

No Shining Knights Anymore

The dancers of the Sultry Siren had always been a rather vapid and brainless bunch. With that in mind, Rumil expected that anything resembling drama would be absorbed and chewed on for a prolonged period of time.

But thirty-seven cycles later was a bit much in her estimation.

“Oh, Rumil, you are *so* lucky!” one girl – a woman whose name Rumil had never bothered to learn – declared as she stepped to the mirror to apply lip color. The dancer's headdress... plumage... dangled in front of Rumil's face rather annoyingly, even as Rumil tried to push it out of the way.

“And why is that?” Rumil answered blandly.

“Oh, you can stop trying to be all unimpressed by it all,” the dancer said, clutching her hands together as she continued airily, “It's every woman's *dream* to be rescued by the hero, the knight in shining armor!”

Rumil sighed. “Are you people *still* going on about that?”

Another dancer, Urma, if Rumil remembered correctly, interjected, flanking Rumil on the other side, admiring herself in the mirror. “And he was a literal Knight at that, from what I hear.”

“Really?” the first dancer asked in awe. Rumil scoffed... wondering how the woman couldn't have possibly heard that bit of news by now. That had been a secret that survived all of three cycles.

“He was a Solarian,” Rumil scoffed, again batting away the long feathers of the dancer's headdress, before fluffing the bottom of her bustier to create the cleavage that the audience predictably drooled over. “That should tell you all you need to know.”

“But... that is like out of a storybook!” the dancer retorted, aghast by Rumil's passive dismissal. “The down on her luck lady is saved by the dashing knight! Oh... to be rescued by such a noble man, his code of chivalry demanding he come to your aid in your distress!”

“Bah!” Rumil huffed, again adjusting her bustier, not quite satisfied with the result she achieved. She could do to be a bit more busty to make this outfit really work... but this was the style that was earning huge tips as of late, so she had to make do. “The only code the Solarians *or* the Kiros follow is the code that gets them what they want.”

“Here. This will help,” Urma said, handing a pair of cotton pads to Rumil before continuing on her bittersweet reverie. “Rumor has it that the Knight was hunting Regis Gallan, and that Regis escaped in the melee. I'm not sure how coming to your aid advanced his goals any. If anything, rescuing you from those pirates set his mission back a bit.”

The first dancer gasped, then squealed in delight. “How romantic! The dashing knight gives up his bounty to rescue the fair maiden! You couldn't sell this on the GalNet!”

“Yeah, it would be too unbelievable,” Rumil muttered as she finished sliding the pads into her bustier, and found that they did indeed achieve the desired effect.

From behind, yet another voice added herself to the conversation. Sasha was the main attraction for the Sultry Siren most nights, and unlike Rumil, enjoyed this line of work; almost always granting her favorite customers with a “private showing.” The raven-haired Arcadian was properly equipped for work as a dancer; tall, graceful, and with all the right curves in all the right places. “I wouldn't be surprised, Rumil dear. Gallan *was* here that night. Or do you think you got the marquee performance because you earned it?”

Rumil had personally never seen Regis Gallan, or at least hadn't thought so. The rumor was that Sasha was Gallan's favorite girl in the Sultry Siren, and that he would request her specifically whenever he was in the club. “Wait... you mean that skinny Demodian you went backstage with...?”

Sasha laughed, “Yeah, that was Regis. Doesn't look like a fearsome pirate type, does he? Rather a shame he won't be coming around anymore since the Solarians finally caught him. He paid *very* well.” She looked straight ahead, and then finished, “Well, I suppose I should start getting ready. Urma, Tabbi, you're on pretty soon, so I suggest you get out of Rumil's hair and let her finish

prepping.”

The two other dancers realized they did indeed have a job to do, and extended hasty partings before dashing off to their respective corners to get ready for the show, leaving Rumil to her own thoughts. Prepping was the last thing on her mind as she found herself reliving the events from thirty-seven cycles ago.

