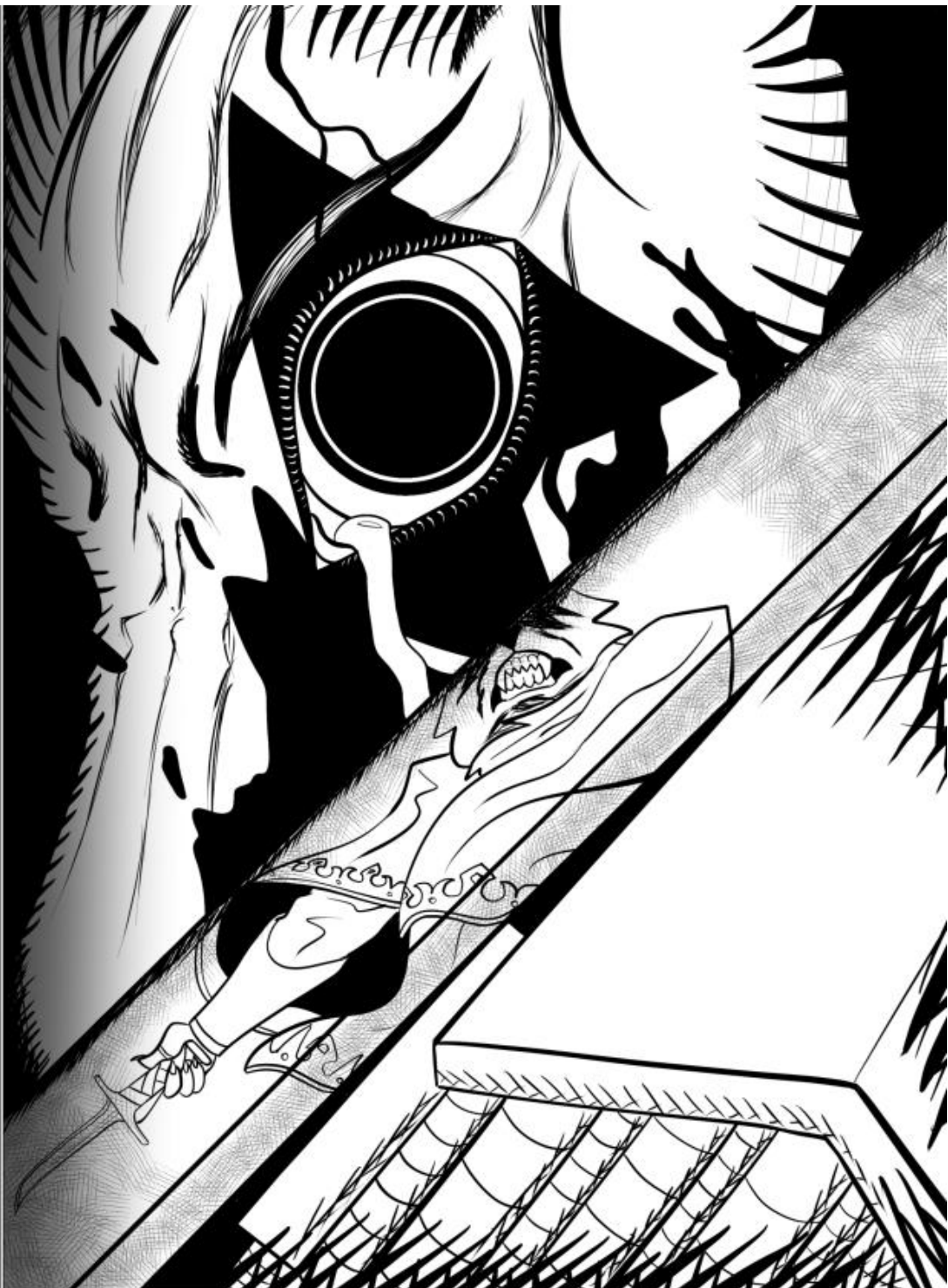


WORLDS APART



Worlds Apart

Who will you become after you walk away from the crossroads of who you are and who you were?

A Foxxoverse short story.

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NO GENERATIVE AI WAS INVOLVED IN ANY PART OF THIS PRODUCTION.

—

Adrenaline bled from Stargazer, leaving her too-old soul hot and hollow.

She panted in the wake of the fight, at the center of a hallway striped red with the blood of about a half dozen members of the station's security team. It had been less than two minutes, but the aching weight of decades set into her joints as if the blur of fury, the flashes of gunfire and the steel of her blade had lasted half a lifetime. The work was quick, and necessarily cruel.

It seemed fitting that all of her greatest cruelties were rooted in expedience.

After hacking the security of the door controls to the data vault, Stargazer took a moment to run a quick diagnostic on her armor systems. Ballistic weapons performed poorly against the exotic alloys that protected her like a full body carapace—though the impact still ached in her ribs and her joints where the bulk of their fire had been concentrated. The servos and synthetic myofiber which amplified her strength and agility still whined and whirred with powerful promise. The plates which protected the wide, pointed ears on top of her head were fully intact—though as uncomfortably tight as the binding that kept her tail tucked close to her body. Made it difficult to hone in on the little noises that could be anything from a damaged door hydraulic inside a wall to a brave few members of station security rallying for a counterattack. She took a slow, deep breath, steadying herself before passing through the door.

A lifetime ago, she'd designed weapons like the pair of auto-guns on the ceiling. Stargazer raised her gauntleted arm and caught the tungsten darts they fired in an invisible field that expanded around her. Waste heat from the suspension field built in her gauntlet, causing her to sweat uncomfortably beneath her fur, and she rebuked the pair of darts right back into the weapons they came from. The metal warped like liquid as the sheer speed of the projectiles annihilated them.

Then she grabbed the data storage array, glistening in its fitting with flickering red lights, and tore it free.

"That was easier than I expected." She said as she passed it to the robot attached to her back. Her *Little Buddy* as the engineers had called it. A skeletal torso, metal arms, and pair of cameras on a spindly eyestalk that peeked up over her shoulder. Piloted by a little piece of The Boss's consciousness, the sapient, predictive AI which ran her organization and dispatched her to this station. It took the array into its arms and clutched it tight like a child. Beginning the transfer of the vast store of information on the array to its internal storage.

