

World Station Glorindal

Timothy Honore was many things; determined, focused, uncompromising at times, and idealistic to an extent, among other traits deemed valuable for a noble Knight of the Solarian faith and people.

One of the traits normally *not* prescribed to him was curiosity. Yet when Tenant Jamison Argole abruptly woke from late hour slumber, then left the Solarian Quarter with considerable haste and even more considerable stealth, the Knighthood Initiate was stirred as well.

To be perfectly fair, Timothy had felt something... off... about the nobleman that oversaw Solarian military operations for the massive deep space “world station.” The young male had taken it upon himself to watch and sense the commander’s movements so closely that the mere process of the older Knight waking up did the same to the young Initiate.

“What are you doing? It’s one tenth into the early ten,” a voice muttered sleepily, reinforcing the obvious fact that it was the depths of the galactic standard night. Initiate Emmitt Fransisca’s blanket-covered lump on the lower bunk barely moved, aside from what could have been an involuntary shuffle of half-consciousness.

“Can’t sleep,” Timothy answered, as he geared himself up for battle, complete with full field armor, military grade plasma shell pistol and the hypersteel longsword that declared a Solarian Knight’s noble station.

At this point, his bunk mate rolled over, and with sleep-hazed green metallic eyes mumbled, “So, you’ve decided to go take a walk in full combat ordinance?” The elder Initiate sighed, “I have no idea what you’re about to do, but I suspect whatever it is could get you discharged and jailed.”

“That’s doubtful, Fransisca,” Timothy answered.

“Right, of course... you’re an Honore, the highest family within the Knighthood; how could I forget?” Emmitt replied, his voice reflecting a hint of bitterness. “No one at any level of the Adjudicates would *dare* criminalize such a noble line.”

“No, because I won’t get caught.”

“Yeah... that too,” Emmitt mumbled, turning back over to try and return to sleep. Timothy was probably right about that too. The kid was a literal prodigy, accomplishing at fourteen staryears what took most of his fellow Initiates up to twenty. He was already the physical, mental, and psionic equal (or superior) of all his peers, with a handful of years of growing yet to do. “Well, whatever you do, I know nothing, understand?”

“Of course.”

Timothy left his slumbering bunk mate, and stepped out into the hall where all the Initiates’ quarters were situated, merely one fingertip in the much larger body that was the Glorindal space station.

It was called a “world station” for good reason, being the largest artificial construction in the recorded history of the galaxy, several times larger than the massive Dreadnoughts the Solarian Fleet employed. At over two thousand TackMets from the apex of the fore section to the apex of the aft, it comfortably housed over seven million sentient beings, military munitions, and three distinct and completely legitimate cities – the centers of operations for the three separate political forces needed to design, build, and operate this “pinnacle of civilization.”

Such an alliance truly was a rare period of genuine cooperation. The Galactic Parliament overwrote the project, but it was the two vassal states, Solaria and Arcadia, that provided the manpower, materials, and the great majority of the initial funding. The state of cooperation was

remarkable in that the Arcadians were a largely atheistic society, to the point of violent abhorrence to anything that might be remotely construed as religious. Meanwhile, the Solarians were a people of their own due to a schism caused by matters of faith; a society driven almost entirely by religious dogma and a grand divinity centered on the Solarian temple.

Which was theoretically why he was here in the first place; most Initiates to the Knighthood rarely traveled past their homeworld, whether it be Solaria or any of the bundle of auxiliary colony planets the Solarian people had occupied over the last eight hundred staryears. Glorindal gave these young men the opportunity to interact with the other developed races of the galaxy in a relatively controlled setting; to learn the differences and how to deal with those who don't necessarily fall lock step with their beliefs.

In reality, both races kept mostly to themselves and interacted at the barest minimum, made easy due to the simple size of the station. This made Tenant Argole's movements even more suspicious, as Timothy felt the officer's psionic aura moving out of the Military Sector, and even out of Yaral, the Solarian city on Glorindal. Even more suspicious was that he was moving by some sort of vehicle rather than the teleportation skills he would have to possess with his level of ability.

Teleportation was, in truth, a misnomer; what psionics did wasn't exactly teleportation, as the psionic barely moved during the process, but it was what the laymen and uneducated came to call it, and such it took on the inaccurate descriptor. In reality, it was more of a subspace fold, where a shortcut through the physical world was created, and the psionic merely stepped through the tunnel.

But doing so expended a tremendous amount of energy, so much that even a short fold was like flashing a large, glowing beacon telling every psionic sensitive anywhere near the area where you went... that is, if you didn't know the trick to hiding it.

By channeling the radiated energy from teleportation towards a certain direction, a psionic can make it practically invisible to anyone not within that narrow channel; which was what Timothy did to prevent alerting the peacekeepers patrolling the Military Sector to his actions.

It didn't solve all his problems, as without a good idea as to Argole's destination (both in distance and a clear mental image of where exactly to fold himself), he couldn't teleport directly to that location; but it did get him outside the careful monitoring of his fellow Knights, Initiates, and other units of the Solarian Military.

At this point, his plan started to hit some fairly major snags. Procuring a vehicle in which to maintain pursuit proved to be a difficult proposition... first, he was technically underage to drive a civilian hover, and second, finding a distributor that was still operating at this extremely late hour would be quite frustrating.

A tenth-cycle had passed before he found a potential method of transport; the fixed hover rail. Public transportation ran mostly the entire cycle, if on very limited schedules that would make pursuit even less successful. Nonetheless, rather than cause a scene by appropriating a manual hover through probably illegal means, the rail was his only suitable option.