She had been in a tough spot; three Demodian males (who Rumil now correctly guessed were Blood Hawks) had jumped onto the stage to teach her a lesson, not appreciating how they felt she was teasing them with her routine. Actively degrading her in front of the audience that, disgustingly, did nothing to stop it, and even encouraged the activities... one of the pirates had started making her lick his filthy boots, when the Solarian Knight in question jumped into the fray.

After swiftly dispatching the three thugs, he lifted her up into his arms, carried her to safety, then restored order to the club single-handed. He even waited with her for peacekeepers to arrive, and left her his jacket when she had started shivering from the nerves of the incident, thinking she was cold.

People had been taking from her for as long as she could remember. An orphan from Baramak after the slaughter, she had been bounced from foster home to foster home... no one willing to take in a “miner trash child” for terribly long. She would then be bounced back to the orphanage and the matron who would receive millions upon millions of credits... yet somehow the orphans themselves saw less than five percent of that. Even the parliamentary stipend given to her to fund her education had been revoked three staryears prior amid complaints from well-to-do citizens that said “miner trash children” were getting unfair special privileges over their own brood.

Hence, Rumil was working as an exotic dancer at a rather unsavory nightclub... unable to pay the outrageous tuition fees any other way while having the time for her studies.

“Find a new line of work,” she muttered, recalling the Knight's advice to her. “Right.”

But even that little blurb had been more than most had given her. Not too many people had fought on her behalf before for *any* reason, much less for seemingly no reason at all. In a way... it was rather nice to have someone else fight for her for once; rather than having to claw, scratch, and struggle for everything she could get her hands on.

“Rumil!” a sharp-toned male voice snapped from the entrance to the dressing room. The blond jerked, and looked over at the time display, worried that by getting lost in her thoughts she was nearing her stage time. When that proved not to be the case, she spun her stool about to regard the stagehand.

“The boss wants to see you,” he said simply. He was normally one to enjoy his job escorting scantily-clad women far too much, so to see him so serious suggested that something was truly wrong.

“What did I do this time?” she grumbled rhetorically, pulling out her stool and standing reluctantly before taking the lead with the stagehand behind, as if he was worried she'd try to run off if given the opportunity.

Rafe Ijimi was a short, dirty, lecherous, belligerent, mean-spirited, insipid Arcadian male with a horrible comb-over, but he cooked good steaks according to his wife. Rumil supposed everyone had to have one redeeming trait. Then again, Rumil supposed it would be difficult to have a sunny disposition when your office was probably more suited to be a small walk-in closet.

“Rumil,” Rafe gestured to his left, where cramped into the tiny office were two Solarian men in deep brown suits with no identification visible. “These men want to talk to you. They were rather insistent and somehow have the authority of the local peacekeepers, so I expect you will give them the respect you don't give me.”

“I am Geoffrey Sansin, and this is Maxwell Kennifor. We have some questions to ask you, if you will spare the time.”

For somewhat obvious reasons, Rumil did not like that idea. “I have to perform at the top of the hour.”

Maxwell shook his head. “You don't seem to understand. One way or another you are answering our questions. At issue is whether you leave with us voluntarily or whether you do it in

restraints. I'd rather not make a scene unless we are required to do so.”

“Hey!” Rafe interjected, “You told me that you wouldn't interfere with my busi...”

He was promptly kicked in the chest, topping him over in his chair. As the chubby club owner tried to get to his feet, he was promptly pinned by Sansin's boot pressing on Rafe's cheek. It had taken Rumil knowing these two Solarians all of fifteen demiticks to do something she had never thought possible; make her feel for her boss.

“You do not make demands of us. Feel fortunate we're considerate enough not to bring this hive of debauchery to the ground. Your dancer will be returned to you when *we* see fit to do so. If you dare presume to speak to me as an equal again, there won't be enough of you left to identify. I trust there will be no confusion about this matter ever again.”

Meanwhile, Maxwell had stepped in front of Rumil and lifted a pair of hypersteel restraints into her line of sight. “We are done being patient. You will come with us now, or we will remove you by force.”

