

Near Misses

There were times Dewin Rio didn't like being Regis's second in command. This was one of those times.

Following the Blood Hawk leader like a lovesick puppy was bad enough; the man had enough vices to file for moral bankruptcy. And the standard vices weren't enough for a man of Regis Gallan's pedigree. He couldn't just drink himself into a stupor... he had to drink himself into a stupor while engaging in sexual relations with whatever dancer (or dancers) caught his fancy. He couldn't just gamble... oh no... he had to gamble on illegal animal blood sport, like he was now.

But even worse than all of that; he apparently couldn't even relieve himself without an escort.

"I left the Kiros Armed Forces for this..." Dewin mumbled. Okay, in truth, he didn't so much leave the Kiros Armed Forces so much as ran for his life, but that was quibbling details.

"Did you say something, Mister Rio?"

Dewin jerked his head up towards the source of the voice, from the side of the lavatory door across from him. Dewin often chose Orion Salazar to accompany him on these extracurricular jaunts of Regis'. Not so much because he liked the Ubek's company (Orion was often a boorish lout), but because Orion was for all intents and purposes the typical Ubek; big, loud, and intimidating. After all, Dewin wasn't exactly going to dissuade aggression in quite the same way as a three-tack tower of flesh and muscle would.

"No... nothing, Salazar," Dewin replied with a shake of his head.

"I understand what you mean," Orion continued. "I was in line to lead my clan, possibly even in the Ceremony of War. I joined the Blood Hawks to get the money and support needed to overcome the despicable advantages the Bluebloods get from the Solarians each ceremony. I did not join to run from seedy hovel to seedy hovel, getting drunk and gambling away money on fighting beasts."

Dewin blinked. "Why, of all the organizations you could have chosen, did you choose the Blood Hawks? And why, in the name of all you find holy do you stay?"

"No one wishes to acknowledge anything is amiss, and Ubeks aren't exactly held in high regard in the 'civilized galaxy' to begin with. The only place I could make significant money was working with a pirate clan, and the Blood Hawks are considered the best. As for why I stay, I vowed I would not return to Ub until I had secured the money and resources to make a difference and lead my clan to victory."

"Good luck with that," Dewin quipped sarcastically.

"What about you? Why are you here?"

"I'd rather not talk about it. But since you shared; let's just say the Kiros would pay a lot of money to make sure I never talk about them and what I saw them do. The Blood Hawks are as much protection for me as I work for them."

Anything more Dewin might have said was cut off when he got "that" feeling. For as long as he could remember, he had a sort of nose for trouble... he could feel when something bad was going to happen... and he was getting that feeling now.

He rapped on the restroom door, and said sternly, "Gallan, we have to go."

Fortunately, over the years, Regis had become accustomed to Dewin's gut feelings, and judged from Dewin's tone of voice this was one such moment, because the Demodian pirate

leader nearly tripped over himself pulling up his trousers as the door slid open. “That feeling, again, Rio?”

“Yeah,” Dewin answered, the sickening weight in his stomach growing heavier with each second they hung around. “We move as a group. Stick tight, and be alert.”

Demiticks later, an eruption of sound rocked the docking bay, the force rattling the walls of the adjoining control center where they were located. The dull roar of conversation turned into screams of panic, quickly choked off by coughing and hacking. The cause became clear as they neared the door to the bay, where a rancid gray smoke had started to waft in.

“Damn it! Get as low as you can... someone gassed the bay,” Dewin ordered, ripping off part of his shirt sleeve to form a makeshift mask. It wouldn't do all that much, but it was better than nothing. He then crouched down, rather than dropping flat to the deck, and began his progress forward again. Dewin wanted to be able to move quickly if he had to – to his sidearm, for example – and that would be cumbersome if he was crawling around.

Then he stuck his head around the corner, and realized his sidearm would be useless.

“Creator save us...” he gaped, and ducked back in, coughing twice to clear his lungs enough to speak. “When I give the word, we run to the exit. Don't look back... don't dawdle... just run.”

“Why?”

“And don't ask questions, either,” Dewin replied. “Just... run.”

The next sounds were of psionic combat, paranormal energies crackling and crashing against each other. “Move! Now!” Dewin hissed, and while still crouched down to avoid as much of the acrid smoke as possible, dashed towards the smaller personnel door leading out of the cargo bay.

