

About The Daily Dose

This story was originally told as a series of small daily chunks on the web that ran from November of 1997 to March of 1999. Each page that starts with some numbers (and, possibly a day of the week) is the start of a day's worth of the story.

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The Daily Dose

by Michael P Calligaro

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November 1997

1.1

The Daily Dose's entry nanocurtain generally slid aside happily, giving the bartender, Alfonso Tanaka, a subtle audio clue to let him know he had new customers. When the shalk walked through it, though, Alfonso swore he could hear his little bots scream as they scrambled to get out of the way. A hush fell over the room, and all but Alfonso's eyes turned immediately toward the creature. Alfonso self-consciously stared down at the glass he was cleaning.

The shalk were small creatures, roughly a meter tall and covered in thick fur. They had big eyes, little leather noses, and mouths that rested naturally in the shape of a smile. Many humans, on meeting a shalk for the first time, made the mistake of exclaiming something to the effect of, "Oh, how cute." Sometimes the shalk allowed such people to live.

No shalk had ever before come into the Daily Dose. And Alfonso knew this one wasn't here for a drink. His name was Quixar, the head of outpost security. And he was here to see the owner of the bar. He was here for Alfonso.

1.2

Alfonso scanned across the bar and found the fiery red hair of a human named Judy. She was watching the shalk with the same detached curiosity as everyone else. Her eyes flitted to his, and he fixed her with an intense glare. Ignoring his malevolence, she grinned and looked back to the shalk.

Quixar scanned around the room with the attention of an investigator, his big eyes taking everything in. People subconsciously glanced down when the shalk looked at them, but their eyes sprang back when he looked away. He walked up to the bar, where two patrons scurried away to make room for him.

In perfect shalkish, the only language universally spoken in this section of the galaxy, Alfonso said, "You honor my bar with your presence, sir. What can I get for you?"

Quixar glanced around again and said. "You have a fairly nice place here. How's business?"

1.3

Inwardly, Alfonso grinned. Outwardly, he put on his best innocent look. "Today business has been great. In the past it's been so-so."

"Do you have any idea why business is booming for you today?"

Alfonso shrugged. "Hey shalk, I just tend bar."

Quixar nodded. "There is only one other bar in Frakar Spaceport. And its owner turned up murdered this morning."

A gasp rushed through the crowd, and Alfonso covered his face in shock. "But he was a shalk!" Quixar nodded. "Then another shalk killed him?"

Quixar shook his head. "That's unclear. His death does not appear to have been caused by shalk weaponry."

1.4

Another gasp went through the crowd. Alfonso laced his voice with a slight hint of desperation. "But nothing can kill a shalk but another shalk. Your defenses are too strong for non-shalk weaponry, and your weapons are genetically coded to only work in the hands of a shalk."

Quixar stiffened and grabbed the edge of the bar. Alfonso felt pleased that he'd scored a hit, but he carefully covered that in a mask of concern. "I'm sorry, sir, did I say something wrong?"

Quixar's cheeks bulged slightly as if he was clenching his teeth. Then he sighed, and his professional demeanor returned. With only a trace of anger, he said, "The murderer cut off the shalk's hand."

Putting on his most shocked expression yet, Alfonso exclaimed, "But that means he can't become a spirit and join the celestial palace."

Quixar frowned. "You say a lot of obvious things, human."

Well, he wouldn't be expecting this. Alfonso stared up at the ceiling, as if remembering something. Then he made shocked realization cross his face. "Oh my God, it's my fault!"

1.5

The entire Daily Dose went silent, and all eyes turned to Alfonso. Quixar, the shalk, squinted intently at him and said, "Explain."

Alfonso made a show of looking around in despair but used the movement to check Judy's expression. He was happy to see her look worried. Alfonso then turned his full attention to Quixar. "Investigator Quixar, my apologies for not realizing the connection until now. It's just that it sounded so crazy at the time that I forgot about it."

Evenly, Quixar said, "Go on."

"It happened over a week ago . . ."

It had been yet another long and unsuccessful business day. Alfonso stared at the blinking red numerals in

his ledger and sighed. The nanocurtain made its refusal of entry sound. Alfonso checked the time--well past closing. Still, he was here and late night customers were better than no customers. He nodded to the curtain and it parted, revealing an agitated sliss.

1.6

Alfonso is describing what happened over a week ago.

Like all sliss, the Daily Dose's late-night patron looked like a giant snake. This particular sliss' scales were currently dark red, denoting agitation and fear.

Concerned, Alfonso grabbed a bottle of sliss juice and said, "Come in, friend, come in." He poured the deep green liquid into a normal glass and set it on the bar. The sliss' two independent eyes alternated in their jobs of scanning the room and watching Alfonso. It (Alfonso still hadn't learned to tell one sex from the other, if there even were two) slithered up to the bar. Wrapping the extremely dexterous tip of its tail around the glass, it took a long drink. Its color lightened.

"Sank you."

"What had you so agitated, friend?"

One of the sliss' eyes panned over the entry curtain. Alfonso nodded to the curtain and it became solid. The sliss took another sip, paused, and said, "I have learned ssomesing very imporsant."

1.7

Alfonso is describing what happened over a week ago.

"What's that?" Alfonso asked.

The sliss let both eyes scan around for a second, and its color darkened. "I've learned how to kill a sshalk."

Alfonso suppressed a chuckle. "And what do you plan to do with this information?"

The sliss looked at him with both eyes, as if he were trying to understand why Alfonso would ask such a stupid question. "I'm going to kill one."

"Why?"

"You have to ask? Humans have been even more abussed by se sshalk san se resst of uss."

"But what would killing one accomplish?"

"It will let sem know sey aren't invinssible. It will make sem sink twice before sey abuse uss again."

Still trying to contain his mirth, Alfonso asked, "Well, you seem to have this all worked out. So, why are you so agitated?"

1.8

Alfonso is describing what happened over a week ago.

The sliss lowered its head. "I don't know which one to kill."

Alfonso didn't really believe any of this. While the sliss were fantastic engineers, the concept of anyone

finding a way passed a shalk's defenses seemed unlikely at best. A blinking red image caught his eye, and he glanced down to see his still-open ledger. He sighed as his earlier frustration returned. "Why don't you kill the owner of Frakar's other bar?"

It bobbed its head once, the sliss equivalent of a shrug.

Concluding the story, Alfonso said, "After that, we didn't say much else. The sliss finished its drink, paid in cash, and slithered out. I went back to worrying about my finances and forgot about it."

Quixar squinted at Alfonso for a moment. Alfonso did a quick scan of the bar and saw that everyone else watched in interest. Judy, however, looked bemused.

With a sigh, Quixar said, "Well, I can hardly arrest you for making a sarcastic suggestion."

In actuality, he could. By being the most powerful beings in the area, the shalk could do, and generally did, anything they wanted. The sense of fairness this one was showing was quite unlike them, but it was also what Alfonso had banked on. "Thank you, sir."

1.9

The investigator asked, "I don't suppose this sliss had any identifying marks--a scar or a damaged eye?"

Alfonso frowned. "No, I'm afraid not."

Quixar nodded. "My job is never so easy. And your name is?"

He knew damn well what Alfonso's name was. He probably knew the names and faces of every inhabitant of Frakar Spaceport. "Alfonso Tanaka, sir."

"That's a somewhat strange grouping of human names, isn't it?"

Quixar was letting Alfonso know he'd done his homework and wasn't going to let anything slip by out of ignorance. Alfonso nodded. "Yes, sir, it is."

With a curt nod, Quixar said, "Then that's all for now. Thank you for your help." He strode purposefully out of the Dose. His stride, of course, looked more like a cute little waddle.

Emmanuelle, a pretty human who tended to hang out at the bar and chat during slow times, grinned at him. "That's impressive, standing up to a shalk like that."

Alfonso shrugged, "Oh, I don't know. Quixar isn't so bad--for a shalk."

As the Dose returned to its normal level of noise and activity, Judy stood up and strode over to the bar. Leaning in close to Emmanuelle, she grinned and said in a quiet voice that was still too loud, "So, wanna hear what really happened?"

1.10

Annoyed, Alfonso punched a button behind the bar. Thousands of microscopic nanobots poured out of the ceiling, set themselves up around the three of them, and began to vibrate wildly. They caused a noise-obstructing hum in the audio spectrum and serious localized distortion in the other spectra. A few hunter/killer bots went in search of any recording bots inside the screen. The nanoscreen was supposed to be used for clients to privately unload their sorrows on the bartender. But it was also effective with people who knew too much but didn't know enough to keep their mouths shut.

Alfonso glared at Judy and replied in the same language she'd used. "If you think speaking in English will protect this conversation, you're sadly naive. And if you really want to kill me, let's go hand to hand and be done with it."

She looked him up and down, as if assessing his abilities in that regard. Then she grinned to Emmanuelle. "Do you think he could take me?"

Alfonso interjected, "Watch out how you answer, Emmanuelle. Judy was a soldier in the Freehdom wars."

Emmanuelle whistled. "Which side?"

This brought out the most intensely displeased frown Alfonso had ever seen on Judy's face. Would he have to hop the bar and get between them? Judy snarled, "Which do you think? I'm here, aren't I?"

1.11

A terrified look spread across Emmanuelle's face, and she bowed her head. "I'm sorry, Judy. I didn't mean anything by it."

Judy paused for a moment, then smiled. "No problem." Her smile became a wry grin, "But if it happens again, I'll kill you." Emmanuelle looked frightfully to Alfonso, who shrugged and nodded. Judy's tone became jovial, "Now, let's talk about something more pleasant, like how this shalk really died."

Hastily, like she was glad to change the subject, Emmanuelle turned to Alfonso. "You actually lied to Quixar? I'm impressed."

Judy laughed, "Alfonso lies to everyone!"

This evoked a frown from him. "'Lie' is such a strong word . . ."

She nodded cheerfully and said, "So, it wasn't last week--"

Alfonso cleared his throat, interrupting her. While he'd hoped to keep the situation secret, it was obvious that Judy was determined to tell someone. Hopefully, after Emmanuelle knew, she'd keep things to herself. "I own this place. I tell the stories."

1.12

Alfonso began to tell what really happened to the shalk bartender. "It pretty much went down the way I said, only it wasn't last week, it was last night, and it wasn't a sliss, it was Judy."

Emmanuelle's mouth literally dropped open and a loud gasp escaped. Turning to Judy with newfound admiration, she said, "*You* killed a shalk?"

Judy shrugged and said. "Hey, it's Alfonso's bar. He tells the stories." Then she turned to him and asked, "I was wondering why you told the cop it was a sliss, though."

Alfonso smiled and replied, "To most shalk, all humans look alike. But even the sliss have trouble telling each other apart. Also, a small amount of physical or emotional pain will cause a sliss to go into a coma. That makes it impossible to torture information out of them. I figured if I said it was a human, we'd all be rounded up and thrown in cells by tomorrow morning. But they really can't do anything to the sliss."

Judy nodded, "A coma, eh? I'll have to remember that."

1.13

Alfonso continued, "Now I hadn't seen Judy in a long time. I thought she'd died in the Freehdom wars. So, imagine my surprise when she showed up in my bar last night . . ."

The denial of entry sound pulled Alfonso's eyes from the insipidly blinking ledger. Though it was long after closing, he figured late night customers were better than no customers. He nodded to the curtain and it slid open. In stepped a tall woman whose pale complexion complemented her fiery red hair. She moved with the grace of either a ballerina or an experienced martial artist and cast about her an air of intense confidence. She reminded Alfonso of someone he used to know long ago.

As the curtain closed behind her, she checked Alfonso over and smiled. With three strides of her long legs she crossed the room and grabbed a stool before him. The sound of her voice jogged Alfonso's memory, immediately telling him that she was the person he was remembering.

"I heard that some smooth-talking human had managed to cheat a botiira out of his bar. My first thought was that it had to be my old friend, Alfonso."

1.14

Alfonso is describing what really happened last night.

Alfonso smiled. "Dios mio, Judy, how long's it been? Ten years?"

She notched an eyebrow. "More like four hundred and ten."

This took him aback. "What? You count the stasis and dilation time? No one else does."

After pursing her lips, she said, "You used to be the one who was exacting about such matters."

He shrugged, "Things change. So, what brings you into my bar--which, by the way, I got by perfectly legal and above-board means."

She laughed. "Legal by human standards or by shalk ones? No, wait, don't answer that." She looked back at the curtain and Alfonso made it go solid. Nodding, she continued in a quieter voice, "About three days after we woke up, I saw one of those damn teddy bears kill an associate for giggling. I've spent my time since then trying to think of a way to fight back."

Alfonso rested his forehead in his hand. It appeared that some things never did change. "Judy, the Freehdom wars were over four hundred years ago. Forget about them."

1.15

Alfonso is describing what really happened last night.

Judy violently shook her head. "But these shalk are worse than anything we faced at home. We've got to do something!"

"What can we do?"

She paused, as if trying to decide whether or not to tell him something. Finally, she said, "I think I've figured out how to kill one."

Alfonso recognized the look on her face, and a chill ran down his spine. "And you want me to help . . ."

"Well, I know I can trust you."

He shook his head. "It's been a long time, Judy. How can you be so sure?"

"I know you, Alfonso. You haven't changed that much."

"Well, I won't do it."

She sighed, "I'll sweeten the deal for you. We'll take out the owner of that other bar that's depressing your business."

Alfonso glanced down at his ledger again. The thought of removing the competition *was* appealing.

1.16

Alfonso is describing what really happened last night.

Alfonso thought about it for a second, then shook his head. "Sorry, Judy, but no. The shalk are abusive bullies all right, but we're not at war with them. We shouldn't be killing civilians just to make a statement."

"They have no such qualms. They kill us because they know they can get away with it. If we show them they're mortal, they may back off."

Shaking his head, Alfonso replied, "You're rationalizing, Judy. What you're suggesting is wrong, and you shouldn't go through with it."

She frowned, paused, and nodded slowly. "I suppose you're right." Then a wry grin spread across her face. "Well, it's not a total loss. I could always sell my idea to one of the other races."

Alfonso nodded in relief. They chatted for a little while longer, and then she made noises about turning in for the night. Promising to come back tomorrow so they could talk about old times, she left. Alfonso went back to his books.

But he couldn't concentrate on them. Something bothered him.

1.17

Alfonso is describing what really happened last night.

Alfonso nervously drummed his fingers on the bar. No matter how obviously right he ever was, Judy had never let him convince her to change her mind so easily. He tried to tell himself she'd changed from her old stubborn ways; after all, he had. Then he shook his head and said to himself, "Who are you trying to fool? If you've changed at all, you're probably more stubborn now than you were before."

Finally deciding that he couldn't possibly get any work done without first checking on Judy, he looked up her quarters on his terminal. What he found confirmed his worries. She hadn't registered with any of the regular places. That most likely meant she'd planned to stay with him. So her previous talk of turning in was a lie. She didn't have anywhere to turn in to.

"Damn," he muttered, "she's planning to go through with it."

He locked up the Dose and, though his heart raced, he calmly walked down the poorly lit hallways of this section of Frakar Station. He didn't want anyone to remember him sprinting worriedly on a night when a shalk got killed.

1.18

Alfonso is describing what really happened last night.

It took him about five minutes to get into the shalk section of the station, with its wider halls, better lighting, and lower ceilings. Having assessed the competition before acquiring his bar, he knew right where to go.

The shalk bar (the concept of naming an establishment was a human one) had no nanocurtain or other such security measures. The shalk wore their security on their persons. The bar also had translucent windows at shalk head height. Alfonso bent down and tried to peer through the window.

Sure enough, he could see Judy's red hair. She and the shalk bartender were the only two in there, and it looked like she was rubbing the palm of his hand. The door was unlocked, of course, and Alfonso rushed in.

The shalk looked up at him in surprise, and then his already large eyes grew wider. He yanked his hand away from Judy and stared down at it. He clutched it into a fist, released it, and then grabbed at his chest. Making a gasping sound, he fell to the floor behind the bar.

Judy turned to Alfonso and beamed. "Perfect timing, Tanaka-san, I knew I could count on you."

1.19

Alfonso is describing what really happened last night.

Alfonso ignored Judy's playful use of the honorific form of his name and raced behind the bar. He felt for a pulse on the shalk but didn't really know where to look. The usual places revealed nothing, though. "Shin de ru . . . I think you actually did kill him." He jumped up and grabbed her hand. "We've got to get out of here."

He dragged her to the door and stopped. "Wait a minute. How were you planning to cover your tracks?"

She shrugged, "I knew you'd think of something."

He shook his head and sighed, "Nothing has changed at all, has it?" He pulled out a pocket nanofactory and punched a few codes into it. He held his hand next to the opening for a second and then held it near Judy's arm.

"Okay, I've programmed some hunter killers to destroy anything with either of our DNA patterns. Now let's go."

Alfonso finished the story, "And so Judy stayed with me last night." He noticed a twinge of disappointment on Emmanuelle's face and added, "But she's finding her own space tonight, or she's sleeping in a hallway."

1.20

"And that's the extent of story," Alfonso said.

Judy pursed her lips and stared intently at him. He glared back at her. Their eyes locked for over fifteen seconds before she blinked and nodded.

Alfonso added, "And if she tries to tell it to anyone else, she'll be sleeping outside without a psuit. Am I clear?"

She nodded again.

Emmanuelle excitedly asked, "So, how'd you get passed the shalk's defenses?"

Judy held up her hand and displayed long nails filed to points. She wiggled her index finger and said "Poison on this nail. Their defense shields will stop any fast moving object, but they still want to be able touch each other. Rumor has it that they're wild in sex and often scratch. That gave me the idea that I might be able to worm my way into scratching one. I also heard they love to have their hands rubbed. So all I had to do was go in, commiserate with the bartender over his rough day, and offer to rub his hands for him."

Alfonso sighed. "And, here I am, her too predictable stooge. I surprised him and gave her a chance to scratch his hand."

Judy smiled, "If the poison hadn't worked, I'd have said I slipped when Alfonso startled me."

Emmanuelle nodded. Then, a second later, she frowned. "But they can't be so easy to kill!"

1.21

Judy reeled back as if she'd been struck. "Easy? Do you know what I had to go through to develop a poison their internal bots wouldn't counteract?"

Emmanuelle frowned. "But in the centuries that all these races have been living together, no one thought to try poisoning the shalk before?"

Alfonso spoke up. "I suspect those centuries have a lot to do with it. Everyone here knows the shalk are 'unkillable.' They have been for as long as anyone can remember. And, while individually they're bullies, they haven't been sacking planets or any other such nonsense that would make organized resistance spring up."

Judy nodded, "Yeah, especially amongst these damn races. No one wanted to help. As far as everyone non-human is concerned, the shalk are the way they are, and that's it. The wimps make me sick."

Emmanuelle said, "But couldn't anyone kill them now? Just poison a dagger and attack."

Alfonso shook his head. "No. In a battle they'll set their shields to not allow anything through. Killing one requires an element of surprise and some amount of trust on the part of the shalk. They too have known forever that they're unkillable, and that made them careless. I doubt any others will be letting their guards down any time soon."

Pursing her lips, Emmanuelle said, "I suppose you're right." Then her face lit up, like she'd just remembered something. "Wait a minute, how did the shalk corpse lose its hand?"

1.22

Judy started to say something, but Alfonso cut her off. "Someone must have come by, seen the dead shalk, and cut off his hand. A severed part of an unkillable creature might be very valuable to the right kind of person." With a frown, he added, "Our big hope, though, is that whoever it was wasn't as careful as we were. Maybe Quixar will catch him and pin the murder on him. If anyone figures out it was a human, we're all in danger." He glared at Judy.

The two women nodded, though Judy was less enthusiastic than Emmanuelle.

Alfonso added, "Now, you two can stay and chat, but I've got a bar to run. He stepped out of the screen to choruses of calls for drinks.

Damn, he'd hoped no one would want anything. It seemed dangerous to unleash Judy on an innocent mind like Emmanuelle's and he wanted to get back into the screen and keep an ear on their conversation. Still, he couldn't afford to annoy his new customers on their first day here.

He covered everyone at the bar and made a quick pass of the tables. Then, just as he was about to head back into the screen, Judy and Emmanuelle stepped out. He disabled it and said, "Judy, I meant what I said. You tell no one else."

She nodded.

"So, where will you be sleeping tonight?"

Emmanuelle smiled, "My place. I've got an extra room."

1.23

Later that night, long after Judy and Emmanuelle had left, the Daily Dose started to wind down. They'd done a hopping business for most of the day, but now people were starting to trickle out and go home. Alfonso didn't need to bring up his ledger to know that he was in the black for the first time since he'd acquired the Dose. How had that botiira managed to hold on to this place for so long?

He checked over the night's remaining clientele, making sure everyone was happy. Then he noticed movement in the far back corner of the bar. The lighting was bad back there and he'd assumed no one would want to sit in the dark. Worried that the patron had been waiting a long time and perplexed that he hadn't called out for service, Alfonso wandered over.

As he approached the table, a shiver ran down his spine and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. A creature of indiscernible race sat in the darkest part of the room. It appeared to be taller than a shalk and, judging from the shape of the robes it wore, it was a biped. But the robes were extremely baggy and far too large for the creature, making the sleeves and legs obscure its hands and feet. The robes also had a hood, which was pulled up. In the dark Alfonso could not make out anything of the face inside.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see you back here. What can I get you?"

1.24

The creature spoke in a quiet, raspy voice that sounded male. "Is it required that I purchase something to sit here?"

Alfonso frowned. "I would prefer it. After all, I don't charge rent."

The hood nodded. Strange. That was human body language. Was this a human, or had the creature studied his people long enough to pick up their mannerisms? The right sleeve rose above the table and a value transfer card fell out. Alfonso picked it up and checked the offered value. His heart almost stopped. It was just over half the cost of the bar. "What's this?"

"For rent. Is it enough?"

Was this guy for real? "And what do you think you're buying?"

"I would like to rent this table for the foreseeable future. When I or my associates are using it, we are not required to purchase anything and we may stay for as long as we'd like."

Alfonso asked suspiciously, "Anything else?"

1.25

The hood turned back and forth.

The card weighed heavily in Alfonso's hand. In his gut, accepting it seemed like a bad idea. But his mind kept reminding his gut that it was *anawfully* large sum of money. Trying to find an excuse not to take it, he quickly asked, "How will I know who your associates are?"

In the same emotionless, raspy voice, the creature responded, "Anyone who sits here may do so for free. Perhaps some will wish to purchase drinks, but none will be required to do so. I will ensure that the table is free if I need it to be. You do not have to worry about that."

Alfonso tapped his foot. "Well, you still have to leave at closing time."

The hood nodded. "I have no need to be here after closing."

Alfonso clenched the hand that wasn't holding the card and then released it. He squinted, trying to see the face veiled in darkness, but could make nothing out. Frowning and shaking his head slowly, he dug into a pocket and extracted a transfer card. He held them both near each other and pressed the appropriate buttons. In the botiira equivalent of a bank, value transferred from one anonymous account to another. Alfonso checked his balance on his card and set the creature's card on the table. The sleeve rose up and set its opening down over the card. When it moved away the card was gone.

"Rent paid in full. Call me if you decide you'd like anything." Worried that he'd just sold something larger than they'd discussed, he spun around. Before he could move away, however, he heard that voice again.

"Mr. Tanaka. Wait."

1.26

Alfonso turned around slowly. "Yes?"

"I am curious to hear your opinions on the recent changes in the sector."

Raising his eyebrows, Alfonso asked, "Changes?"

"Yes. For as long as anyone can remember, the shalk have been considered omnipotent. The murder of one will undoubtedly have far-reaching consequences."

Alfonso nodded. "Ahh, I see. We humans haven't been here long enough to really understand the status quo, much less recognize when it's been damaged."

The hood nodded. "A fair observation. But it is interesting to note that the status quo, which has been unchanged for hundreds of years, suddenly fell apart only a year after you arrived."

1.27

Frowning, Alfonso replied, "Would you expect otherwise? The arrival of a new race, even one as insignificant as mine, would almost have to change things."

The creature leaned back in his seat. "I feel you do not give your race enough credit. Significance is dependent on one's ability to make change, not the power of one's weapons. The shalk seem to have forgotten this."

Alfonso kept his next thought to himself--well, Judy just reminded them. He bowed. "If that is a compliment, I accept it gratefully."

The creature responded, "I am not yet sure whether it is a compliment. Determining thus will require a greater study." The creature shrugged his shoulders--another human expression. "Thank you for this enlightening discussion, Mr. Tanaka. I hope we can have others in the future."

Another chill ran down Alfonso's spine, but he smiled and said, "Hey, that's what bartenders are for."

The voice changed slightly. Was that a faint touch of mirth? "Not shalk bartenders. I see that your bar has advantages beyond the fact that it is the only one in the spaceport. Farewell for now."

Alfonso walked quickly back to the bar. The whole way back, it felt as if the creature's eyes bored into his back. He shuddered and looked over his shoulder, but he couldn't see anything in the dark. He couldn't even be sure the creature was still there. "Alfonso Tanaka, what have you done?" he muttered to himself.

1.28

The next morning Alfonso got to the Dose an hour before opening. He installed a new light source above the table in the rear corner of the room and then got ready for the days' customers. If business kept up like yesterday, he'd need to restock soon. Hell, if business kept up like yesterday, he'd need to hire help.

Judy was his first customer. Alfonso subconsciously looked into the back corner of the room, but saw no one there. "Hey Judy. How was Emmanuelle's?"

She smiled. "We stayed up most of the night talking. The poor thing seems to need more sleep than I do, though. She looked dreary-eyed on her way to work."

Alfonso became worried. "What did you talk about?"

With a shrug, Judy said, "Oh, this and that. She thinks the world of you."

"Yeah, well, she's naive that way." He paused and glanced back at the corner of the room again. He already regretted the decision to rent it out.

Turning his full attention to Judy, he frowned and said, "Speaking of which, what in god's name were you thinking when you decided to blab to her?"

1.29

Judy took this in stride. "She's okay."

"Yeah, she is," he raised his voice, "but you didn't know *thatbefore* you opened your big mouth!"

A confused look spread across her face. "What do you mean?"

"You'd never met her before then. How did you know you could trust her to not turn you in?"

"Turn me in? She's a human!"

Alfonso shook his head, "So?"

Her voice took on a lecturing tone. "Tanaka-san, this isn't the Freedom wars. We don't have to fight against our own people anymore. I can't imagine any human turning against another now that we have the shalk to fight against."

Alfonso closed his eyes and took two deep breaths. It was worse than he thought. Composing his thoughts for a moment, he finally said, "To put it simply, my dear, you're wrong." She started to say something and he threw up a finger, cutting her off. "No, you listen. As much as you'd like to think the anti-freeh forces were heroes, we *did not* leave all of the greedy and power-hungry humans back on Earth. Be careful from now on."

She opened her mouth again, but the door opened. Alfonso silenced her with a quick hand movement.

1.30

Alfonso looked past Judy to his new customer. He stifled a gasp and blinked a few times. Judy arched her eyebrows and looked over her shoulder to the newcomer. She left her neck twisted in what had to be an uncomfortable position. Speaking quietly, Alfonso said, "Is that a kiree?"

Judy untwisted her neck and nodded slightly. In a similarly quiet voice, she said, "I think so."

Alfonso whistled. Would the wonders never cease? The kiree was over three meters long, but only about half a meter tall. It had a huge number of thin legs on both sides of its body, each separated from the next by about ten centimeters. The kiree method of locomotion was enthralling. The legs moved in perfect synchronization, appearing to flare out in waves that ran down the side the body. The kiree was thin, with segmented plates covering its back and head. It also had ten eyes positioned in a circle around the outer rim of its head. The eyes appeared to be able to focus separately, for they each looked in a different direction.

Alfonso stepped behind the bar and Judy took a seat on one of the barstools. The kiree slid up to the bar and arched its back, bringing the first half of its body vertical. With the legs on the ground still propelling it forward, it slid in between two stools, one away from Judy, and a few of its legs gripped the bar. Up close, Alfonso could see that each leg ended in what amounted to two fingers and an opposable thumb.

A few eyes looked at Judy, others at Alfonso, and still others at the rest of the bar. It twisted slightly and nodded to Judy and then turned to Alfonso. Speaking in a high pitched, staccato voice, it asked, "Bar open yet?"

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2.1

Alfonso nodded. "I am honored to have one such as yourself grace my bar. Yes, we are open."

The kiree waved this off with a few of its legs. "Kiree rare here. Not make honorable."

"Rare" understated the case. And according to all Alfonso knew about them, honorable did fit. He'd heard that the kiree had enormous brains that were able to control each leg individually. And they could simultaneously process separate inputs from all ten eyes while doing so. They made some of the best engineers in the galaxy, able to work on multiple projects at a time. But even a kiree had trouble making a pressure suit with protection for so many legs. So they tended to avoid places where a hole in a bulkhead could evacuate the breathable atmosphere. "I'm afraid I wasn't expecting many kiree clients,"

Alfonso said, "so I don't know what you prefer to drink."

The kiree turned to Judy, presumably so that she'd know it was talking to her. "What you drink?"

Judy smiled. "Alfonso can't get what I drink this far away from home. But he does make a workable ale."

The kiree turned back to Alfonso. "You Alfonso?"

2.2

"Yep. And this is Judy."

The kiree turned back to Judy and nodded again. "Pleased. I Sukomb."

"Pleased to meet you," Judy said as she held out a hand.

Sukomb scratched its chin again, paused for a second, then folded back many of the legs on its right side, leaving one extended. Judy took the foot in her hand and shook it lightly. When she let go, many of Sukomb's legs flared about, an expression Alfonso hoped was pleasure and not disgust. Sukomb's voice became even faster and more high pitched, "Few touch. Most scared. You different."

Alfonso laughed. "Judy's not afraid of anything. Some day that'll be her downfall."

"Not today." Sukomb nodded to her again. "I will try ale."

A blur behind Sukomb caught Alfonso's eye and the new light he'd installed flashed and went out.

2.3

"What was that?" Judy asked.

With a shrug, Alfonso replied, "The light in rear corner of the bar went out. I'll have to replace it later."

Her voice suspicious, she said, "But these lights don't burn out."

"Well, I just installed it this morning. I mustn't have done it right." Inwardly, he suspected something else. He tried to peer into the darkness, but saw nothing.

Sukomb stayed silent, but a few of its legs waved back and forth seemingly of their own accord.

Others filtered in to the bar and Alfonso went about serving them, leaving Judy and Sukomb to talk. He checked in on their conversation from time to time, but generally was kept busy by the growing throng of people.

At one point he said to Judy, "Do you see this crowd? Word must be spreading that I've got a good place here."

Sukomb interjected. "Yes. Before you, bar different. Reputation for illegal activities. Everyone afraid of risk. Yesterday word spread new owner."

So, that strategic bit of advertising space Alfonso had bought right near the closed shalk bar had paid off. Yes, it had also brought investigator Quixar to his establishment, but he'd been expecting that. Word was now spreading quickly enough that he even had a kiree come. This could only be good for business.

Then something happened to make him reassess that opinion. The nanocurtain was flung aside and two shalks stomped into the bar.

2.4

A human had been heading toward the exit. He tried to jump aside, but didn't move quickly enough for one of the shalk's taste. She drew her weapon, a metal baton that fired an annihilation beam, and slammed it up into the man's groin. He collapsed and she yelled down at him, "Don't make we wait for you to get out of my way next time."

Sukomb drew all its free legs inward to clutch its body. Judy's fist turned white as she gripped her drink tightly. Alfonso laid a hand on hers. She looked up at him with fire in her eyes, and he shook his head. In a quiet voice he said, "The shalk could have done worse things with that baton." She sneered and he added, "Calm down or you'll learn firsthand."

He saw her jaw muscles bulge as she clenched her teeth and nodded slightly.

The shalk surveyed the bar for a moment, their little eyes checking out every table. Then the male pointed to the darkened rear corner and they headed that way. The female left her baton out and twirled it around in her fingers. They reached the table and both leaned forward to peer into the darkness. The female stood up to her full height, which would have been a comical sight if not for the device she was holding, and barked, "Get out of my seat, kruxpa."

2.5

Alfonso quietly repeated the word he'd just heard the shalk say. "Kruxpa?"

Judy filled him in, "It means 'not shalk' and carries the same negative connotation as 'gaijin' from your father's language."

Alfonso nodded and Sukomb flared its legs. "Judy right. Shalk wrong."

Judy frowned. Alfonso had been working hard to comprehend the kiree's fast and abrupt shalkish, but he didn't understand what it meant here. "Excuse me?"

Sukomb's legs continued to shake. Alfonso was starting to assume that meant joy. "This case 'kruxpa' not appropriate. Watch."

Nothing happened for a moment, and the female shalk pointed her baton into the dark. The male's hand went to his own weapon. Suddenly they both took a quick step back and the female hastily tried to holster her baton. She was in such a rush, however, that she missed the holster and the baton dropped to the ground.

2.6

The male shalk's hands shook and the female bent over to retrieve her baton. When she got her hands on it, she stayed bent over for a second. The creature in the dark must have said something for she nodded vigorously before standing back up. She made a show of holstering her baton carefully.

They stood there facing the dark for another minute. Then they both nodded and backed away. They bumped into a table. Not letting their eyes stray from the dark area, they stumbled into this table's seats. Someone in the bar snickered and the female immediately drew her baton and fanned it across the room. When she swept it by the bar Alfonso saw death in her eyes. That silenced the snickering.

Judy leaned close to Sukomb and whispered, "Who the hell is that?"

Sukomb's legs flared again. "Before I suspect. Now I know. Shalk only defer to one. A ghost."

2.7

Alfonso's understanding of shalkish was as good as anyone's, but he still had to make sure he heard that correctly. In English, he asked Judy. "Did Sukomb just say 'ghost?'"

She nodded, "That's my understanding of the word."

Switching back to shalkish, Alfonso asked, "Do you mean the creature in the dark is a dead shalk?"

The kiree pulled its legs in to its body. "No. Don't think so. Only shalk know. Only shalk talk with ghosts."

Alfonso didn't know whether to feel honored or dismayed that the ghost had chosen to speak with him as well. "So kruxpa was the correct word, but it wasn't appropriate because of the negative connotation?"

Sukomb's legs flared. "Yes. Shalk defer to ghosts. Insult bad."

Judy stared into the dark with a far-off look on her face. Alfonso knew that look, and it worried him. She was trying to decide how to enlist the ghost in her personal war against the shalk.

2.8

Alfonso considered saying something to Judy, but decided against it. If he told her not to try to talk to the ghost she'd just ignore him. He said before that not being afraid of anything would be her downfall. Being stubborn and not listening to him would surely contribute. He patted her hand, drawing her gaze away from the table. "I've got to go serve the shalk. Cover me."

She grinned and her rigid shoulders slouched a bit.

The normally abusive shalk had just been embarrassed in front of a bunch of people who were supposed to be inferior to them. Alfonso wondered how he would possibly survive this encounter with them. He stopped just out of swinging range of the female's baton and took a deep breath. He knew all too well that she could still fire it at him. "Honored madam and sir, you do me a great honor by gracing my humble establishment with your presence. I hope that, despite my shortcomings, I can interest you in something from my meager bar."

The female shalk scratched at her cheek and nodded to her companion. "See, now this is a kruxpa that knows its place. Though I don't like being forced to look up at it."

2.9

Alfonso immediately dropped to his knees and sat seiza with his toes pointed behind him. Since he was on the floor and the shalk were on chairs, his head was now below theirs.

The female shalk grinned. Then she slapped the back of her companion's head. "You kept making us go to that other bar when we had such a delightful alternative. I should divorce you for impertinence." She turned back to Alfonso. "What kinds of shalk beer do you have?"

He bowed his head. "I regret that I only have Seqra, Mikkar, and Blue Fang."

"Bring me a Blue Fang."

Her husband said, "Bring me one too."

Alfonso dreaded the next question. "May I open an account for the lady and lord?"

She slapped her husband on the arm. "See how it puts me before you. It knows the way of things."

The female shalk pulled out a value card and tossed it on the table. "You will draw from this account."

He reached for the card slowly. As soon as his fingers touched it she slammed her hand down on his. Alfonso winced.

2.10

The female shalk leaned down and glared at him. Through clenched teeth she said, "But be very clear. Despite my enchantment with you, if you withdraw too much I'll make your death miserable."

Alfonso hastily said, "Yes of course." But would she consider the normal rate to be too much? He'd have to talk to the other merchants who did business with the shalk. She released him and he drew the card to his own. He held them near each other and pressed the appropriate buttons. Then he handed her card back. "Thank you kind lady. I'll be right back with your beer."

His ankles made popping sounds as he returned to his feet. It had been a while since he'd been forced to sit seiza. But this was probably the first time doing so had ever saved his life. When the shalk said she didn't like looking up to him her hand had fallen to her holster. As he scuttled back to the bar he wondered if she would have annihilated his whole body or just his legs.

When he got back behind the bar, Judy didn't say anything about his being so demeaned. All humans who'd survived their first few encounters with the shalk had learned quickly to put up with much worse.

2.11

That night, after he'd closed the bar, Alfonso took some equipment and inspected the new light he'd installed. Despite the fact that it was guaranteed to last for years, it had burned out. And, though it showed no obvious signs of being tampered with physically, he suspected foul play. "If I were a ghost, what could I do to a light source?" he muttered to himself. "That's a stupid question," he answered. "You don't even know what a 'ghost' is, much less what one can do."

He disassembled the light and checked its parts. A section of the inside of the case had melted and its surroundings were charred black. This implied that too much current had run through it. But how could that be? It ran off a battery. He checked and found the battery to be fully drained. Frowning, he got some wire and another light out of storage. He shorted the battery, but the wire just got a bit warm--no fireworks. And it didn't drain very quickly. The batteries were high density and low voltage. Still frowning, he attached the new light to the ceiling above the ghost's table.

He verified that it still worked and then shut all the lights out. Wondering again what he'd gotten himself into by renting the table to the ghost, he left. The nanocurtain solidified behind him.

2.12

Alfonso's quarters were five levels down and two sections over. He could have taken a lift down and a shuttle over, but he preferred to walk. The half-hour walk helped him unwind after a long day. Also, he closed the Daily Dose late enough that he sometimes got to witness interesting things going on in the surrounding areas. His life was even threatened occasionally. Confident of his abilities, but not overconfident, he felt that the rush of adrenaline these rare occurrences brought about were good for his health.

Tonight, though, everything seemed fairly quiet and routine. He turned a corner and found a manta wearing little but her natural fur leaning suggestively against a bulkhead. Her tail idly traced the ample

curves of her body, but when she recognized him it stopped.

"Hey, Slimmerr," Alfonso said, correctly rolling his tongue for the last part of her name, "slow night?"

"You know it, man. I've rarely seen anyone since that barr of yourrs got legitimate."

"Really?" he asked. "I'd have thought someone with your looks would have little trouble seducing people."

She licked a hand and idly rubbed it over her whiskers. "That hasn't worked on you."

2.13

Alfonso smiled. "That's not your fault, dear, I'm jaded and uneducible. But, if things were different, I'd spend time with you in an instant."

Slimmerr sighed, "Thanks, Alfonso." Then she looked both ways and spoke in a quiet voice. "You be careful tonight. I hearr therre was some trouble overr in section 27."

"I'll keep my eyes open. And hey, if any of your clients ever try to rough you up, you know that I'm a just quick call away, right?"

She laughed. "That's verry chivalrrous of you, dearr, but if anyone tries anything with me," she held up her hands and flexed them, revealing her claws, "I'll just shrrred him."

"I'm sure you would, but the offer still stands. Good night, Slimmerr." She nodded and he wandered off smiling. The manta were his favorite race of aliens. They were extremely fast, amazingly graceful, and had better balance than a kiree. They also liked to get physical and had had a loose sense of morals. These were all traits he admired in a person.

He reached the entrance to the stairwell and had just motioned for the door to open when a massive explosion rocked the floor beneath his feet.

2.14

The door had opened about half way when the floor buckled and jammed it. The explosion caught Alfonso, who had been thinking about Slimmerr, off guard and he stumbled forward. He saw that he wasn't going to make it through the doorway and had to twist sideways to keep from pounding his head on the door. This maneuver got in the way of the roll his body had automatically tried to execute, and he smashed his ribcage into the floor.

He let out an involuntary yelp of pain and then winced as he pushed himself up. He poked at his ribs and was relieved to not find any broken. The entire side of his body was tender, though. He pulled his feet under him and stayed in a crouch as he surveyed the situation. The stairwell he was in seemed to be relatively unharmed. It had separated a bit from the wall where the floor had buckled, but didn't look ready to fall. Things didn't look too terribly amiss on the other side of the door, so he cautiously crept to the edge of the stairs and looked down.

He could see the stairs circle down for about eight levels, but below that there seemed to be a thick mist obscuring his vision. Worse, the lights down there were flickering, casting strange shadows and making it hard to focus on specifics.

The mist seemed to be swirling about. Alfonso leaned over the edge and tried to get a better view of it. Then his eyes got large and he gasped as he tried to dive back into the corner.

2.15

Alfonso had seen a giant fireball burst out of the mist. He hit the back corner and curled into a ball, covering his face with his arms. A giant "woosh" enveloped the stairwell and he felt a great heat pass. He uncovered his face and found that specks of burning material had covered the area. He quickly patted out the one that had landed on him and looked up. He was on the second floor below ground. The fireball had smashed into the ceiling just two floors above him and had distributed itself all around. Specks were still floating back down.

It occurred to Alfonso that the tenth floor was heavily populated by shalk and that at this time of the night most of them would have been home asleep. He had to try to help them, even if they were shalk. He ran down the steps, ignoring the burning specks he trampled with his boots. He did pay attention to the stairs, though, and took care not to turn his ankle when he hit uneven areas.

As he descended, the lighting got worse and he had to slow down. The stench of ozone and burnt electronics assaulted his nose and he hoped he wasn't breathing poisoned air. He slowed at the ninth floor and looked over the edge again. He could see farther into the mist, but couldn't tell what it was. Then, a sudden sound behind him almost made him jump out of his skin.

2.16

He spun around to find the door into the stairwell. The floor was buckled under it, holding it shut. There was someone on the other side pounding. Alfonso ran up to the door and touched it lightly. It wasn't warm. He pounded back and yelled, "Hello?"

The muffled voice on the other side cried out, "Help, uss! Ser iss gass. We can't ssurvive much longer!"

Alfonso pushed against the door, but it did not budge. He gave it a test kick, but that also had no effect. Maybe he could pry it open. He looked around frantically, but there was nothing of use in the stairwell. He looked up. There were definitely things he could use in the Daily Dose, but that was eight floors up and a long jog away. The floor below him appeared to be in serious disarray. Maybe a something had been knocked loose that he could use.

He pulled out his pocket nanofactory, set it to scavenge mode, and told it to start building a metal cutter. The device was designed to make microscopic devices and would take a long time to produce a cutter, but it couldn't hurt to start it going. He set it on the floor and yelled to the door, "I'm going to try to find something to pry this open. You keep working on it from your end."

He then pulled off his shirt and wrapped it around his mouth. Taking a deep breath, he plunged down the stairs.

2.17

The mist and smoke stung Alfonso's eyes and the air he breathed tasted acrid, despite its being filtered through his shirt. The door into the tenth level was gone, as if it had never existed. Parts of the walls around it had disappeared as well. He peered into the darkness beyond, but saw little. There was an intense buzzing sound filling the hallway but he couldn't see its source.

He stepped gingerly through the gaping doorway into a long corridor with a low ceiling. There was debris everywhere, but none of it seemed to be big or strong enough to be useful. He stepped over fallen chunks of ceiling and frequently glanced up in a blind hope that nothing would come down on him. Ahead, he saw sparks jump from the wall.

Then a cone of orange light enveloped the area of the sparks, lighting up the tunnel for a second. Alfonso used the opportunity to scan the ground. He took in the location of everything in his way and then, when the light went off, he rushed ahead. He misremembered the location of one large object, though, and tripped over it. Not wanting to fall into the source of the cone of light, he thrust himself into the wall and braised his shoulder and hand in the process.

He was very glad to have stopped his momentum in time. Running down a shalk in a darkened hallway would not have been good for his health.

2.18

The buzzing was louder here, but he didn't have time to worry about what was causing it. Instead, he focused on the shalk--whose help he desperately needed. In the dim light he couldn't see much of her, but she appeared to be wearing sleepwear--a tight, frilly dress that didn't cover much. She pointed her baton at another set of exposed circuitry and flipped it on. The orange cone enveloped the morass of wires and a second later they were gone.

Yelling to be heard over the buzzing, Alfonso said, "Thank the spirits! You've got an annihilation baton."

She turned around, looked him up and down, and shrugged. She pointed the baton at another exposed bit of circuitry and destroyed it. The buzzing stopped.

"Finally!" she exclaimed as she holstered her baton.

Alfonso could speak in a normal voice now, but the urgency of the situation made him yell. "I've got a bunch of people trapped behind a door nearby. You can blast them out with your baton."

She turned to him and frowned. "Why? Let them blast themselves out."

2.19

"They can't. They're stuck."

The shalk frowned even deeper. "Well, that's their own fault for not keeping their weapons near them at all times." She patted the baton in her holster.

Her wasting time like this was getting on Alfonso's nerves. "Damn it, lady, these people are going to die if we don't get them out soon."

Now she scratched behind her ear. "What do you mean? Nothing happening down here can hurt a shalk." As if to punctuate her statement, her personal defense shield glowed dimly as a tendril of smoke drifted up to, but not through it.

"But they're not shalk!"

She shrugged. "Then they're not people."

2.20

The shalk turned and waddled further down the hallway.

Alfonso's hands clenched. If he'd possessed any possible way to strangle a shalk, he would have used it. Hell, if trying now didn't mean sure suicide, he would have just for good measure. He clenched his teeth and growled, "Chingate, perro." But, despite his running around in this acrid air, he didn't want to die. So he limited his actions to that one curse.

The shalk didn't seem to hear him. She stopped at a doorway, pushed something aside, and went through. That was probably her quarters. Alfonso noticed that no other shalk had left their quarters. The bastards were probably planning to let the other races clean this mess up. Never mind that the work would be hazardous to everyone but them.

Anger welled up in him. Alfonso couldn't remember the last time he felt this frustrated. He coiled his arm back, tensed his muscles, and came within a heartbeat of pounding the wall with his bare fist. Then he exhaled heavily and lowered his arm. "No, stupid. Breaking your hand isn't going to do anyone any good."

A light further down the hallway flickered, revealing something long and straight hanging in front of it. Alfonso rushed down to it and found a bar that was only connected on one side. He held his hand near it and found it to be hot. Clenching his teeth, he grabbed it and yanked. It was uncomfortable to hold, but not so hot as to burn him.

The ceiling above him creaked and moaned.

2.21

Alfonso looked up at the ceiling and saw that the bar was wedged above a slab of metal. He yanked at the bar again and it gave a bit. Unfortunately, so did the ceiling. "Damn it all to hell!" he yelled as he threw all his weight into the bar. It pulled free and he fell backward. He arched his back and rolled over his shoulder, coming up in a low crouch holding the bar in both hands. The ceiling creaked and started to sink down. He immediately rolled over his shoulder again, ignoring the scrapes he picked up on his bare back. He didn't even pause when he came back to his feet. As the ceiling collapsed before him, he spun around on his toe and launched up into a run.

It was unlikely that much of the ceiling fell, but he didn't bother to look back. He rushed out to the stairwell and up to the ninth floor. There, he pounded an end of the pole into the edge of the door. It bounced off, but seemed to leave a dent. So he pounded it again, and again, and again. Eventually it pushed its way in and he pried it over.

His arms and back ached, but he continued to push from the end of the pipe, using as much leverage as he could. It slipped out and his knuckles crashed into the wall. He screamed and dropped the pipe and it fell on his foot. This caused him to close his mouth around his shirt. It tasted terrible. He yanked the shirt off and threw it to the ground. Then he noticed the nanofactory. It wasn't even halfway finished in making the cutter.

2.22

With a resolute sigh, he grabbed the bar from the ground and shoved it back into the hole. It looked as though he'd started to bend the doorway out a bit. He set the bar and started pushing again. The door creaked and the top started to bend. Heartened, he pushed harder and the door creaked some more. Then the top popped out.

Smoke poured from the opening and he heard hoarse hissing. With the top of the door free, he was able to pry the bottom out and yank the door open. A number of sliss lay on the ground with their mouths open.

Alfonso grabbed one in each hand and rushed them up to the next landing. He didn't worry too much that he was dragging their tails. They had far worse health risks to avoid. He set them down on the landing and rushed down for more. He found himself coughing as he worked to pull air into his lungs but tried to ignore it.

When he reached the ninth floor landing again he almost stepped on a sliss that had slithered out. He crouched down and yelled, "Can you get up the stairs?" It nodded and started up.

Alfonso grabbed two more and dragged them up. A few other sliss followed under their own power. After many trips, he got them all out into the relatively good air of the stairwell. Many coughed and sputtered. Some didn't move at all. He found the liveliest of them and asked, "is anyone else down there?"

2.23

The sliss' color lightened and it closed its eyes. "No. We checked. Sank you."

Alfonso slumped down on a step. "Don't thank me yet. The only door I'm sure is open is all the way up on the second floor. And I've seen fireballs erupt from the tenth. We're not out of this yet."

But, now that the immediate danger had passed, he found it very hard to pull himself up. He coughed and his lungs felt like they were on fire. He leaned back and stared up. That was a lot of flights of stairs to climb. He'd never make it.

Then he heard a pounding above him. He looked up to the eighth floor door and sighed. More trapped people. He reached behind him and grabbed the railing tightly. His arms screamed, but he pulled himself up. Just then, the door burst open and four manta rushed through holding a large blunt object between them. They dropped their battering ram and looked around quickly.

"Well, I'll be damned," one said. "Do you folks need any help?"

2.24

"Yes," Alfonso said hoarsely. "We need a sliss doctor right away. And we need to get these people out of danger."

One of the manta dropped to all fours and bounded back through the doorway. One of the others said, "I've got double quarrters that arre close. We'll set up a temporrarry hospital therre." Another nodded to her and they rushed down the stairs to start helping the sliss up. The fourth manta jumped up onto the railing and leapt down to Alfonso, landing softly beside him. He slid a furry arm under Alfonso's shoulders and helped him up. Alfonso tried to resist, but the manta pinched him. "You need help too. And the human doctorr arre farrtherr away."

Alfonso found himself glad for the help. He looked back at his nanofactory, but decided to leave it. The manta misinterpreted the look and asked worriedly, "Arre therre otherr people down therre?"

"No," Alfonso replied. "Just some shalk."

As other manta rushed out and joined in the task of transporting the sliss, the one with Alfonso helped him up the stairs. "Is therre a human doctorr you prrfer?"

"Yeah, I know a good one."

2.25

"Sit still, Tanaka, I'm not hurting you."

Alfonso frowned. "With a bedside manner like that, I don't know why I keep coming back to you, Doc."

She smiled. "I'd like to think you keep coming back to me because I keep fixing you up."

He put on his best innocent grin. "Yeah, you keep thinking that. It's better for both of us."

She poured something onto a wound on his arm, causing him to wince. The look on her face said that she'd done it on purpose.

"So, Doc, will I live?"

2.26

"Yeah, Tanaka, you'll live. The cuts and scrapes are minor; I don't even think you'll have any new scars. But your lungs have chemical burns. That's more serious. I've infested them with repair bots, but what you really need is rest. You're taking tomorrow off."

"No can do, Doc, I've got a business to run."

"Right, that *bar* of yours." She put just the right amount of disdain in her voice. "Give it up, Tanaka. You can do better."

He grinned. "Is that your professional opinion, Doc?"

She sighed. "No. It's my personal one. Look, I mean it about taking tomorrow off. I really want you to take a week, but I know you'll never do that. I hear *Judy's* back in town," she used even more disdain than before. "Have her cover for you."

2.27

Alfonso clenched his fist. In a strained voice, he said, "Yeah, I'll be speaking with Judy tonight."

"Not tonight. Don't you remember needing to be carried in here by a manta?"

"Yeah, but then my doctor fixed me all up."

She frowned. "I could sedate you."

He smiled, "You could try."

She let out a frustrated grunt and threw her hands up. "Fine, run yourself into the grave. Why should I care?"

Grinning, he stood up and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Because you love me."

"Only because I'm required to."

2.28

He held his hand to his heart and feigned a mortal wound. "Oh, you're killing me."

She slapped him on the shoulder, hitting a wound dead on. "Go. Shoo. Do whatever you're going to do with Judy and then get to bed. And stay there. If you go into work tomorrow I swear I'll come down and quarantine the place."

He nodded. "Okay. Thanks, Sis."

He opened the door and, as he stepped over the threshold, she called to him. "Tanaka."

He looked back. "Yeah, Doc?"

"What you did tonight . . . I'd fix you up from that even if you weren't my brother."

He nodded and left.

2.29

Even though Judy wouldn't be pouring things on open wounds, Alfonso's meeting with her would be far more unpleasant than the one with his sister. He stopped at Emmanuelle's door and double-checked the address against the one he'd looked up on a directory terminal.

With a deep breath, he pounded on the door. He could have pressed the call button, but that didn't fit his mood. He waited for a minute and then pounded again. On the third pounding he heard a faint whir as the sentry scanned him.

The door opened immediately, revealing Emmanuelle with her hair down. He hadn't seen her like this before and the image gave him a slight pause. He quickly pushed it aside. He had far more important issues to deal with.

She tightened a thick bathrobe around herself and looked him over. Her face became concerned, "Alfonso! What happened to you?"

In a gruff voice he said, "Where's Judy?"

Her face fell a bit, but he couldn't tell if it was due to the tone of his voice, or because of whom he'd asked for. She looked over her shoulder at a door. He stalked over and pounded on it. "Judy, get out here."

2.30

Judy opened her door wearing only a long shirt. She yawned and rubbed her eyes, then looked him over. "Damn, I'd hate to see the other guy."

"Did you do it?" he asked in a voice laden with accusation.

She frowned, "Do what? Attack you?"

"Cause the explosion."

"Explosion?" Emmanuelle exclaimed. "What explosion?"

Keeping his eyes locked on Judy's, he said, "There was a massive explosion on the shalk floor of section 28."

Judy's eyes showed no hint of recognition, but that didn't say much. She was an accomplished liar. She frowned. "And you think I caused it?"

"Did you?"

2.31

Judy gave Alfonso her exasperated "you're unbelievable" look. "What have I ever done to make you think I'm so stupid?"

"Judy, peopledied down there."

"More shalk were killed?" Emmanuelle asked.

"Of course not!" Judy snapped. "No simple explosion can kill a shalk."

Emmanuelle looked to Alfonso, who nodded. "She's right. The ones who died were sliss on the floor above the shalk."

"And that's why you should know it wasn't me," Judy said. "If I'm going to kill someone, I'm going to do it right."

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3.1

Judy did have a point. Alfonso opened his mouth for a retort, but coughed haggardly instead.

This caused Emmanuelle to blink and ask worriedly, "Are you all right?"

He shook his head. "Chemical burns in my lungs."

Emmanuelle became all business. "That's it, you're going to bed right now."

Alfonso nodded, "I was just heading home."

"Not a chance, mister. You live four sections away. You're staying right here where we can keep an eye on you. Hit the couch."

Alfonso didn't ask why Emmanuelle knew where he lived. He looked to Judy, who gave a half shrug. Then he looked back to Emmanuelle. She had a determined look that he'd never seen on her before. Her whole demeanor suggested that he'd have an easier time opposing a shalk than her. He set his mouth in a half grin and said, "Senorita, when you let your hair down, you really let it down." He nodded and walked over to the couch.

3.2

"Oh," Emmanuelle continued, "and you're not going in to work tomorrow. Judy will cover for you."

Judy arched her eyebrows, but Emmanuelle turned her intense gaze on her. Judy looked at Emmanuelle and then turned to Alfonso and smirked.

Alfonso stared at her in distrust.

"Alfonso," Emmanuelle said, "Judy's been here all night. If she caused the explosion, she set it up long ago."

Alfonso coughed again. He then scratched his chin and said. "Okay. But Judy if I ever learn that you're lying to me, *I will* separate that head of yours from its shoulders. Understand?"

She nodded. "I'd expect nothing less. Now lie down and I'll get you a blanket." Then, in a quieter voice, she said to Emmanuelle, "Well done. He never listens to anyone--especially not when they're telling him to slow down."

3.3

Alfonso woke up to empty quarters. It no longer hurt to breathe, but he did feel tired. He glanced at the

subdermal timepiece in his wrist and saw that he'd been out for fifteen hours. Well, that was enough sleep no matter how he felt now. Though he must have been truly exhausted for the women to be able to get out without his hearing them.

He sat up and noticed that they'd left out a jumpsuit for him. He yawned, grabbed it, and stumbled off to the bathroom. The shower's warm water felt good on the tight areas of his skin where his wounds were healing. He got out of the shower and dried himself off with a pink towel from the rack. These were obviously Emmanuelle's, and he grinned at the thought of Judy being forced to use such things.

He sighed and wondered idly what it would be like to live with someone who cared what color her towels were. He'd come from the same place as Judy, and there you were lucky to have a shower, much less matching towels.

He pulled on the jumpsuit, noting uncomfortably where it rubbed against his wounds, and stepped out of the bathroom. The outside door began to open.

3.4

Instinct made Alfonso look around frantically, find nothing of use as a weapon, and step backward into the bathroom. But it was just Emmanuelle who came in. She had her hair back up, but he remembered how she looked last night, her long black hair reaching down past her shoulders. He should have said something then.

She looked at the couch with its messed up blanket and called out "Alfonso?"

He stepped out of the bathroom and smiled. "Damn, you're home already. I was just about to go rifling through your personal things."

She frowned for a second, and then smiled and said. "You wouldn't have found anything incriminating. I had to hide all that stuff when I took Judy in."

"How's that working out?"

She shrugged, "She's an interesting woman."

3.5

Alfonso nodded, "She most certainly is."

Emmanuelle's face fell a bit, "But she won't tell me about you and her."

Nodding, Alfonso said, "Judy and I go way back." Then he grinned, "But the part you really care about was over a very long time ago."

She blushed.

With a warm smile, he said, "Thanks for the use of your couch." He stepped toward the door.

Emmanuelle said, "Alfonso?"

"Yes?"

She paused uncomfortably, and then said, "What did you mean, last night, about me letting my hair down?"

He smiled again. "Two things. One, self assured, opinionated women are much more interesting than cheerleaders. And two, you look very pretty with your hair down. See ya, Emmanuelle." He left before she could respond.

3.6

Alfonso got to the dose early the next day. He was pleasantly surprised to find the place in good shape. It even looked liked Judy had cleaned up after close. Of course, the light over the far corner of the room was out again. He checked and found it to be burned out the same way as before.

He walked behind the bar and punched some numbers into a touch pad. The screen next to it sprung to life, showing a sliss with a data monocle over one eye. "Ssupliess," it said.

"Yes, I need a directed beam spotlight."

"How bright?"

"Standard room luminosity at," he glanced over to the darkened table, "ten meters."

The monocled eye moved back and forth rapidly for a second, then the sliss said, "I have two modelss." A pair of spinning images appeared on the screen with prices next to them. "Your factory or mine?"

Alfonso said, "Mine."

3.7

The prices dropped to a tenth of their previous values. Alfonso selected the cheaper of the two lights and held a value card up to the reader. That he was paying value for nothing more than the information his factory needed to build the light didn't bother him. Nor did it bother him that he could have gotten that information cheaper through a wholesaler. He liked this dealer because it employed real people. Most jobs, even his own, could be done by computer. But people had to work. Otherwise they wouldn't have value to spend in his bar.

A receptacle next to the screen chimed. He opened the panel and extracted the finished light from it. "Thanks," he said to the sliss.

"A pleassure" it replied.

He affixed the light to a spot right above the bar and directed it at the table in the darkened area. Then he rearranged a few things and got ready for customers.

Again, his first customer was Judy.

Her eyes immediately went to the newly illuminated table and she traced the light back to its source. She smirked. "You're fooling yourself."

3.8

Alfonso shrugged. "You never know."

She shook her head. "No, I do. You can't beat the ghost."

He sighed. "I figured you'd try to talk to it. Tell me what happened."

She slouched a bit and her normally strong voice wavered. "Very little, to tell the truth. I saw the light

burn out and waited until we had a slow time. Then I just went over and tried to talk to it." She shuddered.

"And?"

Becoming pale, she said, "The hairs stood up on the base of my neck as I approached. Then I found it hard to breathe."

"Like the ghost was choking you?"

She shook her head slowly. "No . . . like an enormous feeling of dread had come over me. My heart pounded in my chest and I wanted nothing more than to be away from that table."

Alfonso pursed his lips. "Interesting. Obviously a psychological effect. Maybe intense subsonics."

She nodded hurriedly with her mouth tight. Then she muttered, "Yeah. Maybe."

He frowned. "But even though you *know* it was just a psychological trick, it still makes you nervous?"

3.9

Judy shrugged and nodded. Nervously chewing at her lip she looked at the ground. "Hey, can we talk about something else?"

Alfonso blinked once. He once saw Judy, armed with only a knife, face down a tank. When she got here and everyone told her the shalk were unkillable, she stubbornly devised a way to kill one. But here she was telling him he couldn't beat the ghost.

He forced a smile. "I wanted to thank you for covering for me yesterday."

She turned her back to the table and her mood brightened considerably. "You're welcome. And I didn't even steal any cash from the register."

"Because I don't have a cash register."

She snapped her fingers, "*That's* why I couldn't find it!"

He laughed. "How'd it go?"

Warming to the conversation, she replied, "Really well. Your patrons like having a sexy woman behind the bar."

"Most of my patrons can't tell the difference between male and female humans."

"Yeah well they all look the same to me too."

Alfonso nodded. That kind of comment was typical of her and he was expecting it. He wasn't sure, though, how she would react to his next question. He paused for effect, then said, "You wanna come on full time?"

She scratched her chin and tried to cover her smile with a thoughtful frown. "What's in it for me?"

3.10

Alfonso shrugged. "What do you want?"

Without hesitating, she said, "Full partner, forty percent."

He immediately shot back, "My capital, twenty five percent."

She arched her eyebrows. "So you really do want me here; you're not just saying this to make up for last night. Interesting."

He nodded, "You are correct. I'm not apologizing for last night."

She stuck her tongue out at him and then said, "Okay, you've got a deal." With a smile, she added, "So, how's the health plan?"

He grinned, "You manage to not get yourself killed by the shalk patrons and you'll live a long and happy life."

"Great, next you'll tell me your sister will fix me up from anything less than death."

"If she doesn't kill you first, yeah, that too." Judy rolled her eyes and he continued. "So, did anything exciting happen yesterday?"

"Not a lot. That shalk investigator came in."

Not a lot? His heart rate picked up. "What did he want?"

3.11

Judy shrugged. "A drink?"

"He didn't ask you any questions about the murder or the explosion?"

She shook her head. "As far as I could tell, he was just thirsty."

"Well, watch him. He's extremely crafty. Anything else?"

"Yeah. Some guys came in and asked if they could play some game."

"What kind of game?"

"I don't know. Something with tiles and betting. Looked pretty dull."

"You let them?"

"Of course. They played all afternoon and bought drinks the whole time." Alfonso nodded and Judy let slip a guilty smile, "Then I taught them poker."

3.12

Alfonso smiled and cracked his knuckles. "Well, an extra source of income never hurts."

"My thoughts exactly."

The day went smoothly. It was much easier with two people working the bar than one. Then early evening came and the new spotlight burned out with Alfonso standing right below it. He looked up, frowned, and muttered, "I'll get you yet." He glanced into the darkened area but could only just make out the outline of someone in robes.

Later, four botiira came in. Judy elbowed him in the ribs and whispered, "Those are our new students."

Alfonso nodded. It figured. The botiira were his least favorite of the races. He wondered, though, why he found giant bugs and snakes acceptable, but got the creeps from these guys. The botiira were humanoid, but with four arms--two on each side. Each hand had four fingers in a row with no opposable thumb. When they needed opposable digits, they used the fingers from the upper hand as thumbs for the lower hand.

They were generally tall, most over two meters, and were very thin and frail looking. Their heads were large and looked barely supported by their little necks. Their two eyes were huge, even for their oversized heads, and they tended to blink a lot, especially when excited. Alfonso couldn't describe the tonal quality of their voices, but it grated on his nerves.

The botiira practically thought in binary, and most of them were either computer programmers or finance wizards. But, to his knowledge, they didn't lie well. That would make them enjoyable poker opponents. He smiled to himself and was just about to suggest that Judy take over for a while when he saw who came in behind them.

3.13

One of the new patrons was Emmanuelle. Alfonso noted approvingly that she'd let her hair down, but he only glanced at her. It was her companion that gave him pause. She was chatting with Inspector Quixar. He leaned over to Judy and whispered, "Why don't you go over and give our botiira fiends another lesson?"

She nodded and walked over to their table. Alfonso smiled at Emmanuelle and then turned to Quixar. "Inspector Quixar, to what do I owe this honor? Please, have a seat."

The shalk climbed up onto a barstool. "I don't know that it's such a honor, but I'm here because you've got a nice place and I'm off duty."

"Well, thank you." He grabbed Emmanuelle's regular drink and poured for her. Then he said to Quixar, "What can I get for you?"

"Seqra, please."

A shalk saying "please." Quixar sure was a strange one. Alfonso grabbed a bottle and poured it. "I'll bet they've got you working hard to figure out what caused the explosion."

Quixar frowned. "You'd think so, wouldn't you? No, I'm still on that damn shalk murder."

3.14

Alfonso had spent an exceedingly large amount of time working on not letting his outward appearance reveal his inner thoughts. All that practice was put to good use now. Without missing a beat, he said, "Yeah, no shalk were killed in the blast."

Quixar sighed. "It's sad that that's the first thing you'd think. It's sadder still that you're justified in thinking so." He took a long drink of his Seqra. "My people are fools. A ruling class that doesn't take care of those it rules doesn't deserve to rule." He finished his glass and pushed it to Alfonso. "Another, please."

Alfonso knew that Quixar was different than most in his race, but he hadn't realized just how different he was. He poured another glass. "I'll bet you don't say things like that to your superiors very often."

Quixar shook his head. "I'm a coward."

Another shalk in the bar yelled out, "Bartender! Bring me Seqra now! Don't make me annihilate you." Judy looked up from the poker table and locked eyes with Alfonso. He looked down at Quixar and back to her. She nodded and rushed over to the bar and grabbed the bottle of Seqra.

Alfonso said, "No, sir, you are not. That," he nodded to the shalk who'd just spoken, "is a coward."

Quixar frowned and nodded. "Regardless, the explosion case has been closed. They claim to already know the cause."

3.15

Alfonso arched his eyebrows. "Really? What?"

Quixar said, "My superiors are saying it was just a computer glitch."

Emmanuelle frowned, "I've been reading everything I could find about the explosion and I haven't heard that."

With a depressed frown, Quixar said, "You're just a kruxpa, why should we tell you anything?"

Alfonso said, "Well, this kruxpa appreciates your telling us."

Emmanuelle added, "This one too."

Quixar nodded.

"So, a computer glitch that killed seven sliss," Alfonso said. "Do you believe them?"

Shrugging, Quixar said, "I don't know. They haven't let me investigate it. They say I'm to focus all my attention on the shalk murder."

With a force of effort, Alfonso kept the anxiety out of his voice, "So, how's that going?"

3.16

Quixar rubbed at one of his eyes and matted down the fur on his forehead. "Poorly. I ran down that lead you gave me, but all it did was uncover some illegal activities that had nothing to do with the murder."

Alfonso relaxed a bit. He glanced to Emmanuelle, who seemed to be studying him. That unsettled him a bit. What was she doing?

Judy returned with the bottle of Seqra. Standing behind Quixar, she glanced down at him and then gave Alfonso a questioning look. He returned an almost imperceptible shrug. She frowned and started making rounds of the bar.

Alfonso asked, "So, have you made any progress on figuring out how a kruxpa killed a shalk?"

Quixar smirked, "Wouldn't you like to know?" He then sighed and shook his head. "It was definitely poison. But I've scoured every inch of the corpse and can't find an entry wound. I'm starting to think the hand was cut off not for religious defilement but to hide the means of the murder."

"Interesting. Of course, even if you could prove that, it wouldn't appease your superiors."

Quixar looked at him with what could only be suspicion. Alfonso held his gaze even but quaked inside.

Had he gone a step too far?

3.17

Quixar scratched at his chin. "Human, you either know more than you should, or you're very perceptive. Your race is not known for its perception."

His heart now racing, Alfonso gave an unconcerned shrug. "My race is known for its diversity. I'm a bartender. Perception is practically my job."

Quixar frowned, but nodded. After a long pause, he said, "Fair enough. You're right. My superiors are short sighted enough to not care about the means of the murder. They just want a guilty party to 'pay' for the defilement. They grow more insistent daily. I tell you, I'm approaching my wits end. I've actually considered finding someone guilty of an equally heinous crime and using him as a scapegoat."

Standing in the fire, Alfonso had no choice but to push on through it. "But what's more heinous than killing a shalk?"

Quixar snarled. "To most shalk, nothing. But I'm not so shallow." He finished off his drink and hopped off the stool. Tossing a value card on the bar, he said brusquely, "Thanks for the drink."

Alfonso looked down at the card and back at the angry shalk. Quixar was possibly the only member of his race that Alfonso had any chance of calling an ally. "Hold on a second." He hit a button and dropped the nanoscreen around the two of them, cutting them off from the rest of the bar.

3.18

Quixar looked around at the screen and gazed at Alfonso with questioning eyes. His voice softening a bit, he said, "What?"

"Look. You're the most honorable shalk on the station, and possibly in the galaxy."

Quixar slouched. "That doesn't say much."

Alfonso let his voice take on a forceful tone. "It doesn't *have* to say much, but in this case it says plenty."

"You humans tend to be long winded. Is there a point to this?"

"I want to help you."

Quixar blinked. "What can you do?" He then squinted, "You *did* tell me everything you know, didn't you?"

3.19

Alfonso ignored the second question. "I'm a bartender. I hear things. I'll keep my ears especially open for information that might help you."

Quixar straightened, "I'd expect nothing less!"

Alfonso gave him an annoyed frown. "Don't play 'bad shalk' with me, Quixar. You're good at what you do because people know they can talk to you. And you know damn well that people talk to you because of your reason and your sense of fairness, not your annihilation baton. So you can expect whatever you want, but no *kruxpa*," he put extra emphasis on the pejorative term and caused Quixar to cringe, "is going to go out of his way to help a shalk. Not even you."

"But you're offering to?"

"I need something in return."

Quixar sighed. "Your race is that way to a fault. You're worse than the botiira." He paused, then said, "What do you want?"

3.20

Without hesitation, Alfonso replied, "I want you to give me your word that you will *never* reveal the source of your information to *anyone* . If it gets out that I turn my patrons in to the police, they'll stop coming to my bar."

Quixar blinked in surprise. He'd obviously been expecting something else. "I give my word freely. Now, do you have anything for me?"

Alfonso shook his head. "No. But give me some time. I'll get back to you."

Quixar eyed him carefully, and then nodded. Alfonso deducted some value from his card and deactivated the nanoscreen. Quixar took the card from him, nodded, and waddled out.

Emmanuelle shot him a questioning glance, but he just met her eyes and shook his head. He then looked to Judy and let his eyes linger.

3.21

Alfonso walked home on autopilot, his mind racing through the events of the day. Unaware of his surroundings, he didn't even notice Slimmerr until she called out to him.

"Alfonso!"

He stopped, blinked, and looked over to her. "Oh, hi Slimmerr."

"What has you so prreoccupied that you don't even look at me? While you always turn me down, you usually look."

He shook his head. "Sorry, dear. I'm just thinking about something that happened at work today."

She waved a finger in the air. "You can not afforrd to do that, love."

He smiled. "You're right. While not looking at a beautiful female isn't a crime, it should be one."

She smiled back. "You say the nicest things. That's why I'm going to miss you when you'rre gone."

3.22

Alfonso blinked. "Excuse me?"

Slimmerr purred, "Ah, now I have yourr attention. Worrd on the corridorr is that there's a manta afterr you."

Alfonso fought the urge to look around suspiciously. "Who, and why?"

"Don't know why. But he's an assassin. A damn good one too. Someone hirred him to kill you. You watch yourr back, now, you hear?"

Nodding, Alfonso said, "Thanks for the tip. Take care of yourself."

"You too."

He took a step away and stopped. Turning back toward her, he said. "Slimmerr, mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"What? Are you afraid that a whorre'll be embarrassed?"

"Have you ever hunted your own food?"

She frowned and paused. Then she nodded. "Back home, I'd chased a few wraen now and again."

"And when you caught one, did you kill it right away or did you play with it first?"

With a shrug she said, "I played with it firrst. Doesn't everyone?"

Smiling, he replied, "Maybe everyone with cute little whiskers. Thanks dear." He headed home.

3.23

The next morning, Alfonso got to the bar early and tested some of his defensive measures. He placed a chair on a table in the center of the room and stared at it. He then clenched the thumb, pinky, and middle fingers of his right hand together. The precise spot on the chair he'd been staring at disintegrated as a stream of microscopic, intelligent bullets pounded into it from nanoguns set up around the perimeter of the bar. Nodding to himself, he put the chair back on the floor.

He walked around the Dose, making sure everything was in order. He straightened a table here and adjusted a chair there. Glancing back toward the bar, he chuckled at the line of bottles in front of the mirror. Quixar had been in here twice now and had never asked about their contents. They gave credence to the old thief's adage that the best place to hide something is in plain sight. Then his eyes fell upon the burnt-out spotlight above the bar. With a frown, he traced its direction back to the inimical dark area.

Something about that area drew his eyes to it. Why had the room's designers left that area unlighted? If they'd laid out the lights a bit differently, it would have had good lighting. Could the ghost have had something to do with the design of the place? But the botiira had owned the place for years! How much foresight did the ghosts have?

He stared at the table and had the glimmerings of an idea.

3.24

Alfonso muttered to himself as he ambled slowly over to the darkened area. "What if I mirrored those two walls and that part of the ceiling?" The reflections from the rest of the bar would certainly cast more light on the area. Would the ghost break the mirrors or dim all the lights in the room? That would definitely tell him something about the ghost's personality. It might even tell him something more about its power.

His mind made up, he strode behind the table to size up the wall. But his foot caught the leg of a chair and he lost his balance. Falling headfirst toward the rear wall, he quickly twisted his body and hit it with his shoulder. Strangely, it gave a bit. The wall didn't seem solid enough to support the roof.

Perplexed, he applied more pressure and felt it give again. He touched the corner lightly with his fingertips

and slid them outward along the wall. At about a meter and a half out he felt a very slight vertical ridge. He ran his fingers up and down the ridge and discovered that it went all the way from the floor to the ceiling. There was also another ridge on the other side of the corner at about the same distance away. Alfonso then pushed on the sections of wall outside of the ridges. They didn't budge.

He grabbed a portable light from the bar and shined it on one of the ridges. Looking closely under the bright light, he could just make it out. When he turned the light off it was impossible to see the ridge in the dim light of this corner. Very interesting.

Suddenly, the nanocurtain on the other side of the bar opened. Alfonso spun around into a crouch.

3.25

With a long exhale, he relaxed. It was Judy.

She frowned. "What's got you so jumpy?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

Staring at the portable light in his hand, she said, "Is this something I should know about?"

With a smile, he said, "Nope," and returned the light to its spot behind the bar.

She nodded and let the curtain close behind her. But, rather than come in and get ready for work, she glanced around and then at her feet. She looked like she wanted to ask him something but was afraid to.

With a frown, Alfonso asked, "What is it, Judy?"

She sighed and walked over to the bar, "Alfonso, what do you know about Emmanuelle?"

He shrugged. "By now, I'm sure you know more than me. At the start I only had a few customers--all human. She came in one day, sat by the bar, and started chatting with me. She never told me much that was consequential, though. Why?"

3.26

Judy shrugged, "I'm not sure. You saw her come in with the shalk yesterday. Then last night, out of the blue, she asked me how I designed the poison I used on the--"

Alfonso's eyes bulged and she stopped mid-sentence. Frowning, she looked around. "Need an exterminator?"

"You can never tell."

She nodded. "Well, I just found it strange."

He gave her a wry grin. "I thought that, with the shalk as a common enemy, all humans could be trusted implicitly."

With a sigh, she said, "Well, either you were right, as usual, or you're making me paranoid."

"Hey, my paranoia's saved your life three times."

"Twice. I was the one who got us out of the Denver boondoggle."

He shook his head. "If it weren't for my paranoia, we would have been in Aspen at the time. You're

good, but you're not *that* good."

Exasperated, she threw up her hands, "Fine. So what do we do about Emmanuelle?"

3.27

Alfonso held up his hands, palms upward, "You're asking *me* for advice?"

With a sigh, she said, "Yes, Alfonso. I'm asking for your advice."

"And you're actually going to follow it this time?"

"Probably not, but give it to me anyway."

"Okay. Step into my extermination zone." He waited for her to step closer and then put up the privacy nanoscreen. "Emmanuelle is easy to deal with. If she's a mole, she's a lousy one."

"What if she's playing mind games with us? Maybe she's being so obvious to get us to dismiss the possibility of her being one."

Alfonso shrugged. "It doesn't matter one way or the other. The solution is the same either way."

"And that is?"

3.28

Alfonso said, "You keep a close eye on her, you report to me anything remotely suspicious she does, and you happily answer every question she asks--with lies."

She nodded. "A typical Alfonso Tanaka solution."

With a shrug, he turned off the screen and said, "It's served me well over the years. Especially with you."

She pursed her lips and threw a playful slap at him. He easily misdirected it past his ear and then caught the punch coming in from behind. "You're getting slow in your old age, my dear."

With a devilish smile, she responded, "If that's what you'd like to believe, it suits me fine."

He squinted at her, but her expression revealed nothing. Damn it, he was the one who taught her how to do that. He shouldn't have taught her so well. He tried to look down, but the bar obscured her legs.

"Okay, what are you doing with your feet?"

She shrugged, "Aging, I guess."

The nanocurtain made its denial of entry sound and he pushed her hands away. "Time to open."

3.29

The day went much the same way many of the recent ones had. The bar was busy with happy customers. The botiira came back and played poker, but this time they brought friends. Alfonso wondered if it would make sense to devote some floor space to a casino and start taking a cut. He'd have to discuss the matter with Judy later. Sukomb also came back in, though it was talking with a pair of sliss, and they took a table in the back.

Alfonso suspiciously eyed each manta that came in. But The Daily Dose was becoming very popular and a huge number came through. Then, late in the day, a lone one caused something of a stir. He was

extremely dirty, his hair was poorly groomed, and he smelled awful. He walked with a limp, favoring his right foot, and dragged his tail. But he wore a giant smile and he made good time getting to the bar, despite the limp. In a loud but jovial voice, he said, "Barrtenderr, give me a glass of yourr strrongest drrink."

3.30

Alfonso had hardly finished pouring when the manta snatched up the glass, downed it, and slammed it back on the bar. "A little weak, but not bad. Give me anotheerr. And rrefill my firriend's drrink too." He pointed at the sliss sitting next to him.

The sliss turned an eye to the manta, pulled its mouth straight, and then bobbed its head. "Thank you, ssir."

"Glad to do it!" He slapped the sliss on the back, perhaps a bit too hard, and then spun around in his stool to take the whole bar in. Turning back to Alfonso, he said, "Nice place you've got herre. It was verry differrent the last time I was on Frrakarr."

While pouring his drink, Alfonso said, "Thank you. You just get in?"

The manta nodded and downed his refilled drink.

Alfonso crooked his head to the side and squinted at the patron. "But that's not why you're celebrating."

The manta laughed jovially. "You'rre Perrceptive. No. Frrakarr's a hole in the moon. The day I celebratte coming herre is the day I've finally lost my mind. I'm celebrrating something much morre imporrtant."

Alfonso waited a second, but when no further information was forthcoming, he asked, "What's that?"

3.31

The manta leaned in close and whispered, "I'm still alive."

Alfonso suppressed a chuckle. "Was that ever in doubt?"

"Actually, yes it was." He frowned and slapped his head with a hand. "Wherre arre my mannerrrs?" He held out a hand. A big grin spread across his face, showing he was proud of himself for knowing the human greeting. "I'm Shastan, a gas minerr."

Alfonso took his hand and squeezed. There was a good deal of strength there. "Alfonso Tanaka. Pleased to meet you. So what happened on your last trip that almost killed you?"

Shastan exclaimed, "I thought you'd neverr ask." He spun around again and said, "Everyone crrowd arround." Some people looked up, while others ignored him. A bit disappointed he continued at a slightly lower volume. "So I was worrking a mining platfform down on Grraget."

"On?" Alfonso asked.

"Okay, not on. You can't be 'on' a gas giant, of course. But we werre orrbiting inside the outerr layerrr gasses." Alfonso nodded and Shastan continued. "We've got this giant platfform that sucks gas in the front, processes it, and spits the cheap stuff out the back. I fly a small rrecon ship that looks forr pockets of the worrthwhile gasses and dirrrects the platfform to them. And I was in my ship when the incident happened."

