

## Roots in Hell

(Ann S Koi, March 2012; All content c. Catalyst Studios)

### Part 1

“Another one of these missions? How many of these ‘cells’ are we going to have to bust up?” The freckled blond shook his head, holding his slate distastefully. Karshi tried to ignore him as he refreshed the ‘Missionotes’ application, hoping for more than a bare outline.

A dark-skinned kaffir seated beside the first speaker, a lieutenant by his insignia, mumbled, “Seriously, Kieryl. Tired of these, yeah.”

“Shut up, man! It’ll rock.” This was spoken by another lieutenant. “Look at the maps and the terrain conditions. That’s some –“

“Rock? You’re joking, right, Mysh?” The dark-skinned man’s face slacked into a dubious expression as he looked across the room. It bothered Karshi that he did not know this man’s name, as he saw him often around the ship. He seemed profoundly unsociable on most encounters, though; in fact, this was the most he had ever heard his voice.

A mass of brown mudlocks hopped as the second lieutenant gestured emphatically. “No way, Aukaldir. Snake-nests are a lot more challenging than scything through rebel cave apes. Gimme something that doesn’t go down in one –“

“Can the racist shit, Myshkor.” A man of substantial height entered the room. He was shirtless, tattooed, and sporting 5-o-clock shadow and body hair that only human genes could have endowed him. A high officer’s jacked was thrown over one shoulder. The briefing chamber became suddenly quiet. As the man passed Lieutenant Myshkor, he gave him a rough elbow shove. “Seriously, you sound like a tool.”

A few of the ten present prior to his entry stood or at least saluted from where they sat, although most continued to read their screens. Karshi cast an eye to his best friend for a behavioral clue; Jasenjya did not look at the shirtless officer now standing front and center, only gave a half-hearted forehead tap. The fuzzy gentleman – now reading his own slate – was clearly lacking any fucks to give regarding their collective lack of protocol.

“Ooh we get Cap’n P today. I feel so special. Shit, where’d you come from, anyway? I thought you were back at Fenrir polishing balls?”

Long sideburns previously concealed by disarrayed braids became obvious when the near-giant scowled. Long pointed ears flicked irritably. He continued to read, though, not making eye contact with the lieutenant who hurled the attempted insults. “Why are you so fucking insubordinate?”

“Hey,” beamed Myshkor, the deep tan coloration of his face setting off his pearly teeth and short Ryzaan fangs. He waved his slate at the captain with a wink. “I learned it from the best of ‘em.”

Some of the officers laughed. Kieryl spoke again. “Really, wing commander, why are you here, sir?”

A snort issued but his attention remained on the device in his hand, clicking through something methodically. “Why, do you meat pounders have a problem taking orders from me?”

“No, sir,” confirmed about half the officers present, including Aukaldir, who added in his sharp, unaccented voice, “although the mission specs do say, ‘Major Jaahyden’, sir.”

“Oh, right. Anyone wanna go get him? Bonus rations if you volunteer.”

Karshi could not detect from tone whether Captain Parthenos – call sign ‘Checkmate’, in charge of the port-side small craft bays, according to the record he had just opened – was serious. Beside him, however, Jasenjya’s bemused silence hinted no action was the best action.

Upholding his reputation as the slowest worm on the line, Kieryl hopped to his feet, checking his crew locator as he headed to the door. The captain, still quite absorbed in his task, remarked precisely as Kieryl passed through the entryway, “If you time correctly, you might catch him between bong hits.”

The doors responded to Kieryl’s slack-jawed stalling by swooshing shut, smacking into him mostly, and pulling back. A robotic, “Apologies, sir” issued as they retracted.

Aside from his long brows momentarily rising, Parthenos had no reaction; he merely kept tapping on his screen.

“Shit,” Jasenjya muttered quietly. Karshi jumped a little, turning toward his friend.

“What’s up, Jessie? You know something?” Jessie – Jasenjya Intaul’lu – was native Vasiit and religious to boot; illness fell from his lips only under the direst of circumstances.