Dewin, unsurprisingly, didn't take his own advice; looking back towards the sounds of battle. A male in distinctive Solarian armor was engaging one of the gamblers, a Solarian Knight himself named Jamison Argole, if Dewin remembered correctly.

He found it momentarily amusing that despite the animosity between the Kiro and the Solarians, their manner of combat ordinance looked remarkably similar. That thought was ended when a large Ubek hand grabbed his shoulder and whipped him out the door.

“I thought you told us not to look back,” Orion noted in confusion.

Dewin wasted no time breaking out into a full sprint towards the cargo bay further down that had been appropriated for “client” parking. “Yeah, that's why.”

“So... now what?” Gallan asked.

“We get as far as we can from this place, and hope to whatever power we believe in that the Solarian Knight in there didn't see us.”

“That was a Solarian Knight?” Gallan gaped as they dove into the bay, and located their hover. “What in... what was a Solarian Knight doing there?”

“My guess? Looking for that other Knight he was fighting,” Dewin explained. “So, I suspect we'll be safe as long as we can avoid the peacekeepers that will no doubt start pouring in anytime.”

They drove out of the bay, and Orion consulted the very illegal positioning grid interface located forward of the front passenger seat. “You're right, Mister Rio. Coming from the east. If we go north quickly, we should be able to avoid at least that wave.”

Regis and Orion didn't understand... they couldn't possibly, of course. Very few sentient beings in the galaxy could. Hopefully, they'd never realize just how near a miss the three of them had just experienced.

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Regis Gallan had let time forget that incident very quickly. Within seven ten-cycles, he was back to who he was; a hedonistic, deviant, and immoral excuse for a Demodian male.

Dewin had been expecting to get replaced in his role as Gallan's shadow about two ten cycles ago, and was rather disappointed that such changing of the guard hadn't occurred. Regis had declared a sense of confidence in his work and subtlety that allowed him to continue his post.

Perhaps Dewin was overly cautious; if so, it was because Regis Gallan was anything but.

In this case, it was a dancer... Sasha, if Dewin remembered the name correctly, employed by this... glorified brothel called the Sultry Siren. This was how Regis celebrated a fresh mark; but spending every last credit he had managed to procure.

Regis was not particularly known for his taste either. What was wrong with a nice Demodian girl? Besides, if he *had* to dip his seed into an Arcadian, Dewin would have preferred the blonde that was getting ready to take the stage after Sasha left.

The sound of moaning then became too loud to ignore, and Dewin clenched his eyes shut, trying to think of anything that would keep his mind off the noise.

“Why do you hate me, Mister Rio?”

Dewin again jerked his head up to the other side of the door they were “guarding.” Orion was looking down on the much smaller Demodian man with dismay.

“I don't hate you, Salazar.”

“Then why do you always choose me to be your second when we escort Mister Gallan?”

Dewin chuckled at this. “I choose you because at this point, you're about the only person in this whole damn organization I trust. Besides, I kinda like you.”

The Ubek visibly colored in embarrassment. The reaction was rather amusing, considering he could crush Dewin dead simply by falling over wrong. “I am honored by the respect you have in me, Mister Rio. I will do my best not to disappoint.”

“Well, my standards are pretty low, so you shouldn't...” Dewin's eyes then jerked forward, through the wall towards the dance floor. The crowd had suddenly become quite excited, and at that same time, Dewin felt that telltale weight in his gut.

“Stay here,” Dewin ordered, and he made his way back towards the parlor to scout out what had happened.

“Mister Rio?” Orion asked in confusion, but Dewin paid him no mind.

He stealthily stuck his head around the corner, and beheld the scene. Four of the grunts within the Blood Hawks had decided to take to the stage, accosting the blonde dancer Dewin had noticed earlier. He had taken one foot out the door to correct the underlings actions when he froze in mid-step.

A Solarian male had squeezed through the mob on the parlor floor, and a nimble standing leap placed him onto the stage. Dewin's blood ran cold; there was no way he could have ever proven it at the time, but he knew... Dewin had seen this man before, on Glorindal.

“Bannor take us...” the Demodian pirate captain hissed breathlessly, stumbling as he whirled about quickly, trying to take off running before he had even set his feet.

Orion didn't even have the chance to ask Dewin what was wrong, as the Demodian forced his way through the door leading to Gallan's love nest.