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They did provide her a jacket, but more to preserve her “modesty” within the peacekeeper station than out of any concern. The desk lieutenant didn't seem to appreciate the two Solarians' presence (a sentiment she found herself agreeing with), but when presented with several treaties and regulations under the Galactic Alliance reluctantly allowed them use of whatever they would request, in this case a room for questioning.

She was forced into one of the uncomfortable metal chairs circling a table in the center as the thick metallic door was shut with a deep thud. “Alright, time to talk about that night thirty-seven cycles ago.”

Rumil adamantly answered, “I'm not answering anything until I know who you work for and what authority you have.”

She jumped involuntary when Geoffrey slammed his hands on the table and crouched over her. “We will ask the questions. All you need to know is that we have all the authority we need to make your life very unpleasant.”

“What do you care to know about?” Rumil asked in resignation.

“We want to know your relationship with this man,” Geoffrey said, slapping down a photographed image on the table in front of her.

She recognized the face. “He's the Solarian Knight who... helped me when I was being accosted by some customers.”

“I already know that, you harlot,” Geoffery spat. “I want to know the extent of your relationship with this man.”

Rumil looked up at the Solarian interrogator in disbelief. “*What* relationship? That was the first and only time I've ever met the man. I don't even know his *name*.”

Geoffrey snarled, and slapped the picture away, and very nearly struck Rumil as well before he restrained himself. “Don't you *dare* lie to me! One more time, what is your relationship to this man?”

The blond woman forced herself to remain brave. “There *is* no relationship. I met him *once*. When he left, I haven't seen him *since*.” She knew if she showed any sense of intimidation, this Solarian would try pushing that button until she told him what he wanted to hear.

What she didn't get was why these two thought she would have *any* interaction with the Knight who rescued her. They were fishing for something, anything on this Knight, no matter how unlikely but for what reason?

“Wench!” Geoffrey yelled, and this time, it didn't seem restraint was going to be applied, until the Solarian's partner interceded.

“That sort of behavior is frowned upon much more in this culture than in ours, Mister Sansin.

Settle yourself,” Maxwell reminded calmly. And then followed the nice approach. “Miss Bonamede... I'm not sure how aware you are of Solarian custom, especially in the nobility, but it is immoral and improper for someone of this Knight's standing to associate with one such as you.”

Okay... “nice” was apparently a relative term. “I fail to see how this is my problem.”

Maxwell sighed, taking a seat in the chair directly to her left. “It's not. You would be in no trouble even if you were directly under the Solarian authority. This Knight however, is. I don't ask you to understand or accept our beliefs, but it is imperative that we know his relationship with you.”

“Did he do something wrong?” Rumil asked warily.

“He might have. That's what we are trying to find out.”

Rumil rolled her eyes. “One more time. I met this man *once*. He rescued me from a bunch of pirate goons who thought they could make me do whatever they wanted. He stayed up until the point that peacekeepers arrived, and then he left. I had not met him before that, nor have I met him since.”

Maxwell shook his head. “You expect me to believe that a Solarian Knight, a man so far above your meager existence, for no reason compromised a delicate mission, in the aid of a total stranger?”

“You're not very good at this, are you?” Rumil deadpanned. “Listen, I'd know if you had anything. You'd have followed this guy, whoever he is, and you would have seen him meet me. All you have is this one incident, and there's a reason for that... *because that's all there was.*”

“Miss Bonamede... we know that's not true,” Maxwell said. “We know you've been in close association before.”

Rumil's patience came to an end. “You two are insane.” She stood up. “By your own admission, I am in no trouble here. So, by that logic, you are in no position to keep me here against my will. Now, I have to get back to work.”

Geoffrey impeded her exit. “I told you she wouldn't reveal the nature of her intimacy willingly, Kennifor.”

“Intimacy?” Rumil boggled.

“Very well, Sansin,” Maxwell conceded. “Don't dawdle in there. Who knows what perversions lie in the mind of a woman like her?”

“I beg your pardon if I don't feel gentle, miss,” Geoffrey snarled with insincere apology, “but I'm not going to waste time on any potential discomfort.”