“Jady’s an ace. Jady don’t do shit like this.” He spoke softly in a low form of the Ryzaan tongue, verbally economic and extremely vulgar, and probably unknown to most of the room. “If he no fly, numbers bad.”

Karshi blinked, absorbing the ramifications of Jessie’s hurried statement. Jaahyden Illoquar had transferred from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Strike Force under unspecified conditions a few months prior. Jessie had been his astrum, his page, and transferred in loyalty. Jaahyden had been ‘M-Prime’, the second in command of the ISC Ishulya, under the supervision of Brigadier Okallin. Persistence at that post would have eventually led to being in command of said vessel, ‘the youngest colonel in Star Assault’s history’. No one questioned this man nor his blatant abuse of his position. As Squadron Commander of the Sanjeera, he had pharmaceutical supremacy and could write his own prescriptions. And he did. All the wing commanders did, Karshi had learned; the job was deeply integrally drug-intensive but also painfully exhausting on all levels.

*Captain A. once told me Parthenos was the only wing commander he’d ever met he wouldn’t call an addict. ‘Hatred is his crutch and his fuel; he doesn’t need the drugs outside his pilot seat.’ But he also said that Jady was a mathematical genius, and could assess statistics or write hypergeometrical equations off the top of his head regardless of pharmaceutical intake. ‘That’s why he gets along so well with our colonel.’*

Rumor around the ship had it that Jaahyden could have been a navigator, but he preferred to fly and fight and keep company with genadri. Combat simulator score charts reflected his prowess

with both weaponry and odds; he could speed through mission sims other men labored over, his marks always high but often with a grotesque civilian body count. He always brought back his virtual team nearly unscathed, however, and he had an excellent record, the older men bragged, of doing the same thing in real scenarios. *'A record he refuses to tarnish'*. As this fact sunk in, Jessie's comment finally clicked for Karshi.

*If he opts out of a mission, or slips his way out of one with the excuse of being 'too high', it's because he couldn't figure out a 70% or higher team survival rate. Karshi's mouth momentarily drew into a frown as he scanned the call signs on his locator. At least three of these men aren't coming back. I will come back, I am sure... but some of these men will not. I shall not consider this further; sometimes idiots they may be, but not a single one do I hate.*

Something darkened his view. Karshi shook his head, wondering for a moment if 'dark thoughts' had 'clouded his vision', a thing Captain A. once warned him against. However, a towering figure was distinctly the cause.

"My head count is off. Did you walk in here by accident?"

From the tapping, armor-clad foot, Karshi swung his eyes up, meeting the simultaneously furry and icy face of Captain Parthenos. Beside him, Karshi heard an intake of breath.

"Who the hell are you, number?" snarled the wing commander at the lack of an initial response.

Without a second thought, he struck upright. "Astrum Valdieren Karshimziel, sir!" He snapped the salute just shy of clipping the captain's ribs.

"At ease." Huge, peculiar dark eyes looked him over before returning to the slate. "You're Alshuenjol's new astrum, huh?"

"Sir, yes sir."

"Step outside, I'll be out to have a word with you in a moment."

Jessie made a little gesture as if to say, 'Sorry man, you're on your own now' as Karshi scooted around him and out of the room. The captain joined him shortly.

I think I'm pale until I stand next to a Shandrian. He has an incredible skin tone, it's like... polished bone or something. Wait, he has weird pupils, and I thought he didn't have fangs but he's got them sheathed. Retractable fangs! I took him for haki Shandrian, but no, he's ... he's Ruhn. Holy fucking shit, that is awesome.

"The fuck are you staring at, kid?"

"Apologies, sir. You're the first Ruhn I've ever met, sir."

Something peculiar crossed his face as his dilated but distinctly triple-lobed pupils bored into Karshi's eyes. His voice was flat. "I get that a lot." Parthenos gestured slightly at Karshi with his slate, his tone was soft now, almost alarmingly kind. "Al gave his approval, so I see no reason to kick you off my team. However, and I know he warned you already, but this is an exceedingly risky situation. I am giving you a second chance to change your mind now. There will be no shame in it, and I will personally hand any man his ass who gets on your case about it later."