This array held a mirror of the decision making data used by the imperial Governance AI. A massive AI system that spanned the whole of the Volnic Empire's dominion and greased the wheel of their grinding bureaucracy. Everything from the location of military units to copies of the blockchain that business transactions within the Empire's borders were minted to. The Governance was the only thing that Boss could not predict. Because it was like him. A sibling, of sorts. He had stipulated perhaps that a look into its decision making data might allow him to change that, and he sent her to retrieve it.

"it defies the precedent from earlier raids on similar facilities. this was too easy. eighty percent likely this is a trap." He responded in matter-of-fact mechanical monotone. "be ready."

Stargazer sighed. "I'd be surprised if this whole station wasn't bait for a trap." Suit energy supplies were still good. She could probably handle a few practicals if the inquisition decided to

show in force, but a prolonged engagement wouldn't favor her. Her Majesty's questioners were hard men, torturers, but fighting was seldom their strong suit. Practicals were the answer to that. Sets of highly trained armored hands to do the dirty work of bringing in their quarry so that the inquisitors could ask their questions.

"Give me options for backup escape routes."

Little Buddy stayed silent for a while.

"maintenance landing accessible from the crew deck. impromptu eva through the observation port of the control floor at the top of the station. your suit will not suffocate you for a few hours at least. enough time for your associates to find you."

A metal clang resounded through the still silence of the lift shaft as her magnetized boot clamped to the wall and she began to climb back up the way she had come. "Best chance of survival?"

"both require navigating the upper level. station security held in the hangar. forty percent chance there is a backup force hiding above us. twenty percent chance the rest of the station is clear."

Stargazer crested the small outcropping which marked the door she had carved open on her way to the data vault and pulled herself upright with unnatural ease. Took a moment to scan the hallway before moving any further. It was as she left it. Dark. Splatters of Volnic blood striped the white plastic that covered the metal walls. Corpses of security personnel littered the path that she had entered through, dense enough that even an untrained eye could trace her approach. Some separated from arms. Heads. Behind overturned crates or the pop-out barricades that unfolded from the walls for just such an occasion.

She advanced with her sword ready. Creeping slowly through the carnage. The power to the station had temporarily been disrupted, Little Buddy claimed to have convinced the reactor that spooling down was less suffering than being alive, and though her suit's optics were sensitive in low-light conditions the end of the hall toward the hangar was deep and dark as the void itself.

"stop." Little Buddy's voice, cold and monotone.

She listened. An order from it was an order from Boss. Stopped in place and assumed a ready stance.

"look."

Some symbols and equations flashed across her optics. A pair of lines intersected on a point of light in the darkness where the bullet-holed door gave way to the hangar beyond. The image over one eye zoomed in. A bright spot amid total darkness. Spraying out invisible light in a cone all down this hall.

"the trap."

"Infrared." Stargazer managed before two bullets from the dark struck her center mass. Knocked the wind out of her.

The metal projectiles sparked off her armor in a spray of light, fragments pinging and plinking off of the walls and floor. Another shot hit her leg. Pain, dull and deep like a solid punch from a prize fighter.

"Stop!" A stern male voice commanded from the darkness. "You're wasting your bullets."

"Lights, please!"

Sudden and intense white light from overhead overwhelmed Stargazer's optics, blinding her for a moment as they compensated. When the image cleared, a Volnic inquisitor in a tan jacket and violet cape stood a few paces away from her, a wicked looking hooked knife sheathed at his hip. He was flanked on both sides by heavily armored practicals in full ballistic plate. They had traded out their rifles for wicked maces that arced with crackling energy. Weapons that might actually work.

"So you're the ghost I've been chasing!" The inquisitor chuckled, putting his hands in his pockets. A wolfish grin cut across his snout, stark white teeth framed in stark white fur.

"I'll be quite honest with you, I was starting to think you might not have been real." He studied her up and down. "Nice armor. Clearly not the trash the Caladoran rebels use, but not a model I've ever seen. Are you a defector?"

Stargazer tensed, tried to dash at him. To take him by surprise. At this distance, with the enhanced speed her armor offered she could have been upon him—blade through him—in a moment. But the armor did not move.

"no."

The word appeared in the corner of her field of vision, sent by Little Buddy. Hanging there in a stark green so he could avoid being overheard.

"we need to run. now."

The inquisitor's smile fell a little bit as he scrutinized her with icy blue eyes. His practicals had advanced forward a few paces. Spreading out to either side. Encircling her as best they could in the narrow quarters.

"skeivola. listen to me- [please] - leave. now."

She strained, trying to fight the armor lockup. Tried to move to swing, but the servos and myofiber which once augmented her arm resisted her.

"skeivola. skeivola, they are surrounding us, turn around and run. i can't lose you."

"I can take him, damn it!" She snarled.

The inquisitor lowered one star-white ear, and cocked his head to the side. "Ooh, transmitting to someone? A man on the inside? My men searching the other floors will find him in good time."

He flashed a predator's smile. "I'm giving you three seconds to drop your weapons and submit to my justice."

—

The best day in Skai Degani's life was also the hottest day he can ever remember, because of course it was.

Standing in line at Starlight Rapids—the biggest water park in Dawnspire, maybe even in the whole wide Empire—until his feet hurt, because of course they did. To make matters worse his mom, Skeivola—the best mom a quiet boy could ever ask for because of course she was—forgot his very favorite water bottle. The one with all the awesome Ancestor Knights on it. Because she had a long night at work, and she was very very tired.

Two tickets. His mom always would complain that it's too expensive to go to Starlight Rapids, but on days like this it's just too hot to be inside. They pushed into the park and first thing's first, bought him a brand new water bottle filled up and icy cold. Skai wondered what they

did out in the desert before they figured out how to make ice. Underground wellsprings, where most of the water on Inos came from, were cool but not *cold*, and with the sun baking his stark white fur as they stood in line for water slides and wave pools he needed something really cold.

Skai laughed and laughed as he shot down the bright plastic tubes, rushing on the water and slipping up the sides. Breath catching, ears twitching each time he thought he'd flip right over onto his belly, but then he'd be dumped out into the sun and the chilly water with just enough time to turn around and watch his mom launch out right behind him in a white blur, smiling the whole way.

They pulled up next to each other, water running off drooping ears and flopping tails on the concrete ground that ringed the wave pool. Skai leaned against his mom as they watched a half-dozen species in twice as many colors splash and bob on the churning water. He glanced up at her, studied her face as she looked out across the water.

She wasn't smiling.

She wasn't smiling, so he stopped smiling too. That must have been the right thing to do because she couldn't be wrong.