The Solarian's right hand snapped forward and touched Rumil's temple, following her down as she collapsed to her knees, paralyzed in fear and repulsion. The young woman wasn't so much in pain as shocked by the unexpected sensation... like a gentle minor surgery that didn't require full anesthetics. The phantom fingers wove through her brain, pulling out whatever memories could be grabbed, forcing her to recall them as her interrogator read through them himself.

And many of them she didn't want to remember, to be honest.

Still deeper he pried, to her experience on Glorindal, and what she did on the station. Surprisingly, he didn't dwell on her hacking exploits. Rumil would have figured her attempts to get into a prominent nobleman's personal files would have at least generated a passing interest.

Then her world abruptly went black.

The blackness was broken by occasional bursts of red light. She couldn't make out details of her surroundings terribly well through eyes filled with tears, just that she was being put into... something. She's crying out to a figure, blurred and indecipherable, then without a sound, a lid, or perhaps a door closes in front of her, and all light is banished again.

The Solarian's presence broke off, and he stepped back as if stung, but Rumil was barely aware of his or his partner's presence at that point. She smell of death had crept into her nose, roaring of explosives in her ears, and nothing but darkness in her eyes. She scrambled into the nearest corner, huddled in a ball, crying silently. How dare that... monster... force her to live her nightmares? They were bad enough when she was sleeping.

That had only been the capstone to the violation... that Solarian, whatever he did, read her mind,

dug through her memories, all her secret things she never wanted anyone to know. That bastard even went so far into her past to know what boys she thought had been cute in the orphanage, the first friends she could remember. What purpose could those things have held?

Meanwhile, Maxwell had grabbed his partner, and roughly pulled him out of the interrogation room, nearly slamming the door shut behind him, before pinning Geoffrey against the wall in carefully restrained anger.

“What did you do?” Maxwell demanded sternly.

Geoffrey was caught looking at his hands, awestruck. “I... don't know. Once I was in her mind, I couldn't stop. Something kept pulling me... ever further.” He shook his head, in an attempt to clear it. “I couldn't control the path I was taking.”

“Did you at least find what we were looking for?”

Geoffrey shook his head. “No. In that regard, the woman is telling the truth. Her memories carried no recollection of Knight Honore, not his name, his position, prior meetings... none of it.”

“Could he have altered her memories?” Maxwell mused. “He's certainly powerful enough for such a delicate task... but if he did, then that still means she doesn't have anything of use to us.”

But something was bothering Geoffrey, and it was clear to his partner that he was distracted. It wasn't about what Geoffrey had seen... your typical fare, all things considered. Most of it he had already known from earlier investigation. But, he had felt something else within her mind... something that should not have been there.

It was hard to describe... even for someone who had grown up with the gift all his life. She had that little something extra that no one other than Erani like himself had... that spark that was the gift of the Creator, the blood of the host of Annor.

The path he had taken... it had been for a purpose. To *show* him... that despite her deviant past, despite her lowly station... even despite her crimes... there was a noble soul underneath it all, a purity of spirit that nothing in this galaxy could tarnish.

She couldn't be... could she?

“Geoffrey! Let's go!” Maxwell insisted. “We're done here.”

Still in a daze, the interrogator fell behind his partner. The Solarian Inquisition Agency was not going to like their report. Bonamede's memories only confirmed that there was no impropriety occurring between her and the Knight Commandant. The two meetings they've had were pure coincidence, and no relationship, working or intimate, had come from them.

Unless...

They had finally exited the building, and as they hit the bottom steps, Geoffrey decided to breach the topic that was on his mind. “Kennifor... perhaps we should keep watch on Bonamede after all.”

Maxwell stopped, and said dismissively. “I don't see why. Even if Knight Commandant Honore *was* having illicit relations with this woman and *had* cleaned her memories of that, he's not going to come back to her after doing so. He's not stupid.”

“No... I mean... there's something about that woman. She... I think she's psionic.”