“Captain Parthenos, sir, I would like to be rid of this number I have worn for nearly seven months, sir.”

“I appreciate and respect that, but there will be a second wave, under supervision of Captain Alshuenjol.”

“I am not interested in the clean-up wave, sir.”

“Al says you’re as sharp and as tough as they come, and you do him justice.” The captain nodded, a hint of a smile on his face. “You’re in if you want. Far be it from me to deny a talent as vital as the one you’ve demonstrated on this mission.” Parthenos turned his slate towards him so Karshi could see his own file on the display.

Karshi nodded solemnly, although he wondered specifically which talent the captain meant. *That’s my ma’at-shi club awards from school... stylized formal combat cannot be what he’s referring to; I doubt saurtzek terrorists settle things in mat bouts.*

“Due to your inexperience I’m going to put you with the airmen for purposes of crew distribution, but do not take that as a slight, and by no means dismiss yourself as combat sausage because of it.”

*Combat sausage? That’s how he thinks of airmen? Classist jerk.* “Affirmative, sir.”

The captain was wrangling his braids into a holder now, an action requiring both hands, stretching the grisly tattoo on his fuzzy chest – thorny briars exploding from a saurtzek skull – before Karshi’s disturbed eyes.

*My ancestors did some terrible things too, so I guess I get it. Seems like wallowing to tattoo it on ones self... that’s got to be a pretty close approximation to what his skull looks like under all that shiny black hair. Oh holy shit, he has stripes there, under the sideburns, blue ones. Why cover them up? They’re cool as fuck. I’d kill for something that distinguished me like that. What a crying shame for a man to be so ashamed of a heritage that rich and diverse...*

“Why are you still standing here? Go back in there.”

“Apologies, sir. I was waiting to be dismissed, sir.”

A half-laugh and head shake accompanied the response. “Valdieren, I’m putting you with the airmen for distribution; you still have to sit through my briefing like the rest of the officers on my team, dumbass. Get. Tell them I’m getting some coffee and I’ll be right back.”

When Karshi re-entered the briefing room, about half the group was teasing Kieryl, referring to him as ‘Astrum Door’.

“Man, thank fuck I already have a call sign,” he sighed in resignation, his eyes falling on the only one in the room lower in station. “Speaking of, hi Val.”

Karshi shot him a glare and returned to the empty spot aside Jessie.

“How’d your little chat with his furry fucktasticness go? A little rapey, perhaps? Rough against the wall with a side of man sauce?”

*I’d forgotten about that part of his reputation. Old school non-consensual violation as a punishment; a way to teach humility without necessarily incapacitating the pupil. The way Cap’n A. talks about knighthood in ancient Eshandir makes me so happy I was born in this century.*

Kieryl was not giving up. “Can’t talk? Hair on your tongue getting in the way?”

Karshi produced his slate and continued to ignore the harassment.

“Leave him alone, Kier,” Myshkor barked. “He probably hasn’t swallowed it all yet.”

“Actually, lieutenant” Karshi said, just loud enough to be heard over the laughter, “we were discussing the fact that the last time he balled your ass, it took weeks to get the smell off his dick.”

“Watch it, Swampy,” growled Myshkor.

“Hey you guys are the idiots picking on a flamethrower. You deserve whatever foulness he fires back.” Aukaldir shrugged.

*According to his file, he’s a former trencher. He knows how disgusting ground force troops talk to each other, in other words.*

Jessie was eying him somewhat oddly. “So, what did he actually want?” Just normal Archon this time, something anyone in the room could understand.

“To tell me not to feel like meat because of my crew position.” Karshi shrugged and spoke a little louder. “And that he’s getting some of that nasty brown shit from the o-lounge and he’ll be right back.”

“Oh, cool you’re assignable,” Jessie grinned. “Maybe I can have you on my group.”

*That’s what I’m hoping. If there’s a chance you are going to die today, I want to be right with you, to the last breath.*

.....