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4.1

Shastan continued with his story. "I was having a bad day. I'd just gotten back from an extended search that didn't turn up anything. I pulled up behind the platform so I could thrash about in its wake."

Alfonso frowned. "Excuse me?"

"The platform is pretty fragile, so they never let me go anywhere near any turbulence. I'm too good for that sort of flying. It's boring. So I like to pull up behind the platform and fight the wake its gas expellers put out. Keeps me on my toes."

Alfonso glanced to Judy and nodded knowingly. She used to do similar, yet more dangerous, things on Earth. "So what happened?"

"The wake cut out! It stopped holding me back and I almost rammed the station. If my hands weren't so fast, I couldn't have pulled out quickly enough."

The sliss sitting next to Shastan said, "But surely you knew they might turn off the expellers?"

Shastan shook his head. "You don't understand, my friend. Gas causes drag. Drag slows you down. If you slow down, you can't keep up your orbit and you sink. And, as you go deeper, the gas gets more dense, adding more drag and making you sink even faster. The platform has to keep its thrust going at all times, or it'll sink to the center of Grraget and be crushed. They never turn off the expellers."

4.2

Alfonso asked, "So, what did they have, a malfunction?"

Shastan slapped his leg. "I'll say. But it was more like a system-wide blackout! All their lights went out, and I couldn't get through on the comm. They became a big flat rock skipping along the Grraget upper layer. I was terrified!"

The sliss next to him bent its head over, then turned it back--a sign of agreement. "You were worried for your friends."

Shastan frowned and scratched behind one of his ears. "Yeah, I guess I did have a few chums on the platform. I didn't want to lose them, mind you, but my first thought, of course, was for myself. My scout ship didn't have enough thrust to make it back up to the innermost moons, let alone Jasperr. Frakarr may be a hole, but it's a hole with plenty of air to breathe and a reasonable amount of ambient pressure."

Though Alfonso hadn't noticed him come forward, Sukomb had apparently become interested in the story. He asked in his normal high pitched, rapid voice, "What you do?"

4.3

Shastan, the manta gas miner, continued with his story. "Well, a number of the blokes on the platform are pretty smart. Okay, most of them are morrons, but I figured those ones would be so lost in the dark they'd be out of the way of the smart ones. The smart ones would either fix things, or we'd all die. They just needed as much time as possible. So I expertly maneuvered my scout craft below the platform, brought it up into contact, and gave her full thrust."

Alfonso nodded, "Thus counteracting the drag. Very smart. How'd it work?" A blur in the middle of the bar drew his eyes. He saw Judy grab a botiira by an arm, twist it, and force him up. With a snarl on her face, she led him toward the nanocurtain. Every time the botiira tried to complain, she twisted his arm a bit more. That silenced him immediately. Deciding that she had the situation, whatever it was, under control, Alfonso returned his attention to Shastan.

". . . we werre definitely sinking slowerr, but we werre still going down. I used everry trick I knew to get maximum benefit from my ship. But in the end, all I could do was watch my altitude gage, watch my fuel gage, and ppray. Yeah, that's rright. I actually pprayed to the wrrarranging shalk gods. That's how desperrate and scarred I was!"

He paused for a second and glanced around the room. Then, in a solemn voice, he added, "But my fuel didn't last forr verry long."

4.4

Shastan raised his glass, saw that it was empty, and set it back down on the bar. Continuing in a solemn voice, he said, "My warning lights went off. My gauges went dead. And my thrrust started to sputterr. Then, just as I was getting rready to slit my own throat, I felt the platform rrise above my ship!"

Now excited, he continued, "I cut my thrrust immediately and got on the comm. 'I'm on fumes herre!' I yelled. 'Get those rrear bay doorrs open now!' Then I did the most amazing bit of flying I've everr accomplished. I used the minimum amount of thrrust to keep my altitude while the platform moved ahead of me. When it clearred me, I nudged it up and glided into the bay on the last of my thrrust. I swearr on my motherr's wiskerrrs; another second and I'd have been a ball about this big." He held up is thumb and forefinger spread about a millimeter apart.

Some of the Dose's patrons sighed in relief. Others murmured in disbelief. Alfonso nodded and headed toward the nanocurtain. How was Judy holding up?

A slow, nasal voice asked, "If blackout true, tell cause."

Alfonso glanced over his shoulder and saw Shastan glare at a botiira, then respond, "You'll neverr believe it."

4.5

"It was a computerr glitch!"

Alfonso stopped suddenly and turned around to get a better look at Shastan. Another catastrophe caused by a computer malfunction? Could that be a coincidence? He asked, "What kind of computer glitch?"

Shastan shook his head. "The damn thing was playing some game."

No botiira could hurt Judy. Alfonso forgot about her and walked back to Shastan. "What kind of game?"

With a shrug, Shastan replied, "A human one. The morrone who installed it said it was called 'Go.'"

Suspicious, Alfonso asked, "Why were the platform's computer systems playing Go?"

"The morrone taught an AI to play and told it to solve the game. It sucked up all the computerr resourcces."

One of the botiira in the bar exclaimed, "Not correct. If AI is greater than maximum, then terminate!"

Shastan shook his head. "Well, this AI got passed yourr safeguarrds, and I almost died as a rresult. I guess you'd betterr rrethink them."

4.6

The nanocurtain opened and Judy walked through knocking her hands together. In a loud voice, she proclaimed, "The Daily Dose is no place for pickpockets. The next one who tries gets worse than a few broken fingers. Understand?"

Many patrons looked down at their hands and nodded. Alfonso smiled and walked back behind the bar.

Shastan stayed for a while longer, but with each new story his audience thinned. Eventually, he too lost interest, paid his tab, and left. Then, just before close, a call came through for Alfonso. Judy had been behind the bar at the time, and she walked over to him with a confused look on her face. He had just finished taking a table's order when she leaned in close and said, "Call for you, but they refuse to go visual and won't leave a message."

Alfonso handed her the data pad he was using for orders and rushed back behind the bar. "This is Alfonso."

An electronically garbled voice said, "Ulysses."

Alfonso flipped on the privacy field and responded, "X y z z y."

4.7

Though the display screen was blank, a red frame appeared at its edge and the words, "Encrypted for Alfonso Tanaka" scrolled by on the bottom. Alfonso touched his thumb to a spot beside the screen and the red frame became blue. Every time he used his bioidentification technology, he wished he could come up with a clever way to make it work with the other races. He'd be rich.

"What have you got for me?" he said to the screen.

Despite the encryption, the character on the other side of the line chose to continue to scramble his voice. "The hotel room is done."

"Excellent. You built it in the spot we agreed upon?"

"Close."

Alfonso frowned. "What do you mean, close? Show me."

The screen came to life, showing an image of a rocky scene with Graget close to the horizon. This was obviously outside Frakar on Jasper's surface. Alfonso squinted and could just make out a hatch on the ground. "You idiot!"

4.8

The voice, still garbled, said, "What?"

"I can see the entrance!"

"Awe, don't worry. No one ever comes out here."

"But the place we agreed upon hid the entrance in the shadow of that boulder over there!"

Unapologetically, the voice replied, "We ran into some cost overruns. This was the best we could do."

With a sigh, Alfonso replied, "Fine. When can you expect your first customer? Or have you decided they cost too much too?"

"Hey, don't get snippy with me. I'm the one out here in a psuit every damn day. We're on schedule for the customer."

"And you'll be selective about him?"

"Yes, the list hasn't changed."

"Good. Don't screw this up."

"Fine, later." The connection broke.

4.9

The day wound down and the patrons shuffled out. Judy practically had to get physical to convince the poker-playing botiira to leave. They seemed to enjoy their new game. As the nanocurtain closed behind them she turned to Alfonso and smacked her hands together. "Okay, let's get this place cleaned up."

He shook his head. "Naw, I'll handle it. Your turn to go home early tonight."

She frowned and looked at him through squinted eyes. "We don't take turns going home early. What's up?"

"Nothing. I've just got some things to take care of."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Hey, Emmanuelle wasn't in today. That's weird. Maybe you can find out what's going on with her."

She nodded and backed a step toward the curtain. Then she stopped. "You're worried about something. What is it?"

4.10

Damn it, she could read him too bloody easily. To everyone else, he was as readable as Rushmore after they destroyed three of the presidents. He arched his eyebrows. "Worried?"

She frowned. "Well, no. I guess I'd say more 'apprehensive.' You sure you'll be okay?"

He smirked. "When was the last time you weresure of anything?"

Judy nodded. "Well, you know where to find me."

"Thanks, Judy."

She left and the Dose became very still and quiet. Alfonso went about cleaning up. He wiped off the tables and arranged the chairs. Then he wiped down the bar and adjusted the bottles in front of the mirror. He looked up at the wall time source. It had only taken a few minutes. With a sigh, he set about doing it again, this time putting more effort into removing the second layer of grease from the tables.

4.11

Now a half-hour had passed. Alfonso sighed. "Cool it, kid. You'll hardly make an interesting target if you die of an apprehension-induced heart attack." Waiting had always been the worst part. It didn't matter whether he was waiting to open birthday presents or for the Guatemalan executioner to come take him to the gallows. The wait was always the worst part.

He glanced down at the floor. Did *hereally* want to get on his hands and knees and scrub? The nanocleaners would be through the place seconds after he left. But he didn't have much else to do. He looked at the floor again. "Naw. I'll take up pacing."

After a few minutes of that, he stopped and mumbled, "You'd think I'd be better at this. I've done enough of it." He walked back behind the bar, grabbed a deck of cards and started laying out Seahaven Towers. But he didn't get very far with that. He couldn't focus enough attention on it to keep the undo string straight in his head. Frustrated, he put the cards away.

A great wave of relief rushed over him when the nanocurtain made its denial of entry sound.

With a sigh, he looked up at it. "About damn time." He took a deep breath and raised his hand to give the open command. But, to his surprise, the nanocurtain opened on its own.

4.12

A much cleaned up Shastan walked through. He now wore a black overcoat over a dark gray jumpsuit that left his hands and feet bare. His hair was now impeccably groomed and he gave off no odor. There was no limp in his walk and his tail darted back and forth to the limits of its range.

"Sorry, Shastan, we're closed."

The manta's face took on an almost hurt expression as he sauntered the rest of the way into the bar and let the nanocurtain close behind him. Alfonso noticed that the curtain became solid. "My good man. I'm a tad bit embarrressed about that. You see, 'Shastan' is not my trrue name."

"Oooh, there's a shocker. So, what is it?"

The manta walked slowly but purposefully over to the table directly in front of Alfonso's position. His tail snaked out, slid between two slats on the back of a chair, and drew it out. This showed a considerable amount of skill for a manta. They could hit with their tails, but generally couldn't manipulate objects with them. He sat down gracefully and then put his feet up on the table. Leaning back in the chair, he said, "My name, is Shasirr."

Alfonso nodded. "Well, that's a considerably better name for an assassin than 'Shastan.'"

4.13

Shasirr smiled. "So, old chap. How long have you known?"

"To what degree of certainty?"

"When did you firrst suspect me?"

"I've suspected every manta I've seen."

Shasirr extended the claws on his left hand and scratched behind his ear. "When did you become morre suspicious of me?"

Was that a touch of annoyance in the assassin's voice? Alfonso smiled. This might be more fun than he'd expected. "When you started to tell your story. By the way, was it real?"

"The story? Why yes. A gas minerr told it to me just beforre I killed him. Of course, I did embellish it a bit. It was rratherr dull the way he told it."

"So you added the scout ship element. How about the computer playing Go?"

"No, that parrt was rreal. Thisis an undue amount of curriosity forr a human about to die."

Alfonso leaned forward across the bar. "Well, you know what they say. Curiosity killed the cat."

4.14

Shasirr's tail ceased its motion and a frown spread across his lips as he stared at Alfonso. "Intriguing. No, I've nevrerr hearrd that expression beforre. So, what about my telling of the story gave me away?"

Alfonso stood back up. "You kept looking around the bar, presumably at the other patrons, but your head and eyes didn't move correctly for looking at people. When you're scanning for defenses, you need to move in spurts, as if you're looking from person to person."

A smile spread across his face and he clapped once. "Well, well. Youarre perrceptive, arren't you? I believe yourr worrd forr this occasion is 'brravo.'"

"It is. The clap was right too. So, let's get down to business."

Shasirr sat up a bit straighter. "So soon?"

Alfonso shook his head. "No, not that business. You can lean back."

4.15

Shasirr leaned back again.

Alfonso asked, "Who took out the hit on me?"

"Does it matter?"

"It does to me."

"That curriosity. A verry interesting trait in you. Well, I do like my clients to die happy. It was a botiirra. He seemed to think that if you died, he would somehow rregain control of this barr. Therre must be something to this place, though, as he just barrely met my price by paying everrything he had."

Alfonso should have suspected the Dose's former owner. But how would he get the bar back? Judy didn't know about their arrangement, and would have just kept running the bar. Maybe the botiirra had something to hold over her. Then again, maybe he'd just shown the same remarkable lack of foresight that led to his loss of the bar and had overlooked Judy in this.

Or was it a double hit? For the first time since the assassin arrived, Alfonso's heart skipped a beat. What if Shasirr had taken so long to get here because he first took out Judy? Unable to keep a waver out of his voice, he asked, "Did the botiirra's price cover one or two hits?"

4.16

Shasirr laughed. "Just one. I charge more than double for two. Few individuals could afford that."

So, Judy was okay. He sighed. "That's very good to hear."

"What is? That I am an expensive assassin?"

Alfonso shrugged. "Well, that's good too. It's always good to know that your enemies care enough to send the very best. But what I'm most happy about is that, since the botiira paid you everything he owns, you will be the last to come after me."

Shasirr smirked. "And that matters?"

Alfonso frowned and nodded brusquely. "Of course it does." He focused on Shasirr's eyes and touched the thumb, pinky, and middle fingers of his right hand together.

Nothing happened.

4.17

Now Alfonso's heart skipped two beats. He hastily looked down at his screen and a schematic of the bar came up. Blinking red dots appeared over the locations of all of his defensive nanoguns. Alfonso's face fell and it took him a second to compose himself. Then he took a deep breath and looked back to Shasirr. "You're worth your high price."

Shasirr laughed and stood up. "Thank you."

"I've got what I thought were the best anti-hunter killers guarding my nanoguns. How'd you bypass them?"

Shasirr casually stepped up onto the chair and from there to the table. "Technology is nothing but magic. And there are always better wizards. To put your faith in a magical solution is foolhardy. That's why I always kill with my claws." He extended the claws on his hands and crouched slightly.

Alfonso's mind raced. Even elderly manta were fast and nimble. And here was one who made his living killing people with his hands. Then again, in an age of annihilators, how many of his targets knew how to fight back? And Shasirr did think Alfonso was like the others; one who relied on technology to survive.

Alfonso bent his legs slightly, sinking down into a ready stance. He let his arms fall loosely by his sides and relaxed his hands, feeling them tingle. Taking deep breaths in through his nose and exhaling through his mouth, he focused all of his attention on Shasirr.

The assassin leapt from the tabletop to the bar, crouched down, and raised a clawed hand.

4.18

Alfonso drew his right hand in to his waist and twisted his hips back. As the claw came down at his skull he threw his whole body, from the untwisting of his hips, to the extending of his legs, into an open handed punch at Shasirr's gut.

The palm of his hand hit when the claw had only covered half the necessary distance. Shasirr's eyes flashed with intense shock and he toppled over backward off the bar. But, when his head dipped below his feet, he bent his legs and thrust outward, flipping himself over causing him to land in a crouch on his feet.

Despite the situation, Alfonso marveled at the acrobatic move. "Damn, I wish I could do that," he

thought.

The shocked look on Shasirr's face turned to one of joyful surprise. He stood up and clapped again. "Well, well. I see that I underestimated you. This *will* be enjoyable."

There was now a bar between them and Shasirr had seen the danger of trying to get around it. The act of doing so gave Alfonso the first attack. Alfonso raised a hand. "Hold it. We're not done talking yet."

Shasirr squinted at him, but didn't move.

"I'll bet you're one of the best assassins out there, aren't you?"

Shasirr nodded. "In all humility, I truly am. I once fulfilled a contract on a shalk."

4.19

Alfonso blinked once and frowned. Was the assassin a liar? If he had to lie about his abilities then Alfonso could probably take him. Lacing his voice with surprise, he exclaimed, "You killed the shalk bartender?"

Shasirr frowned and shook his head. With a sigh, he said, "No. That job was beyond my abilities. This contract was years ago."

If the bartender job was beyond his abilities, then he didn't know how to kill a shalk. So he must have been very creative in pulling off his shalk hit. But, since he hadn't lied about the bartender, he was probably telling the truth now. Alfonso nodded and said, "I'm sure you got paid an awful lot for that hit."

Shasirr nodded. "I am exceedingly well paid for every job. But that one was particularly profitable."

"So I'll bet you have everything you could possibly want."

Shasirr shrugged and nodded once.

"And that means that there is no amount of value I could offer you to walk away from this hit."

With a frown, Shasirr responded, "I'm afraid not, friend. While I do enjoy your company much more than that of the wormy botiirra who is paying me to kill you, I can't think of anything you could do to make me break my contract." He laughed. "Well, except kill me. But that's not going to happen." He stepped forward.

4.20

Alfonso ignored the advance. Instead he stood up straight, crossed his arms and drummed his fingers on his chin. "What to get for the manta that has everything . . ."

Shasirr stopped, obviously confused by Alfonso's behavior.

Alfonso left him in his confusion for three seconds, and then smiled and exclaimed, "Wait! I've got just the thing."

He bent down behind the bar and opened a hidden panel, revealing a numeric keypad. His hand shook a bit and he quickly steadied it. This would be *ahorrible* time to accidentally enter the wrong code and destroy the safe's contents.

Shasirr's voice was full of disappointment. "I sincerely hope you don't think you're going to get a

weapon down there. I disabled everything dangerous in yourr barr."

Alfonso paused and looked back up at the bottles in front of the mirror. Shasirr was a hypocrite. He'd lectured Alfonso on the folly of relying on technology, but he had fallen into the same trap himself. Alfonso had half a mind to show Shasirr the error of his ways.

He looked back at the keypad. No, this solution was better. It had the potential to solve other problems. He entered the forty digit code and the safe opened. Alfonso extracted a rectangular box from the safe and closed it. He stood up and set the box on the bar. "What if I offered you something you couldn't possibly get anywhere else?"

Shasirr eyed the box warily. "What?"

Alfonso shrugged and said, "Take a look." He turned around, grabbed two bottles, and set them on the bar. Then he reached below the bar and took two shot glasses. As Shasirr picked up the box, Alfonso opened one of the bottles (making damn sure he had the right one) and filled the shot glasses.

Shasirr opened the box and gasped.

4.21

Alfonso picked up one of the shot glasses and held it up. Shasirr looked at him in raw shock. Alfonso smiled and downed the glass.

With a stammer, Shasirr asked, "H . . . h . . . how?"

Alfonso shook his head. "'How' is worth considerably more than my life. And I'm not selling. But *I am* offering to sell you the contents of that box."

Shasirr looked down at it again and then back at Alfonso, now with newfound respect. "To sparre yourr life?"

Alfonso shook his head. "That's not enough. I have three conditions." He held up his index finger. "One. You break your contract with the botiira and don't kill me." He added his middle finger. "Two. You do *not* give the money back to the botiira. I'd rather he not send others after me." He added his ring finger. "And three. No matter what happens, you give me your word that you will not kill me or my associates any time in the future."

Shasirr looked down at the box again and then closed it. "You trrust the worrd of a manta?"

"No. But I do trust the word of the greatest assassin in this corner of the universe."

Shasirr smiled. "But, what is to stop me from not giving my worrd, killing you now, and walking off with this?"

Alfonso picked up the second bottle and put his hand on the cap as if he was about to open it and pour himself another drink. He shrugged, "I'm betting that you have more pride in yourself and your work than that. You're an assassin, not a lousy thief."

Shasirr thought about it for a second and nodded. Alfonso put the bottle down.

4.22

Alfonso pointed to the still full shot glass. "I poured one for you."

Shasirr laughed. "I'm sorry, but you have proven yourself far too crafty for me to trust that drink. I can envision manta poisons that don't affect human physiology. I've certainly used similar substances in the past."

Alfonso smiled. "Paranoia is an extremely useful trait in both of our professions." He took the glass and downed it. "So, I have your word?"

Shasirr nodded. "Yes. I give it freely."

"Then I guess our business here is done."

"Perhaps we will run into one another again, only under less antagonistic circumstances."

Alfonso nodded. "Yes, that would be nice. Take care of yourself, Shasirr."

"And you."

The assassin walked up to the nanocurtain and it opened. Judy, who had been leaning against the wall on the other side of the corridor, stood up immediately and strode toward the door. Glaring suspiciously at Shasirr, she blocked his path and looked to Alfonso. He nodded and she stepped aside, letting Shasirr by. The manta nodded to her and sauntered down the corridor.

She stepped into the Dose and let the curtain close behind her. "What's the deal locking me out?"

Alfonso shook his head. "Wasn't me. The assassin did it."

"What?! Shastan was an assassin?"

Alfonso held a finger in front of his lips to quiet her. Was his next action the right thing to do? No, not really. But it was necessary. He frowned. That didn't make him feel any better about it, though. He hit a button by the communications screen. "Connect me to Investigator Quixar."

4.23

The connection didn't go through immediately and he glanced over to Judy. Her eyes questioned what was going on, but he chose not to answer. She walked over and sat down on one of the barstools.

Quixar's face showed up on the screen looking surprised. "Alfonso, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Investigator. But I do have a question for you."

"It's getting late, can this wait until tomorrow?"

"If I thought so, I wouldn't have called you."

The shalk nodded. "What's your question?"

"Have you ever heard of a manta assassin who goes by the name 'Shasirr'?"

Quixar frowned. "The name is vaguely familiar. Hold on a second." He looked down and his arms moved. A few seconds passed and his eyes got wide. "Yes. I have a file on him. Why?"

"He was at the Dose today. Came in all depressed about something and drank a whole lot. And, after a while, his tongue got loose. He started bragging that he was the best assassin in the universe. When people didn't seem interested, he claimed that he'd even killed a shalk. No one believed this and he said

that he could prove it. He then left, presumably to prove it, but he never came back."

Alfonso had a difficult time reading Quixar's expression. The investigator stared at him for a good ten seconds in what might have been disbelief. Then he nodded. "So, you think he killed the bartender?"

Alfonso said, "He said he can prove it, and I can only think of one possible way to do that."

Quixar finished his thought for him. "He'd need to have the severed hand."

4.24

"Ju got it mang!"

Quixar frowned. "What was that?"

Answering in shalk this time, Alfonso replied, "I agree with your assessment."

With a curt nod, Quixar said, "Okay, I'll get right on it. Thanks Alfonso." He cut the connection.

Judy whistled. "So, you traded the hand for your life and now you're setting 'Shasirr' up to take the fall for us. A dangerous game."

Alfonso nodded. "My life was once safe and simple. Then you showed up."

Judy laughed so heartily she had to grab the bar to keep from falling off her stool. It took her a moment calm down. Then, wiping tears from her eyes, she said, "But now we have a problem. You cut off the hand to hide the entry wound. Won't Quixar figure out what happened now?"

With a shrug, he replied, "He'd pretty much figured it out already. The hand will only confirm his existing suspicions. Continuing to hide it from him wouldn't have bought us much."

She nodded, then grinned. "When you took the hand, were you just trying to hide the evidence, or were you already planning to frame someone for the murder?"

He opened his mouth for the readied quick retort when the nanocurtain's denial of entry sound cut him off. With a frown, he said instead, "Busy night tonight."

Judy looked over at the curtain. "Your assassin come back?"

Alfonso shook his head. "No, he'd just come through." He hit a button at the edge of his screen and an image of outside the bar came up. "It's a sliss." He shrugged and motioned to the door. The curtain opened and the sliss slithered in. Alfonso said, "Sorry, sir, but we're closed for the night. You'll have to come back tomorrow."

The sliss continued forward until it was fully inside the bar and the curtain closed behind it. "Are you Alfonso Tanaka?" it asked.

Alfonso nodded.

The sliss smiled and the end of its tail darted into a pouch tied to its body. It drew out a handgun and pointed it at Alfonso. "In sat casse, get your handss up where I can ssee sem." It waved the gun at Judy. "You too."

4.25

Alfonso left his hands at his sides. "What the hell? Is there a sign outside the Dose that says, 'Grudges against Alfonso, form a single line'?"

The sliss fired a particle beam at the stool at the end of the bar. The stool exploded. "I'm not asking nissely."

Alfonso pushed thoughts of the bottles from his mind. He couldn't think of a way to grab one without looking threatening. Besides, the sliss was in the wrong position for them to be effective. And even if it moved, then Judy would be in the way. He raised his arms and, a second later, Judy followed suit.

"That'ss better. Now, move into the ssender of the bar."

Keeping their hands above their heads, Alfonso and Judy complied. The sliss moved the gun to farther up its tail, leaving the tip free. Still pointing the gun at them, it reached back into its pouch and drew forth two coils of what looked like rope. It tossed the coils at their feet. "Pick sem up with bos handss. One each."

When Alfonso touched the rope it uncoiled, wrapped one end around his wrists, and launched the other end at the ceiling. The tip held fast and the nanorope started to contract, tightening itself around his hands and pulling them up over his head. In a few seconds he had been lifted slightly off the floor.

Judy frowned, looked up at Alfonso and then to the sliss. Alfonso knew her well enough that he could practically see her mind working. She was calculating the distances between the sliss and her, accounting for the obstacles between them, and factoring in the sliss's likely reaction time.

The sliss pointed the gun at her and sneered.

With a sigh, she bent down and touched her nanorope.

4.26

The nanorope hefted Judy up just as it had Alfonso. The sliss sneered again, set the gun down, and slithered behind her. "Well, I came for him, but you're se one who wantss to be difficult." It set its head near the ground and arched its back, raising its tail high in the air. It spun the tail around once and then snapped it into Judy's back.

She flinched a tiny amount and quickly clenched her teeth. Her eyes unfocused and she glared at infinity. This told Alfonso that the blow had stung immensely. She would have responded with some sort of witty barb if she hadn't had to go to such lengths to hide her pain.

The sliss's color lightened in enjoyment. "And sstill you fight. Siss will be very enjoyable. Did you know, human, sat sere iss no race in se known universse sat can match a ssliss'ss control of se tip of itss tail? I can hit seexact sspot again. Watch." It flicked its tail and Judy clenched her hands together, her knuckles turning white. With a laugh, the sliss said, "I can hit sat sspot ass many timess ass I want."

After a gasping intake of breath, Judy exclaimed. "My god, Alfonso, don't you have any bar defenses?"

The sliss's color deepened and its eyes got wide.

Alfonso looked down at the sliss and frowned. "Amateur," he thought. The fool hadn't even considered bar defenses. He just got lucky. Alfonso turned his eyes to Judy and sighed. "Well, I did. But the assassin disabled them."

The sliss's scales lightened.

4.27

The sliss said, "Sso, ass I wass ssaying--"

Not even curious about the assassin? This sliss was extremely uninteresting. Alfonso cut it off. "Perhaps now would be a good time to tell me what this is about?"

The sliss closed its mouth, frowned, and then bobbed its head once. It slapped Judy again and then slithered out from behind her. This time she did flinch, and then she glared at Alfonso. He tried to apologize with his eyes.

The sliss said, "You, Alfonsso Tanaka, ruined my bussinesss and ssent my ssibling to jail."

Alfonso's mind raced. What businesses had he ruined in recent memory? Basically just the botiira's bar and the shalk's bar. There was no way the shalk had been in business with two sliss. He wouldn't have lowered himself to it. And most of the races tended to avoid the botiira when possible. Besides, how would either situation have resulted in the sliss's sibling getting thrown into jail?

Judy raised her eyebrows at him and all he could do was attempt to shrug. With a frown at the sliss he shook his head and said, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"My ssibling and I were in se bussinesss of sselling scertain chemicalss to motivated buyersss."

4.28

"So, you're a drug dealer. What's that got to do with me?"

The sliss snarled at him. "Not long ago, a sshalk wass murdered. Se sspaceport'ss chief invesstigator came to your bar and questioned you. One of your patronss told me sat you told him a sslisss killed the sshalk. Iss sat true?"

Alfonso attempted to shrug again. It was difficult when hanging from his hands. Then he nodded and said, "Yeah. So?"

"Quixssar took it upon himssself to invesstigate every sslisss in the spspaceport. He'ss exsstremely thorough. Because of you, he caught my ssibling carrying a very large sshipment of chemicalss."

Judy rolled her eyes. "My god! And that's why you're here? You're as lousy a bussinesssnake as you are a strong arm."

The sliss angrily rushed behind her and whipped her back again.

In English she said to Alfonso, "Do you need anything else out of this loser?"

Alfonso shook his head.

She looked over her shoulder at the sliss and said, "You're a lousy sliss too. That last time you were a good millimeter off the mark."

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5.1

The sliss hissed at Judy and swung its tail around for another strike. But the instant it hit her she thrust her feet back and clamped them around its tail. Then she threw her feet forward, dragging the sliss with her.

Its head shot around toward Alfonso, who kicked it between its eyes. The sliss went slack in the grip of Judy's feet.

She looked down and shook it once. Its eyes were closed and it hung limply. "Hey, you were right about them going into a coma." Then, with a snarl, she twisted her hips and flung the body at a wall. It made a gratifying smash and fell to the ground.

Alfonso pulled at his bounds, but they refused to budge. Then he looked up and traced the nanorope to the ceiling. "Okay, spot for me." She nodded and swung forward, wrapping her legs around his waist. He hefted himself upside down and grabbed the rope with his feet. Then he moved his grip further up it. The rope constricted to take up the slack. He repeated the maneuver and was then able to plant his feet on the ceiling. "You got me?"

"I don't know. My back stings. That might make me drop you."

With a sigh he said, "Well, just keep me from falling on my head." He bent his legs and let the rope constrict some more. When it had shortened out the slack he pushed upward with his legs. The rope dug into his wrists and his legs strained against the tensile force of the rope. His back ached, but the rope didn't budge. As the blood rushed to his head he huffed, "Damn, this is good stuff."

"Get on with it," Judy replied. "My legs are getting tired."

5.2 Monday

Alfonso took a deep breath and really threw his back into pulling on the rope. He strained and strained, until eventually the ceiling began to crack. This bit of progress gave him hope, so he redoubled his efforts. The ceiling split apart in two grooves running outward from the rope's entry point. With a final pull he was able to tear out the rope's split ends and free them from the ceiling.

He fell straight down, head first, toward the floor. He heard Judy grunt as he felt her legs tighten around his waist. He curled his head inward and hoped she could hold on. Luckily, she did. He swung forward and ended up face down, hanging not even half a meter from the ground. She let go before he could get his feet under him, but he easily rolled out of the short fall.

Once its other end was freed, the rope released his hands, curled itself up into a small coil, and dropped to the ground. He looked down at the marks it left on his wrists and, with a frown, rubbed them gingerly. Then he stood up behind Judy and inspected her back. It was bleeding. "You dropped me on purpose," he accused, "I should leave you up there."

She blindly kicked back at him, but he easily sidestepped it, slapping her butt as he went by. He retrieved the sliss's gun from the ground and looked it over. It was a fairly standard model, with a unigrip that had been designed to adequately fit the hands of all of the races (except the humans--these designs predated their arrival). Not using his thumb, he wrapped his fingers around the grip, pointed the gun at Judy's rope, and squeezed. A particle beam blasted out of the gun and disintegrated a portion of Judy's rope.

She dropped easily to the floor, but landed stiffly. Alfonso went behind the bar and told the nanofactory make an antiseptic spray. Then he said to her, "Take off your shirt and I'll treat your back."

5.3

Judy snorted. "Yeah, like those days aren't long gone." She walked over to the bar, turned around, and gingerly pulled up the back of her shirt without removing it.

Alfonso grinned and said, "Behave, or I'll send you to my sister."

The wound looked fairly superficial. She'd have a nasty bruise for a while, but the sliss had not hit her spine, so it hadn't done any real damage. As he sprayed the antiseptic on her back, he instructed the factory to make gauze and skin tape. He used that to cover the wound and said, "There you go. Looks like you'll have to sleep on your side for a while."

She pulled her shirt back down and took a seat on a barstool. Crinkling her nose at him, she said, "We'll see about that."

He laughed. For a while, they'd slept on a tiny futon. If she had consented to sleep on her side, they might have actually fit. But she had insisted on sleeping on her back, leaving almost no room for Alfonso. That was so long ago, he couldn't remember whether it was one of the excuses he'd used for leaving her.

She pointed over her shoulder at the unconscious sliss. "What should we do about it?"

"I'll tie it in a knot and drop it off at security on the way home." He set the sliss's gun behind the bar. "So, I'll bet you wish you'd stayed home."

She shifted her back uncomfortably and frowned. "I should have just called."

"What's up?"

"You remember that you told me to check up on Emmanuelle?"

Alfonso nodded.

"Well, she wasn't home. And there was no indication that she'd been home. I checked with her work, but they were closed. I'll check again tomorrow, but I've got a hunch she didn't go in today."

With a frown, Alfonso said, "That would be unlike her. Suggestions?"

Judy sighed and shrugged. "There's not much we can do. The shalk over in security aren't going to care that a human seems to be missing. I think we're just going to have to wait and see."

5.4

A few days later, Emmanuelle still hadn't been home. Both Judy and Alfonso were worried, but their attempts to find her had proven unfruitful. She'd just disappeared.

It was a fairly standard day at the Dose. They were doing good business and keeping busy. Nothing out of the ordinary happened until late in the day. Then, the burnt out spotlight above the bar came alive, illuminating the table in the darkened rear corner of the room. A robed figure sat at the table. Alfonso looked over at the table, then up at the light. It shone for a second and then went off.

With a shrug, walked over to the table. But, as he approached, he kicked himself. He'd remembered that he discovered something about the walls back there. But that night had been so eventful that it had slipped his mind. He made a mental note to look into them after the bar closed.

As they had the last time he talked to the ghost, the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end when he got close. He stopped at the edge of the table "Can I get you something, sir?"

The ghost looked the same as before, but with its robe covering all of its skin and the darkness obscuring what hid behind the hood, it was hard to tell if this was the same one. He did speak in the same sort of male sounding, slow, raspy voice, however. "I have just heard some interesting news."

"What's that?"

"The shalk murderer has been captured."

Shivers ran down Alfonso's spine, and he could practically feel the ghost's hidden eyes boring into him. Although the ghost was clearly interested in his reaction, Alfonso calculated that revealing his surprise was acceptable. He knew that Quixar was a good investigator, but he had expected Shasirr to be a better criminal. Perhaps Quixar had already been keeping tabs on the assassin.

"Really?"

5.5

The hood nodded. This gave Alfonso pause. This reminded him that the last time they communicated, the ghost had used human body language. Why would he bother?

"Yes," the ghost said. "It has turned out that the murder was actually an assassination. At least, the murderer was an assassin--a manta named Shasirr."

"Interesting. Was it Quixar who caught him?"

"Yes, how did you guess?"

Oh please, you think you can catch me up that easily? Alfonso frowned and said, "Well, he's head of security and he's purported to be very good at his job."

The hood nodded again. "Your inference is correct."

Enough of this. Alfonso didn't know the ghost's agenda, but he assumed it was not aspirations for a career in journalism. And if this conversation was something important, Alfonso *was not* going to let another being drive it--even if the other being was an enigmatic and apparently super-powerful ghost. Time to go on the offensive. He pulled out a chair from the table, reversed it, and sat down with his chest on the backrest. "Now, I have a suspicion that you believed we humans had committed the murder. Are you disappointed?"

The ghost ignored his getting closer and shrugged. "I am not so sure your race is, as you would put it," he switched to English, "in the clear." He switched back to Shalkish. "If the shalk was assassinated, there is always the matter of who paid for the hit."

5.6

So the ghost had gone to the trouble of learning one of the most chaotic and difficult languages in the known universe. Shalkish was so logical and intelligently designed that few humans had trouble learning it. In fact, most of the members of the other races had given up or forgotten their own languages, and only spoke in Shalkish. There was little to no reason to learn anything else.

Was the ghost trying to impress Alfonso? Or was he trying to unsettle him? That could be determined by how well he knew the language. If only a little, it was to impress. If he was fluent, however, he had other motives. Very well, the rest of the conversation would be in English. "You think humans hired the assassin? Why would we bother?"

There was an uncomfortable pause and Alfonso got ready to repeat the question in Shalkish. But before he could, the ghost responded. "Why indeed? Perhaps you wanted to perturb the status quo? Perhaps you have not adjusted well to your place in this society and, too impatient to move up through normal means, have decided to change the structure."

Alfonso nodded. "Interesting speculations. Have you relayed them to Quixar?"

The ghost chuckled and waved the matter aside. For the briefest of instants, Alfonso got a glimpse down his sleeve. Due to the dark he couldn't really trust his pattern recognition, but he swore he saw a hairless hand with four fingers and a thumb. The only race that matched was human.

The ghost said, "The shalk can draw their own conclusions. They're on their own when it comes to trivialities such as this. We're interested in bigger pictures."

5.7

Alfonso raised his eyebrows. "Oh really? And what do you see in this big picture?"

The ghost paused again. It had a strong grasp of his language, but was very slow at it. Finally, it shrugged. "The integration of a new species into an old society can be quite unsettling. Sometimes even trivialities can have an enormous impact on the whole."

Alfonso scratched at his chin. Slipping a reasonable amount of disbelief into his voice, he said, "And you think my race is deliberately trying to bring about these changes?"

Again there was a long pause. "Some percentage of my thoughts run along those lines. Then, sometimes," the ghost leaned forward, but not enough forward to illuminate his face, "I think a single human just wanted to drum up business for his establishment."

Its using slang like "drum up" answered the question of how well the ghost could speak English. His heart beat a little faster, but Alfonso reigned in any outward appearances of worry. Staying in his native tongue, he replied, "So, we've gone from you randomly accusing my entire race of murder to a directed attack on me." Snarling, he leaned forward and held a finger up. Unfortunately, the ghost leaned back at the same time, ruining Alfonso's chance to look into his hood. Adding anger to his voice, he fumed, "But, before you drag me away, consider this. If I could afford the services of an assassin capable of killing a shalk, why would I be here toiling away in this bar every day? And, more importantly, why would I have consented to let you, an abusive and destructive guest, stay? You threw money at me, but if I could have pulled this off, I wouldn't have needed it."

He stood, reversed the chair, and tried to walk away. But, after two steps, it felt as though a hand clutched at his heart. The thought of taking another step away from the darkness of the corner terrified him.

The ghost said, "Mr. Tanaka, wait."

5.8 Sunday

Alfonso balled his hands into fists and clenched his teeth. This is a psychological effect, he told himself. The fear is not real. The ghost can likely kill me, but he can't scare me. That is beyond his powers. Only I get to choose what I'm afraid of. He was squeezing his hands so tightly they shook.

Angry now, Alfonso spun around and pointed a finger at the ghost. In Shalkish, he said, "You're paying for rent, not to waste my time." He turned back to the bar and summoned enough courage to take one step farther away. This is a psychological effect. Just an effect.

The ghost said, "Mr. Tanaka, please."

Alfonso, with his back to the ghost, smiled. Please. The ghost wanted something from him. A hand still gripped at his heart, but Alfonso shoved his induced fears away. Only an all-powerful being could force

him to do something he didn't want to do. And what would a god need from him? He strode back to the bar and found that the ghost's effect on him weakened with distance.

Judy, who was pouring a round of drinks, looked at him worriedly. The light above the bar came on again and she shuddered. Alfonso jumped up onto the bar, tore the light down, and threw it into the darkened corner. All activity in the Dose came screeching to a halt.

Still standing on the bar, Alfonso proclaimed in a loud voice, "If tomorrow you think you can come back and speak *civilly*, I'll *consider* listening to you. But you might as well leave now."

Most of the bar's patrons didn't understand what was happening. They nervously went back to what they were doing. But a shalk patron looked into the corner, blinked, and stared at Alfonso in shock.

Judy also didn't look pleased. "What are you doing?"

Alfonso hopped off the bar, shook his head, and answered her in a low voice. "You and I are on a bus careening out of control down a mountain road full of switch-backs. And our brakes are out. I'm just trying to stay in the driver's seat."

5.9 Monday

Judy frowned and started to say something when the "incoming call" light on the bar's status screen cut her off. Alfonso nodded to the screen and it switched from displaying diagnostics to all black. The caller had disabled his video. A computer-scrambled voice said, "Ulysses."

Alfonso looked to Judy and said, "Sorry, I've got to take this in private."

She stood still for a second, then nodded and stepped back. Alfonso flipped on the privacy field and said, "X y z z y." The screen went to encrypted and Alfonso unlocked his key by touching his thumb to the bioidentifier. "I really hope you've got good news for me," he said. "Anything else *isnot* going to go over well right now."

"You're the one who always tells me that concepts like 'good' and 'bad' are relative."

Alfonso sighed and slouched a bit.

Despite the scrambling, he could hear amusement in his companion's voice. "However, this news could only be considered bad relative to, say, winning the lottery." He paused for effect and then said, "We've got our first customer."

Alfonso blinked and perked up. "Wonderful!" Then he stopped to think. These were the same bozos who put the hotel entrance in plain sight. His voice bordering on distrust, he asked, "Did you get a good one?"

"You'll be pleased."

"Any difficulties?"

"No, it went off without a hitch. Your plan worked perfectly."

Alfonso smiled. "When can you start your hospitality service?"

5.10 Tuesday

The electronically scrambled voice replied, "We already have."

Alfonso beamed. "Fantastic! I'll be out there after the Dose closes."

"We'll be here." The connection cut.

Alfonso took a moment to hide his elation, and then turned off the privacy field. Judy was still there. He looked into the ghost's corner and asked, "Has our friend made any noise?"

She followed his gaze and then shook her head. She looked back to him and asked, "Who was on the phone?"

He grabbed a data pad and said, "No one you'd know." Ignoring her questioning glare, he walked over to the table nearest the bar. They didn't want anything, so he moved on to the next table. He could almost feel Judy's eyes boring into the back of his head, but he continued to ignore her.

Eventually, he worked around to a shalk's table. "Can I get you anything, honored sir?"

The shalk stared intently at him, sizing him up. "You don't look insane. Do you have a death wish?"

Alfonso blinked. "Excuse me, sir? Have I offended you?"

The shalk glanced into the darkened corner. "No one is ever knowingly rude to a ghost. And you threw a light at one!"

To Alfonso's knowledge, the shalk were the only beings who ever dealt with the ghosts. "So a ghost can kill a shalk?"

The shalk laughed. "The ghosts can do*anything*. You're very fortunate that they are less excitable than we are. I would have killed you instantly if you'd thrown that light at me."

Alfonso bowed. "Oh, but I would never consider throwing a light at one such as yourself."

5.11 Wednesday

The last of the Dose's patrons ambled out and Alfonso slapped his hands together. The last hours had dragged on forever. Excitedly, he said to Judy, "Could you clean up tonight? I've got to get somewhere."

"You got a date?"

He cocked his head at her. Lacing his voice with sarcasm, he said, "Sure," and started for the nanocurtain.

"What's up, Alfonso?"

He stopped and looked back. "Judy, in all the time we've known each other, have you ever told me *everything*?"

She crossed her arms and stared at him, not answering.

He nodded. "Not even when we thought we loved each other?"

She flinched slightly, causing Alfonso to regret dredging it up. That had been the one time in each of their lives when they'd been truly happy.

She immediately covered her discomfort with a quip. "Oh no. Especially not then."

Alfonso exhaled slowly. She was lying, of course. As was he; "Neither have I." He walked out.

5.12 Thursday

Alfonso walked much more quickly than normal toward home. Although there was a reasonably large supply of human psuits at each airlock, his personal one had a few extra features he needed. Besides, if he didn't sign for a renter, he didn't need to explain to anyone why he was going outside.

He turned a corner and saw Slimmerr leaning against a wall. Alfonso smiled. He hadn't seen her in a few days. As he approached he called out, "Hey, Slimmerr. That tip of yours really helped me out."

She turned to him and smiled, showing her long teeth. "Alfonso Tanaka, a human capable of surviving a hit from a manta assassin. You are an interesting one."

Alfonso got a good look at her face and stopped dead in his tracks. Her left eye had swollen shut. The whiskers on her right side were gone. Tufts of hair from her face and upper body had been torn off, showing pink, aggravated flesh below. There was a partially healed gash running from her right shoulder, across her chest and into her scant clothes, probably crossing her top left breast. Her tail drooped between her legs and had a compression wrap in the center.

His voice preoccupied, he said, "Well, I couldn't have done it without your help."

She laughed hollowly. "That's not how I heard it."

Alfonso paused. Why didn't she bring up her wounds? It would be impolite for him to ask about them. She looked at him expectantly, but the eye he could see had lost some of its fire. Screw politeness. "Slimmerr, who did this to you?"

5.13 Friday

Slimmerr sighed. "I'm working, Alfonso. I can't talk about that now."

He looked up and down the corridor. Not a soul in sight. Was she being watched? Or did she just not want to talk about it? One way to find out. In a loud voice, he said, "Hey baby, I like to play rough too. How much for you to come back to my place?"

She squinted her still functioning eye at him for a second, then nodded. "A thousand an hour."

"An hour? That's not nearly long enough. You got a bulk rate for spending the whole night?"

She pushed herself away from the wall, flinching as she bent her back. Somehow managing to look sexy despite the damage, she sauntered over to him and put an arm around his shoulders. "We'll work something out. Lead the way."

He slid his arm around her waist and she flinched again. She had cuts on her back too. Touching as gingerly as he could, he said, "This way, baby."

They didn't say much of consequence the rest of the way to his place. She said the kinds of things a prostitute would say and he replied appropriately in his loud, "obnoxious client" voice. While he would normally have preferred to walk, this time he took the nearest lift/shuttle.

At the door to his quarters he held his palm to a bioreader and it took a tiny sample of his DNA. That activated a pad, on which he typed his access code. These locking mechanisms were standard, but his door had further precautions. He glanced into the nanocamera he'd hidden above the palm pad and let it scan his retina. Then he blinked twice in quick succession. That disabled the internal defenses. Three times would have set them to kill his companion.

The door opened and they stepped through. As soon as it shut, he spun around to face her. Still speaking in his obnoxious voice, he said, "Wait a minute. You don't record these things do you? I like my privacy, ya know."

Slimmer shook her head. "Of course not."

"I don't trust you." He grabbed a sweeper and fired it at her. Thousands of hunter/killer bots surrounded her body and destroyed any tiny recording devices she might have been wearing. Reverting to his normal voice, he said, "There you go. Now, what can I do to help?"

5.14 Saturday

She sighed and slumped against the door. "You already are. I'm in no shape to be standing out there, and I was really worried that I'd get a client, especially the kind of sick bastard who'd be interested in me now."

Alfonso looked around his small quarters. They were a mess, as always, but he figured Slimmer had seen worse. He grabbed the chair from in front of his terminals and tried to wheel it over to her, but its legs hit the bed and got stuck. Finally he picked it up and carried it over. "Here. Sit down."

She sank into the chair and sighed. "Thanks, Alfonso."

He sat on the edge of the bed. "You're most welcome. Now, what's going on?"

She frowned and looked at her feet.

"Slimmer, you can tell me." When she didn't respond immediately he dropped back into his obnoxious voice. "Considering what I'm paying you to be here, you'd better!"

She looked up at him and grinned. "I really appreciate this, Alfonso, but I don't want to tell you. You'll go after them and that'll just get you killed."

He sighed. "Slimmer, dear, there have been very few times in my life when there wasn't at least one group out to kill me. Right now there are about three. Adding another isn't going to drastically change things."

"But none of them are like this."

Alfonso thought about the ghost in his bar. "You'd be surprised."

She thought for a moment, sighed, and said, "Ever heard of the Symbarri Syndicate?"

5.15 Sunday

Alfonso shook his head.

Slimmer absently licked the back of her hand and rubbed it over her swollen eye. "There are two types of criminals in this sector: small time operators and members of the Syndicate. Prostitution isn't quite legal, but no one seems to care much about it. That put me in the first group."

"Put? Past tense?"

She nodded. "Two days ago, I got unionized."

"So the Syndicate is moving into prostitution?"

She rolled her shoulder back and flinched. "Not exactly. As I understand it, the Syndicate never does anything as a whole. They're an enormous operation of individuals. You only know the people you work with and your immediate boss. And he only knows his immediate boss. If you were to ever learn who your boss's boss is, your boss would die very quickly for giving you too much information. No one knows how many levels there are, or who's at the top. And a cut of everything you bring in goes up the chain."

Alfonso started to understand. "So, a local Syndicate member decided to go into the prostitution business and take part of your revenue."

She nodded. "None of us liked the idea, but I was the most vocal in my opposition to it."

"And so you found yourself in your present condition. I suppose your new boss is requiring that you work your corner as an example to the other girls."

She closed her eye and nodded.

"Who's your boss, Slimmer?"

She clenched her teeth, leaned back in her chair, and said nothing.

"Slimmer, I will find out. But the more people I have to talk to, the more likely someone will learn who was asking."

5.16 Monday

Slimmer let loose a depressed sigh and opened her eye. Staring at Alfonso intently, she said, "If you get killed over this, I'm going to be very disappointed in you."

Alfonso smiled. "I'll endeavor not to let you down."

She hesitated again, then said, "My Symbarri boss is a botiira named Forrea."

Alfonso leaned back and whistled. "Something would be truly wrong with the universe if a lousy botiira were allowed to get away with beating up a manta."

"But if you kill him, his superior will probably draw a connection to us."

Alfonso sat up straight, held a hand over his chest, and spoke in his best innocent voice. "Kill him? I'm not a killer." He leaned forward. "Besides, this will take some time. And, sadly, I can probably only afford to take you off the street for tonight. Will you be okay for a few days with him or should we put you into hiding?"

She clenched her teeth and arched her back to stretch. "I'll be okay."

He stood. "Good. Now, I've got some other business to attend to. As my slave for the night, I order you to get into bed and stay there. I'm going to set my sensors to tell me how long you've slept, and if it's not ninety five percent of the time I'm gone, I'll whip you myself."

She stood and stepped alongside him next to the bed. She looked down at it and Alfonso followed her gaze. A blur shot by at the very edge of his peripheral vision. Before he could react, he felt her hand grab the back of his neck. She instantly pulled him in and kissed him squarely on the lips. Her lips were warm, but her nose was cold and her fur tickled a bit.

She held the kiss for a moment, then released him. Her hand slid from the back of his neck to his cheek

and she stared deep into his eyes. "Humans are *not* the worst thing to ever happen to us, as I've heard people claim. Some humans are good and some are very bad. You're a good one, Alfonso."

He stroked the soft fur of her hand and then stepped back. "Don't be so sure."

5.17 Tuesday

Slimmerr shrugged and gingerly climbed into the small bed. "I'm sure nonetheless." She curled up into a ball, by stretching her legs out and holding them with her hands. Alfonso suppressed a chuckle. She was taking up the entire bed. She closed her unhurt eye and said, "Thanks again, Alfonso."

Alfonso hit a key on one of his terminals and said, "Voice print authorization grant for climate control. He looked back to the bed and said, "Say something, Slimmerr."

Leaving her eyes closed, she smiled. "Something, Slimmerr."

Alfonso rolled his eyes and looked back to the screen. It said, "Authorization granted."

He pulled out a value transfer card and looked down at her tight, skimpy clothes. "If you're hiding a value card in there somewhere, I'm impressed."

Still keeping her eyes closed, she held up an arm and flexed her wrist. "It's subdermal."

That made sense, especially for someone in her profession. Alfonso, however, preferred the greater anonymity allowed by having separate cards that weren't attached to him. "So, what's the bulk rate? Four thousand?"

"Make it three. You're a good negotiator."

He held his card near her wrist and transferred the value. Then he said, "Okay. The environmental controls are standard and there's some stuff in the foodstore. Don't open the door for anyone and don't even think about going outside. I'll be gone for a fairly long time."

Suddenly both her eyes shot open, causing her to wince and close the hurt one. "Wait a minute. Forrea will never believe that a customer paid three thousand and then left me here. If he's watching your door, I'll catch hell."

5.18 Wednesday

Alfonso bent down and kissed Slimmerr's cheek. While down there he whispered, "The truly paranoid hate to spend time in places that have only one exit. Don't worry about it. Go to sleep."

She nodded and closed her eye again.

Alfonso stepped over to the closet and removed his personal psuit. Aside from two small rectangles for his eyes, it was entirely black. The majority of the suit was extremely thin and durable, made of synthetic spider silk woven so tightly that its gaps were smaller than air molecules. However, four air tanks occupied the back. Double redundancy was for the reckless.

The chest, arms, legs, and hood were all fully slit open, revealing a harness for the tanks. Alfonso slipped the harness over his shoulders and then set about closing up the suit. He pulled the two halves of one of the legs around his ankle and touched them together. Nanobots immediately stitched the seam together and worked their way up his leg. He did the same for the other leg and then pulled treaded boots over his other foot coverings. More bots stitched the boots to the psuit legs. Within half a minute, the suit covered

him entirely, and he was breathing through the tanks. Small numbers appeared in the lower corners of his eye slits, showing that all four tanks were full and that they were in scavenge mode, constantly compressing in ambient air to keep themselves full.

"Lights, off." The room's lights turned off and his eyepieces automatically went into nightfinder mode, but then, on finding no ambient light, switched to infrared. Now he could see Slimmerr and other heat producing items clearly. Of course, he didn't show up in infrared. If his suit had let heat radiate out, he'd freeze while outside.

He stretched his arms over his head and moved around a bit, reorienting his body to the suit's encumbrance. When moving felt natural again, he entered the bathroom and closed the door. In English, he said, "Open sez me. Six four, nine eh gee."

5.19 Thursday

There were no sources of heat, nor sources of light in the closed bathroom. But Alfonso had practiced this particular maneuver with a blindfold on. What could be the point in having an escape route if a little thing like blindness kept him from using it?

Running his hand along the wall, he found the newly opened doorway and reached into it. There was a metal rung on the other side of a small expanse, which he grabbed with both hands. He stepped through the doorway into an area with no floor and let his body swing down against the opposite wall. "Batten down the hatches." He released the rung with one hand and reached back to verify that the doorway had closed. He then ran his hand down the slick wall and found another rung by his thigh. Someone with a shorter arm span than his would have trouble negotiating this path. A shalk without a rope wouldn't have a prayer.

He grabbed the lower rung, locked his arm, shifted his weight, and slid his other hand down to the rung. Then he unlocked his arm and lowered himself past another rung. He executed the maneuver again and then reached back. His hand encountered a panel with a large button in the center. He pressed the button and said, "The rain in Spain falls mainly down the drain." The panel slid up and he kicked his leg back. It found a ledge. He pushed himself across and said "Its me. Lights on." There was a slight pause as the sensors analyzed his voice, then the lights came on.

Alfonso found himself in a bathroom very similar to the one he'd just left. He glanced into the opening and looked down. There were no new obstructions or obvious signs of tampering. It was good to know that he was the only one who'd co-opted the use of this air duct. After all, it was a convenient one. It ran vertically the entire depth of the spaceport, and, other than those three rungs many levels above the base, it provided no easy way to climb out. If he ever needed to use this exit in an emergency, anyone who tried to follow him would be in for a rude awakening.

He closed the hatch and stepped out into a room with the same layout as the one above. However, since he rarely came down here, these quarters were less messy. He checked the nanocam outputs by the door and verified that no one was in the hallway. This was a mixed race floor, but he didn't want to draw attention to his secondary room.

Alfonso opened the door a bit and slid out. It locked behind him and he walked at a quick pace toward the nearest lift/shuttle entrance. In ten minutes he'd be outside.

5.20 Friday

Alfonso walked up to the airlock and hit the "cycle" button. A bored-looking sliss, who'd been curled up on a chair behind a counter, popped his head up. "Hey, you in the sstupid massk. You can't go out sere!"

Alfonso put his hands on his hips. "Why not?"

"You want to breas don't you? You have to check out a pssuit." It pointed with its tail to a rack behind it. An assortment of bulky psuits with bubble helmets and single tanks hung on the rack. Alfonso shook his head and stepped into the airlock.

He heard the sliss say, "Sstupid humans. Sink sey can breas vacuum." Ignoring the ignorant sliss, Alfonso checked his tank readouts and hit the interior "cycle" button on the wall. The inner door closed and the air was pumped out. As soon as the air got too thin, the numbers in the eyepieces showed that all four tanks switched out of scavenge mode. The outer door opened and revealed Jasper's rocky surface.

Alfonso stepped out and looked around. Here only a small part of Frakar spaceport rose above the surface, enough to hold the airlock, the elevator, the spare psuits, and not much else. On the horizon, a scant hundred and fifty meters away, he could see two large cargo ships on the landing pads. One of them hadn't unloaded yet--a large tube snaked out of the ground and attached itself to the ship's cargo hatch. The other ship was preparing for takeoff. It rolled up to the entrance of the launch railgun and came to a rest. Its supporting platform pitched forward, dipping its nose downward. The ship seemed to bore into the surface as it entered the launch tube, and most of it disappeared from view. It paused again, showing only its tail, and then raced away. Alfonso didn't bother trying to see it fly into space on the other end of the tube. The railgun went at an almost straight line through Jasper, to erupt out well beyond the horizon.

Jasper's planet, Graget, was high in the dark sky, its orange and blue surface gases swirling together impressively, as they had for the last month. That meant the gas miners were still trying to deal with bad storms. Alfonso stomped the firm ground below his feet and thanked himself for choosing to tend bar rather than to mine gas.

The distant star Graget orbited, Sustan, hung low in the sky, but provided enough light for him to see the terrain ahead. Using a pair of distant rock formations to orient himself, Alfonso turned and muttered a string of coordinates. A compass with a blue destination dot appeared in his eyepieces. The blue dot was just a few degrees left of center. Not bad for a visual. Alfonso turned left, centering the dot, and started walking.

5.21 Saturday

Walking on Jasper was largely a lesson in trying to keep a straight course while tracking around large craters. In the absence of an erosive atmosphere, most of the things that hit the moon left calling cards that lasted forever. But one of the craters was more significant than the rest. Alfonso paused at the edge of the largest crater on the moon and mused at the incredibly dense, yet small hunk of matter buried deep below it. The shalk claimed that they had used these dense seeds to set the gravity of each of the inhabited areas in shalk-controlled space. However, if they really had, none of them knew how to do it anymore. And there was a controversial study on Shalk Prime that seemed to indicate that its gravity had also been modified. So people tended to chuckle when they referred to "Shalk Standard Gravity." Of course, they kept their mirth to themselves when in the presence of shalk.

Alfonso told himself that he was stopping at the crater out of curiosity. But, in reality, he needed the rest. He had walked for about half an hour and had that much more time to go. He'd been taking it easy, keeping his pace brisk and his strides long, without exerting himself too much. But he kept passing things he had seen on the horizon, and that made him feel as though he'd walked forever. Because the gravity was so close to what he'd grown up with on Earth, his mind refused to believe the horizon wasn't similarly far away. He sighed, took another look at the deep crater, and pressed on.

Another half hour later, his readouts showed that three of his tanks were at three-quarters full. One was lower, implying that it had a slight leak he'd need to check later. He glanced back at the compass and the blue dot was gone. Alfonso stopped. He'd either arrived, or his extremely reliable equipment had just gone haywire. He looked around and found the boulder he'd wanted them to use to hide the "hotel's" access hatch. That meant the hatch had to be right about . . . he turned left and looked down. There it was, right out in the open--a small hatch about a meter by a meter and a half. It was a good thing he'd required that the hotel go in a remote location--a third of the way around Jasper from Frakar Spaceport.

The hatch had a knocker on top. He pounded it three times quickly, waited a second, and hit it once more. The hatch sunk in and slid back, exposing a gravel ramp leading down into darkness. If he'd realized they weren't going to follow his specs, he would have designed the hatch to allow camouflage from above. Alfonso's eyepieces went into nightfinder mode, and he had little trouble seeing the thick steel door at the base of the ramp. Then the hatch closed, leaving him in complete darkness. A light came on by the door, and a card popped out of a slot. He grabbed the card and interfaced it to his eyepieces. They'd finally done something right. As it was supposed to, the card contained a large, randomly generated number. Alfonso digitally signed the number and shoved the card back into the slot. They'd be able to check his signature and verify that it was him, even though they didn't really know who he was.

A second later, the door opened, revealing a long corridor of roughly hewn rock with temporary lights attached to the low ceiling. At the end of the corridor stood a human in a suit identical to Alfonso's, all black with only small clear rectangles over the eyes. Alfonso had never seen this man's face and knew little of his identity. They both intended to keep it that way.

When Alfonso reached the end of the corridor, the man's electronically garbled voice came over the short-range radio. "Welcome to the Hotel."

Alfonso also garbled his voice. "You Ulysses?"

The figure nodded.

Alfonso pointed over his shoulder. "That ramp was supposed to be a trapdoor over a deep pit. And there were supposed to be disrupters every meter in here."

5.22 Sunday

His associate, who went by the code name "Ulysses," shrugged. "Sue me. It just didn't happen."

Alfonso pointed at him. "If you ever come under attack, you're going to get fried. I'll bet you didn't even put in the secondary escape route."

By not answering, Ulysses confirmed his suspicions. Alfonso was extremely glad he didn't intend to come down here very often. The figure turned, "Come on, I'll take you inside. How's your air?"

Alfonso considered mentioning the leaking tank, but decided against it. This guy's work was too sloppy for Alfonso to trust him with vital equipment. "Air's fine, why? Don't you have air inside?"

The annoyance played through the garbling, "Yeah, we got air inside." Ulysses led him to an elevator, and they rode it a long way down. The door opened on a tiny room with rough stone walls and nothing but the elevator door on one side and an airlock door on the other. The lock pumped in air, causing Alfonso's tanks to go back into scavenge mode. They'd refill shortly. A mist seemed to descend on Alfonso and Ulysses. It surrounded them head to toe for a second, then dissipated. Alfonso was surprised to find that all traces of dust had been removed from his suit. He hadn't expected Ulysses to be so careful.

When the lock's inner door opened, Alfonso was treated to another surprise. After seeing so few of his plans followed, he was expecting more shoddy work in here. But instead of low ceilings and dim lights, he found a giant room with polished steel walls. The entire floor was covered with an anti-static mat, and the ceiling high above had permanent, high intensity lights that bathed the entire room and left no shadows. There was not a spec of dust anywhere.

The room was full of various forms of equipment, ranging from large nanofactories to simple acetylene torches. Eleven other people, also dressed in tight, face-hiding psuits, worked at various desks and tables around the room. Two in the corner were arguing animatedly about something, but they were too far away for Alfonso to follow their conversation. Three other people were huddled around one of four large windows at the far end of the room. Despite the pressure suits, it was obvious that every single person in the room was a human.

Alfonso pointed to the windows. "Are those the suites?"

5.23 Monday

Ulysses nodded.

"You put in four?"

Ulysses nodded again. "We've been considering parallelizing the hospitality service, so one wouldn't have been enough."

As Alfonso looked around again, his eyes stopped on two large devices. "Dios mio. Are those megawatt generators?"

"No. They're *two* -megawatt generators. And we have four of them."

"Sou desu ka." Alfonso's opinion of Ulysses reluctantly started to rise. The man didn't have an appropriate feel for the danger of his situation, but perhaps he was good at his job nonetheless. "How's the hospitality service going?"

"Slow, as we expected. Here, let me show you the current program."

They walked over toward the window with the humans in front of it. As he passed one of the desks, Alfonso took note of a display lying on top. It showed a long list with the first few items checked off. He could just make out the first non-checked item: "standard fire."

When they reached the window Alfonso gruffed internally that the people in front didn't move aside to better let him see. Still, the window was big enough that they didn't block his vision entirely. On the other side was a small room with dirty walls. Two nozzles hung down from the ceiling and soundlessly shot flames at the center of the far wall. It appeared that there was something behind the onslaught, but Alfonso couldn't make it out.

One of the people in front of Alfonso nodded and said, "That's enough." The fire subsided, revealing a bored-looking female shalk pinned against the wall by a thick steel bar.

5.24 Tuesday

Although he'd devised this plan himself and was not surprised by the presence of the shalk, Alfonso was surprised by his reaction to seeing her. What had seemed to be a perfectly good idea on paper now gave him chills in person.

The shalk waited for the bar to descend into the floor and then walked away from the wall, none the worse for wear. She said something, but no sound came through to the main room.

Ulysses chuckled, "We shut off the speakers. All she ever does is swear at us. You know these shalk. They just don't appreciate science."

Keeping his tone neutral, Alfonso asked, "You *did* get a good one, didn't you? "

Ulysses stared at him for a second before answering. "You're not having second thoughts, are you?"

Alfonso shrugged.

"Well, don't worry yourself over Myrana Thutote Aximushi there. Where most shalk are content to just annihilate all humans that step in front of them at the wrong time, she's turned abuse into an art form. The first ten or fifteen people she ran into she only maimed, cutting off a leg here, a hand there. But recently she's learned that if she tunes her baton to a tight enough beam she can fire it through a human's eye and only fry enough of his brain to render him stupid. We picked her up on the Kiree home world, where lobotomized patients were starting to fill up the medical wards."

Alfonso looked back at the shalk in the "hotel suite." She was pacing back and forth, shaking her finger at the window and yelling something at them. He turned back to Ulysses. "If you find a way to brace her shields, you'll kill her quickly."

"Actually, I was planning on seeing what a needle through her eye would do."

Alfonso pushed all uncertainty from his voice and commanded, "No. You will kill her quickly and that's it."

One of the scientists by the window looked back at him. Ulysses held his tongue for a second, then nodded. "Yeah, sure. You're the boss."

Alfonso nodded. "So you got her on the Kiree home world. And you're sure didn't leave a trail back to here?"

Ulysses nodded. Alfonso momentarily regretted the psuit. He would have liked to search for traces of guilt in Ulysses' face. This was the same man who had built a research center with only one exit.

"So, what tests have you run so far?"

"Well, we quickly tried all the standard weaponry in use by the various non-shalk races. Not surprisingly, none of it had any effect. Since then we've tried extreme cold, an eight-megawatt discharge, various forms of acid, and now flame throwers. After we verify that she wasn't affected by the fire, we'll move on to extreme heat."

Alfonso nodded and turned his back to the window. "It looks like you're running a tight ship here."

Ulysses bowed his head in acknowledgment. "We like to think so. I just wish we could find the guy who killed that bartender and ask him how he did it. It'd save us a lot of time."

With a shrug, Alfonso said, "Or it would bias your research. We're almost as interested in what doesn't work as what does. And knowing one answer can blind you to others. Besides, we've been planning this place too long to let one assassin make it all for naught."

"Assassin?"

Alfonso nodded. "Yeah, the shalk recently caught a manta assassin who had the missing hand."

Ulysses whistled. "Any word on what they're going to do with him?"

"I haven't heard yet."

"Well, I wouldn't want to be that guy."

Despite the grim feelings gnawing at his heart, Alfonso smiled. "Neither would I."

5.25 Wednesday

Alfonso looked around the "hotel" again, and nodded. "I must say. This place turned out better than I expected. Keep up the good work."

Ulysses nodded. "Thank you."

"So, you have people working on the annihilation batons?"

Ulysses directed him to far end of the room, where two people hunched over a table and stared at an annihilation baton with its casing removed. They were tracing minuscule circuits by sight, so their psuit eyepieces must have been on magnification.

One of them, a woman by body shape, looked up as Alfonso and Ulysses approached. "Who's he?"

"Athena, meet our benefactor, Zeus."

She quickly sat up straight and held out a suited hand. "Pleased to meet you."

Alfonso smiled again. He had little idea what she looked like, and the electronic garbling on her suit radio insured that he'd never be able to tell her by voice. "To the degree that we're meeting, yes. How's it going?"

She sighed. "Bloody slowly. The tech here is beyond wild. It destroys all bots we send near it, making it damn hard to trace. And, tracing by visual isn't teaching us much. We think we may have found the general area of the power source, but that's about it."

Ulysses quickly interjected. "There's no human in light years who's better at reverse engineering strange technology than Athena. If anyone can figure this out, it's her."

Alfonso held up a hand, "I understand Ulysses." He turned back to Athena, "Don't worry. I've asked you to undertake an almost impossible task. Their job," he pointed over his shoulder at the suites, "is considerably easier than yours. At least they know it's possible for a shalk to die. So, I'm not expecting miracles out of you."

She relaxed visibly.

"Of course, if you want to send me a miracle, I'm not going to complain."

She laughed, and Alfonso said, "Don't let me interrupt your work." He stepped away.

5.26 Thursday

The chills running down Alfonso's back told him it was time leave this place. Walking back into the center of the room, he asked, "So is there anything else I should see before I go?"

Ulysses paused for a moment, then said, "Well, I'd like to introduce you to the head of the anti-shield effort. But I have to warn you, his personality isn't the easiest to deal with."

Alfonso shrugged. "Don't worry about my feelings. They're armor plated."

They walked over to the two people Alfonso had seen arguing earlier. One of them said, "Wait a minute. What if we shook it violently? Maybe we could get its internal organs to crash together hard enough to hurt it." Alfonso clenched his teeth.

"Won't work," the other said. "If it did, then they'd be susceptible to long falls, and they're not. Their shields must have some sort of dampening effect."

"Then maybe we can find a frequency that beats the effect--Ulysses, who the hell is that?"

Ulysses sighed. "Apollo, meet Zeus."

Before Alfonso could say anything, Apollo said, "Oh, so it's Mr. Moneybags. I suppose you want me to kiss your ring?"

Alfonso shook his head and replied in an equally gruff tone, "No, I want you to come up with a way to kill a shalk."

"Well, I can't do that while wasting time talking with you, now can I?"

"Then by all means, get back to work." Alfonso stepped back.

As they walked back toward the elevator, Ulysses said, "I warned you."

Alfonso shrugged. "I don't care if he accuses me of sleeping with manta prostitutes. So long as having him around makes our chances of success better than they would be without him, he's good by me."

Ulysses nodded. "Most of us have learned to tolerate him. His ideas are good enough that the rest have grudgingly agreed that slitting open his psuit and shoving him out the door would probably not be a good idea."

5.27 Friday

Alfonso nodded, "Good, I'll leave you to your work then. You'll inform me, of course, the instant you learn anything."

"Of course."

Alfonso held out his hand. "You don't need to show me out. Thanks for the tour of the facility, Ulysses."

Ulysses took the hand firmly and shook it. "Hey, you paid for it."

As Alfonso stepped into the airlock he thought to himself, "Sort of."

A few minutes later he was outside and watching the hatch close. Had he ever done anything like this before? He sighed. Yeah, he had. And he'd regretted it then too. In some ways, he was worse than Judy. He mumbled a string of coordinates, causing the compass to reappear, this time with two dots, a blue and a yellow. He would take a different path home. If anyone saw him leave it would be dangerous for him to come back from the same direction. He set off in the direction of the blue dot, staring at the horizon as he went.

About twenty minutes into the trip, he saw a flash at the leftmost edge of his vision. He jerked his head in that direction but only saw rock formations. He looked back in the direction of the blue dot. This path home already took him out of his way. Going off to investigate a strange flash would mean getting back even later. Still, he had plenty of air, and if Slimmerr weren't safe in his quarters, he was already too late to do anything about it. He looked back toward where he'd seen the flash and thought for a moment. "What the hell." He headed that way.

With such a close horizon, if something was moving away from him, it wouldn't take long for it to go out of sight. Alfonso scanned back and forth across the horizon and picked up the pace. Sustan was behind him, so the star's light might have glinted off of something. But what? All he saw was rocks.

When he passed another rock formation, something metallic appeared on the horizon. Alfonso slowed his pace. As he approached, the object rose up into his view. It was fairly large, maybe the forward nose of a ship. He cautiously advanced and found that it was, in fact, a ship--one that landed on its tail. The ship must have come in quickly and fired tail rockets just before it landed. That would hide it from observation by the spaceport and by ships taking off through the railgun. It would also explain why he saw a brief flash instead of a long descent. The rockets must have fired just before the ship went beyond his horizon.

5.28 Saturday

Alfonso headed for a nearby rock formation. Hiding behind it, he was able to check out the ship. It had no noticeable viewports and was unmarked. Alfonso set his eyepieces to magnify and scanned it over again, but this only revealed a hatch near the base.

A treaded surface vehicle approached on a straight-line path from the spaceport. Alfonso set his short-range radio to scan through the usable frequencies, looking for communication between the vehicle and the ship. It didn't find anything.

The vehicle rolled alongside the ship and stopped. The ship's hatch opened, and a humanoid figure with four arms stepped out. A botiira. Alfonso blinked and increased his magnification. It looked like the botiira wasn't wearing a psuit. A four-armed figure in a psuit stepped out of the vehicle. Then it reached up and removed its bubble helmet.

Alfonso switched to maximum magnification and verified that neither of them was wearing any sort of face mask. Didn't they need to breathe? Was that why botiira seemed so creepy? Had his eyes subconsciously picked up on the fact that their chests didn't rise and fall? But why had the one in the surface vehicle worn a psuit? Could they only survive in a vacuum for a short period of time? Or were they trying to hide their ability to do so from the other races?

The two botiira stood facing each other. Their lips didn't move, but that wasn't surprising. Sound needs air to travel. Their hands weren't moving either. So what were they doing? Were they communicating? How? Did they have built in radios? Alfonso's own radio was still cycling and wasn't picking anything up. Maybe their radios were very short range?

Then he noticed their blinking. Like all Botiira, these two blinked rapidly. But, if they could exist in a vacuum, then they weren't blinking for the same reason humans did. Were they using it to communicate?

Alfonso muttered, "How in God's name did a race like this evolve?"

He watched them for another minute, when suddenly the one from the ship looked back. Alfonso zoomed out and saw that another botiira had come out. After blinking at the first botiira for a few seconds, the new one pointed in Alfonso's direction.

5.29 Sunday

Alfonso realized that, with his radio scanning frequencies, he'd probably just broadcast the last thing he said. As he ran away from the ship, he turned the radio off and swore, "Shimatta!" His heart pounding, he kept looking over his shoulder as he raced ahead. As soon as the tip of the ship disappeared below the horizon, he turned left and headed in the direction of the blue dot. Were they following? What would they do? What kind of weaponry did they have with them? He only had a small disrupter. It wouldn't do much against the surface vehicle.

A few minutes later, Alfonso saw a bright light. He looked to the left and saw the ship rising into the sky. He verified that his radio was off and muttered, "Sorry to cut your meeting short." Then he picked up the pace. The vehicle would be along soon. When another rock formation appeared on the horizon, Alfonso sprinted for it. Wearing black, he'd be hard to see. If he could get behind the rocks, the vehicle would likely drive right by. He reached the formation, ran around it, and then leaned back, panting heavily. "I need a more cardiovascular job. Bartending is making me fall out of shape." He checked his air levels. They were dropping quickly due to his exertion. He wouldn't be able to run the whole way back to the spaceport. But if he walked from here, he would be fine. Of course, it didn't help that one of his tanks was leaking. Alfonso swore again. If the vehicle had the right kind of sensors, it would be able to pick up the leaking tank.

He rested against the rock formation and waited for ten minutes. Deciding that the vehicle must have missed him, he said, "Take me back to the station." The yellow dot disappeared, and the blue one moved. Alfonso aimed for the blue dot and took off at a brisk pace. He kept looking over his shoulder, but didn't see anything. Of course, the vehicle could have been less than two hundred meters away without his being able to see it. Fortunately, the converse was also true.

On reaching the station, he entered through a different airlock than the one he'd used on the way out. No sense in giving the psuit sliss any ideas. The botiira, however, had been wearing a standard-issue psuit and had used a standard vehicle. Alfonso made a mental note to acquire access to the rental logs.

He took a shuttle over to his lower quarters. As the door shut behind him, he breathed a sigh of relief. The suit split along his face, freeing his head and giving him a chance to take a welcome breath of fresh air. This suit was about as comfortable as they came, but he would still be glad to get out of it. He retraced his path through the air vent, which was more difficult on ascent than descent, and entered his quarters' bathroom. When he stepped out, he heard a gasp and frantic movement.

5.30 Monday

"Quarter power, lights on," Alfonso said quickly.

Slimmerr was standing naked on the bed with her claws extended and death in her eyes. It took her a second to recognize him before she retracted her claws and closed her hurt eye. Alfonso struggled to focus on her face. Some humans felt that nudity had no effect for a creature covered in fur. They were wrong.

"How are you doing, Slimmerr?" On his removal of the psuit, his back rejoiced at no longer straining to carry the air tanks. He hung the suit in the closet.

"I've been sleeping well. Yourr bed is verry comforrrtable."

"Good, because it's yours for the night."

"Yourrs too."

He shook his head. "That bed is not big enough for the two of us. Especially not the way you sleep."

She smiled, "Have you forgotten my chosen profession? I can sleep in any position you'd like me to."

"I don't think so, Slimmer."

With a frown, she said, "Come on, Alfonso. I only bite on request."

He took a step closer. "I've been sweating in that suit for hours now. I must stink horribly. I'm sure you'd rather that I sleep on the floor over there."

Her face fell, and she looked at the floor. "Am I really so hideous now? You don't have to have sex with me. Just hold me for one night."

Alfonso immediately crossed the remaining distance between them, grabbed her under her arms and lifted her off the bed. Putting his face right in front of hers, he said, "No, you are not hideous. Even beaten up, you're probably one of the sexiest creatures I've ever seen. Now, get into that bed. Do you know the spoons position?"

The fur near her eye glistened as she smiled. She quickly kissed him on the cheek and said, "It's my favorite."

She lay down on the bed, and Alfonso climbed in alongside her. He most definitely did keep his clothes on, though.

5.31 Tuesday

Though The Daily Dose was exceptionally busy, Alfonso floated through the day on autopilot. Running a bar had seemed like a good idea back when, but on days like this it really began to feel like work. He glanced over to Judy, who was busily waiting on a table. She looked as worn out as he felt.

She arranged the plates from her tray in front of the table's occupants, two botiira and a manta. "That's strange," Alfonso mused. "The manta and the botiira generally hate each other." Alfonso frowned. Did one of the botiira look familiar? Judy placed the last plate, turned back toward the bar, and, while brushing a lock of her red hair out of her face, looked at him with tired eyes.

Suddenly, a bit of movement behind her caught Alfonso's attention. The manta drew a handgun from a leg holster and stood up. Alfonso's eyes went wide, and his hand shot behind the bar. He drew his own gun and aimed it at the manta at the same instant the manta got his trained on Judy. That Judy hadn't reacted in time to Alfonso's glare was a testament to how tired she was.

The manta declared, "Alfonso Tanaka, we of the Syndicate would very much like for you to teach us how to kill a shalk." He extended the claws of his free hand and wrapped them around Judy's throat while placing the barrel of his gun against her temple.

How had the Symbari found out? Were they the cause of Emmanuelle's disappearance? Alfonso stared deeply into Judy's eyes. He couldn't give the manta the information he demanded. That would make the Symbari too powerful. Did Judy understand?

Judy returned his gaze and held it longingly for a moment. Then she looked down and back up, effectively nodding with her eyes. Keeping his eyes locked on hers, Alfonso said, "I can't tell you that."

The manta laughed. "Can't, orr won't? You know what I'll do to herr."

Alfonso said, "There is only one person in the universe you could use against me in this way."

His voice showing his pride in himself, the manta said, "I know. And I've got herr. If you don't tell me what I want to know, I'll torturre herr slowly forr*hours* . Would you put herr through that?"

With a deep sigh, Alfonso tried to apologize with his eyes. Judy pulled her face into a tight frown, but held his gaze evenly. Still keeping his eyes locked on hers, Alfonso said, "No, I wouldn't." He moved the gun down and to the right, now aiming for Judy's nose.

He pulled the trigger.

April 1998

6.1 Wednesday

Judy's head exploded, and her body crumpled to the ground. Alfonso fired again, this time killing the manta. As he stared down at what was left of Judy's body, his arm dropped to his side. The gun slid out of his hand. Some period of time later, maybe a second, maybe a minute, he felt something poke into his back.

A slow, nasal voice whispered into his ear. "If Alfonso is dead, then return: Bar is mine."

A portion of Alfonso's mind jumped into overdrive.*Botiira. Slow reflexes. Gun in lower right hand and against outer edge of my kidney. Can spin quickly enough to disarm him.* But the rest of his brain just stared down at Judy's body.*Why bother?*

The nanocurtain swished open, and Emmanuelle sauntered in. Alfonso blinked once and said, "It's good to see you're okay, Emmanuelle, but you've picked a lousy time to return."

She smiled. "I beg to differ, Alfonso. Since I'm here to see you die, I'd say my timing is perfect."

This struck Alfonso so off guard that it momentarily pushed his thoughts of Judy from his mind. "What?"