Not that boarding a rail in full combat ordinance would necessarily be discreet, and the four passengers, all of them Arcadians likely trying to return to their side of the station, were put slightly on edge as they took seats as far away from Timothy as they could manage.

At this point, however, he was largely moving blind. Tenant Argole's aura had faded off in the distance, and Timothy could only hope he caught a whiff of the nobleman as the rail zipped off towards Glorindal Central Junction.

Until he got a piece of unexpected assistance...

It flashed at the top of his helmet's HUD, a single line of communication in text format, likely to conceal the identity of the sender and reduce the size of the transmission so that it could more easily slide under the radar of automated communications filters.

➤ *And where would a Solarian Knight be going at this time of night, hmm?*

Timothy was terribly short on time to be dealing with a second-rate hacker. He couldn't imagine receiving an unidentified communication in the dead of night from anyone else. Rather than give the deviant any more than he was given, Timothy opened a text line of his own and activated the sensors in his glove fingers into a virtual keypad.

➤ ***Nowhere that concerns you. Now get out of my communications link before I have you apprehended.***

➤ *Is that any way to treat someone who just wants to help?*

Somehow, Timothy doubted benevolence drove this hacker's intentions, but also knew that such people could access information that would be difficult (if not impossible) to get through legal and official channels. It might prove worthwhile to play the game for now, since he still had nothing to go on.

➤ ***And how exactly do you plan to help me?***

➤ *Well, considering that you're the second Solarian Knight to show up on the station positioning grid, and the second one trying to be real quiet about it judging from your modes of travel, I'd bet an account of credits that you're trying to follow him and not be discovered doing it.*

➤ ***So we've got the notice of the station peacekeepers?***

➤ *No, nothing like that. The PKs have stopped trying to figure you Solarians out. Unless you move in mass, you're just a blip barely worth paying attention to. Although they might get curious if they look at bit more closely and see that you have no info tags corresponding with your movements. Nice bit of work blocking that, by the way.*

Timothy almost let slip that the lack of info tags had nothing to do with anything he did, and everything to do with Solarian classified information on their Knights and Initiates. The information software "tags" that linked a Knight's combat ordinance to security detection could not be found on any server other than the homeworld of the Knight owning the hardware. It was likely a violation of some Galactic Alliance treaty.

➤ ***Then how do you know who is who?***

➤ *Oh, your friend isn't nearly as careful. The network has been watching him for a while... Tenant Jamison Argole, if I remember correctly.*

➤ ***And why does he have your attention?***

- *That's not how we play this game. You want more information out of me; you have to share some of your own. Why are YOU following our mutual friend?*
- ***Suspicious behavior since I was assigned to the station; if I knew precisely what he was doing, I wouldn't be trying to tail him.***
- *You expect me to believe that?*
- ***Whether you believe it, or not, is your initiative. If I had anything concrete as to what precisely he was up to, I'd have him in front of the Solarian Adjucate General on this station.***
- *Very well... suppose I believe you, why would you care?*
- ***Behaving in such a manner dishonors the uniform and the oath of knighthood he took just by itself, and it tells me he is something even more despicable to hide. My order has had enough shame and reprehensible actions that have gone unpunished. I will not tolerate another while I have the power to do something about it.***
- *Right... okay... whatever. Forget I asked.*

Timothy let silence rule out over the hacker's final statement. Unfortunately his unwelcome companion didn't have that same sentiment.

- *What, you're not going to ask what I want?*
- ***I'd rather you get to the point where you help me than waste my time with life stories.***
- *I'll tell you where Tenant Argole is going. But I need you to secure something for me when you take him down.*
- ***You assume I'm taking him down.***
- *You wouldn't be loaded for war if that wasn't your plan. I've determined you're in full combat ordinance carbide at least. Give me a few demi-ticks and I can tell you the security identification code on your sidearm. I'll give you this; you Solarians are pretty good with your encryption.*

This was where Timothy stopped liking the turn of events, and the conundrum he found himself in. There was little doubt the hacker wanted something he (or she, Timothy supposed) should not legally have; either technology or information. If he gave his word, he'd be honor bound to uphold it, a promise he was not going to make until he knew more.

- ***I'm not agreeing to anything until I know what you're looking for. For all I know, you haven't any clue what is going on, and are hoping I'm stupid enough to give you what you want.***
- *I have reason to believe that Argole possesses information on the Baramak Slaughter, information I'm looking for.*
- ***You and five trillion other hackers in the galaxy.***
- *It was my home planet, jerk! If Argole has anything about why your people decided to burn up half of it, I want to know!*
- ***And you think Tenant Argole carries highly sensitive and utmost tier secured information on him at a whim?***

- *In his comp unit, I'm sure. I figure if he's too busy fighting you off he won't be jumping to defend his data from my prying little fingers.*
- ***So, that's your deal then? For me to be a convenient diversion for your hacking efforts?***
- *Pretty much. You in or not? Otherwise, good luck finding Argole. This station is only... what... a couple thousand TackMets from end to end?*

The Solarian Initiate suspected he was going to regret this decision at some point, but had to admit he was rather curious about the events this hacker was trying to discover, for his own reasons. Besides, Timothy doubted that a minor noble like Tenant Argole had anything that would be so classified.