Aukaldir was the senior paratrooper, apparently, and allowed to pick his team first, grabbing Karshi without hesitation. Amid the scowls aimed in his direction, the lieutenant shrugged. “Unlike most of you, he is quiet.”

He had also picked Jasenjya to be his pilot, but Parthenos reassigned him almost instantly. “Sorry, Holiday,” the captain said with a head shake, “I need him in my ship. Wyvern will be flying for you.”

The only man among the ten who had opened his mouth even less than Aukaldir through the pre-briefing chatter, Lieutenant Yadzfreyr Vrynheim, call sign ‘Wyvern’, was a former tanker of Shandrian lineage. He was a full-fledged pilot, but held back from his next rank due to some

personal issue with one of the high brass. He approached the head of his team and outstretched a hand in silence.

“Lieutenant Spooky? Are you shitting me?” Aukaldir eyed the hand, non-plused.

“Apologies.” The voice was gentle and gracious, entirely genuine. The former tanker bowed, his mass of gold and black mudlocks shifting slightly on his back. “The mission plan requires a senior pilot on each Dash. Your clearance may not have allowed you to see that, Lieutenant Aukaldir.”

*It's amazing the way Shandrians can tell you to fuck off and die without creasing their faces... wonder if he keeps the glasses on when he's flying?*

Lieutenant Yadzfreyr pushed his small spectacles back up his nose with one finger as he returned to the upright position.

Aukaldir's lip twitched. “Fine. Meet with the team in the hangar. I'll expect pre-flight done before I get there.” He stared after the man as Yadzfreyr glided out the door and finally muttered: “Impossible for me not to hate that guy.”

“Why so, sir?”

“Huh? Oh outside voice, woops.” The lieutenant gave an embarrassed grin. “Talk to me as we walk to the hangar, Val.”

Karshi dutifully followed his temporary superior down the hall after clasping arms briefly with Jasenjya. His friend's fearless smile lingered in his mind as Aukaldir spoke.

“Colonel K's former astra, they're always hotshots, usually assholes. Alshuenjol is the golden exception to the rule, you're seriously fortunate.” His swift long strides were a bit of work to keep up with but Karshi did not want to miss the explanation. “He's friends with some of the big brass and his clearance is high, but still a lieutenant, and note how I'm senior paratrooper in this arrangement.”

“He's not a paratrooper, then?”

“Path to knighthood, has no bug; seem strange?”

Karshi considered this as he caught up. “Hadn't noticed, but maybe that is strange...” He was looking forward to seeing Squeak in the hangar bay; Captain A was keeping the genadri in the hive until ‘go time’ in case a mission detail changed.

“He's a fully trained paratrooper, with no bug.”

“So's Captain Parthenos though.”

“Yeah, but his bug died, that's different. Hard to re-bond for some guys.” He tilted his head towards Karshi as they slowed near the crew lockers. Aukaldir's voice was very low. “I don't trust guys with a lot of religion and no bug. Figure it out from there.”

This was very strange for Karshi; he was new to the idea of religious knighthood. Alshuenjol had told him he would choose his own path when and if he 'felt it' and there was no point in pushing it. "Are you? That kind of knight-candidate, I mean?"

The face was indescribable. "Valdieren, to me, religion is for people with nothing to live for or people who need justification for their actions. I have self-love and a job. I've never seen the need to follow a faith, even if it keeps me a squire forever. I am amazed my master was OK with that, but he is a rare man."

"Who were you astrum to?"

"Master Chelmauritzen, of course." Aukaldir smiled.

*The ship's ultra religious Major Prime? I can see some of his mannerisms reflected in you, though. I still don't get the deal about Wyvern; are you implying he isn't trustworthy or that he is likely to do something suicidal? A lot of guys just hate tankers in this unit, I've noticed that, but Chel is an ex-tanker, too. And I think he's on good terms with Wyvern... I think you may just be jealous because he's the same age and rank as you and has a better clearance.*

The five airmen in their crew were already assembled in full gear by the Dash. Wyvern must have been inside it. Aukaldir hailed them as he informed Karshi to go ahead and board while he briefed the new team.