“Rio!” Regis yelled in shock as he covered himself and Sasha quickly. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Get some pants on, and move!” Dewin ordered frantically, throwing the discarded article onto the bed. “We have to go!”

Gallan was so stupefied that he complied at first, then forced himself to stop with his trousers at his knees. “Wait one tick... why do we have to go? Rio! Explain yourself!”

The sound of a barfight answered Regis's question, but Dewin elaborated further. “That Solarian Knight we passed by on Glorindal... remember him? He's *back*.”

“*What?*” Regis bellowed, trying to walk while still pulling up his pants, hopping comically in the attempt. The Blood Hawk leader had finally completed the task as the ignition of three plasma rounds immediately quieted the din outside.

No further words were said. Orion literally busted down the rear emergency exit of the Sultry Siren in their flight, both Demodian men right behind the barrelling Ubek as the massive humanoid wedged his way through the nighttime city crowd towards the hover they had parked at the side of the roadway.

Dewin had started the vehicle and was pulling out into the flow of traffic before either passenger had secured themselves, looking over to the Sultry Siren for a brief moment as it vanished from view. The Knight didn't seem to be following, but now Dewin knew that it wasn't coincidence.

He was going to have to brief Regis Gallan, and the rest of the Blood Hawks, on what exactly they were up against.

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Dewin did just that by calling for an assembly of the Blood Hawks leadership, an unusual request considering that the general policy was *not* to all be in the same place save exceptional circumstances. The other captains of the pirate clan didn't fully understand exactly what one single Solarian would cause Dewin to react so strongly.

But they were about to.

The leadership, five in all including Dewin and Regis, had taken their seats at the circular table of the primary briefing room of the *Gallan*, the intermediate class cruiser that served as the flagship of the Blood Hawk pirate fleet. None of them looked pleased to be there, their nerves showing in little details; the unwillingness to brighten the room's interior, eyes always drifting towards the ship's status screens in case of an ambush, hands on their communicators ready to give orders and arrange for a retreat... even though currently they were in one of the safest places for any of them aside from the Galactic Rim.

“Thank you for coming despite the reservations I am sure you all have,” Dewin began. “I'll try to keep this as brief as I possibly can so that we can decide on our course of action.”

“You keeping something brief? That would be a first,” Rydia Nabul sneered.

Dewin ignored the jab. Pettiness was Rydia's strong suit, and she'd taken an immediate dislike for Dewin when he decided once in her bed was enough for him. “How many of you have seen an Erani Knight in action? Either sect; doesn't really matter. And no, Regis, three demiticks out of the corner of your eye on Glorindal as we were running for our lives doesn't count.”

Dewin raised his hand, and as he expected, no one else did. "Anyone?" he said. "Not surprising. Even on Kiros, with a population of ten billion, there's only about three thousand psionics that have suitable strength to be deemed Knights."

"Your point please," Trev Ogral droned.

"The point is that you have no idea just what we're now up against," Dewin said grimly. "I, on the other hand, do. I've seen the strength of an Erani Knight firsthand."

Now sensing that he had their full attention, Dewin thrust into the meat of his tale. "It was a little over twenty staryears ago. I was assigned to pilot a drop shuttle for a strike force from the Phantom Regiment, the special operations unit of the Kiros. Their mission was to deliver a final blow to a heretical movement on a backwater planet named Yeel, on the borders of Kiros influenced space just before the Galactic Rim."

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"Beginning atmospheric descent," Dewin announced into the shuttle's communication systems. "As I'm sure you're all aware, this could get a little rough, so brace yourselves."

The pilot that Dewin was assisting on this mission, a much older Kiros man nearly double Dewin's sixteen staryears, noted, "Pilot Rio... these gentlemen have done their cycles. They know what's up at this point."

"Right," Dewin sighed, beginning the procedures to take them down through descent. Dewin hadn't been deemed "combat zone ready" until recently, and he knew the nerves were probably showing. "I just don't want anyone here getting hurt... at least I can avoid such casualties until they get off the shuttle."

The pilot, Dewin remembered his name to be Nathaniel, then added, "That's about all you can do... but I suspect there's going to be a lot of people getting hurt; and not just on the heretics' end, either."

"Well... obviously. There's going to likely be some fighting."