- ***Very well, you have an agreement. Where is the Tenant currently?***
- *Where he is right now isn't nearly as important as where he is going. It's a docking and cargo bay on the aft section of the station. I'm uploading coordinates and a station map onto your interior visor display right now.*

To the lower left side of his vision, a small closed panel popped up. Turning his focus to that panel, it opened to a full transparent overlay projected across his visor with a shimmering white ring and crosshairs over his supposed target. He could take the rail all the way to the Central Junction and probably find transportation at or close to that point, but there might be a faster way.

- ***Is there any current visual surveillance of that area?***

There was no immediate response, which was partially expected, but not getting a reply for nearly a full tick piqued the Initiate's curiosity.

- *There's video surveillance in all areas of the station, but someone disabled it around that small unit. Whatever is going on over there, they don't want anyone to know about it. Could be another hacker like me, or they have someone in the Joint Security Task Force under their employ.*

This gave Timothy a hint of pause.

- ***What do you mean, "their" employ?***
- *Hold a tick... you were following this Tenant around, thinking he was acting all on his own? Curse the Old Religion, I had personally tagged sixteen different people from all over this station from all the different developed races of this grand galaxy before they got wise to me and started really locking down security.*
- ***Any idea what they would be doing?***
- *This is a big galaxy, my sheltered friend. They could be doing anything illegal or merely of questionable morality.*

For a moment, Timothy considered taking issue with the implication he was sheltered, but for one, figured it wouldn't be worth the effort, and for two, the rail started slowing towards

the stop he had signaled for when he had acquired a destination for his quarry. Not wanting to cause a scene by asking the rail operator to continue, he stepped off the train car and onto a platform that was the closest to the middle of nowhere a person could get on a space station.

- *What are you doing? Why'd you disembark?*
- *Waiting for you to get me some visual surveillance.*

There was another moment of communication silence, which either meant the hacker was quickly to work, or too annoyed with the turn of events to immediately reply. Demiticks later, he received implied confirmation of the latter.

- *Fine, give me a tick or two.*

Timothy started entertaining himself with his surroundings, a vast expanse of flat cultivated farmland with very few notable landmarks, just a stretch of open air all the way up to the top of the currently dark station ceiling.

With little to note along the horizon, his attention turned to a community message board, illuminated by a pair of dim glowing tube fixtures at the top of the board. The contrasts in culture and sophistication were amusing at least... a small farming collective using nothing more than handwritten (occasionally type printed) paper pinned to a slab of wood on a post while the proclaimed greatest technological marvel of the galaxy spanned in all directions around them.

There wasn't much of interest to him on it, so it didn't entertain him for long; just a few announcements, a handful of advertisements, and a smattering of lost pet pleas. The Solarian people as a whole rejected keeping animals in their homes for companionship before they were advanced enough to even escape their planetary orbit, so the idea of growing that attached to lower species was a largely foreign concept to him.

- *I got your visual. Transferring now. I'll say this; their doormen don't exactly look of fine, upstanding sort.*

Timothy was in agreement when a panel to the upper left popped into existence, and gave him a real-time visual of the scene just outside his destination. Four Ubeks, two to each side, were flanking the closed gate from the cargo bay to the rest of the station proper. To their credit, they were trying to look inconspicuous, but it's hard to blend in when you are nearly twice the size of other sentient races and have blue skin.

He started manually controlling the feed, looking for an appropriate place in which to make his next teleportation maneuver. He really didn't want to make a scene until he found out more about the secret business the commanding Knight on the station was involved in and why. Space stations didn't afford many alleys, cubbies, or hideaways, and so he had to settle for distance rather than a convenient hiding spot.

Timothy shielded his psionic aura as tightly as possible once he sensed Tenant Argole approaching. It did no good for him to be discovered now, and he wanted to confirm beyond any doubt that the nobleman was going into the location identified.

The Tenant's hover vehicle pulled to a stop, and Argole swiftly climbed out of the port side hatch as it folded open, the vehicle itself pulling away with great speed the moment its passenger had exited. Quite familiar with the surroundings, the senior Knight nodded to the

Ubeks still vainly trying to look casual, and stepped through the personnel door next to the bay's main gate like he owned it.

Something told Timothy he wouldn't have such luck. He would need to find another way in to continue his investigation.

- *Not much to discover out here, huh? Got to get inside, don't you?*
- ***Got any ideas?***
- *I do, in fact. Go to the next bay to the fore... Docking Bay 2201. I've hacked in an impromptu... station exterior servicing. You can take the service walkway directly to the mechanics closet back and forth. By my information, no one is in either. You will be exposed to deep space, but there should be vacuum suits available within the closets.*
- ***No need. Solarian combat suits are designed to handle short term vacuum and radiation exposure.***
- *I wasn't aware that outer space was a climate in which Solarians fought in to the point where it was a trait desirable in their equipment.*
- ***We like to be prepared for any contingency.***
- *Apparently.*

Truth be told, Timothy didn't understand why that feature was designed into their gear either; not that he was going to complain about it now. Stepping away from his vantage point, he went down the line towards the docking bay in question, entering through the smaller service door and into the dark, unused space.

The overhead lighting came to life before Timothy had even completed his second step, revealing what the dark had made quite obvious, that there was nothing of note within the empty bay. Judging from the puffs of dust he kicked up with his steps, there hadn't been much recent use either.

- *The maintenance closet should be to your right. I've hacked the verification lockout so that it should just let you in.*

True to her word, the normal red glowing trim along the door was a calm blue, and slid open with a tap on the touch pad to the right of the frame. The closet itself provided very little space for movement considering the amount of supplies stacked in varying degrees of safety within.