Karshi poked his head into the cockpit and saluted Lieutenant Yadzfrey before going to his seat.

"Oh, hello." The mudlocked head turned with a smile; the spectacles were gone. "You are Val, yes, astrum to Brother Alshuenjol, yes? It is very nice to meet you."

Excessively polite formal Archon for an ex-tanker. Maybe Holiday is onto something; that is pretty weird. And 'brother', really, like a monk in a book? That's so... antiquated and silly. At least it's not 'brother' the way Jady uses it, that makes me embarrassed to be Ryzaan. "Same, sir."

"Sirs are unnecessary. I am aware of our ranks."

*Stop smiling like that, fuck that is spooky, you are spooky.* Karshi took a seat. "Any sign of the gen?"

"Hmmm no, now that you mention it. Oh, except Linda, she is sitting right next to you." He barked something quite suddenly in what sounded to Karshi like old Shandrian. Cap'n Al and Chel both swore that this was always the best language to use with genadri.

A massive arthropod form, occupying the seat next to Karshi, made herself visible, tapping feelers on her own snout in a cute but rather defeated looking gesture. She slumped from the spot on her scythe-like feet and slunk into the cockpit.

"You need to be a good bug until your bond gets on board, miss. Ah ah, I did see you, you know; you were going to surprise Astrum Valdieren, do not pretend otherwise."

*He can talk to them at least; she seems to be listening. I'm not sure I could command anyone else's bug. I have enough trouble with Squeak.*

Aukaldir boarded. “Ugh, great, let’s get this over with, shall we? Hi honey. You’re behaving, right?”

“She has been a very good girl, lieutenant. You should give her a treat.” Yadzfreyr nudged the big bug and winked, a gesture Karshi caught and Aukaldir missed. Linda trilled in agreement.

*He’s a bad babysitter, too; I guess you could hate him for getting along with your bug better than you, maybe, too?*

“What are you laughing at, astrum? Why do I always have the wackos on my teams?” Aukaldir plopped into the gunner’s seat, rolling his eyes. “Brace yourselves, sausage boarding.”

“Is that cruel vulgarity really necessary?” The big blue eyes stared down Lieutenant Aukaldir. “They are kaffa, too.”

“Yes, that is true. Kaffa whose job is dying so we can figure out where our enemies are...”

“Sacrificing their lives honorably for us, you mean?”

“Fuck off, spooky. I’m warning you. I’m in command here and if you keep spewing religion you’re going to get some on me.”

“I should hope so,” Yadzfreyr remarked as the airmen came aboard. “You might be less of a prick.”

Aukaldir laughed. “With examples like Parthenos, I’m not sure where you get those ideas.” Responding to Karshi’s curious head tilt beside the cock pit door, he explained, “He’s a knighted Tetrarch; it’s like a combat priest... Space monks don’t come more religious than that.”

“Let him be the exception, not the rule.”

“Astrum Valdieren, did your Missionnotes ever fully update after the briefing?”

“Yes sir, reading through them now... piecing it all together with what Parthenos and you said back in the room...”

“Don’t hurt yourself; most of the work is intuitive once you’re actually on the ground. With these saurtzek bastards the rules can change pretty suddenly.” There was a moment of silence and some shuffling. “Man I hate to ask this but Wyvern, can you shoot me up? Thank you.”

“Where’s my bug?”

As if in answer, Squeak hopped into the Dash, issuing the mildly humorous rubbery sound for which she was named.

“Late, apparently,” noted Aukaldir with a laugh. “Al and Parth were probably arguing about whether she had enough training not to be a liability on this run.”

“Storm activity in the atmosphere where I will be letting you free,” Yadzfreyr noted for the benefit of the whole crew. “This of course, means two things...”

“Shit, yeah, uh... OK. Be on the watch for above ground activity. During regular daylight hours the saurtzek won't come up to fight, yeah? But with shitty weather like this, they'll be out on the surface, because it's wet and dark. Be prepared to fire before you hit the ground. Drugs, guys, now, everyone.”