"How do you think your botiira friend there got into the Dose? I reprogrammed the curtain and bar defenses to allow him in."

Aghast, Alfonso stammered, "Why?"

"Because I have some extremely valuable knowledge. But I can only guarantee its worth if I am its sole proprietor." She laughed again. "Bye, Alfonso."

Enraged, Alfonso threw his right arm out and spun around. He felt his arm connect with the botiira's hand and knock the gun aside. But the instant he finished his spin, he felt another barrel against his temple. The botiira had a second gun in his upper left hand.

"If adversary is Alfonso Tanaka, then plan carefully." The botiira used two of his other hands to grab Alfonso's wrists and then said to Emmanuelle, "Query: Set bar is mine to true?"

Alfonso could hear the shrug in Emmanuelle's voice, "If you agree to make the changes we discussed."

The botiira nodded. "Agreed is true." His hand tightened around the unigrip of his gun. Alfonso shoved outward and twisted sideways. The gun went off, and pain erupted through his head. Feeling extremely dizzy, he tried to push again at the botiira. Instead he lost his balance and fell to his knees. A liquid ran into his eyes and stung. He pulled his head up and saw the botiira level the second gun on him. The

botiira squeezed. For the briefest of instants, Alfonso felt his chest get very warm.

* * *

Emmanuelle personally supervised the changes. The workers had torn down the old "Daily Dose" sign and were just attaching the new signs. The first, in big letters, said, "The Nightly Nosh." Directly below that, in slightly smaller letters hung a sign that said, "Fresh Bagels Cooked Daily." She nodded to herself. This would generate far better business. Bars were so passé.

The workers hung the last sign below the other two and then stepped back. In small letters, the final sign said, "April Fools Eat Free."

6.2 Thursday

Alfonso's body spasmed. His heart was pounding. His back was soaked in sweat. It was pitch black. He was disoriented. Something had been on his arm, but when he'd moved, he'd knocked it away. It made a noise, but he ignored it. He flailed about for a moment, then stopped and took a breath. He sat up and gasped, "Lights."

The lights came on at just quarter brightness, but they forced him to immediately shut his eyes to the glare. When he opened them again, he found himself sitting in bed in his quarters. Something seeped into his eyes and stung. He hastily ran his hand across his forehead. When he pulled it away he was relieved to find only sweat there.

Slimmerr picked herself up from the floor. "Alfonso, what's wrong?"

He took a few deep breaths. His heart began to calm its rapid beating. After a few more breaths, he finally started to relax. He lay back down and was annoyed by the cold, sweat-soaked shirt pressing against his back. Suddenly his eyes went wide. He sat back up and yelled, "Judy!"

He launched himself out of bed and tried to run to the wallscreen. But his legs got tangled up in the covers, causing him to trip and bang his head on a chair. Staying on his knees, he rubbed his head for a moment and then carefully extricated his feet from the blanket. He stood, took a breath, and walked calmly to the screen.

"Call Judy," he commanded.

The word "Connecting" appeared. A growing number of dots appeared next to it, each one pounding into Alfonso like a punch to the gut. When dots reached the edge of the screen, the words "No answer" appeared below them.

Alfonso fell back against to the wall and let his body slide down to the floor. He rested his head in his hands. "Did I kill her or not?"

6.3 Friday

Slimmerr crawled over to him on all fours, the look on her face one of intense concern. "Alfonso?"

Still disoriented, he looked at her for a moment. Then he jumped up and said, "I've got to find out."

Slimmerr stood up too. "Hold on. I don't know what this is about, but let me find my clothes, and I'll come with you."

Alfonso looked her over and nodded. "There's a unisuit in the closet. I think it'll fit you."

She carefully pulled on the tight stretch pants. Then she gritted her teeth and pulled the top over her head. The unisuit now covered her from neck to ankles. Alfonso said, "I think there are some boots in there too, but you probably don't want them."

Slimmerr laughed. "Alfonso, dearr, if you everr see a manta wearing shoes, you'rre looking at an impostorr."

Despite what Alfonso secretly hoped, Judy *was not* waiting for them right outside the door. The corridors were empty. They took a shuttle over to Judy's section, but when they got off Alfonso paused. Slimmerr just looked at him expectantly.

"She has to be alive. I'm alive, so it must have been a dream. I don't need to go check."

Slimmerr shook her head. "You wouldn't have come out here if that was true."

Alfonso looked at her for a second and then nodded. He waked over to Judy's door and hit the call button. They waited for a minute, but there was no answer.

6.4 Saturday

Slimmerr shrugged. "So, maybe she's out."

Alfonso mumbled, "I didn't kill her. It was a dream. I didn't kill her. It was a dream." He hit the call button three times. It was a dream. It had to have been. He hit the call button again.

Suddenly, a tired and angry-looking Judy ripped open the door. "What?"

Alfonso stared at her for a second. He blinked and looked again. The look on her face went from anger to confusion. But, before she could say anything else, he asked, "Am I dreaming, or are you really alive?"

The confusion on Judy's face deepened. "I'll say one thing; I'm dreaming about killing you if you don't have a damned good reason for waking me."

Relief flooding through him, Alfonso rushed forward and threw his arms around her, holding her tightly.

She waited a second before returning the embrace. Her voice now full of concern, she said, "Alfonso, what's wrrong?"

The world collapsed around Alfonso. What had been soft flesh in his arms was now softer fur. He pulled back and saw Slimmerr. Then he opened his eyes. It was dark. He was lying on his side with something warm and furry snuggled up against him. He blinked once and took a breath. The earlier dreams played vividly in his head, but they no longer felt real.

After carefully sliding his arm out from under Slimmerr, he got up. He found his way to the bathroom and closed the door before turning on the lights. He drank some water out of the faucet and splashed some on his face. Then, as he stood up and looked in the mirror, he saw someone standing behind him.

6.5 Sunday

The being standing behind Alfonso was translucent and hard to look at directly. The more he tried to focus on it, the less of it he could see. But it seemed somehow more distinct if he looked at it out of the corner of his eye. He looked over his shoulder, but the being was gone. When he looked into the mirror again, it was back.

Alfonso shook his head and sighed. "I hate the dreams I can't wake out of."

Much as they did in the presence of a ghost, the hairs on the back of Alfonso's neck stood on end. The being spoke, but Alfonso didn't hear its words. He just sort of knew them. It said, "I'm sure you do. But you are awake now."

He grinned. "Prove it."

The being ignored him. Instead it said, "Alfonso Tanaka. We believe we have just about figured you out. You have faced death so many times that it is no longer a threat to you. And your thoughts toward us follow the lines of 'What's the worst they can do, kill me?'"

The being paused. Looking at it from the corner of his eye, it appeared to want a reply. So he shrugged.

The being continued. "Take careful note, Mr. Tanaka. We gave you your recent dreams as a warning. We can do *far* worse than kill you."

6.6 Monday

The being faded away. Alfonso scanned around in the mirror and then looked behind himself. There was no trace of his visitor. He sighed. The thought of going back to sleep gave him chills, so he returned to the bedroom, sat at the edge of the bed, and woke up Slimmerr.

"Hey, Alfonso."

"I'm going to work now, but stay as long as you'd like."

"What time is it?"

He smiled, "Too early. But I've got work to do."

Stretching her arms over her head, she pushed her feet off the end of the bed. She held the stretch for a second and then curled up. A look of contentment covered her face, and she said, "Thanks, Alfonso. I've never had anyone help me like this before."

He shrugged. "De nada, senorita."

Arriving at the dose well before opening time, he was surprised to find Judy there. It looked as though she was trying to work up the nerve to approach the ghost's table. Although he consciously knew that she'd only died in his dreams, he still felt extremely relieved to see her. "Judy? What are you doing here?"

The look on her face showed intense surprise at seeing him--more surprise than was warranted by his early arrival. After staring at him for a second, she exhaled and looked at her feet. "I had a bad . . . I couldn't sleep."

6.7 Tuesday

Alfonso blinked. "Wait a minute, you had nightmares too?"

She waited a second and then nodded. It was interesting that she didn't want to talk about it. He drew the obvious conclusion from this. "Did you kill me in your dream?"

A look of suspicion spread across her face. She pursed her lips and stared at him. Then she asked, "You too?"

He nodded.

"It felt real."

He nodded again. "But it wasn't."

"Did a ghost come talk to you afterward?"

A ghost? "I'm not sure. The ghost I've been talking to seems more solid."

She shook her head. "It was a ghost. I know too damn well what it feels like to be near one."

Alfonso nodded non-committally.

"So, what should we do?"

What indeed? He thought for a second and sighed. "I see two options." He held up his index finger.

"One. We can slink away with our tails between our legs and become good little citizens that the ghosts don't have to worry about. Or, two," he held up his second finger. "We can start focusing on ways to fight them." He put his arm down and added, "Which do you prefer?"

After staring at him for a moment, she clenched her hands into fists, spun around, and stomped over to the ghost's table. Each step closer became slower than the last, until she stood one pace away with her foot in the air. Her clenched fists became red and started to shake. She stood there for a moment, trapped between her induced fears and her considerable force of will. Then she leaned forward until she fell off balance and had to put her foot down. She pounded the table with her fists.

Spinning around with a triumphant sneer on her face, she asked, "Where do we start?"

6.8 Wednesday

Alfonso smiled. "I think you just did."

Judy reached back, grabbed the table, and pushed herself up onto it. Letting her feet dangle, she smiled back at him. "Okay, what's the next step?"

He paused, looked at the ground, and said, "Do you feel comfortable talking about your dream?"

She also paused. "Not really, why?"

Neither did he. He grabbed a chair, sat down, and put his feet up on the table. "Here's the thing. Did they give us our entire dreams, or just parts? If they know everything that happened in mine, we're in trouble." He stopped and looked around. Calling out to the computer behind the bar, he commanded, "Sweep the place for crawlies."

Judy frowned, but gave the antibots time to clear out any listening devices before speaking. "How's that?"

He described the first of his dreams. She listened intently at first, but interrupted to ask about the Symbari. When he explained that he'd just learned about them yesterday, she nodded knowingly. As he finished describing the first dream, he decided that she didn't need to hear about the second one.

"Well, mine was nothing like that. Though I did kill you."

There was an uncomfortable pause.

Alfonso held up his hands. She ignored him. Then he said, "Hey, no fair. I showed you mine. "

She kicked her feet out and sighed. "Fine."

6.9 Thursday

Judy hopped off the table and started pacing. "We were driving in a car on Manta Secundus. I was pissed at you for something, so I was driving like a madwoman."

Alfonso snickered, "You always drive like a madwoman."

She crinkled her nose at him and continued. "Well, this time it was annoying you. You sarcastically said something about how much of a shame it would be if we didn't get there in one piece. That, of course, just made me angrier."

"Where were we going?"

She stopped pacing and glared at him. "Are you under the impression that I won't tell the story *unless* you keep interrupting it?"

He pulled his feet off the table and sat up straight. "Sorry. Go on."

"We were going to see an old . . . associate of mine. A sliss named Boussa."

Alfonso raised an eyebrow, but stayed silent.

She quickly added, "Boussa knows more about physiology than anyone around. And he uses that knowledge to make the best poisons in the sector."

"He? The sliss have sexes?"

She blushed slightly and shrugged. "I don't know. But I think of Boussa as a he. Anyway, we got there in one piece, thank you, but were both fuming. You and Boussa didn't hit it off at all. Everything he said and did seemed to make you more and more annoyed." She paused, looked at him again, frowned, and continued. "Then he said something disparaging about you and referred to his and my relationship. You went crazy, pulled out a beam weapon, and cut him in half."

Alfonso nodded, "I always was a jealous vendeho."

6.10 Friday

Judy smiled at Alfonso, but the look in her eyes was sad. When he'd been with her, *hedid* used to get jealous. But how could he not? He was young (well, at least not wise), insecure, and going out with an amazing woman who couldn't really love him for just his brain--even if that was the only plausible explanation.

"So, I drew my own gun and cut you in half."

Standing up, Alfonso said, "Something you've been wanting to do for years, I'm sure." She smiled and didn't answer. He started pacing. "Okay, our dreams are so different that I'm willing to hope that the ghosts only implanted the ideas to have us kill each other. We fabricated the rest."

She nodded. "Either that, or they're not just powerful; they're clever too. That would suck."

"Indeed." They'd faced powerful yet stupid enemies before. The Freehdom wars were a lesson in it. If

the ghosts understood enough to purposely give them different dreams just to throw them off, they were in for a tough battle.

She shook her head, "Either way, what do we do?"

He scratched his chin and then pointed at the light above the bar. "Well, the Dose's ghost has been practically begging us to test his limits. We know he can take out a battery-powered light from a distance. We also know that he can make it come back on after he's burned it out. What can we do to make it more difficult for him?"

6.11 Saturday

Judy stared at the light for a minute before saying, "Wrap it in a grounded, spherical mesh. Then, tomorrow we'll do two meshes. We'll ground the outer one and charge the inner one to some huge voltage."

Alfonso nodded. "Good ideas. I'll get to work on the first. You start thinking about what we can use to charge up tomorrow's inner mesh."

Judy watched as he ordered two more lights. While they were waiting for his factory to make them, she asked, "Why did you pay for the lights? You already bought one."

He shrugged, "The recipe destroys itself as the light is being made."

"But, surely you could hack your factory to copy the recipe first?"

He put his hands on his hips. "Do *you* know how to do that?"

She frowned and shook her head. "Naw. Nanotech's way over my head."

He nodded. "Mine too. I have a suspicion it's over everyone's head. Do you know anyone who understands how it works?"

"No. Everyone just pushes the right buttons on the factories." She became thoughtful, "I wonder if Sukomb knows?"

"Well, if anyone knows, it's going to be a kiree. But I'll lay odds that the shalk don't."

The incoming call light blinked, cutting off Judy's reply.

6.12 Sunday

Alfonso took the call. The screen came to life and showed the head of spaceport security.

Quixar blinked once and said, "Alfonso, you're there early. I was expecting to leave a message."

Alfonso shrugged. "I couldn't sleep. What can I do for you?"

"I just wanted to thank you for your help with the shalk murder case."

Alfonso smiled. "I heard you caught the guy. Congratulations."

"In no small part due to your tip. You really took the heat off of me, Alfonso. I owe you one."

Alfonso's smile widened. "I'm glad to hear that, Quixar. Because, coincidentally, I need a favor."

Quixar's eyes narrowed. Suspiciously, he asked, "What?"

"Ever heard of an organization called 'The Symbari Syndicate?'"

Quixar became even more suspicious. "Of course."

"There's a small-time operator in the area, a botiira named Forea--"

Quixar cut him off: "I know of him. Do you want to file a complaint?"

Alfonso laughed. "Heavens no. That wouldn't be a favor. I want the name of his superior."

6.13 Monday

Quixar's eyes went wide with shock. Then he squinted them again. His voice lighthearted, but with a worried undertone, he asked, "You planning to sign up?"

"And tell the head of station security about it? I don't think so."

"Alfonso, these are truly bad people. You do not want to get messed up with them."

Alfonso smiled. "Does that mean you know who his superior is?"

Quixar crossed his arms and stared at the ground. After a long pause, he said, "If they discover that I know even this much about their organization, I will personally make your life a living hell."

Pasting on a mask of seriousness, Alfonso said, "I understand."

Quixar paused again. "I don't suppose you'll tell me why you need this?"

Alfonso shook his head.

After yet another pause, Quixar looked down and typed something on the terminal in front of him. "Okay, I do owe you. But not that much. I won't give you a name or even a race, but I will give a comm address you can use."

"That's perfect, Quixar. Thanks."

"I urge you to reconsider, though. Both of my warnings still stand."

Alfonso nodded. "I understand."

An address showed up at the bottom of the screen. Quixar cut the line, leaving the address visible.

6.14 Tuesday

Judy walked behind the bar and looked at the screen. "Your conversations with Quixar are always so interesting. What's that for?"

"A friend." Alfonso typed a simple message: "Your associate, Forea, is quite careless." Then he turned to Judy and said, "Any new remailers I should know about?"

She nodded, "There should be thousands by now. I unleashed a pretty good viral one just before I came to Frakar."

"Good. Send this through fifty of them. I've got enough people trying to kill me. I don't need this guy to

figure out who I am."

She nodded and stepped up to the screen. While giving it commands, she spoke in an offhand voice, "So, you learn about this Symbari Syndicate yesterday, it forces its way into your dreams, and you take steps today to mess with it. What*did* they do to you?"

Alfonso crossed his arms and stayed silent.

* * *

The day wore on, much the same as any other. Late in the afternoon the new light was still on, causing Alfonso to wonder if the ghost was going to show up. Or was the grounded screen keeping him away from the light? It couldn't be that easy, could it? Then again, few knew anything about the ghosts. Perhaps their true power was through reputation, not actions. If that was so, did it mean that they couldn't really defeat a shalk's shields? Thoughts of enlisting the shalk to battle the ghosts, and, at the same time enlisting the ghosts to fight the shalk, made his head swim. Judy was better at that kind of stuff than he was.

Later in the day, a bit of movement caught Alfonso's eye. A biped in brown robes with a hood pulled over its head was standing next to the wall, facing the ghost's table. It jerked its head to look at the light above Alfonso's head. The robed figure froze in place, and a strange noise filled the room--kind of an electrical squeal with what seemed like anger behind it. The light above Alfonso exploded, sending a shower of sparks down upon him.

6.15 Wednesday

Alfonso dove aside. The glowing light narrowly missed him. He jumped up and looked for the figure. It was gone.

The dose had fallen silent. Everyone was staring at Alfonso. He painted on a pleasant smile. "Nothing to worry about. That was an experimental light. I would never put such things over the client parts of the Dose. Go back to whatever you were doing."

He looked to Judy and nodded. She nodded back. Taking a deep breath, he walked over to the ghost's table. The unease he always felt near the ghost seemed stronger this time. He grabbed a chair, reversed it, and sat down.

In shalkish, the ghost said, "You are getting to be annoying."

Alfonso sneered. "So, ghosts can be annoyed. That's good to know."

The ghost's chest rose and fell, and the sound of a long exhale emanated from the hood. "Why do you think I am your enemy?"

"Oh, so the dreams and death threats were the work of a close friend?"

The ghost leaned forward suddenly, causing a momentary start in Alfonso. "You had strange dreams?"

Alfonso nodded slowly. "And I had the pleasure of a visit from a translucent fellow who I'd assumed was you without the robes."

The ghost leaned back and looked aside. "No, I can't induce dreams." He paused for a second, and then

shook his head. "Damn them! I said I'd handle this."

Dissent amongst the ghosts' ranks? Or was there another race that Alfonso didn't know about? Either way, this unexpected turn of events had left him not knowing what to say next. "Them?"

The ghost turned back to Alfonso and paused, as if remembering that Alfonso was there. Then he disappeared.

6.16 Thursday

Alfonso's eyes went wide. His hand shook involuntarily. He stared at the place the ghost had been, but his mind refused to believe there was nothing there now. After a few minutes, Judy came over and crouched beside him. "What're you doing, Alfonso?"

He shook his head. "The ghost disappeared. I was staring right at him, and he disappeared." His hands started to shake, and he clenched them together. "It's one thing when they're translucent and you can't really see them anyway. But this one was wearing cloth robes! How could he disappear?"

Judy touched his shoulder, causing him to jump. She rubbed the shoulder and said in a quiet voice, "Let's talk about this after close. We've got a bar to run here."

"But--"

"Shush," she said soothingly. "We'll talk about this after the customers go home. Okay?"

Nodding, he stood up. She said, "You stand behind the bar. I'll wait the tables." He did as she suggested, but throughout the day his eyes kept finding their way back to the ghost's table.

By the end of the day, he was dead on his feet and worried out of his mind. After the last patron left he held his arms around himself and shivered. "They can induce horrible dreams. They can destroy things from a distance. And they can disappear right in front of us. What the hell are we thinking going up against these things?"

Judy shook her head. "Do you remember what the TLAs used to do to the Anti-Freehs they caught?"

Alfonso just stared at her, so she answered herself. "They chemically lobotomized them. I'll take scary dreams over that any day. And destroying things at a distance? We've been able to do that since the first ape threw a rock at another. Disappear? Your ancestors used to hire assassins who were so good at blending into their surroundings, people thought they were evil spirits. You're not being rational, Alfonso."

6.17 Friday

Alfonso blinked, tore his eyes away from the table, and stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"That same ghost had me so afraid of it that I couldn't look at the table without getting chills. It did something similar to you. This is a psychological effect, nothing else."

Part of his mind desperately wanted to believe her. But he was unsure. "So, how did he disappear?"

"Describe what happened when it destroyed the light."

He thought back. "A bit of movement caught my eye. The ghost was standing next to the wall, about three meters from the table. He looked startled and destroyed the light. Then he was at the table."

She nodded. "Pretty much. But you've got a hole where the light exploded. You were diving out of the

way, and everyone else was turning to look at the loud noise. But I kept my gaze locked on the ghost. After the light blew up, it disappeared. Then, at least ten seconds later, it appeared at the table. Now, tell me this. If the ghost can teleport, why didn't it appear at the table immediately? And, more importantly, what was it doing along the wall three meters from the table?"

Alfonso felt his pulse slow. Like he was coming out of a bad dream, he started to relax. "Are you saying--"

"It doesn't teleport," she interrupted. "If it could, it wouldn't be walking along the wall. We know the ghosts can influence people's feelings. I say they're just making us believe we can't see them."

Alfonso nodded. "Nothing but a psychological effect. I don't know why that's so comforting, but it is."

"It's comforting for the same reason learning how a magic trick is done is comforting. There is no magic. Just tricks. They may be clever tricks. They may be powerful tricks. But they're just tricks."

He smiled. "And they're not even all that powerful. When he tried to disable the light and failed, he lost his concentration and we could see him."

Judy nodded. "That's how I read it too."

6.18 Saturday

Alfonso exhaled. "Well, I'll sleep better tonight. Thanks."

Though Judy nodded, she'd cringed a bit at his mention of the word "sleep."

Alfonso stared at her. "Despite everything you just said, you're worried about going to sleep tonight. Aren't you?"

She looked down at her feet.

Alfonso yawned. "Look, you need to be alert. You're not going to be if you keep yourself up worrying about bad dreams."

Still looking at her feet, she nodded. Then she glanced at him. "You got room for me at your place?"

He thought about it for a minute. Although more exhausted than she was, he was just as worried about his dreams. It would be great to have her there with him. But it was still a terrible idea--for more than one reason. With a frown, he said, "Imagine the following tactic. They induce a dream in which I make you furious. They build and build the anger, and then, just before you snap, they wake you up. Would it be a good idea if I were in the room with you then?"

She sighed, "No, it wouldn't." After a pause, she added, "I wish Emmanuelle was home."

He nodded. "Me too." As he was walking away, a thought from his dreams flashed across his mind. He couldn't help but chuckle. "The Nightly Nosh. Where did I ever come up with that?"

In a surprised voice, Judy said, "Wait."

He looked back at her.

Her face a mask of worry, she said, "Has Emmanuelle ever complained to you about not being able to find a good bagel in this sector?"

He shook his head. "I run a bar, not a deli. Why?"

"Are you sure?"

Alfonso carefully thought back through his discussions with Emmanuelle. Bagels had never come up. "I'm sure."

Judy jumped up. "Penc!"

6.19 Sunday

Alfonso shook his head. He was too tired to follow her. "What's wrong?"

Judy started pacing. "Emmanuelle complains about not being able to get bagels all the time. And that showed up in your dream, despite the fact that you didn't know this about her. You know what that means?"

The realization punched its way through his exhaustion. His eyes went wide. "The ghosts have Emmanuelle!"

Judy nodded.

He squinted at her. "And, thanks to *somebody* in this room, she knows all about our little experience with a certain bartender."

Judy gave that a second to sink in, and then replied, "Maybe I should stay here and finish the new light?"

After thinking about it for a second, Alfonso shook his head. "No. She's been gone for long enough that if they know, they've known for a while. For whatever reason, they're holding back. So nothing has changed. You're still better off rested."

She frowned and looked back at the light.

"Look, do I need to walk you home?"

She shook her head, took his arm, and led him out. "My chivalrous Alfonso. Offering to protect *me* from bad people in the halls, he conveniently forgets that time in Singapore."

Ignoring the jab, he said, "I'll see you tomorrow."

She nodded.

6.20 Monday

Alfonso fretted over the realization about Emmanuelle. Why had the ghost's let that slip? Were they careless, or did they have a more nefarious reason for the admission? Worrying about this, he walked past Slimmerr's corner and halfway down the next hallway before realizing that she hadn't been standing there. Was that a good or a bad thing? After last night, it was disconcerting no matter what. He tried to comfort himself by imagining that she'd stayed at his place.

When he got home, he found his quarters empty. There was a message waiting for him, though.

On signaling the message, a perplexed-looking Slimmerr showed up on his screen. "Alfonso. I got a strange message today. It was an image of my new boss flayed alive and left to bleed to death. Below the image were the words, 'The Symbarri are required think carefully about who they should talk to.'

I was worried for a second. Then I called some of his other employees. Everyone got the same message."

She looked over her shoulder for a second. "Anyway, I figure this means I don't need to stand out in the corridors again until I heal." She smiled. "I don't know if you had anything to do with this, but thank you. If you need me, here's my comm address." A string of characters showed up at the bottom of the screen.

Alfonso considered calling her. But he was tired, and, hopefully, she was already sleeping. So he stored the address away and went to bed.

He slept comfortably through the night, and, if he had any more dreams, he didn't remember them the next morning.

6.21 Tuesday

When Alfonso got to the Dose, he found Judy hunched over a table and working on the new light. She looked up.

"How'd you sleep?"

She shrugged. "Like a log. You?"

"Same. How's the light going?"

Sighing, she pushed it away and stood up. "Not so hot. Every time I up the voltage high enough it arcs over to the grounded screen."

Alfonso raised his eyebrows. What she considered "high enough" was obviously higher than what he'd intended. Still, it was her baby, so he decided not to meddle. "Then take a break for a minute. What do you make of this?"

He led her over to the ghost's table and pushed on the walls. They still moved slightly. He stepped aside, allowing her to push them as well. With a shrug, she said, "It's a door. What's behind it?"

"I don't know. I haven't had a chance to investigate it yet."

She ran her fingers along the creases. "We'll need some nanocams to see what's going on inside."

6.22 Wednesday

Alfonso went over to the nanofactory and created a few thousand crawling, remote nanocams. They were members of a group of programmable bots whose recipes were widely available and thus free. One of the programs Alfonso had already written for such bots would be perfect for this task, so he commanded the factory to download it.

The factory spat out a package. Alfonso grabbed it, walked it over to the wall, and set it on the floor. Then Judy and he both went back to the screen behind the bar. Bit by bit, a three-dimensional image of the creases along the wall appeared on the screen.

Judy pointed to the screen. "Definitely a door. See the latch there?"

Alfonso commanded half of the bots to converge on the latch and let the remaining ones continue to catalog the creases. With so many bots crawling around on the latch and reporting what they saw, Judy and Alfonso got a detailed image of it.

Alfonso pointed to a pair of thin lines running away from the latch. "Are those wires?"

Frowning, Judy nodded. "I think so. Why didn't they use some sort of wireless receiver?"

6.23 Thursday

Alfonso offered, "Maybe they were worried about a scanning bot picking up the signal?" He told a few of his crawlers to follow the wires.

Each of the bots continually reported its location, its orientation, and whatever its tiny camera could see. The screen behind the bar aggregated all of their reports into a composite image. Slowly, two lines grew out of the image of the latch. They ran down to the floor and over to what must have been the base of the ghost's table. Then they ran up, apparently through the table's leg, and back toward the wall.

Judy walked over to the table. "There must be a button on the underside. Direct me."

Alfonso commanded one of the bots at the end of the wires to start emitting a faint electric waveform. Judy slowly moved her hand around under the table. When the bot reported that something new had obstructed the waves, Alfonso called out, "Right around there."

She frowned, "There's a little bump, but I can't press it in or turn it."

Alfonso walked over. "The bar's previous owner was a botiira, and they use their upper hands as thumbs for their lower ones. Maybe you need more leverage."

Judy pressed her left hand on the top of the table, causing the muscles in her arms to bulge. There was a faint pop, and the two corner walls swung outward. Judy exhaled. "Those botiira are stronger than they look."

6.24 Friday

Alfonso peered into the darkness behind the open walls. Judy stood up and started in. He grabbed her arm. "Probably trapped."

She sighed. "Sometimes you're too cautious." She walked back to the bar and grabbed a portable light. He commanded the bots to scour the entrance for traps. The screen showed a thin walkway with walls that quickly became rough.

Judy looked at the rough walls. "Are we at the edge of the station here?"

Alfonso nodded. "Yeah, this won't be on any of the station schematics. It looks like they cored into the surrounding rock."

"So let's go see what's in there."

Alfonso smiled. "Patience always was your strong point." She stuck her tongue out at him. "Give the bots one more minute. Then we'll go in."

The bots didn't find any signs of traps, so Alfonso left them cataloging the new area. He grabbed another portable light, and they went up to the wall. They shined their lights into the opening. "Looks like we'll have to go single file," he said. "Who's first?"

Judy stepped in. "Mr. Paranoia can bring up the rear."

He looked at the two walls, thought for a second, and went back to the bar.

In a perturbed voice she asked, "What is it now?"

"What if the walls decide to close, and we can't find a release?" He grabbed a portable controller for his nanobots and went back to the opening. In a pinch he could command the bots at the ends of the wires to close the contacts.

Judy and Alfonso stepped into the opening. They walked a short distance before coming to a large cavern with rough-hewn walls and a high ceiling. Judy panned her light around near the ceiling, then moved it to the floor. She gasped.

6.25 Saturday

Judy's light was shining on a rifle. The rifle stood in front of about a hundred other rifles, all arranged in a neat row. On either side of the rifles were rows of different weapons. On either side of those were still other weapons. She panned back and forth across the set. There were a good thirty different types.

"My god! There's a whole arsenal in here."

When Alfonso stepped farther into the room, overhead lights came on. He quickly looked back to see the walls close behind them. Patting the remote control, he sighed in relief.

Judy wandered over to the weapons and picked up one of the larger rifles. "It's brand new and fully loaded."

A huge nanofactory took up most of the right wall. With awe in his voice, Alfonso said, "They're making them here. How could anyone afford all of this?"

Alfonso and Judy wandered over to the factory and checked its inventory. Both of their eyes went wide. They looked at each other and then back to the factory. It showed itself as having permanent copies of thousands of recipes. These weapons cost nothing more than their raw materials.

Judy scratched her head, and crinkles appeared on her nose. "But someone would notice if you pulled so much mass out of the feed."

Alfonso hit a few keys and reported, "It's got huge storage tanks. They're ninety percent full and have been refilling slowly since...." He hit another key and stopped.

"What?" Judy asked.

"Since I got the bar."

6.26 Sunday

Judy nodded. "That botiira set you up to take the fall if someone noticed this thing filling its tanks?"

Alfonso tapped his chin. "I don't think so. This is coming in slowly enough that it probably wouldn't be noticed anyway. In fact, if I had the huge funds this would have cost, I would have...." He looked around and pointed to another machine against the far wall. "Yep. I'll bet that's a molecular disassembler. Then they could use waste materials, maybe partially diverted from the bar's trash output, to help feed this guy." He tapped on the factory.

"So, why give you the bar?"

"Well, *Idid* win it in a bet. But perhaps that was planned. The bar was getting a reputation for shady dealings. Maybe Quixar started snooping around and got close to here. If the whole bar was nothing but

a front for this room, they did well to pull out and let me watch things while their tanks refilled."

Judy looked from the disassembler to the factory and back. "Devious little bastards."

"Yeah. You sure you didn't train them?"

She threw an elbow at his gut. He diverted it.

She looked around again. "So, what now?"

"Well, he sent an assassin after me, so he wants his bar back. If we assume that arsenal can be made from this guy with full tanks, we're looking at double that many weapons soon."

"Who do you suppose they're planning to invade?"

"That seems to be the question of the day, doesn't it?"

6.27 Monday

Judy looked over the arsenal again. "What we could have done with this place during the Freedom wars...."

Alfonso shook his head emphatically. "We didn't lose due to lack of guns. We lost because the majority of humanity was too lazy to care what their governments were doing to them. Unless that factory can make a gun that destroys complacency, it wouldn't have done much for us."

Frowning, Judy nodded slowly. "You never can let my idealistic images of my race stand, can you?"

Alfonso shrugged. "If it makes you feel better, you can consider the humans here to be your race. After all, Earth will never find us. And, while not all of the humans here fought in the wars, they were at least smart enough to leave."

She looked back at the weapons and sighed.

Alfonso laughed. "Forget it, we've got bigger troubles right here."

She turned back to him. "You're right. Let's get back to the Dose."

They searched around and found a screen on the wall with two buttons near it. One of the buttons activated the screen. It showed the dose from a camera positioned above the ghost's table. Alfonso stared at the screen and frowned. "How many times have I swept the room and still missed this camera?"

Judy shrugged. "If I'd designed it, I would have had it covered and sealed except when in use."

Alfonso nodded and pressed the other button. The sound of the walls opening came down the corridor. As they stepped out of the cavern, the lights went out.

Back in the Dose, Judy showed Alfonso the button under the ghost's table. When he pressed it, the walls closed. "Customers will be here any time now," he said. "I guess you'll have to work on your light tomorrow."

6.28 Tuesday

As was becoming the norm, the Daily Dose was very busy. Alfonso couldn't help but bristle at the thought that this was exactly what the botiira he'd "acquired" the bar from wanted. The more busy the

bar, the more waste products it produced. That meant more mass for the secret nanofactory.

Midway through the day, the large screen he occasionally used for sporting events came on of its own accord. All eyes turned to it, and Alfonso shook his head. The screen showed a close-up of a shalk with a dour look on her face. Alfonso hated the fact that the shalk had the ability not only to preempt his viewing, but also to turn on the display and make him watch.

The shalk on the screen waited for a few seconds before speaking. "Citizens of the Shalk Empire, I come to you today with disturbing news."

Alfonso snorted at the suggestion that a bunch of bullies with big guns amounted to an "empire."

The shalk continued. "Not long ago, a shalk in a remote spaceport was brutally murdered...." She paused, as if considering whether or not to give the next part. Finally she added, "By a manta."

No one in the Dose showed any particular surprise at this, but Alfonso imagined the admission caused quite a stir most everywhere else in the sector.

The shalk on the screen snarled. "To make matters worse, the murderer mutilated the corpse, insuring that our shalk brother could not, in his rest, join the celestial palace." She clenched her fuzzy little fists and took a few deep breaths before continuing. "The shalk want to make it abundantly clear that this behavior *will not* be tolerated. We have captured the murderer and brought him to Shalk Prime for sentencing. In two days, the Manta named Shasirr's execution will be broadcast to all corners of Shalk space. Watch and remember."

The screen shut off.

6.29 Wednesday

The Daily Dose returned to normal almost immediately. Everyone in Frakar knew about the murder, and most knew Shasirr had been caught. That the Shalk would kill him was obvious. Judy turned to Alfonso and whispered, "What do you think?"

He whispered back. "Tactical error on their part."

She nodded. "They just told every oppressed citizen in the sector that they're not invulnerable. What are they thinking?"

He shook his head. "They're not. That was moral indignation speaking, not calculated reasoning. They're also putting him to death before learning how he allegedly killed the shalk. Dumb, very dumb."

Someone at the end of the bar motioned for another drink. Alfonso walked down to get it for him.

Later in the day, the nanocurtain shot open, and a depressed-looking Quixar moped in. He wandered over to the bar, climbed up onto a stool in the center, and sighed. He put both elbows on the bar and rested his cheeks on his hands.

Alfonso rushed over to him. "Investigator Quixar, what's wrong?"

With another sigh, he said, "You ever have one of those days that makes you doubt everything you've ever believed in?"

Alfonso blinked. "As a matter of a fact, I have. If I tell you about it, maybe it'll take your mind off your own problems."

Quixar looked up at him with probing eyes. With a half smile he said, "That's kind of you, Alfonso. Perhaps some other time."

"Well then, telling me about your problems might help."

Quixar frowned and nodded. "That's why I came in. Give me a glass of your strongest stuff."

6.30 Thursday

Alfonso turned around and grabbed a bottle. He didn't get the *strongest* stuff. Opening that bottle would be a very bad idea. But he did get the most potent alcohol he had. He poured a shot glass for Quixar, who quickly downed it.

Staring at the glass in his little hand, Quixar said, "Physically the shalk are unimpressive. We're small, weak, and slow. And, judging from the recent actions of our leaders, we're not very bright either."

Alfonso frowned. "Well, as a race, you can't be all that stupid. You invented shields and annihilation batons that no other race can understand."

Quixar nodded. "That's what I used to use to comfort myself in my feelings of inadequacy. It may not look like we deserve to be ruling, but *wedid* invent the objects that allow us to do so. So what if I don't understand how the shields work any more than you do? My race invented them, so I'm entitled to the power they give me."

Quixar paused. Alfonso let the pause drag on for a moment then nudged him by saying, "Used to? What happened?"

With a sigh, Quixar said, "A shalk was murdered. And the task of figuring out how fell into my lap."

"Well, *youare* the head of security."

Quixar shook his head. "No. As head of security I only had to catch the murderer. My superiors don't seem to care how the shalk was killed. They just want," he paused and sneered, "justice. It was on my own -- as one of the apparently few curious and intelligent shalk -- that I took on figuring out how the shalk was killed. And what I learned ruined my day--maybe my whole life."

May 1998

7.1 Friday

Alfonso looked around. The bar was busy, and Quixar was speaking quietly. With three empty stools on either side of him, it was unlikely that anyone else could hear them. But the direction the conversation was going was making Alfonso uneasy. He considered turning on the nanoscreen to guarantee that no one else could listening in. He decided against it, though. Doing so might make Quixar decide he was saying too much, and Alfonso didn't want him to stop. So, he decided to go in the other direction. While pouring another drink he asked, "What did you learn?"

Quixar looked down at the full glass and smiled. "Thanks. I might need a lot more of these." He downed the drink and set the glass back on the bar. Alfonso refilled it, but Quixar took his hand away. Instead he continued his story. "The shalk's severed hand showed me how he must have been killed. But I didn't understand how it was possible. So I started doing research. I searched further and further through the archives until I found some highly classified, eight-hundred-year-old documents that answered my questions." Quixar looked from side to side and lowered his voice. "You ready for a shocker?"

Alfonso couldn't believe Quixar was about to give him information from ancient, classified documents. Why? Was he drunk? Whatever the reason, Alfonso didn't want to stop the flow of information. He nodded slightly.

Leaning across the bar to be closer to Alfonso, Quixar said, "We shalk didn't invent our shields. They were given to us."

Alfonso blinked and feigned surprise. While this was certainly new information, it didn't come as a shock. "The annihilation batons too?"

Quixar nodded.

"Then who made them?"

Quixar leaned back. "They only deal with the shalk. You've probably never heard of them."

This didn't sound good. Keeping his face neutral, Alfonso said, "Try me."

With a shrug, Quixar said, "Ever hear of a race called the 'ghosts'?"

7.2 Saturday

Alfonso's heart quickened. Fighting to keep his voice calm, he said, "As a matter of fact, I have."

Quixar stared at him for a second, then laughed heartily and slapped the bar. "One of these days, I'm going to learn not to be surprised by you."

This worried Alfonso. He hadn't surprised Quixar enough times to warrant such a statement. Did the investigator know more about him than he let on? Keeping these thoughts hidden behind a mask of detached interest, he asked, "So when you learned that the ghosts gave the shields to the shalk, did you ask a ghost how the manta could break past one?"

Quixar shook his head. "No, the document told me. You see, it was a report from the shalk who made the murder possible."

Alfonso shook his head. "I'm sorry? You said the document was eight hundred years old."

Quixar nodded. "That was when they gave us the shields. But we're not just ignorant, we're stupid too. The shields the ghosts gave us couldn't be breached by *anything* but the annihilation batons they also gave us. But, despite the fact that the gifts instantly made us rulers of the sector, we didn't accept them."

He sighed. "You see, the shalk like to scratch each other in ... certain situations. But the ghosts' shields didn't allow that. And though we complained, they refused to help. We whined some more, and they finally gave the plans for the shields to our best scientist. If we wanted to weaken our shields, we'd have to do it ourselves."

"So he hacked the shields to allow you to scratch each other?"

"Yep. But it looked to me like he did a bad job of it. So I experimented a bit with my own shield. The change was supposed to work only at the lowest settings. But at a higher setting I could still get through with a sharp object. As I upped the intensity I needed sharper and sharper objects, but even at the highest setting I could cut myself with an extremely sharp blade."

7.3 Sunday

Alfonso flipped on the nanoscreen. Quixar had just freely given away too much information. Something else had to be going on. After waiting a second for it to engage, he exploded, "Quixar, why are you telling me all this?"

Quixar sat up a bit straighter and stared deeply into Alfonso's eyes. "You want to hear my theories on why no one's figured this out?"

Guardedly, Alfonso said, "Sure."

"No matter how sharp the point is, you can't puncture the shields. You have to slash to get through them. All weaponry at the time was energy based, and the shields are perfect at guarding against that kind of attack. I figure that when energy weapons failed, a few people tried firing projectiles at the shalk. But, you just don't go hand to hand against someone armed with an annihilation baton. That means no one would have tried any sort of slashing attack. So we got this reputation for being unkillable even though there's a kink in our armor."

Alfonso tried desperately to read Quixar's face. He didn't get much. The only thing he could tell was that the shalk *wasn't* drunk. "What are you doing, Quixar?"

His gaze unwavering, Quixar changed the subject. "Do you remember a few weeks back when we had an explosion on a shalk floor of the station?"

Alfonso nodded. "It was right after the murder. What about it?"

"Well, some sliss living on the floor above got trapped, and some even died. But they all would have died if not for the help of a single human. Do you know anything about this?"

7.4 Monday

Though the human had been Alfonso, he suspected this was some sort of trap. So he slowly shook his head.

Quixar continued. "It seems a human risked his life by going down into the destroyed area and helping the sliss get out. The sliss were shocked that a member of another race went out of his way to help them. They want to honor that person but, unfortunately, don't know who he is."

Alfonso shrugged. "Sounds like a great guy."

With a nod, Quixar said, "I too was impressed and would have done some investigating even if the sliss hadn't asked me to find him. It seems this human went down to the shalk floor and tried to enlist the aide of a shalk he found there. Sadly, yet predictably, she refused. She didn't care what happened to a bunch of sliss. But she couldn't help me identify the human either. It seems you all look alike to most shalk."

With a smile, Alfonso said, "I'll bet *you* can tell us apart, though."

Quixar nodded. "I'd be terrible at my job if I couldn't. Anyway, there were also some manta in the area, and the human had been hurt. One of the manta told me he took the hero to a human doctor. I questioned her, but she, like most members of your race, was very stubborn and refused to help me. That left one last bit of evidence."

He reached into a pouch and withdrew a pocket nanofactory. With a mild shock, Alfonso recognized it as his. Suddenly, he remembered that he hadn't seen it since the explosion. He kept such recognition out of his outward expression, though.

Quixar set the nanofactory between them and said, "Someone, presumably the human, left this behind. The sliss had been trapped behind a door, and this nanofactory had been told to make a cutter. But it was too slow about it, and the human had to find another way to get the door open."

Alfonso shrugged, "Too bad he lost it."

Quixar nodded. "What's even more unfortunate, though, is that he's a hero without recognition."

"Maybe some heroes don't want recognition."

Quixar squinted at him. "Perhaps not. But that's usually only when they have something else to hide."

7.5 Tuesday

Alfonso stayed silent.

Still staring intently at him, Quixar said, "Alfonso, did you know that all nanofactories have unique serial numbers?"

That wasn't mentioned in the marketing slicks. Alfonso blinked and said truthfully, "No, I didn't know that."

"Then you also wouldn't know that nanofactories embed their serial numbers in every single thing they make."

Alfonso seriously didn't like where this was heading.

Quixar continued. "As a matter of course, I checked this factory's serial number against one of my databases. And it turned up something interesting. Any idea what?"

Alfonso had a very good idea what, but he shook his head nonetheless.

"When I arrived, the murdered shalk's bar had been swept clean of the murderer's DNA. The person who did this had used self-destructing nanobots programmed to find his and his accomplice's DNA. But nothing works perfectly. If you send a thousand nanobots out, at least one will malfunction. I found one of these bots. It had been programmed to first clear the patterns it was looking for and then self-destruct. Unfortunately, this one had failed in the middle of clearing the DNA patterns. Its serial number was still intact. And guess what?"

Alfonso sighed. "Since you went to the trouble of telling me the explosion story, I'll assume that the serial number matched that nanofactory."

"Very good. And while the DNA was too scrambled to point to a specific person, enough of it was there to give me a race. The bot was looking for human DNA. Strange then, that the 'murderer' we're about to execute is a manta."

7.6 Wednesday

Alfonso stared at Quixar for a moment before he spoke again. In a slow voice, he asked, "Then why, in light of this new evidence, are you going to let them execute the manta?"

Quixar frowned. "New evidence? Aside from the kink in our armor, I've known all of this since the day after the explosion."

Alfonso raised his eyebrows. "Then why are you telling me all this now?"

Quixar leaned forward. "I've known everything I needed to do my job since the day after the explosion. But my job is narrowly defined by narrow-minded fools. The bigger picture, though, is more important. And if, as now, I don't understand the big picture, I'll search for it to the exclusion of my job. That's why I came to you and practically begged for a scapegoat. My superiors were making enough noise that I would have soon been forced to turn in the murderer regardless. Fortunately, you gave me my scapegoat. And he was a good one too. My compliments. I've been looking for an excuse to get rid of Shasirr for a long time."

Alfonso caught himself just before he self-consciously rubbed his suddenly sweaty palms on his legs. Although he fought to contain his shock, he suspected some of it leaked through. Never before in his life had he so completely underestimated his opponent. He suddenly realized that the playing field he was standing on was absolutely foreign and that he had little understanding of the game, much less what his next move should be.

In an attempt to stall, he asked, "So, what about the big picture don't you understand?"

Quixar stared at him with unblinking eyes and asked, "Why did you help the sliss?"

7.7 Thursday

Alfonso inhaled and shook his head. "Are you fishing for a confession, Quixar?"

Quixar leaned forward and spoke in a grave tone. "Listen to me very carefully, Alfonso. I don't need a confession. Two humans, not a manta, committed the murder. The murder happened the night your red-haired companion arrived at the spaceport. On your home world, you both were members of a terrorist organization that tried to overthrow your government. As co-owners of this bar, you two stood the most to gain by the shalk's death. The stairs down to the explosion area are right on your path home. The doctor who wouldn't speak to me is your sister."

Alfonso's eyes went wide.

Quixar nodded and said in an offhand voice, "I had to dig deep to find that." He then continued. "But the most damning bit of evidence I have is this: A minute ago, when I mentioned that the murderer had an accomplice, a fact I'd up to then relayed to no one, you didn't show any of the human signs of surprise."

Grasping at straws, Alfonso shrugged. "All circumstantial."

Quixar shook his head. "You don't know your shalk law very well. Yes, if you were a shalk, circumstantial evidence wouldn't be enough. But as a kruxpa, your rights are far less secure. By shalk law, any three bits of circumstantial evidence is enough for a conviction. I've got you a couple of times over. A confession would change nothing." He raised his voice. "So, answer my question. Why did you risk your life to save a bunch of lousy sliss?"

Alfonso's mind frantically tried to decide what to do. Then he stopped, took a deep breath, and tried to see the situation from a different angle. He'd been in jams before. Losing his cool was no way to get out of this one. What else did he know? Quixar seemed reluctant to bring him to justice. And Quixar had given him some extremely powerful information. Why? To trip him up? Or did the shalk have something bigger in mind? So far, Alfonso had consistently underestimated his adversary. It was high time to stop doing so.

7.8 Friday

Alfonso said, "Why did you tell me how to get through your armor?"

Quixar shook his head. "First you answer my question. Why did you save the sliss?"

Alfonso crossed his arms and glared at Quixar. Was he actually going to do this? Was he actually going to tell the truth and incriminate himself? *It did* seem to be the only way to move forward.

He sighed and shrugged. "I was walking home when I heard the explosion. I was unhurt, but I figured some people might need help. If I'd just gone home I couldn't have lived with myself."

Quixar leaned back. "Why? The sliss wouldn't have given a damn if a group of humans had been trapped. Neither would the botiira. Hell, there's few in any race that care what happens to members of the other races."

Alfonso shook his head and held his arms out. "But you can't just leave people to die. You've got to try to help them."

"So, you tried. But you couldn't get the door open. And then, knowing they were sliss and not humans, you further risked yourself, and even damaged yourself, trying harder to help them. Why?"

"I don't know. It's just the way I am, I guess."

Quixar nodded slightly. "Recently you asked me for the name of a low-level Symbari's higher contact. Forea turned up dead shortly thereafter. I looked into that, of course. Turns out he'd been abusing prostitutes in the area. And he'd terribly beaten up one whose corner is on your path home. None of these prostitutes were humans either. Most were manta. Why'd you help them? They're just prostitutes."

With a long sigh, Alfonso said, "They're still people."

Quixar smiled and hopped off his stool. "I suspected you'd say something to that effect. It's because of that opinion of yours that I told you about the kink in our armor."

7.9 Saturday

"How's that?" Alfonso asked.

Quixar replied, "The shalk are lousy rulers. And my recent discovery shows me that our power isn't even our own. Perhaps what this sector needs is something different."

Alfonso blinked. "Quixar, do you know what would happen if I gave your information to the public?"

Quixar slowly nodded. "Yes, I do."

Incredulously, Alfonso asked, "And you think it's a good idea?"

With a slight shrug, Quixar said, "I don't know. But if *someone* is going to have the power to usurp shalk rule, I want him to be a guy who actually considers random sliss and manta prostitutes to be 'people.'" He nodded once and stepped through the nanoscreen.

In shock, Alfonso stared after Quixar. He'd underestimated the shalk too many times to allow him to think he fully understood the current situation. What would he do with the information Quixar gave him? Alfonso would have to consider his next move very carefully.

Alfonso turned off the screen and looked around the bar. Not much had changed. His patrons certainly weren't acting as though the fundamental balance of power in the sector had just shifted.

The only real difference in the bar was a new patron Alfonso had never seen before, sitting on a stool

near where Quixar had been. The new patron was a heavily scarred manta with a patch over his right eye. He was watching Quixar walk out through the nanocurtain.

When the nanocurtain closed, the manta looked to Alfonso and pointed toward the exit. Alfonso noticed that the manta was missing three of his fingers. "Was that Chief Investigator Quixar?"

Alfonso nodded.

The manta studied Alfonso carefully with his single eye before saying, "You just spent ten minutes alone with that monsterr and came out unscathed? How did you manage that?"

7.10 Sunday

Alfonso blinked. "Excuse me? Quixar is the fairest shalk I've ever met."

The manta coughed and asked incredulously, "Quixar? Grranted, it's prrobably been five yearrs since I've been to Frrakarr, but I can't believe he's changed so much."

Alfonso looked to the nanocurtain and then back to the manta. "What was he like when you knew him?"

"Well, he was a lousy investigatorr, but he excelled at getting confessions out of people--even those who werren't guilty."

Lousy investigator? Nothing could be farther from the truth with Quixar. Alfonso frowned. "But the shalk don't need confessions, nor even strong evidence, to convict a non-shalk. Why would he care about getting confessions?"

The manta rubbed the stumps on his mangled hand. "You'rre rright that they don't need confessions. But Quixarr enjoyed getting them."

Alfonso looked down at the hand. "Are you saying he cut off your fingers?"

The manta laughed. "Cut off? I wish. Evertt hearrrd of pirrahants?"

Alfonso shook his head.

"They'rre tiny little bugs that swarrm about flesh and nibble at it. I was down on my luck and hungrry at the time. Quixarr suspected me of stealing some food and, to get a confession out of me, stuck my fingerr into a jarr of them."

Alfonso blinked. "Must have been painful."

The manta nodded. "Exccruciating."

7.11 Monday

Alfonso wasn't sure what to make of all this. "How'd you lose the other two fingers?"

"The next two times something turned up stolen, no matter how tight my alibi, I found myself in Quixarr's office. Man, as soon as he pulled out the pirrahant jarr, I confessed immediately. But that wasn't enough forr Quixarr. It was much morre fun to watch me scream."

Though Alfonso had spent most of the last year here, he'd never seen behavior anything like this out of Quixar. At the same time, he'd frequently wondered why the investigator acted so unlike the rest of the shalk. Had he seen the error of his ways and decided to change, or was there something else going on?

Then again, it was a strange coincidence that this manta showed up at the very moment Quixar told Alfonso how to defeat a shalk's shields.

"Did Quixar take your eye as well?"

The manta nodded. "Extremely low intensity particle beam. It took three hours to burn through my eyelid and then another hour to destroy my eye."

"What was the crime?"

"Someone had planted a nanocam in a female shalk's shower. As if I want to see a naked shalk."

"Well, today's Quixar is quite a bit different than the one you've described. I wonder what brought about the change?"

The manta shrugged. "I don't know, human, but I wouldn't rely on that change being permanent."

7.12 Tuesday

Alfonso usually woke up two minutes before his alarm went off. But this morning, when he woke up and looked at the clock, he saw nothing. "Lights."

The room stayed pitch black, but the shower in the bathroom came on. Strange, the shower wasn't under voice control. It just went on when someone stepped into it. Alfonso sat perfectly still and tried to sense the presence of another person. But the shower's noise was masking any other sounds that might have given away an intruder.

Alfonso slid out from under his covers and stood up. Moving slowly and placing his feet carefully, he silently padded over to the closet. He grabbed his psuit and slid the hood over his head. The goggles immediately went into nightfinder mode, paused a second, and switched to infrared. Alfonso scanned around, but could only see himself and the water in the shower. Tucking the majority of the suit under one arm, he moved slowly toward the bathroom.

There was no one in the shower. Alfonso felt around and hit the manual shutoff. He then scanned around his quarters once more before taking the hood off. He set the psuit on the bed and made his way to the door. He hit the open button, but nothing happened. He tried to do a voice override, but that just turned the shower back on.

Alfonso sighed. Because these things never failed, there was no manual override on the door. In fact, the only computer-controlled appliance in the room that had a manual override was his shower. And that was to allow people to conserve water while lathering up.

He went back into the bathroom and shut off the shower again. Was this a targeted attack on him, or were other rooms also affected? The controls for his escape route were, for just this sort of reason, not on the main computer system. But would things be any better in his other quarters? If this was a targeted attack, yes. If not, probably not.

Still, with no other plans coming to mind, it seemed he'd have to try the other room. He closed the bathroom door and said, "Open sez me. Nine seven, be gee eight." The secret panel opened. Alfonso navigated down to his other room and closed the secret passage.

He waited a second before saying, "Lights." The lights came on, and Alfonso sighed in relief.

Then the lights went back off again.

7.13 Wednesday

A few seconds later, the lights came back on. They stayed on for a second or two before going back off. With a sigh, Alfonso walked into the other room and hit the button on the door. Nothing happened. He waited for the lights to come back on and hit the button again. The door began to open, but stopped at about half way when the lights went back off. When the lights came back on, the door closed again. The door had a sensor that was supposed to keep it from crushing someone standing in the way. Alfonso decided not to trust it.

The lights came back on, but the door stayed shut. He waited for another cycle and hit the button. As soon as the door opened, he turned sideways and pushed his way through. He got halfway through and got stuck. The lights went off. Alfonso sucked in his gut and pushed himself through. His leg was still in the doorway when it started to close. He fell to the ground and yanked it out. The door just missed him as it slammed shut.

Alfonso stood up and looked around. The lights in the hallway were all at different brightness settings; as if they each thought it was a different time of the day. Shaking his head, Alfonso made his way to the Dose. He found more evidence of computer malfunction along the way, and saw few people.

The problem stretched all the way from his quarters to the Dose. Wondering if it was a station-wide phenomenon, Alfonso had a grim thought about airlock doors opening and closing. If he'd designed the system, he'd have made it mechanically impossible to have the inner and outer doors open at the same time. But he would also have put manual overrides on any doors that might possibly trap someone. These people relied on their computers too much.

The Dose's nanocurtain disassembled itself when he commanded it to open. Alfonso sighed and stepped inside. That damn thing had cost him a bundle. Then he smiled. Maybe the illicit nanofactory in the secret cavern had the recipe.

The lights in the Dose were blinking at about thirty times a second. It was enough for him to see by, but would probably give him a headache. He went behind the bar and checked the screen. It, of course, was malfunctioning. Alfonso looked up at the lights. First order of business would be to get them working. If he ripped out the autodimmers and wired them to a physical switch, this wouldn't happen anymore. He hopped up onto the bar and pulled down a light.

Unfortunately, the light's technology was over Alfonso's head. "Let's see," he muttered to himself, "this looks like the battery, so maybe this thing is part of the dimmer control receiver. But how could I route past it by hand?"

A voice by the door said, "If light is not working, call nanobots."

Alfonso's head jerked to look in the direction of the voice. There was a botiira standing in the entryway. The botiira lightly clutched a gun in his lower left hand.

7.14 Thursday

Alfonso recognized the botiira as the one from whom he'd acquired the bar. He stuck the light back onto the ceiling and hopped down off the bar.

"Unfortunately, my bots are on the fritz. What can I do for you?"

The botiira walked into the Dose and sat down on the barstool directly across from Alfonso. He kept the gun trained on Alfonso the entire time. "Query, Alfonso Tanaka recognizes me?"

Alfonso nodded. Imitating the botiira's voice, he said, "Recognize is true." Then he switched back to his own, "but I never did catch your name."

The botiira said, "Important is false."

Alfonso looked down at the botiira's gun. With the current state of things, this was a long shot. But it was worth a try. He touched his thumb, middle finger, and pinkie together. His nanoguns didn't fire. Alfonso internally berated himself for falling into the trap that everyone else had. He should never have allowed the guns to be linked to the same global system. He was starting to understand why the botiira had run wires to open the cavern walls.

"So, have you come to ask for your bar back? Killing me would not be in the spirit of our agreement."

The botiira blinked more quickly than normal. "Agreement is not Alfonso can open cavern."

Holding his hands where the botiira could see them, Alfonso shrugged and slowly turned around. "Hey, you didn't tell me I wasn't allowed to open the wall." He grabbed two bottles and two glasses, turned around and set them on the bar. "Though I must say, I was surprised to find it there. How can you afford such expensive equipment?"

The botiira slowed his blinking and said nothing.

7.15 Friday

Alfonso carefully selected the correct bottle and opened it. He poured two glasses, closed the bottle, and set it right next to the other one. Then he picked up his glass and pushed the other closer to the botiira. Would this gambit work? The botiira *had* been gullible enough to lose the bar to him. But that might have been a setup. Alfonso decided that putting on an air of total unconcern should at least make his opponent pause and wonder.

The botiira eyed the drink. "Look," Alfonso said, "we both know you're going to kill me. If our business together is about to come to such an abrupt end, you might as well drink to it with me."

The botiira picked up the drink in one of his free hands. "Can poison is false." He downed it. Alfonso shrugged and drank his own. "I wouldn't know how to poison a botiira. Especially not one so involved with the Symbari."

The botiira's blinking sped up just enough to confirm Alfonso's suspicion. Not that this was a surprise. How else could the little guy have afforded the equipment in the secret room? He poured another round of drinks for the two of them. "You sent the assassin after me before I found the room. But now you're suggesting that you're here because I discovered your secret. Why?"

The botiira picked up the glass and drank. "Drink is good." He finished it off and set it back on the bar. "But kill time is current time."

Alfonso shrugged. "Do what you've got to do. But your Symbari friends are going to be pissed."

The botiira slowed his blinking. "Explain."

Alfonso leaned forward conspiratorially, causing the botiira to step back. With a grin, he said, "Because I have some information they'd kill to have. And they'll certainly kill you for not getting it."

The botiira's blinking slowed even more. He stared at Alfonso for a long moment, his mind likely running probability calculations. Finally he said, "Command: give information."

Alfonso laughed. "Or what? You'll kill me? Answer my question. Why did you send the assassin before I discovered the armory?"

The botiira fretfully tapped the fingers of two of his hands together. Finally he said, "Bored was true. If want bar, call assassin."

Alfonso poured another drink. "But, when you failed, the Symbari wouldn't give you the funds for another assassin. They liked my owning the bar and keeping the heat off of their nanofactory."

The botiira drank another glass. "While Alfonso not find room, run bar is true. High priority command: give information."

Alfonso ignored the command. "But, since I found the armory, they no longer feel comfortable with me running the bar. So they let you disable the entire station's computer system to kill me."

The botiira set the glass down and waved the gun. "Alfonso Tanaka is smart is true. If situation is different, Alfonso is good Symbari is true. Else, must die is true. Highest priority command: give information." He pointed the gun at Alfonso's head.

Alfonso shook his head. "What's your rush? You have me. My closest gun is out of reach. And I can't kill you with these bottles." He picked up the second one to emphasize his point. "Who are the Symbari going to invade?"

The botiira sighed. "Further stall is true. Lying probability is greater than threshold. Alfonso must die is true." He re-aimed his gun.

Alfonso rolled his eyes. "Well, if I'm going to die, then you're certainly not going to get this." He tossed the second bottle in an arc over the botiira's head.

7.16 Saturday

The botiira turned and watched the bottle sail over his head and fall toward the floor. Alfonso jumped down behind the bar. A second later, he heard glass break, followed immediately by an explosion. The botiira screamed. Alfonso stayed on the ground for another minute before standing up. Most of the chairs and tables in the Dose were on fire. The bar, however, had a metal kick plate and had been unaffected. The botiira lay in a burning heap on the ground.

Alfonso shook his head in mock sadness. "You see my friend, in a world of high-tech problems, you occasionally need a low-tech solution. Chemists would call the contents of that bottle 'highly volatile, jellied petroleum.' I just call it air-igniting napalm."

He looked up at the ceiling and sighed. The fire extinguishers were also linked to the main computer system. Alfonso grabbed a few supplies and muttered, "Convergence sucks." He pulled out his portable nanobot controller and tried to communicate with the bots he'd left at the end of the wires. They were still functioning. "Finally something's gone right." He commanded the bots to sever the contacts and stalked out, leaving his bar burning.

Assuming the lifts would also be malfunctioning, he jogged to his destination. On that particular hall, the lights were out, leaving everything dark. He used a portable light to check all the doors, and, on finding the correct one, he grumbled, "I'm surprised they didn't use computers to display the room numbers." He pounded on the door with his hand.

No answer.

He pounded on the door with the handle of a blaster.

Still no answer.

So he stepped back, pointed the gun at the center of the door, and blew it open. Then he quickly crossed the hallway and pasted himself to the wall beside the hole.

A thin, blue particle beam pulsed through the hole three times.

7.17 Sunday

Alfonso called out. "From waking up to firing in ten seconds. You're getting slow, Judy."

Her voice surprised, Judy called back, "Alfonso? What the hell are you doing blowing up my door? Emmanuelle will be furious."

"Wake up service. We've got problems."

"Couldn't you have called first?"

"No I couldn't. Can I come in?"

There was a pause, then she said. "Sure. I probably won't shoot. Lights."

He ducked and stepped through the hole. The lights, of course, didn't come on.

"What did you do, disable the lights?"

He shined his portable light toward the sound of her voice. She was dressed in a long shirt and was holding a small gun. "Get dressed and, if you've got any heavier weaponry, grab it. We've got work to do."

She put her hands on her hips. "You know that doesn't work with me."

He sighed and bounced the light up and down once. "Okay, I'll explain while you get dressed."

She turned and walked toward her room. "You'll stay out there, too. Now talk."

"The station computers are down. And way too many things are dependent on them."

From within her room she said, "I thought those things had failsafes on top of failsafes."

7.18 Monday

"They do. But the Symbari took them down. They're angry that we found the armory and sent the botiira to recollect."

He heard her walk into the room, so he shined the light back on her. She was wearing a black jumpsuit and holding a laser rifle. "If they've taken down the computers, then your bar defenses are probably disabled. What's keeping them from retaking the armory right now?"

"You and me. Let's go."

While jogging back to the Dose Alfonso told Judy about his experience with the botiira.

She listened carefully, then said, "I can't believe you left the armory unguarded."

He snickered, "This coming from the woman who overslept because her alarm didn't go off. Like I could have counted on you finding your way there on your own."

They reached the last corner before the Dose's hall and stopped. Alfonso darted his head around the corner and immediately pulled it back. "Two manta flanking the door. The nanocurtain is down."

She frowned. "Any chance they're Quixar's men?"

"Why would a shalk need bodyguards?"

"You're right. I'll take the one on the left."

He nodded and backed up. She took his position, held her rifle ready, and nodded.

"One, two, three!"

7.19 Tuesday

Alfonso dove out into the hallway, rolled once, and came up in a crouch. Judy spun around the corner and aimed. They fired simultaneously. The manta went down without so much as a glance in their direction. Alfonso jumped up and they quickly converged on the doorway. A large amount of smoke was pouring out.

This time, Alfonso stayed up, and Judy crouched down. They fanned their guns around in the opening, but only saw one person. A botiira was kneeling by the ghost's table and pounding on the button. Alfonso held a finger to his mouth, pointed to himself and then to the botiira. He then pointed to Judy and then to the ground. She nodded.

While she stayed crouched down with her rifle trained on the botiira, Alfonso slipped in and slowly moved toward the bar. The botiira pressed the button again and then pulled out a little box. Alfonso stopped and held his breath.

The botiira stood up and held the box to his mouth. "Set glitch off. Need nanobots is true."

He clipped the box to his clothes and turned around. Judy and Alfonso both fired.

Judy moved inside the bar, but stayed by the door and faced outward. Alfonso rushed over to the ghost's table. He pulled out his controller and told the bots to reconnect the wires to the button. This table was far enough away from the center of the bar that it hadn't caught fire. He waited for the bots to report success and then pressed the button. The walls swung open.

"Come on." He commanded the bots to cut the wires again and rushed into the armory.

Judy followed a few seconds later.

The lights came on in the armory as soon as they stepped into the main room. The outer walls closed. Alfonso shook his head. "They were smart enough to take this off the main system. Why didn't I do the same?"

7.20 Wednesday

Judy shook her head. "They did it to hide themselves from Quixar. That it also helps in this situation is a coincidence. These bozos aren't smarter than us."

Alfonso thought back to his recent discussion with Quixar. Judy's confidence was comforting, but was it

also misplaced?

She looked down at her rifle and then at the ones stacked up in the room. She put hers down and grabbed a more powerful one. "What's the plan?"

Alfonso paced the room's length twice. "The Symbari can't have the armory, but I'm not ready to destroy it yet. It would be nice to have something to hold over them. Besides, after killing four of them, we probably need it to keep them from killing us."

She walked over to the nanofactory. "It's got recipes for a bunch of different kinds explosives."

Alfonso scanned over the list and pointed to a disarmable proximity mine. "Those. Make a bunch."

She keyed in a sequence and the factory started humming. When the first batch came out, they grabbed them and started distributing them around the room. Alfonso said, "Attach them to the walls and ceiling, too. We don't want our friends to core in."

When they'd made enough mines, Alfonso told the factory to make a small computer. He had the computer create an eight-digit code but not show it to him. He split it into four parts and, still not looking at it, encrypted and sent the first part to his own mailbox. Then he encrypted the second part and sent it to Judy's box. He sent the third part to Quixar with a message that said, "Quixar, you asked me to be the keeper of a very important piece of information. I'm now asking you to return the favor. Don't give this number to anyone."

Then he handed the computer to Judy. "I've split the disarm code up into four parts. You and I each get one. Someone I trust gets another. Send the last to someone you trust."

7.21 Thursday

Judy thought for a minute, smiled, and keyed something into the computer. "Done. Since we're able to connect to the main system, it must be back up."

Alfonso nodded and walked over to the screen by the door. He enabled the camera and saw that the lights were on and that the fires were out. There were also manta, two sliss, and a botiira in the room. "The Symbari seem adept at looking past the typical racial prejudices," he mused aloud.

"True." A touch of irony crept into her voice. "Maybe they should be running things."

Alfonso laughed and grabbed a powerful rifle. "Okay, I'm going to set the mines to arm in one minute. We've just got to hold them off for that long. You ready?"

She nodded.

Alfonso set the timer, dropped the computer, and hit the button on the wall. As soon as the doors started to open, they both fired through them. Then they walked out.

All four Symbari had guns trained on them.

Alfonso and Judy walked far enough into the room for the walls to close. Then Alfonso pointed over his shoulder. "You can't have the armory."

One of the sliss turned light in color. "And jusst how are you going to sstop uss?"

Alfonso smiled. "We've got fifty proximity mines scattered about that room. They're on the walls, the ceiling, the floor, and by the doorway. If so much as a nanobot moves in there, the place will be gone."

Judy turned around and pointed her rifle at the wall.

Alfonso continued. "I recommend that you get the hell out of my bar. We're not open for business yet."

7.22 Friday

The sliss stared at Alfonso for a second, then bobbed its head. With more malice than Alfonso thought a sliss could muster, it said, "We'll be in touch."

Alfonso smiled. "Looking forward to doing business with you."

Keeping their guns trained on Alfonso and Judy, the Symbari grabbed their dead comrades and backed out of the Dose.

Alfonso breathed a sigh of relief. Judy nodded and said, "Well, that buys us some time. Now what?"

Alfonso shrugged and walked behind the bar. "We've got a lot of work to do if we plan to open today."

She looked at him and frowned. When he didn't respond, she nodded.

They recycled the tables and chairs that were burned beyond repair. As a temporary measure, though, they kept any that were still sturdy. Alfonso set his nanofactory to build a thick door. The nanocurtains were too expensive, and he didn't want another device that crumbled the first time a computer glitched. He then queued up a series of chairs and tables.

Judy looked at the factory's slow progress and sighed. "You know. The one in the armory could churn this stuff out in no time. And it'd be free too."

"I know. But we're not using that factory. I'd rather not have Quixar come in and ask where we got our furniture."

In response to her questioning look, he explained that the nanofactories stamped serial numbers on everything they made. Her eyes went wide at this. Then they squinted. In a sly voice, she said, "But that's an illegal factory. I'll bet it'll use any serial number we give to it."

Alfonso hadn't thought of that. "We'll experiment with it later." He changed the subject. "I wonder how the rest of the station handled the glitch?" He turned on the large viewscreen in the corner.

7.23 Saturday

"...As the damage reports roll in, it appears that a considerable amount of shalk property was destroyed, largely at the hands of its annoyed owners." The grim-faced shalk reporter continued. "In related news, the death toll among non-shalk is relatively small. It appears that only about a hundred kruxpa were killed, including the psuit vendors at each of the station's airlocks. The cause of the computer glitch is still unknown, but investigations are underway. This is the third glitch to affect the neighboring area in the last month, and many shalk are growing annoyed by the failing systems." The scene cut to a shalk being interviewed.

Alfonso set the volume to zero. "People died, and the shalk are only worrying about the property they destroyed themselves. They make me sick." He paused, looked up at the ceiling, and released a wave of hunter/killer bots to clean out any listening devices. After giving them a minute to do their work, he looked to Judy and said, "What would you do if you knew how to kill the shalk?"

Her eyebrows raised. "Um, Alfonso? I already know how to kill a shalk."

He shook his head. "Special case, and you couldn't use that method in combat. What if you knew a way to circumvent their shields at any setting?"

She blinked. "I'm listening."

"What would you do?"

Without hesitation, she replied, "Start a war."

He sighed. "Would it take that? Could we change things without a lot of bloodshed?"

"What do you know, Alfonso?"

Quickly he said, "Nothing." Then he paused and added, "But come up with something we could do in the event that ever changes." He looked around the Dose. They had repaired enough of the fire damages to open. Suddenly he remembered her door. "You've got to get back to your apartment."

7.24 Sunday

Judy's eyes went wide. Then she rolled them. Calmly, she said, "That's right. Someone destroyed my door. You be okay here for a while?"

"Of course. But what does that matter? A door with a giant hole in it is practically an invitation for a sticky-fingered manta to come in and rob you blind."

She smiled. "Think so? We'll see how many are dead on the floor when I get back."

Alfonso arched his eyebrows. "You set up portable defenses, in the dark, without my noticing it? You didn't take *that* long getting changed."

She looked at him incredulously. "You mean your home defenses were on the main system?" Her look became one of mock distrust, "What'd you do with my Alfonso?"

He sighed and held up a hand. "Guilty. I guess I'm getting lax in my old age. Now get out of here."

She was still shaking her head as she walked out.

Although the Dose opened on time, no one showed up at first. Alfonso figured most people had other things to deal with. His first client didn't arrive for half an hour. It was Sukomb.

Alfonso smiled. He hadn't seen the kiree in a while. "Hey, Sukomb. Good to see the computer glitch didn't have too bad an effect on you."

Sukomb took the two feet closest to his head and flared them out. He repeated the motion with the two feet below them, and then continued down until he'd made a wave with the top ten pairs of feet. Alfonso had learned this was an expression of mild negation, like a human quickly shaking his head. "Dark not hurt kiree. Just waited."

Alfonso nodded knowingly. Then he caught himself. Just because the creature looked like a giant millipede didn't mean that it liked to live under rocks. He realized that he didn't know very much about the kiree home world and decided to visit some day. "The regular?" he asked.

Sukomb flashed out his top ten pairs of feet in a wave moving upward--a kiree nod.

7.25 Monday

Alfonso poured Sukomb a drink and pushed it over to him. Sukomb drank it down and then said, "Bar damaged."

Alfonso nodded. "We had a fire during the glitch. No big deal, really. Hey, I've been meaning to ask your advice on something." He pulled out a small datapad, transferred a file to it, and handed it to Sukomb. "The kiree are the best engineers in the sector. Do you know anyone who could make this for me?"

Sukomb looked over the schematics for a minute before waving his feet upward. "I can do."

Alfonso had been hoping that would be the answer. He clapped his hands together and beamed. "Wonderful. How much?"

Sukomb considered for a moment, then said, "Ten thousand. Eight if explain why."

Alfonso scrunched his eyebrows together. "Explain why?"

"Curious. What for?"

"Oh. Well, at one time my ancestors used those. I've always wanted one."

Sukomb flared his legs downward. "Not true. Beyond human technology. "

Alfonso shrugged. "Well, I might as well make one as good as existing technology can make."

"Then not for ritual. Why want?"

After a pause, Alfonso said, "Sorry, I can't talk about that right now."

Sukomb flared his legs upward. "Then ten thousand."

7.26 Tuesday

Alfonso reconsidered. Remaking the bar had hurt his savings a bit. Saving twenty percent on this item would be a good thing. But he couldn't tell Sukomb what the kiree wanted to know. "Ten thousand is fine. When can you have it for me?"

"Two days. Maybe three."

Judy returned shortly thereafter. Alfonso wanted to ask how many dead burglars she found on her floor, but she immediately struck up a conversation with Sukomb. Over the rest of the day, people filtered in slowly. It looked like it wouldn't be a very busy day.

Late in the day, the screen came back on. It showed the same dour-looking shalk from the previous day. She waited a few seconds before speaking. "Citizens of the Shalk Empire. As we told you yesterday, a heinous crime was committed against a shalk. Today we will bring the murderer to justice."

A murmur ran through the dose's small crowd, and many people adjusted their chairs to better see the screen. Alfonso hadn't seen any executions in the year since humanity had been here. He suspected they were enough of a rare occurrence to make this a novel experience. Judy walked over to stand next to him.

The scene changed to a closeup of a large box with clear walls. The shalk announcer's voice said, "While many would like to see the criminal rended limb from limb, we must remember that we are kind and benevolent rulers. We will not meet his barbarism with our own. And, we don't need to take any steps to keep the manta out of the Celestial Palace, as he did to his victim. Manta are already not welcome in the

Celestial Palace. So, band together, my brethren, and see swift justice."

Alfonso leaned over to Judy and muttered, "What do you think of that?"

Judy responded in a similarly quiet tone, "She's pissed. I'll bet they all are. I heard there were riots after yesterday's announcement. This 'swift justice' isn't going to placate anyone."

With a nod, Alfonso asked, "Do you suppose the ghosts wouldn't let them torture Shasirr to death?"

Judy snorted. "Well, the decision certainly didn't come from the 'kind and benevolent' shalk."

7.27 Wednesday

The camera panned back, revealing an enormous number of furry creatures. It appeared that the box was in the middle of a large amphitheater packed with shalk. Alfonso wondered what tickets to the show had gone for. He whispered to Judy again, "Does anyone here understand the concept of scalping?" She arched her eyebrows. Maybe they'd have to expose the non-human races to the concept before the next big event.

Suddenly many members of the crowd started pointing to the left. The camera shifted to a doorway at the top of the amphitheater. A shalk in dark-red robes walked down the stairs, followed immediately by a manta and two more shalk. Shasirr towered over the shalk, and the ones behind him had annihilation batons trained on him. People in the amphitheater started to yell angrily. As the crowd began to get ugly, Alfonso idly wondered if the spectators had been allowed to bring their batons to the event.

The procession moved slowly, and the crowd got louder and more angry with each step. Finally, the group reached the clear box. The red-robed shalk held up his hands, causing everyone to quiet. He turned to Shasirr and spoke in an amplified voice. "Shasirr of Manta, you have been found guilty of treason against the Shalk Empire. The penalty for this crime is death. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Shasirr smiled and said, "As a matter of fact, I do." He raised his hands and turned around in a slow circle. "Forr hundreds of yearrs, the shalk have used technological superriorrrity to make up forr a prrofound lack of intelligence." This brought immediate angry murmurs from the crowd. Shasirr only smiled more broadly and continued. "But now, those days arre gone. As the grreatest assassin everr to live, I am prroudd to be the one to brrring you this message. Yourr days arre numberberred."

The crowd erupted. Many jumped up and screamed at him. Some started to push forward. Shasirr laughed and put his arms down. Then he pushed the red-robed shalk aside and stepped into the box.

7.28 Thursday

The red-robed shalk sealed the case and stepped back. In a hushed tone, the announcer's voice came on. "The chamber will now be filled with a fast-acting, poisonous gas. The murderer will die quickly, but at least we will be able to see it happen."

Shasirr held up his right hand and extended his claws. He grinned and slashed the side of the case. Instantly, the case filled with a thick black gas, totally obscuring the manta. The announcer lost her composure and burst out, "They promised we'd be able to see him die!"

The case filled completely with the gas, stayed that way for a moment, and then dissipated as quickly as it had appeared. Shasirr was gone.

The crowd erupted. Everyone leapt to their feet and started yelling. Someone pulled out a baton and

fired it at the case. The person directly in front of him ducked hastily. Then he turned around and pushed the shalk who'd fired over his head. The shalk fell backward into the people behind him. They shoved him back. He tripped over his seat and fell toward the shalk in front of him. That shalk stepped aside and let him fall in between the seats. He was now stuck upside down between two seats. He fired his baton at the seat in front of him, annihilating the shalk in that seat. The shalk next to that one pulled out her baton and shot back.

Total anarchy broke out. Annihilation batons throughout the stadium went off, killing many. The scene quickly cut to the shocked-looking announcer. She stared down at a monitor with wide eyes, then looked hastily up at the camera. Clearly unsure what to say, she stammered, "Um ... that's all for now. We'll be back when we understand what happened." The screen cut out.

Alfonso suppressed a chuckle. Judy giggled. A number of other patrons did as well. The giggling built into laughter, which built into raucous laughter. Alfonso, glad there were no shalk at the bar, looked around in curiosity. All these people were happy to see shalk killed. Though they were used to the oppressive shalk rule, they obviously didn't enjoy it. More to think about. He shut off the screen.

Judy poured herself a drink and held it high. "I propose a toast." The Dose quieted and turned to look at her. "To our kind, benevolent, and, most of all, *intelligent* rulers--the shalk." The humans in the bar held up their glasses and said, "Here, here." The non-human patrons looked at the humans in confusion. Then they mimicked them.

7.29 Friday

The rest of the day was uneventful. At some point, Alfonso realized that the ghost had arrived and returned to his table. Unfortunately, since Alfonso didn't have a new light up, he didn't know when the ghost had appeared. The ghost didn't do anything to suggest he wanted to talk, so Alfonso left him alone. He wondered, however, if the ghost knew anything about the room right behind him.

At closing time, the ghost was gone, and the last of the patrons filed out. As Alfonso and Judy walked toward the door, he patted her on the back. "You saw that the ghost was here today?"

She stopped. "No, I didn't notice."

Alfonso shrugged. "We'll get back to work on the modified light tomorrow."

Judy shook her head. "Then we lose a day. We've got a lot of balls in the air. If we neglect one, they'll all come crashing down. I'll stay and work on it."

With a frown, Alfonso said, "I barely slept at all last night. I really need to go home."

Judy nodded. "No problem. This is my project anyway."

Alfonso stared at her for a moment, then nodded and left. When he got back to his quarters, he found all the fears and worries from the previous night waiting for him. Quixar knew a lot more than he'd suspected. But how much did he know? Did he know about the secret exit? Worse, did he know about the hotel?