Further down the narrow room was the unforgiving blackness of outer space, held back by the translucent sheet of energy that was the bay's restraining field. Timothy acknowledged the first time he left Solaria and arrived on Glorindal, it was considerably unnerving to see the impenetrable void in front of him with no physical barrier between him and the cold vacuum.

But, as Timothy felt he was infinitely adaptable in all things, he had adjusted quickly. And so, with no hint of fear, he passed through the field, and onto the exposed station's exterior...

... and fell flat on his face when the gravity shifted.

The interior of Glorindal utilized an artificial gravity generator to keep everyone on the same plane rather than scattered all about depending on their position relative to the station's center of mass. Outside the station, however, that field didn't exist. Thus, the sheer mass of

Glorindal, roughly equivalent to a small moon, took over and Timothy's weight distribution abruptly shifted forward about sixty degrees.

Hissing in discomfort from the pain due to his fall, he slowly pushed himself back up and found himself staring up into the star-speckled darkness of outer space.

He had been told that there was a moment of crippling epiphany when a person saw the depths of space all about them for the first time; when the whole entirety of the universe sank in and brought proper perspective as to just how small an individual was. That was not Timothy's impression... in fact he was rather underwhelmed by the sight. It was just empty blackness with little dots of light scattered all over. After enough time, even the universe rather loses its wonder, he supposed.

➤ *Enjoying the view? Don't you have work to do?*

Timothy sighed. How did he explain it was exactly the opposite... even if it was worth the effort to do so? He gingerly turned about, keeping a grip on the nearby railing. Once he felt his balance was secure, he started moving towards his destination.

Holding onto the railing wasn't terribly important, even as Timothy did so to be cautious. As long as he didn't do something stupid like run at a full sprint and trip, or teleport and grossly overshoot his target, there was little concern that he would fly off into the depths.

That was a good thing, as he wanted to pick up his pace; both to get to his location before Tenant Argole did, and because the air supply within his armor was not particularly vast. It didn't turn out to be much of a concern though, as the only hang-up he had was when nearly fell flat on his chest again once he re-entered the artificial gravity of the station.

The scene he entered was much like the one he left, a maintenance closet filled haphazardly with tools and supplies; the marked difference being less dust and the sounds of activity coming through the wall from the bay itself.

➤ *I'm gonna get quiet from this point on. They've likely got all sorts of people watching for exactly what we're doing. All I ask from you is to give me some message to make my move.*

➤ ***Understood.***

The first thing was to establish exactly what was going on that was so exciting on the other side of the wall. From the number of voices, there appeared to be a rather large number of people; cheering, booing, yelling, talking... Despite his exceptional hearing, the din and the dampening effects of the wall made it difficult to understand any singular voice, and thus made it a largely incoherent jumble of noise.

He held out one finger to the divider in front of him, and expending as little power as he could manage, superheated a small column of air in front of him into a makeshift cutting torch, carving a mere coin-sized hole into the wall silently and efficiently.

The gap didn't serve to give him a good line of sight. He could barely see a line of what might have been cages, and a bar judging from the kegs behind it. But that wasn't Timothy's intent anyway; he merely needed *something* he could use to better improve his vantage point.

And he got that opportunity. A being across the bay knelt down at one of the cages, and that gave Timothy the clear image to project himself telepathically across the bay, and become a passenger in his target's eyes.

It was a trick that many psionics didn't use or even learn. It required a level of control and subtlety that his people rarely developed... and imposing yourself on another's mind (even if only to observe) was rather taboo. But in this case, with no other options, it cast light on what he needed illuminated.

The bay was filled with a misty smoke, presumably some burning narcotic or hallucinogenic herb, and the lighting above was altered to project an amber hue, possibly for ambience, and to keep the amount of light to a minimum.

Through the smoke was confirmation of his impromptu partner's claims. It was indeed a mixed, motley crew comprised of every developed race in the galaxy, from the short reptilian Ruma to the massive towering Ubeks. He counted twenty sentient beings before the movement of his host made it too difficult to keep track... although the entrance of Tenant Argole got his host's attention, and confirmed the presence of Timothy's quarry. The Initiate didn't want to dwell in his current position too long in case the elder Knight caught hint of Timothy's psionic presence.

The smell of blood then caught Timothy's – and his host's – attention, and the view turned to the center of the bay, where a large, domed cage had been constructed. Currently, it enclosed two canine animals... or more accurately, one canine and one fresh corpse.

That explained what this small cabal was doing; illegal bloodsport, likely taking bets with money or contraband materials. And it also explained the rather significant amount of lost animal posters Timothy had observed earlier. No doubt these wretches were abducting whatever creatures they could get their hands on to train and kill each other.

Timothy retreated from his mental perch, mulling over the activities across the divider. Argole's presence could be excused easily enough; the Solarians (or their sister sect, the Kiros for that matter), with no real concept of "pets" or any significant attachment to animals, could argue not seeing any real issue other than the barbarism of typical bloodsport and the deviance of gambling.

But as far as Timothy could tell (and a secretive scan for any other psionic presences confirmed), the Tenant was the only Erani of either sect present in the bay. The significant majority of the assembly were Arcadian, which supposedly held such creatures in high regard. Not that he should expect that such generalizations could be expected to hold true in the case of degenerates such as these.