Karshi popped his combat combo dose and adjusted his harness so he and Squeak were more comfortable. *This is going to get really ugly, even if the two knobs in the cockpit stop arguing.*

He closed his eyes and waited for the pharmaceutical cocktail to do its job. This had been one of the toughest things to adjust to in this unit, the massive amount of drugs... he had never been a fan of recreational drugs, even when exposed to them under fairly positive circumstances while training as a flamethrower. Karshi enjoyed regular consciousness far too much and was relatively mortified when told what he would be ingesting in order to endure short range jump drive use and encourage the constant renewal of what was colloquially referred to as 'pulse energy' in his system. He chose not to think about the havoc being wrecked upon his body at the moment, focusing on focus itself. Every simulated mission with saurtzek enemies had taught him the same lesson: stay alert, be prepared for anything.

The airmen, all on manual parachutes, jumped first. When Karshi was the only person left in the crew cabin, Aukaldir released himself from his seat. “Twenty five, you are next. I'm going to team with you on the ground, so I'll register as your first 'target'. Do me a favor and don't shoot me.”

0025 was all Karshi had for a call sign currently and he clenched every time it was said. *This ends today; I will have a name, regardless of whatever else occurs.*

The view from the hatch robbed him of breath and for a moment, word or thought. Lightning arced between the dark clouds and wind roared. Squeak cooed, an echo of the fascination he felt. There was nothing to be concerned with from the electricity; his armor and her natural substance were built to handle electrical impulses. The worst it might do might be to separate them while still in the air and they had practiced repeatedly at the cliffs on Gravian for such an event.

“Damn it's beautiful,” he uttered into his helmet, broadcast to the cockpit and Aukaldir simultaneously.

“Yeah, my favorite conditions, minus the saurtzek guerillas on the ground, yeah?”

Yadzfreyr interjected calmly, “I will cover you, no need for tension. Enjoy your fall; I can gun and fly at the same time.”

“I forget you're D-7 trained. Is there anything you can't do?”

“Ever return to the Exo Armor Division... otherwise, no, not really.”

“Oh fuck off.”

“Do you curse like that around the colonel, Holiday?”

“Hell the fuck no,” laughed Aukaldir. “I try to keep out of his field of awareness as much as I can, Wyvern. Ready to go there, twenty five?”

*You fucking bet I am. Goodbye number, hello manhood. "See you on the ground, Holiday."*

Maybe it was the drugs, maybe he would have seen the prismatic halos in the air moisture when the lightning flashed without them, but free fall through the raging storm moved him to misty tears. In spite of the emotional flood, Karshi had his rifle armed and ready well before Squeak released him to slam into ankle-deep mud.

Wind whipped the rain around him furiously; bolts of lightning flashed few miles off in the distance. *She moved me out of the main body of the storm, that's good of her. Now where did Aukaldir come down?* He watched the dot representing his symbiote select a proper hovering distance on his goggle overlay monitor. There were no hostile marks on the map, either, at least, as he moved towards the flashing goal.

From the Missionnotes, Karshi understood that they landed near the remains of a formerly human settlement that had already been consumed by the saurtzek living in the caves below. Whether they had all been literally eaten or 'repurposed' into living machinery remained to be seen. Parthenos had been explicit about encounters with such machines – 'mercifully execute'.

This planet, Kezemek, had been inhabited by human and kaffir colonies for centuries, historically farming and co-existing peacefully, much like Holtiin inside the main body of the Archon Empire. A military base had been established here somewhat recently, due to a desire by some residents for protection from saurtzek vessels seen in nearby airspace. This desire was not shared and there had been problems of a now-legendary nature between Archons and the independent colonists. The soaking road on which Karshi now stood was of Archon design, clearly part of the peace program's efforts.

*They consent to having a road built between their isolated farming towns finally only to get raided out of their homes by cannibal monsters. I guess that's why we're here, even though it's technically outside Archon jurisdiction.*

He remained cautious in his approach, aware from simulations that saurtzek combat technology included rapid burrows that might not necessarily show up on his locator until they were right beneath him. The road, being composed of particularly dense material, was his best bet to slow down anything of the sort. It unfortunately increased his visibility otherwise, so he activated his armor's camouflage function.