He tried to take a shower, but the water refused to get warm. Strange. Was that a residual from the earlier glitch? Had they not totally fixed the system? Well, he had more important things to worry about. He turned off the lights and lay down. But, like last night, he couldn't sleep. What would he do with Quixar's information? He suspected that he was the only non-shalk to know. If one of the many people after him--damn, Shasirr had escaped. Would the assassin be gunning for him now, too?

Alfonso sighed. His life certainly had become complicated since he got the bar. He liked things to be interesting, but this was starting to push it. His mind raced on, jumping from one thing to another until hours later, when he finally fell asleep.

The incoming-call buzzer woke him. He checked the time. Still early in the morning. He couldn't have slept for more than an hour. Who the hell could that be? "Ignore call," he commanded. The buzzer stopped.

A second later it started again. Angry, he rolled out of bed and stumbled over to the screen. It came on and showed a worried Judy. "Judy, I realize I woke you up yesterday, but this isn't nice."

She shook her head. "Alfonso, you'd better get over to my place right away."

Still half asleep he said, "Why?"

"Emmanuelle's back."

7.30 Saturday

Alfonso immediately woke up. "Is she okay?"

Judy looked over her shoulder, then turned back to the screen. "Just get over here."

Alfonso quickly changed his clothes and rushed out. If he sprinted the whole way, he could probably get there faster than if he took a shuttle, but that would leave him too exhausted to deal with the situation, whatever it was. So he chose to catch a shuttle. He rushed over to the nearest station and hit the call button.

Time dragged on. What was going on? At this time of the night, the shuttles should never take more than a minute to arrive. Alfonso waited a bit more before he gave up and started running toward Judy's place. Were the shuttles being delayed by a random glitch, or was someone trying to make his life difficult? After all, the Symbari would be watching him now.

He pushed all thoughts of computer glitches and the Symbari from his mind. The more important matter at hand was Emmanuelle. What did the ghosts do to her? And, perhaps more importantly, why did they let her go?

When he reached Judy's door, he was breathing heavily. He took note of the new door, then hit the call button.

A minute later, a disheveled-looking Judy opened the door. She nodded to Alfonso and waved him in. The lights in the quarters were dim, and Alfonso didn't see Emmanuelle in the main room. However, the doors to Judy's room and the bathroom were both open.

Judy yawned and closed the door behind him. Then, in a quiet voice, she said, "When I got home the shower was on. My first thought was that it was a residual from the glitch, but the door was also locked. None of my defenses had gone off, so if someone was in the shower, it had to be either Emmanuelle or a damn good cat burglar." She looked toward the bathroom door, but didn't move in that direction.

7.31 Sunday

Alfonso followed Judy's gaze. Matching her quiet voice, he asked, "But it was Emmanuelle?"

Judy nodded. "I knocked on the door and called to her, but I got no answer. I didn't want to just barge

in, so I did a few things around the house. But, ten minutes later, the shower was still going. So I fried the lock and went in. Steam poured out of there like it was a sauna, and I found Emmanuelle sitting on the shower floor with hot water hitting her in the face and chest. That's when I called you."

Alfonso nodded. "Where is she now? Her bedroom?"

Judy shook her head. "I turned off the water and draped a towel over her, but she refuses to move. And her skin is wrinkled like a prune. I think she's been in there for hours."

"Has she said anything?"

Judy shook her head. "She barely seems to recognize that I'm there."

Alfonso took a deep breath. "Mind if I go in?"

Judy shrugged, "I'm not making any progress. She was hot for you, so maybe she'll respond to your presence."

Alfonso nodded and went over to the bathroom. He took in the scene quickly. The bathroom didn't look much different from when he'd stayed here after the explosion. Judy had even left the pink towels. She must have been more worried about Emmanuelle than she'd let on.

The shower door was open. Emmanuelle was sitting on the floor with her legs pulled tightly against her chest. Her wet hair draped over the towel Judy had wrapped around her. She was sniffing a bit and continuously rocking back and forth.

June 1998

8.1 Monday

Alfonso crouched down by the shower door and tried to look at her face. Although her head was bent downward, and her hair was mostly obscuring her face, there didn't seem to be any outward signs of abuse.

In a soft voice, Alfonso said, "Emmanuelle, it's Alfonso. Can you hear me?"

Her eyes stayed clamped shut, and she continued rocking.

Alfonso slowly moved his hand toward her. Continuing to speak gently, he said, "Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you. I'm just going to move your hair aside so I can see your face."

When she didn't give any sign of recognition, he slowly pushed her hair aside. Making shushing sounds, he moved the hair behind her head and stroked it. Now he could see her face more clearly. Other than being soaking wet and red from the hot water, she looked okay.

Continuing to stroke her hair, he said, "Wouldn't you rather come out of there? You've got to be getting cold."

No response.

"Emmanuelle, it's okay. Everything's okay." He softly brushed his fingers across her cheek.

She gasped, her body tensed, and her eyes popped open. Alfonso made shushing sounds. Her head jerked around, and she stared at him with unfocused eyes.

"It's okay, Emmanuelle. It's just Alfonso."

As she continued to stare at him, her eyes refocused. In a timid voice, she squeaked, "Alfonso?"

8.2 Tuesday

Alfonso smiled and put his palm on her cheek. "That's right."

She launched herself at him. He caught her in his arms, and she wrapped hers tightly around him. Sobbing, she said, "I can't get clean."

Continuing to hold her tightly, Alfonso slowly stood up. He looked to Judy and pointed at a thick robe. She grabbed it and put it over Emmanuelle's shoulders. Alfonso said, "From where I'm standing, it doesn't look like you could get much more clean."

She clenched him more tightly and cried, "No. I'm filthy!"

"Okay. Well, let's get this robe on you. Then we can talk about why." He looked to Judy again and made a drinking motion. Judy nodded and left the room. Emmanuelle lightened her grip on him, allowing him to slide around behind her. "Okay, dear, arms through here. You don't want me getting any cheap thrills off you while you're in this state."

Since he was behind her, he couldn't tell if she'd smiled at his attempt to lighten the mood--but she did slide her arms into the robe. He pulled the front closed and tied the wrap in place. Then he put his arm around her shoulders and slowly led her into the main room. "I think you'll find the couch to be more comfortable than the shower floor."

He set her down gently on the couch, and Judy handed her a steaming mug. She looked up at Judy and seemed to see her for the first time. Taking the mug in both hands, she smiled, "Thanks, Judy."

Judy smiled back. "No problem." She opened her mouth to say something else, then closed it and looked to Alfonso. The look said, "I'm a soldier, not a psychologist. You run things."

Alfonso wasn't much of a psychologist either. He sat on the table directly in front of Emmanuelle. She took a sip from her mug and then looked to him.

Should he plunge straight to the issue, or give her more time first? He wasn't sure how to proceed. Then, Emmanuelle decided for him. Focusing intently on him, she said, "So, did you get my message?"

8.3 Wednesday

Alfonso blinked. "Message?"

Emmanuelle nodded. "Yeah, about the bagels? I didn't have much latitude to play with the dream, and that was the only thing I could think of that they wouldn't figure out."

Alfonso nodded. "So the ghosts*did* have you."

Emmanuelle's knuckles whitened, and her hands shook as she tightened her grip on the mug. She clenched her teeth together and nodded. Alfonso leaned forward and patted her knee. "It was a brilliant idea, Emmanuelle. Yes, we got the message." Telling her that the information hadn't really helped them didn't seem like a good idea.

She leaned back and said, "Good." Then she took a sip from her mug.

Alfonso looked to Judy, who shrugged. He turned back to Emmanuelle and said slowly, "Emmanuelle, can you tell us what happened with the ghosts?"

She turned pale. She tried to bring the mug to her lips, but her hands were shaking so much, she spilled some of the hot liquid. When it hit her hands, she yelped and hurled the mug against the far wall. Then she pulled her knees to her chest and held them tightly.

Alfonso berated himself for trying to move too quickly. He'd made progress with her, only to see it slip away. He looked to Judy and frowned. She nodded sadly.

After rocking forward and back for a minute, Emmanuelle surprised them. In a far-away voice she said, "They're bad. They're very bad. I thought the teddy bears were bad, but the ghosts are much worse."

Alfonso spoke as slowly and calmly as he could. "Can you tell us what they did to you?"

She continued to rock, and a tear rolled down her cheek. "It... I'm so dirty."

Alfonso took both of her hands in his and squeezed gently. Staring into her eyes, he said, "You're not dirty. You're perfectly clean. What did the ghosts do?"

She clenched her teeth and pulled back, but Alfonso held tight. "It's okay Emmanuelle."

Another tear rolled down her cheek before she said. "It ... it possessed me."

8.4 Thursday

Continuing to hold her hands, Alfonso kept his face neutral. "So the ghosts can leave their bodies and control others?"

She shook her head. "They don't have bodies."

Alfonso blinked. "Go on."

"The ghosts I met were hard to see if you looked directly at them. You had to catch them out of the corner of your eye. And you could walk right through them and only feel a chill run down your back."

She let go of his hands and wrapped hers around her knees again. "If they want a physical body, they possess one."

Alfonso stood up and started pacing. The ghost at the table, the one who had human mannerisms and seemed to look like a human, *was* a human. He was a human possessed by a ghost. And the creature in the mirror after his dream was probably a ghost in pure form.

He stopped pacing. "Do you think they can read your mind when they possess you?"

She shook her head. "No. It asked too many questions. But it knew when I tried to lie."

That meant ghost at the table probably didn't know English. It was forcing its human host to translate for it. That's why it took so long to reply.

"So, when you're being possessed, do you know what's going on around you?"

She shook her head. "You don't understand. They don't control you. They just tell you what they want you to do. But they have ... ways ... to make sure you comply."

Alfonso looked at Judy and raised an eyebrow. She frowned. He looked back to Emmanuelle. "Then they--" He broke off and aimed a spin kick at Judy's head.

8.5 Friday

Judy dodged aside, causing the kick to miss narrowly. Emmanuelle yelled out, "Alfonso!"

Judy, however, didn't return the attack. And Alfonso didn't attack again.

Judy said, "It's okay, Emmanuelle. Alfonso was just checking to see if I was possessed."

Emmanuelle stared incredulously from her to Alfonso. "How?"

Alfonso smiled. If she'd been possessed, she purposely wouldn't have dodged quickly enough. The ghost couldn't know how fast she was, but, if she'd been hit, Alfonso would have known something was wrong. He shook his head, "Not important." He sat back down in front of her. "How'd you get away?"

"I've been off the station since the last day I saw you. We were cruising around on a botiira ship." She shuddered. "You think a few botiira are tough to deal with. Try wandering around a large ship full of them. The only thing worse is being possessed by a...."

Lest she dwell on that, Alfonso asked, "Do you know what the ghost was doing?"

She shrugged. "Not really. There were ghosts on some of the other ships we docked with. Whenever two of them wanted to say anything important, they communicated directly by blending together. Sometimes it left my body to do that, but other times they held conferences inside me. I once had six possessing me at the same time." She shuddered again, then set her jaw and continued on. "When they were in me, I could almost get a sense of what they were talking about. But I guess they didn't think that was important."

Judy said, "Then can you give us a sense of what they were doing?"

She shook her head. Then she frowned. "Well ... I sort of know, but...." Tears started to flow freely. "I think I knew once. But now I feel sick when I try to focus on it."

Judy walked over and sat by her, taking Emmanuelle's hand in hers. "I know what that's like. They've done something similar to me. I can help you get past it. But tell us, how did you escape?"

Emmanuelle said, "I think the ghost got tired of me. After all, it'd been possessing me for so long--"

Alfonso nodded. "Maybe possessing someone wears a ghost out. If your case is typical, it sounds like that time frame is a few weeks."

Emmanuelle blinked. She looked at Judy and then back at Alfonso. "No. I'd been possessed since the day after you acquired the bar."

8.6 Saturday

Alfonso gasped. Then he looked to Judy and shook his head. "And someone here *justhad* to tell you about the shalk we killed."

While Judy looked down at her feet, Alfonso got up and started pacing. Emmanuelle cried out, "I'm sorry, Alfonso, I didn't mean to be a spy. But it ... made me."

Alfonso shook his head, saying, "Don't worry, Emmanuelle. It wasn't your fault. Besides, that's the

worst-kept secret on this station."

Judy raised an eyebrow at this, but Alfonso chose not to elucidate. "Besides, it's better that we know for sure what they know than to be guessing all the time. So, how'd you escape?"

She looked worried. "I don't really know. The ship docked here, and the ghost told me to get off. Then, suddenly, it was gone. I wandered back to my quarters and got into the shower."

Alfonso nodded. "Okay, from now on, if one of us gets possessed, we'll find a way to work the line, 'It was all so much easier on Earth,' into the conversation. That will tip the others off." Judy and Emmanuelle nodded. Alfonso then crouched in front of Emmanuelle, "Are you going to be okay, dear?"

She frowned and tightened her grip on Judy's hand. After looking to Judy for a second, she looked back to Alfonso and nodded. Timidly, she said, "I think so."

"Great." Alfonso stood up. "I need to get back to bed, but I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

She nodded again. Alfonso gave Judy a particular look and walked over to the door. Judy interpreted the look correctly: He heard her say, "Let me talk to Alfonso. I'll be right back."

As they were stepping outside the quarters, Judy masked what they were really going to talk about by saying, "I'll probably be in late tomorrow."

8.7 Sunday

While closing the door, Alfonso replied, "No problem. Take care of Emmanuelle."

With the door now closed, he sighed. She shook her head. "No, I don't buy it either."

Frowning deeply, he replied, "I don't see any reason for them to have let her live. We learned too much about the ghosts for free."

Judy walked across the hallway and returned. "Do you think she's still possessed?"

With a shrug, Alfonso said, "I've got no idea how we could verify it. But, if that's so, then everything she just told us could be false."

"On the other hand, the most important thing we learned from her is that the ghost's possess their victims. If that's not true, then she's not possessed."

Alfonso frowned and scratched his chin. After a long pause, he said, "What if she's working for them voluntarily? This whole thing could be a ruse to throw us off."

Through clenched teeth, Judy said, "We left the traitors on Earth."

"Are you sure?"

She tapped her foot a few times, then shook her head. "I don't know. I'll keep an eye on her. But we've got to learn more about the damn ghosts. There could be one standing out here with us for all we know."

Alfonso nodded. "Did you finish what you were working on at the Dose?"

"Yep. It's on and ready."

"Then we'll just have to take this slowly and see what happens."

She nodded and turned toward the door. Before Alfonso could walk away, though, she said, "So, what alert phrase are we really going to use?"

8.8 Monday

Alfonso considered for a moment, then smiled. "Remember the tag line I wanted to use for our last conflict?" He looked over his shoulder at her.

She nodded and went inside.

Alfonso walked home slowly. He needed his sleep, but he also needed time to think through the situation with Emmanuelle. What could be done about the ghosts? If what Emmanuelle had said was true, then he'd never know if the person he was talking to was a ghost. He needed a way to detect them. But how? He didn't even know where to begin.

And what did the ghosts want? They didn't seem to care that he'd participated in the murder of a shalk. Were such things below them? Or did they have other plans for him? The dreams they'd given him seemed to imply that they wanted him to behave, but the one in the bar was angry that they'd given him those dreams. Were there conflicting factions within the ghost race? So many questions, with so few answers. The only thing he knew for sure was that the ghosts were the ones who were really running things in this sector. The shalk were little more than puppets.

He arrived at his door and held his hand to the ID panel. He heard the door unlatch, but just as he was about to push on it, he felt his ring finger sting. Alfonso quickly stepped aside. Long ago, he'd added a nanobot to the unlocking mechanism. Whenever the door opened, the bot selected a number at random and communicated it to another bot on Alfonso's hand. When Alfonso tried to enter his quarters, the bot on his hand retrieved the current number from the one in the door. It then compared the new number to the one it had received when he left. If the numbers didn't agree, it vibrated wildly, tipping him off.

Someone had opened Alfonso's door without his consent.

8.9 Tuesday

Alfonso pulled out a portable controller and tried to bring up a view from any of the nanocams he'd spread around the room. None of them responded.

What to do? If someone was in there waiting for him, he could surprise him by coming in through the hidden entrance. On the other hand, that would give away the secret, possibly for nothing. Also, if the room was booby-trapped, it might not matter how he entered it.

He paced back and forth across the hallway before deciding on his course of action. He drew a handgun and held it in his left hand. He then put his left arm slightly behind his back, obscuring the gun from the view of his door's camera. With a deep breath, he hit the call button.

Nothing happened, so he buzzed it again. A minute passed before the door opened. As soon as he saw the silhouette of a figure behind the door, he threw his hand behind its neck, grabbed hold, and stuck the gun in its face.

Slimmerr threw up her arms and shouted, "Alfonso, it's me!"

When Alfonso released her, she jumped back. Exhaling slowly, Alfonso stepped into the room and closed the door.

"If you didn't want me in yourr quarrters, why'd you give me entry access?"

"Sorry, Slimmerr. I wasn't expecting you and today's been ... interesting. Didn't mean to scare you."

She tapped her foot and frowned. Then, a second later, she smiled. "Okay, but don't let it happen again." Her smile vanished. "Don't shoot the messengerr, okay? I came to brring you bad news."

Alfonso put the gun away and sighed. "Why doesn't anyone ever bring megood news?"

8.10 Wednesday

Slimmerr frowned and sat down on his bed. "I'm sorry, Alfonso. But this one's actually my fault. You shouldn't have everr helped me."

Alfonso sat beside her and rubbed her shoulders. "Somehow I suspect I'll draw a different conclusion from whatever you're about to tell me."

With a grave stare, she said, "Worrdd's been sprreading through the Symbarri that if anyone knows anything about you they arre rrequired to rreporrt to theirr superriorrs immediately."

Alfonso nodded. "Just me?"

Slimmer thought for a second. "Well, they also wanted to know about someone named 'Judy McMalley,' but I assumed that was for something else."

"So, what did you tell your superior?"

She shook her head. "Since he died, no one has come to take his place. Without a superriorr, I've got no one to tell." He scrunched her eyebrows together, causing her to add, "I got this information from ... otherr sources."

Alfonso patted her back and stood up. "It's nothing for you to worry about, dear. The Symbari are interested in Judy and me for much bigger reasons than the death of one low-level heavy. Not your fault."

She relaxed visibly. Then she tensed up again. "Wait. A biggerr rreason? Arre you okay?"

"Of course. I'm on the edge, but it's the place I'm used to. Did you hear anything else? Even if it seems unrelated and inconsequential, it may help me."

Frowning, she said, "Well, therre was a rrumorr that the rrecent computerr glitch wasn't accidental. And therre was another that the people who set it off didn't correctly fix it. Lots of people arre having small prroblems now, and the prroblems seem to be getting worrrse."

8.11 Thursday

Alfonso scratched his chin. "So, they didn't really know what they were doing. Interesting."

"What's that?"

Alfonso shook his head. "How high up are your 'other sources'? I don't suppose they know who's the highest-ranking Symbari on the station?"

Slimmerr bit her lip. "It's possible. Do you want me to find out?"

Alfonso touched her cheek. "Only as a really low priority task. I'd much rather have you alive than learn this. Okay?"

She frowned.

In an extremely serious voice, he repeated, "Okay?"

She nodded slowly.

"Good." He sat down on the bed and took off his boots. "You done for the night?"

"Yeah. I'm just going home."

"You want a place to stay?"

She blinked. "Alfonso, are you finally propositioning me?"

He smiled. "Not quite. I could use someone to hold, but just to hold."

She shrugged. "It's a start. Lights, off."

8.12 Friday

Alfonso got to the Dose just before it opened. True to her word, Judy was not there. But Sukomb was. The kiree was holding a long, slightly curved object that was wrapped in some sort of soft material.

While unlocking the door, Alfonso said, "Is that my sword?"

Sukomb shifted the object to his left legs and sent a wave running up the right ones.

Alfonso opened the door and stood aside for Sukomb to enter. Sukomb tipped his head, a learned human expression, and walked over to the bar. Alfonso followed him, asking, "I thought you said it'd take a few days."

Sukomb set the sword down on the bar and sent waves of feet going in both directions--a shrug. "Fudge factor."

Alfonso looked at Sukomb's chest. The kiree was wearing a strange piece of clothing he hadn't seen before. It looked like an extremely tough material, and it had a huge number of small pockets, one for each of his legs. It was hard to tell, but Alfonso thought the pockets had thin objects in them. Though curious about the new outfit, he decided not to pry. Instead, he pointed to the sword. "May I?"

"Please."

Alfonso removed the wrapping material, revealing a katana sword in an exquisitely crafted scabbard. He ran his finger appreciatively along the smooth black case. Then he carefully drew out the sword. It had a good, solid feel, with perfect balance. He walked over to one of the bar tables, rose the sword above his head, and sliced downward. The corner of the thick table fell to the floor.

While walking back behind the bar, Alfonso whistled. "This is perfect."

Sukomb let all of his free legs fall to his sides and leaned his body forward.

To Alfonso's knowledge, that *was not* a kiree expression. It looked more like a Japanese bow.

8.13 Saturday

While still bowed, Sukomb said, "Doumo arigatou gozaimasu."

Alfonso stared at the kiree in shock. He'd just said, "Thank you very much" in Japanese.

Sukomb stood up straight and said, "Nihon no karuchaa wa totemo omoshiroi desu ne?"

Alfonso nodded and replied in shalkish. "Yes, Japanese culture is very interesting. When did you learn the language?"

The kiree also returned to shalkish. "When making sword."

"But that was yesterday!"

Sukomb shrugged with his legs. So, learning a language in a day didn't seem like a big deal to the kiree. He'd even managed to mask his considerable accent.

As Alfonso sheathed the sword, Sukomb pointed to the sheath. "Sheath design wrong. Real sheath different."

With a smile, Alfonso lengthened the "incorrect" strap and slid it over his shoulder. "That's because I'm going to wear this on my back."

Sukomb sent two waves running down his body. "Correct on hip."

"Yeah, but it gets in the way there."

Sukomb considered for a moment, then nodded with his feet. "Wear on back. That why too short."

"Right, I wouldn't be able to draw a full-length katana that's strapped to my back. So I had you make this one a little shorter."

"Understand." He paused a second, then quickly added, "Reminds. Have present for you."

8.14 Sunday

As was normally the case, Sukomb was bent at the middle, with the lower half of his legs on the ground and the rest of his body vertical. When the legs on the ground started to move, Alfonso realized that one of them had been bent up. Now the next one bent up and the previous one went down. Then it switched to the next one forward. Eventually, a short black tube appeared on Sukomb's chest as each foot passed it on to the next. When the tube got high enough, he set it on the bar.

Alfonso frowned. "For me?"

Sukomb sent two short waves running up his legs.

Alfonso unwrapped the tube to find a short sword. "You made me a wakizashi?"

"Katana without wakizashi not right."

Alfonso drew the wakizashi and smiled. Its blade appeared to be identical to that of its longer brother. "Thank you, but you didn't have to do this for me."

"Owe you more."

After sheathing the short sword, Alfonso shook his head. "No you don't. The price you asked for the katana was quite reasonable--especially considering the quality of your work. Which reminds me." He rooted around behind the bar and dug out a value card.

Sukomb sent his legs flaring in two waves that ran all the way to his last pair of feet. The longer the waves, the greater the emphasis, and Alfonso had never seen Sukomb go more than half way. "No payment. I owe you."

The kiree sense of fairness was legendary, but Alfonso truly wasn't following this. Sukomb had made him two extremely high quality swords and now didn't want to be paid for it? "I don't understand."

"I deduced reason for swords."

Monday 8.15

Alfonso's heart sped up. Keeping his outward appearance neutral, he said, "You did?"

Sukomb waved around one of his legs to draw Alfonso's attention to it. When Alfonso looked at the leg, it reached into the little pocket near it and extracted what looked like a ninja throwing star. However, rather than points, this one had small curved blades on the edges. "Recognize shuriken? More Japanese culture."

Alfonso nodded.

Without turning his head, Sukomb flicked his leg. The shuriken flew toward the table directly behind him; the one Alfonso had chopped. The throwing star sliced into the table right next to Alfonso's cut.

As with the Japanese language, Sukomb had probably only been practicing that for a night. Alfonso whistled and looked again at Sukomb's underside. The kiree had pockets in front of each and every leg. "How many can you throw at a time?"

Sukomb backed over to the table and extracted his shuriken. Then his upper legs moved in a blur. Suddenly he was holding about thirty of the stars. "If not moving, this many."

Alfonso gasped. "At different targets?"

Sukomb cocked his head to the side. "Why throw two at one target? Shalk too stupid to duck." He put away all but ten and walked forward. In an annoyed voice, he said, "If walking, only throw this many." When he stopped at the bar, he put the remaining stars away.

Alfonso fought conflicting emotions. On one hand, he was angry at himself for giving away his secret. He should have realized the supersmart kiree would figure it out. However, if a situation arose in which he had to go into battle against the Shalk, he wanted this killing machine on his side. In a slow voice, he asked, "What are you planning to do with your new-found knowledge?"

Tuesday 8.16

Sukomb stayed silent for a moment before replying, "Will wait for you."

Alfonso relaxed. "Thank you."

With a shrug, Sukomb said, "Am engineer. Not make policy."

Alfonso nodded and looked down at his short sword. He held it next to his hip, then against his leg. He knew how to use a wakizashi, but he didn't know the best spot to attach it. Sukomb said, "Didn't know about wakizashi skabbard."

"I think I'm going to strap it to my leg."

The kiree cocked his head aside again, then looked down at his own legs. The concept of strapping things to them was obviously new to him. Then he held a hand out. "I will fix scabbard."

People started to filter in. As the day progressed, more and more arrived, and Alfonso had to hustle to keep up with demand. He was quite relieved when Judy finally showed up.

Emmanuelle walked in behind her. Alfonso was glad to see her out and about, but wondered why she didn't go in to work. Judy walked over and pulled Alfonso aside. She glanced at the sword on Alfonso's back and, after a second, her eyes went wide in realization. Then she brushed this aside and said, "When Emmanuelle disappeared, they gave her job away. If we hired her on as a waitress, we could keep an eye on her."

Alfonso glanced up at Emmanuelle. She had sat down at the bar and was talking with Sukomb. "Did you offer her the job?"

Wednesday 8.17

Judy fixed Alfonso with a look that said, "Please, I'm *notthat* bad." Aloud, she said, "Not without asking you first. I just told her I didn't want her to go home alone."

Alfonso glanced back at Emmanuelle. "We can't afford to pay her too much."

"We can pay her rent plus a little."

Alfonso frowned. "And what happens when the ghost shows up?"

Judy followed Alfonso's gaze back to Emmanuelle, then shrugged. "Either she flips out, and we help her through it, or she deals with it on her own. Either way, she's better off here."

"You realize that she took you in because the ghost wanted to keep you under surveillance. Under her own control, she might not have done anything like that."

Judy frowned. "When'd you become so cold? She's a human being who needs help. So what if I don't owe her anything?"

Alfonso smiled and nodded. "Just checking. Go ahead and offer her the job."

Judy shook her head. "Your bar; you make the hiring decisions."

Alfonso nodded and took a step toward Emmanuelle. However, the "urgent message" light on the comm screen started blinking rapidly, interrupting him. He stopped and took the call. The screen came to life showing a figure wearing a black, close-fitting psuit. He was looking over his shoulder, and there was a good deal of commotion going on behind him. He looked back at the camera and said, "There you are. Ulysses."

Alfonso flipped on the nanoscreen. "X y z z y. What's up?"

Ulysses' hands moved off-screen, and a status bar appeared at the bottom of Alfonso's screen. Ulysses was sending him a file. Something happened behind Ulysses, and he looked back. "Damn it, no! I told you that goes there. Hurry up!"

Thursday 8.18

"Ulysses, what's wrong? And what are you sending me? It doesn't look like we've got a secure channel."

Ulysses turned back to the camera and swore. "Damn it, you're right. He paused for a second, then shook his head. No time. I don't know if the file will make it as it is."

Alfonso raised and slowed his voice. "Ulysses. What is wrong?"

"Suffice to say, I'm regretting not listening to you about the need for an escape tunnel. Hold on." He rushed away from the camera, and Alfonso heard him say, "No, if this thing's going to blow, you need to overdrive it."

The status bar on the file transfer slowly inched to the left. He was getting an awful lot of data. Ulysses rushed back to the camera and said, "Damn, this things not done yet? I sent too much. Let me give you the executive summary."

"Ulysses, wait."

Ulysses looked over his shoulder, then jerked his head back and shook it. "No time boss. We were running out of ideas anyway. The shalk are unstoppable. You can't stab them, you can't shoot them, you can't asphyxiate them, and you can't starve them. Their damn shields actually generate food! We also tried shaking her violently and," he looked over his shoulder again and added hastily, "and a bunch of other things." He rushed away from the camera again.

When he got back, Alfonso said, "Ulysses, slash with sharp blades."

"What?"

"If you're being invaded by Shalk, I've learned that their shields have a bug. You can't stab, but if you slash with a sharp blade, you can get through their shields."

There was an explosion off to Ulysses' right, and someone yelled, "They're coming through!"

Ulysses sighed and said, "Well, that information has come just a little bit too late. Bye boss." He turned around and yelled, "Hit it!"

The connection cut out.

Friday 8.19

A second later, Alfonso felt a slight rumble. Words appeared on the screen that said, "Transfer halted. Keep fragment?" Though his hands shook a bit, he carefully selected "yes." He encrypted the file and then backed away from the screen.

He'd just killed all of his employees at the hotel. He should have told them about the blades. Then they might have decided to stand and fight rather than blow themselves up. He disabled the nanoscreen and looked around at the busy bar. Judy, who had just finished pouring a drink, did a doubletake when she saw his face.

"Alfonso? Are you alright?"

He hadn't told her about the hotel before, so he couldn't now. He frowned and shrugged. "Hire Emmanuelle and cover for me, okay? I need to get out of here." Without waiting for a response, he stumbled out.

Alfonso wandered around without a particular destination in mind. His feet, however, seemed to know where they wanted to go. They stopped in front of a doctor's office. It took him a second to realize he

was standing in front of his sister's practice. He shrugged and walked in.

A homely-looking, human receptionist smiled and said, "Hi there. How can I help you?"

Alfonso found it endearing that his sister employed people where computers would do a better job. He gave the receptionist a weak smile. "I'd like to see Dr. Smith. Is she free?"

The receptionist frowned. "Dr. Smith? The only practitioner here is Dr. Diego. Is it possible that you've got the wrong place?"

Although Alfonso didn't talk to his sister very often, this surprised him. He shook his head. "I'm sorry. It's Dr. Diego that I'd like to see."

Saturday 8.20

"The receptionist looked at him suspiciously. "Do you have an appointment?"

He set his lips in a straight line. "No. Is she really busy?"

"Can I get your name?"

"Alfonso."

"Alfonso who?"

He gave her a sad smile, "Just Alfonso."

With a frown, she hit a button and said, "I'm sorry, Doctor, but there's an 'Alfonso' out here who would like to see you."

Alfonso couldn't hear his sister's response. The receptionist must have been wearing an earphone.

"She lowered her voice and looked suspiciously at him. "Are you sure? He thought your name was Smith." There was a pause, then she said, "Okay, I'll tell him." She nodded to Alfonso and said, "She'll be right out."

A second later, Alfonso's sister opened a door next to the receptionist. She looked Alfonso over and frowned. "Come on in." As soon as she closed the door behind him, she said, "Are you okay? You look terrible."

He raised his eyebrows. "I'm just transparent to you, aren't I?"

She shrugged and sat down in a chair. "You're my brother."

Sunday 8.21

Alfonso hopped up onto the examining table and leaned against the wall. "I'm a brother who hardly ever talks with you, and who only comes to see you when he needs something."

She shrugged again, "I didn't say you were *agood* brother."

"I didn't even know you'd stopped using your married name, much less that you were using Mom's maiden one."

She inhaled deeply. "Well, I get to talk with you so infrequently, I wasn't about to waste one of those times on Jack."

"So, things didn't work out between the two of you?"

Without hesitation, she replied, "He used to beat me."

Alfonso leaned forward quickly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Matter-of-factly, she replied, "Because you would have killed him."

He sighed and looked at the ceiling, muttering, "Everyone thinks I'm a killer."

She gave him a look that said, "Get real. Who do you think you're talking to?"

He smiled. "Okay, so I would have killed him. Doesn't sound like it would have been a bad thing."

Though she nodded, her teeth were clenched, and her face had the most intensely angry look he'd seen since that time when they were kids, and he beheaded all of her dolls. Her voice dripping nails, she said, "Death would have been too good for that bastard."

Monday 8.22

Alfonso nodded. "Hey, I told you not to marry him."

She shrugged. "So you were right--for once."

"Maybe he left Earth with us. That would give us a chance to do something to him."

She shook her head. "Remember the night you called and said you were fleeing to the asteroid belt?"

He nodded. "Yeah, you really surprised me when you jumped on the chance to come along. I thought you'd never leave your comfortable life on Earth."

She shrugged. "Comfort is relative. Having a husband who regularly beats you isn't comfortable. Not doing anything about it is less so."

Alfonso frowned. "You should have told me."

With a quick shake of the head, she said, "As soon as I got off the phone with you, I drugged his meal. While he was drowsy, I injected hydrochloric acid into his spinal cavity."

Alfonso's eyebrows shot up. "Hontou desu ka?"

She nodded. "Yes, really. And that's why I didn't tell you. If I'd let you kill him, I wouldn't have gotten the satisfaction of seeing the look on his face when he'd realized what I'd done. He was screaming when I walked out."

Well, if there had ever been any doubt about her being his sister, this removed it. Starting to see her in a different light, he whistled. "Damn. I should have taken you on a raid or two."

She shook her head again, this time emphatically. "I truly am not a killer; Jack was a special case. Scorn me all you want. But Hell hath no fury like a woman beaten."

Tuesday 8.23

Alfonso's sister waved her hand, as if to brush aside the previous discussion. "But you didn't come here to talk about my ex-husband. And you certainly don't look like that because you feel guilty for not seeing me more often. So tell me what's wrong."

After a pause, he said, "What would you do if your actions caused a lot of good people to get killed?"

She leaned back. "You'd better take *that* one from the top."

Could he tell her? He had to tell someone. This would eat him up if he didn't. He released a batch of anti-bug hunter/killers and sighed. "When we came out of stasis and found ourselves in this sector, I perceived the shalk as a threat."

She shrugged. "So did everyone."

"Yeah, but I suspect not many of them decided to do something about it. Do you know why we're currently sitting in a remote spaceport, a place whose only purpose is as a launch point for a bunch of unimportant gas miners? Do you know why we're here?"

"Well, I'm here because you're the only family I've got. So I decided to follow you."

"Well, I'm here because I needed a remote place to run my experiments. I set up a research center, and had a group of people try to find a way to breach a shalk's shields."

She blinked. "Did they find anything?"

"No. An hour ago they were discovered. They blew themselves up rather than get caught."

With a confused frown, she asked, "But if you designed the research center, then it had at least two escape routes."

Wednesday 8.24

He shook his head. "They didn't follow my plans precisely."

"But you locked them in the center anyway?"

"Well, no, I didn't lock them in there."

She raised her eyebrows. "So, they were there of their own free will, and they couldn't get out because they didn't listen to you. But it's your fault that they died?"

He held a hand to his forehead. They died because they didn't need to be there. As soon as he learned how to get through a shalk's shields, he should have closed the hotel down. But he couldn't explain this to her.

She misinterpreted his silence. "Look, Alfonso. They made their own choices. Anyone who works to overthrow the government has got to know his life is on the line. The only thing you can feel responsible for is deciding to build the center in the first place."

Unconvinced, he painted on a smile and hopped off the table. "Thanks, Sis. Why don't you come down to the bar sometime?"

"A respectable doctor like me come to that den of iniquity?" She jabbed playfully at his ribs, and he let her hit him. "I wouldn't be caught dead."

He nodded and stepped toward the door. He paused with his hand on the handle, though. Looking over his shoulder, he asked, "So why are you using Mom's maiden name instead of Dad's? Don't tell me he hurt you too?"

She laughed and shook her head. "Far from it. I'm using Mom's name because *you're* using Dad's. Knowing you, I was worried that I'd be considered guilty by association."

He rolled his eyes and said. "Didn't work. Quixar still figured you out." He left before she could reply.

Thursday 8.25

Alfonso smiled to the receptionist and said, "Thanks," as he walked by. When he stepped out into the corridor, however, he paused. Where to go? Absently, he scanned around. The corridor had a fair number of people in it. One, however, caught his attention. The person was a male human wearing dark, non-descript clothing. He was down the corridor a ways, staring into a window. This wouldn't be noteworthy, except that Alfonso had seen him before he went into his sister's practice.

Probably only someone as paranoid as Alfonso would have noticed the guy in the first place. And, if a normal person *had* noticed, he'd probably have assumed this guy was just going the same way as he was. Even Alfonso didn't think much about it before. But, on seeing him now, he knew something was up. There wasn't enough interesting stuff in these windows to warrant standing out here for so long.

Alfonso decided to go back to the bar. This guilt he was feeling wasn't going to magically disappear, so he might as well find a way to work through it. He walked back in the direction he'd come, but paused to look in a window. He used the opportunity to covertly glance behind him. The human had followed him and was now looking in a window three stores down. Definitely a tail.

Why would someone use such a simplistic way to follow him? His tail could have used a flying nanobot that had no possibility of being seen. But he was doing too good a job to be a rank amateur. Strange. Alfonso decided to get a better look at the man's face. He snapped his fingers, as if he'd suddenly remembered something, and rushed off down the corridor. He didn't bother to look back. The guy would be working to keep up.

He turned a corner and immediately ducked into the first shop there. He acted as though he was looking at an object in the display, but really stared out the window. A few seconds later, his tail turned the corner. The scarred face Alfonso saw was the last one he would ever have expected. He immediately turned his back to the window and pretended to inspect the merchandise on a shelf.

He must have been mistaken. The man who'd been following him couldn't possibly be who he thought it was. No. Impossible. Albertson was dead.

Friday 8.26

After a minute, a confused-looking sliss slithered up to him. "Do you have a need for a sliss harness? I don't think I have one that would fit you."

Alfonso smiled. "No, this is for a friend." He selected the cheapest one on the shelf and said, "I'll take this one." The sliss took the harness from him and went back to the rear of the store. Alfonso checked over his shoulder, but the person following him was no longer there.

He paid for the harness and then quickly returned to the Dose. It was extremely busy. Judy was behind the bar, and Emmanuelle was waiting tables. When he walked in, Emmanuelle quickly walked over to him with a big smile on her face. "Thanks, Alfonso. This really means a lot to me."

With a nod and smile, he replied, "No problem, Emmanuelle. I'm glad to be able to help."

He went behind the bar and stood next to Judy. She rattled off a list of drinks for him to make and then said, "You okay?"

He grabbed a bottle and said, "I'll live."

"Wanna talk about it?"

He shook his head and started preparing the first drink on her list. "Can't. Besides, something more important has come up."

She finished a drink and set it on the bar. Then she grabbed another bottle and poured. "What's that?"

"Someone was following me. I only got one good look at him, but I swear it was Albertson."

She shook her head. "Couldn't have been. Albertson is dead."

"I'm aware of that, but I saw him. How many humans do you know with a scar like the one I gave him?"

She sighed. "Even if he were alive, there's no way he would have left Earth."

"I agree. But--" An unexpected movement caught his eye. There was a brown-robed figure standing near the door. Suddenly, the light Judy had installed sent a huge, lightning-like arc into the ceiling. Then it exploded. A blood-curdling wail filled the room.

Saturday 8.27

The robed figure looked back and forth around the bar. After a pause, he took a tentative step toward the door. Then he raced out. The wail continued after he left.

Judy elbowed Alfonso and pointed to the burned-out light. As his eyes went up, he got a glimpse of a translucent blob floating by the light. When he tried to look directly at it, however, he couldn't see anything.

"We got it," Judy said.

Alfonso hopped up on the bar and said, "I'm sorry folks, but it looks like we're having technical problems with our lights. For your safety, we're going to have to close the bar for the day. Please come back tomorrow."

There was a little bit of grumbling, but, mostly, people seemed to be happy to get away from the disturbing wail. Everyone but Sukomb, Emmanuelle, and Judy filed out. Sukomb said, "Can I stay?"

Alfonso considered for a second before nodding. He then looked out of the corner of his eye at the blob. "Can you hear me?"

When the wailing continued, he said, "Look. You're not going to scare us away with your screams. If you can hear me, you may as well talk."

Emmanuelle, apparently having just figured out what was happening, became extremely pale. She sat down.

The wailing subsided somewhat, and a faint voice said, "Well, I guess we can be hurt after all."

Alfonso realized that he didn't actually hear the voice. The words had just appeared in his head. But his brain registered them as having coming in through his ears. He'd had this same experience with the ghost who'd visited him after his dreams. "Will you survive?" he asked.

There was a long pause before the ghost said, "No. I don't think so."

Sunday 8.28

"Anything we can do?" Alfonso asked.

Judy blurted out, "Alfonso!"

Alfonso, who was still up on the bar, looked down at her. "We wanted to find their limits. We were searching for a way to fight them. We didn't intend to kill this one."

She sneered. "Maybe you didn't."

He sighed and looked back up at the ghost. "Okay. Is there anything *I* can do?"

With evident sadness, it said, "I can't move, and communicating with you is sapping my energy. I won't be able to hold myself together much longer. I don't need much energy when I'm in a host, but mine left."

Alfonso glanced from Judy to Emmanuelle. Judy looked smug. Emmanuelle looked distressed. Obviously, neither knew what he was considering. They probably couldn't fathom it. He looked over to Sukomb, who sent a small number of feet waving upward. Sukomb knew. And he approved.

But what did Alfonso really think about it? Although the thought scared him, he knew he had to do it. He truly had not intended to kill this ghost. Besides, maybe he would learn something about the enigmatic race. And it never hurt to pick up an extra ally.

His voice more timid than he would have liked, he said, "I'll host you."

Emmanuelle's chair crashed to the ground as she leapt up. Judy, her face a mask of shock, tried to say something, but Emmanuelle didn't give her a chance. She marched over to the bar and shouted, "Alfonso, you can't!"

Monday 8.29

In a soft voice, Alfonso said, "Look, Emmanuelle, I'm not going to just let him die."

"But you don't know what it's like."

"I guess I will soon." He turned to Judy. The shock had worn off, and now she looked thoughtful.

Emmanuelle's voice bordering on hysteria, she said, "But, if you let him into you, he may never let you go!"

Alfonso shook his head. "When you were possessed, did you invite the ghost in, or did it just take you?"

A look of utter despair covered her face. Choking back tears, she said, "It just . . . invaded me. There was nothing I could do."

"As I suspected. So, what does it matter if I invite him in? If he wanted to possess me, he could just do it." He looked back up at the ghost. There were no outward signs to reveal any opinions it might have about the discussion. "Will you release me when you get your strength back?"

In an extremely faint voice, the ghost said, "Yes."

Although he knew this was the right thing to do, a chill still ran down Alfonso's back. "Do it."

Emmanuelle let out a blood-curdling scream and charged at him.

Tuesday 8.30

Judy smashed her forearm into Emmanuelle's gut, causing her to double over and wheeze. Judy then sighed and started to rub Emmanuelle's back. While doing this, she looked up to Alfonso and nodded.

Alfonso looked back up to the ghost and said, "Okay."

The ghost replied, "I can't move. You'll have to touch me."

So it wasn't enough that he was going to willingly let the ghost possess him. He now had to instigate the transfer. When he raised his hand, he noticed that it was shaking. He clenched his fist and took a deep breath. He then spread his fingers and thrust them into the ghost.

The possession didn't happen the way he'd expected. He'd half expected the ghost to snap out and latch on to him like a hungry piranha. He'd certainly expected there to be some pain involved. But neither was the case. When he touched the ghost, the hairs on the back of his hand stood on end, and his skin tingled. The ghost flowed into him smoothly, and the tingling sensation ran up his arm.

Suddenly, Alfonso could see the ghost more clearly. It seemed to be giving off a faint glow, even when he looked directly at it. Somehow, his eyes saw the glow running up his arm as well, even though he felt that it was inside his arm, not on the surface.

The ghost seeped into his chest and pooled in his gut, precisely surrounding his center of mass. The tingling persisted for a second or two, then stopped.

"Thank you."

Alfonso jerked in shock. Earlier, his mind had interpreted the ghost's "voice" as coming through his ears—even though he knew that it wasn't. But, now that the ghost was possessing him, its voice seemed to be his own thoughts.

July 1998

Wednesday 9.1

Judy said, "Alfonso, are you okay?"

He flexed his hands, then lifted one foot and set it back down. Although he could feel the ghost inside him, his control of his body had not changed. He hopped off the bar and said, "Yeah, I'm fine." Then he looked down at his chest and said, "Can you read my mind?"

"No. But I can certainly hear what you say. Also, if you imagine yourself saying something, but do not say it, I will hear that as well."

Alfonso thought, *"Like this?"*

"Yes."

"Your words sound like they're my own thoughts. No wonder you can make your victims do what you want."

"Victims? You make us sound like monsters."

Alfonso sat down on a barstool and slouched against the bar. *"Emmanuelle seems to think that's so."*

He felt the urge to smirk. The ghost said, *"Are you really sure you know what Emmanuelle thinks?"*

Alfonso frowned. *"What do you mean?"*

"Have you looked at her lately?"

Alfonso sat up straight and looked over at Emmanuelle. Judy had just helped her stand up and was apologizing for hitting her. Though frowning, Emmanuelle nodded and walked away from the bar. Alfonso blinked. Her midsection was glowing.

Thursday 9.2

Alfonso leaned back against the bar and thought, *"So, she is still possessed."*

"You suspected?"

"Yeah, but her recent behavior had almost convinced me otherwise."

"The human is a good actor. That is part of the reason we selected her. That and the fact that she willingly accepted the assignment."

Alfonso frowned. *"Then why did she just try to stop me from hosting you?"*

"It is more complicated than you understand. But, trust me, you are better off acting as though you do not know. And you are certainly better off not telling Judy." The glow in Emmanuelle's midsection disappeared.

Alfonso made sure he did not sub-vocalize his next thought. The ghost could have made him see the glow even if there was no ghost there. He thought, *"Trust you? Even if Emmanuelle is hosting of her own free will, you ghosts clearly aren't benevolent. Or were the dreams and threats just more parts of a plan I'm incapable of understanding?"*

When he felt the urge to sigh, he realized these emotions were coming from the ghost. *"For a person with such a strong sense of fairness, that is a remarkably closed-minded view,"* the ghost admonished. *"If I were to treat humans the way you are treating my race, I might look at Judy and decide that every one of you is a cold-blooded killer. Or I might look at Alfonso Tanaka and decide that you are all willing to obstruct justice by lying to the authorities in order to cover up serious crimes. Would that be a fair assessment of humanity?"*

Alfonso sighed of his own accord. *"I see your point."*

"Are you sure you do? Because I might also look at you and decide that all humans are likely to heroically risk their own lives to save members of other races." Alfonso could tell from his feelings that the ghost was starting to become angry. *"Listen carefully, Mr. Tanaka. I have been on your side since long before you saved my life. You think you understand the situation? You think it is bad? It is considerably worse than you think. And you need all the allies you can find. So do not strain my good nature."*

Friday 9.3

Judy walked toward Alfonso slowly, studying him as she approached. Alfonso said to the ghost, *"I understand, and I'm sorry."*

He felt the urge to nod. Had the ghost learned human expressions from its human host, or was it sending

out feelings that his mind was interpreting as shrugs and nods and so forth?

Judy said, "So, are you sure you're okay? You've been very quiet since the ghost possessed you."

He smiled. "If I wasn't okay, would I be able to tell you?"

She didn't laugh at his attempt to lighten the situation, so he stood up and put an arm around her. When she tensed, he rubbed her back in a way that she liked--a way only he knew. The ghost couldn't know to make him do that. She relaxed considerably. "I'm fine," he said. "The ghost and I can communicate directly now, so we've been chatting."

"What about?"

"Well, you know what I think of our place in this sector?"

She nodded. "So, the ghost is telling you that you're paranoid and that things aren't nearly as bad as you think they are?"

With a wide grin, he shook his head. "Nope. It's telling me that I'm severely underestimating our problems."

Emmanuelle threw up her hands. "And you're willing to believe it? A ghost? A hideous monster that's right now feeding off your life force? Until it regains the strength to force you to do what it wants, it'll tell you anything."

The ghost quickly said, *"That is a test. Her ghost is trying to figure out if you know that she is still possessed."*

Saturday 9.4

Alfonso frowned. *"Please. I'm not stupid."* With a nod, he said, "I'm sorry, Emmanuelle. I know the ghost that possessed you hurt you badly. But I don't think it'll be back. You're safe now."

The ghost gave him another nod. *"Well done."*

Emmanuelle turned red. "How? How can you protect me?" She pointed at him with a shaking hand. "You can't even protect yourself from that *thing*."

Inwardly, Alfonso said, *"You're right. She is a good actor."* To her, he said, "Well, it seems that we now know how to hurt them, so I doubt they'll try anything for a while." He paused for a second, then nodded. "It agrees with me."

"I do?"

"Hush, I'm on a roll." He continued, "And Judy's already got some ideas for how we might be able to make anti-ghost, personal shields. Don't you?"

She looked at his chest, frowned, and nodded.

"See? So you don't have to worry about that ghost coming back."

Emmanuelle looked from him to Judy. Then she said, "But you just gave that information to the ghost in you."

Alfonso shrugged. "It knew. As soon as it touched the light and felt pain, it knew all of this." He turned to

Judy, "And no, letting it die wouldn't have changed anything. The other ghosts would have figured it out immediately."

Judy nodded.

Sunday 9.5

The ghost said, "*You are a clever being, Alfonso Tanaka. They are foolish to think they will be able to stop you.*"

He frowned. "*Who's foolish? Stop me from what?*"

"All in good time, Mr. Tanaka. All in good time."

With a sigh, he subvocalized, "*Fine. If I can trust you to possess me, I suppose I can trust you to give me the information I need. But, if we're going to be so intimate here, you might as well call me Alfonso.*"

Alfonso felt the urge to laugh. "*Alfonso it is, then.*"

He looked around the empty bar and stood up. "Well folks, it seems we have the night off. He nodded to the two women. "I'll see you two in the morning." He then nodded to Sukomb. "And I hope I'll see you soon."

Sukomb sent a quick wave of legs upward. "Very soon." He backed away from the bar and ambled out the door. Emmanuelle stood up and looked to Judy. When Judy didn't move, she asked, "You coming?"

Judy shook her head. "I'll see you later."

Emmanuelle shrugged and left.

This brought a smile to Alfonso's face. Judy was worried about him and wasn't sure what to do about it. "I'm fine, Judy. You don't have to stay with me."

She laughed nervously. "No, you're insane. You were out of your mind to let the ghost possess you, and you're crazy if you think I'm going to let you out of my sight while it's got you."

"That could be difficult, Judy. It may be here for a while."

She shrugged. "You still sleep in the nude?"

Monday 9.6

He shook his head and put an arm around her shoulders. "You still hog the whole bed?"

She elbowed him in the ribs. "I never did that."

He snorted and started walking them toward the door. "Not worth arguing over, since you'll be sleeping in a chair."

The ghost said, "*You two are considerably more interesting than my last host.*"

"Don't get your hopes up. We don't perform for spectators."

Judy walked out, and Alfonso followed her. However, just as he was stepping over the threshold, he felt an urge to look back over his shoulder. Before he could act on the urge, though, it disappeared.

Confused, he stopped. He started to look back, but suddenly was very interested in a billboard in front of him. Strange. That billboard hadn't changed in weeks.

Judy said, "What is it?"

Alfonso frowned. Why had he stopped? "Um, I can't remember." This seemed strange for a second. Then it didn't. He shrugged. "Must not have been important." He walked out and closed the door behind him.

"So, where to?" she asked.

What Alfonso really wanted to do was go up on the surface and check out the hotel. But he knew he couldn't do that. Whoever invaded it would have at least left surveillance equipment. Before the ghost possessed him, he could have sent bots out to check on it, but now that too was out of the question. He considered suggesting they just go out and walk around. Maybe he could get some clue as to what had happened. But that was futile and dangerous. And, if Judy didn't have her own suit, she'd be registered as having gone outside. "I don't know. What do you do for fun these days?"

"Oh, the same old stuff. Plot to overthrow the government. Work on my assassination list. Et cetera."

Tuesday 9.7

Judy looked at Alfonso's abdomen. *"That, Mister Ghost, was a joke."*

"Tell her that I appreciate her attempt at levity."

"He got it."

Alfonso thought for a second. It would be interesting to learn if the ghost was affecting his reflexes in any way. That would take combat. "I could use a workout."

"I thought you said I was sleeping on a chair."

He frowned and threw a slap at her. She easily deflected it over her head. "You know what I mean."

She smiled. "Yeah, I do. There's a decent place two sections over. Mostly populated by manta, but they don't mess with me anymore."

"Lead the way."

As they approached their destination, Alfonso was surprised to hear loud music. Was the gym next to a nightclub? They were definitely in manta country, though. Two inebriated ones stumbled by, each trying to prop the other up, and neither doing a particularly good job. They both looked younger than Alfonso would have expected.

Alfonso and Judy came to a large, double doorway with the largest manta Alfonso had ever seen standing by. Much to Alfonso's surprise, Judy stopped there.

A second later, the doors burst open and a young manta flew out. He landed on his feet and tried to charge back in. But the huge manta's twin stepped out and blocked his way. "You know the rules. You so much as touch a female without herr permission and you're out. Do it twice and you're out forr a week. On the thirrd time, you're out forr good. You come back herre and I'll bbreak yourr arms."

The young manta threw himself at the bouncer screaming, "I'll kill you!"

Wednesday 9.8

The bouncer shrugged and punched him in the face. He slumped to the ground. The bouncer then nodded to the door guard, grabbed the young manta by the foot, and dragged him off down the corridor. Judy then started to step through the door the bouncer had vacated.

The door guard threw a meaty arm out, obstructing Judy's path.

She frowned and pointed a thumb over her shoulder at Alfonso. "It's okay, Rrazz. He's with me."

"Who arre you?"

Judy put her hands on her hips, cocked her head to the side, and gave him a perturbed glare. "How hard did I hit you last time?"

He stepped into the doorway and crossed his arms.

"Oh, I get it. You want a rematch." When the guard didn't budge, Judy continued. "No. I beat you fair and square. And we're not going to go through this every time I see you." Alfonso instinctively stepped back. "You're just going to have to get over the fact that you were beaten by a slow, *human* woman."

Alfonso noticed that the bouncer had dropped the manta's foot and was ambling back toward them. Judy continued, "No. Forget it. There are other places. I'll go to one of them." She turned around.

Alfonso stared at the bouncer. How was he going to react? He had a lot of mass and would be a pain to stop if he charged at them. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Judy spin around and kick the guard in the face. The guard fell to the ground. Alfonso bent his knees a bit and kept his focus on the bouncer.

But the manta didn't charge. Instead he laughed. "He just doesn't learn. Does he, Judy?"

Judy shrugged. "Some people never do."

Thursday 9.9

Alfonso followed Judy into the nightclub, although he stepped over the fallen guard, rather than on him as she had.

"I can see that you know Judy very well."

"You could say that." Though he didn't tell the ghost that he was totally confused by her choice of locations. What kind of nightclub provided a reasonable place to work out? The room pulsated in loud, grinding music with a fast beat. Colored lights flashed in rhythm with the music. A large number of manta were dancing on a huge dance floor. Others sat at tables and tried to converse over the noise. All of them looked very young to Alfonso. Manta tended to live almost as long as humans did, and the manta here seemed to be in their teens. Many of them wore garish clothes, and some had colored their fur in bright pinks and purples. This kind of behavior had never made any sense to Alfonso. Of course, when he was their age, he spent all of his time trying to survive. He certainly didn't have time for picking up girls in a nightclub.

He blinked. There was a faint smoke hanging throughout the room. He hadn't noticed it until he looked into the far corner of the bar. He sniffed at the air, but couldn't smell the smoke. And he couldn't see anyone smoking. He wasn't even sure if any non-humans did that. Most of the other races couldn't understand the point.

The bartender nodded to Judy, and she led Alfonso down a flight of stairs behind the bar. They came to a long corridor full of doors, each so close to the other that they must have led to very small rooms. Alfonso suspected he knew what those rooms were for. At the end of the hallway, they turned right and came to an area full of windows. The windows revealed moderately sized rooms with padded walls. A number of male manta were sparring in the different rooms. One of them looked up at Judy and immediately rushed out.

"I thought I told you never to come back here."

Judy rubbed her fingers on his fuzzy cheek. "Awe, Jurrio, you're just pissed because I showed your girlfriend how to fight back."

He sneered and grabbed her hand.

Friday 9.10

Judy pulled her hand in, dragging the manta closer to her. Then she smashed his face with her elbow. She must have caught him off guard, because she connected an instant before his manta reflexes could get a hand up to block her. The blow dazed him for a second, giving her time to spin him around and twist his arm behind his back. He grunted while she inspected his ears. They were lacerated. "Ah. She did a good job too. I guess you're just going to have to find someone else to push around."

The manta muttered something, causing to Judy to push his arm higher on his back. "What was that?"

"I said, she won't let me."

Judy laughed and released him. "Ah, then my work here is done."

Jurrio gingerly rubbed his arm as he turned around. "Who's the monkey?"

With a smile, she replied. "An old friend. But don't get your hopes up. He'll kick your tail too."

"Well, let's see." He started to advance on Alfonso. Intelligence wasn't this kid's strong suit.

Judy rolled her eyes, grabbed his tail, and yanked him back. "Maybe later. Right now, he's mine." She pushed the manta back into the room and closed the door behind him.

Alfonso chided, "Don't mess with you anymore, eh?"

She shrugged. "You should have seen this place before I won them over with my sparkling personality." She led him to an unoccupied room.

"What's with the smoke?" he asked. "I don't see anyone smoking, but it's everywhere."

Saturday 9.11

Simultaneously, the ghost and Judy both said, "Nanobots." Judy, of course, didn't hear the ghost, and continued. "They're a low-level screen. Quixar could get surveillance bots by them, but they keep out the kinds of things these kids' parents could afford."

Alfonso blinked. He should have figured that out. Why hadn't he? Was the ghost affecting him? And, if so, was it doing so purposely? Nodding, he said, "Oh, yeah, of course. Where's my head?"

Judy said, "Right here." She threw a kick at it.

They traded attacks for over an hour. It took him a little bit of time to get used fighting while wearing a sword. Then he started using the existence of a hard line across his back to his advantage. After the first time Judy hit him in the back and smashed her hand, she had to back off.

Judy had always been a bit better than him, and that was still the case. But she did not seem so much better that he could blame his failings on the ghost. The ghost hadn't even distracted him once. For a time, Alfonso was almost able to forget it was there.

Afterward, he leaned against a wall and slid down to sit on the floor.

Judy sat next to him and patted his leg. "You're holding up in your old age."

He snorted. "Last time I checked, you were older than me. What are you now, thirty-two?"

She shook her head. "I stopped aging at twenty-nine." Nodding to the sizable crowd of manta that had amassed outside the window, she said, "Let's go. If our fans see us sitting here too long, they'll start to wonder if they can take us."

Keeping his hands off the floor, Alfonso slid his feet under him, pitched himself forward, and rolled over his shoulder. He came up standing. "Are they any good?"

She made a similar maneuver. "A few of them aren't bad. But it'd be a pain to try to take them all at once. Besides, I'm tired."

Sunday 9.12

They threaded their way through the crowd of manta and walked over to the stairs. But when Alfonso opened the door at the base of the stairs, he stopped. The music was no longer playing, and there was a lot of shouting and hissing going on. "That's trouble," he said. "Is there another way out?"

Judy shrugged. "Of course, but maybe it's just a fight. The escape route isn't fun. Let's check up there first--"

The sound of a shalk annihilation baton cut her off. She immediately said, "Scratch that. This way."

The ghost said, "*This is not necessary. The shalk will defer to me.*"

Alfonso replied, "*Have you ever tried to reason with a cop in the middle of a riot?*"

"*Of course not.*"

"*Trust me. It doesn't work.*"

They ran back down the hall and were stopped by Jurrio, the manta who'd accosted Judy earlier. He pointed at a screen that showed the nightclub above. "They've just announced that they're after you. You know the way out?"

The screen showed five shalk standing in a wedge formation in front of the door. Strangely, although most shalk didn't wear clothes, these ones were covered from head to toe in loose, black garments. They even had dark goggles over their eyes. Their batons were black too. Every other baton Alfonso had ever seen had been silver.

Alfonso felt himself getting angry. But he didn't understand why some shalk showing up would make him so. Then he realized that the anger was coming from the ghost.

Monday 9.13

Judy nodded to the manta. "You going to turn us in?"

A shocked expression filled his face. "To shalk enforcers? My girlfriend would kill me if I did that. Get out of here."

She nodded to him and rushed down the hallway. Alfonso followed, but concentrated on communicating with the ghost. *"You recognized the shalk. Who are they?"*

"They are what the manta said they are. Enforcers. Your decision to run was the correct one. Enforcers most certainly do not listen to reason."

Judy turned a corner and tried to open the fourth door on the right.

Alfonso said, *"I thought the shalk always deferred to ghosts."*

The door was locked. Judy didn't bother knocking. She kicked it open.

The ghost replied, *"Possessed shalk do not."*

A female manta screamed and pulled a blanket up to cover herself. Her male partner yelled, "Get out of here!"

The room was empty except for a large bed pushed into the back corner. The bed just about filled the room, leaving only a small walking space in front and along the side. Judy didn't even look at the manta. As she rushed alongside their bed, she said, "Don't mind us, we're just passing through." She lay down on the floor and rolled under the bed.

Alfonso frowned and said, "Sorry." He pulled his scabbard off his back and hugged it in front of him. Then he lay down on the floor and looked under the bed. Judy was gone.

Tuesday 9.14

When Alfonso rolled under the bed, the floor gave away under his weight. It sloped downward at a steep angle, revealing a dark opening. He managed to keep himself from rolling again. Instead he slid downward. After passing through the opening, he fell about a meter and landed on something soft. The floor above slid back up, casting the area into complete darkness.

Alfonso sat up slowly and found that the ceiling was only about a meter high. He rolled onto his knees and returned his sword to his back. "Judy," he whispered, "where am I going?"

Her voice came from the right. "This way."

He crawled toward the voice. The soft floor quickly became metal. He felt around and discovered that he was in a square shaft about a meter by a meter. "I see why you didn't want to come out this way."

"On the other hand, I prefer it to annihilation batons. Now hush. If they find the entrance, our voices will carry back to them."

Alfonso turned to subvocalization. *"Tell me about these enforcers."*

The ghost stayed silent.

"Look, I value freedom over just about everything. And, despite that, I'm letting you possess me."

Tell me about the bloody enforcers."

The ghost sighed. *"I work for a certain organization. We are comprised of two branches--one for investigation and one for enforcement. Those of us in the investigative branch spend every day working to improve the lives of the citizens of this sector. Theoretically, the enforcers do as well."*

Wednesday 9.15

Alfonso asked, *"Theoretically?"*

The ghost didn't respond.

Alfonso repeated his question. *"Theoretically?"*

After a long pause, the ghost replied, *"The enforcers' definition of 'improving the lives of the citizenry' appears to differ from mine."*

Alfonso nodded knowingly. *"I understand. All too well."*

The ghost responded solemnly, *"Yes, I suspect that you do."*

They went on for a while in the silence of the dark tunnel. Then, suddenly, Alfonso stopped. *"Wait a minute, is Emmanuelle possessed by an enforcer?"*

The ghost hesitated, before saying, *"Yes ... and no."*

When no explanation seemed to be forthcoming, Alfonso started forward again. *"Explain?"*

He felt the urge to sigh. *"The enforcers are not known for their forward thinking. When humanity arrived in this sector, we in investigation immediately started training to possess you. The enforcers, however, did not understand the importance of such training."*

Alfonso had assumed the ghosts could possess anyone. It was interesting to learn that they needed training to possess a human. This, however, made him wonder why the ghost was telling him so much. He doubted it was out of gratitude.

Thursday 9.16

The ghost continued. *"Emmanuelle is an investigator on loan to the enforcers. She is currently doing both jobs. Unfortunately, this puts her in the middle of an extreme amount of divisional bickering. I am sure that it is hard on her."*

Alfonso asked, *"Hard on her? What about the ghost?"*

The ghost blurted, *"Nothing can harm a--"* It fell silent.

Alfonso left it at that. They traveled for a time before Judy whispered for him to stop. She pulled a panel aside, letting in light. Suddenly she yelled, "Alfonso, run!"

He immediately started backing away. But a shalk's voice called out. "Do and she dies. Out of the tunnel. Now!"

Alfonso only considered for a second. He didn't know why they were after him, but he could see no reason to sacrifice Judy over the matter. So he called out, "Keep your pants on, I'm coming."

Grumbling, Judy crawled out. Alfonso followed directly behind her. He crawled out of what looked like a ventilation shaft into a nondescript corridor. Far down the hall to his left, he could hear the music from the nightclub. Three of the enforcers were standing in a triangle around the tunnel's mouth. They had their annihilation batons drawn and aimed at him.

Alfonso wondered how many shalk besides Quixar knew the significance of the sword on his back. And how about the ghosts? The technology transfer happened long ago. Perhaps they didn't know either? He'd have to find out. In an annoyed voice, he said, "You're shalk. What do you think we could do to you that would require so many batons cocked and ready? "

The one in the center snapped, "Shut up. You're coming with us."

Judy started to say something, but Alfonso elbowed her in the ribs. He said, "May I ask what the problem is, officer?"

The one on the left said, "Officer? What do you know about us?"

Alfonso smiled, "I know that I have to do everything you ask."

Friday 9.17

The shalk nodded, "Damn right, you do."

Alfonso nodded. "At the same time, I could be more helpful if I knew what the problem was."

The center shalk sneered, "You know what you did."

Alfonso put on his most innocent frown. He'd done so many things that he had no idea what this was about. He would have felt better, though, if Quixar had been here. "Truly, I do not."

The shalk rammed his baton into Alfonso's gut. When he doubled over in pain, the shalk smashed the baton across his shoulders. Alfonso dropped to the ground. The shalk then kicked him in the ribs. Judy must have been going crazy trying to hold herself back.

One of the other shalk said, "Hold. His crime is too great. We are to bring him alive to Shalk Prime for sentencing."

While breathing raggedly, Alfonso pushed himself up onto his knees. Slowly, he said, "What ... did ... I ... do?"

Sneering, the shalk said, "You know damn well that you killed a Chosen One."

Alfonso looked up at him with confused eyes. "What's a Chosen One?"

Despite the pain, Alfonso felt the urge to sigh. His ghost said, *"My host must have reported that I was dead. They think you killed me."*

While Judy helped him to his feet, he thought, *"So tell them what happened!"*

Alfonso felt a slight stirring in his gut followed immediately by a wave of exhaustion. Then he felt intense sadness. *"I can not. I am surprised to learn that I am still too weak to leave your body. The only way I could communicate with them would be for one of them to possess you. But I am sure none of them are capable of that. You are on your own."*

Saturday 9.18

Alfonso looked over the three shalk. All of them still had their batons trained on him. With a diversion, he might get his sword drawn and disable one of them. Judy might possibly distract a second long enough for him to finish with the first. But she'd be the likely cause of the diversion. And there would be no way to deal with the third. What were his other options?

One of the shalk said, "Get moving," and rapped Alfonso on the back. Still weighing his options, he started off down the corridor.

Everything Alfonso considered seemed unacceptably risky. Perhaps his best bet was to ride out the storm--wait until they got to Shalk Prime and hope the ghost had healed enough by then to clear him. But what if the ghost had been permanently damaged? It had seemed surprised that it could be hurt at all. So it couldn't know much about its ability to heal. And, if he'd crippled it, they might still execute him. Besides, after Shasirr escaped, the shalk were thirsty for an execution. They wouldn't be able to broadcast the reason for this one, but that wouldn't slow them down. They'd just trump up some charges and execute him anyway.

No. Escaping seemed the best bet. But even if he managed to get away from these three, where would he go? He didn't relish the thought of becoming a marked man again. He glanced over to Judy. She was clenching and unclenching her fists. The only reason she hadn't ripped the head off of one of these shalk was the small matter of his impenetrable shield. The look on her face worried Alfonso. She probably already suspected the sharp blade technique. She'd be impossible to control once he confirmed it. So he had bigger troubles than the immediate arrest. He would have to decide what to do about Quixar's information very soon. He wouldn't be able to keep it out of the public's hands much longer. He sighed.

The shalk directly behind him rapped him in the back with his baton. This caused Alfonso to grind his teeth. *"Are the shalk so obnoxious because that's the way they are, or did you ghosts have a hand in it?"*

"I am afraid we are not blameless in this matter. You know where they got their technology."

That was a statement, not a question. Had Quixar spoken with the ghost? *"Yes, I do."*

"Regrettably, our part in their development is more substantive than that."

Sunday 9.19

Alfonso pondered the ghost's last statement. Finally he offered, *"Genetic manipulation?"*

A feeling of mirth washed over him. *"Not as such. We are an extremely old race full of very long-lived individuals. And, when the need arises, we can be exceedingly patient. We participated in the shalk racial development, but through indirect methods. However, some of us wanted to be more proactive. Perhaps, if we had been so, much of their present negativity could have been avoided."*

Alfonso started to say something to the ghost, then stopped. He started again, and stopped again. The ghost asked, *"What is troubling you?"*

"A million things."

"Of course. But what is troubling you this moment?"

Alfonso paused, then, before he could stop himself, blurted, *"Why are you telling me all of this?"*

"Would you like for me to stop?"

"No, of course not. Knowledge should always be sought out and never turned down. But I want to understand your motives. Forgive me, but I'm worried that they are not fully in my best interests."

"Forgiveme, but that is because you are paranoid."

Alfonso smiled. *"Paranoia has served me well over the years."*

"Then I am not sure whether you will be able to believe me. However, I will say with some earnestness, that my behavior is intended to work for the best interests of your race."

Alfonso took note of the ghost's interesting choice of words. He was working for humanity's best interests, but not necessarily Alfonso's.

Monday 9.20

A shalk enforcer rushed down the corridor toward them. Alfonso took stock of his surroundings and realized that they were heading toward the launch tube. The enforcer rushed up to the shalk in front of Alfonso and, in a hushed voice, said, "There's trouble up ahead."

Incredulous, the shalk responded, "Trouble? What could cause trouble for us?"

The newly arrived shalk rolled his eyes. "Who do you think? I left Spren arguing with him, but he wasn't making any headway. I doubt he's going to let us leave with the prisoners." The shalk cast an ice-cold glance at Alfonso. Alfonso smiled and blew him a kiss.

His ghost said, *"Are you trying to get yourself killed?"*

Alfonso responded, *"He knows he can't kill me for being obnoxious. And if I can piss him off, all the better. The more angry your opponent, the more likely he is to make a mistake."*

"Yes, but you also increase the odds of his annihilating your leg for showing insolence."

"Naw, then he'd have to carry me."

"He would make Judy carry you."

The shalk in front of Alfonso exploded, "He is our prisoner. And this crime makes it our jurisdiction. He will let us leave or else."

The newcomer replied. "I told him these same things, but he disagreed. He questions our jurisdiction. It's not like this crime has ever been committed before."

Frustrated, the shalk fired his annihilation baton into the wall. All the lights in the corridor went out.

Tuesday 9.21

Alfonso immediately reached out and grabbed Judy's arm. In English, he said, "Don't run. We're better off with whoever's working against them."

She pulled at his hand. "We're not going to get another chance like this."

"And where would we go? They think I killed the ghost. We can clear our names and get out of this without becoming fugitives. That's the route we need to take."

She hesitated, then eased the tension on his hand. He released her. The ghost said, *"Wise."*

Alfonso responded, *"I don't know about 'wise.' In the kind of life I live, stupidity gets you killed. And I'm still alive. But if I was 'wise' I wouldn't be living this kind of life."*

"In that case, you are the wisest unwise person I have ever met."

With a nod of his head, he subvocalized, *"Thank you."*

He felt a tingling sensation as something brushed against his arm. Immediately, a hand locked around his wrist. "Ah hah! You thought you'd escape. I'll show you."

Alfonso could feel from the pull on his arm that the shalk was swinging his other arm at him. The little monster undoubtedly had his baton in the hand. Alfonso kept his arm stationary but twisted his body to be out of the way of the swing. The baton did not hit him.

"I'm trying to escape by standing around during a blackout that you fools created? You must think I have the intelligence of a shalk."

The enforcer swung again and Alfonso moved aside again. The shalk then grunted in frustration and pushed him forward. "Get moving, and don't try anything funny. I'll shoot you in the back if I think you're trying to escape."

Wednesday 9.22

Alfonso started walking. Over his shoulder, he said, "I hope none of your companions are in front of me. It'd be unfortunate if you shot them too. Of course, that would not be without precedent." He quickly stepped forward and to the right. He heard a swish behind him as the shalk swung his baton again.

They came to a lighted intersection. Now in the light, Alfonso could see that, in fact, there were two shalk in front of him. The one at the head of the line said, "That way," and pointed down the left corridor. Alfonso glanced to a perturbed Judy and dutifully walked in the direction indicated. They walked for a while, turned the corner again, and came to the launch-tube station. The fifth enforcer joined them there. She was so frustrated she looked ready to start shooting things at random. She pointed to a figure blocking the entrance and growled, "Do something about him."

The figure standing in the center of the entrance with his arms crossed was Quixar. Alfonso stared at the shalk for a second, then looked up at the ceiling and muttered, "I should have figured that out."

"What?"

He switched to subvocalization. *"That Quixar is possessed by a ghost. He's an investigator, isn't he?"*

"One of our best."

Alfonso nodded. *"From what I've heard of the pre-possessed shalk, I suspect that one isn't working fully of his own free will."*

The ghost seemed to hesitate, causing Alfonso to quickly add, *"Don't get me wrong. In this case, I think it's a good thing."*

One of the enforcers said, "Get out of the way, Sarial. We're taking these prisoners to Shalk Prime."

Quixar didn't budge.

Thursday 9.23

His voice angry, Quixar said, "And were you planning to tell me first?"

The enforcers looked to each other, but didn't respond.

Quixar slammed his fist into his palm. "This is *my* station, and *my* jurisdiction. We only keep you frumpta around in case there's a riot. You are *not* to be holding investigations and hunting down alleged criminals. That's *my* job."

Alfonso asked the ghost, "*What's a frumpta?*"

The ghost immediately responded, "*Never use that term in the presence of a shalk. He will kill you on the spot.*"

Alfonso muttered, "Omoshiroi desu ne."

The enforcer continued. "You're outgunned, Sarial. Don't make us do anything rash."

Quixar's eyes got wide and he stood a little straighter. "You're *rethreatening* me? You've been living in that shalk for too long. You're out of line and out of your league. Turn the humans over to me and go back to your security office before you embarrass yourselves further."

The enforcer spoke in a slow, angry, voice. "This is not a case for investigation. This criminal *killed* one of us. Dealing--"

Cutting him off, Quixar called out, "Is that true, Alfonso?"

Friday 9.24

Alfonso immediately shook his head. "No, Quixar. It's not."

Quixar glared at the enforcer. "Perhaps there is a need for investigation after all."

His voice reaching an uncomfortably high pitch, the enforcer said, "You believe him?"

"No, but I believe there's a need for an investigation."

"But your own agent reported the murder!"

Quixar frowned. "Belan's host, while a good agent, was understandably confused by the situation. Being disposed to use my brain before my host's weaponry, I'm going to look into the situation before jumping to conclusions. You five are obviously incapable of doing likewise. And, considering your overpowered batons, that makes you an extremely dangerous bunch. If you don't back off, I'm going to have to arrest you for endangering the public."

"Belan, eh? I didn't realize you ghosts had names."

"How did you think we referred to each other? Shout 'hey you'? Hardly."

One of the other enforcers sneered. "I've had enough of this." He drew his black baton and pointed it at Quixar. "Stand aside, Sarial. Now!"

Quixar didn't flinch. Calmly, he said, "You crossed the line four paces ago. Do not proceed."

The shalk held his baton steady and called out, "Enforcers?"

The other four drew their own batons and aimed them at Quixar. Quixar didn't move. He just glared at

them. Alfonso frantically looked from Quixar to the enforcers. They weren't paying attention to him. He could probably cut the hands off two of them. And Judy might knock one aside temporarily. But Quixar would still be dead twice over.

Still, he had to try. He reached over his shoulder and grabbed the hilt of his sword. But, just as he was hissing a command to Judy, one of the enforcers yelled, "Fire!"

Saturday 9.25

Nothing happened. All of the enforcers looked down at their batons in bewilderment. Quixar stepped forward and said, "It's sad that you enforcers so accurately match your stereotypes. Now, consider yourselves under house arrest. Run along to the security office and stay there."

One of the enforcers opened his mouth to say something, but Quixar cut him off. "Listen stupid, my report is already going to make things difficult for you. Continue to give me a hard time and I'll make things *extremely* difficult. Get out of here. *Now*."

The enforcers looked back and forth to each other, then sulked off down the hall.

As soon as their backs were to Judy, she started making faces at them.

Alfonso began to ask Quixar how he disabled the batons, but Quixar, no less angry than before, immediately cut him off. "You. Tell me what happened to the ghost."

Alfonso stared at him for a second. That was unlike Quixar. Trying to decide how to handle the missing ghost must have put him under a great deal of stress. "The ghost's alive, but hurt. He was too weak to move and was on the verge of dissipation, so I let him possess me."

Quixar visibly relaxed. "If that's true, I can't tell you how much it brightens my day."

Doors on either side of the corridor opened, and a number of people of different races poured out. One of them was a human in brown robes. He had his hood drawn back, allowing Alfonso to see his face for the first time. He had blond hair, blue eyes, and a general Nordic look about him. Alfonso didn't recognize him, but that wasn't surprising. There were a lot of humans on the stasis ship that brought them from Earth.

"That is my host. I will be able to transfer over to him if he touches you."

Sunday 9.26

Alfonso responded to the ghost. *"Before you go, can you tell me how Quixar disabled the enforcer's batons?"*

"It is not a technique you could use."

"I'm still curious."

The ghost paused for a second, then said, *"When the enforcers were granted higher-powered batons, we complained that we needed better equipment as well. The forces that be, however, failed to see our point of view. So, in a fit of organizational childishness, we decided to concoct nanobots that would disable shalk weaponry. However, these are special nanobots that can only be activated by a ghost."*

The ghost's host walked toward Alfonso.

"I understand. Thank you for all the information you've given me."

"Be aware, Alfonso Tanaka, that the information has come at a cost. There will come a time when you will need to use this, and other information. A considerable amount rests on your using the information correctly. Now, call my host over and tell him to touch you."

Alfonso nodded to the blond-haired human. "Belan said that he'll be able to transfer to you if you touch me."

The human glanced back to Quixar, who nodded. He walked up slowly, staring distrustfully into Alfonso's eyes.

Alfonso said, "Jeez, guy, I don't bite."

The human frowned and reached out to touch Alfonso's abdomen.

Monday 9.27

As soon as his fingers made contact, the ghost said, *"Thank you for saving my life, Alfonso. I will not forget this."*

Before Alfonso could respond, he felt that the ghost was gone. His first feeling was one of relief. Even though the ghost had been a good guest, he hadn't particularly liked having it inside him. But the relief quickly turned to confusion. If the ghost could transfer out through touch, why couldn't it have talked to the shalk enforcers?

Was Belan unable to possess a shalk? How likely was that? If he'd been alive for as long as he implied, then he'd have had plenty of time to learn to possess members of each of the races. Did that mean that a ghost could only know how to possess one race at a time? Did learning to possess a new race somehow make the ghost forget how to possess the others? Strange.

Or was the situation some sort of elaborate test? The ghosts had given him misleading and incorrect information in the past. In fact, for all he knew, everything the ghosts had told him was a lie. Maybe his sword couldn't even get through a shalk's shields. But if that was the case, why? Were they playing games with him, or did they have a bigger plan in mind? And if it was just games, why devote so much time to him?

Belan *had* seemed sincere, but a scary thought struck Alfonso. If he had lived for thousands of years, he'd most certainly be bored out of his mind. Playing elaborate games on unsuspecting people might be Belan's only source of amusement.

Belan's host looked to Quixar and nodded. Then he said something in a language Alfonso didn't recognize. The tone of his voice was clear, however. He was relieved. Quixar replied in what was probably the same foreign language. Everyone filed out, leaving Quixar alone with Alfonso and Judy.

Returning to his normal, somber voice, Quixar said, "We need to talk."

Tuesday 9.28

Quixar looked to Judy and said, "Alone."

She frowned.

Before she could snap back at Quixar, though, Alfonso said, "I'll see you at the Dose tomorrow, okay?"