He turned her expression over in his head. Picked it apart. Eyes fixed, not on the colors and forms and sprays of water catching the light of Godseye high above. She was staring at nothing. The empty space past the pool, past the water slides and the towers blasting upbeat music from loudspeakers.

Mouth drawn to a thin line, like she was trying really hard to concentrate on something. It reminded him a little bit of the face she made when she stared down at the complicated drawings on her drafting table. The pictures of guns all blown up so you could see the way the parts fit together.

Her ears were wet but she'd been sitting in the sun for a few minutes now. They were drooped low, but not from the weight of water. She was thinking about something.

Something that scared her.

He took a deep breath and popped up to his feet all at once, startling himself and his mom both out of the thought. His paws grabbed onto the wet fur of her arm and he started to tug at her.

"C'mon mommy," he said with bright eyes and a smile she could never resist, "I want to use the big water guns to spray people coming off the log ride!"

-

"Okay, fine." Stargazer whispered. *"Release my armor."*

A practical on either side. The inquisitor just a few steps away from her nose. Even if she raised her sword at one the other two would pounce on her. Could the armor take three at once in close quarters? Volnic regulars, maybe. Not inquisition practicals. Little Buddy would help if he could but it was clutching the data array, still copying. Running really was the best option.

So with her free hand, in a servo-assisted blur, she pulled one of the grenades from the quick release on her hip. In a flash the pin was out, metal clinked on metal and she was running.

The warbling explosion that followed drowned out the inquisitor's shout. Little Buddy on her back turned up a finger in a rude gesture at the group as they hammered toward the door behind them. That grenade was something very special. Something new. Its detonation affected

metal, and only metal. Disrupted its crystalline coherence. It turned dense structures into liquid for a short time. Enough time for the confused, stammering practicals to sink through the floor as if through quicksand.

Stargazer leapt into the opening. Boots slammed against the far wall as they magnetized. She glanced back down the hall. The inquisitor was saying something into his earpiece. He mentioned men up above. Taking advantage of the few precious seconds she still had while the floor roiled between them like an ocean she ran up the wall toward the crew deck. Footsteps thundering in the hollow dark.

The leap into the door of the crew deck completely destroyed it. Granted, these doors weren't reinforced or armored in any way. Just enough to prevent a crewman from falling into the shaft while the lift wasn't there. Not enough to prevent Scholartech armor at a mad leap from caving it in.

"*that* was smo~oth." Little Buddy drew out the word.

Stargazer moved through the hall quickly, passing doors marked with the names of the men who used to bunk there. Portraits of the glassy spires and desert mesas of Inos, the imperial homeworld. Reminders to maintain operational security when sending out messages via Pigeon drone.

"Why did you lock my armor?" She asked eventually, coming to a map of the floor and looking it over. Trying to find the next lift up to station control.

"he is not supposed to be here." Little Buddy replied as Stargazer began to move toward the large common room at the center of the floor. She would need to cross through there to reach the lobby for the elevator up to the top of the station. If the Inquisitor did have another team up here, that's where they would be.

"Who is he? What makes him different from every other tan-suit we've put down?"

"we laid a diversion for him. he must have called our bluff."

Stargazer stopped before a stately portrait of the Empress near the common room. Looking resplendent in blue and violet, the crown of Dawnspire framing her wide ears with silver and jewel. "You didn't answer my question, boss."

"he is the arch-lector's foremost torturer. if they capture you, i will not be able to save you. please forgive me.."

"All the more reason we should have killed him."

Boss kept a lot of secrets. No one agent ever had the full picture. It helped to hedge against possible compromise in case of capture. The best lies were the ones you didn't need to tell.

She crept through the common room, letting her dull-gray sword take the lead. Probably four times the size of the usual quarters, with a sitting area on one side. Several tables lined with chairs for meals. A large display on one wall with a whole shelf of entertainment systems below.

It reminded her almost of the layout of the apartment she once lived in, back before all of this. The way that the dining area gave way to her living room. Awards for excellence in engineering on one wall, her husband's game consoles below their large-format television. Could almost see it now. He'd put on another action movie that their son, Skai, was too young to watch. He used to beg to eat at the couch so he could be that much closer to the screen.

“are you listening to me?” The words appeared across her HUD in three times the normal font, ripping her from the memory.

“No, sorry. Checking the room.”

“i have defeated ninety-seven attempts to intrude upon your armor systems in the last fourteen seconds. signals originate from the access point in this room. we’ve been rumbled.”

—

The sun, so strong and so far away, seemed like a small thing to Skai as he trot alongside his mother across a wide bridge that spanned a lazy-river running underneath it. Lounging inii and kaaz, avisians and canii floated along the water beneath them on brightly colored inflatable rings. Hand in hand with his mother, they walked past other groups of laughing children and exhausted parents. The older kids teasing each other below poles set with fans and misters to help everyone keep cool as they moved from ride to ride.

The path forked at a cartoonish signpost marked with large wooden arrows pointing toward a winding path to “Adventure Cove” where the log ride lived with its credit-operated water cannons, and passed a statue of the park’s mascot—an avisian duck with vibrant plumage that Skai absolutely knew wasn’t the right color for that kind of avisian—down one side, and the other pointing up a hill towards “Snack City”.

His mother tugged him one way, but something caught his eye along the other. A gray-furred kit, eagerly lapping at a fresh scoop of ice cream in a wide mushroom cap, garnished with candy in the shape of little blue crystals, between two clinging paws. Smiling mothers dressed in swimsuits that looked almost the same but were different colors on each side, from the same store maybe? Skai stopped and stared, one ear cocked, as the trio came down the hill from Snack City, resisting the pull from his mother’s hand.

“Skai, my star, what’s wrong? I thought you wanted to go do the water guns?” She asked in a syrup-sweet voice, adjusting the big floppy sun hat she bought so she could look a little less silly and see what he was looking at.

That’s right. He knew he recognized her. Mira! Yeah, that was his best friend Mira! Felt a little bad that it took him so long to figure it out. Were those her moms? She got to have *two moms*? He thought she only had one mom! Skai took that idea apart for a moment. If he had two of his mom, then one of them could be at work building cool stuff and the other could be at home playing with him. Mira must have been the luckiest girl on all of Inos.

“Mom, mom! That’s Mira! I wanna go say hi, can we go say hi?” He gripped his mother’s arm with both paws, trying to tug her toward Mira’s family as they grew closer. “Come on, please? I haven’t seen her since Mrs. Bright’s class, please?”