"Our commanders are obviously expecting something a little more severe than a skirmish. Don't you remember the docking stop we made in open space a cycle ago?"

"Yeah..." Dewin replied. That had been a rather odd maneuver, Dewin had thought, and the command personnel had been tight-lipped as to why, saying nothing other than priority mission resources had been acquired.

"Scuttlebutt says that the resources in question was a Knight, from Garris."

"Oh come on," Dewin said with a roll of his eyes.

"The Knight is supposedly already on the surface, and the Phantoms are going to meet up with him on landing," Nathaniel continued. "If my buddies are right, our bosses could be expecting things to get real nasty down there."

Dewin shook his head. Knights among the Kiros were so rare that it was quite likely no one on the cruiser they had just left had ever even met one, much less know that one had boarded. They aren't assigned just on a whim, much less for something like suppressing a minor uprising.

The stress of atmospheric entry then ended their conversation, both pilots turning their attention to landing safely.

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Dewin hit the deck as the sounds of plasma fire ripped through the failing energy shields of the shuttle and crashed against the hull, causing the panels to glow visibly red even from the inside of the craft.

There was no contact from the Phantoms, although the sounds of weapons fire suggested they were still engaged. The last transmission had been to the cruiser still in orbit, requesting support of any manner that could be provided.

“Well, that Knight you said was on board would be useful right...” Dewin began in loud rebuke to Nathaniel, but stopped short when he was overcome with a feeling he had never really felt before... a weight in his gut that his instincts interpreted as something very bad about to happen, and that he had to move.

“Sir, move!” Dewin hollered, nearly diving out of the cockpit as he did so. Nathaniel didn't respond right away, looking in confusion and starting to speak when a plasma charge ripped through the hull and turned the cockpit into a flash of white hot flame.

Okay... *now* was a good time to try and figure out what was going on with the Phantoms.

“Commandant Tablot, do you read?” Dewin shouted into his communications device. “The shuttle's hull has been compromised... main pilot deceased. Please respond!”

The squad leader for the Phantom team didn't respond. But someone else did.

“I confirm... Pilot Rio,” an unfamiliar voice replied through the channel, the momentary pause likely to identify Dewin. “I told those Phantoms to hold up for ten ticks... but did they listen? Of course not.”

Three more shots crackled against the shuttle, causing Dewin to cringe and huddle down. The voice spoke again, in an attempt to be reassuring. “I have locked onto your position, Pilot. Hold position, and I will respond promptly.”

The channel then went dead, and Dewin noted that the sounds of combat were dwindling, and that the fire turning onto the shuttle was increasing.

Then it all abruptly stopped. In confusion, Dewin moved towards the aft shuttle hatch, and just as his hand reached the manual lever – he figured automatic release was probably out of order due to the damage – the exterior again burst into violent weapons fire.

But this time, the shuttle was not bearing the brunt of the assault, and the amount of weapons fire was steadily decreasing as time passed. A couple of ticks later by Dewin's reckoning, all was silent once again.

“Pilot Rio?” The voice he had heard over the communications channel spoke from outside. “It's clear.”

Tentatively, Dewin pushed open the hatch, and into the warzone. Not surprisingly, it was scarred from the exchange of plasma rounds and ripe with the smell of recent death. What *was* surprising was the lone figure still standing, looking pristine amidst the carnage. Not one drop of blood stained the surface of his royal blue carbide combat armor.

Most Kiro's units wore situational camo colors on their armor... only someone either catastrophically stupid, or catastrophically powerful, would dare don such bright hues. On the chest was emblazoned a nameplate in gold lettering, “Kenseth, Vance.”

Nathaniel's “scuttlebutt” had been right.

“I take it you're all that survived?” Vance asked rhetorically. “Damn Phantoms... they don't have to listen to a secondary planet Knight. No, of course not. This will make things a bit more difficult.” He then turned back to Dewin, and said, “Well come on, make sure that sidearm of yours is charged, and follow me.”

“Uhhhh...” Dewin began.

“You will address me as 'my lord', Pilot Rio, if that is what concerns you.” Vance said with a shake of his head. “Are they not even teaching proper conduct and address at the academies now?”

“I'm sorry, my lord...” Dewin began, a little overwhelmed at the presence of a being that had been near legendary in his mind. “It's just... I have little combat training. I'm a pilot.”