The idea that anyone not of the Erani race would have the gift of mental power was one of lunacy and possibly heresy, so Geoffrey was expecting the look of astonished disbelief Maxwell gave him. “Are you *mad*?” Maxwell asked.

“I thought so... but... I felt it. That's what I couldn't figure out earlier. She has the spark of power... it's dormant, but it's there. Do you think...?” He left the question trail off, reluctant to voice the implications on his mind.

Maxwell spun his head around, and settled on the alley running along the north side of the peacekeeper station. “Over there. *Now*.”

The two Solarians gained the privacy they both felt they needed. Maxwell rubbed his forehead, and said, “So... you think that woman might just be the one Bryan Honore wrote about?”

"I... think so. That's why it probably wouldn't be a bad idea to keep her under watch."

Maxwell smiled. "I think you might be right, which is why I think it's best you don't report anything at all, old friend."

Geoffrey then became aware to the tiny strands of psionic energy that Maxwell had twined through Geoffrey's vital functions. Threading, as it was called, was a very old, very exclusive, and very forbidden art... an assassination technique that left no traces of wrongdoing, and could be used from nearly interminable distance, as long as you maintained a mental link with your target.

Further thought ended with but a swift mental jerk that ended Geoffrey Sansin's life in the blink of an eyelash. Maxwell sighed, opened a communications channel, and accessed the secured protocols that he needed to get in touch with his superior.

"I had to dispose of Sansin. We discovered the sign that we've been waiting for since the migration to Solaria."

The man on the other spoke with a mechanically altered voice. "You found the sixth?"

"I believe so. The information we have on her follows what was written, and she does possess the gift from what I can tell."

There was a moment's pause. "I will arrange for Sir Sansin to be disposed of, and the incident handled. I will send you briefing materials; memorize them and do not deviate from the outline within it. The last thing I need is you slipping up if someone decides to investigate."

Maxwell nodded. "Agreed. I will not fail."

"See to it that you don't. Once you feel properly briefed, report in to Supreme Commander Honore. I suspect he will want to hear your report."

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By the time Rumil returned to the Sultry Siren, mentally drained and still rattled by her interrogation, the club was closing up for the night. No doubt Rafe would be in a fit that she missed her performance time.

Sure enough, the stagehand saw her come in, and pointed right to Rafe's office. "He wanted to speak with you the moment you returned."

"Obviously," Rumil groaned, clenching her eyes shut in anticipation of the coming headache, stumbling towards the back of the club.

"Woah... Rumil, you alright?"

"No," She replied honestly. "I need about thirty tenth-cycles sleep, and a session with a therapist. Then, I'll probably be something remotely close to 'alright.'"

The stagehand was demonstrating a concern that Rumil found even more disturbing. He gently felt her forehead, and noted, "You're sweating like crazy and you feel cold. What did those Solarians do to you?"

"When I find out myself, I'll let you know." She shrugged away further concern, and disappeared behind the doors backstage.

Rafe was thumbing through the single filing cabinet in the southeast corner of the office, which was to say two tacks from his chair. Once Rumil appeared in the doorway, he said simply, "You're fired."

She heard Rafe perfectly, but instinct and denial caused her to ask, "What?"

"You're fired. I've already had your personal locker cleared out. It's in a box in front of the locker. Just... get out."

"Why?" she asked incredulously. "I'm one of your most profitable dancers!"

Rafe leveled a finger at her. "No, you *were*. *Now*, you're a liability. You don't get it. No one wants to get anywhere near you, and this club by extension. And now, with those Solarians barging in and taking you off to wherever their damnable religion led them, you're even *more* off-limits. No one

is going to risk pissing off the Solarians by even showing up most nights. I kept you around because I know you're in a bit of a bind with credits, but this was the last straw. Just... get out. Oh, and get changed first.”

Rumil, aghast, tried to keep her head from spinning as her brain tried to pick up the fragile pieces of her life as it spiraled down the drain. Thus, she didn't move from the door until Rafe re-issued his order, angrily pointing past her towards the hall.