She tilted her hat and looked away. Was she hiding her face? Why didn’t she want to move? Her muzzle scrunched like she was going to say something as she tried to pull away but she didn’t, why didn’t she? Skai let go of her with one paw, pointed to Mira and waved his hand like mad, jumping up and down to get their attention. Calling her name.

Mira’s mothers waved. His mother waved back. Their smiles were real. Her’s wasn’t. He could tell. His dad said you knew a fake smile because their eyes weren’t smiling too and there was fear in her eyes, not happiness. It didn’t add up, but Skai didn’t have time to put this puzzle together as Mira bounded over once she saw him, lighting up and moving at playground speed

over the paved pathway until a paw moving too fast for its own good hit a crack in the pavement and Mira pitched forward. Ice cream flung and splattered in a bright spray over the dark pathway.

Everything was still in that moment, as Mira's ears slowly flattened. Tears welling up. Skai let go of his mother's arm and rushed over to her, grabbing her up into a big hug, tail swinging in wild white arcs behind him.

Mothers all mutually caught up to their children. Both of Mira's descended onto her and split the pair up, checking for scrapes or bruises, doting about the lost ice cream. Skai's mother just rested her paw on his shoulder and he turned his head up to look at her as they all exchanged greetings. Kalin was an Inii of dark colors, like Mira, gray all over save for splashes of white on her face, her exposed belly, and up her legs like natural little socks. Lilia was bright orange, a little taller and a little rounder than Kalin. Mira and Skai smiled at each other, waiting attentively for their turn to talk again.

"My name is Skeivola." Skai's mother extended a white-furred hand sharply and Kalin and Lilia each took her hand and shook it, one after the other. She straightened her back just a little bit, not enough for most people to notice but Skai noticed more than most. The way she got when she was talking with a client. "You've probably met my husband, his schedule is a little bit more open and he tends to be Skai's chaperone at school events."

Kalin and Lilia shared a quick look and then Kalin snapped her fingers, "Skeivola! That's a beautiful name. Y'know I've heard a lot about you from Mira and Skai, those two are inseparable." Kalin tousled the hair between Mira's ears and she giggled.

Skai's mother froze for just a moment. A heartbeat. No one else would have noticed, but Skai knew his mother the way no one else did. He knew what to look for when something was wrong. Her breath stopped and her face sharpened. Ears twitched downward just a tiny bit. She swallowed. "I... trust you've heard good things."

Lilia laughed. She covered her mouth when she laughed and Skai thought it was kind of cute. "The little ones say your work in weapons development is quite admirable."

Skai interrupted, "It's awesome! I said it's *awesome*!"

Skeivola glared at her son. Not a full turn of the head. Not a snarl. But the movement of an eye to fix on him, fiery orange. Intense. The look he got moments before getting in trouble. He felt something sink in his belly and his ears drooped. Then his mother cleared her throat.

"What an imagination my son has, vision is a virtue after all!"

She faked a smile. "It's correct that I design military equipment, yes, but I'm not..." Searching for something. She wanted to lie to them and Skai knew it. "I suppose I've done a small amount of consulting work on a few designs."

Nevermind the phrase *Degani means precision*. Skai's father came up with that one before the trade show that made his mother famous.

"I primarily focus on all-terrain vehicle designs and exocraft systems."

That's not true. She's got it all backwards.

"And my husband works primarily in marketing and sales."

Thinking about his dad made Skai a little sad. He was a salesman, a nice face and a smooth talker, like those guys in the movies who are always making 'special deals' with shady guys who have lots of money. His parents worked closely together, but his mom spent a lot of

time in the lab. Time that he and his dad would be playing games together or swordfighting in the back yard.

Skai and Mira slinked away as the adults continued talking. They padded over to the resting place of Mira's ice cream and stared down at it. More melted than not on the pavement which had been soaking up sun all day.

"I think your ice cream is dead." Skai said, and looked up at Mira with ears flat.

She nodded. "Yeah I think it's dead too. It's so hot and my moms said I could only have *one treat!* Now my treat is all splatted on the ground."

Skai nodded back. "Yeah. I'm really sorry. My mom didn't want to come say hi but we haven't gotten to play together since school was over and I was just happy to see you and stuff."

Then, an idea struck him. He unclipped his water bottle from where it was hanging by a small carabiner from a loop on his shorts and passed it to her. "Here! This is nice and cold! Have some water."

She took a drink and his tail began to swish behind him again. As Mira passed it back to him, he realized there was something else he could do. Without explanation, he grabbed Mira's paw and looked up at her with wide eyes.

"Come on!" He said, leading her at a jog back to where their mothers were talking.

Skeivola stood confident and straight talking about something, while Mira's mothers nodded along with smiles on their faces. Whatever was on her mind before, Skai could tell it had passed. Or, perhaps, she'd covered it up as she tried to steer the conversation away from her work.

"Figured I would take the day off, Goddess knows I need to take a week but the work never stops."

"Mommy!" Skai interjected, running in between them to break up the chatter. "Mommy, I know what I want to do with the money from grandma."

Skeivola blinked a few times. "Oh? What do you want to do with your money from grandma?"

"You said we always have to look out for each other right? It's a Inii value right?" Skeivola swallowed and nodded her head. "Yeah, that's right little star."

"I wanna buy Mira and me a new ice cream. Will you take us, please? *Please?* You don't even have to stop talking about grown up stuff but Mira could only have one treat and her treat—"

His mother laughed and pulled her son into a hug. "Of course I'll take you. That's so sweet of you to do for your friend."

—

The eastern wall exploded inward, showering her in fragments of plaster and steel that thunked against her armor. A thudding rush of armored footsteps behind a billowing cloud of debris. She brought up her sword barely in time to catch a mace, its head crackling with energy against the edge of her blade, mono-edged steel biting into the weapon. This gave her enough leverage to push it away, the practical holding it sent stumbling.

"two more. both sides. one behind." Little Buddy silently advised.

Stargazer whirled, bringing her weapon about in a deadly spiral. A practical with a mask like a skull dipped out of the way, and another dashed in on her left and thumped her on the

small of her back with his mace. Energy arced across the surface of the armor, causing servos and systems to seize and scramble before regaining control. Just one hit could drop a raging six hundred pound Mustel. The insulating layer below the impact plating of her armor might protect her body, but too many hits would fry the systems that made moving and fighting possible.