Dewin couldn't determine Vance's facial expression due to the tinted visor on the Knight's helmet, but the nobleman sounded amused when he asked, “Can you hit the broad side of a barn?”

“I... think so.”

“Then that should be enough. Let's go.”

They made as rapid progress as Dewin could manage, into a valley that would at least provide visual cover, although would matter little if they were being tracked by technological means. Halfway through the lowland area, Vance slapped his hand on Dewin's chest.

“What's wrong?” The young pilot asked.

The Knight then slapped a hand over Dewin's mouth. *If you must communicate, simply direct thoughts to me. I can read them quite capably, and won't be as easily detected.*

Dewin's eyes widened, hearing Vance's voice in his head. Having never experienced telepathic communication, it took him a bit by surprise.

Now, stay behind me. We have a handful of deviants who are going to try an ambush us shortly. Vance continued. I'd rather let them think they have the element of surprise for now.

A handful meant five, and Dewin finally got a good look at the heretics. As he expected, they covered their faces to prevent being identified, but he didn't expect the high grade military munitions they carried, recognizable even to Dewin's eyes, and he was simply shocked by the camouflage carbide armoring they clad themselves in. The process of making the amorphous metal blend that was then custom molded into carbide was not cheap by any stretch of the imagination... well beyond what Dewin would expect out of a mere group of religious outcasts.

“Our foe is quite well prepared, aren't they?” Vance said conversationally. “I think we now know why the Phantoms were overwhelmed.”

Their foe was also well trained. Weapons went to ready, and the first salvo of plasma charges were launched. Normally, upon impact, the charges would explode with intense heat, the truly deadly aspect of plasma rounds.

But not this time... not this fight. The fires ignited, as if striking an invisible wall. The second salvo was slapped away harmlessly by unseen hands and exploded far off course in all directions.

Dewin pulled himself out of the ball he had curled up in as Vance raised his right arm, the limb crackling angrily with electrical energy. It struck with all the speed and violence as a bolt from a storm cloud, arcing at random across the tightly grouped together fighters at the top of the valley.

The levels on which the natural laws of the universe were defied were many in that scenario. But to Vance, the extraordinary was apparently quite ordinary; the attackers hadn't even crumpled to the ground before he turned and motioned for Dewin to get up, his mental voice candid. *I suspect that little display will cause our enemies to either attack in greater numbers, or fall on the defensive. Either way, it's going to get messy from this point on. Be ready.*

The latter was the case; the heretics falling back into a tight perimeter around what Dewin presumed to be their base of operations.

It was literally a barn. A rather well constructed barn, sure... but a barn nonetheless.

Yes, that is the broad side I require you to hit. Vance explained, pointing ahead towards the side of the building they were facing. *Merely puncture the wall, and I can do the rest.*

Dewin wondered why the Knight couldn't do it himself, and that prompted Vance to sigh.

Sure, I could do it myself, but this way, I can jump into the fray the moment you open the door. Every fraction of a second counts when you're looking for the element of surprise.

The young pilot had to wonder just what sort of surprise Vance was expecting. If these heretics had the resources and funding to afford high quality combat carbide, they certainly also had several means of tracking the surrounding area. They must have already known Vance and Dewin were there.

Of that, I am sure. Vance agreed. *But what they likely don't know is the extent of my abilities. I can assure you that they will not be prepared to square off with a Kiros Knight, even one of my meager caliber.*

Dewin decided it was best just to take Vance's word for it. The Knight raised an eyebrow, and gestured towards the direction of the barn, and put a reassuring hand on the young pilot's left shoulder. Taking a deep breath, Dewin pulled the trigger...

... and felt the telltale resistance of the trigger lock still in place.

You sure you've had basic combat training?

Touching the proper pad on the butt of the sidearm, the lock opened, and allowed Dewin to actually fire the weapon.

Perhaps you should check to make sure there's a charge in there?

Knight or not, Vance was starting to cross the boundary into an annoyance. Pulling the barrel forward to expose the firing core, Dewin displayed the loaded plasma charge to the Knight, snapping it back into place, and taking his shooting stance.

He fought off the recoil of the weapon, and the charge's tracer lit to give a bright red streak where the cartridge was headed, exploding in the telltale ball of superheated matter. The plume had barely started to form when his eyes were filled momentarily with a flash of white light, and his entire world shifted.