She turned to him and stared deeply into his eyes. "Are you sure you're okay?"

He nodded, "The ghost is gone. I'm fine."

With a sigh, she said, "That's good. I know how you feel about your freedom."

She was setting him up to give the code phrase that would reveal that he was still possessed. Since he wasn't, he didn't use the phrase. "Yeah. It's good to have it back."

She nodded and walked down the hall without so much as a glance at Quixar.

Quixar started walking slowly in the other direction. Alfonso took a few quick steps to catch up, then matched his speed. After a second, Quixar said, "We don't like Judy."

Alfonso smiled. "She's an acquired taste."

When Quixar didn't respond, he added. "I know you don't. But if you like me, you're stuck with her."

After waiting a few seconds for a response, Alfonso changed the subject. "So, what should I call you, Quixar, or Sarial?"

Quixar immediately said, "Quixar." Then, after a second, he added, "Do you understand the significance of the other name?"

Wednesday 9.29

Alfonso replied, "Yes, I do."

"You got the information from Belan?"

"Some of it. Some of it I deduced and it confirmed."

"He."

Alfonso scrunched his eyebrows together, "What?"

"Belan is not an 'it.'" They walked on in silence for a time. Then he added, "You're very fortunate. Do you know that?"

"Sure. I'm lucky for a million things. I'm especially lucky that you freed me from the enforcers. Thank you."

Quixar shook his head. "My job. But that's not why you're fortunate. You're lucky that you didn't kill Belan. I was able to protect you in the shalk murder. But if you'd killed a ghost, I couldn't have done anything for you."

Alfonso nodded.

Quixar stopped and looked up at him. "Watch yourself, Alfonso. You've thrown our plans off kilter with this discovery. We didn't know we could be hurt. When word gets out, they might come after you even though you didn't kill Belan."

With a confused frown, Alfonso said, "How could you not know you could be hurt? What we did wasn't that complicated."

Thursday 9.30

Quixar made the shalk equivalent of a shrug. "No one's made a conscientious effort before. The shalk think we're gods. The other races mostly don't know we exist. And while we often quarrel amongst ourselves, we gave up trying to kill each other long before we became ghosts."

*Became*ghosts. Interesting. "The shalk think you're gods?"

With a curt nod, he said, "Your race has an expression that, when translated into shalkish, becomes, 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.' Have you heard it before?"

Alfonso said, "Of course."

"Well, here's a corollary. 'Any sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from the work of a deity.' Add the fact that the shalk are somewhat lacking in mental acuity, and suddenly we're gods."

Alfonso nodded. "You don't speak like a god."

Quixar stood up straight and said, "That is due to the fact that I am a god who is impersonating a shalk." Then he relaxed and said, "And, from now on you'll treat me as you did before. I'm the shalk head of security, not a ghost investigator. Understand?"

"Completely."

"Good. Now go get some sleep and think about everything you've learned. The future is far from assured."

"My future?"

Quixar shook his head. "Everyone's."

Friday 9.31

Alfonso blinked. "I don't suppose you're going to elaborate on that, are you?"

Quixar shook his head. "Good night, Alfonso."

Alfonso watched the little guy waddle down the hallway for a minute, then he turned around and headed home. Along the way, he thought about the ghosts. Belan hadn't forced him to do or say anything against his will. Emmanuelle had said that they couldn't directly control her, but they had ways to make her do what they wanted. However, Sarial seemed to be directly controlling Quixar.

Emmanuelle could have been lying. And Belan could have just not exerted control to keep the front up. Or, perhaps the "lacking in mental acuity" shalk didn't have the strength of will to keep from being controlled. Then again, maybe Sarial worked on Quixar so long that the shalk finally broke down and just ceded control to him.

No matter what, though, he knew that he wasn't getting all of the information. Although it was obvious that the enforcers were not his friends, it was unclear whether the investigators were.

When he arrived home, his ring told him that his door had been opened since he was last there. He stopped and pulled out a remote. He tried to connect to his active nanocams, but they had all been disabled. After the last time this had happened, he had spread a number of dormant cameras around the room. His hope was that, because they were off, they wouldn't be noticed by whatever was destroying the working ones. He sent the command to wake one of those up, and the remote's screen came to life. He enabled a few more and scanned the room carefully. No one was there. Alfonso stood to the side of

the hallway and opened the door.

Nothing happened. He cautiously stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. Without moving, he cataloged every inch of the room with his eyes. As far as he could tell, only one thing was out of place.

There was a small black cube, roughly two centimeters on a side, sitting on his bedside table.

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Saturday 10.1

Alfonso stared at the cube for a second, then stepped back outside and closed the door. Using his remote control, he focused a number of cameras on the cube. Then he sent a wave of investigative bots at it. Each of its six sides was exactly one shalk measuring unit, a slorg, long, and it had no apparent seams. It was giving off no radiation of any sort, not even reflected light.

Alfonso casually strolled down the corridor, away from his quarters. He instructed a few bots to attempt to bore into the cube. They failed. It was made of an extremely hard substance with what seemed to be an exceedingly tight crystalline structure. Alfonso walked a bit farther away and then ordered a macroscopic cleaning robot to knock the table over.

The cube fell to the ground, bounced once, and rolled. The robot did not report a significant change in the weight of the table, so the object was not extremely heavy. Alfonso turned around and slowly walked back. The cube did not react in any way to having fallen, even after a minute.

With a frown, Alfonso opened his door and walked in. He went straight to the cube and crouched over it. His eyes, unsurprisingly, did not pick up any new information, so he reached out and touched it.

Nothing happened.

Alfonso shrugged and picked the cube up. His guess about its mass proved to be correct. It was not very heavy. The dense outer shell must have been just that, a shell. So, what was inside the cube? And who brought it to him? He righted the bedside table, but didn't put the cube on it. Instead he put it on the sink in the bathroom. After cleaning himself up a bit, he crawled into bed.

The cube itself was an enigma, but he didn't spend much time thinking about it. He knew that breaking its secrets was beyond his technological capability. Instead, he wondered who brought it to him and why.

Just as he was falling asleep, a thought occurred to him. This was just the kind of thing that Albertson would do. Except, of course, Albertson was dead.

Sunday 10.2

Alfonso awoke to a buzzing sound. He was disoriented for a second, causing his eyes to dart about the room looking for an attacker. But, as he awoke further, he realized the buzzing was the announcement of an incoming call. Alfonso yawned and checked the time. It was too damn early for this.

"Ignore call."

The buzzing went off, and he closed his eyes. About thirty seconds passed before the buzzing started again. Alfonso swore to himself and rolled out of bed. A bit groggy, he stormed over to the communications screen and hit the accept button. He opened his mouth to give the caller a piece of his mind, but the image he saw made him forget his anger.

The caller was a human of middle-eastern descent who looked just like an old friend of Alfonso's. Unfortunately, he couldn't possibly be. A long period of time, maybe twenty seconds, went by before the caller reacted. "There you are, Alfonso. You're a hard one to reach at home."

The voice matched his friend too. Dumbfounded, Alfonso said, "Ramishar? Is that you?"

After another long pause, the caller smiled broadly. "The one and only!"

Alfonso closed his eyes and shook his head. How many ghosts was he going to see in one day? "But you're dead!"

There was another pause. Ramishar must have been calling from one of the planets in the solar system. The delay was too great for him to have been anywhere on Jasper.

Eventually, Ramishar laughed. "Damn. And I was such a great guy too."

Monday 10.3

Alfonso shook his head. "Spill it, my man. I saw you die."

During the pause, he remembered the horrible scene...

They were dug in, but trapped at the summit of a hill, pinned down by government forces. There was a dense jungle halfway down the rear side of the hill, but their opponents had set up gun emplacements on the side. One of Alfonso's comrades had gotten scared and tried to make a run for the jungle, only to be cut down by the enemy guns.

With a severe frown on his lips, Ramishar surveyed the scene gravely. Finally he grabbed Alfonso's arm and said, "Get the men to safety. I'll make a diversion."

Alfonso looked at him in shock. "How?"

Ramishar pointed to the closest equivalent to armor that they had, a reinforced hummer with a remote control gun. Alfonso gasped, "You're crazy. You wouldn't have a chance."

"If you're not out of here by the time their air strike comes in, neither will you."

"But--"

Ramishar tightened his grip on Alfonso's arm. "Freedom isn't free, my friend. You know that."

Having been the person who'd made a slightly different version of that phrase into their rallying cry, Alfonso most certainly did know. He nodded, "We'll go as soon as you draw their fire."

Ramishar nodded and tried to step away, but Alfonso held tight. "May Allah guide your soul."

Ramishar smiled. "You don't believe in Him."

Alfonso shrugged. "You do. That's enough for me."

Tuesday 10.4

The Ramishar on the screen nodded. "And so did a whole battalion of government troops, including some of our favorites. If they hadn't all believed I was dead, I'd never have been able to pull off the Baghdad incident."

Alfonso arched his eyebrows. "That was you?" Then he smiled. Of course it was. It had had Ramishar's style written all over it. He had just never made the connection because he'd assumed Ramishar was dead. "Why didn't you contact me after we regrouped in the asteroids?"

After the pause, Ramishar frowned and said, "To tell you the truth, I was afraid to. By not looking you up, I could continue to convince myself that you and Judy had survived. I didn't want to try to search you out and learn that you hadn't."

That was like Ramishar too. He once refused to decrypt a communication from his wife because he was worried that it contained bad news. When confronted with this, he'd smiled and said, "I'm a Schrodinger's man. If I don't open the box, the cat gets to stay alive in one of the two probability distributions."

Alfonso nodded. "Judy's alive too. She's here with me."

Ramishar nodded back. "I know. I recently got a message from my superior. He wanted to know if I knew anything about a pair of humans named Alfonso Tanaka and Judy McMalley."

So Ramishar had joined the Symbari Syndicate. Alfonso idly wondered how long it would be before he was running the organization. Ramishar was a born leader. Nodding appreciatively, he said, "A Symbari. I'm sure they're a good fit for you."

"They have been. Until now."

"Why? What's up now?"

Wednesday 10.5

Ramishar sighed. "Alfonso, you have to give back the room. Some people here are really pissed."

Alfonso painted on an innocent face. "Room?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

The long pauses sucked the humor out of kidding around like that. Alfonso decided to get down to business. "Of course I do. Look, Ramishar, I can't just give it back. It's what's currently keeping me alive."

In the intervening pause, he made a decision. The idea had been nagging at him ever since Judy jokingly suggested it. Knowing that Ramishar was a member of the Symbari helped push him to his decision. Ramishar was no saint, but he wouldn't be part of a truly bad group of people.

Ramishar sighed. Slowly, he said, "Alfonso, I don't think you fully comprehend the seriousness of this matter. My superiors are not the sorts to take this kind of thing lightly."

Alfonso nodded. "What if I told you that I had something that would make them forget their measly, mostly-useless room?"

Ramishar replied, "I'm listening."

"And I'm not talking. At least not with you. I want you to send this message up the Symbari chain of command. Up here," he pointed to his temple, "I've got something considerably more valuable than they could possibly imagine. I'm willing to give it to the Symbari for certain concessions. I want to meet with the highest-ranking member on this station. I'll discuss with him what I'm offering and what I want in

return."

Ramishar whistled. "Make sure you know what you're doing, old friend. These guys don't back down. But I'll relay the message."

Thursday 10.6

Alfonso said. "Thank you. And relay this one too. We'll meet at my bar after hours. And I want the highest-ranking member. If anyone else shows up, I'll blow up the room immediately."

"You're bluffing. You can't possibly know who the highest-ranking Symbari on the station is."

"Who are you talking to, Ramishar?"

"That's easy. The worlds most eloquent liar."

Alfonso laughed. "And?"

Ramishar leaned back and crossed his arms. After staring at Alfonso for a second, he frowned and said, "And if there's a guy who could possibly know, it's you. I'll make sure they understand the odds."

"Thanks. So when can we get together?"

Ramishar replied, "Given this mess, perhaps sooner than you'd think. I've got to go, Alfonso. It seems I have an ultimatum to deliver."

With a smile, Alfonso said, "I understand. I want to see you soon, though."

He nodded. "Give Judy my best." The connection closed.

Alfonso stared at the dark screen for a moment before going back to bed. Maybe it was the long pauses. They made the conversation seem forced. Or maybe it was the shock at learning that Ramishar was alive. But he could have sworn his old friend wasn't telling him everything.

He shook his head and tried to go back to sleep. But his mind raced. Ramishar was alive. How many of his other comrades had also faked their deaths to give themselves more room to move around? And, for that matter, how many of his enemies had done something similar? Maybe he really had seen Albertson.

But that bastard would never have left the Earth. He had been on the winning side of the Freedom wars. He had no need to leave.

Alfonso's mind was still churning when he finally fell asleep.

Friday 10.7

Alfonso awoke in a panic. "Lights!" he called out. The lights came on, revealing an unchanged room. Why'd he feel so panicked then? He glanced at a clock, blinked, and looked at it again. He'd heavily overslept. If he rushed, he'd just barely get to the Dose before opening time.

He leapt out of the bed and rushed into the bathroom. Had his alarms not gone off, or had he slept through them? Maybe being possessed had taken more out of him than he'd thought. After hurriedly freshening up, he turned to head out. But the little black box caught his eye.

Someone had given this to him. If it was someone who wanted to kill him, he'd have been much more effective with a long-range shot down a hallway. If it was someone who wanted to track him, he'd have

been better off attaching a few hundred nanobots to him. But that didn't prove that the cube was benign. Maybe the perpetrator got a kick out of playing with his victims' minds before killing them.

Alfonso took a step away from the sink, then stopped. He was probably going to regret this. He grabbed the box and dropped it into a pocket.

Then he rushed over to the Dose. Because he was so late, he decided to catch a shuttle. One came right on time, and he arrived at the Dose a good ten minutes before opening.

Judy was there, hunched over a table in the center of the room. She looked up. "Welcome back, sleepy head."

He nodded. "You'll never believe who called me last--" He stopped talking when he saw what Judy had been working on. It was a much larger version of the box he had in his pocket.

Saturday 10.8

The new box was also a cube, but its sides were around half a meter long. Alfonso suspected they were an exact number of shalk measuring units. "What's that?" Alfonso asked.

Judy stood up and shrugged. "I don't know. It was here when I got in. It's exactly twenty-one shalk measuring units per side. And I mean exactly. It doesn't give off anything, it's got no seams, and it's too hard to bore into. It's also *heavy*. I can't lift it. It's a perfect cube, except for one corner, and--"

Alfonso cut her off. "One corner?" She nodded and led him around to the other side. The lower corner facing the hidden room was missing a small notch.

Judy said, "It's hard to see from here, but that corner is missing a cube with sides exactly one slorg long."

Alfonso raised his eyebrows and looked at her. Then he looked back at the cube. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the little cube. "Like this?"

She held her hand out. "Where'd you get that?"

He dropped it into her hand. "It was in my room last night."

She shrugged and stepped toward the box.

"What are you doing?" Alfonso asked.

"Whoever left this forgot to leave the instructions. But as far as I can see, he wanted us to join the cubes."

"And if it's a trap?"

Judy smiled. "What? You think it's a bomb? Why not just set it to go off when you arrived, then? I've tried everything I can think of to figure this guy out. If we don't join them, we'll never know what it does."

Sunday 10.9

Frowning, Alfonso said, "Fine. Let's do it by remote control, though."

Judy shook her head. "You worry too much. It's amazing that you ever get anything done." Before he could stop her, she slid the little cube into the bigger one. There was a strange fusing sound, and the seam around the little cube disappeared. Nothing more happened for a second, then the large cube began to hum. Judy took a step back. The humming increased in volume, and the black walls of the cube started

to glow.

The cube got brighter and brighter, until Judy and Alfonso had to shield their eyes. Suddenly, there was a flash, and the light subsided. The cube was no longer a cube. It now looked like a complicated piece of machinery. The machinery appeared to be a little smaller than the original cube, which caused Alfonso to speculate that the cube's walls had somehow disappeared and that this is what had been inside it.

They slowly walked over to the machine. There were a number of colored wires running from different spots around to the side facing the Dose's entrance. Somehow, it all looked familiar. Judy and Alfonso traced the wires around to the front, where they met with surprise.

All the wires went into a little box on the front. The box had a number of buttons and a large display. In big red numbers, the display said 4:57. A second later, the seven became a six.

Judy sighed. "Okay, so maybe it was a bomb." She slid into the chair and started tracing wires.

Alfonso said, "What are you doing? Do you think you can disarm it?"

Continuing to trace wires, Judy frowned. "Maybe. Ignoring the magic box trick, it looks pretty similar to a government bomb from the Freehdom wars."

Yes. That's why it looked familiar. That'd also explain why the display was using human numbers and human time increments. Judy had disarmed bombs like this before, so she should be able to handle this one too.

But, somehow, that didn't reassure him.

Monday 10.10

Alfonso started pacing. "There's something wrong here."

Continuing to work, Judy smiled, "Yeah, there's a live bomb in the middle of the Dose."

Alfonso shook his head. "Not that. Something else."

"Go on."

He paced a few more times and then looked at the bomb. The display was down to 4:13. "Well, for one, there's that display. We're not in some stupid movie. No one really puts displays on their bombs. All those are good for is building tension while giving the hero a chance to disarm the bomb at the last second...."

Judy didn't comment. She had missed the conclusion he'd just made. Alfonso scanned the bar quickly. Did he have time to save anything? Was there anything so important as to be worth risking his life to save? His eyes wide, he stared at the dark corner of the room. He didn't have time to retrieve the disarm codes. This bomb was going to set off the mines.

Through clenched teeth, he muttered, "Albertson, temee kono yarou." He grabbed Judy's arm and pulled her up. "Come on, we've got to get out of here."

She pulled her arm free. "What are you doing? I think I can disarm this." She looked down at the display. It said 4:05. "I've still got time."

He grabbed her arm again and pulled her toward the door. "It's going off early."

Her eyes went wide, and she quickly glanced over her shoulder, then sprinted ahead of him. Out loud she said, "Three."

They went through the door. "Two."

She immediately turned away from the Dose and raced off down the corridor. Alfonso followed. "One."

Tuesday 10.11

A massive explosion rocked the hallway, forcing both Judy and Alfonso to the ground. As they rolled, he heard many smaller explosions. Debris blasted out into the hallway, smashed against the wall and spread sideways. Alfonso was pelted with rock fragments, but nothing big hit him.

Judy didn't fare as well. He found her lying facedown with a chunk of table protruding from her back. He felt for a pulse. It was faint, but there. Working hard to not jostle the table fragment, he scooped her up and raced down the hallway. At the first shuttle station he hit the emergency call button. A shuttle appeared quickly, and a female voice came over a speaker saying, "Which hospital?"

Alfonso jumped on the shuttle and sat down on a couch. "Closest one. I've got a human with massive injuries." The shuttle sped off. Alfonso continued, "I need you to contact the human doctor named Maria Diego. Tell her that Alfonso Tanaka is bringing a patient in critical condition to the hospital and that she needs to get there immediately."

The voice said, "I'm dispatching a shuttle to pick up the doctor now. I'm going to get some information now to speed up your admission to the hospital. Okay?"

That wasn't necessary. She was just trying to take his mind off worrying about Judy. He appreciated the effort. "Sure."

"What is the name of the patient?"

"Judy McMalley. She lives in section twenty-two."

"And what happened?"

"There was an explosion at our place of employment. She was hit and punctured by debris."

"Are you hurt?"

Wednesday 10.12

Alfonso was running on adrenaline. He didn't feel anything. He responded, "No. Well, I don't think so. Nothing serious if I am."

"Is the patient still breathing?"

He looked down at Judy. She was bleeding profusely and had fully soaked his legs. Her face was pale, but her chest still rose and fell. "Yes, but not very strongly."

He felt the shuttle begin to slow. "Thank you. I've relayed all this information to the hospital. You should be there very soon."

True to the manta's word, the shuttle stopped a second later. The doors opened, and two manta rushed on. They looked Judy over for a second, then attached hover-gurneys to her shoulders and knees. She floated up, staying in the same position she'd been in when Alfonso was holding her. One of the manta

pushed her out while the other stayed with Alfonso.

"We need to check you over."

Alfonso stood up. "Forget me," he said. "Deal with her."

The manta shook his head. "She is being taken care of. I need to deal with you."

Alfonso followed the other manta. "Fine. So long as I can stay with her."

The manta said, "Are you hurt?"

Alfonso shook his head.

"So, all that blood is hers?"

Thursday 10.13

All these questions were not helping Judy. Alfonso said, "Yeah. I think so. I don't know. Is my sister here yet?"

The manta replied, "Who is your sister?"

"The doctor who's going to fix Judy."

"Then I'm sure she'll be here shortly. Are you sure you're all right? You're looking very pale."

A bout of dizziness overcame Alfonso. He rocked a bit and grabbed a wall for support. "Well, maybe I should sit down. They'll take care of Judy though, right?"

The manta made a quick motion and another was there immediately with a hover chair. While helping Alfonso into the chair, he spoke in a comforting voice. "Yes. She's in good hands."

For this first time, Alfonso took his eyes off of Judy. He was in an emergency room. There were sick people, mostly manta, all around him. However, he couldn't really make much out. Each area was surrounded by a partial nanoscreen that made it hard to see through. He could tell races, but not much else. The screens were also putting out a faint hum. But with thirty of them going, the hum seemed more like a roar.

A screen off to Alfonso's right opened up, and a doctor stepped out. Just before the screen closed again, Alfonso got a glimpse of a female manta curled up on a bed and moaning. He wasn't as bad off as she was. He didn't need to be here.

He tried to stand up, but immediately became dizzy and fell back down into the seat. "Okay, I'm not all right," he muttered.

Friday 10.14

Alfonso awoke with a start. He didn't remember falling asleep. He looked around rapidly, trying to make sense of his surroundings. He was in a bed that wasn't his, in a room decorated entirely in drab whites. The place smelled of industrial strength cleaners.

His memories slowly started to come back to him. A voice coming over a PA had caused him to wake up. Had it said something about a doctor? Or was that part of a dream? More memories came back. He was in a hospital, and had apparently survived whatever ordeal had brought him here.

He sat up suddenly. Judy! What had happened to her?

There was another human in the room. She was sitting on a chair in the corner. Alfonso forced himself to calm down and focus on her. It was Emmanuelle. She stood up, smiled, and walked over to his bed. Taking his hand in her own, she made shushing sounds and gently pushed him back down.

"How are you feeling?"

He nodded and opened his mouth to speak, but his voice came out raspy. He cleared his throat and said, "I feel okay, I guess."

She smiled again. "That's good." Then her smile disappeared, and she squinted as she tightened her grip on his hand.

He gasped, "What the--" and was interrupted by the telltale feeling of a ghost transferring to his body through their hands. The ghost shot up his arm and lodged itself in his abdomen.

Alfonso directed a thought at it. "*Belan?*"

A feeling of malice washed over him. "*Hardly.*"

Of course it wasn't Belan. This was Emmanuelle's ghost--an investigator on loan to the enforcers.

Emmanuelle released his hand, nodded once to him, and turned toward the door. After she took her first step, Alfonso called out, "Emmanuelle, what happened to Judy?"

The ghost sneered, "*She's dead.*"

Saturday 10.15

Alfonso gasped. He looked around the room, trying to see something out of place--something to tell him this was a dream. Emmanuelle walked out. He called out to her, but she didn't return. So he switched to subvocalization. "*What?*"

The malice coming from the ghost was intense. "*You understood. She's dead. She's dead, and you killed her.*"

Although the ghost had likely intended for that to further agitate Alfonso, the statement actually had the opposite effect. Calmly, he replied, "*Wait a minute. I didn't kill her.*"

"*Yes, you did. The bomb was meant for you. You always arrive at the bar before she does. If you had not overslept today, she would not have died.*"

Alfonso frowned and sat up. "*What's this? Guilt by exhaustion? You ghosts aren't very creative. You've already done the 'Kill Judy' dream. Couldn't you have come up with something new for the sequel? The first one was at least a tiny bit believable.*"

The ghost chuckled. "*So, you believe that you are dreaming. I am sure that nothing I could say would convince you of the truth. But that is not a problem. I am a patient being. And I will truly enjoy your reaction when you realize that you are wrong.*"

Although the ghost's confidence shook Alfonso's, he buried his worry. "*I'll be sure to disappoint you.*"

Full of confidence, the ghost said one word. "*Try.*"

Alfonso blacked out.

Sunday 10.16

Alfonso woke up in the same hospital room. He looked around, but Emmanuelle wasn't there. The room was empty. "*Ghost, you still with me?*"

No response.

He exhaled slowly. *It had* been a dream. He sat up just as his sister walked in. At the sight of her, he smiled. "Hey Sis."

She smiled too, but hers was forced. "How are you feeling, Alfonso?"

He shrugged. "I'm fine. My leg hurts a bit, but that's all."

She nodded. "Some debris nicked you, which caused you to lose some blood. But it was just a surface wound that was easy to fix. You should be good to go soon."

"Great. Where's Judy."

She hesitated uncomfortably.

His heart rate quickened. "Maria, how's Judy?"

"Alfonso, you know I don't like her, but that's only because I thought she'd get you into trouble. I certainly didn't want her to get hurt."

"But?"

Maria sighed. "She'd lost an awful lot of blood by the time I got here. I patched her up and replaced the blood, but...."

Alfonso's world shook. "Is she dead?"

Monday 10.17

Maria shook her head. "No. Her heart's still beating, and there's some brain activity, but she's not waking up."

Alfonso said, "So, she's in a coma?"

His sister nodded.

"Will she ever wake up?"

Maria frowned, and her eyes showed intense sadness. "I don't know. I don't know at all. And...."

He let the pause drag on for a few seconds before he pushed. "And?"

She sighed again. "And, if she does, there may be brain damage."

Alfonso stared at her. After a long pause, he said, "You can't hide things from me, Sis. I can tell that there's more."

She nodded. "The fragment punctured an area right next to her spine. I repaired the area with nanobots,

but, until she wakes up, I can't be sure that I was effective."

"So, if she ever wakes up, her brain might not work. And, if it does work, she may not walk again?"

His sister nodded.

Alfonso lay back down and stared up at the ceiling. Maria took his hand and squeezed. "I'm sorry, Alfonso. I did everything I could."

He turned his gaze to her and returned her squeeze. "I know you did, Sis. Without you, she would have died. She's got a chance, however small, to come through this unhurt. And you gave her that chance. Thanks."

Tuesday 10.18

Choking back a tear, Maria said, "I'm going to go back and check on her. I'm sure you're still weak. Rest for a little while longer, then you can come see her. I'll tell the staff that you're allowed in at any time."

He nodded. As soon as his sister left the room, a voice in his head said, "*See. I told you.*"

So, the ghost was in him after all. "*You told me she was dead.*"

"She basically is. You humans are so frail that you cease to function after losing just a small percentage of your fluids. She will never wake up."

Alfonso clenched his fists. The ghost was lucky to not be a corporeal being with a neck to wring. Still, he refused to give the ghost the satisfaction of seeing him explode in anger. He took two deep breaths and stared up at the ceiling.

After a while, the ghost said, "*You were right. I am disappointed. I thought you cared more for your friend than this.*"

Alfonso ignored the ghost.

He felt the urge to sigh. The ghost said, "*Of course, none of this matters. It is time to go.*"

"Go? Where are we going?"

"Away. You are woefully ignorant for the power you possess. Ignorance and power are a dangerous combination."

Alfonso nodded. "*They certainly are. But why don't you just kill me?*"

Wednesday 10.19

The ghost seemed to become angry. "*That is no longer an option.*"

Alfonso smiled. Someone wasn't pleased about the bomb. He sat back up and slid out from under the covers. He noticed that he was wearing a hospital gown and that his legs were bare. The lower part of his right leg was covered in a thin, clear, rubbery substance that revealed the wound below it. It looked worse than his sister had let on. Deciding not to worry about it, he got up and gingerly put weight on the leg. It hurt, but seemed to be able to take his weight. There was a new jumpsuit hanging in the room's closet, and new boots were set neatly on the floor against the wall. His sword was also there, as well as a small assortment of weapons.

The jumpsuit caught against the repaired part of his leg and was generally uncomfortable. The boots didn't fit as well as his old, broken-in ones, but would do. Not all of his weapons were there, but it would have taken an extremely thorough search to find everything that had been in his old jumpsuit. Thankfully, his nanobot remote control was still there. Some of the worker bots were attached to it. Others were attached to him. He'd only lost the ones that were attached to his old suit.

He strapped the sword to his back and slid the other items into pockets. This suit didn't have as many pockets as he liked, but it would do until he could get back to his quarters and change.

"Okay. Let me go see Judy, then I'll go where you want."

"No. We will leave right this moment."

"Hey, chingate, Ghost. If you don't want me to cause a fuss, I'm going to see her first."

The ghost seemed amused. *"I believe that you do not fully understand your situation. Let me show you."*

Thursday 10.20

The tips of Alfonso's fingers felt warm, as if he were holding them near a heat source. The temperature increased slowly. Now they were starting to ache. It kept increasing. They started to burn. Alfonso clenched his teeth as the fire spread up his fingers to the palms of his hands. He started to shake. It felt like he'd stuck his hands into a blast furnace. If it weren't for the fact that he could see that nothing had happened to them, he would have sworn up and down that the flesh had burned off.

Still clenching his teeth, tears welled up in his eyes. "This is a mental effect," he told himself. "This obviously isn't happening." It didn't help. The pain spread up his arms. He hurt so much he had to sit down. The voice in his head that was saying, "This isn't happening" seemed very small compared to the one that was screaming.

Finally he yelled out, "Okay, stop!"

The pain dissipated immediately. He touched his hands together, and they felt absolutely normal, as if nothing had happened to them. Of course, nothing *had* happened to them. It was just a mental effect.

The ghost said, *"I can do much, much, much worse. You will do as I command, exactly as I command, or I will make you hurt so badly that you will feel it even after I stop. Do you understand?"*

Alfonso stood up and angrily clenched his teeth. *"I understand. Where do you want me to go, Master."* He put a significant amount of sarcasm into the way he intoned "master." But it backfired on him.

"That has a nice sound to it. You will continue to call me 'Master' until I instruct you to do otherwise. Now, travel to the launch tube."

They were heading off the station? This didn't bode well. *"Okay. Can I go to my quarters and change first?"*

A brief wave of pain washed over his entire body. Even though it only lasted a second, he cringed and doubled over. *"No you may not. And you will stop questioning my commands. Now go."*

Friday 10.21

Alfonso subvocalized, *"Yes, master."* He continued to put sarcastic emphasis on "master." Before he could leave, however, a kiree appeared in the doorway. The kiree flashed out a number of his hands, an expression of surprise.

"Alfonso unhurt?"

The ghost said, *"Get rid of him quickly, and do not even consider doing anything to let him know that you have been possessed."*

Alfonso nodded. "I'll be fine. Thanks for coming to see me, Sukomb."

Sukomb flared a few legs downward. Then he let a number of his legs droop. "But Judy hurt."

With a deep frown, Alfonso said, "Yeah. She's in bad shape."

"Visit together?"

"You know, master, making me act differently than I normally would is a horrible way to hide your presence. What's Sukomb going to think when I turn him down? And, even if I used a good excuse to convince him, what's my sister going to think when I never ever show up to visit one of my closest friends? Not to question your judgement or anything, but I think your judgement sucks."

"You are extremely trying. You are speaking to me this way because you know that I can not cause you to go into convulsions while the kiree is here."

Alfonso smiled inwardly. *"Damn right. You may have all the power, but I can still be annoying."*

"Fine. You may visit Judy. But do so quickly."

Saturday 10.22

Alfonso nodded to Sukomb and said, "Let's go see her."

Sukomb ambled aside to let Alfonso by. Alfonso, on heading for the door, found that he was walking with a slight limp. That wouldn't do. He concentrated on walking normally. Sukomb matched pace with him. "Not better."

Alfonso shrugged, "Good enough."

The kiree's legs flared out of pace with his movement, and a black tube appeared where his body bent. He passed it up to his upper legs and then handed it over to Alfonso. "Came to bar to give this."

Alfonso stopped and received his wakizashi. It now had a different set of straps. "Thanks." He bent down and strapped the short sword to his leg. Then he started walking again.

Sukomb asked, "Use katana yet?"

Alfonso sighed and shook his head. "Not yet. I'm not sure I'm ready for the consequences."

"Consequences for Alfonso?"

"For the sector."

It felt as though the ghost started to say something, then stopped.

Sukomb flared a large number of legs upward. "Understand. Will wait."

Finally the ghost said, *"He knows about the shalk weakness?"*

"He figured it out. But, so long as I'm alive, he's waiting for me to make the first move."

"Most fortunate. Certain parties become angry when we kill kiree."

Sunday 10.23

Alfonso ignored the ghost's comment and flagged down a nurse. "Excuse me, which way to the intensive care section?"

She looked him over suspiciously before saying, "Visitors are not permitted in intensive care."

"But the doctor said--"

"I don't even care if a shalk promised you otherwise, there are no visitors in intensive care."

Sukomb said, "Please. Good friend hurt."

The nurse turned to him and straightened up. "Excuse me, sir. Is he with you?"

Sukomb flared his legs upward.

"Well, I guess we can make an exception for you."

"Alfonso too."

The nurse cast a disdainful look at Alfonso before saying, "Okay. If you say he's okay."

"He okay."

She nodded and said, "This way." As she led them down the hall, she asked Sukomb, "Who are we going to see?"

Alfonso replied, "Judy McMalley."

The nurse glared over her shoulder at him and hissed, "Quiet, human."

Alfonso rolled his eyes.

Monday 10.24

The nurse led them to Judy's room. She was lying on her side in the same kind of bed that Alfonso had woken up in. He'd half expected to see many wires attached to her, but realized immediately how silly that preconception had been. They would use nanomonitors to keep track of her.

Alfonso walked around the bed and crouched down by Judy's face. She was breathing softly but otherwise wasn't moving. Most people look peaceful when asleep, but she didn't. She wore an intense look that he'd seen on her face many times before. She'd looked like this that time when she faced down the tank.

At the time, he hadn't thought she'd live through that experience either.

Losing her back then would have devastated him. He wanted to believe that now he was stronger, less

attached, but seeing her here like this made it clear that he wasn't. Much had changed. Even more hadn't.

Alfonso set his face into a tight frown. He brushed a lock of hair aside and whispered, "Keep fighting, dear. Your demons'll back down. No one wants to stand against a crazy redhead." He then leaned over and kissed her cheek. With his lips next to her ear, he whispered, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry? So you do feel responsible?"

Still staring at Judy, he stood up. *"With all due respect, master, bite me."* He stared at Judy for another moment, then tore his eyes away to look to Sukomb. "I've got some serious business to attend to off-station. I don't know when I'll be back."

Sukomb pulled all of his free legs inward. "Leave now? While Judy hurt?"

Alfonso inhaled deeply and nodded. "I can't explain, but it's important. When she wakes up, tell her I said that, 'freedom isn't free.' She'll understand."

Tuesday 10.25

Alfonso paid careful attention to his emotions, trying to see if the ghost realized what he'd just done. When it didn't give any indication, he relaxed slightly. Giving the code phrase had been a risk, but it seemed to have worked out. If Sukomb relayed the message, Judy would know that he was possessed. He didn't know what she could do about it, but, at this point, all he could do was take these things one step at a time.

He stepped around the bed to where Sukomb was standing. "Will you check in on her while I'm gone?"

"Every day."

With a smile, he said, "Thanks," and left without looking back.

He didn't say anything to anyone. He just navigated his way to the hospital's exit. There he caught a shuttle headed for the launch tube. Although there were plenty of seats available, he chose to stand.

He brooded for a while before subvocalizing, "Thanks, ghost."

A feeling of shock came over him. *"Thank you? For what?"*

"For letting me see her."

The ghost paused for a moment, before replying slowly, *"As you suggested, I did not have a choice."*

Alfonso shook his head. *"Yes you did. Everyone has choices. Even with you in complete control of me, I have choices."*

"And what is your current choice?"

"I chose to play nicely. Where are we going?"

"Perhaps I should wait until we have left before I divulge that information."

Alfonso sensed that the ghost was watching his reaction. He easily kept all semblance of guilt out of it. Yes, he'd been pressing for information that he could feed back to Sukomb, but he hadn't really expected to get it. He shrugged. *"Fair enough. Will I be coming back?"*

Wednesday 10.26

The ghost responded, "*Largely, that depends on you.*"

He looked out the window at the rough-hewn walls flying by. "*I would like to come back. What do I need to do?*"

"*Do as you are told, answer all questions truthfully, learn what you need to learn, and do it all without angering me so greatly that I am forced to kill you.*"

The shuttle stopped, and Alfonso got off. He immediately headed for the launch station. "*I'll do my best. Do you have any questions now?*"

"*Yes. What did the kiree give you?*"

He paused, reached down, and drew the sword from his leg. "*It's called a 'wakizashi.' My ancestors used to carry them into battle.*"

"*What does it emit?*"

"*Emit?*"

"*Surely your ancestors didn't engage in hand to hand combat?*"

Alfonso put the wakizashi away and shrugged as he continued on. "*It's just a long knife.*"

"*Your ancestors were primitives.*"

His mind immediately responded with the quip, "*At least they were polite,*" but he managed to keep from saying it to the ghost.

The ghost continued, "*Do you know how to use the wakizashi?*"

Alfonso couldn't help but grin as he remembered the last time someone asked him if he knew how to use a sword....

Thursday 10.27

It was back on Earth, during the Freehdom wars. Alfonso and his compatriots had been battling against the various governments of the world over a series of totalitarian laws that had been passed in the names of law enforcement and public safety. Strangely, the various crime organizations had come down on the side of the governments, rather than the Freehdom fighters. Apparently, what was good for law enforcement was also good for organized crime.

However, while the crime families refused to help Alfonso's friends, they didn't actively help the governments either. Alfonso and his people were having enough trouble fighting against their intended targets, so they were very careful to not anger the mob as well.

However, in this case, they'd failed at that goal. Alfonso had just finished a job in Tokyo and was waiting in a crowded station for a train out of the city when he was grabbed. They shoved a bag over his head and hit him a few times in the gut. He tried to fight back, but they pounded his head, knocking him out.

When he came to, he was slouched over on a couch in a large--by Tokyo standards--room with a pretty receptionist behind a desk. His head throbbed, and when he reached up to gingerly touch it, she looked over to him. Then she quietly said, "Okimashita" ("He woke up"). Alfonso scanned around the room

quickly. It looked as though they were planning to paint the ceiling. All of the furniture had been pushed against the walls and a large plastic tarp had been placed in the center of the room.

A few seconds later, three men walked in through a doorway. They were typical Japanese, although one was missing a pinky finger. Alfonso's eyes only paused briefly on that, and immediately went to the two katana swords another was carrying. Perhaps they weren't planning to paint after all. He stood up.

The nine-fingered man spoke in passable English. "We not need ask questions. You are Alfonso. You blew up our factory. You will die."

Outwardly, Alfonso looked very worried. Inwardly, he was thinking about the myriad unpleasant things he would do to the agent who'd given him the assignment. The targets were supposed to be checked and triple checked. He never should have touched a Yakuza-owned building.

"I know that my life is already forfeit, but we did not know that the factory was yours. We will not hurt your property again."

Friday 10.28

Alfonso is reminiscing about an event that happened back on Earth.

The nine-fingered mobster nodded, "That very good news. But you right, your life forfeit." He looked back to the man with the two swords. That man stepped forward and bowed as he offered one of them to Alfonso.

Alfonso purposely received the sword in a culturally-unacceptable manner. He didn't bow, and he just grabbed it in one hand. The swordsman then offered a cloth belt. Alfonso looked at the belt and frowned. "What's that for? Do I have to fight blindfolded?"

The swordsman, who had his back to his boss and companion, let a slight smile slip onto his face. He quickly squelched it, however, and spoke in perfect, unaccented English. "The belt is to hold the sword. We must draw before we can attack. Have you ever used a katana before?"

Alfonso made a show of looking down at the sword in his hand and arching his eyebrows worriedly. "Is that what you call this? No, I've never even seen one before."

The third man spoke in an extremely deep voice. In Japanese, he said, "Then this will be a very short duel."

Alfonso gave no indication of having understood. He took the belt from the swordsman and fumbled with it while awkwardly holding the sword under his arm. He let the sword tip forward and slip down, to crash on the floor. The swordsman cringed. Alfonso frowned. "Sorry."

He left the sword on the floor and tied the belt in a big bow not. Then he bent over stiffly and retrieved the sword. He fumbled with it a bit before sliding it between the belt and his left side. The swordsman bowed again. "Are you ready?"

Alfonso shook his head. "No, wait. Let me draw this thing once for practice." He pulled on the handle and dragged the scabbard with it. He frowned and pushed it back down. Now he held on to the top of the scabbard and pulled again. This time the blade started to come out, but he couldn't get it far enough out free it from the scabbard. He frowned and pushed it back in. "Thing seems to be defective," he muttered.

Saturday 10.29

Alfonso is reminiscing about an event that happened back on Earth.

Alfonso untied the belt and dropped the sword again. He picked it up, drew it out part way, and again couldn't pull it far enough to separate the two. So he grabbed the handle in both hands and shook the sword until the scabbard fell off. He kicked the scabbard away and said, "You can draw your sword. I'm starting like this."

He stood up ramrod straight, with a stiff back and even stiffer arms. His feet were together. He held the sword in front of him, but its tip shook noticeably. Everything about his stance was wrong, and even the receptionist could tell. She gave him a sad smile, and he shrugged back at her.

The swordsman looked back to the nine-fingered man. The man frowned, then nodded brusquely. The swordsman then said, "That's fine. Are you ready now?"

Alfonso shrugged. "No one's ever ready to die. But we should get this over with."

The swordsman stood up straight, held his hands to his sides, and executed a deep bow. Alfonso just bowed his head slightly while keeping his eyes on his opponent, another cultural faux pas. The swordsman then settled down into a perfect stance. His feet were shoulder-width apart. His legs were bent slightly at the knees. His back was straight but relaxed. His arms hung loosely at his sides. But, most importantly, the look on his face was one of extreme confidence. This, of course, was exactly what Alfonso wanted.

They stood there facing each other for at least twenty seconds. Alfonso hoped they'd go soon, as his back was starting to hurt from the incorrect stance. A small part of him worried about fighting with an obvious master, but he quickly squashed that. In a few seconds he'd either have won, or he'd be dead. There wasn't much point in worrying about it.

The third man deeply intoned, "Hai!"

Sunday 10.30

Alfonso is reminiscing about an event that happened back on Earth.

The swordsman's hands flashed to his sword and scabbard. He quickly started to draw. Alfonso dropped into a relaxed stance. He launched forward into a stable lunge and sliced off the swordsman's head. He then spun around and threw his sword at the closer of the two men. It pierced the nine-fingered man in the gut, toppling him over. Alfonso's hand shot out and snatched the undrawn sword from the swordsman's limp hand. The headless body hadn't even hit the ground yet.

The remaining man's eyes went wide. He tried to flee for the door. Alfonso drew the sword out and threw it at the man's retreating form. It struck him in the back.

Alfonso took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Killing Yakuza was a dangerous business. Then again, being killed by Yakuza wasn't much fun either. He turned to the receptionist, who was white with terror. Alfonso smiled and executed a proper bow. Then, in flawless, Tokyo-accented Japanese, he said, "Surprise almost always triumphs over skill."

She smiled, but it was forced. She was still afraid. Using highly polite forms of speech, Alfonso asked, "May I use your phone?"

She said, "Hai," and quickly pushed the phone toward his side of the desk.

Leaving his hands where she could see them and keeping a pleasant smile on his face, he walked slowly

over to the phone. She became increasingly more tense as he approached. He picked up the phone, gave her a sad smile, and yanked it out of the wall. He then set the phone back on the table and said, "Doumo arigatou gozaimasu."

Without looking back at her, he calmly walked out.

However, as soon as he got through the doors and out of her sight, he raced toward the stairs. He was hoping she was shocked by the actions she'd just witnessed and would forget to scream for a while. If she had seen him run out, she would have remembered immediately that she needed to call for help.

It worked. He got enough of a head start that he was able to get out of the building. And later--much later--he was able to escape unharmed from Tokyo.

Monday 10.31

"Hello?"

Startled, Alfonso shook his head. "What?" he said out loud.

"I asked you if you know how to use your wakizashi."

He smiled. *"Nope. But it looks cool, doesn't it?"*

Exasperated, the ghost said, *"Humans."*

They didn't say anything else to each other until Alfonso reached the launch station. Even then, the ghost only said, *"Bay six."*

The launch station was a loud, active place, with legions of people and macrobots bustling about in every direction. Generally, Alfonso enjoyed such chaos. It was easy to evade pursuers in a place like this. But this time it worked against him. There was no way to evade the ghost that was possessing him, so his only chance here would be for someone to notice him and ask why he was leaving.

As he scanned over the faceless sea of movement before him, Alfonso realized that would never happen. *"Which way to bay six?"*

"Left."

The loud "Whoop, whoop" of a macrobot vehicle's klaxon drew Alfonso's attention. It was a flatbed transport stacked high with small, square containers. It was pushing its way through the crowd, using the klaxon to warn people in its way, and an electroshock arm to give those that didn't move aside an incentive to do so. Alfonso waited for it to pass and then slid in right behind it. The vehicle blocked his forward view, but riding in its wake did simplify the act of navigating the area.

They passed bay number twelve. Then, a few minutes later, they passed number eleven. Alfonso sighed. *"You're an important person. Couldn't you get a better parking space?"*

"Sometimes it is best not to make use of the privileges one's rank affords."

September 1998

Tuesday 11.1

Alfonso was looking up at the sign for bay eight when the macrobot stopped suddenly. Not noticing, Alfonso bumped into it. The next thing he knew, the fronts of his legs were tingling, and he was lying on

top of someone, three meters away from the back of the bot.

"Get off me, human," the manta below him hissed.

Alfonso jumped up, but his legs wobbled, and he almost fell back down. "I'm sorry."

"You people are so stupid. The transports think you're trying to steal their cargo if you touch their rear sides."

Alfonso nodded, "And they pack quite an electrical wallop too. I'm sorry to have inconvenienced you."

The manta shoved him aside and went on his way.

Shaking his head, Alfonso made his way around the vehicle, carefully avoiding contact with it. When he got to the front of the vehicle, he discovered why it had run aground. There were two sharks standing in front of it and chatting. The macrobot was waiting patiently for them to move, but they didn't show any interest in doing so. Alfonso sighed and continued on unaided.

By the time he'd reached bay seven he'd been jostled and bumped into so many times that he almost didn't notice the weight of his wakizashi lessen. He picked his leg up, which shoved the blade back into its scabbard and showed him where the pickpocket was. It was a botiira. Alfonso didn't hesitate. He kicked the botiira in the gut, sending him sprawling into the crowd. Then Alfonso moved on.

"Okay, master. One more bay to go."

The ghost didn't respond.

Wednesday 11.2

Alfonso tried to stop, but the tide of people forced him to keep moving. He frowned. *"Hello? You still there?"*

No response. Alfonso let the stream pull him along while he became lost in thought. Was the ghost hurt by the jolt? Or did it choose to transfer to another person for some reason? Alfonso looked around quickly but didn't see any humans around. He didn't remember seeing any in the last while. If the ghost had transferred away, it would ruin Alfonso's theory that they could each only possess one type of race. Of course, it might not have just struck out on its own. But why would it do that?

On the other hand, if it had been hurt by the jolt, then the ghosts were considerably more fragile than he'd thought. Or, maybe they were vulnerable while possessing another being. Perhaps they permeated every bit of the being they possessed, so while the electricity had rushed through Alfonso's body missing vital organs and generally not doing any serious damage, it had hit the ghost harder.

How could he test these theories? It seemed reckless to repeatedly shock himself with progressively higher voltage sources to find out who he hurt first, himself or the ghost. And even a dumb ghost would catch on too quickly for the technique to be effective.

Alfonso noticed the sign for bay six. He treaded over to the edge of the crowd and took up a spot on the wall right by the entrance into the bay. What should he do? If the ghost was gone, he wasn't about to get on the ship. But if the ghost was just knocked out, it'd give Alfonso hell if he didn't do what it had ordered for him to do.

Unsure which of the two paths was the correct one, Alfonso chose another. Back in the hospital, the ghost had been possessing him without his knowledge. That unsettled him. If they were ever going to fight

against the ghosts, they'd need to at least know if they were possessed. So, Alfonso decided to search for a sensation or stray feeling that betrayed a ghost's presence. He knew he could feel their overt emotions. Perhaps he could sense more subtle ones as well.

Tuning out the noise and movement around him, Alfonso let his mind go blank. A few times his own stray thoughts popped into his head, but each time he took deep breaths and relaxed. Eventually, his mind was clear.

Thursday 11.3

In his meditative state, Alfonso had blocked out all of his thoughts and emotions. But, right at the edge of his consciousness, he could feel something. Was it an emotion? It felt familiar, but he couldn't quite place it--

Suddenly a wave of intense anger washed over him. A second later, the ghost said, "*Where are we?*"

"Bay six. Where were you?"

The ghost ignored his question. "*Do not ever do that again.*"

"What? Accidentally bump into a truck that has an overzealous anti-theft device?"

It felt as though every molecule in Alfonso's body burst into flames. The agony continued for over a minute before subsiding. Alfonso found himself lying on his side in the fetal position. "*If you make light of my commands again, you will die. Now get up and board the ship in bay six.*"

Alfonso clenched his teeth and pulled himself up. That response was way over the top. The ghost was starting to make the shalk seem like caring individuals. But was it all an act? The overreaction might have been caused by anger, as the ghost had let on. But it might have also been a desperate action by a being that was unsure what to do. It might even have been intended to make Alfonso forget what he'd just learned.

Careful not to subvocalize, he thought, "No you bastard, you failed. I didn't forget."

He made his hands shake a bit and walked with a limp. While doing so, he scrutinized his emotions for the one he'd felt just before the ghost seemed to wake up. There it was, and it was stronger now than before. He stopped, shuddered, and leaned against the wall, as if to steady himself. The emotion got marginally stronger. Again making sure he didn't subvocalize, he thought, "Got you."

The ghost was doing a good job of hiding this emotion. It was very subtle, and right at the edge of Alfonso's ability to notice it. And it was also an emotion he hadn't really felt in a while. But, with repeated exposure, he was now sure he recognized it.

The emotion the ghost was feeling was guilt.

Friday 11.4

Alfonso pushed himself off of the wall and steadied his shaking hands by clenching them into fists. "*Sorry. I'll have it back together in a second.*"

So, what was the ghost feeling guilty about? The torture was an obvious candidate, but what about before it? If it had the presence of mind to feel guilty, then it probably wasn't knocked out by the shock. Was it lying to him? Did it want him to believe he could hurt it by shocking himself?

Everything he learned about the ghosts seemed to generate more questions.

He turned his thoughts away from the ghosts and stared at the small spaceship before him. The launch tube limited the size of ships that left Frakar, but this one was considerably smaller than the normal cargo vessels. Of course, he hadn't expected to be dragged away from the station in a luxury liner. A hatch opened as he approached.

"What, no red carpet?"

"You do not rate one."

"I was thinking about you."

Alfonso stepped through the hatch into an airlock and turned around. As the hatch was closing, he just caught sight of a familiar-looking manta staring after him. The hatch sealed shut, the lock cycled, and the inner hatch opened. Alfonso then stepped into a spartan room of metal bulkheads where everything was colored white. Four botiira stood waiting for him in a semicircle around the hatch.

The ghost said, *"While on this ship, you will follow the orders of these botiira completely and without question. Is that clear?"*

"As clear as a ghost without a host. But your order is surprising. Are you leaving me?"

"I have work to do. But I will not be far. Remember that when you consider trying to escape."

"I wouldn't dream of it--" Alfonso cut himself off when he felt the ghost leave him. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the ghost float over to one of the botiira and enter him. There went the theory that they could only possess one race at a time.

Saturday 11.5

One of the botiira pointed to the right and said, "Command: move."

Alfonso did as ordered. The botiira took him to a door with a small window and a big lock. The lock had a large deadbolt bar, which the botiira pointed to. Alfonso had to struggle to pulled the bar back; It was massive and had a lot of friction with the doorframe. No nanobot would ever be able to move it. The room beyond the door matched what he'd seen of the rest of the ship--functional with no frills. It had a small cot against one wall, a simple chair in front of a data terminal, and bathroom facilities that looked like they'd been hastily converted from manta to human. Since there was nothing to separate the facilities from the rest of the room, Alfonso was glad he'd be staying alone. At least, he hoped he'd be staying alone. The room was so small it wouldn't even have been able to hold another cot.

"So, this is my new home?"

"True. Command: enter."

"Yes sir, Mister Warden Man." He stepped into the room and sat down on the cot. "What time is dinner? I'll take my steak medium rare in a light hollandaise sauce, if it's not too much trouble."

"If time is mealtime, feed Alfonso is true. Alfonso can select meal is false." The botiira slammed the door, and Alfonso could hear the deadbolt slide into place.

He sighed, leaned back against the wall, and looked around. Other than the four items he'd already noticed, the room was featureless. "Well, lets hope our destination is close. I've been in nicer jail cells."

He got up and checked out the data terminal. It had a read-only news feed as well as two-way communications with the rest of the ship. However, although he could signal a desire to speak, the communications had to be enabled from elsewhere. Still, he had all the hardware he needed. Given time, he was confident that he could hack through the software to get a message out.

He brought up a news article and, while pretending to read it, reached into a pocket and palmed his nanobot remote.

Sunday 11.6

Still pretending to read the article, Alfonso pulled out the remote, left it by his leg under the terminal's hutch, and activated it. A minute later, he glanced down and saw that it was working. Strange, very strange. They hadn't disabled his toys, nor had they taken anything from him. Were they so confident that he couldn't do any damage? Did they have any clue who they were dealing with? The blades of his swords had edges that were a single molecule thick. They were so sharp he could probably cut through the ship's outer hull and kill everyone on board.

Everyone but the ghost, of course. If the ghost's technology allowed the shalk to survive in a vacuum, then the ghosts themselves undoubtedly could as well. Perhaps that was it. They were so confident of the ghost's ability to control Alfonso that they didn't bother to limit his options very much. As if he were speaking to a ghost, he subvocalized, *"Bad move. Overconfidence can topple even the most powerful beings in the universe."*

Every time Alfonso got a new gadget, he spent a day working intensely with it until he could fully operate it in complete darkness. The nanobot remote was no exception. Continuing to read the article, he sent half of the investigative bots that were on him off to search the room. Then he slid the remote back into his pocket. The bots were in maximum stealth mode. They'd move slowly and freeze anytime anything looked likely to spot them. So they'd take a few hours to survey the room. In the mean time, Alfonso decided to get caught up on what was happening in the universe.

The explosion in his bar had been attributed to racism. The article claimed it was a retaliation by races that blamed humans for causing the recent computer glitches. It was written in that patented journalistic, "create the news by seeming to report it" style. Not very many people blamed humanity for the recent computer glitches, but the article was worded in such a way that most people who read it would start doing so.

Alfonso was sure that the bomb had been set by a human. Racism had nothing to do with it. But hate crimes made good news. And if they could be covertly encouraged, all the better. He sighed and switched away from the local Frakar scene. In the shalk-local section, he found a humorous article that described the Herculean efforts the shalk were expending to find the "convicted murderer," Shasirr, on Shalk Prime. There was even an interview with the head of the search, who said, "He can't hide forever. We'll get him."

Alfonso laughed and leaned back in his chair. "You buffoon, you're not even looking in the right solar system."

Monday 11.7

Alfonso's bots had just finished a second sweep of the room, this time using no stealth, and searching as thoroughly as possible. Again they said that there was nothing in the room. No surveillance cameras. No hidden microphones. Nothing. Wasn't that taking the overconfidence thing a bit too far? Were they setting some sort of trap for him? The ghost had warned him about trying to escape. Or had it hoped that the warning would be sufficient to scare Alfonso into behaving. No, it couldn't be that stupid, could it?

He put the investigator bots back into stealth mode and sent them off to catalog the ship. If he did decide to escape, he wanted to understand every corridor, every crawlspace, and every bulkhead. He then sent half of the remaining bots to investigate the wiring that ran by his room behind the walls. If anything important happened to be there, he could cut it to create a period of confusion.

A while later, he heard the bolt sliding aside. He calmly slid his remote into his pocket and went back to reading the news. When the door opened, he looked over his shoulder to see a botiira holding a tray in his lower hands. A smell of warm food permeated the room, but Alfonso couldn't figure out what kind of food it was. He turned his chair around and said, "Dinner? Thanks! I'm starved."

The botiira nodded and handed him the tray. It was a bowl full of some sort of brown slop. It smelled okay, though. He grinned, "I'll bet the guys up in first class get steaks."

"False."

Alfonso tried to remember a botiira ever getting a joke. Did they not understand, or did they just choose not to play along? "That's okay. This is fine." He grabbed the provided spoon, and the botiira turned to leave. But, before the botiira could step over the threshold, Alfonso asked, "Did you already eat?"

"True. Query: why query?"

Alfonso shrugged, "I have a feeling this is going to be a long trip. I wouldn't have minded the company."

The botiira's blinking sped up. Incredulously, he asked, "Desired companion is botiira is true?"

"Sure, why not?"

Tuesday 11.8

The botiira said, "If not group race is botiira or race is ghost ungroup, hate botiira is true."

Alfonso took a bite of his food. It tasted remotely like beef stew, but the consistency was all wrong. It was almost as if they'd puréed it. He'd certainly tasted better food. With a frown, he said, "Yeah, why is that?"

The botiira looked out through the open doorway, considered for a moment, then closed the door and sat down cross-legged on the floor. "Know for sure is false. While date is less than date is human arrival, botiira are newest race."

Alfonso took another bite. This one tasted a bit better than the last. It needed a good hard bread to go with it, though. "So, you used to be the new kids on the block, eh? How long have you been around?"

"Eight thousand, four hundred, ninety-seven years."

The stew in Alfonso's mouth started to go down the wrong tube, causing him to cough a few times. After he cleared his throat, he said, "Well, it's good to know that, with time, we humans will eventually be welcomed into the fold."

"Probability is finite. Botiira strangeness is greater than human strangeness."

Alfonso frowned. The botiira were strange, but Alfonso found it weird that they would admit it. "You consider yourself to be strange?"

"False. Other race think is true."

With a nod, Alfonso said, "It's hard to change someone's impression of you, even when that impression is unfair."

The botiira said, "Query: Alfonso thinks botiira are strange is true?"

After hesitating for a second, Alfonso smiled broadly. "On my home world, there are only humans. All of the races seem strange to me."

Wednesday 11.9

The botiira's blinking sped up, and he leaned back against the wall. "Home world is nice is true?"

Alfonso nodded. "The world is very nice. But the people are not. That's why we left."

The botiira tapped the fingers of his top hands against the fingers of his lower hands as he stared at the ceiling. "Small frequency internal query: what would botiira home world value have been?"

What kind of evolutionary forces would have created beings like them? While contemplating that, he took another bite of the stew. It was starting to grow on him. "I've never heard anything about your home world. What's it like?"

The botiira let his hands droop to the floor. With sadness in his voice, he said, "Botiira home world exists is false."

Well, that explained why he never heard anything about it. Did one of the races destroy it? Probably the ghosts. "What happened to it?"

"Alfonso understands is false. Botiira home world not exist is true."

He was restating himself. Although the botiira were generally difficult to understand, this didn't seem like a hard concept. "You're right. I'm not following you. Did something destroy your homeworld?"

Before the botiira could answer, the door pushed open slowly. Alfonso's companion stood suddenly as another botiira stepped in. "Goneb, switch problem."

The waiter botiira said, "Exception: problem exists is false."

The newly-arrived botiira slowed his blinking. Before either of them could say anything, Alfonso spoke up. "He was making sure that I ate. The ghost wouldn't like it if I starved myself to death."

The botiira stared at him for a second. Alfonso hoped this wasn't the one the ghost was currently possessing.

Thursday 11.10

The botiira considered for a moment, then turned to the other one and said. "A problem is false. Now work exists is true. Command: return."

It seemed that Alfonso's guesses had been correct. He'd guessed that the lowest ranking botiira would have been sent to feed him, and, when he didn't return immediately, the second lowest would have been sent to investigate. The ghost would have possessed the ship's captain.

The botiira who had brought his food said, "Acknowledged." The new botiira stepped out. After a moment, the botiira said, "Query: why Alfonso's statement is truth is false?"

Alfonso shrugged. "I'd hate to have seen you get in trouble for talking with me."

The botiira thought for a second, then said, "Alfonso is nice is true. Goneb likes is true."

"Is that your name, Goneb?"

"True."

"Well, nice to meet you, Goneb. I hope we can talk again tomorrow."

"My hope is same is true." Goneb walked out and pulled the door shut. The bolt immediately latched.

Alfonso went back to eating his now-cooled stew. What had Goneb meant when he said that the botiira home world didn't exist? He'd used the same phraseology to say that there wasn't a problem. And, in that instance, he didn't mean that there had been a problem but that it was now gone. He'd meant that there never was a problem.

But how could that be true of the botiira home world? What, did the botiira spontaneously generate in the middle of space?

Alfonso suddenly remembered that he'd seen two botiira without psuits standing in a vacuum. A few hours ago he'd thought about holing the ship to kill its inhabitants. The only inhabitant he'd have killed was himself.

Friday 11.11

By the time Goneb brought breakfast the next morning, Alfonso had recalled all of his bots. They had cataloged the whole ship, and Alfonso now had three separate plans for escaping from his room and hiding himself in different secluded spots within the ship. He also had a plan for getting off the ship, so long as they were docked at a place with a breathable atmosphere. Unfortunately, that plan required that he kill Goneb--something he didn't want to do. He'd keep working on it.

He was now trying to hack the software in his terminal. He wanted to get remote access to the long-range communications gear.

When he heard the deadbolt pulling aside, he causally switched the screen back to the morning's news feed and turned his chair around. Goneb stepped into the room holding two trays.

"I'm hungry, but two meals?"

"If can join is true, execute: eat my food here."

Alfonso smiled. "Happily. Please join me."

The botiira handed him a tray, then stepped back and sat down. Breakfast appeared to be another bowl full of another soupy substance. This time it was white and didn't really give off much of a smell. Alfonso slowly dipped his spoon in and brought some to his mouth. It was cold and largely lacking in taste. He made a face. "The botiira might be a little strange, but your food is *really* weird." Hopefully it had all the nutrients he needed.

Goneb was holding his tray with his bottom hands and was using one of his upper hands to shovel food in. He was scooping at such a rate that he had to hold on to the bowl with his fourth hand. But when Alfonso complained, he stopped eating. "Like is false?"

Alfonso shrugged. "It's certainly not something I'm used to."

Goneb frowned. "Apologies. Have human food is false."

Saturday 11.12

Alfonso nodded. "I figured as much. Oh well, I'll survive."

The botiira went back to eating. As Alfonso ate more, it, like the stew from last night, started to grow on him. He took a few bites and then said, "So, where are we going?"

Goneb stopped again and stared at him. "Humans also strange is true. While eating is true try to talk is true."

"So, botiira eat everything first and then talk?"

His companion hesitated for a second before answering, "Eat time does not equal work time. If eating, working is false. Else if working, eating is false."

Alfonso asked, "What about talking with your friends?"

"While working is true?"

"No. What do you do when you're not working and not eating?"

Immediately, Goneb replied, "Sleeping is true."

"So, all you ever do is work, eat, and sleep?"

Goneb considered for long moment before saying, "True."

"But I've seen botiira come into my bar. I've even taught some to play poker."

"Query: enumerate poker."

"It's a card game. You play for value."

Goneb hesitated again, then said, "Working was true."

Sunday 11.13

Alfonso frowned. "Are you saying that the botiira who were coming to my bar were working, not relaxing?"

With a good deal of confidence, Goneb replied, "Were relaxing is false."

The botiira did nothing but work? No wonder everyone hated them. "Are you working now?"

"Attempting to eat is true." The botiira's blinking increased.

Alfonso stared at him in shock. Was that a joke? That was a joke! He smiled. "Then, by all means, continue." He continued with his own breakfast. It was starting to get sticky, which seemed to improve its taste.

Goneb quickly finished off his meal and set the tray down. "Not eating is true."

"So, now you're working?"

During the long period of time in which Goneb pondered the question, Alfonso was able to take two slow bites of his breakfast. Finally the botiira said, "Know is false. Query: Alfonso is working is true?"

Of course he was. He was working on a method to get off the ship, and how to get a message back to Frakar, and a number of other things. He was never not working. But bringing that up didn't seem like a good idea. So, instead he said, "Alfonso is trying to eat."

Goneb copied his smile. Alfonso returned it and said, "But no, when we're talking I'm not working. I'm just chatting with a friend."

Astonished, Goneb said, "Query: friend is true?"

"Sure."

"If race is not botiira, friend exists is false."

Alfonso grinned, "That's probably because all you ever do is work, eat, and sleep."

Monday 11.14

The confusion was evident on Goneb's face. Eventually he said, "Query: Alfonso executes more is true?"

Alfonso nodded.

"Query: Chat with friends is more is true?"

"Yeah, like that."

The botiira thought for a while, then said, "Will try is true. Query: How chat?"

Well, they certainly weren't going to talk about what Goneb did for fun. "We're already chatting. Learning about people is good."

"Is working is true."

Alfonso frowned. Goneb wasn't far from the mark. To cover, he replied, "I guess it can be work. It depends on why you're learning about people. If you're just trying to be friendly, then it's not work. If you're trying to collect data to gain some sort of advantage, it is work. When you told me that you sometimes wondered what your home world would have been like, you weren't working."

Goneb said, "Understand."

"So, if the botiira home world never existed, where did you come from?"

He slowed his blinking. "Query: Alfonso is working is true?"

Alfonso shook his head. "No. I'm just curious."

Goneb contemplated for the longest pause yet before saying, "Botiira were designed is true."

Tuesday 11.15

Goneb's admission caught Alfonso totally off guard. The race had been designed? The botiira he'd killed had bled. They most definitely weren't *androids*. So the race that had designed them had designed *organic* life forms. That was some feat. It had to be the ghosts.

Realization slowly dawned on Alfonso. He'd thought that the ghosts could only possess one species at a time. But then the enforcer had possessed him and then went on to possess a botiira. If they had designed the botiira, though, they would have made them ideal hosts. Maybe it was easy for a ghost to possess a botiira, but they could only possess one other race.

In a disappointed tone, Goneb said, "Alfonso is disgusted is true. Query: Now not is friend is true?"

He'd misinterpreted Alfonso's silence. "Why? Because you're a designed race? Why should I care?"

The botiira's blinking rate increased substantially. Then he smiled. Alfonso had never seen any other botiira smile. He suspected that Goneb had learned the expression from him. "Alfonso is good friend is true. If other race is true, disgusted is true."

"Who else knows about this?"

"If is friend is true, know is true."

Alfonso laughed. Goneb had recently said that the botiira didn't have any non-botiira friends. So this was another joke. Their humor was subtle, but definitely there. "Then I'm glad to be your friend. The ghosts designed the botiira?"

"Race is shalk is false."

Another joke. When they let their hair down, they really let their hair down.

Goneb stood up. "Now must work is true."

Alfonso nodded. "See you for lunch?"

"True."

Wednesday 11.16

Alfonso pondered what he'd recently learned. How did the secret of the botiira change things? It taught him that the ghosts were even more powerful than he'd suspected. It also meant that the botiira were, as a whole, more powerful than he'd suspected. They held the programming and banking positions not only because they were good with numbers, but also because the real rulers of the sector, the ghosts, had put them there.

No wonder the botiira were so hated. They were weird, they'd shown up out of nowhere, and they'd inexplicably taken over influential positions in the power balance. Most people didn't even know that the ghosts existed. Eight thousand years later, people wouldn't remember all of the reasons their ancestors hated the botiira; they'd just know that hating them was what everyone did.

Of course, there were botiira working with the Symbari. Did that mean that there were also ghosts in the Symbari? Or were there now enough botiira that some worked without ghost supervision? If the Symbari had taken in the botiira on their merits alone, without ghost coercion, it said something good about them. It said that they were more concerned with results than racial prejudices. And that said that they would probably make better rulers than the shalk.

Before an explosion and an abduction had forced a change of plans, Alfonso had been thinking about giving the Symbari the ability to kill shalk. He still wasn't sure his conscience was ready for the weight of all the blood that would be shed in the following war. But Quixar hadn't given him the information to keep to himself.

At the same time, he wished he knew exactly *why* Quixar--or rather, Quixar's ghost, Sarial--had given him that information. He liked the investigators more than he liked the enforcers. But, by virtue of the fact that he understood the enforcers' simplistic motivations, whereas the investigators were complex and enigmatic, he *trusted* the investigators less than he did the enforcers. Yes, his trust in the enforcers was for them to do the wrong thing, but that didn't affect much. A powerful but fully understood enemy would be easier to defeat than an enemy for which he knew little.

Perhaps the investigators truly were his friends, not his enemies. But too many life lessons had taught Alfonso to not count on that.

Thursday 11.17

"Where are we going, anyway?" They were now four days into their journey, and Alfonso hadn't been let out of his room even once. However, he had managed to bypass the security lockouts on his terminal and had gained access to the navigational data. He knew precisely where they were, and he knew the direction they were heading. They just didn't seem to be heading toward anyplace special. They'd been going in a straight line for the last three and a half days, but when Alfonso plotted that line forward it didn't intersect with anything important. And, if the computer knew anything about their destination, that information was well hidden.

They were going nowhere, but they were doing it at an outrageous speed. Alfonso hadn't even realized that there were ships that could travel at eight-tenths of the speed of light.

Goneb responded, "Special place is true, and secret place is true."

A secret, special place. Well, at least that explained why he couldn't plot a line to any place he knew. "I suppose you can't tell me much about this place."

"True."

"Who knows about it?"

"Ghosts know is true. Some botiira know is true."

Alfonso blinked. "No one else?"

Goneb didn't answer.

"I'm the first non-botiira to ever go to this place?"

After hesitating, the botiira said, "True."

Something was seriously wrong. If this place was such a secret, why weren't they doing a better job of hiding it? When they arrived at the "secret, special place," he'd know where it was. Did they think *so* little of him that they couldn't imagine his hacking into the ship's computer?

Realization sent a chill down Alfonso's back. None of this would matter if they were planning to kill him there.

Friday 11.18

"Do you know what they're planning to do with me at the secret, special place?"

Goneb frowned. "Understand ghost is false."

"Well, what do they usually do there?"

Goneb's blinking rate increased. "Special things is true, and secret things is true."

Sometimes the botiira's humor was annoying. Alfonso frowned, causing the Goneb to slow his blinking.

"Switch problem."

Alfonso sighed. "What's my problem? My problem is that I've been abducted from my home to be locked in a featureless white room for days so that my enemies can take me to some place no human has ever seen before. If I had a secret place no one had ever seen before, I'd want to keep it that way. My problem is that I don't know what the Hell the ghost is going to do to me to keep it that way."

Goneb's blinking slowed to its slowest rate yet. He slowly looked around before asking, "Query: White room?"

Alfonso slapped the wall next to him and stomped his foot on the ground. "Yeah, there's not a bit of color anywhere in here."

The botiira looked from Alfonso's hand to his foot. Slowly, he said, "Much color is true."

Alfonso stared at him for a second before looking around the room again. Definitely all white. "What visual range do you see in?"

Goneb walked over to Alfonso and pointed to the stark white section of wall next to his hand. "Here, video advertisement is executing." He pointed at Alfonso's foot. "There, floor appearance is purple sand. Stylish is true."

Saturday 11.19

Alfonso stared at Goneb for a couple of seconds. Finally, he said, "Well, I don't see those things. I just see white everywhere."

"Alfonso is unfortunate is true. Ship is very interesting is true." He collected Alfonso's plate and left.

As soon as the door closed, Alfonso pulled out his remote and instructed a surveillance bot to run through the electromagnetic spectrum while scanning the walls. It found nothing that could possibly be interpreted as a running advertisement in anything near the human visual range. It found electrical interference from the wires behind the wall, but not much else. In the radio frequency range it found the same communications traffic that was present everywhere, though there was perhaps more traffic than Alfonso would have expected. Still, that didn't really explain anything.

With a sigh, Alfonso said, "Yet another mystery." He turned his thoughts back to the problem at hand. Were they planning to kill him at the secret, special place? He considered sending a message back to Frakar. In hacking into the ship's computer, he'd gained access to the communication's equipment. But it was much easier to hide his accesses when he was just monitoring information. He was very likely to be caught if he took a more active role in the computer's behavior. Since he'd likely only get one chance to send a message, he'd been planning to wait until he had something useful to say.

Now, however, he was starting to wonder if he'd get that chance.

He stared at the screen for a while, then shook his head. No, he shouldn't waste his opportunity now. What could he possibly accomplish by it? Even if someone on Frakar had a ship that could go faster than this one, it couldn't possibly go much faster. They were already pretty close to the speed of light. It would

take days for the message to get back, and then, at the very best, it would take days more for someone to get here.

As usual, he was on his own. Maybe he'd send the location of the secret, special place when they got there, but he couldn't expect any help. And that meant he had to come up with a way to deal with the ghosts.

Sunday 11.20

Three days later, he'd made negative progress in that arena. He was trying to get his bots to store up a large electrical charge to allow him to jolt himself at will, but had only succeeded in destroying a number of them. When he'd been shocked by the delivery truck, the ghost had seemed to be knocked out. Of course, it might have been faking it. For all he knew, Belan had been faking as well. The ghosts had lied to him enough times that he couldn't discount the possibility that the whole incident with Belan had been an elaborate setup. But, despite his worries, this electrical shock defense was all he had.

Unfortunately, he didn't have much to work with here. His bots hadn't been designed to hold a large electrical charge, and he kept frying them. All he really needed was a decent-sized capacitor, but he didn't happen to have one on him. And, in his cataloging of the ship, he hadn't found any aboard--not that he'd expected to. Sukomb could undoubtedly make one for him, but that wouldn't help him now.

The remaining option seemed dangerous in the extreme, so it would be a last resort. Between sure death and extremely likely death, he'd roll the dice every time.

Suddenly, one of the bots on his right shoulder started to vibrate wildly. He'd set a number of alarms to trigger off of different events happening in the computer. One of them had gone off. He glanced at the screen to get the time. Goneb would be here with dinner soon. Well, the door's unlatching always gave him a few seconds to cover his actions.

He checked his alarms and found that the acceleration one had gone off. The ship had begun to slow down, implying that were getting close to something. Alfonso took their current location, direction, and rate of deceleration, and plotted out their likely destination. Then he looked it up on a chart. There was nothing out here--no stars, no planets, no charted hunks of rock, not even any gas clouds. Like most of space, their destination was absolutely empty. At least, that's what the chart said.

Alfonso waited for the long-range sensors to scan by the location he'd calculated. When they did, a faint blip appeared. From this distance, a planet or a moon would show up much larger than that. But a ship or a space station would have had to be enormous to show up at all.

The sound of the latch unlocking made Alfonso hastily switch his screen to the day's news.

Monday 11.21

Goneb walked in and handed him a tray. Dinner appeared to be the same old slop Alfonso had been eating for the last week. However, that slop had started to grow on him. He doubted that he'd start ordering botiira cuisine at restaurants, but he no longer minded eating it.

In a chipper voice, Goneb said, "Near destination is true. Alfonso must worry is false."

"How's that?"

"Executed talk with ghost. If mission is completed, return Alfonso."

"You're saying that they're going to bring me home when they're done with me?"

"True."

Alfonso leaned back in his chair. "While that's a relief to hear, let me ask you a question. Do the ghosts ever lie to the botiira?"

"Query: Define 'Lie'."

"Say things that are not true."

Goneb's blinking slowed, and he considered for a moment before answering. "False."

"Are you sure?"

His blinking slowed further, and he considered for a longer time before answering, "False."

Alfonso nodded. "They lie to me all the time."

Tuesday 11.22

Goneb ate in silence, but Alfonso could tell that he was thinking carefully. He was eating much more slowly than normal, and his eyes were barely blinking. Alfonso considered it a minor triumph that he'd managed to get the botiira to eat and talk at the same time. He wasn't sure, however, if he'd taught his new friend to do something other than eat and work. Did he consider their time together to be play, or was he actually working?

After finishing half of his slop, Goneb looked up at Alfonso and said emphatically, "Ghost did lie is false. Must return Alfonso is true." In a quieter, more pleading voice, he added, "Like Alfonso is true."

Well, there went any remaining possibility of using either of the two escape plans that required killing Goneb. He smiled, "Thanks, my friend. Don't worry, I'm sure I'll pull through this."

They finished their respective meals in silence.

It took another day for the ship to finish decelerating. Alfonso spent most of that time studying their destination. It was an enormous space station that looked capable of housing a thousand people. The station looked like two cones stuck together at their wide ends. It had twenty spokes sticking out of its center, about half of which had ships moored to them. Except for the mooring posts, the entire surface of the station was covered with receiver dishes that pointed in all directions. If someone wanted to send a message to this station, it appeared that they could send it from anywhere and still hit a dish.

Alfonso now had the precise location of the station, but decided against trying to send that information back to Frakar. No matter how tightly he directed the broadcast, the station would definitely pick up fringe noise. Of course, he recorded the coordinates in seven different ways, including having a nanobot carve them microscopically on one of his bones. If he got out of this, he'd be able get back here.

The station was not moving at all, so, unless there was a spinning part inside the receiver shell, they must have been using the same sort of electrogravimagnetic coils that provided gravity for the ship. However, Alfonso had been under the impression that those coils didn't scale well and that crosstalk made it very difficult to provide gravity for a station so large. Apparently this was another technology the ghosts kept largely to themselves.

Alfonso watched from his terminal as the ship made its final approach toward a docking post. Suddenly he had the uncanny feeling that he was being watched.

Wednesday 11.23

Alfonso switched off the terminal and spun around. He could just make out the ghost floating before him.

"I didn't hear you come in."

As the ghost moved closer to him, Alfonso imagined that his body was covered with an impenetrable substance that would hold the ghost out. If it was possible to repel a ghost by sheer force of will, Alfonso was going to do it.

He failed. Miserably. The ghost didn't even hesitate at his skin. It just blasted right into him. Once inside, it said, *"We do not need to use doors. What were you doing?"*

So the ghosts could travel through walls. That wasn't particularly surprising. *"Are you sure you've never been to Earth. We had all sorts of stories about creatures that could act as you do. But we thought they were the spirits of our dead."*

Intense pain flashed through his body. *"You are to answer my questions, not ask your own."*

Alfonso clenched his teeth. *"I was watching the docking."*

"This is a restricted terminal. How do you have access?"

"Restricted? Really? I was just looking around one day and found a screen that gave me access to the ship's sensors. I thought it was an in-flight information system. You know, keep the customers happy by giving them useless information like their current speed, etc."

More pain flooded through him, and this time it lasted twice as long. *"Do not lie to me again. How did you get access?"*

After a pause to calm his slightly addled brain, Alfonso said, *"I hacked into the ship's computer. Having complete control of the sector's programmers has made you complacent in the realm of computer security."*

Thursday 11.24

The ghost said, *"Later, you will teach the botiira to make the computer more secure."*

Alfonso took care to not subvocalize his next thought. "Sure I will."

The ghost continued. *"What else did you do?"*

"I put out a call to my people, and they're converging on us as we speak. You don't have a chance. They'll overrun your puny station and--"

Alfonso found himself lying on the ground. He didn't know how long he'd been out, but his body still tingled from the pain. Groggy, he sat up and stared at the far wall. There was an electrical conduit behind that bulkhead. When he couldn't get his nanobots to hold enough charge, he'd decided his last resort was to slice through a conduit with his sword and electrocute himself. Unfortunately, doing that wouldn't let him control the degree to which he shocked himself. He'd likely fry.

"This is your last opportunity to answer. What else did you do?"

Still staring at the far wall, he replied, *"Nothing. I was afraid that I'd get caught if I sent a message*

out."

"Do I need to hit you again to guarantee that you are telling the truth?"

Alfonso sighed. *"I hope not."*

The ghost hesitated before saying, *"Very well. Go to the bridge."*

"I hesitate to point out, master, that I am incapable of traversing walls. The door is locked."

Immediately, the door unlatched.

Friday 11.25

Had the ghost unlocked the door? Could they control inanimate objects from a distance? Alfonso opened the door to find an empty hallway. Apparently they could. He whistled as he stepped over the threshold. *"Some of those powers of yours must be very handy. Is there anything you can't control?"*

"You are proving to be a challenge...."

Alfonso smiled.

The ghost directed him down stark white hallways to the bridge. Since it too was all white, Alfonso's eyes were immediately drawn to an enormous clear section that let him see through the forward view of the ship. Alfonso assumed that it had been added for the benefit of visitors. The station filled the forward window and stretched well beyond its boundaries.