Timothy could leave right now, proceed to the Solarian Adjudicate and have Argole apprehended, but that would give this cartel opportunity to cover their tracks and clear out. He also suspected that there were a good number of people who cared about the animals being used in this fashion, and the idea of being indifferent while others suffered was not one he permitted himself since he was a child.

Besides, he had promised his hacker ally a grand distraction.

Before he made his move, he had to formulate a plan of attack first. As formidable as a psionic was, it was foolhardy to assume that he could barge in on a motley crew such as this without any strategy. Fortunately, he had the means within this very closet to give him enough advantage.

Thus, by the time he started building his power to make his move, and open himself to detection by his quarry, it was too late to make an escape or adequately prepare. Thrusting his stored energies forward, Timothy literally ripped the dividing wall between the maintenance closet and the bay from its anchors, the wall collapsing into its component panels and falling with a clatter, made all the more audible by the sudden end of conversation throughout the bay.

At that same time, an acrid, poisonous smoke wafted through, the product of mixing cleaning supplies, mingling with the narcotic and herbal fumes to create a breath-stealing cocktail... unless you were wearing full combat armor with optional environmental containment.

The entrance reduced the number of viable combatants to one; Tenant Argole, who generated a psionic field to create a pocket of clean air and avoid the fate of his accomplices, who were sputtering, coughing, hacking and choking, mindlessly looking for escape routes from the bay.

But even with Argole's experience, the elder Knight was at a significant disadvantage. Timothy knew he was a prodigy among his people; even at his age, his psionic output was higher than all but the most elite among his people. On top of that, Argole had not been anticipating a fight like Timothy was; the Tenant was dressed in civilian attire, which offered none of the protection that even standard combat armor would provide, much less the high quality carbide alloy reserved for the Knighthood.

Argole clearly understood that he didn't have the upper hand either, as he was blatantly looking for potential escape routes rather than face the initiate. His voice even had no hint of bluster that would normally be reserved for a subordinate.

"Honore! What are you doing here?" he asked nervously as both his physical and mental sight whipped in all directions looking for means of retreat.

"Ending your extracurricular activities," Timothy answered flatly. "You will either come with me quietly, or you won't come at all."

"Always the idealist, aren't you, boy?" the elder Knight sneered.

"Hardly; I simply have the power to put a stop to this. Last chance. Stand down, or I will not hesitate to end you for your sins against the Code of the Knighthood."

That was not an entirely empty boast. While a service execution of another Knight for disgracing themselves and the Knighthood was rare even in earlier eras, as far as the Adjucates were concerned, it was still a perfectly proper and legal procedure.

Argole was aghast at the implication. "You wouldn't dare."

"We'll see," the younger Knight answered, and attacked, lunging forward while drawing his sword from his right hip in a smooth slash. While the melee weapon was more ceremonial in a Knight's combat arsenal, it didn't seem proper to burn a hole through Argole's head with a pistol.

The elder Knight jumped backward, aided by his mental powers so that he not only cleared the blow, but managed to make some distance between him and his younger counterpart.

"Using a sword against an unarmed opponent?" Argole chided. "That doesn't exactly sound in the spirit of the Code."

Timothy straightened, shrugged, and sheathed the blade. "I suppose that's true."

"And I can't help but notice that I'm not exactly armored to the teeth like you are."

But the younger Knight wasn't about to cede every advantage to his disgraced superior. "Well, that's your fault, not mine."

No further words were exchanged at Timothy moved on the attack again, this time in a precision fold. Most teleportation was used over great distances simply for the sake of rapid travel. Timothy, and a handful of other talents, had mastered the technique to the point where they could use it in combat, jumping short distances in the blink of an eye to get improved position on their opponents, either to flank or even move behind their foe.

While Argole might not have had the same skill, he at least knew of it, and the moment Timothy flashed out of his vision, the Tenant was on the move, jumping forward where the

younger Knight had been, and saving him from a severely concussing elbow to the back of his head.

Timothy followed quickly, his fighting style predicated on constant movement and activity, not allowing his opponent to gather himself once taken off balance. And so, Argole couldn't turn about and square himself in time, as Timothy's right cross connected with the Tenant's side, followed by a left jab that cracked sickeningly against the elder's jaw.

Argole once again created space by forcing the younger Knight back with a compressed wall of psionic force, using the clearance to form a series of needle-like lances of energy, a technique designed specifically for piercing armor or other shielding. However, the space Argole had made proved to be a tactical error, as it gave Timothy room to react to the attack, absorbing the piercing needles into small gravitational sinks that stripped them of their harmful force and trajectory.

Argole's expenditure of energy also allowed Timothy a counter, but it wasn't what the Tenant was expecting. Anticipating a direct blow, Argole's tightened physical and mental defenses permitted Timothy to rip apart the field that kept the air around the Tenant clean. With his next breath, the elder Knight was crippled by the suffocating, noxious gases.

Timothy was honestly surprised that the air filtration systems hadn't kicked in, but deduced they were likely disabled to prevent station surveillance from detecting the recreational narcotics being used by the members of the bloodsport ring. In retrospect, it was fortunate that Timothy's impromptu mixture wasn't fatally toxic without extremely prolonged exposure.

Not that Tenant Argole had to worry about that... his demise was going to come far sooner than asphyxiation.

The younger Knight drew his plasma sidearm from its holster. Argole wasn't worth killing with psionic ability at this point. The disgraced Tenant tried to choke out a plea for mercy, but it would have fallen on deaf ears even if comprehensible.

