go and pull the atomic core from it. I’ll explain why we let her persist when you get back.”

Tauverius stared at the burning orb – just a sad little red dwarf dying out on the perimeter, surrounded by blackness, but still far out of his reach and out of his ken to control. He had nothing to say.

“I will speak to Lieshlyn on your behalf, and I will see you in three weeks. Welcome to my unit, Tauverius.”