The sound of metal on metal rang out behind her. Little Buddy had cracked a practical approaching from behind across his visor with the data array. He stumbled back. Stargazer pressed the advantage.

She danced away from the three engaged with her, brought up her sword, and drove it point-first smooth as butter through the chest of the practical that Little Buddy had knocked off-balance. Breath caught. He gagged. Stargazer threw him from the end of the blade with a swift kick that sent his body up and over the couch on the far side of the room, flipping it in the process.

"run. now--ajwher12jt0lk69jy"

Gibberish text shook across her visor as an electric mace from behind smashed against Little Buddy and the array both, rocking Stargazer forward. Armor seizing, nearly bringing her down.

Stargazer sprang forward. She charged the door she had sealed behind her and smashed through it completely.

"they're still coming."

"I can't fight them all at once, Boss." Stargazer hissed through grit teeth.

"funnel them through the room on your right. go."

Shouts behind her. A stunner shot flashed past her head, bright blue. She threw her weight against the door Little Buddy had directed her to, smashing it to splinters, bursting into the common quarters beyond. This triggered the proximity mine her pursuers had previously attached to the ceiling.

The blast caught Stargazer by surprise and threw her against the ground. Her face smashed against the inside of her helmet when it bounced off of the floor. The lenses over her eyes cracked, her nose bled and throbbed with pain. She swallowed hot blood, grabbed her sword, and tried to lever herself up onto her feet. Gotta get moving again.

"no, play dead." Little B's words distorted around the crack across her lenses, then he let the array slump onto her back as he held his arms in a disorderly feign of death.

"the blast ruined the array. so i'll just give it back to them. when i do, through the door."

The practicals caught up a few seconds later.

"Target down. Moving to subdue." One of the practicals said as he stepped into the ruined quarters, kicking aside debris from the drop ceiling and half-melted plastic furniture.

He knelt behind her, stunner holstered, mace hanging at his belt. He drew and readied his restraints. Then Little Buddy slammed the data array into his head.

The heavy construct of storage drives smashed the practical's helmet, knocking him over completely. Stargazer scrambled up as stunner shots came in from behind. Little Buddy threw the array at the group of rallying practicals, cracking two of them right in their exposed faces, and Stargazer burst through the connecting door to the storage room.

Into another trap.

A practical hiding just inside the door crushed her stomach with his mace. Her breath came out in a wheeze. In an instant, Little Buddy took over, drawing a line predicting the arc of

her right arm's swing up through the practical's chest. Then moved the servos of her armor on its own before she could even take another breath. Slicing the graywashed ballistic plate of the practical's armor like cloth. Blood bubbled from his mouth as he choked.

In a pinch, Little Buddy could exert limited control over her armor systems. Enough to solve exactly those situations where an operative might be caught by surprise, stunned into inaction—and sometimes to motivate its operatives. Resource intensive and impractical, but highly effective.

After minutes of running, snaking between rooms and corridors, Stargazer slowed. No sign of the practicals still pursuing her. She needed to ascend. The control deck's observation windows would be thin enough she could detonate another Emulsifier Grenade and fall through them, exiting the station that way. The hull on any other deck would be too thick. She'd be stuck once the wall resolidified. But she was running out of time. Even despite the assistive technology of the armor her joints ached, breath came fast and heavy into her chest. Starting to feel her age again.

Her chest and her back throbbed with cramping pain. She rounded a corner in another common area deeper into the station, passing through a communal kitchen where someone had abandoned a bowl of soup when her arrival triggered the alarm. An open door near a fridge decorated with printed memoranda led into the deck's central junction: a cross of two hallways, with a gargantuan Volnic Research Directorate seal dominating the floor at the center.

"Do you see anything?" She leaned into the hall far enough to get Little Buddy's cameras on the end of its long stalk of a neck out into the open space.

"the lift which leads to station control is ascending from below. seventy percent certain it will arrive on this floor. i am intercepting new radio signals."

"More Practicals?"

"unlikely. autonomous transmissions between devices. enter the junction slowly and be prepared to shield yourself."

Stargazer took a step, revealing herself from behind the doorway. Then another, knuckles aching from the grip around her sword's hilt.

"transmissions are increasing in frequency."

Now she was out in the center of the junction. Expecting gunfire and practicals from all angles, standing atop that great seal she'd once held her hand over her heart and pledged allegiance to.

But there was nothing except the polite ding of the lift arriving at the far end of the corridor ahead. The doors slid silently open.

The inquisitor stood triumphantly inside with a device held high in his hand. Armed practicals on either side. The grenade she had thrown warped the metal of the station and dropped them through the floor, how could they possibly have—

A shockwave ripped through the space between them. Her left arm jolted in front of her, yanked by a puppeteer's string—Little Buddy's split-second intervention. Her protective shield blazed to life as a half-dozen explosions rocked the center of the junction, throwing shrapnel and debris.

She was so dazed that it took her seconds to realize she'd been buried under debris. Smoke, sulfur, and plaster dust choked the air. Heat inside her gauntlet bordered on unbearable and she caught the stink of burnt fur.

“hold. repulse on my command.”

Stargazer set her jaw against the searing pain up her forearm.

Through tears, she could see the bulkheads, the furniture and office partitions, and the deck plating splintered and blown apart in the explosions. Exposed metal in gnarls, bundles of wire sparking. The symbol of the Research Directorate utterly destroyed. Practicals closing in on all sides with the inquisitor and his grisly knife close behind.

His proud voice cut through the ringing in her ears. “Why do rebels always force me to make a mess of everything we’ve built? I gave you the chance to come quietly, and now look at this place.”

The pain in her arm had gone from sizzling to screaming but she continued to hold. Every nerve from claw to elbow set alight as the gauntlet’s systems took on more heat. Too much.

She didn’t move.

The inquisitor’s voice filtered through the debris above her. “He can’t move while that shield is up. The moment he drops it, subdue him in the name of Her Majesty.”

The inquisitor took a step back and the ring of practicals closed in. Briefly, they physically shielded him from her.

“release.”

Stargazer thrust out her arm, shattering the barrier. The full force of the trap thrown outwards. Metal fragments punched through flesh, pieces of the walls and tiles shattered bone, ripped their armor to tatters. Inii bloomed bright red as they fell dead across what remained of the tile flooring.

The inquisitor flipped the knife in his hand, baring teeth. “Fine,” he spat. “I’ll carve you out of that suit and drag you in myself.”