*The Ilxuviy claim no connection with this group, so I wonder how well they're really armed... they said there were no ships approved in this vicinity at all. Wonder how old they were? Parthenos said there are still groups wandering who did not agree with the accord at the end of the Mior Wars... that their ships are dying, they've run out of supplies or their built-in food growth systems are compromised, so they have to land wherever they can... desperate people, who are justifiably angry at mine...*

Karshi had no visual on Aukaldir yet but the dots of both the kaffa and his symbiotic companion were directly ahead up a hill side. A lot of hostile movement was not far beyond. He passed the burned out husk of a Ryzaan-style country home, stone and mud build up between the trunks of what should have been living trees. The environmental analysis included 'carbonized plant material' and he wondered if lightning had taken it out recently.

Aukaldir crouched, camouflaged but visible via tuning one's goggles. He gestured for Karshi to keep down and come over. "The rest of our crew is already out. You missed Wyvern sniping a landspiker from the air... then they all came out of the tunnel."

Listening to this via the communications system within his helmet, Karshi eyed the valley opposite his approach. A small group of bipedal figures were digging about in the singed remnants of something blown apart by a direct hit from a mini-cannon. His environmental analyzer was going nuts and he temporarily tuned it down. "Fuck, dude."

"He said he would have taken them out too, but they're carrying launchers of some kind; didn't want to open himself to a shot if he did not get them all the first time."

"So they're ours, then..." Karshi settled into a position to convert his rifle and awaited orders. "What do you suppose those launchers fire?"

"Don't fucking want to know, yeah? They can't go back down with any of our gear... really, I don't even want 'em touching those corpses. Fucking pieces of ..."

"Everyone's gotta eat something, Holiday. You weren't real keen on those gentlemen when they were alive. Change of heart?"

Aukaldir shot him a look, although he could not really see it through all the facial gear. "That is not what I meant when I called them 'sausage'."

"Fine, I believe you. How do you want to minimize our risks?"

"You're not going to like this, but we have to close the distance and decrease their chances of firing whatever the hell those are... we also have to keep our bugs out of the fray until the guys with launchers are disabled."

"Don't we have something specifically for going into landspiker burrows?"

"Us? No. The Ishulya has all the cockatrice payloads."

"Then why isn't the 23<sup>rd</sup> here?"

A strained sigh was audible from the lieutenant. "Tied up in another system."

"Or the 89<sup>th</sup>?"

"Tied up... in the same system..."

They glanced at one another. Karshi could not immediately ascertain what that meant, but he realized that any reason for the brigadier's ship and the notorious prison ship to be in the same system at the same time was not a happy one. At best, it indicated a mass arrest; at worst, a matter of extreme imperial security requiring immediate decisive action. He knew better than to ask more questions; even if Aukaldir knew, it was likely classified.

"Right. So... we sneak down and hope they can't see us somehow, or we rush forward firing barrages?"

“We’re going to start with the former and be prepared to switch to the latter. Wyvern’s got our backs, in theory; he’s currently circling in the upper atmosphere charging the ship on the storm.”

“I get you don’t like him, but that’s pretty badass.”

A snort. “That’s kinda why I don’t like him; he makes the rest of us look like back country fruit pickers.” Aukaldir pumped his rifle arm. “On my count, we each move around this hump and start down the side. Match my pace as much as possible. Parthenos says you can fan fire a single rifle bolt, so I’m counting on you to get the pair with launchers that are currently to the right. I’ll get the guy who’s off by himself more. We can pick off the other fuckers at leisure, in theory. With me? Alright. Three, two, one, go.”

*That requires too much proximity for me to be comfortable, but this is my job, and I will do it. I guess that’s what he meant about my ‘valuable skills’.*

As they inched carefully down the steep bank, Yadzfreyr’s voice crackled in Karshi’s helmet. “Careful... I’m detecting subterranean activity behind and to your left...”