Apparently, Vance had pulled him forward, his momentum carrying him off his center of balance once an environment reformed around him literally a blink later. He quickly guessed this was the barn interior, judging from the ceiling overhead... and the surge of weapons fire that had filled his vision.

Take cover however you can, and leave the rest to me.

Dewin readily complied with Vance's request. He doubted the makeshift stall he cowered in would really qualify as suitable cover, but he figured that the presence of the Kiros Knight would assume all of the heretics' attention. Not that it mattered... Vance was untouchable. Their weapons couldn't penetrate his shielding, and he dutifully picked them off one by one with his own sidearm... something that Dewin found surprising, having seen what Vance was capable of without any weapon.

Fortunately, the concept of fighting to the last man was completely foreign to the heretics. Once their number had dwindled in half, and the strength of their opponent became clear, they gradually broke out into retreat, falling over themselves in an attempt to flee. To Dewin's confusion, Vance didn't try to follow. As the young pilot stood, he then dashed out towards the Knight when the armored nobleman dropped to his knees.

Once Dewin reached Vance's side, he noticed that the Knight was breathing heavily and his body was trembling. "Teleportation takes a lot out of me," Vance explained. "My father

says I shouldn't even do it... between that and maintaining the defensive shield around us I'm exhausted. You really couldn't have found a closer place to be in plain sight?"

Dewin abruptly felt guilty. He had never noticed that the heretics had indeed been attacking him, and Vance had been shielding him as well. An appraising look over at the stall he had cowered in showed the scorch marks of low density plasma above where his head had been.

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Dewin's tale finished, he said in closing, "That... is the sort of thing we're facing now. That is what is chasing us, if not worse. The Knight I met was from a secondary world. If it is a Knight from one of the primary colonies or even Solaria itself, he would be much stronger."

For all his vices, Regis was a capable and rational thinker when he wanted to be. So, to see the eyes of the Blood Hawks' leader darting about frantically despite his impassive posture was an ill omen. No one had gotten so close to Gallan, much less on two separate occasions. "You sound so sure it is the same fellow."

"Do you understand just how rare Knights are?" Dewin sighed, anticipating this argument. "Do you understand how astronomically small the chances of us happening to cross the paths of two different Knights? Once I can dismiss, twice... no. It was the same Knight on Glorindal and Altair. And he's after us."

"But why?" Gallan asked. "Have we really become that much of a thorn in the Solarians' side that they've sent a Knight after us? Last I heard from our sources, they were sending a Wraith team to target one of our old bases. What changed?"

"I don't know... we might learn more when..."

The conference was interrupted when the door to the room slid open and a figure appeared in the backlit doorway. As the captains' eyes adjusted, the figure spoke nervously, with a timid female voice. "I am sorry, Sir Gallan, but you told me to inform you right away when he had heard from our agents."

Finally their eyes had adjusted to the source of lighting, and it became clear that the Demodian girl... barely age of majority, Dewin guessed... was carrying a small datapad, clutched to her chest like a child.

Regis perked up, "Oh yes! Of course, Allie." He gestured for her to enter, and put the pad she was carrying on the desk. "Thank you, dear girl, you are dismissed."

Dewin snatched up the pad, and the screen flashed to life with the information collected. "Our apprehended agents report that the Knight issued his name during the melee." His eyes scanned down to the name in question, and the pad nearly dropped out of his slack fingers.

"Rio?" Gallan asked, no longer able to mask his nerves.

"Timothy Honore," Dewin said grimly. "The premier family of the Solarian Knighthood. If they are anything like the Feroz family of Kiros, and I suspect they are very similar, they have the purest psionic bloodlines among their sect. This... is very, very, very, bad."

It was moments like these that a group turned to its leader for guidance. This was when the captains of the Blood Hawks turned to Gallan, and where Dewin once again got that ill, sinking feeling in his belly. This was going to end badly.

"We're withdrawing to our center on Canasa," Gallan ordered. While he seemed calm and collected, issuing such a retreat was not made of a sound mind.

"Gallan, I'm not sure that's wise..." Dewin began to protest.

“The Knight won't have the support staff on the Rim. He'll be far away from his circle of influence.”