—

Skai, his mother, Mira, and her mothers spent the rest of the day riding every ride at Starlight Rapids. They all mounted up on a water cannon and soaked the riders coming down the big drop at the log ride, right as they thought they were done getting wet. Skai’s mother always aimed for the head, so Skai did too and they laughed and laughed. Mira and Skai pulled a fretting Lilia onto her first ever roller coaster—she was screaming the *whole entire time*. Skai bought Mira a new ice cream after midday passed so it wouldn’t melt in the heat right away, and the group took a long break under a striped parasol while the kits finished up.

The whole afternoon splashed by one waterslide at a time, and the pair of friends only got in trouble with the lifeguard *once* when they were roughhousing too much. To be fair, though, Mira started it and Skai was never a boy to be outdone so he finished it and then the lifeguard finished *them* by calling over their parents and kicking them out of the pool.

Afterwards, Skai crammed Mira and her mothers into a photo booth, but it took the effort of both kits to get Skeivola inside. She was doing that thing again. That stare off into nothing. It reminded Skai of the way he looked when he was trying to think about something really hard. What was she thinking about? Was there anything more important in the desert and the whole world than spending time with him?

The interior of the photo booth was little more than a metal box with a wide bench and a lime-colored background behind. Light strips ran the perimeter of the ceiling and cast a shifting rainbow gradient across the five Inii crammed inside. Once Skeivola had been coaxed in, Skai closed and locked the door behind them, squishing a groan out of Kalin and Mira stuffed in the middle.

A screen set into the wall opposite them lit up with brightly colored graphics. Kalin selected the amount of photos to take and sets to print—one for each family—but when the time came to choose the theme the kits couldn't decide between them. Luckily, they didn't have to choose. For her set, Mira got her way. The background with a little colorful bird and palm trees and gulls and a hot sun. For theirs, Skai picked a background that was nice and simple. The Starlight Rapids sign with the mascot leaning back on it, sunhat over his eyes. Flanked by the words: "Wish you were here". Because he did really wish his dad could be here with them. He probably wouldn't have fit in the photo booth though.

A countdown. Ten seconds, with a ticking clock graphic to accompany it.

Then the camera opened up, and began to take photos.

A silly one. Mira and Skai smushing up against Skeivola and pulling their cheeks into a wide smile.

A silly one. Skeivola giving Skai little two-finger bunny ears. Kalin and Lilia doing the same to Mira before they were able to notice.

An angry one. Skeivola, Kalin, and Lilia all laughing as the kits puffed up their cheeks.

A silly one. Mira and Skai pushing forward up into the camera with their tongues out so the camera couldn't see the adults at all.

And one single good one.

Skai snuggled up to his mother, smiling like the Goddess.

Kalin and Lilia each resting their heads on top of Mira's.

It really was a great picture. But Skai could tell that his mother had sad eyes, even despite her smile. There was a shine to them from the light of the screen. It made her look almost like she was about to cry.

The screen flashed that they could pick up their photos from the drop box on the outside of the booth, and Skai flipped the switch to unlock the door and pushed on it. But it didn't move.

He pushed, pushed, pushed. Knocked, knocked, knocked. Even thumped both feet against the door and nothing happened.

"Mommy the door's stuck!" Skai whined, ears back. Backing up to her for comfort as the door rebuffed his best attempts.

Mira started to whine to herself. Retreating and pressing herself against her mothers. "But I have to pee!"

Skeivola put a paw to her chin. Tapping her nose as she considered. Taking her cue, Skai took a deep breath and stared into the door with that far-off look his mother sometimes got. He began to turn the problem over in his head.

The door only shuts with a lock—no latch. The lock works by turning a little knob. If the lock has to push into the door jamb to make it stay closed to keep the light in, there's probably something like a pair of gears that turn because of how the knob moves that pull or push the lock along.

Skai lowered one ear. Tilted his head just slightly to the side. His mother was trying to slide a card in the space between the door and the jamb but that didn't work.

He had turned the knob all the way, he knew he did.

The gears moved by the knob must not be catching on the knob itself.

Which means that no matter *how* he moved it, it wouldn't budge.

"We need a lever." He said after considering it for a while. "There's a bit of metal that pushes into the wall and holds it closed. The knob is supposed to move it but it isn't anymore. We have to push it back on its own."

Skeivola's card slipped and it fell from her hands. She cursed under her breath. Mira had begun to restlessly sway herself back and forth.

Skai picked the card up and turned it over in the colored light. His mother's installation access card. A precious thing. Something she'd get in a lot of trouble if she lost. Her picture on the front standing stark and straight in her Volnic Research Directorate uniform made him so proud. "We can use a card like this," he said, passing it over to his mother. "We don't have something bendy enough to get into the wall-hole but we can make a dent in a card like this so we can pull on the metal bit. Then we just nudge-nudge-nudge it back into the door!"

Kalin rummaged in the handbag that she had with her, and withdrew a thin metal file. "Here, you can whittle the plastic down with this."

Skeivola took the file, and began to whittle at the middle of the card. Plastic dust flaked off and rained down like a little stream of snowflakes.

"Mommy wait isn't that—" Skai started, but his mother stopped him with a raised finger which said everything she needed him to hear.

After a few minutes of filing, not a minute too soon for Mira who Skai was worried would blow up from holding it for so long, Skeivola had shaved a depression into the middle of the card and passed it back to Skai. "Let me know if I need to make it any wider, little star."

Had she meant to file into the image of her own face?

He pushed the card against the metal bolt and with minute motion, slipped off it.

Mira's whines were getting louder. She couldn't hold it much longer.

"Come on, come on." Skai growled, seating the card against the bolt again and sliding, sliding, sliding against it. He could feel it moving. Just tiny bits. Fractions of centimeters. But movement was movement.

"Hey Mira," Skai asked, sweat starting to bead at his brow as he continued to work his wrist against the stubborn bolt. "if you sing the theme song for *Princess in the Desert* I'll be done before you're finished and then you can run to the bathroom, okay?"

Mira started to sing. Shaking notes and screeching words, but they didn't have to sound good. They just needed to keep her mind off of the problem. Just until he could...

As the song hit its first chorus, he threw himself at the door, hoping it would be enough. It was. His body hit the door, threw it open. The chill of oncoming dusk hit the humid warmth of the air in the photo booth as his body met the concrete walking path. Mira bolted past him heedless of the fact that he was on the ground, moving in a blur of grey toward the nearest bathroom around the bend a few meters away.