It appeared that they were just finishing their docking procedure. The ship closed the remaining gap between it and the station, then came to a rest. Two botiira, who had been sitting at featureless consoles and apparently had been entering data, stood up.

"We are here. It is vital to your health that you behave while on the station. Note that there are many here who deal with insubordination in a considerably more vigorous fashion than I do."

Sarcastically, Alfonso said, *"Yeah, you haven't even killed me yet."*

Matter-of-factly, the ghost replied, *"Exactly."*

The botiira left the bridge, and Alfonso followed them. They went in twos through the airlock, and Alfonso found himself in a long tube with, unsurprisingly, white walls.

The ghost said, *"Welcome to Listener One."*

Saturday 11.26

As they walked down the tube, Alfonso said, *"Large scale electrogravimagnetics. I'm impressed."*

The ghost responded. *"In that case, you impress too easily."*

Alfonso shrugged, *"The whole concept of politeness is just lost on you people, isn't it?"*

The ghost did not respond.

The tube ended in an enormous set of double doors. They opened, revealing a white corridor that sloped upward. Without hesitation, the botiira continued along the corridor. As Alfonso followed, he started

getting the tingling of an emotion. It was anticipation ... no, nervousness. The ghost was feeling nervous and was trying to hide it from him. Nervous? About what?

Even though all of the featureless corridors looked identical, the botiira navigated through them with ease. Of course, for them, there was probably a blinking line running along the floor toward their destination. Alfonso comforted himself by paying careful attention at every intersection and logging each turn. He wanted to make sure he could get back to the ship on his own. Of course, since he was incapable of even seeing the control panels, he wouldn't be able to fly it. Still, other opportunities might present themselves. He glanced over to Goneb, who was walking in front of him.

When they turned a corner, the ghost's anxiety started to build. It appeared that the source of its fear was behind the double doors ahead. As they approached, the doors opened for them, revealing an enormous room with a low ceiling. There were about a hundred botiira scattered about the room, and each was staring at his own white panel. Most of them stopped to look at Alfonso.

Alfonso got the impression that the ghost was summoning up its courage. Then it suddenly left him.

It floated out in front of him and then started to glow, making it easier to see. In a booming voice, it said, "Give him the goggles."

A botiira handed him a pair of goggles. They didn't fit very well; they seemed to have been designed for manta, who had similar but different facial features. However, he managed to get them to stay on his head.

Something blinked a few times in each of his eyes. Then, suddenly, everything looked different.

Sunday 11.27

The walls were no longer white. They were rich blue with aqua accents. Even though there hadn't been any windows in the room, one whole wall gave an impressive view of deep space. Another wall was covered with numbers and letters in what looked like a duty schedule. The ceiling suddenly seemed much higher, making the room feel spacious.

Most importantly, however, the botiira's white panels became video screens, each showing a different person or group of people. So the botiira had goggles like this built into their heads. On noticing that none of the panels was making any sound, Alfonso wondered if the botiira had something similar for their hearing.

The ghost said, "This, human, is why your plans are doomed to failure. From here we can watch every known troublemaker in the sector. You are powerless to stand against us."

Something was wrong. Why had the ghost left him to say these things? It could have spoken just as effectively while possessing him. Realization came quickly: This speech wasn't actually for Alfonso's benefit; it was for one or more other people in the room. So, was the anxiety over not being convincing enough in this speech? And was this somehow related to the guilt this ghost had felt earlier?

Alfonso looked around. "If that's true, show me the screen that's spying on the human Judy McMalley." Maybe he could trick them into showing him if she was okay.

A number of botiira subconsciously looked over to one of the screens. Unfortunately, it was oriented to be out of his view. However, the fact that she was on a screen meant that she was still alive. That, at least, was a comfort.

Angrily, the ghost said, "You will*not* give orders to me."

Alfonso immediately nodded and said, "You're right. I'm sorry for stepping out of my place. Please continue." While saying this, he reached into his pocket and hit a few buttons on his bot remote. This sent one of his camera bots over to Judy's screen. It wouldn't be able to see anything, but he'd work something out later.

Monday 11.28

The ghost started to say something else, when it cut itself off. After a brief pause, it said, "You fool. We *invented* nanotechnology. Did you really think you could use it against us?"

Although Alfonso could not get away with checking on his remote, he suspected his camera bot had just been destroyed. So the ghosts could sense individual nanobots. But, if that was the case, why had the ghost allowed him to catalog the ship? Had it just not happened to look in the right place at the right time? Or was something else going on here?

It was doubtful that the ghost was putting on this show for the botiira in the room. There had to be other ghosts here. That realization caused an idea to form in his head. He was starting to understand what might be going on here. To partially verify his theory, he said, "So, you use this station to investigate possible crimes?"

Mirthfully, the ghost replied, "No, we do not investigate. We enforce the law. If we see a crime committed, the criminal is quickly punished, often severely. Remember this, human."

So Listener One was an enforcer station. And Belan had said that this ghost had once been an investigator but now worked for the enforcers. Yes, this was all starting to make sense. Adding a believable amount of awe to his voice, Alfonso said, "So, you can watch me at all times?"

"Correct."

Now adding some fear, he said, "And if you see me breaking any laws, you'll kill me?"

"Also correct."

Alfonso nodded. "Then you're right. My plans can't work." Not that he really had any concrete plans before. But if the point of this show was to convince him to drop them, he'd play along.

The ghost said, "That is a decision well beyond the limited wisdom typically shown by your pitiful race. Take him to his quarters."

Wisely, Alfonso did not respond.

Tuesday 11.29

The three botiira in front of Alfonso turned around to face him. As one reached up for his goggles, Alfonso felt an urge to look down and over. His eyes fell on a screen that was showing a peculiar image. All of the other screens displayed individual people. This one, however, showed a schematic that depicted space and Proxima Mantissa, the planet that had picked up the human stasis ship over a year ago.

A line extended from Proxima Mantissa to an amorphous mass that filled most of the screen. Just before the botiira plucked the goggles from his eyes, Alfonso caught a glimpse of the writing at the bottom of the screen. It said, "ETA 6 months 14 days." If the schematic was even remotely close to scale, the mass was enormous.

When the goggles came off, everything became white again. Alfonso had the distinct impression that the ghost was expecting something from him. He looked to it, but it had not changed appearance. It still looked like a glowing spherical cloud not much bigger than a basketball.

Since he didn't know what the ghost expected, he instead let his eyes follow the botiira with the goggles. When one of the other botiira pushed him, he quickly extrapolated the botiira's path, trying to figure out where the goggles would end up. This brought his view to a small shelf on the far-left side of the room. "Okay, okay. Don't get pushy. You probably don't know how disorienting it is to lose sight like that. I'm going." He turned around and walked out.

Again, he paid careful attention to the intersections and turns they took him through. On the straight-aways, though, he thought about the goggles and botiira vision. They had to be getting their data from the wireless communications channels. If he could figure out the encoding format, he might be able to override their inputs to paint himself out of their images. That would let him make himself invisible to them.

Of course, he didn't have anywhere near the required hardware to work on this. But if he got away from the station, he'd definitely look into it. In the mean time, if they left him alone, he'd start working on getting access to their vision through his nanobots.

They turned a corner, and, suddenly, the botiira shuddered. They each used their four hands to cover their eyes and ears as they fell to their knees. Alfonso stared down at them in shock, and then he hastily looked back and forth down the corridor. There was no one else around.

Wednesday 11.30

The botiira, still trying to cover their eyes and ears, fell over and curled up into balls. One of them was Alfonso's friend, Goneb. Alfonso wanted to help, but he had no idea how to.

His mind raced. This was a chance to escape, but to where? He wanted to head back to the surveillance room and check on Judy, but he didn't know if all of the botiira had been afflicted, or just these ones. And it was unlikely that the ghosts were affected. No, his best bet was to find someplace to hide and then figure out what to do.

He picked his leg up and drew his short sword. He used it to slice an arrow into the wall and returned it to its scabbard on his leg. If he found this corridor again, he'd be able to find his way back to the surveillance room. He sheathed his sword and pulled out his bot remote. He instructed a bot to burrow into the wall through the cut he'd just made. If he managed to keep his remote, and the bot was not discovered, it could lead him back to here.

He looked down at the botiira again. They were moving a little, so they weren't dead. But they also looked to be in extreme pain. Strangely, they weren't moaning or making any of the noises he would have expected from a creature in agony. Alfonso shook his head and rushed down the hall.

At the first intersection, he found more botiira curled up into balls on the floor. Which way to go? Every corridor looked the same as every other one, and he hadn't seen anything resembling a place to hide since he got here. Just as he'd decided, at random, to turn right, a small section of the wall along the floor opened up, revealing darkness beyond.

Alfonso stared into the darkness for a second. Was this a trap? How could it be? He was on a hostile space station with no way to pilot a ship away. Things couldn't get worse. He shoved any doubt aside and dove into the opening.

Immediately, the wall sealed behind him, casting him into utter darkness.

October 1998

Thursday 12.1

Alfonso felt around. He was in a low tunnel that was less than a meter high but at least two meters wide. From somewhere ahead, a high-pitched, staccato voice said, "Apologies. Not designed for humans."

That sounded like a kiree. And this tunnel would be downright spacious for a kiree with all of its feet on the ground. But Goneb had said that only ghosts and botiira knew about this place. "Sukomb? That's not you, is it?"

"No. You know me not. Please come."

Alfonso smiled. "Well, if you're going to ask nicely...." He could just make out the sound of many feet ahead of him as he crawled forward. The tunnel immediately began to slope downward. That made travel a bit easier, but the blood started to rush to his head. He hoped that he didn't need to go far. The tunnel leveled out, then started upward. He went up about as far as he'd gone down before he came to what seemed to be a dead end.

The kiree's voice came from his left, "Over here."

Alfonso turned left and traveled a short distance before he could see light ahead. The tunnel sloped downward again, but there was now plenty of light to see by. The kiree was just exiting the tunnel at the bottom of the slope. Alfonso followed it down into a decently sized room with a high ceiling. Unlike the rest of the all-white station, this room was colorful. It contained a kiree bed and kiree waste facilities, and it had video screens on all of the walls.

The kiree bent itself at the back, raising the front two-thirds of its body up. Alfonso stood up and, on getting a better look at it, gasped.

The kiree was smaller than Sukomb and had female coloring--bands of purple around the legs with dark red stripes down her belly. However, her being a female was not what had caused Alfonso to gasp.

Friday 12.2

At least fifteen of the kiree's legs were missing. Many others were mutilated. Three of her ten eyes had been gouged out. And a significant number of the hard plates that covered her body had been smashed. Alfonso could see that the smashed plates had rubbed together and had worn each other down. Though extensive, these were not new wounds.

"What happened to you?"

"Long story."

Alfonso shrugged. "You know better than I do whether or not I've got time to hear it, but if you're willing to tell, I'm willing to listen."

She said, "Thank you."

He held his hand out. "I'm Alfonso Tanaka."

The kiree turned her head to get a better view of his hand. She considered for a moment, then pulled

many of her legs in close to her body, leaving one out. "Treia." Alfonso clasped her leg softly and shook it. She looked at his face for a moment before saying, "I lucky."

Alfonso sat down and crossed his legs. "If you don't mind my saying it, Treia, you don't look very lucky."

The kiree straightened her back, lowering herself to her feet. "Lucky for two reasons. First visitor good person. And am alive. All companions dead."

Alfonso asked, "Your companions were other kiree?"

"Mostly. Some Sliss."

"I was under the impression that only botiira and ghosts came to this station."

"We built station."

Alfonso blinked. "And when you finished they killed you all?"

Saturday 12.3

Treia flared her first few feet out in a wave that started at her head. "First torture. *Then* kill."

Alfonso inhaled sharply. "You were tortured by *botiira*?" The botiira were not known for having a mean streak.

"Botiira not bad. Ghost-possessed botiira very bad."

That was at least a little reassuring. Alfonso already knew that the enforcers were hotheads. Learning now that they were evil didn't change his view of them very much.

Treia continued. "Hired for secret job. Can't call home. Worth extra pay. When finished, can't leave. Station too secret. Tortured and killed everyone. I escaped. Hiding since."

The description had taken less than twenty seconds. But, to a kiree, that was a long story. "Do they know you're still alive?"

She sent another wave of legs down her abdomen. "Believe no. Many bodies in parts. Not count carefully."

Although Alfonso consciously considered the races of this sector to be "people," he was not particularly horrified by the mental image of a kiree torn to pieces. The same image with humans, though, sent chills down his back. Did this mean that, subconsciously, he still considered the kiree to be nothing more than giant insects? And, if so, was it a personal failing? He *had* only been here for a year. The concept of non-human sentience was still new to him. But he was disappointed by his lack of reaction.

"I'm sorry. I'll bet you lost a lot of friends."

Treia made the gesture for "yes," then said, "Worse. Lover thinks I'm dead."

Sunday 12.4

Alfonso nodded. "That must be tough on both of you."

Treia copied his nod.

Alfonso said, "You couldn't get a message out to him?"

"No transmitter."

"Too heavily guarded?"

She flared her legs downward again, this time sending them all the way to her tail. The standard kiree gesture for "no" really drove home how many of her legs had been mutilated. "Station has no transmitter."

Alfonso stared at her for a second before saying, "But they sit here and watch for crimes. When they see one, how do they tell anyone about it?"

"Ghosts in person."

Alfonso frowned. "Whenever they want to send information out, they have to fly a spaceship there?"

Treia gestured "no" again. "Ghosts can be massless."

Suddenly it made sense. "Meaning that they can travel at the speed of light. Radio waves don't go any faster and can be picked up by interlopers."

Treia nodded. "Intercept ghost impossible."

Alfonso leaned back and contemplated the implications. A massless body had to travel at light speed, but he'd seen ghosts move slowly. This meant that they could also make themselves have mass. A being that could change its mass at will would likely be in control of an enormous amount of energy. That would explain the ghosts' ability to make annihilation batons and impenetrable shields.

Monday 12.5

Alfonso scratched his head. "Surely you could have made a transmitter."

The kiree said, "Capable, yes. Can use, no. Entire station is receiver. If transmit, ghosts know."

"So you've been waiting for someone else to come to the station. And I'm the first one?"

"Yes."

They'd murdered the workers to keep the station secret. How could they possibly let him get away? But, if they were planning to kill him, what was the point of showing him the station? With a frown, Alfonso said, "Who's your lover? Maybe if I get away, I can find him."

Treia bent her legs, making her body droop closer to the ground. Alfonso took this as a sign of sadness. "Thank you, no. Lover already mourned. Not want reopen wounds."

Alfonso frowned. "There must be *something* I can do to help."

She perked up a bit. "See? I lucky." She lifted the front of her body up and hit a few keys on a kiree data pad. "Can help. Take nanobot to kiree."

With a quick nod, Alfonso leaned forward. "Gladly. If I get out of here, that is. Which kiree should I bring it to?"

Treia hit another key then lowered herself to the ground again. Alfonso assumed the nanobot had attached itself to him. Treia said, "Any kiree."

"Any kiree? What if he's possessed by a ghost?"

She made the "no" gesture again. "Impossible."

Alfonso let his mouth drop open. "The ghosts can't possess the kiree?"

Tuesday 12.6

Treia said, "Yes. Kiree brain complex. Can resist ghosts."

So the ghosts were not all-powerful. And if they could be resisted by one race, perhaps others could resist them as well. Maybe they just hadn't tried hard enough. Then again, the last time he had tried, he'd failed completely. Still, Treia's admission gave him hope. Then he frowned. "But they can possess humans. When you revealed yourself to me, how could you be sure I was on your side?"

She rose up menacingly. But she didn't attack him. Instead, she hit a few more keys on the data pad. One of the screens came to life and showed a recording of the ghost telling Alfonso why he could not resist them. Alfonso looked at the screen for a second, then jumped up excitedly. He rushed closer and pointed to the image of one of the botiira's screens. He could see what was on it. "If you can record this, does that mean you know how to decode botiira vision?"

"Yes."

Alfonso smiled. "Then you'll be able to bring your own nanobot to the kiree. We can escape together."

She said nothing for a moment. She just stood there with her free legs wiggling slightly. Then, quietly, she said, "No."

"Why not? You teach me how to see what the botiira see. Then you can fritz the botiira between here and the docking spokes. When we get to a ship, I'll be able to see the control panels. I'm sure I'll be able to figure out how to fly it. These are botiira ships, so we can be sure the controls are extremely logical. It can work."

Treia hesitated again before saying, "Good plan. You might use. I will not."

"Why not?"

She hesitated for a longer period of time, then said, "Look at me. Would scare children. Not want live like this."

Alfonso stared at her for over a minute before saying, "You're going to blow up the station."

Wednesday 12.7

Treia bent her head down and sent only the top four sets of legs waving forward--the briefest of kiree nods.

"You've been waiting for someone to come here so that you could send your story back home. But you have no intention of returning."

She nodded again.

Alfonso walked over to her and stroked the hard shell around her mouth. He gently pulled her face up so that one of her good eyes could see him. "Treia, this isn't right. Who cares what you look like? Who you are is inside."

She sent a wave downward. "Inside broken too. Only revenge is left."

He frowned. "You'll kill a lot of botiira, but you won't hurt the ghosts."

"Will hurt ghosts' plans."

"Until they build another station to replace this one. They'll probably murder those workers too."

She made the "no" gesture again. "Give nanobot to kiree. No more stations."

He turned his back to her and stepped away. Who was he to judge her? He'd been tortured before, but never this badly. And the time he saw government forces slaughter a whole cell of his friends, he wanted and needed revenge. But he didn't get himself killed in the process. He thought for a moment, then turned around.

In a low voice he said, "Teach me how to see what the botiira see, and I'll teach you how to kill the ghosts."

Thursday 12.8

Treia flared all of her legs randomly, a sign of surprise. "Can kill ghosts?"

Still frowning, Alfonso said, "Maybe. I hurt one badly with a massive electrical discharge. If you flood the station with a hell of a lot of amps, you might be able to kill the ghosts on board."

She stared at him for a moment, then said, "Thank you."

Alfonso nodded. "You *could* set it up to explode on a timer and escape with me."

She drooped her legs and said slowly, "No. Belong here."

Alfonso sighed. "I understand. I don't approve, but I understand. Now, teach me about botiira vision."

"Simple encoding."

She showed him the algorithms for separating their vision and hearing from the communications channels, and he quickly entered them into his bot remote. Now he'd be able to use a nanocam to look at something and see on his remote what a botiira would see. The botiira also received smell, taste, and tactile information, but Alfonso had no way to represent those senses.

Now ready to leave, he held out a hand and said, "I'll make sure your bot gets to a kiree."

She shook his hand said, "Thank you. Will wait until you leave."

Alfonso nodded. "If you reconsider, come find me. I've been staying on Frakar spaceport in the Graget system."

Treia nodded. "Will not reconsider."

Friday 12.9

Alfonso crawled back out through the tunnel. When he reached the hallway, he found that the botiira were still curled up on the floor. He immediately turned right and purposefully strode away. At the first intersection, he turned left and continued to walk quickly. At the next intersection he turned right and slowed down. His story required that he be far away from where he left the botiira, and he wanted to put some distance between himself and the entrance to Treia's lair. However, the story also required that the station be more like a grid than a long tunnel. Given the number of right-angled intersections, that

appeared to be a reasonable assumption.

After turning at another intersection, he looked both ways down the hall and, on seeing no one, surreptitiously pulled out his bot remote. He turned it on and connected to a nanobot on his forehead. The bot relayed the botiira-enhanced view to the remote's screen. Alfonso checked it for just a second--long enough to make sure it worked--before quickly putting it away. He certainly didn't want anyone to know about this new skill of his.

After a few more turns, he came across a botiira. Either Treia had stopped fritzing them, or this one had never been affected. Alfonso said, "Hey, can you help me? I'm lost." Even though the botiira only stared at him silently, a ghost appeared immediately. Alfonso idly ruminated on the intense deceleration required to go from light speed to a standstill in so short a time. Of course, since the ghost was probably just using its mass as an anchor, the deceleration wouldn't have much effect on it.

The ghost hesitated for only a second before advancing on him. Remembering that the kiree could resist the ghosts, Alfonso strained to hold it back by force of will. He was unsuccessful, but it did feel like the ghost paused for a second at the edge of his skin. Of course, that was probably just wishful thinking.

"Are you the ghost that's possessed me in the past?" Assuming what Belan had told him was true, this was the only enforcer who could possess a human. So it had to be the one who had possessed him in the past. He'd only asked the question to hide what he knew.

A wave of animosity washed over him. *"What were you doing?"*

Alfonso shrugged. *"Wandering around lost? The botiira collapsed, so I tried to get back to the room with the screens to warn you."*

"You marked the wall. You knew which way to go. Why did you end up here?"

Saturday 12.10

Here was where it was important that the station was a grid. He hoped it was possible to start moving in the direction he'd marked and end up here. *"Well, I started going in the right direction, but I must have made a wrong turn. When I didn't find the right room, I tried to go back. But all of the corridors looked the same and I must have made another wrong turn. Eventually I just started walking around looking for someone."*

Alfonso felt disbelief, but the ghost didn't respond. So Alfonso subvocalized, *"Hey, is Goneb okay? I was worried about him when I saw him collapse, but I didn't know what to do."*

"The botiira is healthy. It was a temporary condition. You know nothing about what happened to him?"

"Well, I saw him cover his eyes and ears. I suspect his vision overlay malfunctioned. But, without those goggles, I couldn't tell for sure." Lies like this--ones based in truth--were easy.

There was another long pause before the ghost said, *"Walk down the hallway and turn left at the first intersection."*

Alfonso immediately complied. Then he asked, *"Where am I going?"*

"To the docking facility."

This caught Alfonso off guard. *"I'm leaving so soon? But I just got here."*

Alfonso felt like sighing. *"We did not fully understand the calming effect you have on your friend. We miscalculated in taking you away from her."*

That was a remarkable statement. The ghost, who had wanted him to leave without even seeing Judy, had just told him that she was alive and causing trouble. That was a considerable relief. However, it made little sense that they were going to have him try to reign her in when they could just kill her. Then again, there wasn't much about the ghosts that made sense.

But, more importantly, Alfonso never would have expected an enforcer to admit to being wrong. This admission served to further confirm his suspicions about the ghost.

Sunday 12.11

Alfonso weighed the costs between confronting the ghost with his suspicions and leaving them be. If his suspicions were correct, then confronting the ghost was the right track. But if they were wrong, the ghost would, at a minimum, shock him heavily. It might do much worse.

The ghost said, *"Multiple times you have started to communicate and have then cut yourself short. What are you attempting to say?"*

Alfonso sighed. *"Can I ask you a question?"*

"You just did. Clearly you are capable of it."

Who was this, the reincarnation of his third-grade English teacher?" *May I ask you a question?"*

"Turn right."

Alfonso did.

"You may try. It is unlikely that I will answer."

Well, it was worth a shot. *"When you're possessing me, and we're communicating this way, can other ghosts hear us?"*

The ghost hesitated for a moment before responding, *"Only if they are also possessing you."*

"But you would know if there was another ghost inside me, right?"

"Yes."

"And is there one now?"

"Why should I answer that?"

Monday 12.12

Alfonso smiled, *"Because I won't ask my next question if there is."*

"And that is somehow bad?"

With a shrug, Alfonso replied, *"It could be."*

The ghost paused again, then said, *"Ask your question."*

"I believe that you would be better off if other ghosts can not hear my next question. Are you sure

you want me ask it?"

Without hesitation, but with mild annoyance, the ghost replied, *"There are no other ghosts currently possessing you. What is your question?"*

Alfonso paused and considered one more time. Then he took a deep breath and subvocalized, *"You're not really an enforcer, are you?"*

The ghost hesitated before saying, *"If this is some sort of attempt to slow your progress toward the docking spokes, it will not work. Continue on ahead and turn left at the first intersection."*

Alfonso started walking again. *"No hidden motives. My question stands."*

"In that case, you will need to elucidate it."

"If you're really an enforcer working toward the enforcer's cause, a significant number of things don't make sense. On the ride out here, you left me alone with access to a computer terminal. You had to know I'd hack into the system and learn the coordinates of our destination." He started scrutinizing his emotions, looking for signs of surprise or anger. "You feel guilty. I can't tell if it's for shocking me or for lying to me, but I doubt a real enforcer feels guilty for anything." An emotion started to bubble to the surface, but it wasn't surprise or anger. It was more like discomfort. He continued. "Bringing me here doesn't make much sense either. There are other ways you could have scared me."

"You forget the dreams."

"Yeah, so you tried and failed. You could have tried a different attack. You still didn't need to bring me here. And, you certainly didn't need to leave my body to give me the little speech you gave."

Tuesday 12.13

Guardedly, the ghost asked, *"If these situations are not consistent with my being an enforcer, what is your interpretation of them?"*

"I know that you were once an investigator."

Abruptly, the ghost said, *"Where did you learn that?"*

Alfonso frowned and said sarcastically, *"A little bird told me. Do you want to hear this, or are you just going to shock me and hope I forget about it?"* At this point, he was pretty sure the ghost would not shock him. Its reaction up to this point had confirmed his suspicions. And if it didn't shock him now, that would be a further confirmation.

The ghost said, *"Please continue."*

Alfonso stopped at a T intersection.

"Left."

With a nod, he turned in that direction. *"I also know that the enforcers are incapable of possessing humans. That's probably why they took you in. But what if you weren't up front with them in your motivations for joining? What if you were still working for the investigators? How would you act then?"*

"How indeed?"

"Here's how I think you'd act. You'd put up a big front about being a nasty enforcer. You'd shock me at the drop of a hat, putting on a good show for any enforcer spies. But you wouldn't like doing it, the way they do. You might even feel guilty about it. And, maybe you'd want me to know the coordinates of this station. Maybe that's why you brought me here. Of course, it would be good for your cover if I thought I'd discovered them on my own. You couldn't just come out and tell me about them."

The ghost's discomfort increased. *"And my leaving your body to talk about the station. What is your explanation for that?"*

"That one's obvious. That discussion wasn't for me. It was for the other enforcers in the room. You felt nervous as we approached the room. You were worried that they wouldn't believe your motivations for bringing me here. The show was to convince them. Did it work?"

Wednesday 12.14

The ghost hesitated for a long period of time. Finally it said, *"It appears that it did. The enforcers are not nearly as perceptive as you are, Alfonso Tanaka. Sarial chose you well."*

Alfonso said, *"Sarial. Quixar's ghost."*

Alfonso felt a tiny amount of mirth come from the ghost. *"Yes. At this point I should not be surprised that you know about Quixar and Sarial."* The mirth was replaced by a new emotion. Alfonso did a doubletake and stopped. The emotion was longing.

"Is Sarial your lover?"

The ghost sighed. *"Possessing you is dangerous."* After a pause, it added. *"Yes."*

Alfonso blinked and continued on. *"I didn't really know that ghosts had lovers. Does that mean I should think of you as a she?"*

The intense feeling of humor coming from the ghost almost made Alfonso laugh out loud. *"No. I do not partake of such things."*

Alfonso shook his head. *"What?"*

"Well. I never imagined that I would feel proud of confusing a human. Sarial is the female."

"So, you're a male?"

"Yes. My name is Zolem."

"Pleased to meet you, Zolem. Are you unable to communicate on a personal level with Sarial?"

"Yes. It would jeopardize my mission."

Alfonso nodded. *"That must suck."*

The ghost replied. *"It is uncomfortable."*

Thursday 12.15

Zolem asked, *"What will you do with this information you have inferred?"*

"That depends on you."

"How?"

Alfonso forcefully subvocalized, *"I want to know what's going on. I'm tired of being a pawn in this game. Tell me what you ghosts want of me, and I'll decide whether it is the right thing to do."*

"And if I do not, you will tell the enforcers about me? You should realize that we are working toward your best interests. Turning me in would imperil your race."

Evenly, Alfonso said, *"Let me be the judge of that."*

Apparently changing the subject, the ghost said, *"Sarial gave you an important piece of information. I see from the blades you now carry that you understood her. Why have you failed to put that information to actual use?"*

"Why haven't I told the masses how to kill the shalk? I haven't yet convinced myself that the benefit outweighs the cost of the bloodbath that would ensue."

The ghost became thoughtful. *"You have the most powerful piece of information in this sector. But you have chosen not to use it because you are worried that the social implications of its use may outweigh the personal benefit. You are much more like an investigator than an enforcer. Sarial truly did choose you well. Perhaps too well."*

Alfonso frowned. *"So, you want me start the worst war this sector has ever seen. Why?"*

"Not the worst war. You do not know our history."

"Okay, so there were bad wars in your past. How does that justify this?"

The ghost said, *"There was one bad war. But it was a very long time ago and does nothing to justify a war with the shalk. The only way I could justify that is for the alternative to be much worse."*

Friday 12.16

Alfonso said, *"I'm listening."*

The ghost replied, *"It is a long story. I do not have time to explain it all."*

Alfonso frowned. *"We have an eight-day journey ahead of us. Is the story that long?"*

"I have business here."

Alfonso stopped walking. *"You're not coming?"*

"No. I will return later."

Alfonso became nervous. *"Can you answer a quick question for me?"*

"What?"

"Did you have anything to do with the building of this station?"

Without hesitation, the ghost said. *"No. This station has been operating for many years. I only joined the enforcers one hundred and seventy-three standard days ago."*

Alfonso sighed and looked over his shoulder. He couldn't tell Zolem about Treia. But he also couldn't leave the ghost on the station to die. He wouldn't shed any tears for the enforcers on the station, but Zolem didn't deserve it. *"You can't stay."*

"Why not?"

"I won't tell you. But you can not stay."

Suspiciously, Zolem asked, *"What did you do, Alfonso?"*

"I didn't do anything. But if you're willing to trust me with the fate of the sector, then you need to trust me now. You must leave with us."

Saturday 12.17

They arrived at the entrance to the docking spoke. The double doors opened, revealing Goneb. Alfonso smiled, "Good to see you, Goneb."

Goneb replied, "True," and turned around. While following the botiira down the tube, Alfonso subvocalized, *"He's coming with us too, right?"*

"Yes, he is a member of the ship's crew. But I can not. It might look suspicious, which could jeopardize my mission."

"Zolem, your mission will almost definitely end in failure if you stay. Furthermore, whatever you want me to do with the shalk will also fail."

"Why?"

"If I allow you to stay behind, Quixar will most definitely kill me."

The ghost admonished, *"This is a dangerous game you are playing, Alfonso."*

He shrugged. *"Not as dangerous as the one you ghosts have thrown me into. At least I know the rules of this one."*

They walked the rest of the way to the ship without talking. Alfonso could feel the ghost's confusion and worry, though. Just before reaching the airlock, Zolem left him abruptly. Goneb stopped suddenly, waited for a second, and then nodded. He continued on after that.

Goneb and Alfonso entered the airlock together. As the outer door was closing, Goneb said, "Alfonso is alive is true. Alfonso's conjecture about fate was error."

"I can't tell you how happy I am to have been wrong in this case."

The outer door sealed, and the inner one immediately started to open. While they waited, Alfonso casually asked, "Goneb, did you have anything to do with the building of this station?"

Sunday 12.18

Goneb stopped blinking all together. He stared at Alfonso for a good ten seconds before his eyes resumed their blinking. Even then, Alfonso had never seen a botiira blink so slowly. "True."

Alfonso covered his inner turmoil with external confusion. "Why does that bother you so much?"

They stepped out of the airlock to find two other botiira waiting for them. Goneb said, "Ready is true."

The botiira spun on their heels and walked down a hallway. By Alfonso's memories of the ship's layout, they were headed for the bridge. Goneb pointed down another hall, toward Alfonso's room. They walked in silence to the door with the large deadbolt. Alfonso reach out and pulled it aside himself. Just as he was stepping through, however, Goneb said, "If activity is making station, memories are disturbing is true."

Would he come clean? Alfonso turned around to face the botiira. "Why?"

"Can repeat is false."

Alfonso frowned. "Too painful?"

"False. High priority block."

Alfonso nodded, "The ghosts won't let you."

"False. Ghosts made impossible is true." He swung the door closed, causing Alfonso to step back to keep from getting hit in the nose.

He walked over to the terminal and sat down. So the ghosts could physically make it impossible for a being to talk about something. Had they designed this feature into the botiira, or could they do it to all species? Belan had made Judy uncomfortable to even look at the table in the bar, but he hadn't made it impossible for her talk about it. Had he not affected her as strongly as he could, or was that the limit of the ghost's suggestive abilities when used against a human?

Then again, if determination and stubbornness had anything to do with limiting the ghost's powers, then Judy was not a representative human.

Monday 12.19

Alfonso tried the terminal. He was both surprised and relieved to find that they hadn't changed any of the lockout codes. Zolem must not have told the botiira that Alfonso had compromised their system. He brought up the external sensors, which showed a close-up view of the station.

The ship slowly backed away from the docking spoke. How long would Treia wait to blow up the station? That probably depended on how long it would take her to rework her plans to include high amperage electricity in the station's destruction.

The other big question was whether or not Zolem had listened to Alfonso and left with the ship. He'd obviously possessed Goneb and told him something, but Alfonso didn't know if he'd stayed in the botiira or gone back to talk with the enforcers on the station.

The ship turned and accelerated away from the station. To allow him to keep watching, Alfonso changed his view to the aft sensors. They had only been travelling for about five minutes when the top of the upper cone shuddered. A series of ripples shot along the edge of the station, buckling its metal skin in the process. The ripples reached the docking spokes, which separated explosively. The ripples continued on to the lower cone, where they shot to the lower point. When they reached it, the point exploded, spewing molten metal outward and causing the station to spin end over end.

Like an erratic rocket, the station flailed about, continuing to shoot metal out of its tail. Then the entire

structure began to shake. The shaking progressively became worse until parts of the metal skin began to shake off. Suddenly the entire station exploded in a massive, orange ball of light.

Alfonso grabbed the edge of the terminal and held on. The shockwave hit the ship a second later. The ship was thrown forward, but seemed to hold together. Alfonso quickly checked the system readouts and found that, while there was damage, none of it was severe.

He stood up and bowed his head. "Treia, I don't know what the kiree believe about what comes after death, but I hope you are now at rest."

A voice behind him said, "Treia?"

Tuesday 12.20

Alfonso spun around and found a ghost floating next to the door. "Zolem, is that you?"

"Yes. Your resourcefulness is surprising. How did you destroy the station?"

Alfonso exhaled slowly. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Only just. May I possess you so that we can talk about this more comfortably?"

Alfonso blinked. "A ghost asking permission to possess someone? I like you much better as an investigator than an enforcer. Yes, you have my permission."

Zolem instantly lodged himself in Alfonso's abdomen. *"Thank you for your warning. When the first explosions went off, the enforcers assumed they were safe. But I remembered what you'd said. Even though I didn't think I could be killed, I decided to err on the safe side."*

"And the enforcers?"

"Dead. I expect that you will refuse to tell me how, in such a short period of unsupervised time, you succeeded in causing the station to explode."

"Wasn't me."

The ghost sighed, *"As I suspected."*

"No, Zolem, you don't understand. It truly was not me. I knew that it would happen, but had nothing to do with it." Alfonso remembered Quixar's admonishment that he would not have survived if he had killed Belan. So he chose not to reveal his part in the killing of the ghosts.

"Do not try to tell me that you happened across a leaking plasma vent, but neglected to tell anyone."

Alfonso shook his head. *"Do you know who built that station?"*

Wednesday 12.21

Zolem immediately replied, *"Yes. The enforcers built it."*

Alfonso said, *"No, who did the actual construction?"*

"I do not have that knowledge. I assume it was a group of kiree and sliss. Perhaps some botiira helped design the computer systems."

"Your assumption is correct. Now, do you know what happened to them when they finished?"

The ghost hesitated. *"If it had been an investigator station, they would have been paid and sent home."*

"Yes, but it was an enforcer station. All but one of them were tortured to death."

After another pause, the ghost said, *"So the station was destroyed by one of its builders, a kiree named Treia, correct?"* Alfonso nodded. *"And this now-dead kiree is the first creature to ever kill a ghost. These certainly are interesting times."*

Alfonso sighed. *"To you they're interesting. To me they're confusing. You were about to explain to me why you want me to start a war with the shalk."*

"Perhaps later. The premature destruction of the station has changed the situation slightly. I have issues I must attend to now. Farewell, Alfonso."

Clenching his fists, Alfonso said, *"Hold it. Our deal was that you would tell me what was going on, and I wouldn't turn you in to the enforcers."*

"I am able to travel faster than this ship. For your sake, I must arrive in Frakar ahead of you. Also, my primary mission is complete. I needed to infiltrate the enforcers so that I could learn their threats and make it possible for you to neutralize them. The station your friend just neutralized was the biggest threat. Now I need to consult with the investigators to determine the next course of action."

"But, if you don't tell me what's going on, I won't tell anyone about the shalk weakness."

"It is crucial to your survival that you do. Follow your heart, Alfonso."

The ghost left him.

Thursday 12.22

Alfonso ground his teeth and kicked the wall hard enough to feel pain, but not hard enough to break his foot. He pushed away from the terminal and started pacing. "You bastard. I didn't feed you all that information so that you could fly away with it."

He stopped and assessed the situation. The investigators had won a victory and were pleased. But, while he knew a bit more about the less-important enforcers, he wasn't much closer to understanding the investigators. In the "see who can give less information" game, he'd lost this round.

He muttered, "I'm getting sloppy," and sat back down at the terminal. He had eight days of monotony to do nothing more than scour the news. With a sigh, he brought up the most recent Frakar information.

A search on "Judy McMalley" turned up empty. It hadn't said anything about her admittance to the hospital, so he wasn't surprised to not find any mention of her departure. But this was actually a good thing, as the search had covered the obituaries as well.

Just to make sure she didn't show up in the obituaries under an incorrect spelling, Alfonso brought them up. He blinked. They were considerably longer than they should have been. He dug deeper and found that a large number of the dead had been annihilated by shalk. Alfonso searched for more information and learned that Frakar had been plagued by more computer glitches in his absence. The shalk had become increasingly frustrated with each glitch and had started killing people indiscriminately.

Alfonso read every article about the glitches twice. Unfortunately, they were typical of all news reporting--heavy on spin, light on facts, and almost completely lacking in credibility. He found a number of technical errors in the reports, which cast doubt on what few facts they did report.

After finishing the last article the second time, Alfonso leaned back. Were the glitches accidental? Or were they being caused by the Symbari? No amount of reading between the lines in the fluffy "news" reports gave him a clue. The reports just kept hammering on the fact that these glitches hadn't happened before humanity had arrived in the sector.

Disgusted, Alfonso turned off the terminal. Then he smiled. Of course, this garbage was nothing compared to the "news" reported during the Freedom wars.

Alfonso lay down on his thin bed and stared up at the white ceiling. Tomorrow he'd play with his ability to see botiira vision. Maybe he could change what the room looked like. Then, just as he was dozing off, a startling thought hit him. What if the investigators were causing the glitches in an attempt to force his hand?

Friday 12.23

The days dragged on. Goneb did share meals with him, but he seemed extremely uncomfortable in Alfonso's presence. Alfonso was sure that Goneb had, under possession, taken part in the torture of the station builders. He speculated that his asking about it had caused the botiira to link the bad memories with seeing him. So, their mealtime discussions had been anything but lively.

It also seemed that Zolem had not left orders allowing him to leave his room. He understood why he'd been locked up on the trip out. Then, the ghost was still trying to make him believe he was an enforcer. But, despite that no longer being necessary, Alfonso was still locked up.

So he'd spent much of the last eight days working on the computer system. He'd quickly figured out how to do what he wanted, but had to spend the rest of the time figuring out how to cover his tracks. As they approached Graget, Frakar's sun, he decided that he'd covered himself as well as he could. So he put together a message that included identifying information about the ship and an estimate for its arrival time. He checked his failsafes one last time, then sent the message to Judy and Sukomb.

A few hours passed without any botiira storming into his room to yell at him. It seemed likely that he'd pulled it off. He just hoped that one or both of the message's recipients had received it.

Time passed, and the ship finally maneuvered into a landing vector. They landed without incident, and Goneb came and opened his door.

"So, what's the plan, my friend?"

"The ghost set command is false. Default branch to guard Alfonso. Wait for new command."

"Then lead the way."

Goneb stepped aside and pointed down the hall. Alfonso walked to the airlock, where two more botiira were waiting. He smiled to them and said, "I must say, your hospitality has been impeccable." They ignored him. The airlock door opened, and one of the botiira stepped toward it. But Alfonso, who had positioned himself closest to the door, immediately stepped through it. One of the two other botiira started to say something, but Goneb blinked at him and said, "Command: follow." He stepped into the airlock with Alfonso.

While the doors were cycling, Alfonso said, "I appreciate you spending so much time with me on these

trips, Goneb."

Goneb said, "Was not working is true."

The outer door opened, and they stepped out. Alfonso said, "Good, I'm glad you enjoyed yourself as well."

The outer door began to close again. Alfonso spun around and kicked Goneb in the gut. The botiira stumbled back into the airlock.

Saturday 12.24

Alfonso slapped the "close door" button on the panel next to the airlock. The door was already closing, so normally this wouldn't be necessary. However, he knew the botiira on the inside would be hitting the corresponding "open door" button on their panel. The ship had been designed to give their panel precedence over this one, but, while hacking around in their computer system, Alfonso had changed the priorities. He figured it was their own damn fault that he was about to get away. If they hadn't left him with nothing to do for eight straight days, he might not have had time mess with airlock. Of course, this was the first thing he'd done, but that was beside the point.

Goneb pushed off from the rear door, but the outer hatch had already closed too much for him to get through. Alfonso frowned and called out, "Sorry, Goneb." Then he turned around and slipped into the crowd of people.

While there were plenty of people around, there weren't nearly as many as had been here before. And those that were here seemed very edgy. They were moving faster than normal and looking all around. This caused a number of accidents as people ran into each other. But, of the four such mishaps that Alfonso saw, none ended in an argument. In each case, the person who'd been run into spun around with fear in his eyes, and on seeing who had run into him, relaxed. In a crowded place like this, Alfonso would have expected tempers to flare. But that didn't happen even on the time he saw a botiira stumble into a manta.

Alfonso used people's lack of attention to his advantage. When they weren't looking, he quickly cut in front of them. This allowed him to weave through the crowd and put a good distance between himself and the ship. By the time the botiira could have recycled the airlock, he was well out of sight.

He moved to the left side of the stream of people, opposite from the ships. Then he focused on working his way to the docking station's exit. He'd made it about half way there when he heard a familiar voice behind him say, "Hello, stranger."

Alfonso spun around. "Judy!" He threw his arms around her and squeezed.

Sunday 12.25

Judy returned his hug for a second, then was jolted as a manta bumped into her. She tensed, released Alfonso, and spun around. When she saw who'd bumped into her, she relaxed. The manta said, "Sorry," and skirted around them.

Judy turned back around, grabbed Alfonso's hand in her own, and started them forward again. "Damn shalk. They've got everyone on edge."

Alfonso looked Judy over. She was wearing stretch pants and a tight pullover, so he could tell that she was walking on her own without any sort of robotic assistance. It seemed she'd healed fully. She had changed her appearance, though. While her hair was still fiery red, it now had two horizontal black lines

on the right side and one on the left. She also had three short black stripes on her right cheek. Her clothes were all black, but she had three dark purple bands around her ankles and wrists. The look reminded Alfonso of a female kiree. At least, it reminded him of Treia, the only female kiree he'd ever met.

Letting her guide him, he squeezed her hand. "I'm glad you're alive."

She smiled. "So am I. And I'm told it's because of you. From what I hear, you made quite an impression storming into the hospital gushing blood and ordering people to ignore you and take care of me."

"Well, it wasn't quite like that."

She squeezed his hand and looked over to him with soft eyes. "Whatever it was like, I appreciate it."

"You're welcome. Did Sukomb give you my message?"

She nodded. "He gave me more than that. How's freedom?"

Monday 12.26

If Alfonso had still been possessed, he would have said, "Well, it ain't free." Since he wasn't, though, he replied, "It's great, but limited. The ghost is gone, but I've learned that they keep constant watch on all troublemakers. You especially."

Letting go of his hand, she said, "I'm flattered." They had reached the exit. Judy stopped, scanned the corridor in both directions, and then stepped out into it. She then cocked her head slightly to the left, looked down, and said, "We're out. Meet us at loc six."

Looking back to Alfonso, she said, "We can't stay out in the open. Double-time it and keep your eyes open for shalk." She started to jog down the hallway. Alfonso watched her go for a second, then quickly followed after her.

When he caught up, she said, "I want to know everything, but wait until we connect with Sukomb. No need to repeat yourself."

So they were working with Sukomb now. Interesting. Alfonso nodded. "What did you mean when you said that Sukomb gave you more than the message?"

"He woke me up from my coma."

Alfonso blinked. "What?"

She smiled. "Apparently, humans are simple enough that the kiree consider fixing us to be nothing more than engineering. And we all know that they're killer engineers." She held up a hand and they both stopped. She crouched into an attack stance, and her eyes darted back and forth. Alfonso readied himself as well, but he didn't know what she'd sensed. She scanned about for a few seconds. Then slowly straightened up.

"What?" Alfonso asked.

Turning her head back and forth, she said, "I heard an annihilation baton. But I can't tell where. Let's keep moving."

Tuesday 12.27

As they started jogging again, Alfonso tried to listen for the sound of annihilation batons. However, his breathing was getting in the way. After twenty paces, he gave up and said, "What's going on with these shalks?"

Judy replied, "We've been having a lot of computer glitches, and they're throwing tantrums."

"I read that. But what's really going on?"

She looked over at him for a second, then focused down the hall again. "What do you mean?"

They reached an intersection, where they stopped and scanned both ways. The joining hallway was clear, so they started up again. Alfonso said, "Who's causing the glitches? Is it the Symbari?"

She shook her head. "I don't think anyone is causing them directly. Some sort of AI is loose in the system, and they're having trouble clearing it out. Definitely not the Symbari, though."

Alfonso frowned. "How can you be so sure?"

She gave him one of her devilish smiles. "Trust me."

This raised Alfonso's eyebrows. He said, "The press says the AI is a human-programmed one. Do you believe it?"

They stopped at another intersection, and Judy shrugged. While checking both ways, she said, "Sounds like a typical hatchet job to me."

Alfonso nodded. "Me too."

Judy took them around the corner and down another hall. They stopped before a door, and she knocked once. It quickly opened, revealing Emmanuelle.

Wednesday 12.28

Alfonso stopped. "Emmanuelle? Is Zolem here?"

Judy hastily scanned up and down the hall and abruptly pushed him into the little room. He stopped just short of running into the rear wall and almost bumped into Sukomb. Judy jumped in behind him and closed the door. Alfonso spun around and looked at her, but she just walked over to stand on the other side of Sukomb, leaving the door unguarded. He decided that she'd pushed him to get out of the hall, not to trap him. So he turned his attention back to Emmanuelle.

She cringed a bit under his questioning glare. "Zolem who?"

Alfonso shook his head. "Give it up, Emmanuelle. I know all about him, including the reason he went over to the enforcers."

She stared at him for a moment, before saying, "No, he's not here. I thought he'd come back with you."

Judy said, "Who's Zolem?"

Alfonso glanced at Judy, then back to Emmanuelle. "So, you haven't told them."

Emmanuelle refused to meet his gaze. Alfonso sighed and turned to Sukomb. With a nod, he said, "Good to see you, Sukomb. Thank you for healing Judy."

Sukomb sent a short wave of legs downward. "Judy friend. Must fix. Glad Alfonso okay."

Alfonso nodded. "I have something for you. But let me tell my story first."

Sukomb sent a wave of legs upward--a nod.

Judy tapped her foot. "Who's Zolem? And what's Emmanuelle not telling us?"

Thursday 12.29

Alfonso sighed again. "Zolem is the ghost who possessed me. He's also the ghost who has been possessing Emmanuelle for as long as we've known her."

Judy furrowed her brow and turned to Emmanuelle. "Why didn't you tell us when you escaped?"

Alfonso shook his head. "She's working with the ghost, not against it."

Judy's eyes became large. In a shocked voice, she asked, "Is that true?" The question carried a sense of accusation with it.

Emmanuelle rolled her eyes. "It's not what you think, Judy." Her voice sounded different than normal. She typically sounded weak and timid. Not now. Suddenly she was completely sure of herself.

Everyone stood in stunned silence as Emmanuelle's whole demeanor changed. She stood a little straighter and took on an air of importance. Her eyes squinted faintly, and her brow furrowed slightly. These changes gave off an intensity Alfonso had only seen in her once before. That had been right after the explosion, when he'd been hurt, and she'd forced him to sleep on her couch. He hadn't realized then that he was witnessing her real persona.

Locking her eyes on Alfonso, Emmanuelle asked, "What happened to Zolem? He should have checked in as soon as the ship docked."

Judy shook her head and held up a hand. "Wait a minute. What the hell's going on here?"

Emmanuelle brushed her off with a wave of her hand. "Shut up, Judy. This is important."

Judy's face turned almost as red as her hair. She pushed away from the wall and took a step toward Emmanuelle. Emmanuelle effortlessly dropped into an attack stance and pointed at Judy. In English, she said, "Look, girl. I'm not going to take any shit from you. Back off."

Judy inhaled sharply and started to take another step forward. Sukomb grabbed her arm and halted her. She jerked her head around to glare at him. "What are you doing?" she sputtered angrily.

Sukomb said, "Attack unknown foolish. Now Emmanuelle unknown."

Friday 12.30

Emmanuelle ignored Judy and stared at Alfonso. Alfonso answered, "Zolem said he needed to get here before us, so he went ahead on his own. He should have arrived over a day ago."

She started pacing. "Something's wrong. He would have checked in."

Alfonso offered, "Maybe he checked in with Quixar."

She shook her head. "Quixar's too busy with the shalk problem. Zolem would definitely have come to me."

Judy yanked her arm out of Sukomb's grasp and stomped her foot. "Okay, tell what's going on, or I'm going to beat it out of all three of you."

Emmanuelle crossed her arms and glared at Judy. So Alfonso said, "Zolem is an investigator ghost who infiltrated the enforcers."

Emmanuelle threw her hands up. "Damn it, Alfonso! Do you know how hard we worked on that cover?"

He looked to Emmanuelle and nodded. "Don't worry. Zolem knew I'd tell Judy." Then he turned back to Judy and continued. "The ghost possessed me so that he could take me to an enforcer stronghold. He wanted me to be able to find and neutralize it later. But that happened a little sooner than he'd expected, so he said he was going to return here to inform the investigators. Trouble is, Emmanuelle doesn't think he made it."

Sukomb let his legs droop. In a slow--for him--voice, he asked, "Describe stronghold."

Alfonso gave him an empathetic frown and said, "Shortly. I promise." He looked to Judy. "But, first, I need to know what trouble you've been causing."

Saturday 12.31

Judy crossed her arms and nodded toward Emmanuelle. "Not with her in the room. I don't know who she is anymore."

Alfonso sighed. "She works for the investigators. Even though the enforcers are stupid, they know just about everything we do. And I'm sure the investigators are better informed than they are. If Emmanuelle doesn't already know what you did, she will soon enough."

"What makes you think that I did something?"

Alfonso sighed. "Because the enforcers were planning to hold me for much longer than they did. But then you did something that caused them to decide things were better with me around to hold you back."

Judy stared at him. "But it was right after you left. How far away did you go?"

Matter-of-factly, Alfonso replied, "Eight days at point eight c."

She nodded in surprise. "Then you must have gotten out there only to turn around and come back."

Alfonso shrugged. "Pretty much. No, it wasn't fun. Now, what did you do?"

Judy glared at Emmanuelle again. Alfonso shook his head. "I'm pretty sure that the investigators are on our side. She's okay."

Judy sighed. "I got the Symbari off our backs."

When her pause stretched on for a few seconds, Alfonso prompted, "By?"

Staring distrustfully at Emmanuelle, Judy replied, "By joining them."

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Sunday 13.1

Alfonso rolled his eyes. "So you're now a foot soldier for a crime organization?"

She shook her head. "No. Now you, Sukomb, and I are the highest-ranking Symbari on Frakar. Well, we will be."

The look on Emmanuelle's face showed that she had not known this yet. Sukomb was unreadable. Alfonso blinked. "How did you manage that?"

Judy shrugged and walked toward the far side of the small room. While her back was to him, she said, "They need us. They're good at working outside the bounds of the law, but they don't know much about running a war."

Alfonso didn't like where this was going. "A war? Judy, what did you tell them?"

She turned around to face him, but looked at his feet. "I told them we know how to kill the shalk in combat, and that we'd teach them."

Alfonso took one long breath before turning to Sukomb. Angrily, he said, "You promised to wait for me."

Sukomb sent a long wave of legs running up his body. "Did wait. Judy figured out."

"Then you should have stopped her from telling anyone else."

Sukomb nodded again. "Did. Was difficult. Judy stubborn. But did stop."

Judy said, "Don't let him fool you, Alfonso, Sukomb is more stubborn than the two of us combined. He didn't let me tell your secret to the Symbari."

Now confused, Alfonso turned back to her. "Then how did you assure our position in their organization?"

She frowned. "Sukomb made me cut a deal in which we wouldn't tell them until you got back and okayed it."

Monday 13.2

Alfonso sighed and said to Sukomb, "I'm sorry. I should have known better."

Sukomb sent a wave of feet downward. "Is okay."

Alfonso turned back to Judy and sighed. "So, now you want to tell them, right?"

"Of course."

Alfonso glanced to Emmanuelle, who had her arms crossed and had been watching this exchange with interest. He turned back to Judy. "Judy, if we give away that information, we'll be responsible for a bloody war."

She raised her hands palms outward, "And that's different than the Freehdom wars in *what* way?"

"In the Freehdom wars, we lost."

"So what? They were still the right thing to do." Accusingly, she added, "Or have you somehow managed to convince yourself otherwise?"

Alfonso frowned at looked at his own feet. "No," he muttered.

Judy said, "Damn right--"

The sound of an annihilation baton cut her off. Alfonso jerked his head up to see the door disappear. Emmanuelle, who was closest to the door, dove away from it. A female shalk with matted-down, sudsy fur and a snarl that would scare a grizzly bear tramped in and looked around. "Thought I heard humans."

She pointed her baton at Emmanuelle and fired.

Emmanuelle had just stood up. She tried to dive aside again, but only managed to get the upper half of her body out of the beam.

Tuesday 13.3

When the shalk switched off the annihilation baton, Alfonso gasped. Emmanuelle's torso was laying face down on the ground. Everything below her waist was gone, and blood was pouring out. She tried to push herself up, but coughed and fell back down.

Judy, who was on the other side of the room, charged forward and kicked the shalk's wrist. She knew about the shalk's shields, so she must have hoped to catch her off guard and cause her to accidentally drop the baton.

It didn't work.

The baton bobbed a bit, but the shalk clenched her fingers around it. She sneered and pointed it directly at Judy's midsection. Judy batted it aside and dropped into a crouch. The shalk stepped back out of her range and pointed it at her again.

Sukomb yelled, "Alfonso!"

Alfonso's head shot around. Sukomb was holding two throwing stars ready and was waiting for Alfonso to okay his using them. Alfonso only hesitated for a split second. If he said yes, it would be the start of a war. But if he did nothing, Judy would die. And there was no possible way he could stand by and let that happen. Smothering a few choice words, he yelled, "Do it!"

Sukomb's hand moved in a blur. The shalk screamed, and the baton fell to the floor with a clank. By the time Alfonso turned back to look at the shalk, she was bent over and holding her wrist. Her voice a mixture of pain, disbelief, and indignation, she let loose with a long string of curses. Judy grabbed the baton and kicked the shalk in the gut, causing her to stumble back into the wall.

Alfonso rushed over to Emmanuelle. He turned her over and held her in his arms. She was coughing up blood, but she smiled at him. In a soft, comforting voice, Alfonso said, "Hold on Emmanuelle. We can fix this."

Wednesday 13.4

Emmanuelle's eyes fluttered and closed. Alfonso squeezed her for a second, then gently set her down. He frowned and muttered to himself, "You're a lousy liar."

Judy threw the shalk back across the room. Alfonso glanced at Sukomb, who was holding the baton. Judy must have tossed it to him. He then looked at the shalk. She still had the star in her wrist, and a small amount of her blood had joined Emmanuelle's. The shalk knew about the flaw in her shields. She couldn't be allowed to tell anyone. That would ruin the deal with the Symbari. So she had to die. It had

nothing to do with Emmanuelle. Really.

Ignoring the unsteady platform upon which his thoughts were trying to rest, Alfonso grabbed the hilt of the wakizashi on his leg and stood up. The short sword slid out of its sheath. He stared down at its blade for a second. At its edge, it was a single molecule thick. It should cut through anything. He glared back at the shalk. Time to find out. As he advanced, her eyes went wide, and she hastily twisted a knob on a small box on her waist. Her shield started to give off a faint hum, and Alfonso could just see an orange shimmer around her.

Ignoring the pools of Emmanuelle's blood, he calmly walked across the room. Though the shalk held up her hand, he wrenched it down. The shield resisted but did not stop the blade, making it feel like he was cutting through a thick taffy. He drew the wakizashi across the shalk's throat in a slow, purposeful stroke. Her eyes bulged, and she tried to grab her throat, but her shield intensity was set so high her hand stopped a few centimeters from her neck. Not that it would have mattered if she could.

Alfonso turned his back to her and stepped away. He pointed to the baton in Sukomb's hands. "Can you use that?"

Sukomb sent a wave of legs downward. "Genetically coded for shalk. Non-shalk not use."

He turned back to the shalk, who was now face down on the ground. Slicing through the box on her waist caused the shimmering to disappear. He wiped off his wakizashi on her fur and sheathed it. Then, careful to avoid the sharp edges, he pulled Sukomb's shuriken out of her wrist. He threw it at the wall near Sukomb, where it stuck. Then he dragged the shalk's body next to Emmanuelle's.

"Fry the bodies so we can go. We've got to see our new compatriots."

Thursday 13.5

Sukomb pulled his throwing star out of the wall and gave Emmanuelle's body a wide berth as he ambled out. Judy drew a weapon, changed a setting on it, and fired it at Emmanuelle's body. It burst into flames. She then shot the shalk, similarly igniting it. She followed Sukomb.

Alfonso stared at the burning bodies for a moment. Judy's weapon had rendered them into indistinguishable lumps. Quixar would figure out what happened, but the average person would not. Alfonso nodded once and walked out.

They walked in silence for a while. Judy's eyes were constantly darting around, looking for trouble; Sukomb was staring at his throwing star; and Alfonso was staring at his boots--wondering how much farther he'd have to go before they stopped leaving bloody footprints.

Eventually, Sukomb put the shuriken away and said, "Strange. Thought would cut through."

Without looking up, Alfonso said in an off-hand voice, "While we can get through their shields, there's still a lot of resistance." He took a step that didn't leave behind a noticeable bloody footprint. With a sigh, he looked up. "How do we contact the Symbari? We've got to get instated before people figure out what happened to that body."

Sukomb said, "Already contacted. Meet at bar immediately."

They turned a corner. Judy moved closer to Alfonso and slid an arm around his waist. "You okay?"

He put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed. Then he pulled away. In a quiet voice, he replied, "I guess so. She's been around for half a year, but we never really knew her. God knows we've lost better

friends."

Judy sighed. "That we have."

Alfonso wondered if she knew that Ramishar was alive, but didn't feel like bringing the matter up. Instead, he said, "And we're going to lose more in the future."

She nodded, then added forcefully. "But we're doing the right thing."

Alfonso shrugged. "You sure? We're upsetting a status quo that's existed for longer than humanity has. How can we be sure we're doing the right thing?"

Sukomb said, "Humans' arrival upset quo. Must change, so change for better."

Friday 13.6

They arrived at the Dose before the Symbari did. There was a new door up, and the shattered windows had been covered. Someone had put up a sign that said, "Temporarily closed. Please come back later."

Inside, the room was mostly empty. The floor was bare, but there was a large pile of rubble in the corner. The bar had mostly survived the explosion, but the mirror and all the bottles behind it were gone. The wall that once hid the secret room was also gone.

There was a single long table in the center of the room. It was new. Judy walked over and took a seat on its far side. She leaned back in her chair and threw her feet up onto the table, her boots making a solid thump. "Okay, spill it. What was this enforcer stronghold the ghosts took you to, and how did you destroy it?"

Alfonso stared at her new boots. They had soles that were a little thicker than they needed to be. And there were thin slits running along the outsides of the soles. He frowned.

"New boots?"

Sukomb, who'd been moving toward Judy, stopped.

Judy smiled. "Yeah. Sukomb made them for me."

Alfonso sighed and shook his head. She'd never been in any danger. Her boots could undoubtedly sprout ultra-sharp blades on the sides, so she could have disarmed the shalk. In English, he said, "You are one manipulative little bitch, aren't you?"

"Little? I'm taller than you."

"By two inches."

She shrugged and said, "I was holding back, waiting for your signal."

"Sure you were."

From behind Alfonso, someone said in shalkish, "Now, now. Sspeaking in sstrange languagess iss hardly a polite way to welcome guestss."

Saturday 13.7

Slowly, Alfonso turned around to find a sliss flanked by two manta standing in the doorway. There was

nothing extraordinary about the manta. One was a female, the other a male, and both were carrying destructor rifles. The sliss, however, was wearing a colorful tube that contained a number of pockets near its head. All sliss looked alike to Alfonso, but he recognized this one's style of dress. This was Sstoram, the person who was theoretically Mayor of Frakar spaceport. But, although it was the elected official, it obviously didn't have any power over the shalk.

Alfonso said, "Mayor Sstoram, please come in." Alfonso had his back to Judy, so he couldn't ask her the question burning on his mind. It seemed unlikely that the Mayor would happen to choose this moment to pay a visit to a burnt-out bar. So that meant this was their Symbari contact. But, until he could be sure of that, he needed to watch what he said. Judy should have told him who their contact was.

"Sank you." The sliss and manta entered the bar, and one of the manta closed the door. Alfonso was pleased to see that they were holding their rifles loosely. While they'd come prepared for trouble, they weren't expecting it.

"I regret that I can't offer you any sliss juice, but we've had some recent difficulty here."

Sstoram bobbed its head once and its color lightened slightly. "Yess, a quite unfortunate accidnt. But your hosspitality iss unnessessary. I am exsstremely pleased to finally get a chanss to meet Alfonso Tanaka."

Alfonso blinked. "I'm sorry sir. Do you know me?"

"Yess. You kept your identity to yourself, sso we ressppected your privassy. But we ssliss have long known that you were the human who rissked hiss own life to ssave a number of ssliss."

Sunday 13.8

Sstoram had been Mayor when the explosion happened, so it would remember it. And, being a sliss itself, it would have taken a greater than normal interest in a situation that involved the lives of other sliss. But Alfonso was still surprised to learn that Sstoram held him in such high regard. All he did was pry a door open. He nodded. "You've met my companions?"

"Of coursse." Sstoram looked behind Alfonso and said, "Good to ssee you again, Judy. And Ssukomb, it'ss always an honor."

Alfonso looked over his shoulder to see Judy nod toward Sstoram. However, she was still leaning back on her chair and still had her feet up on the table. Sukomb took a place next to her. Alfonso turned back to the Mayor and said, "Please, sit down."

He walked around the table and pulled up a chair next to Judy. Before he sat down, though, he kicked one of the back legs of her chair. The front legs came crashing down to the ground, forcing her to lean forward quickly. She frowned and pulled her feet off the table. Alfonso sat down.

Sstoram slithered over to the table, then paused to look at each of them. It was clear that he couldn't tell where to sit. Judy was between Alfonso and Sukomb, so, by placement, she was running things. But Sukomb was considerably more respected than she was, and, if these were the Symbari, they'd been forced to wait for Alfonso to get back. Alfonso suddenly realized that it wasn't clear *tohim* who was in charge here. He looked to Sukomb, who met his gaze in one of his side eyes and sent a quick wave of legs upward.

Without consulting with Judy, he said, "Please, Mayor Sstoram, sit in front of me."

Sstoram quickly slithered up into the appropriate chair and coiled himself there. Judy gave Alfonso a

perturbed look. He just shrugged to her. The two manta took the chairs on either side of the sliss.

"I assume Judy has filled you in on the plans for our agreement. If you consent to teach us how to fight against the shalk, you will become high members of the Symbari. What is your decision on this?"

Monday 13.9

Alfonso said, "She said that we would become the highest ranking Symbari on the station. That means you'd report to me. How do you feel about that?"

The sliss's scales became slightly darker. "If my superior gives an order, I am compelled to follow it. How I feel does not matter."

Alfonso shook his head. "It matters to me."

Sstoram's scales lightened again. "Interesting." He thought for a moment, then said, "Our organization is better off with one such as you in it. No, I have no problem with you becoming my boss."

Alfonso nodded. "Good. Then here's my first order. How you feel *does* matter. If I give an order you disagree with, and timing is not crucial, I expect you to discuss your misgivings with me."

Judy sighed. "I liked the blind-obey idea better."

Alfonso tried to elbow her in the gut, but she blocked him with her own elbow. Still, she shut her mouth. Alfonso said to Sstoram, that goes for Judy's and Sukomb's orders as well."

Sstoram's color lightened further. "Does this mean that you have chosen to join us?"

Alfonso said, "Yes it does."

"Wonderful! Please tell me how to kill the shalk."

Alfonso shook his head and smiled. "No. I'll tell my superior. How do we contact that person?"

The sliss swiveled one of its eyes to look at the female manta on its right. It blinked twice, and the manta nodded. She stood up and extricated a rolled plastic sheet from a pouch. She unrolled the sheet on the table before them. It ended up being a square that was about a quarter-meter on each side.

The sheet started showing an image of the face and upper legs of a female kiree.

Sukomb flared most of his legs and exclaimed, "Torai!"

Tuesday 13.10

The kiree in the image sent a wave of legs upward. "Sukomb. Is problem?"

Sukomb clasped the hands of his upper legs together. Those that were below the table, and out of view of the Symbari, shook randomly. He paused for over five seconds before he took a deep breath and said, "Not problem."

This did not bode well at all. Alfonso would be all over Sukomb as soon as the Symbari left.

The kiree sent a wave of legs upward and said, "Good." Then she cocked her head so that her mouth faced Alfonso. "I Torai, new boss."

Alfonso nodded. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Alfonso Tanaka."

Torai sent her top three pairs of legs upward and turned to Judy. Judy raised both of her hands and said, "Judy McMalley. May your children give you sustenance."

Torai used all of her visible legs to nod. In an impressed voice, she said, "Honored. Learn from Sukomb?"

Judy smiled and nodded. "I tried to learn to say it in ancient kiree, but I lack the necessary organs. It kept coming out, "Don't eat your parents."

Torai waved her legs forward and back--a kiree laugh. "Good choice not use." She paused, and her legs stopped waving. "Knew boss is kiree?"

Judy shook her head.

"Why learn greeting?"

Judy shrugged. "I just wanted to."

In English, Torai said, "Good job."

Wednesday 13.11

Judy laughed. In shalkish, she replied. "But you knew your reports would be humans."

Torai replied in English, "I confess." She turned back to Alfonso, but he could see that she was studying Sukomb with one of her side eyes. Sukomb appeared to be looking at the far wall. Torai continued in shalkish, "Choose join. Pleased."

Alfonso replied, "And we're pleased to have joined. When can we meet in person? We need to start planning how we're going to run this war."

Torai sent a short wave of legs downward. "War unnecessary. Will only assassinate occasional shalk."

Alfonso leaned back and looked over to Judy. She frowned.

Alfonso considered for a moment before saying, "Mayor Sstoram, I'm afraid that we must converse privately with Torai. Could one of us return this communications sheet to you later?"

Though Sstoram turned a bit darker, it quickly said, "Of course." It uncoiled itself, and the two manta stood up. "Please show me to se door."

Alfonso nodded and walked alongside the sliss. When they got to the door, Sstoram raised his head up to Alfonso's ear and whispered, "Be careful. Torai doesn't like to have her orders questioned."

In an equally quiet voice, he replied. "Thank you. But this can't go any other way."

"Good luck sen." The first manta opened the door, scanned the hallway, and stepped out. Sstoram slithered after him. The female manta paused for a second and patted Alfonso on the back. She quickly said, "I have friends who know you. You can count on me to help in any way possible."

Alfonso smiled and nodded. She quickly left. As he was walking back toward the table, he realized that it would be difficult to call on her if he didn't know her name.

Thursday 13.12

Alfonso carefully composed his thoughts before retaking his seat. He inhaled deeply and said, "Torai, if we keep the information about the shalk to ourselves, we pass up an enormous opportunity for the Symbari to amass value."

Torai paused before asking, "How?"

She was at least hearing him out. That was a good sign. He continued. "The shalk only rule because it is impossible to stand against them. We have the opportunity to drastically alter the balance of power in this sector."

"Change bad for business."

"That is true when the change happens to you. But if you are the instrument of that change, and if you control it, you stand to profit greatly. I have a plan that would end with the Symbari *ruling* the sector."

"Already rule, mostly."

Alfonso shook his head. "If you're talking about people like Sstoram, then it's not the same. We only rule behind the scenes, and don't have any real power. We could become the *true* rulers and hold the real power. The Symbari are a powerful crime organization. But we have the opportunity to become an even more powerful legitimate organization."

Torai's legs fluttered randomly as she considered. After pausing for a few seconds, she said, "Continue. How become rulers?"

She was going for it. This might work out after all. He looked over to Judy, who nodded. Sukomb still seemed to be staring at the wall. Alfonso continued. "The shalk here on Frakar are out of control. The non-shalk here would kill for a way to fight back, to defend themselves. If we started selling shalk-killer weapons, we'd sell as many as we could make."

Friday 13.13

Torai sent a quick wave of feet toward her head. "Profit there. But how rule?"

Alfonso smiled. "That's entirely in how you spin it. If we hide in dark alleys and only sell weapons to people who know the secret password, then we'll only make a lot of money. But what if we came out into the open? We should hold ourselves up as concerned citizens who are doing whatever we can to save the masses. When the dust settles, we'd be considered heroes. And, when they start wondering who to place in charge of the new order, we'd be the natural choice."

She considered for a full thirty seconds before saying, "Suggestion interesting. Will discuss with superiors. Trouble, Symbari not know war."

Alfonso leaned back, "There are thousands of humans in this sector with considerable experience in running a war. The Symbari already have Judy and me. And I'll bet there are others in our ranks." He thought of Ramishar.

"Okay. How kill shalk?"

Alfonso frowned and paused for what he considered to be the correct amount of time before saying, "Let's get our plans straight first."

Her legs drooped. In an angry voice, she said. "Fine. Will contact later." Her image abruptly disappeared.

Judy and Alfonso immediately turned to Sukomb. Judy said, "Spill it."

Sukomb sent the legs on one side upward and the ones on the other downward--a sign of confusion. "Spill it?"

Alfonso stood up. "You've obviously got a big problem with Torai. If we're going to work for her, then we need to know what's wrong."

Sukomb's legs shook again. He backed away from the table and lowered himself until all of them touched the ground. Then he started walking around the bar in what appeared to be a random path.

Judy got up and matched pace with him. She bent down and stroked the base of his neck, right where it met the hard shell of his back. When he stopped, she said, "We don't want to pry. But this seems to be very important."

Sukomb paused for a very long time before saying, "Had life-mate. Torai killed."

Saturday 13.14

Judy laid a hand on Sukomb's beak. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pushed." She looked over her shoulder to Alfonso. "When I connected us with the Symbari, I didn't know we'd be working for a murderer."

Sukomb reared the forward half of his body up and sent a short wave of legs downward. "Not murder. Life-mate was engineer. Worked for Torai. Torai got secret contract. Can't know where work. Can't communicate. Can't know anything. Life-mate not want job. Torai forced her go."

Alfonso became very uneasy. This was sounding familiar.

Judy asked, "Then what happened?"

Sukomb's legs drooped. "Never came back."

Judy rubbed his neck again. "What did Torai do then?"

"Nothing. Customer refuse tell. I distraught. I disgusted. Need get away from kiree. So come to Frakar."

That explained why Sukomb was here, even though most kiree avoided places that didn't have breathable atmospheres. He'd specifically come to this place *because* other kiree avoided it. Unfortunately, Alfonso hadn't heard anything yet to contradict his suspicions.

"Sukomb," he asked, "Do you know anything about the customer?"

Sukomb sent a wave of legs upward. "Did much investigate. Was a ghost."

Alfonso took a deep breath. "Do you know what kind?"

As if he'd suddenly realized something, Sukomb's legs went rigid, and he strode over to the table. Facing Alfonso, he said, "Enforcer."

Alfonso slumped into his chair. "Dios mio. Tell me your life-mate wasn't named Treia."

Sunday 13.15

Sukomb's legs shook. "How know Treia?"

Alfonso's heart sank into his stomach. Sukomb would never forgive him for letting her die. "So she was your life-mate?"

Sukomb steadied his legs enough to send a wave downward. But they still flared about as they went. "Knew Treia. Life-mate's coworker. Worked same job."

Alfonso leaned forward, put his elbows on the table, and held his face in his hands. In a quiet voice, he said, "I met her."

Sukomb's voice raised in pitch and speed. He was practically pleading. "Where? How?"

Alfonso continued to hold his face in his hands. He'd planned to give Treia's nanobot to Sukomb. But could he now? He didn't want to be the messenger that brought the news that Sukomb's life-mate had been tortured to death.

Then again, Sukomb had a right to know. If Alfonso gave the bot to some other kiree, they might cover the incident up and never tell Sukomb what really happened. This discussion had already dredged up bad memories for Sukomb. Getting closure on them would be intensely painful at first, but might allow him to start to heal.

Still, Alfonso didn't relish the job.

He took a deep breath and leaned back. Looking directly into Sukomb's forward eyes, he said, "On a secret enforcer listening station. The enforcers keep a constant watch on all known troublemakers, and they needed a place to send their surveillance data. So they contracted with the kiree to build an aggregation point deep in space." He paused.

Monday 13.16

Sukomb said, "And?"

Alfonso sighed again. "I'm sorry Sukomb. To keep the place secret, they murdered all of the workers."

Sukomb lowered himself back down, then pulled all of his legs in, so that he was lying on the ground. He then curled his body up into a ball. He sat there and shook for a moment. Then he said, "Treia?"

In a soft voice, Alfonso said, "She escaped and hid in the station. She contacted me when the ghosts brought me there. She gave me a nanobot with information about what happened. I was planning to give it to you, but now I'm not sure that I should."

Sukomb immediately unrolled and reared most of his body up. Towering over Alfonso, he commanded, "Give."

Alfonso frowned. "She told me about what happened. If the description is graphic, you might not want to read it."

Sukomb sent a wave that went from his topmost to his bottommost legs. Angrily, he said, "Give!"

Judy walked up behind him and patted him on the back. "This must be devastating, my friend, but don't blame Alfonso. He is just the messenger."

Sukomb's feet shook for a while. Then he lowered himself until only the front two thirds of his body was vertical. In a softer voice, he said, "Please give."

Alfonso asked, "You're sure?"

Sukomb sent a long wave of legs upward.

Tuesday 13.17

Alfonso said, "Very well. She attached it to me, but didn't tell me where. I assumed you'd be able to find it."

Sukomb said, "Need tools. Can we go home?"

Alfonso nodded. "Of course."

Sukomb immediately started toward the door. When Alfonso and Judy didn't move, he said, "Can go now?"

Alfonso rolled up the communication's tablet and stuck it in a pocket. Then he nodded to Judy, and they followed Sukomb.

As they walked, Alfonso said, "I'm sorry about this, Sukomb."

Sukomb sent a wave of legs downward. "Just messenger. Treia now dead?"

Alfonso nodded. In surprise, Judy said, "What?"

Sukomb replied, "Was kiree. Would destroy station."

Alfonso frowned. "I tried to convince her to escape with me, but she refused. She said her lover had already mourned for her and that she didn't want to reopen old wounds."

Sukomb sent a wave of legs upward. "Kiree females very strong. Very gallant. Very stupid. Males rather wounds if get females back. Station destroyed?"

Alfonso looked up and down the corridor. He couldn't see anyone. There was probably a ghost or a ghost nanobot watching them, but there wasn't yet a way to avoid them. Besides, hopefully anything it learned would be lost when the station didn't pick it up. "Yes, right after I left. She also knew how to kill ghosts. She killed the enforcers on the station."

Sukomb sneered, "Good."

Wednesday 13.18

While walking, Judy looked to Alfonso with questioning eyes. She knew him well enough to suspect that he had provided Treia with the knowledge of how to kill the ghosts. He knew Judy equally well. She'd be wondering if he had told the kiree what to do. Most importantly, she'd be wanting confirmation that what she knew about hurting ghosts would allow her to kill them. He nodded, causing her eyes to light up.

Judy said, "Seems to me, the shalk aren't the real problem. Maybe we should be worrying about the ghosts."

Alfonso shook his head. "One threat at a time."

Judy laughed and said in English. "This coming from the guy who's planning to neutralize both the shalk and the Symbari at the same time."

Sukomb was walking ahead of them, but was watching them with his rear eyes. Those eyes blinked. Also in English, he said, "Neutralize Symbari?"

Alfonso stopped. "Okay, I can see you learning Japanese. But English?"

Sukomb and Judy stopped. Still speaking in English, Sukomb replied, "Is chaotic. But not difficult. Judy good teacher."

Alfonso smiled and looked at Judy. Considering all the things he'd learned from her, some of which weren't even painful, he had to agree. Continuing in English, he said, "Obscure language or not, I don't think it's wise to discuss those plans while walking down a corridor."

Since Sukomb's back was to Alfonso, he couldn't see what the kiree did. But it looked like he tapped a series of his legs together. A second later, a cloud formed around the three of them and started to hum. Sukomb started walking again, and the cloud followed him. Judy and Alfonso matched pace. Alfonso could not see through the cloud, but he assumed Sukomb could. At least, he hoped Sukomb could.

Alfonso said, "A portable nanoscreen? Where'd you get this?"

Thursday 13.19

Sukomb used his legs to shrug. "Made it."

Alfonso reminded himself again that he was glad the kiree was on his side.

After no one said anything for a second, Sukomb prompted, "How destroy Symbari?"

Alfonso shook his head. "Not destroy, disable."

Judy piped up, "By giving the Symbari a path to become rulers of the sector, he's really giving them enough rope to hang themselves." She smiled to him. "I'm impressed. Where was that deviousness when we were fighting the world governments?"

Alfonso shrugged. "Where do you think I learned said deviousness?"

Sukomb sent a wave of legs downward. "Not understand. Wait."

He turned a corner and dragged the cloud with him. Momentarily Alfonso stepped outside its boundaries. He took a quick glance around and stepped back in. The paranoid part of his brain couldn't help but notice that, while walking in Sukomb's cloud, he couldn't tell where they were going.

When he matched pace again, Sukomb said, "Please explain."

Alfonso replied, "Getting power is easy. But holding on to it is tough. If the Symbari become the overt rulers of the sector, they'll have to drastically change. Either they'll fail miserably and be dismantled by the angry populace, or they'll change so much that they effectively won't be the Symbari anymore. Either way, they won't be a problem."

Sukomb said, "Can discover plans."

Alfonso shrugged. "Maybe. But I'm betting the draw of power is too great for them to pass up."

Friday 13.20

Still speaking in English, Sukomb said, "Interesting. After shalk and Symbari, fight ghosts?"

Though it was a fair question on the surface, Alfonso had to remind himself that the kiree could not be possessed. At least, that was what Treia had claimed. He shook his head. "I don't understand the ghosts well enough to fight them."

Sukomb said, "Ghosts give shalk control. Fight shalk is fight ghosts."

Alfonso shook his head. "Not necessarily. It was a ghost who told me how to fight the shalk. I think, in reality, we're in the middle of a ghost vs. ghost war."

Judy sighed. "Then we don't control our own destiny."

Alfonso frowned, "Not until we understand what's really happening. We need to make finding out our highest priority."

Sukomb sent a wave of legs downward. "Highest priority get nanobot."

With a smile, Alfonso said, "Of course." He didn't see any point to saying that he suspected they might learn something about the ghosts from Treia's nanobot.

Sukomb stopped suddenly and stood still. Judy and Alfonso did as well. Sukomb held some of his legs outward for a moment, then shut off the silencer cloud. He continued to hold his legs out.

Judy said, "What?"

Sukomb immediately whispered, "Quiet."

Judy and Alfonso scanned around. They were in the middle of a corridor that ended in a T intersection. It was well lit and appeared to be one of the more upscale areas. There were a few people in the corridor, but they all seemed to be minding their own business.

Suddenly, throwing stars appeared in ten of Sukomb's hands, and he furiously started to backpedal. Judy and Alfonso had to jump out of his way. Sukomb yelled, "Run!"

Saturday 13.21

Without hesitation, both Judy and Alfonso spun around and barreled down the corridor. Their relatively long legs let them overtake Sukomb immediately. They slowed a bit so as not to leave him behind, and Judy asked, "What is it?"