The dancers had already left, and so Rumil didn't even get a farewell send-off. Forlornly changing out of her outfit and into more suitable civilian attire, Rumil gathered up the haphazardly packed box of effects, and stepped out into the Altarian night. With luck, tomorrow would be a better day... if anything, by default.

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It didn't promise to be such at first. She woke with a throbbing headache just before midday, which she rather expected.

Her message box was filled with several messages, which she also expected. The majority of which were from the other dancers, extending the condolences they didn't get the chance to convey the night before. Another was from the Iomet Planetary Academy for the Computing Sciences, informing her that due to the loss of her employment, she had violated the terms of her enrollment, and was “hereby dismissed from her studies.” Again, not surprising... no one was going to afford “miner trash” like her any slack.

So much for shining knights. The one that came into her life promptly left it in pieces. Where was he now? Sipping fine alcohols and dining on meals that alone probably cost more than every one of her personal possessions put together, most likely.

How was this fair? She hadn't done anything wrong... well... at least nothing pertaining to what got her fired, her studies terminated, and with grim future potential. Why had cosmic fate chosen her to be its landfill?

She had nothing. If she didn't find new employment within eighty cycles, she'd have nowhere to live, and nowhere to go. The idea of living under boxes in some damp alleyway again wasn't exactly appealing... so that meant she had little time to find another option.

Then her eyes turned to one final message in her box, from a sender she didn't recognize, nor could it be identified. That astonished Rumil, as she was known to be pretty good at tracing. The message itself merely contained a location, a time, 2.75 LT, and a promise that it would help her employment crisis. Considering that her only other options for the time being would likely entail dish-washing or food preparation at a random corporate fast food eatery, she figured the mysterious opportunity couldn't be *that* bad.

She glazed over the fact that the sender's immediate knowledge about her prompt lack of employment should probably concern her. And that whatever this unidentified person had to offer likely wasn't above the level... or else it would have offered more information up front.

But it really was unfair to jump to such conclusions. It could also be a dashing, middle aged, shy and uncertain businessman taking a venture risk, looking for a promising programmer that wouldn't be able to demand a terribly high salary to begin an information infrastructure.

Right. That was it.

Certainly.

She then regarded herself, mussed up from the night before. She hadn't bothered undoing her hair from the style she had prepared to perform in when she returned to her apartment last night, and so it was a catastrophic mess. She also didn't smell all that great, caked in the sweat and grime she picked up during that period. She was going to have to do something about that rather quickly. It wouldn't speak well of her to show up to this... whatever it was... and not be presentable.

So it was quickly to the shower and her personal beauty goods. She didn't have much time, and a lot of work to do.

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Okay, so the shy entrepreneur possibility went out the window rather quickly. This was the rough part of the rough parts of Iomet; even the gangs and organized crime thought the place was too wild for them to operate in. Abandoned buildings, crumbling from almost decades of neglect lined the road she had found herself on after exiting the transit train, and the road itself wasn't much better. Pock-marked like it had been hit by a meteor shower with exposed magnetic hover panels under the surface. Anyone with a hover vehicle would not have a smooth ride, to say the least.

That explained why the roadway was empty... but the sidewalks being equally devoid of activity was not so easily rationalized. Perhaps it was due to being near mid-day, but even then, she expected to see at least some people. Not that she was complaining, as the sort of people that would dwell in this part of the city would find her an easy mark.

Rumil looked at the time display on her communications device: 2.70 LT. Every tick she spent here she got more nervous, and the complete lack of activity became more concerning and nerve-racking. She started to get the sinking feeling that she had walked into some sort of trap, although what any agency or group would want with her at this point was beyond her.

Then, one tick before the scheduled time, a single hover appeared, approaching slowly over the rough roadway. It was definitely out of place, a very posh luxury vehicle with an extended cab and dark tinted windows, expertly polished and painted in a gleaming silver that nearly blinded Rumil as it pulled up to her and reflected the sunlight back into her face. By the time she had banished the glare from her eyes, the vehicle had stopped in front of her, and the front passenger window rolled down to reveal a well-dressed and manicured Arcadian male with dark hair coiffed into a near perfect crop and eyes shrouded by sunglasses.