“Acknowledged, Wyvern,” came Aukaldir’s reply.

The ‘activity’ was not registering on their threat sensors until they were quite a bit further down the slope. “I’ve got a clear line on my targets; they moved into my range, Holiday.”

Karshi watched the sizable red dot moving up from the rear tensely as he awaited Aukaldir’s response. “Mine moved further away... Wait, almost there... I’m in place. Four, three, two –“

“One” never came, as the landspiker breeched above them, dirt and stone rained, a horrible howl briefly broke the air and the saurtzek scrambled in all directions. A mini-cannon blast ruptured the drill-faced creature-device into a hail of flaming debris. One of Karshi’s targets regained his composure enough to aim his launcher at the speeding Dash above.

Wyvern hissed “Hullmite, fuck that” and promptly jumped the ship out of the vicinity.

“Run, twenty-five, that’s coming your way now!”

He surprised himself a little, but Karshi sunk a bolt in the offending saurtzek before propelling himself directly toward the survivors. *How ‘smart’ is a hullmite? I wager ‘not very’. You threw this, want it back?*

It was a bit tougher to fire his rifle while running than he had suspected, but he managed another hit before he took shelter against a broken wall. “Holiday?”

“Still kicking. They’re trying to kill their own hullmite; I’d laugh if I wasn’t trying not to shit myself.”

“Serves them right.”

“Keep your eye on your locator, kid.”

“Affirmative.”

He was being approached, one on either side. Karshi grinned, confident about this scenario.  
*You're in for a surprise...*

Karshi put his free hand up the barrel of his rifle from where his other hand lay inside its coils. He slowed his breathing, calling as much energy up from within his body as he could, flattening his back against the wall. Right as the feet of each hostile rounded the corner, just as the furious shouting in Saurtaf began, he pulled the emergency release on the rifle and sprayed pulse from the sides of the barrel and coils. The waves were too low intensity to kill, but more than enough to stun.

“Where are you going? Kill them.”

The voice was Yadzfreyr's, not Aukaldir's. He looked up, making out the Dash hovering just below the clouds. “They can't hurt anyone, it could be days before they move.”

“Yes, they're probably bleeding internally; if not, they could potentially die of dehydration before anyone brought them medical attention... depending on the sect of this splinter group, the punishment for failing to bring you down could be worse than that... kill them. It's merciful.”

“Holiday?”

“Over here sending a retrieval report on the airmen. Other hostiles down. You?”

“You're the only one who can hear this broadcast, twenty five,” Yadzfreyr explained. “Kill them. That's why you're issued a bayonet.”

*I don't want to stick my gun in saurtzek rebels. What if they have diseases? This thing has an intravenous connection with me right now...* Karshi glared up at the ship as he crushed his armored boot on the windpipe of each soldier in turn. “Happy, Wyvern?”

“No, that was pretty nasty.”

“What did I miss?”

“He stomped two hostiles to death.”

Aukaldir's voice seemed more amused than horrified. “Dude! Don't fuck with ground forces. That's what I'm sayin'.”

“Incorrigible.” The Dash vanished again.

“How do things look, Holiday?”

“Wyvern and I got them all... they fortunately hadn't got very far with the, uh, harvesting. There are only three of our guys here, though; we're missing two...”

“Already below?” Karshi asked, staring down the ragged, freshly opened tunnel before him.

The lieutenant stepped over stones and bodies to join. “Yeah, probably. I hate this part.”

“Not really thrilled by the idea, myself. I like being up here where we have air protection.”

“Call your bug. I want her to know not to follow us in. Linda’s going to come but she’s done this several times now... her breed is built for it. Send her to the town or have Wyvern pick her up – it’s up to you.”

“What town?”

“Lauxia, about fifteen kilometers that way... there’s a base there, it’s primarily a kaffir city. Lots of gen-accessible shelter there and no one will bother her.”

“I’d rather have her out of harm’s way if you think she’s at risk...” Karshi used the bug whistle function in his external speakers, sad about the idea of saying goodbye to Squeak in such an environment, wondering how Jessie was faring wherever he had come down.

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