"Tenant Jamison Argole, you have violated the code of honor that all Knights hold dear, and have descended into vile, primitive acts unbecoming of your rank and file. With this, I exercise my right as a noble Knight of Solaria, and end your stain on the order I represent."

There was no vindictiveness, no anger, or even regret. Just a single press of the trigger, and a single charge of superheated matter, that burned through the elder Knight's head and terminated the life of Tenant Argole.

At that point, his hacker ally returned.

- *Well, that was a waste of time.*
- ***That's not surprising. I've done a lot of searching into the Baramak Slaughter myself. As far as I can tell, only the highest ranking officials would possess such information.***
- *And you didn't think that to be a pertinent tidbit to provide until now?*
- ***And risk losing your capable assistance? Why would I do that?***

There was a prolonged silence, but the communications channel remained open, probably while the hacker was deciding just what to say. Timothy didn't give him or her the opportunity.

- ***Before you go, the air purifiers in this bay were shut off and likely locked out. Think you could turn them back on? I'd rather not subject the animal life forms to this environment for terribly long.***

The hacker did not reply in type, but Timothy did hear a soft whir above him, and the haze within the bay steadily faded, while the communication panel projected onto his visor flashed twice and disappeared, signifying a broken connection.

Timothy then turned his attention back to the now deceased Tenant Argole, and as a matter of procedure searched the body to identify and secure his personal effects. Not surprisingly, he didn't have much on him; a wad of paper credit bills (that couldn't be traced electronically), his personal identification card, a small assortment of grooming implements, a prayer book (not unusual for a Solarian nobleman), and a scrambling field generator. He suspected the latter could be found on many of the still choking and sputtering victims in the bay.

Some escaped apparently, as the service doors had been opened, but that was no longer Timothy's concern. He had done what he had set out to do. A handful of rats slipping out were of little danger, and to be expected.

He started to pack away the personal effects in an empty compartment attached to his belt, and stopped when he actually took a good look at Argole's prayer book. On the exterior, it didn't look particularly noteworthy; the usual brown leather with gold outlines and trim around the family crest. While it wasn't unusual for a Knight like Argole to have it, it was rather odd that he took it with him on this foray. Call it a blind hunch, but Timothy didn't peg him to be terribly devout.

He opened the small leather-bound object halfway, expecting to find a cubby carved into the paper filled with some form of contraband... and found something else entirely.

Timothy knew that the Solarian faith was not followed exactly the same way even among the primary families of the nobility on the homeworld, with interstellar colonization creating even more variations upon the main theme, but he doubted the prayers he saw within were accepted *anywhere*.

He flipped back to the front of the book, and started from the beginning.

*We are the instruments of a new world,
We are the heralds to a new order.
Bless the Creator for the honor to serve him,
As we end the world to usher a new beginning.
Hundreds of years, pulling the strings of a false existence,
Now the time soon comes to rise to our rightful lordship.
Bless us, oh Creator, as we honor and serve you,
As we end the world to usher a new beginning.*

As awestruck as he was by the rhetoric, he wasn't so aghast that he was taken completely off guard. The plasma bolt targeted at him deflected harmlessly off the energy shield he had constructed, and burned into the interior wall of the bay before dissipating.

Calmly he put the prayer book away; there'd be time to address it later... he had unfinished business to attend to.

The other members of the gathering were starting to recover from the fumes, one of them to the point that he was able to draw a weapon and fire that futile shot. "What is such a crime here?" the shooter demanded, a haggard four-fingered Demodian man with obviously colored purple hair spiked in ten places. "They're just animals!"

"Curious..." Timothy grumbled, "I could say the same about you."

Another precision fold brought Timothy's nose within inches of his adversaries, and his sword just beside his target's neck. The ruffian froze fearfully... so much as a deep breath would likely split the flesh of his throat against the near molecularly-sharp blade edge.

"Feel fortunate I strive to be better than you," the Initiate growled, before turning away and returning his sword to his sheath. A quick fluttering through the man's surface thoughts confirmed that Timothy had made his point. That, and the pistol clattering to the floor.

And then, the blaring of peacekeeper sirens began to drift to Timothy's hearing. "Ah yes, as always, just after the nick of time." No doubt they would have some questions, and it was going to be fun answering them five times to five different people.

* * * * *

As if answering to every peacekeeper who thought they could get him to crack wasn't enough, the Solarian Adjucate General on the station decided to have his turn. No sooner had Timothy left the peacekeeper station, he received communication to report to Nathan Sumner immediately.

Which brought him to his current situation, lounging comfortably in the chair across from Adjucate Sumner's desk while Sumner paced back and forth thoughtfully. The aging judicial officer didn't like the casual disregard Timothy was showing with his lax posture, but that was exactly what Timothy was going for... making the older man as uncomfortable being here as he was. But fortunately, it didn't appear any chiding or questioning was forthcoming.

"I see you irritated the peacekeepers on the station," Sumner began with a half grin. "They were preparing a sting themselves on this bloodsport ring; a sting that had been planned for some time. Turns out the group of deviants were members of the Blood Hawks pirate organization. It would have been a major coup for them."

"Not my fault they are as slow to action as they are to investigating," Timothy replied unrepentantly. "I saw a crime involving one of our people, I acted in accordance to my code. Besides, they were able to apprehend several criminals that I would think would keep them busy for some time."

"Yes... Tenant Jamison Argole. Putting aside the nature that you are an Initiate and he was your direct superior for now, the peacekeepers were concerned with how you tampered with Jamison's body."