“Miss Rumil Bonamede, I presume?” he asked confidently.

“Yes...” Rumil answered.

He then reached out of her line of sight before holding out a fingertip analysis scanner. “Then surely you don't mind proving it?”

“Well, this is turning out to be an interesting interview already.” Rumil deadpanned, nonetheless complying with the request and inserting the tip of her index finger into the designated slot. Fingertip analysis had become the generally accepted manner of identification, analyzing both the fingerprint and genetic information, then matching with the Galactic Alliance Census Database or whatever ID storage server the operator chose.

A pale violet light lit up the interior of the scanner, and ended roughly ten demiticks later. The passenger of the hover looked down at his lap where his personal computing unit rested, then said, “Identity confirmed, Miss Bonamede. Please, take a seat in the rear cab.”

The second door from the rear of the hover popped open, and Rumil hesitated momentarily before deciding she had come this far, and might as well see it through. She grasped the door handle, and pulled it outward more for easy entry, then had to wait a moment for her eyes to adjust from bright day to interior darkness once she climbed in and took her seat.

“I do apologize for all the secrecy and subterfuge, Rumil dear,” a scratchy tenor voice said. “But I have found that the sort of business I wish to discuss is not properly done in public... or while stationary.”

Rumil knew that voice, and wagered that everyone involved with some form of media did as well. It belonged to arguably the most powerful person on Arcadia, and perhaps the galaxy itself... the man who controlled the flow of information throughout the Galactic Alliance.

Gregor Krennan.

Rumil wanted to speak, but her mouth had decided to stop cooperating with her brain. Meanwhile, the assistant in the front of the cab called back, "Where should we go, sir?"

Krennan flipped an unconcerned wave. "Anywhere really. As long as we're at Iomet South Starports at 5 LT. I'd rather not have to reschedule to a later flight."

"Yes, sir."

He then turned his attention back to Rumil. "I have been watching you rather closely, young lady... it's a bit of a shame what has happened to you."

"I appreciate the condolences," she replied warily.

Krennan took a deep breath. "I happen to know you are quite talented, and am looking for someone of precisely your skills."

"Me? I'm a programmer; specializing in security and data protection. Not media."

Krennan shook his head. "I also know you have shown considerable aptitude in hacking, my dear. Your efforts on Glorindal aren't as secret as you might think. You see, I am looking for the same thing as you. Together, we just might be able to find it."

Rumil blinked nervously. "What do you mean?"

"The Baramak Slaughter. Even with my monopoly on information, anything pertaining to the Erani genocide of our homeworld has been kept locked away. Where, I don't know... but I know the Kiros or the Solarians have it. I obviously can't look for it myself, I'm too public, and the hackers I already have employed aren't up to the task. I think you are. Even in secondary school, you successfully hacked into Solarian technology. I'd wager you're even more suited now... anyone who thinks you aren't capable simply because you haven't submitted a final term paper is too foolish to properly utilize your talents anyway."

The hover hit a particularly deep divot, and caused the cab to jostle. That jarring seemed to drop a small piece of information she initially overlooked. "Wait... back up a tick. *Our* homeworld?"

"Oh?" Krennan said teasingly, "You didn't know?" He picked up an object at his feet, a cane... judging from its design, used for walking... a bit of a curiosity in this modern day, as medical science had found ways to overcome most genetic defects, and even regrow limbs that were damaged. Unless...

He declared grimly while he spun his cane in his hands, "Baramak was my home as well, young lady. A long time ago, I operated a small GalNet affiliate station on Honsu, at least... until the Slaughter. The radiation from the fusion barrage hit the coastal regions hard, places like Honsu. The fallout damaged my genetic code beyond repair and crippled me."