Sukomb said, "Many shalk." He was running backwards, but could see through his rear eyes. Judy and Alfonso had to try to look over their shoulders while they ran forward. Between glances, Alfonso couldn't see anything at first. Then, a moment later, five shalk dressed in black turned the corner. Alfonso had moved a good distance away from the intersection, so he couldn't get a very good look at them. But he still knew who they were.

"Dame da! It's the enforcers."

One of the enforcers drew a black baton and pointed it down the hall at them. Sukomb immediately threw a star. It caught the enforcer in the shoulder and caused him to drop his baton. Sukomb emitted an agitated series of clicks.

Her voice laden with worry, Judy asked, "What?"

Sukomb said, "Long distance. Aim bad."

Alfonso looked back hastily. The enforcers had stopped to look at their companion. But they wouldn't pause for long. One of them was already pulling out his baton. Alfonso shook his head. "They're not going to have that problem." He scanned ahead. The next intersection was coming up soon. "Left or right?"

Sukomb said, "Left."

Alfonso looked back. Two enforcers were raising their batons. He and Judy dove around the corner just as an annihilation beam destroyed the far wall. They each rolled once and came up running. But then they both stopped. Sukomb wasn't with them.

Sunday 13.22

They spun around and were relieved to see Sukomb. The trouble was, he was on the other side of the corridor. He'd gone right.

Sukomb said, "Sorry. Not run backward much."

Judy turned to Alfonso, "They're already firing. We won't get across."

Alfonso nodded. "Sukomb, we'll split up. Make as many turns as possible to try to lose them. If they get near, disarm them if you can, but kill them if you need to."

Sukomb sent a quick wave of legs upward as he spun around. He rushed down the hall. Judy and Alfonso took off in their own direction. Now they ran at full speed, letting their long legs carry them much faster than the shalk's stubby little legs possibly could. As the intersection approached, Judy pulled ahead and veered a bit to the right. By not speeding up to overtake her, Alfonso agreed with her choice. So, when they reached the intersection, they both curved left without so much as an exchanged nod. They'd played this game many times before.

Alfonso said, "When you picked me up at the ship, you were able to communicate with Sukomb. Can you still?"

Judy nodded. "We need to get you outfitted with one of his communicators."

"Can you talk to other people?"

"No. Private band. Emmanuelle was the only other one on it. Why?"

Alfonso's legs were starting to get tired, and he had to take a breath or two before saying anything else. Judy was still in fantastic shape, but he'd let himself go a bit soft standing behind the bar. "Keep in contact with him. I want to know if he has any trouble. And help me find a general communicator. We need to make a call."

"Dare I ask who?"

"No."

Monday 13.23

Judy cocked her head to the side and said, "You okay?"

They approached the next intersection. They didn't need to do any sort of jockeying to decide which way to go. When Alfonso agreed to turn left at the last intersection, he was really agreeing to double back on the enforcers. They would be turning left at the next intersection as well.

Judy said, "He hasn't lost them yet. He says two followed him."

"So, we've either got three, or the one he stuck stayed back."

"Right."

They stopped right before the intersection. Alfonso pasted himself against the wall right at the edge, pulled out his bot remote, and sent a camera bot around the corner. There were no shalk to be seen. Alfonso and Judy went around the corner and stopped. Alfonso sent the bot back to watch the corridor they'd just left and handed the remote to Judy.

He then walked up to the first door and pounded on it. When there was no answer, he drew his sword and quickly sliced off the locking mechanism. He pulled the door open and looked inside. It was a standard living area, similar in layout to his own, but with more expensive items. Because the bed was small and circular, Alfonso assumed it was a sliss's quarters.

He went straight to the communicator and called Quixar. Quixar appeared immediately and looked concerned. Before he could say anything, Alfonso blurted, "We've got a lot to talk about, but I don't have time right now. You wanted a war against the shalk, and I've started one. I'm on the verge of killing some of the enforcer's hosts. If this is progressing faster than you want, you'd better tell me quickly."

Quixar immediately said, "We do need to talk. But if you've got to defend yourself, don't hesitate."

Tuesday 13.24

That confirmed many of Alfonso's suspicions. He nodded. "That's all I needed to know. You've traced this and know where I am now?"

Quixar nodded.

"Then you should send someone down here. I had to cut open this sliss's door and don't have any way to keep thieves out. I'll try to work my way back to you later." He cut the transmission and returned to the corridor. He pulled the door shut and set the part he'd chopped off in its place. The seam was microscopic; a casual passerby would not notice it. Then he looked to Judy. "What's the situation?" he whispered.

She continued to look at the bot remote. "Two came to the intersection. They split up, and one is about three quarters of the way to us."

Alfonso drew his long sword. "How's Sukomb?"

"He's having trouble losing them."

Alfonso looked over her shoulder at the screen. The shalk was approaching with his baton drawn and ready to fire. But he wasn't close enough to hear them talk, yet. "Tell Sukomb to go around a corner, set an ambush, and kill the shalk that are following him."

Judy looked over her shoulder and blinked. "You sure?"

Alfonso's face a mask of seriousness, he nodded.

She cocked her head to the side and said, "Sukomb, Alfonso says to hole up and kill your pursuers." She paused for a second and said, "Yeah, really. We'll take care of ours and meet you at your place." She turned to Alfonso and pointed at the image on the bot remote. "What about this one?"

"He dies too."

Wednesday 13.25

Alfonso held out a hand. Judy handed him the remote and said, "You're not this bloodthirsty. What's your plan?"

He checked the remote's screen again and said, "I've come to realize that we're not fighting the shalk. We're fighting the enforcers. But, even though I don't trust the investigators, I doubt they're sacrificing us."

Judy nodded, "But we can't win in open combat against ghosts."

"Right. So they must have some other goal. I can only come up with publicity solutions."

"So you think that making a big splash now might shorten the war."

He nodded, "Which should save lives in the end."

Judy started walking down the hall. "Then we need to get all five of them. I'll go find the one Sukomb hit."

Alfonso took up a position at the edge of the hallway. He watched the remote until the shalk got close enough that he could hear his footsteps. Then he commanded the bot to come back to him and put the remote away.

Suddenly the footsteps stopped. Alfonso silently cursed to himself. Zolem had shown him that ghosts can see bots. He should have remembered that.

A translucent, hard-to-see ball appeared before him. Alfonso immediately raced around the corner in an overly wide curve. Alfonso's suspicion that the shalk would expect him to come straight on paid off. The blast shot straight down the wall and hit the far end. Since Alfonso had gone wide, it missed him.

Thursday 13.26

The shalk tried to adjust his aim, but Alfonso was too fast for him. He raced by with his sword held out at neck height. As soon as he felt the sword make contact, he pulled it in toward him. This gave it the necessary slashing motion that let it slice through the shalk's shield.

He flicked his sword, causing the blood to spray off. Then he sheathed it and grabbed the shalk's black baton and turned back toward the T intersection.

The ghost became a glowing ball before him. "You will regret this."

Alfonso held his hands out. "Then hit me."

When nothing happened immediately, Alfonso smiled. "You see, I have this suspicion that you need to be able to possess me to influence me. And the enforcers didn't see fit to learn how to possess humans, now did you?"

The ghost started to pulse, ranging from invisible to bright in a slow beat.

Alfonso shrugged, "Hey, I can't really blame you." He pointed to the shalk's body. "If I could control invincible beings armed with," he held up the baton, "superweapons, I might also have been short-sighted enough to ignore such an obviously important tactic."

He heard a yell and looked over his shoulder. The shalk who'd gone the other way had looked back and seen him. "Well, it seems your friend is coming. I'll be on my way now." He calmly walked toward the ghost, all the while wishing he could see behind him. He didn't know if the shalk was running toward him, or lining up for a shot. He hoped the shalk would worry about hitting his fallen comrade and would choose not to fire. But, of course, he didn't know that for sure.

Alfonso got an idea for some sort of eye augments that would let him see the output from nanocams. It would be nice to have those cams pointing backwards right now.

He adjusted his course slightly to make sure he walked through the ghost. That should really annoy it. Sure enough, the ghost pulsed faster as he approached. When he touched it, though, he felt it try to work its way into him.

Friday 13.27

Alfonso had no difficulty shrugging off the ghost's attempt at control. As he turned the corner, he said, "You'll have to do better than that." The ghost was pretty stupid. Alfonso could think of a number of ways for a being with the ghost's abilities to hurt a human. The enforcer ghosts seemed to be singularly lacking in creativity. Of course, he'd been relying on that when he'd decided to attack possessed shalk.

The lighting fixture above him exploded with a not overly loud bang and sent a light shower of sparks down upon him. He looked back to the ghost. "Not bad. But still useless."

Judy was pressed up against the wall at the far corner. She looked down the hallway at the exploded light, then quickly looked back. A second later a shalk that was using one hand to hold his shoulder rushed around the corner. She kicked him in the gut with the edge of her foot, causing him to double over. Then she axe-kicked him to the back of the neck. He fell to the ground. She bent over and grabbed his baton. Then she started back toward Alfonso.

Alfonso attached his baton to a loop on his suit and pressed himself up against his corner, where he drew his katana and waited. The ghost was still there, so he said, "You'd better warn that other shalk to go away."

The ghost disappeared. Alfonso waited a few seconds, then moved farther down the hall. The ghost might tell the shalk to fire the baton through the corner. A minute later, he heard fast footsteps coming close. The footsteps stopped for a moment; then he heard an enraged yell and more footsteps.

Alfonso quickly slid down to the edge of the corner. The ghost may have warned the shalk, but the shalk appeared to be too stupid to heed it. Seeing his dead companion must have enraged him.

The shalk raced around the corner, right into Alfonso's blade. The shalk stopped suddenly and stared down at the long gash in his abdomen. He then looked up at Alfonso with a shocked expression on his face.

Alfonso said, "Drop the baton. Or I'll take off your hand, and there'll be no celestial palace for you."

The shalk looked down at his hand, then tried to point the baton at Alfonso. Alfonso easily stepped to the side and sliced the hand off. He bent down and removed the baton from the severed hand. Then he casually walked toward Judy.

Saturday 13.28

Judy spun the baton around in her fingers as she sauntered down the hall. She was clearly pleased with herself. Alfonso looked down at her boots and saw that they had sprouted blades on the outer edges. He

said, "I see that Sukomb's boots work."

She smiled and looked down at them. "Yeah. Aren't they great? I wish I'd had a pair of these back on Earth." He saw her calf muscles flex and the blades retract. She suddenly batted at the air, as if to swat a fly. "Go away ghost. You can't do anything but annoy me."

Alfonso flicked his sword to clean the blood off. Then he sheathed it and said, "Listen, enforcers. You'd better report to your superiors that the methods you've used in the past to control the masses are no longer effective. Whether you have the mental acuity to effectively deal with this remains to be seen. But go away now. There's nothing you can do here."

The ghosts seemed to disappear. They may have left, or they may have just stopped showing themselves. Since Alfonso now assumed that they were always watching him, the two were equivalent. He said to Judy, "How's Sukomb?"

She tilted her head to the side and said, "You still alive?" After a moment, she said, "Good. You got their batons?" She paused again, then said, "Okay, see you then." She looked to Alfonso and said, "He's fine. The shalk didn't have a chance. Let's get to his place."

Alfonso nodded. "Lead the way."

Judy looked around to orient herself, then started down the hallway. Alfonso matched pace with her. They walked for a bit before he said, "So, what's up with you and Sukomb?"

She looked over to him and fluttered her eyes. "What do you mean?"

He thought for a moment, then said, "You're dressing like a female kiree and...."

Sunday 13.29

Judy laughed. "Alfonso, dear. Are you jealous?"

Alfonso felt his cheeks flush. He blurted, "Of course not." Then he sighed, "Well, maybe. I don't know."

She threw an arm around his waist and squeezed. "He's a friend. A good friend--one who saved my life--but a friend. When I started spending time with him, he started teaching me about kiree culture. I thought the female markings looked cool."

Alfonso didn't like the feelings he was having. He shouldn't have felt relieved. He shouldn't have cared who she saw. Things between them were long over. But, if that was the case, why *did* he feel relieved? He suddenly became very aware of her warm body touching his. This caused him to tense.

Judy held him for just long enough to let him know she sensed his discomfort and enjoyed it. Then she broke away. "Besides," she said, "how could I get serious about Sukomb? I'm incapable of controlling him. He's too smart for me."

Alfonso laughed. Judy did know how to diffuse tense situations. Since she *could* manipulate Alfonso, she'd effectively just called him stupid--or, at least, not as smart as she was. "Let's pick up the pace," he said. "I need the exercise, and I'd like to get out of the hallways before any more shalk happen along."

Judy nodded and broke into a jog. They went for a minute or two before a far away look came over her face and she said, "Of course, with all of those hands, I'll bet he'd *beamazing* in bed...."

Alfonso shook his head. "Isn't that a nightmare for most women?"

Judy looked over to him and grinned. "And if I was like most women, you wouldn't love me." She slapped his rump and picked up the pace to pull away from him.

Alfonso sighed. Sometimes, when he was with her, she seemed to be a bright light, while he was a mindless fly being drawn in. Unfortunately, he knew all too well about the electrified screen surrounding her. He'd been zapped before.

He upped his speed.

Monday 13.30

They arrived at Sukomb's quarters without further incident. Alfonso was completely out of breath, and his lungs and legs hurt. He stopped and leaned against the wall, taking deep, painful breaths. Although Judy had broken a sweat, she looked ready to run back again. Alfonso consoled himself that he was in better shape than most humans. But, as Judy had pointed out, she wasn't like most humans."

They were on a short corridor with only a few doors spaced far apart. These quarters must have been huge. Judy pounded on one of the doors. Then she tilted her head to the side and said, "We're here."

The door slid aside silently. Strange, most doors opened inward. Judy ushered Alfonso in, then looked both ways down the hall before entering herself. The door slid shut by itself. When Alfonso got inside, he realized immediately why the door didn't swing inward. It wouldn't have fit.

Although the room was enormous, there was very little room to move around. A human tinkerer's workshop would have had a number of tables with half-completed projects littered about on them. But human tinkerers only have two hands. Sukomb's quarters were a maze of tall, backless shelving units. The spaces between the units were cramped, and the units ran all the way to the ceiling. Sukomb must have had to climb up the structures to work on the projects on the highest shelves.

The place felt like a warren.

Alfonso could just make out Sukomb on the far end of the room. "Come in," he said. Judy expertly navigated through the maze, making five turns, two of which Alfonso would have thought were the wrong direction. He wondered how he'd ever get out of here in a fire.

They made one last turn and found Sukomb at a dead end. He was fully vertical and was supporting himself by grasping the shelves with some of his legs. There was a ring of ten video screens surrounding his head, and he appeared to be working on five projects at once. As Alfonso approached, he could see that some of the video screens were showing what Sukomb was working on. Others appeared to be showing news feeds and data.

Sukomb said, "Alfonso, stand there." An amber light on a shelf behind Sukomb started blinking.

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Tuesday 14.1

Alfonso stepped next to the shelf. The light changed to violet and stopped blinking.

Sukomb said, "Many nanobots."

Alfonso grabbed his bot remote, entered a command, and said, "All of my bots should have just jumped laterally. The one that didn't is yours."

Sukomb sent a short wave downward. "Already found. Am reading now. Move bots again."

Alfonso sent a different command to his bots.

Sukomb said, "Many interlopers. All gone."

With a frown, Alfonso muttered, "Sou desu ka?" His remote beeped, and he looked down at it. It had the plans for a bot he didn't recognize. "What's this?"

Sukomb said, "Bot-killer bot. Interrogate bots. Kill all unauthorized."

When Alfonso looked over the new device's capabilities, he whistled. It was far more capable than any of the hunter/killers he'd had access to. "Where'd you get this?"

"Unauthoriz--" Sukomb cut himself short, and all but two of his legs went rigid. His lowest two legs were typing furiously on a datapad that was sitting on the bottom shelf. The screens around Sukomb's began to rapidly flash images at a rate too quick for Alfonso to make any of them out. The images continued on for over a minute, during which time only Sukomb's bottom two legs moved.

Judy's face became concerned. "Hey, Sukomb, you alright?"

If Sukomb heard anything, he ignored her.

Wednesday 14.2

The images flashing in front of Sukomb's eyes stopped abruptly. Sukomb's legs typed a few more things, then he let out an extremely-rapid series of chirps, squeaks, and squeals. This continued for at least thirty seconds. When it stopped, Sukomb appeared to freeze in place. Though his eyes could not close, Alfonso suspected that they weren't seeing anything.

Alfonso and Judy crept closer. Timidly, Judy said, "Sukomb?"

Sukomb didn't answer.

She turned angrily to Alfonso. "What did you do to him?" she accused.

Alfonso shook his head.

In an extremely quiet voice, Sukomb said, "Am alive. Not worry."

Alfonso laid a hand on Judy's shoulder and stepped back, gently pulling her with him. He whispered into her ear, "Give him some space. He's just learned that his life-mate was tortured to death by sadistic ghosts."

Judy frowned and stared at Alfonso in shock. Then she looked back to Sukomb with soft eyes. She seemed to want to help, but didn't know what to do. Alfonso was feeling the exact same way. In Sukomb's deadening silence, the faint whirs caused by his various projects seemed to become deafening roars.

After a few agonizing minutes, Sukomb slowly climbed down off the shelving unit and lowered himself all the way to the ground. Judy and Alfonso had to back up to get out of his way. Finally, in a slow, quiet voice, Sukomb said, "Shalk war. Fight shalk or fight enforcers?"

Alfonso shrugged. "I'm not sure. Maybe both."

Sukomb replied, "If enforcers, all kiree not Torai join."

Thursday 14.3

Alfonso suddenly understood the real reason Zolem had taken him to the enforcer station. The investigators must have been angling for a war with the enforcers. Zolem could have learned about Treia. Then his plan was to use her story to convince the kiree to fight for the investigators.

This realization annoyed Alfonso. He didn't mind the result too much, but he didn't like being used. If Quixar or Zolem had just asked for his help, he would have gone willingly.

Judy said, "All the kiree but Torai. Why not her?"

Sukomb made an angry-sounding chirp. "I thought just dispatcher. Felt guilty for blaming her. Was wrong."

Alfonso frowned. "It was wrong to blame her?"

Sukomb sent twin waves from his topmost legs all the way to his tail. "Wrong to feel guilty. Torai knew all. Knew would murder workers." His legs quavered. "Sent them anyway."

Judy whistled. "So she chose the enforcers over the lives of her own people. What a bitch."

Sukomb said, "Correct term," and added a sharp click.

Alfonso tried to reproduce the click by thumping his tongue down. He didn't do a very good job. "What's it mean?"

"All kiree swear and 'traitor.'"

Alfonso nodded. "Then she's probably not on good terms with any kiree."

"Hunted now."

Friday 14.4

Alfonso frowned. "So, you already sent the message to some kiree? How many?"

"All."

Alfonso looked over to Judy. She frowned, and he sighed.

Sukomb said, "What wrong?"

Alfonso took a deep breath before saying, "I'm not going to tell you how to deal with an 'all swear words traitor,' but without her, we're cut off from the rest of the Symbari. And we need them for the war."

Judy started pacing. After a bit, she said, "No, this is probably better. Considering what she did, Torai would have been against the war anyway. I'll bet she never even gave our message to her superiors. But if the kiree remove her, then her superiors will need to get in touch with us. Or, if she hasn't told them about us, they'll at least get in touch with Mayor Sstoram. If we convince him to join the war, we should get a chance to bubble our message up."

Alfonso thought about it for a minute before nodding. "Okay, you have a point. If Torai becomes incapacitated, we should be okay." He turned to Sukomb. "What will your people do if they catch her?"

Sukomb said, "When catch. Not if. Definitely incapacitate."

"Then we're back on track."

Sukomb asked, "Can send shalk secret?"

Alfonso blinked. "You haven't yet?"

Sukomb sent a wave of legs downward. "Need Alfonso's permission."

Alfonso said, "Send it. But weapons to kill the shalk aren't enough. We need to also tell them how to kill the ghosts."

Saturday 14.5

All of Sukomb's legs flared for a second. "You know how?"

Alfonso replied, "I know what Treia did."

Sukomb said, "Tell. Will build."

Alfonso leaned against a shelving unit and gestured with his hands. "We need something like a lightning wand. The ghosts are hurt by high voltage electricity. If we could make something that stores a bunch and fires it, we should be able to at least stun them. We also need a way to shock ourselves. A delivery van stunned me, and the ghost who was possessing me seemed to go unconscious for a time. Of course, I'm not looking forward to the experimentation needed to find a voltage that hurts a ghost but doesn't kill a human."

Judy said, "Or a kiree."

Alfonso shook his head, and Sukomb sent a wave of legs downward. While typing on a datapad, Sukomb said, "Ghost not posses kiree."

Judy arched her eyebrows. "Why not?"

"Can't. Brain too complex."

Judy crossed her arms and started pacing. "If they can be resisted, then there must be something we can do to resist them."

Alfonso shrugged. "Not necessarily."

She shook her head. "If there's a way, I'll find it." She walked purposefully over to a shelving unit that had a stool in front of it, a screen at her eye level, and a keyboard at her hands' level. Sukomb had obviously set this station up for her.

Sunday 14.6

Alfonso turned to Sukomb. "I'll also need to get in the communications loop with you and Judy."

Sukomb sent a wave of legs upward. He walked over to a nearby shelf, picked up a long, thin device and walked back to Alfonso. As he approached, with his myriad of legs moving about randomly, Alfonso became very disappointed in himself for needing to suppress a shudder. But having this giant bug so close to his face and neck gave him chills.

And to think, Judy had thought positively about having sex with one. There were many ways in which she was stronger than he was.

Sukomb held the probe to the right side of Alfonso's neck for a second. Alfonso felt a sharp pain, like a pinprick, but it only lasted for a second. Sukomb backed away. "Okay?"

Alfonso nodded.

"Sorry, not know hurt. Judy not flinch. Must do ears."

Alfonso smiled. "Go ahead." Since neither Judy nor Emmanuelle had flinched, Sukomb had assumed this didn't hurt. Alfonso didn't know whether to be pleased or distressed that he was less capable than the rest of his group. It did say good things about his choice of company. Sukomb quickly touched the wand to each of his ears. Alfonso felt more sharp pain, and each of his ears started ringing. A few seconds later, though, both the pain and the ringing were gone.

Sukomb said, "Simple operation. Lean head to talk."

Alfonso had gathered that much from watching Judy. He cocked his head to the right and whispered, "Testing, one, two, three."

Judy also cocked her head over and responded in a whisper, "Loud and clear." He heard her voice through his ears, as well as through the ear implants, so it was difficult to tell that it was working. But he was pretty sure that it was.

"Cool. Thanks, Sukomb."

Monday 14.7

Sukomb sent a wave of legs downward and walked to a shelving unit. After he climbed up onto it, the ring of screens floated over to him. "Will work on wand."

Alfonso nodded and looked to Judy. She was engrossed in something on the screen in front of her. He said, "Okay, I'm going to go find Mayor Sstoram and try to convince him to follow us instead of Torai. Do you two need anything while I'm out?"

Judy shook her head, and Sukomb sent a wave of legs downward. Alfonso said, "Okay, if you go anywhere, let me know." He started to retrace the route to the door when Sukomb said, "Wait."

A light on a nearby shelf came on. It illuminated a handgun with a unigrip. Sukomb said, "Take with you."

Alfonso picked it up and was surprised to find it heavy. It felt almost as heavy as a lead-slinger from back on Earth. He was also surprised to see that the barrel ended in an opening. Beam weapons ended in a collector. "What does it do?"

Sukomb replied, "Fires spinning blades."

Alfonso looked incredulously at Judy. "Do you have one of these?"

She nodded.

"And you didn't think it would have been a good idea to use it against the shalk that attacked us?"

She shrugged. "I prefer my boots."

"And when they were firing down the hallway at us?"

She shrugged again, "A little excitement is good for the soul."

Alfonso rolled his eyes and slid the gun into a pocket. The worst part of her answers was that he could see himself in a situation where he'd give the same ones. Sometimes what scared him the most about her was how much she was like him.

Tuesday 14.8

While Alfonso *did* intend to go see Mayor Sstoram, that wasn't his primary reason for leaving. He needed to see someone else first. He anxiously jogged down Frakar's corridors, expecting shalk to be waiting for him at every intersection. He did see a few, but they were always far enough away not to pose a threat. He breathed a sigh of relief when he arrived at the security office without participating in any life-threatening incidents.

He was even more relieved to find Quixar there.

Quixar had people in his office, but, on seeing Alfonso, he quickly shooed them out. "Come in, Alfonso. Please close the door behind you."

Alfonso did as instructed. Quixar's office was spacious, with a large number of terminals surrounding his large desk. Of the terminals that Alfonso could see, each was showing something different. Some appeared to be video feeds of different hallways. Others appeared to be text articles. Still others were magnified still objects. Alfonso assumed these were some sort of evidence that Quixar was collecting against a criminal.

The room had a number of windows, which allowed Quixar to look out into the rest of the security office. But the windows turned black when Alfonso closed the door. He also heard a faint hum, which he assumed was a silencing screen.

Quixar pointed to a pair of chairs in front of his desk and said, "Please sit down."

Alfonso picked the more comfortable-looking of the two and sat down. However, he did not lean back. He preferred to be ready to jump out of the chair quickly.

Quixar looked at him for a second, then said, "You just don't go halfway, do you? You're either refusing to touch the shalk, or you're killing off all of the station's enforcers and thumbing your nose at their ghosts."

Alfonso studied Quixar carefully while saying, "Hey, we didn't kill the ghosts." With emphasis, he added, "Yet."

Wednesday 14.9

Quixar leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the desk. "Are you sure that's wise?"

Purposely misinterpreting the question, Alfonso answered, "Not killing the ghosts? We didn't have the right weapons with us."

Quixar smiled. "No. Are you sure that killing ghosts is a wise endeavor?"

Alfonso shrugged and leaned back in his own chair. "I don't know. For some inscrutable reason, a certain group of people has decided that I'm better off not knowing what is going on. Until you answer

some questions, I don't have the ability to know what's wise and what isn't."

Quixar nodded. "Ask your questions, then."

The shalk was a master of keeping his cards close to his chest. Though Alfonso was concentrating hard on trying to read him, he wasn't getting anything. "First, what happened to Zolem? Did he report back to you, like he said he would?"

Quixar shook his head. "No. Zolem was intercepted in transit."

"By the enforcers?"

Quixar said. "No."

Alfonso frowned. "Why did the investigators stop him?"

Quixar shrugged. "We didn't."

Now Alfonso leaned forward. "What can stop a ghost besides another ghost?"

Thursday 14.10

Quixar smiled. "I'm not ready to answer that yet. Ask some other questions. Perhaps we'll get back to that one."

Alfonso sighed and leaned back. "Then tell me what's going on. Why do you want me to pit the kiree against the enforcers?"

Quixar frowned. "The kiree against the enforcers? I seem to remember teaching you how to kill shalk. How does that pit the kiree against the enforcers."

"You had Zolem take me to the enforcer listening station. You knew that I'd learn about the horrible atrocities the enforcers committed against the kiree who built it, and that I'd bring that information back to Sukomb. You had to expect the kiree to take up arms against the enforcers when Sukomb relayed the information to them."

"Interesting." Quixar drummed his fingers together and stared up at the ceiling for what seemed like a few minutes. Finally, he looked back at Alfonso and said, "No. I did not know any of that. We sent you out to the enforcer station so that you'd learn that it exists. We figured you would eventually find a way to destroy it, as its existence made your war with the shalk impracticable. We *did not* expect you to destroy it so quickly. And this information about the kiree is *very* interesting."

Alfonso cursed himself internally. He thought he was just confirming the truth, when, in fact, he was giving Quixar too much information.

Quixar said, "There was something else we wanted you to learn while you were there. Did you?"

Alfonso said, "Did I what?"

Quixar frowned, "Apparently not."

Friday 14.11

Getting frustrated, Alfonso leaned forward and said, "Okay, Quixar, spill it. What's going on here?"

Quixar stared at him for a moment. Finally he frowned and nodded. He said, "We've underestimated you in the past. Perhaps trying to keep things from you now is a further underestimation." He sighed and said, "It's a long story."

Alfonso smiled, "Does it have a happy ending?"

Quixar replied, "The ending hasn't been written yet." He rubbed his eyes and, in a tired voice, said, "We weren't always energy beings. We used to be a race of highly advanced but corporeal creatures. And, in general, we did what we could to help the less advanced races in this sector. Sure, we made our mistakes. The shalk were two of them--"

Alfonso scrunched his eyebrows together. "Two?"

Quixar nodded. "We put the race that became the shalk in danger. Then we overcompensated in fixing the problem we created for them. But that's not the point of this story."

One of his screens beeped. Quixar hit a button and said, "Is it extremely important?"

A voice said, "It's pretty important."

Quixar said, "If it's not something that threatens the entire station, then deal with it on your own. I'm not to be disturbed."

The voice replied, "Yes, sir."

Quixar looked up at Alfonso and said, "Where was I?"

"You said that the shalk weren't the point of the story."

Quixar nodded. "Right. The story doesn't get interesting until our technology advanced to the point which allowed us to become what we are now."

Saturday 14.12

Quixar continued. "When we left our corporeal bodies behind, we gained the ability to exist as pure energy. And, in that state, we are massless. As you are, no doubt, aware, that means we travel at the speed of light. We also need no nourishment, no sleep, nothing. And we're pretty sure that, ignoring your recent discovery, we live forever. We became ideal explorers, and a large percentage of our kind went off to see the universe."

Alfonso asked, "What happened to them?"

Quixar made the shalk equivalent of a shrug. "None have come back, so no one knows. But the universe is a very big place, and they've only been gone for a few tens of thousands of years. I imagine they're having a good time."

"Why didn't you go with them?"

"Those that stayed behind had differing reasons, but we largely fell into three groups. Some of us felt that our new, godlike powers came with the responsibility to improve the lives of the other races."

Alfonso asked, "The investigators?"

"Very good. Others reveled in their power and enjoyed flaunting it before the other races."

Alfonso nodded, "That would be the enforcers. I don't think I've met anyone from the third group, though."

Quixar frowned. "They are called, 'the rulers.' They are the most powerful of the groups, because there are many more of them than there are investigators or enforcers."

Alfonso asked, "And what was their reason for not going off to explore the universe?"

Quixar sighed. "Sadly, they didn't leave because they are afraid of change. The rulers worship the status quo and have kept this sector largely unchanged for millennia."

Sunday 14.13

Alfonso whistled. "They must love humanity."

Quixar said, "Coping with you has been quite a challenge to them. But humanity is nothing compared to the challenge they now face. And their inability to deal with that challenge is a serious problem."

Alfonso nodded. "You mean our ability to kill ghosts, of course."

"No. We have only just begun to consider the ramifications of that. Though it was the rulers who intercepted Zolem. I presume that had something to do with the ghosts who were killed."

Alfonso thought for a moment, but he didn't have enough information to come up with something that was more damaging to the status quo than humanity's arrival or its having learned how to kill ghosts. "What's this new threat?"

Quixar paused for a moment before saying, "When you were on the enforcer station, Zolem was supposed to make you look at a particular screen. Did he?"

Alfonso shook his head. "No. I saw a bunch of screens showing people the enforcers were watching, but he never told me to look at any particular...." Quixar was just staring at him. Alfonso realized that when he'd said "make," he'd meant it. He thought back and remembered having a strange feeling that caused him to look at a particular screen. "Wait a minute. I did see something. Most of the screens were showing people. But one showed Proxima Mantissa with a line going out to something. I think it might have had a countdown timer too, something like six months."

Quixar smiled, "That's the one. What do you suppose it meant?"

Monday 14.14

Alfonso shrugged. "I don't know. Ten seconds after I saw it, someone ripped the goggles from my eyes, and they dragged me away." This made him remember that he needed to get Sukomb to make him some contact lenses that display the botiira overlays.

Quixar said evenly, "You have made some good guesses in the past. Please speculate now."

Alfonso scratched his head. "Well, clearly something is on its way. And I remember thinking that it was something huge. But I have no idea what it is."

Quixar said, "Not something huge. An enormous number of very small things. And, unless we do something drastic, they will kill everything in this sector that is not a shalk or a ghost."

Alfonso gasped. "Care to elaborate?"

Quixar nodded. "You remember that the human stasis ship was first discovered by astrophysicists on Proxima Mantissa?"

"Sure, they stopped us and woke us up. I think the ship is probably still there."

"It is, and it's been studied heavily."

With a frown, Alfonso said, "You're studying *our* technology? What could you learn? That ship is hopelessly primitive by your standards."

"What we can learn, Alfonso, is history. And important history at that. You see, this was not the first sector in which humanity encountered a race of space-faring beings."

Tuesday 14.15

Alfonso sat forward suddenly. "What?"

Quixar said, "We found a small creature attached to your ship. It was completely organic and possessed no technology the way we think of technology. It looked somewhat insect-like and was rubbing two mandibles together. We discovered that this was creating a highly directed series of pulses that were travelling back toward the direction from which you'd come. We sent a ghost out to follow these pulses, and he brought back disturbing news. The bug was communicating with an enormous swarm of other bugs. And that swarm was slowly heading this way."

Alfonso stood up and started pacing. "Are they intelligent?"

"If they are, we haven't found a way to communicate with them."

"Maybe they're peaceful. Maybe they'll stop in and say, 'Hi, just passing through. Nice to meet you.'"

Quixar pointed to a screen behind him. An image of a green planet appeared. "We've been watching them constantly since we found them. Here's a planet that was in their path." The image on the screen zoomed in until Alfonso could see individual trees. Then the image shifted a number of times, giving him many views of the place. The planet was beautiful. It was full of rolling hills covered with grasses, forests of giant trees, and small animals.

Quixar said, "Here's what it looked like five days after they arrived." The images changed. Now they showed a barren wasteland of rocks, dirt and sand. "The swarm ate every last bit of living matter on the planet."

Alfonso stared in shock at the screen. After a minute of constant images of destroyed land, he shook his head and sat down. "I see why you're keeping this to yourselves. Humanity is already disliked. If it got out that we led that kind of destruction to this sector, we'd be hunted and killed out of spite."

Quixar snorted. "You don't know how hard the investigators had to work to keep the rulers from doing just that."

Wednesday 14.16

Alfonso smiled. But when Quixar didn't reciprocate, he realized the shalk hadn't been kidding. He inhaled sharply and said, "Thanks."

Quixar nodded.

Alfonso tapped the tips of his fingers together as he thought. "I wonder why they didn't just consume us

as we flew by them?"

"We suspect your ship was moving too quickly. It was travelling faster than the swarm does. Maybe the tracer bug that attached to the ship was specialized for high speed. So they tacked it to you and then followed after you, figuring you'd stop sometime."

Alfonso stood and started pacing. "What if we sent the ship off away from here at a right angle to its earlier path? Maybe they'd turn and go straight to it, rather than following the path directly?"

Quixar frowned. "Good idea. Strangely, our ten-thousand-year-old rulers lack your wisdom. They decided the best plan of attack was to kill the tracer bug."

Alfonso rubbed his temples. "And the swarm kept coming, right?"

"Yes. Apparently it had been sending coordinates, not a homing beacon."

"Did someone at least record the pulses so we can analyze their speech? Maybe we can figure out how to make the swarm think the bug is still alive and has moved."

Quixar smiled. "Another good idea. We only have those recordings because the investigator who found the bug immediately made them. The rulers didn't see any point to them."

Alfonso said, "Forgive my insolence, but the rulers are stupid."

Thursday 14.17

Quixar smirked. "You've noticed?"

Alfonso said, "So, have you cracked the code yet?"

Quixar shook his head. "We're having trouble with that."

"How many humans do you have working on it?"

"Humans?"

Alfonso stopped and stared at Quixar incredulously. The rulers were stupid, but Quixar didn't seem to be thinking very clearly either. "Quixar, what do your people know about breaking codes?"

Quixar shrugged.

Alfonso rolled his eyes. "It could be argued that the first shot the governments fired in the Freedom wars was outlawing cryptography. We had just about every cryptographer on the planet on our side. And many of them survived to come here. Put them on the problem."

Quixar leaned back. "Interesting. Can you put me in touch with these cryptographers?"

Alfonso nodded. "I'll make you a list of names. You'll have to track them down from there."

"Thank you." Quixar paused and stared at Alfonso. Finally, he said, "How many humans are like you?"

Friday 14.18

Alfonso thought back to when he was on Earth pleading with people to stand up for themselves and not let the world governments walk over them. Most of them were too scared, lazy, or stupid to do so. He frowned, "Are we talking about humans, or the humans who are here?"

Quixar smiled. "Since I don't plan to visit Earth, I mean the humans here."

Alfonso nodded. "Humanity in general is stupid. But the people here don't constitute a representative sample. We're a select bunch. Of course, I'm unique."

He smiled. If Judy had been there, she'd have said, "Thank God." He continued, "But any of the things I've been suggesting would be readily obvious to any of us."

Quixar nodded. He muttered, "We should be involving you in more of our decisions."

Alfonso leapt on the opportunity. "Good. Then tell me how starting a war with the shalk will protect us against the swarm."

Despite what he'd just said, Quixar considered for a moment before answering. "We have been trying to convince the rulers to allow races other than the shalk to have shalk defense shields."

In shock, Alfonso sat back down. The thought of having an almost impenetrable personal shield blew his mind. In fact, if they didn't give everyone else annihilation batons, they'd effectively disarm society. Of course, they'd have to take the batons from the shalk to do that. He took a deep breath and said, "Because you think the shields will protect us from the swarm?"

"They definitely will. Of course, that doesn't protect the rest of the living matter on our planets. But it's a start."

Alfonso nodded. "I want one of the original shields. Not one of the ones with the shalk flaw."

Quixar shook his head. "It doesn't matter. The rulers won't let us distribute the shields to the rest of the races."

Saturday 14.19

Alfonso leaned back. It suddenly all made sense. "The rulers don't want to perturb the status quo. So you're going to destroy it. Then you'll suggest that, since it's already gone, they may as well give us shields."

Quixar nodded.

"And you're worried that if we start killing ghosts, the rulers will be so angry they'll want the swarm to destroy us."

Quixar sighed, "The fact that they're holding Zolem worries me. We haven't hurt each other since we became ghosts. We rarely did it beforehand."

"Well, why aren't the enforcers with us?"

Quixar sighed. "Most of them have chosen to possess shalk. They like controlling the ruling class, so they don't want the shalk to fall out of power."

Alfonso shrugged. "If the swarm kills everyone else, the shalk won't have anyone to rule."

Quixar sneered. "The enforcers don't have that kind of foresight."

Alfonso thought back to the enforcer ghosts who couldn't think of anything to do to him after he killed their shalk. As with most bullies, intelligence wasn't their strong suit. "Well, at least all of the investigators are with us, right?"

"Most of them."

Sunday 14.20

Alfonso sighed. "Okay, you've got this complicated plan to sort of do something about the short-term threat of the swarm. It relies on pissing off the rulers a little, but not too much. You know them better than I do. Will it work?"

Quixar paused for a long time. Alfonso started to get worried. Finally Quixar looked down and muttered, "I don't know."

Alfonso became very worried. He sat still for a while then took a deep breath. "Give me the odds."

Once again, Quixar said, "I don't know."

Alfonso stood up slowly. "Odds that aren't known are automatically unacceptable. What's your backup plan?"

When Quixar didn't answer immediately, Alfonso realized that he didn't have one. He shook his head. "Quixar, you're an amazing investigator." He put both of his hands on the desk and leaned forward. In a low voice, he said, "Don't quit your day job."

He spun around and, while opening the door, said, "I'll be in touch."

Alfonso strode out of the security office with a determined look on his face. But, inside, he was far less sure of himself. He didn't have enough control of this situation. And he didn't like relying on the benevolence of non-benevolent rulers. Even if everything went according to Quixar's plans, something out of left field could come up and ruin everything. When the time came to make the decision, one of the rulers could be having a bad day and decide to let everyone become bug food. No, Alfonso had to devise a plan to either force them to make the right decision, or to make it for them.

But how? He headed for the Mayor's office and continued to ponder the problem. Along the way, he remembered Shasirr. He'd seen the assassin just before leaving for the enforcer station. He'd undoubtedly see him again. There had to be a way to make use of the sector's best assassin.

Monday 14.21

When Alfonso reached the Mayor's office, he stopped and cocked his head to the side. "Judy, Sukomb, you there?"

Judy's voice came back, "What's up, Alfonso? Is the Mayor on our side?"

"I've just arrived. I got sidetracked. How's the work going on the lightning batons?"

Sukomb responded, "Making progress."

"Good. If you finish them before we get back together, hold off on using them. We need to talk first."

He could hear disapproval in Judy's voice. "What if we're attacked?"

Alfonso said, "Stun them. Don't kill any. It's come to my attention that killing them could cause us a considerable amount of trouble. We need to talk first. Out."

He uncocked his head and looked up at the large double doors of the Mayor's office. Alfonso realized that he was exhausted. A lot had happened since he got back, but he hadn't even been back to his

quarters yet. Well, he'd make this meeting with the Mayor quick. Then he'd get some sleep.

As he approached the office doors, they opened. The voice of a female manta said, "Come in, Alfonso," but no one was there. The doors led into a long hallway with assorted artwork and statues spaced evenly along the way. The doors closed the instant Alfonso stepped through them. He glanced back and noticed that they were made of high-grade composite steel. They should be capable of withstanding a considerable amount of damage.

As he walked down the hallway, he noticed that many of the portraits employed a common trick to make it look as though the eyes followed him. He'd always found those sorts of things a bit spooky. Suddenly Alfonso stopped and looked back at a portrait. It was of a sliss, and both of its eyes were swiveled to look at him. But it hadn't been imaged correctly to make the eyes follow. He stepped closer and noticed the eyes shift a bit. This wasn't a visual trick. Those eyes *were* following him. And, as he looked closely at them, he realized they had collectors in the centers. The eyes were blasters.

Tuesday 14.22

The manta's voice came on again. "Don't worry Alfonso. We know you're on our side. Even if you weren't, I would never fire on you."

Alfonso frowned. The voice sounded familiar, but manta accents were so heavy that he had trouble telling individual voices apart. He shrugged and continued down the hallway. It ended in another set of doors, which were closed. Alfonso glanced back. There was a lot of art on the walls. He suspected that the statues were probably weapons too. Maybe shrapnel bombs. The Mayor was prepared for a serious invasion. Of course, none of this would help if the invaders were shalk.

When Alfonso reached the far doors, they opened, revealing a large room with a receptionist behind a desk. The receptionist was an extremely familiar looking female manta. Alfonso blinked and said, "Slimmerr?"

She smiled. "Hi, Alfonso."

"What are you doing here?"

"After my last experience with my job, I decided I needed a new line of work. So I called a friend, and she got me this one. It doesn't pay as much as I used to make, but I get to work sitting down."

He walked up to the desk. "Makes you the sexiest receptionist I've ever seen."

Before he could blink, she extended the claws on her right hand, lunged forward, and grabbed his neck. "Don't get any funny ideas, mister." She smiled, released him, and sat back down.

Alfonso looked her over. She was wearing considerably more clothing now than the last time he'd seen her, so he couldn't tell how well her body had healed. But her face looked much better. If she had scars, her fur was covering them. Her whiskers had grown back too. "How are you doing?" he asked.

She nodded, "Much better, thanks largely to you."

Wednesday 14.23

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

Slimmerr shook her head. "You cared. That's what I needed most." She looked down and said, "The Mayor will see you now." A door to her left opened.

Alfonso smiled. "Thanks, Slimmerr." He stepped toward the door, then paused. If Slimmerr was here, then what the bodyguard had said to him was probably a reference to her. "The friend who got you the job, is she a manta bodyguard for the Mayor?"

Slimmerr nodded. "Her name's MARRISA."

He smiled and blew her a kiss, "Thanks, dear."

She didn't seem to understand the gesture, but nodded. Alfonso walked through the door. Mayor Sstoram was coiled up on a chair behind a desk at the far end of the room. MARRISA and the other bodyguard each had their own desks on the sides of the room. This implied that the Mantas were more than bodyguards. Alfonso hadn't yet gotten a feel for what constituted "stately" in this sector. Back on Earth, a Mayor's office would be full of wooden bookshelves with thick, leather-bound books. Here, every square centimeter of wall was covered with display screens. They seemed to be showing newscasts and other reports. The sound was off, but subtitles were appearing at the bottom of each screen. The mayor also had a number of screens on his desk, as did the manta.

Sstoram bobbed his head. "Welcome, Alfonso. Have a seat."

Alfonso nodded to MARRISA, who smiled and nodded back. He sat down in a seat directly in front of Sstoram's desk. "Thank you, Mayor Sstoram."

Sstoram said, "In private, you can drop the honorific. I work for you now."

Alfonso said, "Perhaps. That's what I'm here to talk about."

Thursday 14.24

Alfonso drew Sstoram's flexible communicator screen from its pouch and set it on the Mayor's desk. Sstoram said, "Se meeting with Torai did not go well?"

Alfonso shook his head. "Torai is a collaborator with the people we're fighting against. She will not consent to a war with the shalk."

Sstoram's color darkened. "Torai collaborates with the shalk?"

Alfonso shook his head. "No, she collaborates with the people who control the shalk."

Sstoram stared at him for a long moment before it said, "I see that I have much to learn."

Alfonso said, "I'm willing to teach you, but I need you to come to my side."

Sstoram lowered its head until it almost touched the desk. "I want to, but I cannot. They would kill me to disobey a superior Ssymbari. If Torai turns you down, then you are not my superior. She is."

Keeping an even face, Alfonso said. "Not for long. The kiree have just learned that Torai is responsible for the murder of a large number of kiree and sliss. She is being hunted as we speak."

Sstoram's color lightened considerably. After a brief pause, he said. "Good. I never liked her. But, eventually her superior will contact me."

Alfonso nodded. "I plan to get this war over with as soon as possible. We can do a lot between now and then."

When Sstoram hesitated, Alfonso added, "My people have an expression. It's easier to ask forgiveness

than permission.' You make a lot of value while removing the shalk threat, and your new superior won't care what you did."

Friday 14.25

Sstoram considered for a long time. Alfonso began to get worried. The war would go much more smoothly with the resources of the Symbari behind it. He still believed that he and his compatriots could have won the Freedom wars if they'd just managed to convince the world's crime organizations to join them.

Finally, Sstoram's color lightened drastically. Alfonso had never seen a sliss so relaxed. "Very well. What are your orderss, boss?"

Alfonso smiled. "Do you have any more of those massive nanofactories like the one that had been in the Dose?"

Sstoram said, "Yess."

Alfonso cocked his head to the side. "They're in. I need the recipe for the blade gun."

Sukomb's voice came back, "Already in remote."

Alfonso pulled out his bot remote and told it to look up the blade gun. As Sukomb had promised, the recipe was there. "Thanks." He straightened out his neck and handed the remote to Sstoram.

"Start by making a whole lot of these. Distribute them to all Symbari on the station. Give strict orders that they are to only fire on shalk who threaten them. That shouldn't limit them much. *But no one* hurts Quixar. Understand?"

Sstoram's color darkened. "If only se Ssymbari have sesse weaponss, sey will know who we are."

Alfonso shook his head. "You'll also sell them on the black market. Charge a price that makes us a decent amount of value, but that allows fairly normal people to buy them. I want these guns in the hands of a lot of people."

Saturday 14.26

One of the screens on Sstoram's desk started beeping rapidly. He nodded toward the screen. Slimmerr's highly agitated voice came through. "Mayorr, trouble. Three shalk just stormed into the death hall."

The mayor said, "Ssend sem in. Be careful."

The two manta jumped up and moved closer to the mayor. Of course, there was nothing they could do to protect him.

Alfonso said, "Are the statues in the 'death hall' shrapnel bombs?"

Marrisa, the female manta, nodded. "But they won't do anything to shalk."

Alfonso stood up and drew his blade gun. "Replace them with glass. The shalk can be hurt if extremely sharp objects cut across their shields. Shattered glass shards can be a single molecule thick."

Marrisa looked down at her claws. Alfonso shook his head. "Probably not sharp enough. Use this." He tossed her the gun. Then he reached down to his leg and drew his short sword. He looked to the other manta. "You know how to use one of these?"

The manta nodded, but didn't say anything. Come to think of it, Alfonso had never heard him say anything. He tossed the wakizashi to the manta, who caught it easily. He held it for a moment, checking its balance. Then he spun it around a few times and smiled. He reversed it so that it was hidden behind his arm.

Alfonso said, "Remember: Slash; don't stab." He reached over his shoulder and drew his long sword. Then he walked back to the rear wall. He stood next to the doors so that, when they opened, he wouldn't likely be seen.

Marrisa and the other manta took up positions on either side of the mayor's desk, standing with legs apart and their hands behind their backs.

Sunday 14.27

Alfonso could hear Slimmerr's voice over the screen. "Hello honored sirrs. The mayorr will see you immediately. The door next to Alfonso swung inward.

Alfonso tightened his grip on his katana. Would the shalk kill Slimmerr? She wasn't in their way. There was no need for them to hurt her. But one could never tell with shalk. Did the mayor have any sort of defenses to protect his receptionist? What could he do to protect her from an annihilation baton?

Alfonso was relieved when, having not heard any batons fire, he saw three little teddy bears, a female and two males, burst into the room. He was further relieved to see that they'd left their batons sheathed.

Like the consummate professionals that they were, both manta stood perfectly still. Sstoram said, "Scitizensens, what can I do for you?"

The female shalk yelled, "Someone is murdering my people. What are you going to do to protect us?"

The mayor turned his head over sideways, a sliss sign of confusion. "But, you have your sshieldss and batonss. Only a sshalk could kill you. And the sshalk are outsside of my jurissdiction. Have you sspoken with invesstigator Quixsar?"

The female grabbed her baton and smashed it down on his desk. Again, the manta didn't flinch. Alfonso began to quietly sneak forward. The shalk said, "They weren't killed with batons. So it is your problem."

Evenly, Sstoram said, "Invesstigator Quixsar iss resspponsible for law enforssement. I'm afraid I musst defer to hiss judgement." Alfonso had closed half the distance between them without being noticed.

She pointed her baton at him. "He says that he is investigating the matter. He's taking too long. You will do something."

The male manta took a step forward. The female shalk immediately turned her baton on him. "You want to die?"

Monday 14.28

Marrisa aimed the blade gun at the shalk. In a threatening voice, she sneered, "Drrrop yourr baton."

The shalk looked over to her and laughed. "Kill her."

The two male shalk drew their batons. Marrisa fired. The other manta leapt into the air. Alfonso sprinted to close the remaining distance. The female manta dropped her baton. The manta landed next to one of the male shalk just as Alfonso reached the other one. Both shalk pointed their batons at the male manta,

who slashed down at one of the arms holding a baton. Alfonso lunged and cut the other shalk's arm. Both dropped their batons.

The male manta handed Alfonso his wakizashi and collected the batons. Marrisa barked, "On the ground, now!"

The shalk ignored her. All three of them stared dumbly at their damaged arms. The female yelled, "What the hell is this?"

Marrisa sneered, "That's pain. And you'll feel a lot more of it if you don't do what I say. On the ground."

One of the male shalk started to get down on his knees. The female, however, gave him an icy glare, stopping him. She stood up to her full height and said, "I am a shalk. How dare you speak to me this way?"

Without hesitating, Marrisa aimed the blade gun lower and fired. The shalk grabbed her leg and fell over. Marrisa then pointed it at one of the males. The two shalk hastily dropped to the ground.

Alfonso sheathed his long sword and used the short one to cut through the shalks' shield units. Sstoram grinned. "Your authority is not earned. We didn't vote for you to rule us. We don't want you to. But, your shields have forced us to submit to your whims. That is about to change."

Tuesday 14.29

Marrisa looked down at the blade gun and grinned. "I could get used to having one of these."

Alfonso nodded. "Keep it."

She crinkled her nose. "You need it."

Alfonso shook his head. "You need to protect the mayor. I'll be fine."

The mayor snatched Alfonso's bot remote from the top of his desk, made a copy of the design for the blade gun, and handed the device back to Alfonso. "Sank you, citizen Alfonso. As you can see, we are in the middle of an unfortunate incident. Perhaps we can speak another time?"

Alfonso bowed low. "Of course, sir. I will gladly return later. Farewell for now." He winked to Marrisa and walked out, leaving the manta to clean up. He stopped at Slimmer's desk. "You okay, dear?"

She smiled. "Where do I get one of those guns?"

"We should have one for you shortly."

He started to leave, then paused. "I guess I won't be seeing you on the way home from the Dose anymore."

Her face turned sad. "I thought the Dose was destroyed."

He nodded. "I may rebuild ... but I'm glad you got this job."

She looked hurt. "Didn't approve of my last one?"

Wednesday 14.30

Alfonso smiled and ran a finger along her cheek. "There was nothing wrong with it. But I think this one is better for you."

She kissed his finger and said, "Thanks, Alfonso."

He nodded. "Bye Slimmer."

"Good bye, Alfonso Tanaka."

He walked through the "hall of death" and turned toward home. Sleeping in his own bed again would feel wonderful. As he walked, he cocked his head to the side and said, "Things are all set with Sstoram. We've got a lot to talk about, but I'm exhausted. Let's meet tomorrow."

He heard Judy's voice say, "Good by me. Sukomb?"

"Good."

Alfonso arrived at his quarters without incident. He hadn't been here in ages, it seemed, but all of his different failsafes said that no one had tampered with the place. Relieved, he opened the door and stepped in. The room looked just like the internal cameras had shown it. But something felt wrong. He looked the room over again, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Scratching his head, he let the door close. Standing still, he listened carefully. He only heard the faint whir of air coming in through the ducts.

What was bothering him? He took a step into the room and paused again. Did he smell something? He'd been away so long, maybe the place smelled foreign to him. He sniffed at the air.

Suddenly, his eyes went wide. He hastily drew his katana and turned toward the closet.

Thursday 14.31

A voice from within the closet said, "You smelled me? I must say, I am impressed. Humans are not known for their olfactory senses."

Holding the sword before him, Alfonso said. "I guess you should have bathed before invading my quarters. Or do you just lick yourself? Come out of there, Shasirr."

The manta assassin stepped out of the closet. He had dyed his fur black and was wearing black clothing, but Alfonso recognized his face. "I assure you, a manta's bathing regimen is quite complex. Did you recognize my voice?"

Alfonso shook his head. "I saw you when I was getting on the botiira ship. So I expected you to be around. When I realized that someone had defeated all of my security and was hiding in the closet, I figured it had to be you."

"Ah. So your ability to reason has made up for the failings of your physical body."

Alfonso shrugged again. Shasirr hadn't made any threatening gestures. In fact, he hadn't moved at all since stepping out of the closet. So Alfonso couldn't fathom his intent. Continuing to hold his sword ready, he shrugged. "That's how it's always been with my race."

Shasirr extended a claw and idly scratched at a point on the back of his neck. "Forgive me. I was forced to acquire this dye in haste. I'm afraid it is not agreeing with me." Then he said, "Yes, that intelligence is quite an asset. It worked remarkably well against me. Not that I approve of the outcome, but I do appreciate your skill."

Alfonso sighed. "Then you*are* here to kill me."

Shasirr waved this aside. "I gave you my worrrd. You werre correct that it means much to me."

Alfonso relaxed slightly.

Shasirr smiled a toothy grin. "But I have spent a considerrable amount of time trying to decide whetherr my prromise not to kill you allows me to maim."

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Friday 15.1

Alfonso stared intently into the manta's eyes. The assassin was unreadable. "And what did you decide?"

"I haven't yet."

Alfonso could see his bed in his peripheral vision. He could dive aside and land in the bed. Then he'd have to roll over, draw his legs in, grab his short sword, and kick outward. Would he be able to do all of that in the time it took the manta to charge and change direction? It seemed tight. Then again, he couldn't think of a better way to be sure.

He sheathed his sword and held his hands out. "Decide. I'm exhausted and won't get a good nights sleep standing here sparring with you."

Shasirr grinned and crossed his arms. "Will you teach me how to kill the shalk?"

Alfonso shrugged. "Killing shalk is easy. Everyone will be able to do that by tomorrow. What you want to know is how to kill the people controlling the shalk."

Shasirr took a step forward. Alfonso tensed, but didn't jump. Shasirr nodded, "You do look exhausted. Please, have a seat."

Alfonso sat on the edge of the bed. Shasirr walked over to his terminal, picked up his chair, and carried it back into the center of the room. He set it down and then sat on it. "I was unawarre of a rrace that controls the shalk. Please tell me about the shalk weakness, as well as this new rrace."

Alfonso shook his head. "The ghosts aren't new. They're very, very old."

Shasirr smiled broadly, reminding Alfonso that the assassin had spent time studying human customs. "Ah, the mythical ghosts. So, you believe these childrren's storries?"

Saturday 15.2

The bed felt inviting. Alfonso must have been truly tired to consider curling up and going to sleep with an assassin in his room. "It's hard not to believe in the ghosts after being possessed by one."

Shasirr raised an eyebrow, "*Ihad* wonderred why you would get on a botiirra ship without coerrcion."

"You would be surprised how much coerrcion a ghost can dish out while possessing you."

"Interresting. So, how does one kill a ghost?"

Alfonso held up a finger and waved it back and forth. "I'll give you the shalk weakness for free. But I want something for the information on the ghosts."

Shasirr frowned, "I know from experience that you drive a verry harrd barrgain. I also know that yourr barrgains tend to favorr yourrself."

With a grin, Alfonso said, "Is there any other way?"

Shasirr stood up. "What do you want firrom me?"

Alfonso took his sword off and flopped backwards into the bed. "For one thing, I want a good nights sleep. Talk to me tomorrow."

When Shasirr didn't respond, Alfonso propped himself up with his elbows. "What?"

"Firrst tell me about the shalk."

Alfonso shrugged. "Extremely sharp blades slashed sideways across their shields can cut through them."

Shasirr nodded, "That explains yourr new choice in weapons. But a weapon that firres spinning blades would be effective as well. Why have you chosen to limit yourr rrange?"

Sunday 15.3

Alfonso laughed. "Technology is nothing but magic. And there are always better wizards. To put your faith in a magical solution is foolhardy. That's why I always kill with my swords."

The assassin nodded. "Wherre could one such as yourrself learn such wisdom?"

Alfonso lay back down. "A little cat told me. Don't forget to lock the door on your way out."

Shasirr said, "I will be in touch."

Alfonso fell asleep almost immediately.

The sound of an annihilation baton firing jarred Alfonso awake. When he opened his eyes, he saw his door disappear. He rolled out of bed immediately, landing next to his swords. He drew the first one he could grab, the wakizashi, and rushed over to the door. He put his back to the wall next to the gaping doorway and waited. A beam blasted through, annihilating the bed.

Alfonso looked around frantically. If the shalk stepped through the doorway, he could cut off his arm. But if, instead, he decided to annihilate the wall Alfonso was standing against, Alfonso would quickly run out of places to hide. He considered trying to break for his escape route through the bathroom. But what if the shalk decided to come through right when he bolted? He'd be shot in the back.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of a body hitting the ground. A familiar voice said, "Alfonso, arre you still alive?"

Relief flooding through him, Alfonso leaned back against the wall. "Yeah, Shasirr, I'm still alive. Coast clear out there?"

"Forr now."

He stepped into the doorway and saw Shasirr staring down at his claws. A shalk lay at his feet and bled through three long slits across his neck. The assassin smiled, "I have not been able to do that forr farr too long. Thank you, Alfonso."

Monday 15.4

Alfonso shrugged. "Think nothing of it. How long have I been out?"

"Fifteen hours. I recommend you collect your things in a hurry. It is the belief of the shalk that you are responsible for the warring amongst us. Morre shalk will be after you soon."

Alfonso blinked once. He realized that the shalk in the mayor's office must have recognized him. He quickly leaned his head over. "Judy, Sukomb, where are you?"

He heard Judy's voice. "You're awake. Good. Things are getting nasty here."

Dropping his wakizashi, Alfonso said, "Report," and hastily set about changing his clothes.

Judy replied, "Half of the station's shalk are dead. The remaining ones are killing every non-shalk they see."

"Quixar?"

Judy's voice became petulant, "What about him?"

"Is he alive?"

Sukomb's voice came through. "Some tried. Could not breach shields."

Alfonso strapped on his swords' sheaths and retrieved his wakizashi. "Can you two make it to Quixar's office? We need to talk with him."

Sukomb said, "Can't. Office destroyed."

Judy added, "I think we underestimated the pent-up frustration the races have for the shalk."

"Damn it." Alfonso considered for a moment. "Sukomb, any chance of tracking Quixar down?"

Tuesday 15.5

Alfonso heard Judy's voice. "What's the deal with Quixar?"

"We need him if we're ever going to put an end to this. Sukomb?"

Sukomb responded, "Not know location."

Shasirr jumped into the room. "Many shalk coming this way."

Alfonso quickly said, "Sukomb, give me the broadcast frequency of our communicators."

Sukomb sent the frequency. Alfonso hastily composed a message on his terminal and sent it to Quixar. Then he ushered Shasirr into the bathroom, where he opened the escape hatch. When they arrived in his secondary quarters, Shasirr said, "I'm impressed."

Alfonso just shrugged. "Thanks for taking care of the shalk up there. You promised not to kill me. That's a lot different than saving my life."

Shasirr copied his shrug. "You haven't told me how to kill the ghosts yet. What now?"

Alfonso started pacing. The only way to end this would be to get shields for everyone. But they would have to be the impenetrable version, like what Quixar had. Also, after seeing Quixar tangle with the enforcers, Alfonso also knew that the investigator had the ability to disable annihilation batons. Having

both pieces of technology would go a long way toward insuring that no one in the sector could kill anyone else.

He stopped pacing and stared at Shasirr. "That was pretty good, the way you got into my quarters without setting off any of my defenses. What if I told you that there was a job ten times as difficult? Would your professional pride make you want to take it?"

Shasirr scratched at his ear. "What incentive do I have?"

Alfonso stared at him. Could he tell the truth? What he wanted to would put the assassin out of business. Or would it?

Wednesday 15.6

Alfonso considered carefully. He couldn't know how the assassin would react. But this was an extremely talented creature who was extremely proud of his accomplishments. The truth might just work, but it had to be spun correctly. "Well, I'd tell you how to kill the ghosts. But this is worth more."

"Go on."

Alfonso said, "As things stand right now, anyone can kill anyone. I'm sure you work in a very crowded field."

Evenly, Shasirr said, "It can be."

Alfonso could hear the faintest twinges of interest in the assassin's voice. Encouraged, he continued, "But most of your competitors are nothing but hacks. You, on the other hand, once fulfilled a hit on a shalk *before* anyone knew how to kill them."

Shasirr grinned. Alfonso knew that he had him. "And, before today, you caused the deaths of more shalk than any other kruxpa in the sector. The way you played them at your execution was brilliant."

Shasirr laughed. "Idiots." Then he turned serious. "You must want something important indeed if you are spending so much time praising me. What do you want?"

"I want to wipe out all of your competition. I want to make it so difficult to kill people that only the absolute best assassin would have a chance. Trouble is, I might make it too difficult for even you."

Shasirr tapped his chin, "You think you can get shields for everyone."

Alfonso nodded. Whatever the assassin decided, it was clear that Alfonso had made the right choice in telling the truth. Shasirr was clearly too smart to be fooled for long.

Thursday 15.7

Quixar's harried voice came through Alfonso's communications implants. "Alfonso, I got your message. What do you want?"

Alfonso cocked his head to the side. "Quixar, I'm glad to hear that you're alive."

Judy's voice came on. "You gave the frequency to a shalk?"

Alfonso angrily said, "Back off, Judy. We wouldn't be anywhere without Quixar."

Quixar said, "Thank you for the vote of confidence, but I'm not sure that our current state could

accurately be described as 'progress.'"

Alfonso replied, "I assume the rulers have turned down your request to give shields to everyone?" Even though Judy was nowhere near, Alfonso knew her so well that he could practically see the shocked expression on her face.

He heard Quixar sigh. "Yes, they have refused. And, seeing what's happening here, I'm not sure I'm willing to spread this bloody war throughout the sector to convince them."

Alfonso said, "I agree. Fortunately, I have a backup plan that may solve most of our problems."

Quixar said, "I'm listening."

"You have a ship?"

"Of course."

Alfonso said, "Will it hold five people?"

Sukomb said, "Five?"

Friday 15.8

Alfonso replied, "I have a friend here."

Quixar replied, "It can carry more than five. Docking bay ninety-five."

Alfonso said, "Okay, people. Can everyone make it to Quixar's ship?"

Judy said, "We can try. But you've got a lot of explaining to do when we get there."

Alfonso turned to Shasirr. "Okay, it's time for you to decide. Do you want a part in this or not?"

Shasirr licked a hand and wiped it on his whiskers. "You arre a verry interesting perrson, Alfonso Tanaka. I suspect that you will deterrmine a path to success with or without my help. If that is the case, then it is in my best interest to help."

Alfonso patted him on the back. "Good call." He checked his bot remote and saw that he had a fresh batch of his bots, including the new hunter killers Sukomb had given him, crawling about on his body. "Let's go."

They opened the auxiliary room's door and quickly checked both ways. The hallway was clear. There may have been a mob attacking his room one floor up, but they hadn't thought to come down here. Not that Alfonso had expected them to. The only shalk who might have known about his escape route was on his side.

They moved into the hallway, and Alfonso locked the door behind him. Shasirr had started moving, but was going in the wrong direction. "Where are you going?"

"Shorrt cut."

Saturday 15.9

Shasirr padded a short distance down the hallway and stopped at a maintenance hatch. Alfonso had seen these hatches scattered throughout the hallways, but when he had tried to get them open he had quickly

realized that he didn't understand their locking mechanisms. This hadn't bothered him too greatly because he had never had a reason to avoid the corridors before.

Shasirr stared at the hatch for a moment. Alfonso remembered the time this manta had come into his bar masquerading as a miner. He'd used bots to disable all of Alfonso's bar defenses. But he hadn't used a bulky remote like Alfonso's. He had seemed to control his bots with his eyes. Of course, at the time, Alfonso had just thought he was scanning for the defenses. He hadn't realized that Shasirr was disabling them as well.

Shasirr blinked and reached out to the hatch. It opened silently when he pulled on it. Alfonso heard a shout and spun to see a group of shalk rushing down the hallway. They looked comical the way they pumped their little legs. He looked back to Shasirr, but the assassin had already entered the hatch. Alfonso followed him and closed it behind him.

They were in a maintenance tunnel. It looked tall enough for a shalk to stand in, but was too low for either Alfonso or Shasirr. While crawling forward quickly, Alfonso said, "I thought you hated technology."

Shasirr replied, "I hate relying on technology. But I would be a fool to not use it where it is appropriate."

Alfonso nodded. "So, are we going to crawl the whole way to the docking station? Doesn't seem much like a short cut to me." He heard something pound on the hatch behind them.

Shasirr said, "You will see."

Alfonso looked back. If the shalk annihilated the hatch, there would be no where to hide. He looked ahead, but the first turn was over twice as far ahead as they had traveled. They couldn't possibly make it in time.

Sunday 15.10

Alfonso said, "Um, Shasirr. What about the Shalk behind us?"

Shasirr said, "What about them? They will not be able to track us from out there."

"When they blast the door open in a second, it won't matter."

Shasirr laughed. "The shalk are stupid, yes. But I doubt they're that ignorant."

Alfonso crawled in silence for a moment. Sure enough, the door was not annihilated. They didn't even pound on it again. That one rap must have been in frustration when they found the hatch locked. When enough time had passed to prove that Shasirr was correct, Alfonso cleared his throat.

Shasirr said, "Yes?"

"I must confess, my friend, that I am that ignorant. Why didn't they blow off the hatch?"

Shasirr stopped and looked back at him. "When you humans arrived at Proxima Mantissa, the shalk there didn't teach you very much, did they?"

"They didn't have orientation sessions, if that's what you mean. We learned pretty quickly to avoid the shalk, though."

"I guess you weren't curious enough to tamper with a maintenance hatch, then."

Alfonso smiled. "Curious" was the wrong word. They had been deluged with new and wondrous things. Alien races, nanotechnology, giant space stations. When the maintenance hatches initially seemed to be beyond his technical understanding, they dropped low on his list of things to wonder about. "No, the only work I ever did behind the walls was installing the escape route from my room."

Monday 15.11

Shasirr started crawling forward again. "It is fortunate that you did not try to get into that air duct through a standard entry point. The hatches will fire annihilation beams at anyone who tampers with them."

Alfonso looked back at the hatch. "But, the annihilation batons are genetically coded to only be fired by a shalk."

"These are not batons. They are wall mounted units."

"But couldn't you somehow remove the unit and use it?"

Shasirr looked back and smiled. "No. Trust me." As he continued on he added, "But, if you are extremely clever, and a little bit lucky, you can get a hatch to fire at someone other than yourself."

They reached an intersection, where Shasirr immediately turned right. A short distance ahead was another hatch. As Alfonso approached it, he started to hear a low humming sound.

Shasirr opened this hatch and crawled out. Alfonso followed him out onto a catwalk along the side and near the bottom of a giant tunnel. The humming was much louder than it had been behind the hatch. The walls, ceiling, and floor of the tunnel were covered with white tiles. A blue line about three meters wide ran down the center of the floor. Red lines ran along both walls about halfway up. A green line ran along the ceiling. The ceiling looked to be about fifteen meters from the floor, and the tunnel was probably twice that wide.

Raising his voice to be heard above the humming, Alfonso said, "What's this?"

Shasirr replied in an equally loud voice. "Magnetic levitation cargo train. They use these to transfer materials to and from the ships at the spaceport."

Tuesday 15.12

So, Shasirr was planning to ride a cargo train to the spaceport. Nice. The likelihood of running into a shalk down here was minimal. He turned to look at the controls on the wall next to the maintenance hatch. "So, we'll stop it when it gets here, hop on, and start it back up?"

Shasirr grinned and shook his head.

He was planning to jump on as it raced past? "How fast do these things move?"

As if to punctuate the sentence, a loud rumbling filled the tunnel. Alfonso turned to see a long train race by. It passed less than a foot from the catwalk's railing and was moving at about fifty kilometers an hour. A thin walkway ran around the edge of the train.

Alfonso waited for the train to pass before he turned to Shasirr and said, "You're kidding."

Shasirr stared back. "I can jump on."

"You're a manta! I'd kill myself. I'd rather take my chances with the shalk."

Shasirr stared at him for a moment longer before smiling. "Verry well. I will stop the ttrain. So much forr moving unseen."

They waited until a train came from the opposite direction. Shasirr turned around and stared at the controls by the hatch. The humming changed pitch, and the train slowed. When the train reached them it was probably only doing ten kilometers an hour. Alfonso hopped up onto the railing and then jumped across to the train. He landed softly, but had to hastily grab a handrail to keep from falling. The humming went back to its old pitch.

Alfonso looked back and saw Shasirr hop onto the train. He didn't bother to jump up to the railing first. He just hopped from the catwalk to the train's walkway. He landed easily and didn't bother to grab the handrail. Then he walked over to Alfonso.

"You really do jump on them at full speed, don't you?"

Wednesday 15.13

Shasirr just grinned. "Wait until we need to get off."

Fortunately, that did not turn out to be a problem. They rode the train for a short period of time before it started to slow down on its own. When it came to a stop, Shasirr hopped off and checked a readout screen. "Close enough."

They went through another access hatch and crawled through another tube for what seemed like a long time. When they got to the end of the tunnel, Shasirr paused. "We'll come out two bays down firrom Quixarr's. I'm watching the feeds from the securrity bots and don't see any shalk. But we should be carreful."

Alfonso nodded. How stupid did the manta think he was?

Shasirr held up a hand and opened the panel. He crawled out, quickly scanned back and forth, then waved Alfonso out as he stood up. Alfonso followed him out and closed the hatch. The docking area was uncharacteristically empty. Of the few people he did see, most were looking around fretfully as they rushed toward their destinations. The rest were also looking around, but they were doing so methodically as they walked slowly through the docking area. Alfonso noticed that all of these people were clutching replicas of the blade gun he had given to Marrisa.

There was a commotion off to the left. Alfonso looked up at the docking numbers and realized that was the direction he had to travel. He and Shasirr hugged the wall and headed in that direction. Shasirr's eyes squinted a bit. Then he sighed. "It's Quixarr. Therre arre a numberr of hunterrs trying to kill him."

Alfonso said, "What's he doing?"

"Ignorring them. But they'rre startting to box him in."

Alfonso nodded, "Let's pick up the pace."

Thursday 15.14

Quixar quickly came into view. He was surrounded by two humans, a manta, and a sliss and was staring angrily up at one of the humans. All four of the surrounding people had blade guns trained on him. Quixar patted the annihilation baton on his hip and said, "Back away. I'd rather not use this on you."

The manta and sliss looked worried. The humans had their backs to Alfonso, so he couldn't see their

expressions. But they didn't make any move to comply with Quixar's orders. Things were about to get ugly.

Alfonso walked up behind the humans and tapped one on the shoulder. The man quickly spun around and tried to point the blade gun at Alfonso's face. Alfonso grabbed the gun with one hand and his wrist with the other. He immediately pushed up and over, pointing the barrel safely over his shoulder. Then he twisted the wrist in a way that he knew caused a serious amount of pain. The man winced and let go of the gun.

Alfonso held him for a second, then released him. The man pulled his arm in close to his chest and rubbed his wrist gingerly. The other human spun around and pointed his gun at Alfonso. Something blurred by. The man yelped and dropped his gun. It fell into Shasirr's outstretched hand. Alfonso glanced over to the assassin and saw him rub the back of his neck with the tip of his tail. Realizing that he'd struck with the tail, Alfonso wondered idly what it would be like to have a fifth appendage with that kind of control.

The remaining hunters looked unsure of themselves. The way their guns wavered suggested that they were trying to decide whether to point them at Quixar or Alfonso and Shasirr. Alfonso ignored them for the time being. He looked down at his gun and turned it over in his hands. It was definitely a copy of the one that Sukomb had made.

He looked back up to the humans. "When you were given these, were there any stipulations put on their use?"

The one he'd disarmed shrugged. "Yeah, so what?"

Evenly, Alfonso said, "What were the stipulations?"

Friday 15.15

The other human replied, "We weren't supposed to shoot a shalk unless provoked, and we weren't supposed to shoot a shalk named Quixar."

Alfonso nodded. "And do you know who this shalk here is?"

The first human looked over his shoulder. "I assume you're Quixar?"

Quixar gave him a perturbed look.

The second human quickly said, "So what? We paid for these. You can't tell us how to use stuff we bought."

Alfonso sighed and muttered, "The best laid plans are useless if your army is comprised of idiots."

Shasirr grinned and said, "A good general knows the intellectual capacity of his troops and plans accordingly."

Alfonso looked sideways at him. "You're saying I'm not a good general?"

Shasirr held up his hands. "I am saying that your plans weren't very well laid out...."

Before Alfonso could respond, the first human said, "Hey, what are you, some kind of shalk collaborators?"

Alfonso rolled his eyes. "No vendejo. I'm the guy who made these weapons available. And we wouldn't

beanywhere with this if not for Quixar."

The second human crossed his arms. The first said, "How can we be sure that's true?"

Alfonso noticed that the manta and sliss hunters had lowered their weapons. It irked him that a sliss was acting more intelligently than two members of his own race. He glanced over to Shasirr, who nodded slightly.

Saturday 15.16

Simultaneously, Alfonso and Shasirr struck out at the humans. Alfonso executed a spin kick that connected squarely with his opponent's head. Alfonso was too busy performing the kick to see Shasirr's lightning-fast movement, but the assassin's opponent ended up unconscious on the ground, just like Alfonso's.

It took Alfonso a second to realize what he'd just done. He and Shasirr had been completely on the same wavelength and were able to fight accordingly. Usually that kind of connection with a partner required a considerable amount of practice and experience. At the start, he and Judy had almost killed each other more frequently than they had helped each other out. He nodded to Shasirr.

Turning his attention to the remaining hunters, he said, "Pay attention, next time. We have bigger things in mind than petty revenge." The sliss's color darkened, and the manta let his tail droop. They left dejectedly. Alfonso looked down to Quixar. "You okay?"

"Of course I am." The shalk looked suspiciously up at Shasirr and said to Alfonso, "So this is your 'friend'? After what's transpired between you two, I'm surprised you trust each other."

Shasirr replied, "We don't. But we do have a mutual respect. In some situations, that is enough."

Quixar said, "And this is such a situation?"

Shasirr's tail thumped against the ground. "It seems to be. What about you and me? Do we have a problem?"

Quixar laughed and started walking toward the docking bay. Alfonso couldn't help but notice that three of the overhead lights were out. This was extremely strange. Since arriving in this sector, the only light he had ever seen burn out was the one in the Daily Dose. And that had only been happening because Belan had been frying it.

The missing lights cast bay ninety-five's docking ramp into darkness. Alfonso tried to peer into that darkness, but couldn't make anything out.

Sunday 15.17

Quixar said to Shasirr, "You mean because you're a wanted manta? No. My crimes against the shalk are far greater than yours are. At this point, I'd have to take myself in before I bothered with you."

As they got closer to the darkness, Alfonso could just make out two shapes in it. He looked down at the blade gun he still held in his hand and wondered.

Shasirr said, "How is that?"

Quixar replied, "Alfonso?"

Alfonso squinted and peered more intently at the shapes. Then he relaxed. He looked over to Quixar and

said, "What? Oh, Quixar taught me how to breach the shalk's shields."

Still walking, Shasirr stared at him for a moment, then looked to Quixar. "So, when you arrested me, you already knew who had really killed the bartender."

Quixar smiled again. "I did, but not that way. At that point, I hadn't yet told Alfonso about the shield flaw."

Now Shasirr looked confused, "Then who killed the bartender?"

"I did." Judy stepped out of the shadows, holding two blade guns pointed at Shasirr.

Apparently ignoring the guns, Shasirr said to Quixar, "Without your help?"

Quixar nodded. "Without anyone's help."

Shasirr turned back to Judy and bowed. With awe in his voice, he said, "We have not been properly introduced. I am Shasirr."

Her hands rock steady, Judy kept her eyes trained on Shasirr and said, "He okay?"

Monday 15.18

Alfonso replied. "You can drop the guns. He's on our side." He looked at the distance between them, considered their relative reflexes and added, "Besides, he could disarm you if he wanted to."

Judy frowned and glanced down at her guns. Shasirr looked at her apologetically and nodded. She considered for a moment, then lowered her weapons. "I'm Judy. And this is Sukomb."

The kiree stepped out of the shadows and said, "Pleased."

Shasirr bowed again. "I am honored."

Before anyone could say anything else, Alfonso said, "And I'm sick of standing out in the open while paranoid shalk and crazed shalk-hunters are about. Can we continue this inside?"

Quixar said, "Yes," and strode purposefully up the docking ramp. Shasirr and Sukomb followed him. Judy held back and said quietly in English, "You trust someone who tried to kill you?"

Alfonso shrugged and replied, "You tried to kill me once."

"That was different."

He nodded, "Yeah, but considering the two circumstances, I've got more reason to trust him than you."

Still holding a blade gun in each of her hands, she put an arm around his shoulders and said, "Watch it, Tanaka."

He slid his arm around her waist and said, "Watch it yourself, McMalley." He then tickled the most ticklish spot on her body--her side, just above the hip.

She pulled away quickly and tried to throw an elbow at his face. He blocked it with the hand holding the blade gun and tickled her other side with his free hand.

She squirmed away, gave him one of her, "I'll get you" looks, and walked up the ramp.

Tuesday 15.19

All of the space ships Alfonso had ridden on had been extremely cramped. They all had narrow corridors and small rooms. Quixar's ship was quite different in that a single room took up most of the interior. Alfonso saw two seats in front, as well as two rows of ten seats in the center of the large room. The entire rear third was cordoned off by what appeared to be a modified shalk shield. Alfonso suspected that Quixar kept captured criminals in this area, where he could easily keep an eye on them. There were three doors each on the left and right sides of the room, but judging from the size of the main room, these side ones could not have been very large.

As soon as the airlock closed behind them, Judy turned to Alfonso and said, "Spill it."

Alfonso took a seat in the back and said, "Okay, abbreviated version." He nodded to the shalk, "Quixar is actually possessed by a ghost named Sarial. He's an investigator, the only ghost group even remotely on our side." He looked to Shasirr and said, "Many of the worst shalk are possessed by members of a group of ghosts called the enforcers." He then looked back to Judy and said, "But there's a third group, called the rulers. They hold the technology, and they decide who gets to do what."

Judy said, "So the rulers can make shields that anyone can use?"

Quixar replied, "The original design was species neutral. The rulers still have the plans."

Alfonso asked, "Do you know where they keep them?"

The look on Quixar's face showed that he was starting to understand Alfonso's plan. "Yes. But it is the most heavily guarded area in the sector."

Alfonso smiled. "Of course it is." He turned to Sukomb and asked, "Did you finish the plans for the lightning batons?"

Sukomb sent a wave of legs upward.