His mother extended a hand for him, he took it and she helped him up. Skeivola brushed him off, then licked her thumb and rubbed some dirt out of the fur on his cheek. Any scuff on white fur was easy to see, she always said. Then she pulled her boy into a big hug.

"You're so smart, my star. That was good thinking."

He clung onto her with all his might. He wasn't sure why he did it. But he felt like it was the right thing to do. So, that's what he did.

"I just know you're going to grow up to use that big smart brain of yours to do something great. I'm sure of it."

"Mommy?" Skai whispered into his mother's ear.

She twitched a little bit and whispered back. "Yes, my love?"

"Why are you so sad today?"

—

Stargazer moved before she realized. He was cut off from his practicals, alone, with only a knife to defend himself. Practically no defense at all. She pressed him, sword flashing in the unsteady light from the flickering fixtures, half destroyed above them. The blade came up, but the armor seized for just a moment. The inquisitor dipped away from the ruined swing and riposted with his knife. Bashing the pommel against the side of her helmet.

"no—"

She rocked with the impact, making space before dashing in again with a wide arcing cut. Her legs moved wrong. The servos in the armor pulled in directions she didn't want to go. The slash came up short.

"Are you mocking me?" The inquisitor shouted, stepping in. Closing the distance. "Fight me like you mean it!"

"skeivola this is more important than—"

That sinister, hooked blade darted toward the lens over her eye. The sword came up to meet it in a heartbeat before it struck. The inquisitor pulled back, hook catching on the blade. Straining, faltering, failing to rip it free of her hold.

Boss was doing everything he could to stop her. It didn't make any sense. This inquisitor—any inquisitor—was dangerous. Close-quarter-combat training. Ruthless reputations. At least half a dozen heavily armed practicals in any given retinue. Even a single one posed a threat to their mission of putting a stop to the Empire's constant expansion and abuse of their subjects. Someone who stopped her and Boss from severing the head that wore the crown. If he was complicit, he had to die. That's just how it was.

"make space and run."

An armored gauntlet, thrown in a quick left hook took the inquisitor by surprise. Bone crunched. Blood sprayed from his nose. Stained his stark white fur and rolled down his chin in runnels. Stargazer stepped into the follow-up, and Boss yanked her legs out from under her. She fell. Her sword skittered across the floor to rest a few feet from the open door to the lift.

"just get up. go."

Her opponent fell onto her like a predator, his knife screeching off the plate of her armor. Little Buddy pinned between them. Squirming. The robot barely managed to unfold an arm. To catch the knife coming down to the exposed undersuit at the base of Stargazer's neck. Hinges squeaking as the bleeding inii pushed the blade closer. Closer.

Stargazer managed up to her hands and rolled him off of her. Throwing him to the ground. She was up. Heart thundering, breath coming hard. Whirled on a heel, stamped down onto his arm and he screamed. He let go of the knife.

"[skeivola]. [no]."

She came in with a powerful kick aimed for his ribs. Boss stopped her, made her drop a knee into his chest, squeezing a noise like a bellows from the inquisitor.

"[stop.]"

He groped for the knife. She got to it first. Snatched up that bit of wicked steel. Flipped it backwards in her hand.

"[you are making a]"

"[mistake]"

The entire right arm seized. She threw her weight against it anyway. Inch by inch by inch she drew that point closer. Just off the coast of his eye now. His bright blue eye. His calculating, scrutinizing eye.

An eye that saw through her. Armor and persona.

An eye that she had seen before.

In an instant, a lifetime rushed back to her.

Award night dinner. A breathtaking dance. An unforgettable night.

Discoveries and disasters. Inventions and interviews.

Motherhood.

Snow white fur. Piercing blue eyes.

Skeivola was overrun. She dropped the knife and it clattered to the floor near her son's head. Her punch had broken his nose. He growled hate deep in his chest with all the air he could muster below her weight. Following Boss's imperative to run had prevented her from getting a good look at his face, but now only a hand's span and twenty years separated them. She stammered, breathless. Skai thrashed underneath her.

"skeivola, i know you have questions, but we need to go [now]. the other practicals will catch up any second."

She jumped up and bolted into the open lift behind them. Dipped to grab her sword as her son coughed on the floor behind her. She hammered the button for the top floor. Skai gathered himself, red with blood, red with fury. Dark stains soaked into his shirt collar. Teeth locked in a skull's grimace as Stargazer shrank behind the closing doors and sheathed her sword.

"he will have to be dealt with eventually, i'm afraid. i hope you understand that i cannot postpone this forever - especially if your colleagues get involved." Little Buddy wrote into her vision.

She coughed, cleared her throat, trying to claw back her breath. It was a while before she could speak again. It gave her time to pick her words, try to think what Little Buddy would want to hear. "If he gets himself killed, if Thieving Fuck or The Professional put a bullet in him, I can't change that. I have to accept that."

The elevator dinged as it arrived at the top floor, the control center of the station and the doors slid slowly open and she stepped out. "But if we get the chance, can we save him too? He wouldn't have become an inquisitor if it wasn't for what I did to him. Let me atone for this sin, too."

Little Buddy was silent for a while. Then, slowly, it answered her. “you can’t take responsibility for his choices. who is to say the governance would not have selected him for this work anyway? he seems curious. he likes to ask questions. he could perhaps make a decent scholar. if and only if the probability of his defection becomes certain.”

Skeivola sighed to herself, shook her head as if trying to banish the image of his gnarled face framed in her lenses. That was her *son*. If anyone could stop him going further down the path of blood it was her. But without Boss’s support, her own atonement would be impossible. She’d encounter him again. That much was certain. Next time, she’d be ready for him.

The control center was a cavernous space with a dome entirely made of reinforced windows that looked out at the stars far beyond. Rings of terminals in a recessed pit, now abandoned, the men who used to control them all lying face down in their own blood several floors below. Three huge screens hung in the space between the floor and the high dome, each showing an intruder alert in flashing red.

Behind her, the lift doors closed and it began to descend.

They had lost the Array at around seventy percent or so copied over. Not the full backup of the Governance’s processing node, not the whole picture, but still planets upon planets worth of data for Boss to feed on.

She strode across the walkway toward the far end of the room, underneath the huge screens. Losing herself for a moment in the constellations far beyond the windows. Wondering where the planet Exos might have been. Her greatest sin that started all of this. She could still remember how bright it shined when she had burned it.