Dewin shook his head. “The best option is to remain spread out. He's one man, he can't follow all of us. We'll also have a better idea of what exactly he's looking for.”

“We already know that... me!” Gallan shouted. “And that is why we will center our defense on Canasa! And that is final!”

It was clear to Dewin that there would be no reasoning with his commander on this score, and to press any further would probably result in an accusation of mutiny. “Very well, sir. By your leave, I will prepare for our withdraw.”

He left the conference room with all the composure he could muster, and retreated to his quarters assigned to him on the *Gallan*. A Solarian Knight didn't just start appearing on a whim... there was a reason the Solarians had sent a psionic of such pedigree, and Dewin suspected he knew why.

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Vance eventually stood, and waved off concern from Dewin as he did so. “I'm fine. Now, let's hope that in their haste, our foes left behind what the target that the Phantoms were supposed to acquire.”

“What exactly would that be?” Dewin asked.

“Ah, you weren't briefed on the mission beyond 'land the Phantoms' I suppose?” Vance asked rhetorically. “Well, far be it from me to divulge classified information.” The Knight then kicked a corpse, and examined the body more closely. “Solarian made,” he spat, nudging away the plasma rifle the victim had dropped in death. “Figures.”

Vance then retreated towards the rear of the barn, that had several partitions constructed to form walls. “You get this quite often really. A group of Kiros start to think the Solarian way might have some merit, and try some hybrid faith... usually something that declares Bryan Honore to be something more than an average Erani, but going short of being a true prophet.”

Crashing sounds of collapsing partitions and rustling of unknown objects began to filter into Dewin's hearing. “Lately, it seems the Solarians try to entice these groups to become more radical with credits, food, equipment, things like that.”

Dewin then noticed that Vance had kicked out an object from underneath the corpse he had examined moment's before. The young pilot had seen prayer books before, he even had one himself that he carried with his personal effects to wherever he was stationed.

Out of curiosity, he picked up the book, and examined the first page; coming to the conclusion that whatever these heretics believed, he doubted the origin was from the Solarian faith.

*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.*

Vance then emerged from the closed off rear portion of the barn, with a thick, very old, leather-covered book tucked under his arm. Dewin quickly tucked the prayer book away and asked, "That's... what the Phantoms were after."

"Indeed," the Knight replied. "Listen, you're a good kid. And although it might not look like it, you were quite helpful here. I think some big things are in your future. I'm sure the Kiros Armed Forces are looking for devoted pilots like you."

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Dewin found himself in his quarters, and he immediately went into the satchel where he carried his most private items, retrieving that old, frightening prayer book from all those years ago. Brushing the cover, he remembered the details, of the dark, apocalyptic messages it held within, and his first meeting with a Solarian Knight...

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"And this is Tenant Jamison Argole," the fighting ring's creator and proprietor noted as he had escorted Gallan, and by proxy Dewin and Orion, through the shuttle bay that was used for their bloodsport. "He runs the training base for the Solarian Knighthood on this station, and thanks to him he keeps the Solarian dogs from nipping our heels."

Dewin was fairly certain he had never felt a more repulsive person. He felt sick just looking at the pale-skinned Solarian male, and nearly vomited when he began talking. "Indeed. I fear some people just wouldn't understand, even those among us Solarians who hold little value in beasts. I'm training one such character himself."

Argole then became aware of Dewin's scrutiny, and the Demodian quickly felt a stinging pain in his temple, like a ghost was going through his brain. By the time the sickening sensations ceased, the Solarian Tenant had a leering grin on his face. "Ah... not too often you see someone with knowledge of the book. I'd be careful with that knowledge if you know what is good for you."

"Obviously," Dewin replied flatly, wishing upon the Creator he claimed he no longer believed in that he could be somewhere else.

"Rio! Come on!" Gallan called out, the Blood Hawk leader on the move once again. Thankful for the excuse, he made his leave, casting one last wary glance backward at the disgusting excuse of a Solarian.

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Could this book be what Timothy Honore was looking for? Maybe the Solarian wasn't after Gallan at all... maybe he was after Dewin...

"All hands on deck. We are preparing fold jump to Canasa," the first officer declared, and Dewin packed the prayer book back in his satchel, slinging the strap over his shoulder. With one deep breath, he made for the door, and his path to the bridge. Whatever Timothy's intentions, Dewin supposed they all would find out soon enough.