"Securing the personal effects of the deceased, nothing more. Argole was Solarian, and within my jurisdiction as a Knight, even a mere Initiate, to execute the legal protocols established by the Solarian people. As I told them, I touched nothing else other than the body and property directly under the authority of the Solarian crown."

"Which brings me to my next concern... the service execution, as I am sure you are well aware, isn't a procedure that is, or even should be liberally applied. I trust you had good reason."

"Argole was not going to come quietly, and had a considerable number of potential allies that would have made bringing an uncooperative prisoner in alive more difficult than I was willing to risk. One of them tried to attack me after the execution occurred, confirming my estimation."

Sumner then sat in his chair, and tapped his chin thoughtfully, "I will say there is one part of your testimony that both the peacekeepers and I don't find particularly sufficient... there was significant hacking that took place that gave you access to the bay in question. You claimed you had no knowledge of it... is that true?"

“As I explained to the peacekeepers, my armor’s own computerized systems fought off a hacking attempt. There was a hacker floating about the GalNet that night, possibly several, but I have no knowledge of who this person or persons was.” Literally taken, that statement was the truth, and he hoped he kept it from sounding too rehearsed.

“You have no idea of why they would help you?”

Timothy shrugged, even as his mind processed a suitable answer. This would take some careful maneuvering to prevent giving away too much. “Hackers make a habit of knowing things they aren’t supposed to. To someone with a broad enough perspective, I suspect it would have been rather obvious I was following Argole. It’s possible they figured I’d bring the hammer down on the bloodsport going on.”

“Or use you as a distraction for something else,” Sumner noted.

Timothy feigned surprise. “Pardon?”

“Jamison’s personal computing unit was hacked into during your impromptu sting. We suspect the hacker used you to keep Jamison’s attention away from his own security systems trying to tell him about the hacking.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. Argole was carrying a scrambler on him, and no communications device.” Timothy felt a bit lucky, with Adjudicate Sumner offering that bit, it allowed Timothy to claim tainted information if he let something slip later.

Sumner flipped open his PCU on his desk, and tapped on the pad twice. “Oh, while I remember, your father wanted me to relay an official commendation for you. Buried somewhere within the invective, I do believe there is a ‘good work’ somewhere... at least I suspect there is; as it is a commendation from the heading and form I was given. Would you like me to send you a copy?”

Timothy shook his head, “That won’t be necessary.”

“Well, then I suppose we are all concluded here. I honestly see no reason to pursue further legal action, and I see no evidence that what occurred was exactly as you portray it.”

Timothy fought the urge to roll his eyes; more likely Adjudicate Sumner didn’t want to incur the wrath of the Honore family with further legal action. Even if Timothy’s father would like nothing more than to see his son put in his place, he wouldn’t dare allow the family name to be besmirched.

“Dismissed, Knight Initiate Honore... although I suspect after this, you will find the new commanding officer more than ready to drop the ‘Initiate’ part.”

Timothy declined the hand offered, instead giving a short bow in parting. But as he was halfway to the door, he sensed the aura of the Adjudicate shift slightly, reaching out telepathically in an attempt at subtle psionic scan. Timothy deftly filtered the invasion away from his private thoughts yet didn’t resist entirely, not wanting to tip the Adjudicate off that Timothy had caught him in the act.

“Actually, Knight Initiate Honore... there is one more thing.”

Timothy didn’t turn around to address Sumner, to avoid giving anything away through body language or facial expression. “Yes, sir?”

“I received Tenant Argole’s personal effects... he didn’t have anything else on him?”

Timothy’s brows furrowed, knowing exactly what the Adjudicate was asking about; the prayer book with the apocalyptic meditations. Sumner was one of them... whoever they were. Finally, Timothy repelled Sumner’s scrying rather forcefully, even as his voice calmly issued, “No.”

The Adjudicate jerked back as if he had been slapped, knowing that the young Initiate had caught him. “I see... it was simply odd to see so little on his person. Very well then, you are dismissed.”

Once Timothy had left, Adjudicate Sumner opened the most secure communications channel in his authority, text only.

➤ ***The Honore boy knows about us. I told you Argole’s lack of caution could cost us.***

➤ *Argole was a means to the end, and worth the risk. It’s not of great concern... to be honest, I’ve been intending to introduce the Supreme Commander’s son to our cause. This bit of providence could only be the Creator’s will.*

➤ ***Timothy is too idealistic. He would never join us.***

➤ *On the contrary, my friend... idealism is precisely what I look for in prospective members. It takes a rare vision and determination to exact the Creator’s desire. With him on our side, that would give us a powerful ally within the Knighthood, much more influential than the ones we already have.*

➤ ***You think he will succeed his father then?***

➤ *There’s little doubt of it. The laws of succession favor family lines. If Timothy demonstrates to be even marginally capable, the pressure will be on Niles to appoint his son Knight Commandant, whether he likes it or not. I suspect you will be up for a generous promotion very soon yourself. Think of it, my friend, we will have people of great influence in three of the four primary branches of the Solarian sphere of influence, and the fourth won’t be long coming, either.*

➤ ***Very well, I will yield to your wisdom. May the Creator smile on the both of us.***

With that, the Adjudicate leaned back to ponder these events. Perhaps his leader of faith was right... perhaps the end times were coming. His hands would soon be on the pulse of true power very soon.