The lift arrived once again.

“move, now. we need to leave before reinforcements arrive.”

But she wanted one last look at him.

Heartbeats. Then he was there. Not even a pause for breath before he was out of the elevator, knife bared like a fang. Trying to stop the flood. Trying to think of what to say to him, because she owed him at least that much.

She backed up toward one of the windows that looked out into the void. He closed in at a full sprint. Her gauntleted fist smashed into the glass, sending a bloom of spiderweb cracks across the whole panel. Skai slammed against her with all his weight.

The knife slipped between two ballistic plates, ran through the weave underneath, and buried itself in her stomach.

Wet heat pooled in the space between her body and her suit. It purified her guilt like fire. Rendered sorrow down like fat.

He tried to pull the knife back, drive it in again, but adrenaline gave her just enough strength to lash out with a leg, catch his ankle, yank him off balance. She brought her gauntleted hand out, then slapped Skai across the face.

His cheek quivered. Whatever he had expected, it had not been that. The determination in his eyes disappeared and his grip on the knife went slack.

Despite the pain in her chest, the pinching stiffness of her armor working to stop the bleeding, she managed a few words. “Your mother loves you very, very much.”

Then she shoved her son’s body away from hers, after the closest thing they’d shared to an embrace since she abandoned him. Skeivola shoved him away with both arms and hammered her fist against the glass again. Again.

"Wait!" He shouted. All venom, all hatred gone from his voice as he reached out for her, but the glass exploded behind her. The open vacuum sucked the air from the room with a rush like a sandstorm. Her body was pulled out into space moments before an emergency bulkhead crashed down over the breach.

"How do you know my mother?" He whispered to no one.

—

Hours later, Skeivola drove them home. The eye of the Goddess had already set below the mountains and the opalescent glass spires that made up the Empire's greatest city. Crystalline formations refracted the light of fluorescent lamps and threw a soft glow around every corner. Skai had played so hard today he slept the whole ride, the reel of photos from the booth they got trapped in loosely held in his paw as he dozed.

After they pulled into the driveway of their large home, bought and paid for in lives as much as in Credit, Skeivola woke her son and carried him clinging to her inside. He jumped up onto the big bed in Skeivola's room and enthusiastically recited the story of the day's events to her husband whose bright smile never waned for even a single moment. Then it was time to get ready for bed. He changed into his favorite pair of pajamas, printed with stars and planets. Brushed teeth together with his parents in the wide porcelain washbasin that all three of them could use at once. They all shared a big group hug before Skeivola shepherded him to his room and told him to pick out a bedtime story and to curl up with his rocket ship blanket. The one that her husband had brought to the hospital with him the day that Skai was born.

Veshoa's Journey was a story as old as the sand, the rock, and the sky. Skeivola wasn't particularly partial to it, not anymore now that she could see the messages for what they were: A guidebook on how to become the kind of Inii that the Imperial society wants you to become. But it was an old story. Her grandmother had told it to her mother, her mother had told it to her, and she passed it to her son just the same. Who was she, after all, to spurn his choices knowing all the ones that she had made?

By the time she turned the final pages of the story, Skai was already asleep. Gentle breaths, soft snores as she put the book down on his nightstand and turned off the lamp. She rocked him gently awake and pulled him into a firm hug. "Have a good night, little Star. You sleep good, okay? Your mommy loves you very, very much."

Probably for the best that he nestled into his pillow so quickly once she laid him back down. Tears flecked off her cheek and just missed his face. She rose and made her way to the door, scanning over everything that was his, one last time. The posters, the books, the toy guns that looked disturbingly like the real ones that she herself had drawn the plans for. Messes in the corners he never quite cleaned up, no matter how many times he was told to. It seemed so perfect in that moment, boyhood distilled into an image.

Skeivola slowly shut his door behind her. Slipped down the hallway that spanned the whole upper storey of their house to check in on her husband, already fast asleep himself with his reader tablet still lit up on his chest. She snuck downstairs, careful not to make a single creak, a single sound. Passing by the portraits of her family. Every major event up to now. The awards dinner where she met her husband and the award for excellence in her field that she

won there. Her wedding. Skai's birth and the last day of his first year at school. The cover of *Bleeding Edge* magazine featuring Skeivola in a lurid pose with a CQC-19 Assault Rifle over her shoulders, the words *MOTHER DEATH* prominently displayed in a bright typeface.

Only a few years after the photo shoot, the interview with *Bleeding Edge* where she discussed pushing the boundaries of weapons and ballistics technology to keep Volnic soldiers and voidcrew coming home safe to their families, she allowed herself to take part in the biggest mistake of her career. Her greatest sin. The root of all this guilt. The magazine cover was the last thing she allowed herself to hang on what used to be her "I love Me" wall.

In the closet nearest the front door, she gathered the bag she had packed two days before and set inside nestled in the back as if it had always been there, and swept silently out of her home into the chill arid night. Lit from beyond the windows of glass towers, with the flare of fission engines passing overhead. The din of accliveters, traffic, and desert wind thrummed through her. Dawnspire was alive even at this hour.

She sank behind the wheel of her lift-car and started it up, joining its growling voice to the chorus. Lights off, so that they wouldn't stream through the windows into a home that didn't belong to her anymore. They would have so many questions. If Skai came running from the house and forced her to answer them now, she might not have the heart to follow through with this. Her only chance at redemption.

Skeivola Degani was his mother, but she was also Mother Death. In both she knew she was raising broken children. The cost to her was simple. The cost to her boy, her precious boy, would be immense. Nevertheless she needed to pay for what she did. How could she ever call herself a good and moral person with the blood of millions, maybe billions on her hands after the Volnic Empire dropped a planet cracking bomb that she helped to design on Exos? There was only one way to come to an answer. Just one hand to take to pull her out of hell.

She considered destroying the photos they took earlier that day, but she couldn't do that to him too. They were a risk. She could be identified from those images. Kalin and Lilia questioned. Skai would need them, though. He would need them the way he needed her and she couldn't possibly take that away too. There was so much cruelty in her, she had seen it, she knew. But not this much. Never this much. Skeivola Degani wiped away tears. It hurt so much to leave her boy and so many questions behind. But for the Empire to lose its Mother Death, Skai had to lose his mother too. So she put her car into reverse, looked over the life she had built over so many years, and gave it all up.