Wednesday 15.20

Quixar threw his hands up. "You're planning a frontal assault with five people? You're insane."

Alfonso shook his head. "No, I'm going to send the entire race of kiree in a frontal assault. But they're just a diversion. I'm planning to have the sector's best assassin get us in. We sneak in, find the plans, and broadcast them to the universe."

Judy smiled. Shasirr stared evenly at him, but the way his tail twitched suggested that he was interested. Quixar started pacing. Sukomb sat still, his legs shaking slightly, an expression Alfonso couldn't read.

After a moment, Quixar said, "You have that kind of control over the kiree?"

Alfonso turned to Sukomb and said evenly, "I do if we lie to them."

Sukomb had three of his eyes trained on Alfonso. His shaking legs stopped. After a moment he said, "Tell rulers are enforcers?"

Alfonso nodded slowly and said, "If you'll consent to it."

Shasirr looked confused. Alfonso said, "The entire kiree race recently learned that the Enforcers brutally tortured a number of kiree to death."

There was a long, uncomfortable pause while everyone stared at Sukomb. Sukomb stared back at them for over a minute before he slowly let a few pairs of legs wave upward.

Quixar bit a finger, then said, "This could work."

Alfonso smiled, "It's got a better chance of working than your shalk war did."

Clearly liking the idea, Quixar nodded.

Alfonso broadened his smile, "Of course, I want something more from you."

Thursday 15.21

Quixar stared at Alfonso suspiciously. "What?"

Alfonso said, "I want everyone in the sector, the shalk included, to have two things." He held up one finger, "First, we need the species-neutral shields that don't have the shalk flaw." He paused for effect, then held up his other finger. "Second, we need the bots that disable shalk annihilation batons."

Quixar stared at him for a moment before he muttered, "You want to disarm everyone." He started pacing. "Well, that would make my job easier, but," he turned to Shasirr, "why would you go along with this?"

Shasirr extended his now-razor-sharp claws and stared down at them. Then he retracted them and said, "I can survive in that world."

Quixar said, "Okay, start planning the attack. I'll take us out of this system." He waddled toward the cockpit.

Alfonso walked over to Sukomb. The kiree hadn't moved since agreeing to lie to his people. Alfonso said, "You sure you're okay with this?"

Sukomb replied, "Can not fail."

Alfonso nodded, "I don't plan to."

Sukomb said again, "Can not fail. After, I am," he let loose a rapid series of clicks. Then he lowered his entire body to the floor and walked over to one of the doors.

Alfonso waited for Sukomb to close the door behind him before he turned to Judy. "I don't suppose you understood that?"

She frowned. "Whether we fail or not, he'll be an outcast for lying so completely to his people. They won't hunt him down like they're doing with Torai, but no kiree will ever speak to him again. If we fail, his banishment will be for nothing."

Friday 15.22

From his seat in the cockpit, Quixar spoke into a microphone. His amplified voice said, "Crew, prepare for takeoff."

One of the doors on the left side opened, and three botiira walked out. He didn't recognize the first two, but the third was definitely Goneb, the botiira he'd spent so much time talking with on the way to the enforcer station.

The first two botiira joined Quixar at the front of the ship. Goneb, however, walked over to Alfonso. Alfonso smiled and said, "Goneb, good to see you."

Goneb said, "Good is true. Query: can talk with Alfonso?"

Alfonso said, "Sure."

Goneb said, "Request: execute move to quarters." He pointed at the door he'd come from.

Alfonso nodded and followed the botiira. Just before entering the room, he glanced over to Judy and nodded slightly. She returned his nod with an almost imperceptible one of her own. As soon as the door closed, she would move closer to it and be ready to coming barging in if he called out. He didn't think Goneb was going to attack him, but it never hurt to be sure.

The room was small, just as Alfonso had suspected, and was completely white, as were most botiira areas. There were three small bunks running up one wall and some receptacles that were probably for clothes. Other than that, the room was bare. Of course, it looked more interesting to the botiira.

Goneb said, "Query: Alfonso is friend, is true?"

Alfonso said, "Yep."

Goneb did something with one of his hands, which caused Alfonso's eyes to tingle. Alfonso stepped back stammering, "What the--" His own gasp cut off his sentence. The room was suddenly awash in bright colors. Goneb must have programmed some bots to build lenses over his eyes that gave him botiira vision.

Goneb pointed at the far wall. A section of it was white, with shalkish letters on it. The letters said, "High priority command: do not speak. If understand is true, execute one nod."

Alfonso nodded.

The words disappeared and were replaced with new ones that said, "Alfonso needs caution is true. Quixar's story is false."

Saturday 15.23

Alfonso arched his eyebrows and looked at Goneb. He said, "Hey, sorry I had to hit you before."

Goneb replied, "Is a problem is false. Background task: worry friend is angry is true." He pointed to the wall again.

Now the words said, "Maximum rank Symbari on Frakar is Mayor Sstoram is false."

Alfonso nodded and said, "No, I wasn't angry with you. I just needed to escape."

Goneb replied, "Execute: terminate background task. Relieved is true."

The words on the wall became, "Maximum rank Symbari on Frakar is Quixar is true."

Alfonso turned and stared incredulously at Goneb. The botiira nodded. Alfonso looked back to the wall, but the letters had been replaced with what he suspected was botiira artwork. The apparently random mishmash of colors and shapes didn't do much for him. He wondered if having a computer analyze it would reveal some sort of symmetry he wasn't recognizing. Maybe all of the frequencies of the colors were related. Regardless, Goneb had said all that he was going to say.

Alfonso said, "Sorry to worry you." Considering how much Goneb's message had caused him to worry about Quixar, this statement was ironic.

Goneb replied, "Is a problem is false." He pointed to Alfonso's eyes, then pointed to his own. He blinked twice in rapid succession, paused, blinked once, paused, and blinked twice in rapid succession again. When Alfonso copied him, the room became white again. He blinked the pattern again, and the colors came back. Wondering how much he'd been missing, he decided to leave his new lenses enabled.

He felt like kicking himself. When he had been on the enforcer station, Treia had given him all the information necessary to see what the botiira see, and he had been planning on having Sukomb construct botiira-vision lenses. However, in all the confusion that had happened since his return to Frakar, he had completely forgotten about it. So now, even though he had botiira vision, Sukomb and Judy did not.

He opened the door and walked out.

Sunday 15.24

The central room looked mostly the same as before. The only difference Alfonso noticed was that the shalk shields, both Quixar's and the holding cell's, were more visible. Generally the shields could only be seen when light hit them at just the right angle. Now Alfonso could easily see a faint shimmer from any angle.

The two botiira were up front with Quixar, as was Shasirr. Alfonso suspected the assassin was learning to fly the ship so that he wouldn't be trapped if the pilots died. A manta after his own heart. Through the forward viewscreens, Alfonso could see that they were taxiing into the launch tube.

Judy was leaning casually against the wall next to Goneb's door. She arched an eyebrow at him. Alfonso took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. This caused a slight frown to flirt across her face. She now knew that something was wrong, but didn't know what. She let her eyes dart toward the door, then looked back at him.

She was asking if Goneb was the problem. Alfonso shook his head minimally and glanced at the front of the ship. She couldn't know if he was looking at Shasirr, Quixar, or one of the botiira, but now knew it was one of them. She nodded and took a seat. She'd be expecting Alfonso to tell her more when he had the chance. He wasn't sure when that would be.

He sat in the seat next to her and stared forward. Quixar undoubtedly knew what Alfonso was doing with the Symbari. By not revealing himself as part of the organization, he'd effectively lied about himself. But why? Alfonso was doing what Quixar had wanted him to do. They were on the same side. Or were they? If he was lying about who he was, then maybe he'd lied about other things as well. If so, what? The flaw in the shalk's shields had proven to be true. The existence of the enforcer ghosts had also seemed to be true. If not, that standoff with Quixar that he'd witnessed had been an extremely elaborate act.

There were other things he'd only learned from Quixar, however. Maybe there was no swarm heading toward the sector. Perhaps there was a completely different interpretation to the data on the screen Zolem had made him see. In fact, since Zolem was the lover of Quixar's ghost, Sarial, it was likely that Zolem had been lying as well. At the very least, Sarial's and Zolem's lies would match.

And Quixar had been the only person to ever tell Alfonso about the rulers. What if they didn't exist? If so, where were they really going? More importantly, how could Alfonso possibly determine the truth in time to make use of it?

Monday 15.25

Two weeks later, Alfonso sat in the cockpit and stared at the giant space station being displayed on the viewscreens. They'd spent weeks cramped up in Quixar's little ship. Sukomb had spent the entirety of that time coordinating the arming and transport of thousands of kiree to this location. Shasirr and Alfonso had studied all of Quixar's information about the station's computer systems and had devised a number of ways to hack into them. And, while everyone had studied the station's layout, Judy and Shasirr had worked especially hard to determine the best way to get to their destination. Their destination was a special chamber in the center of the station. According to Quixar's information, this was the storehouse of all of the rulers' knowledge. All of the recipes for nanotechnology they had invented--yet didn't propagate to the species--were stored here. Quixar assured them that the plans for species-neutral shields were stored here, as were plans for bots that would disable annihilation batons.

The trouble was, this room was not connected to any of the other systems. It couldn't possibly be accessed remotely. They had to get in, get their information, and then take that data to a broadcast station three levels away. The storeroom was the most heavily guarded spot in all of the sector. The only way they had a chance was if the kiree assault on the station pulled enough of the guards away to let them get in.

On top of all of the planning, Alfonso had spent his time worrying about Quixar. He assumed that Goneb's method of communicating with Alfonso meant that Quixar could hear anything said on the ship. So Alfonso couldn't even discuss his concerns with Judy. This contributed to his stress.

Judy walked up behind him and started to rub his shoulders. He smiled and rubbed one of her hands. While there were six doors in the cabin, one of them led to a bathroom. Since there weren't enough bedrooms to go around, Alfonso and Judy had shared one. They'd slept in separate bunks, but did spend a considerable amount of time talking. At the start, they'd stuck to speaking about the current situation with the ghosts and the shalk. But, as the weeks wore on, they started delving into more sticky issues. They'd talked about what had happened to them as a couple. They talked about what each had done wrong and why they'd been so angry with each other. They let a lot of water flow under the bridge. And, though they hadn't decided whether or not they wanted to start sleeping together again, Alfonso felt closer to her now than he ever had before. He'd certainly felt more mindlessly passionate about her in the past, but they were now older, wiser, and driven by different urges than then.

Besides, he'd joked, with the way she hogged the bed, there wouldn't be any room at all for him in these little bunks. That crack had earned him an attempted punch in the nose.

Judy spoke, drawing him out of his reverie. "We've done more planing for this than we did for any Freedom War assault. Is it going to work?"

Tuesday 15.26

Alfonso shrugged.

"Then what's our backup plan?" Judy asked.

Alfonso looked over his shoulder at her, smiled and replied, "Nuke 'em all. Wipe everyone out, and give the cockroaches a shot."

Her brow furrowed.

Alfonso hadn't intended to tell everyone about the incoming swarm. But when he had seen how hard Sukomb had taken his upcoming banishment, he had decided to pull Judy into Sukomb's room and to explain what was really going on. It had hardened Sukomb's resolve, but hadn't made the decision any easier for him. It was only now, weeks later, that the kiree had seemed to come to grips with it.

Realization spread across Judy's face, and she punched his shoulder with her free hand. She'd undoubtedly remembered that this was the same response he'd given to a similar question she'd asked during the Freedom Wars. Of course, with the swarm coming, it contained a bit more irony now.

Sukomb walked out of his quarters and said, "All vessels ready."

Alfonso gave Judy a questioning glance. She nodded. He then looked to Quixar. The shalk stared back at him with an unreadable expression. Still looking at Quixar, Alfonso said to Sukomb, "Give the order to attack."

The corner of Quixar's mouth twitched slightly before he looked forward to the viewscreen. If Alfonso hadn't been studying the shalk's face when it had happened, he wouldn't have noticed it. Quixar had just suppressed an elated smile. Something was definitely up with him.

On noticing that he was still holding on to Judy's hand, Alfonso squeezed it once and let go.

Sukomb returned to his room. Shortly thereafter, the first wave of ships approached the station.

Wednesday 15.27

Judy took a seat next to Alfonso. "Quixar, I hope you're right about the rulers not having anti-ship defenses. Otherwise, this is going to be a very short battle."

Keeping his eyes on the viewscreens, Quixar said, "We haven't had any sort of war in many millennia. There's been no reason to have anti-ship defenses."

Their screens couldn't show an internal view, so Alfonso had to imagine the wave of kiree pouring out of the ship. His mental image reminded him of a can full of bugs being opened. He had to suppress a shudder.

They stared in rapt attention at the ship in the docking port. Five minutes later, it disengaged. A kiree voice came over their speakers. "Bay secure. Many lost. Send more."

Judy, Quixar, and Alfonso let out a collective sigh of relief. It appeared that their lightning batons were working. Quixar said, "See, nothing to worry about. Using the kiree was a brilliant decision, Alfonso. If our pilots had been members of any other race, the rulers could have taken control of them and forced our ships to crash into each other."

Brilliant? Alfonso frowned. The kiree had said, "Many lost." This decision wasn't going to seem very brilliant if it resulted in the extinction of the best race in the sector. He stood and said, "Okay, everyone, saddle up. Our best chance is to go in when confusion is highest. And that's soon."

He walked into his quarters and looked down at the weapons on the bed. His swords were there, as were two blade guns, two lightning batons, and a holster-belt to hold them. A week ago they'd rendezvoused with a kiree ship, which had brought them supplies and equipment. Unfortunately, Alfonso hadn't been able to think of a plausible excuse to temporarily get both Judy and himself off the ship. He was still the only one who knew about Quixar's lies.

Judy walked up behind him, threw her arms around his shoulders, and squeezed.

Thursday 15.28

They stood there for a moment before Judy released him and stepped over to her own bunk. Alfonso had strapped on both of his swords before she cleared her throat.

Alfonso looked back at her. She was holding a blade gun in one hand and a lightning baton in the other, and was staring at both of them. With a wry frown, she said, "You remember Denver?" She looked up at him.

He nodded.

She looked down at the weapons again and said, "I'll get us out of this."

There was a good deal of confidence in her voice, but it was less than normal for her. It might have sounded like a statement, but it was really a question.

He answered her question with a statement of his own. "I'm counting on it."

She looked back at him, smiled slightly, and nodded. He turned around and donned the belt. Then he slid the guns and batons into it. When he turned around, she had her own belt on and was fingering the blade guns. "You ready?" he asked.

She sighed. "As I'm going to be."

He walked over, put an arm around her shoulders and started them walking toward the door. He could feel that she was very tense. But he couldn't imagine that she was worrying about the danger. He'd seen her stand down a tank when the cause had warranted it. Did she not truly believe in what they were doing?

He said, "The governments were never into genocide. If we don't succeed, the swarm will do far worse. This is bigger than anything we did in the Freedom wars."

She nodded and replied, "I know. But it just doesn't feel the same."

Friday 15.29

Alfonso frowned. "What? Fighting against invisible energy beings while being backed up by three-meter-long millipedes? Did you miss the Atlantis campaign?"

Judy laughed, and Alfonso could feel the tension drain out of her shoulders. She leaned against him for a second then stepped away and said, "Let's do this thing and get it over with."

They stepped out into the central room to find everyone else ready. The three botiira were making use of their four arms by holding their two blade guns in their lower hands and their two lightning batons in their upper ones. Sukomb was also holding all four of his weapons. Quixar and Shasirr had their weapons holstered. Shasirr was idly scratching between his ears with a claw. Alfonso marveled at the control the manta had to be able to scratch itches with claws that sharp.

Quixar looked anxious. Of course, everyone looked anxious. But something seemed wrong about Quixar's anxiety. Alfonso wondered if he was seeing something real, or if his knowledge about the shalk was coloring his interpretation.

Alfonso said, "Okay everyone. You all know what you're supposed to do and you all know how to do it. We're armed to the teeth, but, if we do our jobs right, we'll never fire a shot. Remember that. The fewer shots we fire, the better off we are." Everyone made his or her racial equivalent of a nod, so Alfonso said, "Let's go, then."

Quixar gave a command to the ship's navigation computer, and they began their approach. Alfonso started to feel nervous. As always, he hated the waiting worst of all. He'd be fine as soon as they got

aboard the station. But the next few minutes spent waiting for that point would be excruciating.

Although he wanted to pace, he forced himself not to. Showing his nervousness wouldn't do well with the other members of his group.

There was a jolt and the clanging sound of metal hitting metal. The airlock at the rear of the ship cycled open. Alfonso said, "Okay, folks. By groups." He and Judy got into the airlock.

Saturday 15.30

A female kiree with magenta stripes on her face and legs met them outside the airlock. "Alfonso Tanaka?"

Alfonso said, "Yep. And this is Judy McMalley."

The kiree sent a few pairs of legs waving upward. "Know Judy."

Judy smiled. "How are you, Sokriea?"

Sokriea said, "Well, considering. You?"

Judy replied, "I'm glad to finally get off of that ship."

Alfonso scanned up and down the corridor. It was very colorful and had a number of moving images. Some of the images gave directions, others appeared to be advertisements. The amount of dynamic data was extraordinary. The ghosts must have spared no expense in the building of this station to put up so many viewscreens. It was surprising, though, that no damage had been done to the walls. He'd expected to see electrical burns and abraded areas where lightning batons and blade guns had missed their marks.

Judy said, "Alfonso, Sokriea is one of Sukomb's sisters."

Alfonso began to realize just how little he knew about Sukomb and the rest of the kiree. He hadn't even known that they had siblings. "Pleased to meet you. How is the battle going?"

She waved a hand at the walls. "Can see is hard. But we push on."

He was supposed to be able to deduce something about the battle by looking at the walls? He looked more closely at the advertisements, but they all seemed aimed at causing him to buy stuff. It appeared that they had not been changed for the battle.

The airlock opened behind him, and the three botiira walked out. Realization struck Alfonso. He turned off his botiira-vision lenses.

Sunday 15.31

All of the moving images and most of the color disappeared. The walls still had some color on them, including lines that presumably helped non-botiira find their way around, but most of the image complexity was gone. In its place were the scorch marks and damaged areas that Alfonso had been expecting. He nodded, "Yes, I see. It looks like it's been quite a battle. You've pushed them back past a maintenance hatch, though?"

Sokriea said, "Yes."

The airlock cycled again. This time Shasirr came through alone. Alfonso had wanted to pair him up with someone, but the assassin had argued that he worked better alone. When Alfonso pointed out that having

two people together would make it harder for a ghost to possess one of them, Shasirr had reminded him that the botiira were more susceptible than he was, so it was better if the three of them went together. After a lot of arguing, Alfonso had grudgingly accepted Shasirr's arguments.

The airlock cycled again, this time revealing Sukomb and Quixar. Alfonso had been adamant about these two going together. He hadn't been able to convey his concerns about Quixar to Sukomb, but the kiree was too smart to miss Quixar making any wrong moves.

There was a rapid series of clicks and chirps as Sukomb and his sister rushed together. They stood up to almost their full heights and locked their hands together as they continued to chirp. Ignoring humanity, the kiree were the only race that still spoke their native language. They were also the only race that could not be possessed by the ghosts. Alfonso idly wondered if this was coincidence.

The chirping seemed to get louder. Alfonso looked over to the kiree and saw Sokriea trying to pull away. Sukomb held her firmly and continued to speak, now even faster than normal. Finally, he released her. She backed away a bit, stared at him for a moment, then lowered her entire body to the ground and walked away.

Alfonso walked up to him and said, "I assume you told her."

February 1999

Monday 16.1

Sukomb sent a quick wave of legs upward.

Alfonso said, "She won't tell anyone else until we're done, right?"

Sukomb sent an even quicker wave of legs downward and walked away from Alfonso.

Deciding to let it drop, Alfonso said to everyone, "Move out."

The botiira, Sukomb, and Quixar headed to the left. Alfonso, Judy, and Shasirr went to the right. Shasirr turned at the first T intersection; Alfonso and Judy went straight. The walls continued to look beaten up. Alfonso pulled out his bot remote and instructed his best hunter-killer bots to sweep over Judy and him. When they finished, he said, "We may have trouble."

She snickered, "What gave you that idea?"

He ignored her sarcasm and said, "On the flight out here, I learned that Quixar is the highest ranking Symbari on Frakar."

Judy stopped at looked at him. He nodded. She whistled and started walking again. "We can't tell Sukomb. Quixar might have made his own implant to listen on our comm frequency."

Alfonso nodded.

"So, why do you think we're really here?"

Alfonso sighed. "I've spent weeks trying to figure that out."

Judy nodded. "And how have our plans changed?"

Tuesday 16.2

Alfonso shook his head. "They haven't. For all we know, Quixar had other reasons to lie about his place in the Symbari. It could be that everything else he's said is true."

Judy nodded, "But you don't believe that. What's our new backup plan?"

"We keep an eye on him, and, if we decide that we're doing something other than getting shields for everyone, we use our lightning batons to fry the computer system in the data room."

She nodded. "Code phrase?"

In English, he replied, "Freehdom."

They came to a maintenance hatch. Alfonso turned his botiira vision on and noticed that an animated advertisement obscured it. He turned the vision off, pulled out his remote, and said, "Time to find out if Shasirr is half as good as he thinks he is."

Judy stepped away from the hatch and said. "No way. You looked over this hack. If it doesn't work, I'm blaming you."

Alfonso said, "Considering the ghosts' take on 'tamper resistance,' if this doesn't work, we'll be dead."

He hit a button on the remote. Nothing happened for a moment, then the hatch opened. Judy tilted her head to the side and said, "We're in. How are you?"

Alfonso heard Sukomb's voice say, "Just reached hatch."

Alfonso ducked down and crawled into the hatch. Conversationally, Judy said, "Hey Quixar, you still listening on this channel?"

Wednesday 16.3

Judy crawled into the tunnel behind him.

After a pause, Alfonso heard a high pitched chirp, followed by a low rumbling sound. He looked back to see Judy closing the hatch. With her neck still tilted to the side, she said, "I guess not. A shame. It would have been good to have another guy in the loop."

Sukomb replied, "Yes, unfortunate." After another pause he said, "Our hatch open."

Alfonso tilted his head to the side and said, "Great, see you in the data room."

After he and Judy straightened their necks out, Alfonso asked, "What did Sukomb say?"

She sighed, "Code phrase he and I worked out. Quixar must have done something to give himself away, because what Sukomb said meant 'yes.'"

Alfonso whistled. "So we now have definitive proof that Quixar is keeping something from us, and Sukomb now knows about it. Damn, you're good."

She grinned. "And don't you forget it. Let's get moving."

They crawled for a while before coming to the exit hatch they were hoping to take. Unfortunately, they could hear fighting on the other side of the hatch. Judy said, "The kiree should have pushed the ghosts past this point by now."

"Maybe the bad guys are making a counterattack. If they don't retake the docking area, we'll keep bringing reinforcements in." Even though the ghosts could fly directly to the docking area, when they got there they wouldn't be able to do anything to the kiree. So they needed possessed beings carrying guns to fight their way through.

Judy said, "That doesn't sound like annihilation batons. Don't the rulers have shalk?"

Thursday 16.4

Alfonso listened again. "You're right. Those are particle beams." He thought for a moment before saying. "I'll bet they've got lots more botiira here than shalk. They're probably keeping the shalk back for defense and sending the botiira on high risk offensive moves."

Without hesitation, Judy said, "Then they'll lose."

Alfonso nodded. "I doubt our ghosts are particularly good tacticians. Maybe we'll get our shields *sand* unseat the ruling class...." He let his voice trail off as a thought struck him.

Judy asked, "What?" But, before he could respond she smiled. "You're right. That's what Quixar is really up to."

Sometimes it felt as though she could read his mind. "If we knock off the rulers, the Symbari will probably take over. What if Mayor Sstoram didn't lie to us? What if the Mayor *thought* he was the highest ranking Symbari on the station. Maybe he even reported to Torai, just as we were told. What if Quixar sits many levels above them, and they just don't know it?"

Judy said, "Well, that would make me feel better about Mayor Sstoram. But what does it mean for Quixar?"

Alfonso started crawling toward their alternate exit site. He thought through the possibilities along the way. Finally he said, "If we get our shields, I don't care if the Symbari take over."

Judy said, "Too many ifs in all of that. I say we find a way through Quixar's shield, string him up by his toes, and beat the truth out of him."

Alfonso laughed. "You're welcome to try. But I think you'll find the first step to be a bit difficult."

Friday 16.5

Judy sighed. "How did we ever let ourselves end up in a world where you can't just shoot your enemies?"

Alfonso grinned. "We left a world where there were too many enemies to shoot."

They crawled on in silence for a while and eventually came to their alternate exit. Alfonso listened carefully at the hatch, but didn't hear anything. He opened the hatch a bit and used his bot remote to send some camera bots through. Judy crawled close to him to look over his shoulder at the remote. The hallway was devoid of people and was largely undamaged. This most likely meant that the kiree had not taken this hallway yet.

Alfonso said, "Okay, we go left, right, left, and two more rights, correct?"

Judy said, "Correct. But we're going to have to really move. Look at that." She snaked her arm by his body and pointed to the lower right corner of the screen. There was a hastily-set-up sensor there. The ghosts would know of their presence.

"Suggestions?"

Judy said. "We can't go back. So we should destroy the sensor and sprint to the next hatch."

Alfonso nodded. If they destroyed it quickly enough, it wouldn't be able to report what kind of person had tripped it. If the ghosts thought it was a kiree, they would send botiira to investigate rather than come themselves. He drew a lightning baton, pushed open the hatch, and rolled out. He came up in a crouch and immediately fired at the sensor. A bolt of energy arced out and destroyed it.

Judy had just finished closing the hatch behind her. They raced around the corner, down a short hallway, and around another corner. Alfonso got the briefest of glances of a lone figure standing in the middle of the hallway. His empty hands were clasped in front of him, and he was staring at them with a grin on his face. Then all of the lights in the area went out. Both Alfonso and Judy stopped immediately.

A familiar human voice called out to them. "Alfonso Tanaka and Judy McMalley--two of my favorite people."

Saturday 16.6

Though Alfonso had only seen the human for an instant, he was reasonably sure he had recognized him. The man's words confirmed his suspicion. There was no mistaking that smug voice. For a second he worried that if he spoke he'd give away his location. Then he realized that, if his opponent had turned off the lights, then he could definitely see in the dark.

Judy had apparently drawn the same conclusion. In a voice that could freeze a star, she said, "Albertson. I saw you die."

"Yes, you did, didn't you? Well then, perhaps I am a ghost."

Wondering what botiira did when the lights went out unexpectedly, Alfonso turned on his botiira vision. His eyes seemed to go into an infrared mode, for he could suddenly see a humanoid red blob down the hallway. The former government agent hadn't moved. Alfonso could also see Judy next to him. She had drawn a blade gun and was fanning it back and forth in front of her.

She said, "Be careful what you wish for, you bastard."

Alfonso considered what Albertson had said. The man delighted in playing with his opponents' minds. But he tended to do it by lacing his lies with as much truth as possible. He'd made a play on words. They all knew he wasn't the spirit of a dead human. But, unless humans could turn into energy beings, it was unlikely that he was that kind of ghost either. No, what made the most sense was that he was being *possessed* by a ghost. The ghost could undoubtedly see in the dark, and could probably relay that information to Albertson.

But Albertson had done more than reveal that he could see them. He'd just told them that there was a ghost capable of possessing humans nearby. No wonder he wasn't armed. The ghost was a much greater threat than any gun.

His voice mirthful, Albertson said, "Judy, my dear. After all of the *good* times we've shared, your words hurt me."

Judy continued to fan the blade gun in front of her, but she now covered a shorter arc. She was tracking him by the sound of his voice. She'd fire as soon as she was sure she knew where he was standing.

Sunday 16.7

Albertson said, "Put the gun away, Judy. I only wish to talk."

She narrowed her field more and said, "Yes, please continue."

Albertson took two steps to the left and said. "Alfonso, I am sorry to be the bearer of ill news, but Sarial has been lying to you."

Judy changed her sweep. So Albertson took three steps to the left. Alfonso was still holding his lightning baton, but didn't point it at Albertson. He didn't want to let on that he could see. "What does Quixar's ghost have to do with you and me, Albertson?"

Albertson laughed. "Quixar? That shalk is so controlled by Sarial that he might as well be dead. No, you've never met 'Quixar.' Bloody lucky, that. Everything I've heard says that Quixar was one sick bastard."

Alfonso couldn't help but marvel at what someone would have to do for *Albertson* to consider him a "sick bastard."

Albertson continued. "But, I'll wager that you did not know that Sarial is trapped in Quixar's body." As soon as Albertson stopped speaking, he took another two steps to the right.

Alfonso said, "I didn't know that. How did it happen?"

Albertson walked to the left as he spoke, "It was a punishment for the last time she tried to overthrow the rightful rulers of this sector. Of course, *that* time was not as bloody as this one. She didn't kill even one of them back then."

Judy gave up and lowered her gun. Alfonso said, "I'm not so sure these 'rulers' are all that they're cracked up to be."

Albertson hissed, "And who are *you* to judge them? They've successfully ruled this sector for longer than humans have existed. No government structure we could possibly have tried could stand up to their experience."

Judy said, "You always have been a government boy, haven't you, Albertson? You'll support the current regime no matter how wrong it is."

Monday 16.8

Albertson replied, "Wrong? These are strange words coming from a murderer. There are valid ways to change the government, my dear. Where we disagree is that you and Alfonso think that killing people is one of them."

Judy started an angry retort when Alfonso cut her off. "Is there a point to all of this, Albertson, or are you just here to reminisce? I know you're not just stalling until reinforcements arrive. Ghosts could have gotten here from the far end of the station in less than a second."

Albertson replied, "What has Sarial told you to convince you to embark on this madness?"

With a snort, Alfonso said, "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Albertson continued. "She told you the bug story, didn't she?"

Alfonso let his uncomfortable silence be his affirmative reply.

Incredulously, Albertson said, "And you believed her? A swarm of hungry bugs that propel themselves through space? If you'd been this gullible back on Earth, I'd have caught you the first time you came to London."

Alfonso replied, "If, during the Freehdom wars, you'd told me that I'd be working with three-meter-long millipedes in the future, I wouldn't have believed you. The universe looks a little different from this sector than it did from the Earth."

Despite the fact that he didn't know that Alfonso could see him, Albertson nodded. "But did you know, Alfonso, that I'd only guessed at the story Sarial had told you? I was a fairly easy guess, though. She's not very creative. You see, she used this exact same story to recruit soldiers last time. But that was *four thousand* years ago. That 'swarm' moves quite slowly, doesn't it?"

Tuesday 16.9

Alfonso whistled. "Four thousand years. Quixar's much older than he looks."

"No, you dolt," Albertson snapped, "Sarial was just transferred to Quixar a year ago. Her previous host was killed shortly after we arrived. The interesting bit is who killed that host."

Alfonso thought back to the early days in the sector. He hadn't killed anyone. So Albertson couldn't have been referring to him. He looked to his left. "Judy?"

Despite the darkness, she shook her head. "I didn't kill any shalk right after we arrived. Though, God knows, I wanted to."

Albertson replied, "It wasn't a shalk. It was a manta named Rreltarr."

Judy froze. Alfonso, however, felt relieved. He'd caught Albertson in a lie. "You don't know much about these ghosts, Albertson. Each of them can only possess the botiira and one other race. Sarial couldn't possibly have possessed a manta and then taken over a shalk." He wasn't completely sure about this, but he'd seen enough evidence that it was worth saying, just to see how Albertson reacted.

To Alfonso's dismay, Albertson's voice became even smugger. Though Alfonso wouldn't have believed that was possible. "I'm sorry, Alfonso, but it is you who doesn't know enough about the ghosts. You are right that it takes an enormous amount of work for them to learn to possess any non-botiira races and that, in so doing, they forget how to possess the previous race. This is why we didn't have any ghosts that could possess humans until six months after we arrived. But the rulers have the technology to force a ghost to possess a race she hasn't worked on. And, when they remove that technology, the ghost can not leave the host."

Alfonso had no idea how much of any of this was true. But, while Albertson had contradicted some of Alfonso's theories, he was not in disagreement with any of the known facts. Still, that was just the mark of a good liar. He asked, "And how do you know all of this?"

Wednesday 16.10

Albertson replied, "A friend of yours told me."

Alfonso saw a glowing sphere rise up out of Albertson. He realized that he was about to be possessed and that he didn't want that ghost to know he could see in the dark. He quickly shut off the botiira eyepieces.

An instant later, he felt a ghost enter him. *"Alfonso, it is Belan."*

Belan was the ghost Alfonso had let possess him. Alfonso shifted his grip on his lightning baton. Since the ghosts had thus far only seen kiree using the batons, and since the kiree couldn't be possessed, they wouldn't know about the batons' secondary function. Alfonso's finger now hovered over a button that would cause the baton to send a huge shock through him. *"What's going on here, Belan?"*

"Alfonso, you saved my life once. I owe you. So we have not alerted the rulers to your position. I am confident that, if I tell you the truth, you will choose the correct path."

"And Albertson is telling the truth?"

Belan replied, *"Yes."*

Alfonso focused all of his attention on the ghost inside him. Back when he was being possessed by Zolem, he'd been able to sense some of the ghost's emotions. Perhaps he could do the same with Belan. When it seemed he was in tune with the ghost's feelings, he called out, "Albertson, who put the bomb in the Dose?"

Alfonso felt guilt in Belan.

This told him a number of things. It confirmed that Albertson had placed the bomb. It also said that Belan had been working with Albertson that far back. This meant that, just as Quixar/Sarial had used Zolem to infiltrate the enforcers, the rulers had used Belan to infiltrate the investigators. These ghosts weren't much for trusting each other.

Thursday 16.11

Without even a twinge of guilt in his voice, Albertson replied, "I did."

Alfonso blinked once. He'd fully expected Albertson to lie about that. He turned to Belan. *"That bomb showed up the day after I saved you. Albertson was in the bar that night, wasn't he?"*

Belan replied, *"Yes."*

"You helped hide his presence from me, didn't you?"

Belan paused before saying, *"Yes."*

"I could have died. Judy almost did. You said that you owe me. Your method of repayment is interesting, to say the least."

Belan paused again. Then he said, *"I am sorry."*

Alfonso pushed harder. *"You're sorry? What is your thought process here? After trying to kill me, you come and ask me to believe the monster down the hall? What do you take me for?"*

"I am sorry. We knew where this was going, and Albertson convinced me that killing you off was the best way to avert the problem. It was a mistake. And I will not make it again. He now does what I say, not the other way around. That is why he is telling you the truth. It is very important that you believe him."

"I'm sure it is. The question is, who is it important to?"

"It is important to you, Alfonso. I know you feel that you have no reason to trust me, but you can."

You must. Listen to Albertson, he is telling the truth."

Alfonso felt Belan leave. He turned his botiira vision back on. Judy was still standing next to him, but was trying to aim her blade gun again. Albertson was now farther away and leaning against the left wall. Alfonso said, "Okay, Albertson, I'll bite. Why? Why try to blow me up, and why tell the truth about it now?"

Friday 16.12

Albertson replied, "To answer your first question, I knew Sarial's plans. I knew it would come to this. And I knew that you were a necessary pawn in those plans. If I could have killed you off, it would have delayed Sarial. I was convinced that the delay would be sufficient to render her plans useless."

"And now?"

"Now, that tactic will no longer work. By convincing the kiree to attack this station, you have already fulfilled your part in the plans. At this point, killing you will not have a significant effect. But you are still in a position to stop Sarial yourself. I am telling you the truth now because I need you to use that convoluted morality of yours to do what we both, strangely, will consider to be the right thing. I need your help in averting a disaster."

Alfonso grinned. "And here I thought it was because you had finally realized how much you respect and admire me."

"No, Alfonso. The prospect of working with you is as distasteful to me as the prospect of working with me is to you."

"I love you too. And Judy?"

"She's only alive because you'd ignore me out of spite if I killed her." He turned to Judy and said, "No offense, dear."

Judy replied, "None taken. You're only alive because I can't see where you are."

Albertson started to say something when Alfonso cut him off. "Enough! Albertson, I've grown tired of hearing your damn voice. Tell me about this pending disaster and go away."

Albertson said, "There's a large group of beings headed this way. And, if Sarial makes it to the system in the data chamber, he will destroy those beings. But, I swear on all that I hold important, the beings are not some swarm of bugs. They're humans."

Saturday 16.13

Alfonso laced his voice with sarcasm. "Humans? Beings from Earth? Coming here? What do you take us for, Albertson?"

Albertson replied in an even tone. "I don't like you, Alfonso. But I do respect you. Back on Earth, you were a skilled adversary whose intelligence made you very difficult to beat. I am counting on that intelligence now. I need you to see through Sarial's lies and believe in the truth. If not, the lives of over a million human beings will be squashed like the bugs Sarial told you they were."

Alfonso noticed that Judy had stopped sweeping the gun. She at least believed Albertson enough to listen to him. Alfonso said, "So, let me get this straight. Near the end of the Freehdome wars, you staged your own death and infiltrated us. Then, when we left, you put some sort of homing beacon on our ship so that

your government cronies could follow?"

"Yes, and no. The homing beacon was only a precaution against us going to the wrong place. Since we followed the correct path, it didn't matter that the investigators recently found and disabled the beacon. Our people already know where to go."

Quixar had also mentioned a tracking beacon that had been disabled by ghosts. Their stories did not match, but the similarities were interesting. One or both of them had to be lying, but there appeared to be an element of truth to both of their stories.

Confusion plainly evident in her voice, Judy said, "What do you mean, 'the correct path'?"

Albertson put on an air of amazement. "Haven't either of you ever wondered how we ended up here? Didn't our stumbling across a highly populated area strike either of you as a bit overly coincidental? The universe is a big place. Do you think there's life in every sector?"

Alfonso shook his head. "We chose a direction at random. It was only by luck that we stumbled across this populated sector."

Albertson laughed. "Luck. You're a fool, Alfonso. There was nothing random about our chosen direction. I set the coordinates for Proxima Mantissa myself."

Sunday 16.14

Alfonso leaned against a wall. He was standing in the dark and listening to his worst enemy spout insanity. But, just as Albertson respected him, he respected Albertson. The man was not insane. Evil, yes, but not insane. Strangely, the more unbelievable his story became, the more Alfonso felt inclined to believe it. Albertson's lies were far from obvious. If what he said sounded like an obvious lie, it might just have been true.

"Okay, you've just bought another minute. Explain yourself."

The infrared blob of Albertson's head bobbed. "There were a large number of us who didn't like the governments we worked for. And there were even more citizens who felt similarly. We--"

Judy cut him off. "Wait a minute. Are you saying that the million people on their way are government detractors? Bullshit. Our entire side never had a million people. And just about all of us came here on the first ship."

Albertson became angry. "You and your moronic Freedom wars. We were working to change the governments legitimately. We were making progress." His voice grew louder, "And we would have succeeded if you and your terrorist friends hadn't come along and screwed everything up! We could have made things better without killing *anyone*. But your stupid war ruined everything we'd worked for. You did nothing but make the governments stronger. You gave them an excuse to tighten their choking grip on humanity. You made life on Earth go from uncomfortable to unbearable. By the time we'd finally managed to shut you down, you'd done so much damage that changing the governments would have been damn near impossible."

Alfonso could tell from the tone of her voice that Judy was speaking through clenched teeth. "Then why didn't you join us? With a million more people we could have won."

It was not surprising that Albertson's diatribe hadn't affected Judy. But it had made Alfonso uncomfortable. During the Freedom wars he was young, impressionable, and reactionary. If what Albertson had just said was true, a questionable supposition for sure, then Alfonso had also been wrong.

He sighed. Albertson started an angry retort, but Alfonso cut him off by yelling, "Stop!"

Monday 16.15

In a calmer voice, Alfonso continued. "While the politics of the Freedom wars may be an interesting subject of debate, I'd rather not do it now. Albertson, how did you know about Proxima Mantissa?"

Albertson quickly regained his composure. "Did Sarial ever tell you about the fourth race of ghosts?"

"Do you mean the explorers?"

Despite the dark, Judy turned to him. "What?"

Albertson said, "When the ghosts became ghosts, the majority of them left to explore the universe. Many of them visited Earth a number of times throughout our history. And some of them were there helping us change the governments. But, when you and your Freedom warriors guaranteed that we would not fix things in our lifetimes, the ghosts gave us the coordinates of this sector. They even gave us some technology to make getting here more feasible--technology we leaked to you."

Her voice full of disbelief, Judy said, "Why? If you hated us so much, why bring us along?"

Alfonso didn't need to hear the answer. He understood. In disgust, he said, "Don't you see? They sent us ahead to test the waters for them. The ghosts on Earth couldn't have known how humans would be accepted. For all Albertson's people knew, we'd all be slaughtered. So they followed a discreet distance behind us and were prepared to abort if they didn't get some sort of 'all's clear' from Albertson."

They sat in silence for a moment. When Albertson didn't deny Alfonso's interpretation, Judy said, "So we're nothing but test subjects? You suck, Albertson."

He replied, "Yes, I do. But are you so angry that you'll allow Sarial to kill over *amillion* innocent people just to spite me? I leave you with that."

Alfonso saw Albertson's red blob walk to the left and disappear. He must have walked down a corridor. A moment later, the lights came back on.

Tuesday 16.16

Judy's arm shot up. But, when she didn't see her target, she holstered her blade gun. Alfonso disabled his botiira vision and said, "We've got to double-time it if we're going to make it to the data room before everyone else."

She nodded, and they took off at a run. They ran in silence until they reached the next maintenance hatch in their chosen path. Alfonso opened it and crawled in. Judy followed him and closed it behind her. She waited until they'd started crawling again before saying, "We've got conflicting stories, one from a guy we know would lie if it suited him and another from a guy we know is lying. Which do we believe?"

Alfonso had been trying to figure this out from the moment Albertson had said that the approaching ships contained humans. "What do we want out of all of this?"

Judy immediately replied, "We want shields for everyone, and we want to disable the shalk annihilation batons. With that, we'd have the possibility of a democratic government."

"And, if there are humans on their way, do we want them to be destroyed?"

"Of course not."

Alfonso nodded. "Do we want anything else?"

Judy thought for a moment. "You mean besides a decent beer? Well, I'd like to stay alive. It'd be good if you did, too. I've grown kind of fond of you again."

"That's it?"

She thought for a moment. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Then, so long as we get shields and annihilation baton disablers, don't kill a million humans, and stay alive, we don't really care who wins, right?"

Wednesday 16.17

Judy chewed on this for a while before grudgingly saying, "Right."

"What's wrong?"

"Well, if either path is equivalent, I'd rather see that bastard Albertson lose."

Alfonso grinned and continued on. He felt the same way. They crawled through tunnels and ran through internal maintenance areas for a while, eventually coming to a hatch near the data room. The room had no internal maintenance hatches, and its air ducts were too small for even a sliss to fit through. The walls that separated the room from the rest of the station contained an unmodified shalk shield that they could not cut through. The only way in was through the front door.

Alfonso opened the hatch far enough to let a camerabot through, then re-closed it. He and Judy checked out the screen. There were two shalk standing in front of the control panel for the door. They looked bored; their batons were holstered, and they were chatting rather than suspiciously looking up and down the hallways.

The data room was deep inside the station, and the kiree had not pushed anywhere near this far in. The normal contingent of guards on this room was six. It appeared that four had been pulled away to help repel the invaders. Their plans were working.

Alfonso told the nanocam to switch to viewing only a particular three frequencies. The screen went black but for one tiny spot. Alfonso checked the frequency and said, "That's Shasirr." He instructed his bot to start broadcasting on a fourth frequency so that Shasirr would know he'd arrived.

Judy turned her head to the side and said, "We're here, and so is Shasirr. No sign of the botiira."

Sukomb responded, "Got delayed. Almost there now."

Concerned, Judy said, "Problem?"

Thursday 16.18

Sukomb's voice slowed down a bit, a sign of mirth. "No more. Guards at room?"

Judy replied, "Two. We haven't seen any wanderers yet, but we're not sure. If the botiira make it, we'll go with plan A. If not, you'll have to do plan B."

Alfonso switched the camerabot back to full vision so that he could watch the shalk.

Sukomb replied, "Understand. Five to arrive."

Judy said, "Understand. We'll give the botiira five more minutes after that."

She straightened her neck and said, "Okay, Even though he's impervious to all of our weapons, I know how we can stop Quixar."

Alfonso replied, "Do tell."

"Regardless of his lies, Quixar obviously needs *something* out of that data center. Otherwise, Sukomb would be dead in a tunnel somewhere, and he'd be off doing whatever he really came here for."

Alfonso nodded, "Check."

"So, as soon as we get in, we go to opposite ends of the room and point our blade guns at the system. You smooth-talk Quixar into coming clean, then we decide what to do. Say whatever you need to, but I won't fire unless he kills you or you say the code phrase."

Alfonso nodded. "Why blade guns instead of lightning batons?"

"A system that important would be heavily grounded. The batons might not work. Put enough metal through it, though, and it's got to die."

Friday 16.19

Five minutes passed and, in that time, no wandering guards came by. This implied that they might get away with killing the posted guards. But Alfonso still preferred plans A and B. Pools of blood in front of the door were too likely to draw attention.

Alfonso switched to the filtered view and now saw two dots. The botiira had arrived. A short time later, he heard Sukomb's voice say, "Here." A third dot appeared. Alfonso looked over to Judy, who nodded. He commanded his bot to start blinking and switched back to the normal view.

Shasirr came sauntering down the hallway. One of the shalk noticed him and said, "Stop. You're not supposed to be down here."

Shasirr sneered. "Yes I am. This is sector twenty-seven. My boss said go to sector twenty-seven, and I do what he says."

The shalk said, "This isn't twenty-seven. It's thirty-five."

Shasirr became angry. "You calling me a liar? Listen, shalkie, just because you can't figure out how to operate a lift, you don't have to insult me."

The shalk who hadn't been speaking looked bemused. She obviously was bored. The other one, though, put a hand on his holster. "Look, you've made a mistake. Now, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Before Shasirr could speak, a single botiira came walking down the hall from the other direction. On seeing him, Judy gasped.

The botiira was Goneb, and he was in bad shape. One of his arms was missing, he had a bad gash across his face, and he was walking with a severe limp. His companions were nowhere to be seen. Apparently, they had met an even worse fate.

On seeing Shasirr, Goneb aimed his blade gun at him and limped forward quickly, yelling, "Command: stop."

Saturday 16.20

Both shalk looked to Goneb. The one who had been speaking, said, "What's wrong?"

When Goneb reached them, he stopped and paused a second. Then he said, "Manta is traitor is true. Command: apprehend."

Shasirr's eyes went wide. Both shalk went for their batons. Shasirr extended his claws and made four separate attacks simultaneously. He knocked Goneb's gun away with his tail, he kicked Goneb's knee with his left leg, and he used his two hands to rake both of the shalks' arms as they were going for their batons.

Goneb collapsed to the ground. Both of the shalk pulled their arms away in shock. Shasirr growled at Goneb, then raced off down the hall.

From the ground, Goneb fired after the manta, but his blade went wide. Goneb's blinking eyes went into overdrive, and he immediately yelled, "Command: capture manta!"

The shalk looked to each other and shrugged. The one who had been speaking said, "Our orders are to stay here."

Goneb forced himself to his feet. "Higher priority command: capture manta."

The shalk frowned. "Can't do that. You'll have to go."

Incredulously, Goneb pointed to his damaged leg. "Can run is false! Highest priority command: shalk capture manta."

The female shalk, who hadn't yet spoken, licked her damaged hand and said, "Who are you to give orders to us?"

Sunday 16.21

Goneb began to blink so quickly that his eyes became blurs. "If not capture manta is true, ghosts torture shalk is true. Torture botiira is false."

The shalk looked to each other, their eyes questioning.

Goneb yelled, "I will guard door is true. Repeat highest priority command: capture manta."

The shalk considered for another moment, then they rushed off down the hall.

Goneb pointed his blade gun at their retreating forms. When they didn't call for help, he lowered it. Then he leaned back against the wall and slid down to the floor. As soon as the shalk turned the corner, Alfonso opened the hatch and rushed over to Goneb. In his peripheral vision, he saw Quixar and Sukomb emerge from another hatch further down the hall.

Sukomb rushed to the control panel and started working.

Alfonso bent down to Goneb. "What happened?"

"Sliss ambushed is true."

Alfonso said, "Sliss did this to you? They ripped off your arm?"

"False. Had kiree blade guns is true."

They must have gotten them from kiree they'd killed. Alfonso inspected Goneb's arm. It appeared that a layer of skin had already grown over the stump, sealing it. "You going to be okay?"

"Uncertain is true. If survive mission is true, arm will grow back is true. Know will survive mission is false."

Monday 16.22

Alfonso helped Goneb up. He then looked at Quixar. The shalk was anxiously staring at Sukomb, who was still working on the control panel. The ghost controlling him, Sarial, had consistently outsmarted, out-lied, and out-flanked Alfonso. She'd always held the upper hand. And, apparently, it had all been a complicated plan to get her into this room.

Now that her goal was in sight, would it distract her? Judy's plan to threaten the interface was a good one, but Alfonso couldn't help but wonder if Sarial had already foreseen the possibility and had accounted for it.

While fretfully looking down the hallway, Judy started pacing. "We should have killed the shalk. If they call for help, we're sunk."

Alfonso shook his head. "Two shalk against Shasirr? They don't have a chance. They'll be dead before they even think to call for help."

Judy continued to pace. "Then why isn't he back yet?"

That didn't bother Alfonso. He'd given Shasirr different orders than Judy and the others expected. If Quixar had been listening in on them, as Alfonso suspected, he might have heard the plans. But he couldn't make that known without giving himself away.

Judy said, "And why didn't they call for help immediately? They have to know the importance of what they're guarding. But they thought it was okay to leave one partially incapacitated botiira to watch their post?"

Alfonso shrugged. "Goneb did push them hard to act quickly without thinking about it."

Judy shook her head. "No. Something feels wrong here."

Sukomb said, "Success." The door in front of them slid apart.

Alfonso said, "If that's so, we'd better get in and out quickly. Let's go, people."

They rushed through the door and into the data center. But, even before Alfonso could take in the room's details, the door slammed shut. Four shalk jumped up from behind a console and pointed annihilation batons at them. In a particularly menacing voice, the female one said, "Drop your weapons."

Tuesday 16.23

Alfonso laughed.

The female shalk pointed her baton at him and snarled, "What's so funny?"

Alfonso shrugged and replied, "You got us. We didn't foresee the possibility of you moving people into the room. Well, Judy was just heading there, but I rushed her in before we could do anything about it." He held his hands away from his body.

Goneb dropped his weapons. Sukomb did as well. Quixar and Judy had holstered theirs before entering the room, as had Alfonso. When Alfonso laughed, Judy turned so that she could see both him and the shalk in her peripheral vision. She also held her hands away from her body. Quixar was in front of Alfonso and facing the shalk. He quickly looked over his shoulder, frowned, and copied Alfonso's stance.

The shalk screamed, "I told you three to drop your weapons!"

Alfonso held his hands out farther. "Look, I don't want to die. If I reach for my guns, someone's going to get nervous and shoot me." He raised his hands up, balled them into fists, and put them behind his neck. "So I'm going to stand here and not make any fast moves. You and your people can take my weapons from me without anyone getting hurt. Judy and Quixar will do the same."

Judy clasped her hands behind her neck. Quixar looked over his shoulder again. Then he also copied Alfonso.

The female shalk considered the situation for a moment before waving her baton at Sukomb. "You, kiree, move over there. You too, botiira." She nodded to one of the shalk and said, "Cover them." Then she and the remaining two shalk stepped out from behind the console. Keeping her baton trained on Alfonso, the female walked slowly toward him. The other two headed for Quixar and Judy.

The shalk stopped just out of Alfonso's reach and said, "Flinch and I'll kill you."

Alfonso said, "I understand."

Wednesday 16.24

The female shalk jabbed Alfonso in the gut with her baton and, with her free hand, drew out a blade gun and tossed it out of his reach. She quickly threw his other blade gun and two lightning batons after it. The other two shalk did similar things to Judy and Quixar, though Quixar's made him lower his shield first.

Continuing to push her baton into Alfonso's gut, the shalk blinked and defocused her eyes. "You were right. They tried to get into the storehouse. We've captured them." She didn't say anything for a few seconds, then nodded. "Understand."

As soon as she refocused on Alfonso, he said, "Yeah, it's really a shame that we didn't split our forces before entering the room. Now would be a great time for the rest of our companions to rush in."

He heard the door shoot open.

All four shalk turned to look at it. The instant his captor's attention was diverted, Alfonso swept his left hand down and knocked her baton away. At the same time, he drew his sword in his right hand and sliced down at the shalk. Her baton went off, but missed him. She was so close that his only choice was to cleave her neck.

The first slice guaranteed that the shalk would die, but Alfonso's instincts couldn't leave it at that. In a blur, he had a fleeting thought that she might fire while in her death throes. Without any sort of pause or weighing of consequences, the thought instantly became an action. He stepped to the side, spun his blade around, and cut off the hand that was holding the baton.

The shalk fell to the ground in shock, her dying eyes staring up at him in anger. He looked down at the severed hand and frowned. "Sorry." He wanted to reassure her, to explain that there was no "celestial palace" from which to be banned. But he couldn't think of a way to say it without sounding hollow.

The shalk closed her eyes.

Thursday 16.25

Alfonso looked up. Judy had just finished disemboweling her shalk with the blades in her boots. The shalk behind the console as well as the one by Quixar were both bent over and holding their wrists. Sukomb had six more throwing stars ready.

Shasirr sauntered in through the doorway and said, "Do any of you know what's the most important aspect of an assassination?"

Judy opened her mouth, but, before she could say anything, Shasirr answered his own question. "Timing."

She rolled her eyes and glared at Alfonso, "Think it might have been a good idea to fill me in on that part of the plan?"

He shook his head. "Naw. I learned long ago that you're even better when you're thinking on your feet."

Quixar shoved the shalk near him aside and rushed toward the console. Judy's eyes went wide, and she dove for the pile of weapons. In the middle of a roll, she grabbed two blade guns and tossed one to Alfonso. She came up in a crouch with her gun aimed at Quixar's back. "Hold it, Quixar."

Alfonso caught the gun and took two long strides to the right.

Quixar ignored Judy, so she shot a blade by his ear. It probably trimmed his hair on the way by. Quixar immediately stopped and enabled his shields. He put his hand on his baton and turned back to look at her. "What are you doing?"

Judging that he was now far enough away from Judy, Alfonso aimed for the console and said, "Sarial, if you don't take that hand away from the baton, Judy and I will destroy the console."

Quixar said, "Alfonso, we don't have time for this. You heard them report that we're here."

Friday 16.26

Alfonso said, "Shasirr, close the door. Sukomb, if Sarial so much as draws that baton, destroy the console. Goneb, grab a blade gun and keep an eye on the other shalk."

Mirthfully, Shasirr said, "Always interesting." The door closed.

Quixar took his hand away from his baton. "What's going on, Alfonso?"

Alfonso replied, "I know a lot about what's going on, but not everything. So here's how this is going to go down. I'm going to ask some questions for which I have the answers, and I'm going to ask others for which I don't. *Beverly* careful with your lies, because if I catch you we'll turn that console into swiss cheese."

"But then you won't get the--"

"Shut up. You're right that we don't have much time, so answer quickly. Who's really on their way to this sector?"

Quixar stared at him for a moment, undoubtedly trying to read him. Alfonso kept his face completely passive. Continuing to stare at him, Quixar said, "Humans."

Alfonso didn't flinch. He immediately asked, "How many?"

"One million, two hundred thousand, nine hundred and forty-seven by the last report I saw."

Again, Alfonso didn't hesitate before barking, "What are you planning to do to them?"

Evenly, Quixar replied, "Nothing."

Even if Alfonso hadn't been expecting this answer, he would have kept any surprise out of his expression. He asked, "Why lie about the swarm?"

Saturday 16.27

Quixar stared at Alfonso for a second and then looked at the floor. "I needed you to coordinate an attack on this station so that I could get to this room. That meant that I needed a story that would get you here. I considered making up something about the rulers threatening to destroy the humans, but I didn't know if it would have had the right effect."

Alfonso said, "Why not?"

"I know what you think about your old rulers. And I know what you think about the citizens who didn't help you fight against them. Those are the humans that are on their way. I couldn't be sure that you'd care if they were threatened. But *I knew* you'd care if the people of this sector were threatened. You once risked your life to save some sliss you didn't even know."

Alfonso nodded. Sarial was smart. Everything she was saying made perfect sense. Of course, that didn't make it the truth. "Speaking of that explosion, did you cause the computer glitches?"

Evenly, Quixar asked, "Directly?"

Alfonso frowned. "Did the Symbari cause all of the computer glitches?"

Quixar clenched his fists and glared at Goneb. The botiira shrank away from his gaze. Alfonso said, "Goneb didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. Answer the question." For Alfonso, lying was as easy as telling the truth.

Quixar nodded.

Alfonso said, "You were inciting the shalk to attack humanity, weren't you?" When Quixar didn't respond, he continued, "Did you get the idea for this when Judy killed the bartender, or when she killed your previous host?"

Sunday 16.28

Quixar snarled. "If you know so much, why are we playing this questions game?"

Alfonso tried as hard as he could to read Quixar. Sarial had complete control over him and could make him do anything she wanted to. Was that real anger, or was Sarial putting on a front to hide her glee that Alfonso was going in the wrong direction? She, like Albertson, knew that he didn't trust her. So, for both of them, the most convincing lies would be those that made them look bad. Albertson would admit to planting the bomb, hoping that Alfonso would believe that his coming clean on that meant everything else was the truth. Sarial could be doing the same thing by admitting to inciting the shalk against humans. The

question was, if either was lying, what were they hoping to gain from it?

He grinned, "Well, Sarial, the shalk war didn't have any effect on the attack on this station. It seems that if you went to the trouble of convincing people to attack me just to get me to fight back, then there's probably something more going on here than your desire to get into this room. We are playing this game so that I can fully understand what the hell is going on."

A new voice said, "Perhaps I can help with that."

Alfonso quickly glanced to the corner of the room from which he'd heard the voice. A glowing sphere floated there. He then hastily looked around and found three more in the remaining corners. Judy's hand shot down. She grabbed a lightning baton, threw it over her shoulder, then grabbed another and threw it to Sukomb. Alfonso caught the one she'd thrown to him as she plucked up another one. She now held her blade gun in her right hand and the lightning baton in her left. She kept the gun pointed at the console, but swept her baton back and forth between the two ghosts in front of her.

The ghost said, "Judy, calm down. We move at the speed of light. If there had been a need for you to use that baton, you would not have had a chance to do so." Judy ignored the ghost and continued to sweep the baton back and forth.

Quixar said, "Alfonso, you fool. You stalled us so long that the rulers have arrived."

March 1999

Monday 17.1

The ghost said, "No, Sarial. We have been here all along. Shasirr has successfully disabled the door mechanism, and not even rulers can get through these walls."

Quixar became angrier than Alfonso had ever seen. He spat, "Alaria, are you even capable of telling the truth? If you've been here all along, why haven't I seen you?"

Alaria responded in a calm, soothing voice. "Sister, if you had spent *any* of the last millennia talking to rather than trying to overthrow me, you would have learned a great deal. Yes, we are now capable of hiding ourselves from other ghosts. I would have happily taught you how to do this, but I know how you would have used the knowledge."

Quixar venomously replied, "Fat lot of good it would have done me, considering that you've been trapping me inside these damn corporeals."

Alaria dimmed slightly. In a sad voice, she responded. "And you would prefer the alternative? Our human friends have provided us with one."

Quixar's eyes got large, and his hands twitched a bit. Alaria continued in an even sadder voice. "I am afraid that your preferences and mine may no longer matter. We never thought you would be able to do this much damage from your confinement. You may have forced us to use that alternative."

Quixar looked wildly to Alfonso. "If they were possessing the shalk then the only one of you they can affect is Goneb. And only one of them can do it at a time. Use your batons. Kill her!"

This mad plea made even Judy pause. She kept her baton ready, but stopped sweeping it back and forth.

In her saddest voice yet, Alaria said, "Sarial, what did I ever do to cause such hatred in you?" After a

pause, she said, "Alfonso, though deranged, my sister is correct. We are incapable of possessing you. If you wish to destroy us, there is little we can do to stop you."

Tuesday 17.2

Alfonso said, "I think we'll hold off on destroying anyone for the time being. I have goals for this endeavor, and killing people needlessly is not one of them."

Alaria said, "Wise. What are your goals?"

Alfonso smiled and shook his head. "We'll get to that later. First, tell me why you think Sarial is here. I have no reason to trust you, but I'm willing to listen."

Alaria responded, "Sarial has been trying to overthrow the rulers for over a millennium. After her last attempt, we started imprisoning her in the bodies of creatures she did not know how to possess. We are currently in the middle of her latest attempt to overthrow us."

Alfonso said, "And what does she want out of this room?"

"Two things. She wants the technology to free herself, and she wants the technology to destroy the incoming human ships."

Quixar blurted, "She's lying! I'm not going to destroy the ships."

Alfonso replied, "Everyone lies, Sarial. I don't believe any of you. But I want to hear all of the stories before I make any decisions. Shut up and let your sister speak. Or would you like for me to destroy the console and trap you in that body forever? Quixar will eventually grow old and die. I'll bet it would suck to possess a dead shalk."

When Quixar didn't respond, Alfonso turned back to Alaria. "Why destroy the humans?"

"Sarial has not tried to overthrow us in almost five hundred years. It was not until you humans arrived that she saw another chance. You brought with you the ability to disable computer systems. You brought with you a willingness to question authority. You brought with you hardened warriors for Sarial's Symbari Syndicate. You are a great asset to her cause. But you are also a liability to her continued success. Look to your own history. How many times have warriors been needed in a time of battle, only to be cast aside when the battle is over? Warriors are a problem during peacetime."

Wednesday 17.3

Angrily, Judy said, "So Quixar, were you going to kill off all of us, or just the new ones on their way?"

Quixar shook his head. "I wasn't going to kill any of you. She's the one who wants you dead."

Before Alaria could respond, Alfonso said, "And what do the rulers want out of all of this?"

"We have nurtured this society for an extremely long time. We do not want to see all of our work thrown away. We wish to continue to guide the races of this sector in the beneficial way we have guided them for so long."

Judy snorted. "Beneficial? You've used invincible masochists to hobble all of the other species."

Her voice strained, Alaria responded, "We have ensured order for longer than any human society has existed. Who are you to judge us?"

Before Judy could respond, Alfonso said, "You*have* ensured order, but at the price of progress and growth. Before we showed up, what was the last major advance your society experienced?"

"The result of unrestrained growth is overpopulation, and then extinction. And progress? You call your blade guns and lightning batons 'progress'? They are nothing but destructive forces."

Alfonso nodded. "But progress, nonetheless. It seems to me, Alaria, that we humans are a greater threat to your society than Sarial is. And, if we're a threat, then a million more of us are definitely a threat. Why should I believe that you don't want to destroy the human ships?"

"Have we done so yet?"

He shrugged. "For all I know, there aren't even any humans on their way. I certainly don't trust any of the people who have told me that they are."

She said, "Then what are you going to do?"

Thursday 17.4

Alfonso considered everything he knew. He had three competing stories, each told by someone with an agenda different from his own. Albertson probably wanted to be part of the ruling class, so he'd want to preserve the status quo at all costs. Sarial wanted to overthrow the ruling class, so, on the face of it, she'd make a good ally. But she might not want humanity around after her victory. The rulers also wanted to preserve the status quo, but were being pressured by the kiree attack. They might be willing to compromise.

Alfonso looked to Alaria and said, "I want three things. You're not going to like some of them, but if you hear me out, I may be able to convince you that they are in everyone's best interest."

Alaria responded, "Then please speak."

"First, if there are humans on their way, I want them to get here safely. Everyone says they share that desire, but I don't believe any of you. This is the hardest desire to ensure. Second, I want uncompromised shields for everyone in the sector. Replace the shalk shields with ones that aren't susceptible to sharp blades and give those same shields to the rest of us."

Alaria said, "But--"

Alfonso cut her off. "Hear me out. Then, I want Sarial's ability to disable shalk annihilation batons. At that point, no one in the sector will be able to kill anyone else. You want order, try that."

Alaria considered for over a minute before saying, "We would lose some of our ability to guide the races."

Alfonso immediately responded, "If the kiree defeat you, you'll lose*all* of your ability to guide the races."

"And, if we allowed this, you would call off the attack."

Alfonso smiled. "As far as I'm concerned, this is the only reason*for* the attack."

Friday 17.5

Alaria considered for a few moments before asking, "And what about Sarial?"

Alfonso responded, "I only care about the three things I mentioned. However, if you want my opinion, I

think you should set her free. Your punishment seems harsh, and her ability to overthrow you should be severely limited in a world without warfare."

Alaria considered for an even longer period of time before saying, "Very well. I will show you how to operate the console."

Quixar immediately yelled, "Alfonso, you're giving up too easily. The only way she'd consent to that is if our attack has hurt them badly. Push on and we could take over!"

Alfonso shook his head. "I'll bet you thought that, having failed to overthrow the government once, I'd jump at the chance now. Sorry, Sarial, that's not how I work. I didn't come here to overthrow the rulers. And if that's what you wanted, you should have been up front with me."

Alaria moved next to the console. Alfonso holstered his weapons and joined her in front of the control pad.

Suddenly, a voice screamed, "No!"

Alfonso spun around to see Judy twitching. He didn't understand what was going on. The voice he'd heard hadn't been hers.

Judy dropped the lightning baton from her right hand and grabbed her left hand. Her face became strained, as though she was fighting with herself. Then both of her hands shot forward.

She was aiming her blade gun directly at Alfonso.

Saturday 17.6

Alaria said, "Belan! What are you doing? This is futile."

Alfonso bent his legs and prepared to dive aside. Judy's hands shook, but she didn't fire. Her voice strained, she yelled, "You're wrong, Alaria. If we kill them, they won't get the shields."

"And the kiree will continue to attack. You know we can't afford to lose this station."

Quixar stared at Judy in disbelief. "Belan? I thought you worked for me."

Alaria responded as a teacher would to a misbehaving student, "No, Sister, he's been one of my operatives for as long as you've known him."

Quixar's eyes became wide. "For a thousand years?" He looked back to Judy. Angrily, he grumbled "You ... you...." He shook his head and drew his annihilation baton. As soon as it came out of its holster Alfonso rushed up behind Quixar and kicked the bottom of his hand. He put as much force as he could muster into the kick and succeeded in catching Quixar off guard. Though he didn't do any sort of damage, he did manage to cause the shalk to fumble the baton. It fell to the ground with a clang. Alfonso threw a shoulder into Quixar's back, sending him stumbling away from the baton. He then snatched it up and threw it to Sukomb, who caught it easily.

Judy had followed him with the blade gun. But she still hadn't fired. Her face was turning red from the strain. Alaria moved closer to her. "Belan, this will not work."

Through clenched teeth, Judy said, "Belan, eh? You once had me scared to even think about your table at the Dose. But I beat you then, and I'll beat you now." Her hands started to shake more.

Alfonso drew his lightning baton, but immediately realized that they'd built a critical design flaw into it.

The baton had two modes of operation, "high-amperage, kill a ghost from a distance," and "low amperage, stun a ghost possessing the holder." It couldn't stun from a distance, and the high amperage mode would likely kill a human.

Judy saw the baton in his hands and quickly flipped the blade gun over. It was now pointing at her own neck. Her eyes showed intense fear, and her hands shook even more. After a few long seconds, she cried out, "Alfonso, I'm losing it! Fry me."

Sunday 17.7

Alfonso pointed the lightning baton at her and tightened his finger on the unigrip. But he hesitated. If he fired, he'd likely kill her. But if he didn't, she'd still die, and it would be just as bad as if he'd killed her himself. Still, his mind raced back to his dream and the immense dread he felt when he thought he'd killed her. It would be worse now.

She screamed, "Alfonso!"

He squeezed the grip.

There was a blur before him, and he saw electricity arc out and blast into the wall behind where Judy had been standing. He released the grip and looked down. Shasirr and Judy were on the floor. Judy was on her back and Shasirr was crouched beside her. He had her blade gun in one hand and was holding her right wrist in the other.

His tail snaked out and picked up the lightning baton she'd dropped. As his tail put the baton upside down in her hand, he said, "I p^referr*th*is method." He let go of her wrist.

Judy immediately squeezed the unigrip. Since her hand was on the grip backwards, the baton went into its secondary mode. Her whole body shook, and her hair stood up. Then she dropped the baton and collapsed.

Alfonso rushed over to her. "Judy?"

Her eyes were closed. He grabbed her shoulders and felt a mild shock. "Judy!"

Suddenly, her eyes popped open. "Well,*that* was a pleasant experience."

Alfonso couldn't believe the depth of his relief. He smiled, "You okay?"

She forced herself up onto her elbows. "Think so." Then she looked down at her abdomen. "Somebody get this bastard out of me."

Monday 17.8

Alaria moved down to her, and then pulled away with another glowing sphere in tow.

Judy sat up quickly, but wobbled and grabbed Alfonso for support. With her free hand, she spun her baton around and pointed it at Belan. "Move away, Alaria."

Alaria said, "He is unconscious. He will not hurt you."

More strenuously, she said, "Move*away* Alaria."

Alfonso softly said, "Judy."

She immediately turned to him with fire in her eyes. "Don't *even* start. You don't know what it's like to have something try to force you to blow your own head off." She struggled to her knees, putting most of her weight on him, and said, "Alaria, I don't have anything against you, but I don't have anything for you either. Move aside, or I'll kill you both."

Alaria hesitated, then released Belan's unconscious form and slowly moved away.

Judy thrust her baton at the ghost. But she didn't fire. She held her arm out rock steady for a moment then violently threw the baton at the ground. "God damn you, Alfonso! If I hadn't met you, your stupid morals would never have rubbed off on me, and I would have killed it."

He took her in his arms and put her head onto his shoulder. Her body shook slightly, as if she was sobbing. He ran his fingers softly through her red hair and whispered into her ear, "If you hadn't met me, you'd have been in Aspen that time. And you wouldn't have lived to come here." He heard Judy laugh through her sobs. He looked over to Shasirr and nodded with his eyes. The manta nodded back.

Suddenly he heard the sound of a body collapsing onto the floor. Judy broke away from him and spun toward it. Quixar lay in an unmoving heap on the ground.

Tuesday 17.9

Two ghosts hovered over the body, their spheres intersecting slightly. Alaria yelled out, "Zolem!"

Mirthfully, the ghost on the right said, "Is that surprise in your voice, dear Alaria? Did you really think you were holding me in that pathetic cell of yours? I've been with Sarial since she arrived on the station. Of course, I haven't been able to touch her until now." The ghosts slid a little closer together. "By the way, thank you for the diversion. It gave me a chance to use the console of knowledge."

Judy frowned and looked down at the lightning baton. "So, Belan was working for you?"

Sarial spoke, "Forget the baton, Judy. Zolem learned how to hide from Alaria, and has taught me. Before you could flex your finger, we'd disappear from your view. Then, when you open the door, we'll be gone at the speed of light."

Zolem added, "Besides, no Belan wasn't working for us. He's down the chain a bit from Alaria. But, he's so misguided he's been taking orders from a silly human named Albertson. That guy thinks he can become a ruler if he helps preserve the status quo."

Sarial snickered, "As if the rulers would ever give any sort of influence to a human."

Zolem replied, "I'm sure he will be quite annoyed when he learns that he's lost." In a needling voice, he then asked, "How do *you* feel about it, dear Alaria?"

Alaria said evenly, "The game has not ended yet."

Apparently to Sarial, Zolem said, "The humans have an animal that runs around for a few seconds after you kill it. Apparently its body doesn't know that it's dead. It seems we have a similar case here. Alfonso, you didn't think Alaria was really going to give you the shields and disablers, did you? *One* ghost with the authority to fundamentally change the fabric of society. No, I don't think so. I saw the baton disabler she would have led you to in the console. It would have failed spectacularly at a most unfortunate time. However, I have transferred the plans for the real shields and disablers to your bot remote. I have also replicated a few of each. They are in the hopper."

Alaria and the other rulers immediately disappeared.

Zolem said, "Well, well. Perhaps the game truly is not over yet. Alfonso, Alaria has--"

Wednesday 17.10

Sarial cut Zolem off, "You've done enough for them. They're on their own now."

There was an uncomfortable pause, then Zolem said, "Don't get like that, Sarial. We owe them. We're back together aren't we? Or is that suddenly less important than ruling the universe?"

Sarial spoke in a frustrated voice. "No, of course not." To Alfonso, she said, "Okay, you ruined my plans, but I won't kill you. Maybe our paths will cross again some time." Back to Zolem, she said, "Give them the shields? How will we ever take over?"

Zolem replied, "In all of our work, how much damage have we ever really done to the rulers. If they get out with those shields, we cripple the rulers overnight...."

Alfonso tuned the two ghosts out. He had more pressing concerns to deal with. While Zolem might possibly have been lying about everything, his story was the most believable one Alfonso had yet heard. And, if it was true, Alaria was in the middle of doing something to stop Alfonso and his people. But what?

He looked around the room carefully, and noticed that Judy was doing the same. Nothing much had changed. There were still two dead shalk lying on the ground, and two more live ones were still standing pretty much where they'd been since Sukomb had disarmed them with his throwing stars. Of course, everything had been going so fast, that their batons were still close by. Alfonso looked at the shalk that was standing behind the console. Goneb was covering him with a blade gun, but botiira weren't known for their quick reflexes.

Alfonso caught Judy's eye, then glanced to the shalk. Judy's eyes widened a bit. On seeing this, the shalk quickly dropped down behind the console. Judy and Alfonso immediately sprinted toward it. Alfonso drew his blade gun. Judy had to scoop up one from the ground as she ran. They spread apart and leapt over the console simultaneously. From the air, Alfonso could see that the shalk had already grabbed his baton. Without hesitating, both he and Judy fired multiple blades into the shalk. They both landed in graceful rolls and jumped up.

Everyone else in the room had blades trained on the final shalk, who hadn't moved.

Suddenly, the door opened, revealing a large number of shalk brandishing annihilation batons. Judy and Alfonso fired indiscriminately into the crowd, then ducked down behind the console. "Shimatta!" Alfonso swore. The dead shalk beside them had been a diversion to allow one of the other ghosts to open the door.

Thursday 17.11

Judy jumped up, fired two shots, and then dropped back down. An annihilation beam shot overhead and was absorbed by the wall behind them. She said, "Okay, the shalk are still outside the room. Goneb, Sukomb, and Shasirr are now against the wall by the door, so they'll have a clear shot at anyone who comes in." Another beam shot over the console. Judy pointed up and said, "Did you see that? The shalk are using tight beams rather than cones. They must not want to damage this console. We should be safe for a bit."

Alfonso, who was desperately searching for an idea, said, "Until they toss a grenade in here." He turned on his botiira vision, but it didn't reveal anything useful.

Judy jumped up, fired again, and dove down hastily. Five beams shot overhead. She said, "Well, I was wondering how we'd verify Zolem's claim that he'd given us functional baton disablers. I guess we have a golden opportunity now."

Alfonso nodded. "Disablers, sitting in a hopper on the *other* side of this console."

Judy tapped a panel and said, "The hopper's right here."

Alfonso blinked and inhaled sharply. "Have I ever told you that you're beautiful when you're brilliant?"

"Yes, but not frequently enough."

They traded places, and Alfonso drew his wakizashi from its leg holster. "What are the chances of there being a high voltage line right here?"

"Around a hopper?"

He nodded and sliced through the steel. When he wasn't electrocuted, he quickly made three more cuts. A square plate fell out. He reached into the hole and drew out two of each shape he felt. Judy grabbed one of each. One was a little plate with a dial on it. The other was a small tube with a button on one end. Judy said, "The one with the dial has got to be the shield."

Alfonso nodded and strapped his shield to himself. When he turned the dial, his skin tingled a bit. Judy pointed her blade gun at him and said, "Either Zolem was telling the truth, or we're dead. Should I test the arm or the leg?"

"Left arm." She fired, and they both grinned when the blade stopped a centimeter from his skin and dropped to the ground. Alfonso said, "Oh, I'm liking this."

While strapping on her own shield, Judy said, "Now the disablers. On three. One. Two. Three!" They jumped up, pointed their disablers at the shalk, and pressed the buttons.

Nothing seemed to happen. However, the shalk all stopped to look at their batons. Alfonso said, "Oh, I'm liking this, *a lot*."

Judy walked around the console, opened the hopper, and grabbed the remaining items. She gave a pair to Shasirr, Sukomb, and Goneb. Once they'd all gotten their shields on, Sukomb said, "What now?"

Judy smiled. "Now we broadcast the plans to every single person in the sector. Then we waltz off this damn station. Our work here is done."

Friday 17.12

One month later.

Judy yawned and scratched her head as she walked out of the bedroom. She was wearing a long T-shirt that just barely covered her thighs, and her legs and feet were bare. Alfonso thought she looked particularly sexy this morning, but he'd always been a sucker for that kind of outfit. It was better than obscene lingerie.

He set his coffee cup down, smiled, and said "Ohayo."

She waved her hand and said, "Gozaimas and all that stuff." Then she grabbed his cup in both hands and took a sip. She made a face and said, "Is there any coffee in this milk?"

Alfonso smiled and looked back down at the news article he was reading. If Judy's coffee literally crawled out of the cup and slapped her hard enough to leave a welt, she'd still complain that it was too weak. She set the cup down and moved behind him. His hand shot down to his shield control, and he hastily turned the dial all the way down just before she draped her arms around his neck and put her chin on his shoulder. When they were alone at home, she tended to get annoyed if his shield was on when she wanted to touch him.

Of course, her philosophy about the shields was a bit different than his. She was always telling him that he'd get soft if he started relying on it all the time. Then again, even if he'd agreed with her, he liked the game they played in which he had to get his shield off before she got to him. Of course, the fact that the game usually ended in her holding him affected his judgement. He reached up and caressed her cheek.

Still groggy, she said, "You're lucky I'm asleep. One of these days you'll be too slow on that control. Then you'll get it."

Alfonso shrugged. "I don't know about that. I got a message from Sukomb this morning that suggests otherwise."

She turned her head to look at him. "Really? How's he doing?"

Alfonso frowned. "He didn't say much, but I can tell the banishment hasn't been getting any easier for him. He's still living on Frakar."

"We should go visit him soon. What's he working on?"

"A control bot for the shields that makes them automatically turn down if the approaching object is soft and moving slowly."

Judy squeezed him a bit. "Lazy. When you don't have to worry about stubbing your toe--"

Alfonso cut her off, "You stop watching where you're going. You've mentioned that once or twice before." He reached around and pinched her behind.

"Then you should listen to me."

He smiled, "I do listen. I just don't always do what you say. But that's okay. It's why you love me."

She let go of his neck and said, "Oh, I don't know about *that*. You *do* have one or two other traits that are appealing." She walked around and sat down on his legs. Leaning back against him, she said, "Like a warm lap."

He put his arms around her waist and held her. After a bit, she said, "You know, last night got me thinking. If we wanted to kill someone, we could seduce him or set him up with a hooker or something and then off 'em while he's in bed."

Alfonso pointed to the screen in front of them and said, "I think Shasirr already had that idea." Judy leaned forward a bit to read the article about a shalk dignitary that was found naked and dead in his bed. His throat had been cut by what appeared to be a very sharp knife.

Judy said, "You think that was Shasirr?"

Alfonso said, "Almost definitely."

She shrugged and leaned back again. "Oh well. We'll leave assassination up to him then. It's dirty

business anyway."

Alfonso nodded and put his arms around her again. "So, *what are* we going to do with ourselves now?"

Judy grabbed his arms, held them, and snuggled herself against him. "I'm planning to stay in this exact spot for at least a few weeks."

Alfonso's back cringed at the thought. "Then?"

She shrugged. "You feel like becoming a mobster? I'll bet we could get the Symbari to take us in. Then again, I'd rather run things."

Alfonso nodded.

Judy said, "Running the Dose was kind of fun. Though we'd need a bigger place--with a dedicated casino. We could get your friend Goneb to run the books. I'm sure he's looking for a job. We'll call him 'Three-Armed Jack' or something. How long have we got before the rest of the humans arrive?"

"'Bout five months."

"One and a quarter million people in a strange place. If we catered to them, we'd make a killing."

"Funding?"

"Call your friend Shasirr in. I'll bet he made enough on that last job alone to get us started. Or, maybe we should talk to Sarial. Give her a cut early so that the Symbari don't muscle in on us later."

Alfonso nodded. "Not a bad idea."

Judy closed her eyes and said, "Of course, *you're* going to have to come up with a way to manufacture a decent drink out here. You make me a Guinness, and I'll love you forever."

Seemed reasonable. Alfonso began to consider what it would take to grow the necessary ingredients.

The End

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