* * * * *

“Only you can take an unauthorized jaunt of sedition against the Tenant in charge of the Knighthood on this station, and turn it into a full promotion to Knight,” Emmitt said with a shake of his head as he adjusted the rank pins on Timothy’s shoulder. “Some of us mere mortals still need to take our exam, you know?”

“Humph,” Timothy answered, “I have more on my mind.”

Emmitt frowned. “Oh no... I know that look. You found something, and you’re intent on hunting whatever or whoever it is across the width and breadth of the galaxy once you get half a chance.”

Timothy weighed his options. He had known Emmitt for three staryears, ever since he entered the Knighthood Academy, and was probably the closest thing to a friend he had. He ought to be trustworthy enough, considering the trouble both of them had gotten into. “I indeed found... something... on Argole. Something disturbing.”

“What?”

Timothy removed Argole’s prayer book from the compartment on his belt, and handed it to Emmitt. “This.”

Emmitt flipped open the book, and his eyes widened. “What... is this?”

“I don’t know, but I know Argole’s not the only one.”

“You should bring this to the Adjucate General on the station! There might be more people like this!”

Timothy turned his head balefully. “The Adjucate General is one of them. Until I learn more, both of these... Endtimers... and exactly who counts themselves among their number, knowledge of this...” Timothy plucked the book back and returned it to the compartment it came from, “... does not leave the lips of either of us, understand?”

Emmitt sighed, “Wouldn’t be the first time I kept a secret for you. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“So do I.”

“Got any leads?”

Timothy pursed his lips. “One, possibly. Argole was associating in some capacity with the Blood Hawks. They were the ones that ran the animal bloodsport ring Argole was gambling in.”

“You think the Blood Hawks would know something?”

“Maybe, maybe not. But it’s as good of a place as any to start... once I get the time.”

Timothy examined the new rank pins on his shoulder, and with that one glance was done with it. He quickly snatched his identification badge from the endtable to his left, and tucked into the nearest belt compartment.

Emmitt noticed this move, and asked, “Where are you going?”

Timothy was at the door before he answered. “I have one more thing to do.”

* * * * *

Three tenth-cycles later, Timothy felt the hover pull to a stop roughly twenty TackMets from Glorindal Central Junction, in front of a long, single level farmhouse made of red brick and black shingle roofing; building materials that went back to before civilization could break planetary orbit.

He looked down at the data given to him by Glorindal Peacekeepers one last time. Asuna Padron, nine staryears old, daughter of Abagail and Tyrel Padron. The family supposedly was given notice that Timothy would be arriving in person by GP, but he was prepared to introduce himself just in case the peacekeepers were a little delinquent in said duty... not that such a thing *ever* happened.

“We’re here, my lord,” the driver of the delegation hover declared.

Timothy snorted, “Obviously. Everyone stay in position. I think I can handle myself against a farmer’s family if things get a little rough.”

He was referring to the small procession that the mayor of Yaral had insisted join Timothy on such a “diplomatic mission,” an insistence Timothy eventually tired of refusing. He pushed open the door, and stepped out into the station’s midday heat.

For a brief moment, Timothy forgot he was on a space station. From behind the house, the generated wind blew several fields of grain quite convincingly, and even the environment felt genuine; a temperature and humidity that was a slight bit beyond comfortable, likely the ideal

conditions for the growing crops. Even the paneled ground next to his feet carried soil residue from the grassy lawn just to his left. If not for the obvious constructed ceiling off on the horizon, Timothy could have been convinced he was on an agrarian planet.

But he wasn't there to admire the scenery, and he jerked his mind back to his task, striding down the hover path towards the front door of the farmhouse. Already, three Arcadian figures had appeared on the porch, standing hand in hand tentatively as Timothy approached; the child in between with the mother on the left and the father on the right.

Timothy waited until he was close enough to speak without raising his voice to address the family. "Sir and Madam Padron. Miss Padron," he said with a slight bow.

"Knight Honore," the father replied nervously as Timothy's eyes settled on the daughter.

They made no movement, and so Timothy took the initiative, stepping onto the porch. He could almost hear the cringing from the diplomatic envoy still in the hover; as stepping uninvited onto the property of a foreign race was undignified and inappropriate for a "higher and enlightened" people, as well as a potential political nightmare.

He knelt down to the girl, noting the crust of dried tears on her eyes. Clearly, she had been told already what had happened. "Hello, Asuna."

"Hi," the girl meekly replied. "You... you found Barky?"

Timothy nodded, and with a voice as gentle as he could replied, "Yes. I am sorry... I was too late. Your dog was killed in the fighting."

The girl broke down, sobbing before throwing her arms around Timothy's neck. He cautiously embraced the girl, feeling the wetness from her cheeks through the thin elastic underlayer of his dress uniform. She was not much older than he was when he received notice that someone dear to him had died.

He had remembered his father coming into the manor, and in a very unusual move addressed his birth son without any coldness. The old Knight looked saddened and distressed, hastily informing the boy that his brother had died that morning. He couldn't explain how or why... the details were top secret.

There had been no answers for Timothy then, and there still weren't any now... but at least he had some for Asuna Padron. "It probably doesn't make you feel any better, but I stopped them. They won't hurt any animal ever again."

He was rewarded by a brief flash of a smile on the child's cheeks. "Thank you."

This was why he took the Knight's Code. Because he was tired of seeing the tears of innocents, and if he had the power to change that, even on the smallest of levels, he was going to do it, no matter the pain, or effort, or trials that would come.