Rumil watched as the old man's hand clenched in suppressed rage. "You were probably too young to remember all that happened... how many of our people died. The nuclear fusion within the barrage was so intense that it fused the very atmosphere, creating the carbon blanket that forms the 'burnt side' of the planet... stripping away nearly forty percent of the natural oxygen and air pressure planet wide. Anyone with respiratory problems... died. Anyone who lived at high altitudes... died. All over the planet, emergency assistance was overwhelmed. Piles of dead in places, scrambling over each other trying to find air to breathe. So many... too many... never had a chance. By the time interplanetary aid could mobilize, it was far too late. Over half of the population was dead."

Krennan calmed as the memories faded, and he asserted, "To this day, no one has been punished for this crime. Trust me, my dear, I have more than enough reason to want the people who are responsible for this to pay. I think that is what I have lacked all this time. Our fellow Baramaki seem to want to put the past behind them, they don't want to continue to be a 'bother' to society... I can't let myself do that. I think what I have lacked is an operative with my same determination... my same desire."

He paused a moment to drop his right hand on Rumil's knee. "I need someone like you, Rumil."

She leaned back, “This... is an awful lot to absorb. Hacking isn't exactly considered legal activity, you know.”

“You'll be well compensated, of course,” Krennan answered, “as well as given a legit cover for your activities. All my resources will be yours, just as they are with all my counter-security operatives. You will have means and protections your average GalNet leech could never dream of having. I'm not talking about dark corners with a tiny computing unit trying to find spoilers for the next Loveless episode. I am talking top-of-the-line gear, top-of-the-line pay, and top-of-the-line support.”

“While that's all well and good, why me? And don't give me this 'determination' and 'desire' garbage. I didn't buy it the first time, and I won't buy it now.”

Krennan smiled knowingly. “Because, Rumil, as you well know, this galaxy isn't going to give you much leeway. It wishes you would just disappear and not bother the... better people. I know that as well. Us 'miner trash' have to stick together.”

For the first time in a very long time, Rumil had that warm feeling in her stomach, the kind that comes from feeling you have someone in your corner. “All right, I'll bite. What are the terms going to be?”

The media mogul waved the question off. “We can discuss those details in a more comfortable setting at a later date. I'll contact you with the where and when, as well as arrange for you to travel to Pinnacle. I trust you'll be free anytime?”

She shook her head, sensing the subtle, if rather poor, joke. “Yes, I suppose I will be.”

“Then it is settled,” Krennan said with a clap, then rapped on the divider to the front of the cab. “Jensin, let's return this young lady to her domicile. We should have time before our flight, yes?”

“Indeed, sir,” the assistant confirmed.

“Very good. Then do so.” He then popped open a cabinet in front of him, and removed a green tinted bottle, popping the cork and giving it a good sniff. “Ah yes, a 2550 Marron. A fine vintage, excellent year. Please, take a glass, and to our good health.”

* * * * *

The staryears passed, civilization continuing its slow trod forward. Timothy Honore knew of many of these events, and had been waiting patiently for the gears of the Endtimers' machine to grind to life once more... but even he hadn't expected it to happen so quickly, or the trigger that would begin a fight for the end of days.

“Knight Commandant, sir,” Lieutenant Mason Davvis said with a salute from the doorway of Timothy's office. “The Supreme Commander wishes to speak with you.”

“Did he seem serene or happy?” Timothy asked.

“No sir, he was very morose.”

The young Knight stood, and said, “Good. Very well, inform my father I am reporting immediately.”

Timothy took the most direct route possible, hoping to get whatever his father wanted out of the way so he could get back to his “work,” which in this case dealt with mediating a dispute between two Knights over priority in their orders to the weaponsmiths.

In that regard, Niles Honore had something that approached good news. “I have a mission for you. Top priority.”

Timothy sighed warily. “You *do* know I have my own connections within the Knighthood, and I'll know if you're up to something while I'm off planet.”

Niles turned his nose up distastefully. “I am still the Supreme Commander, boy, I can do whatever I damn well please, whether you are present or not. Now, open your handheld so I can transfer this data to you.”

Timothy complied, regarded the opening file and raised an eyebrow in suspicion. “A hacker.”

“She's been nibbling too close to some very secure military secrets, and is proving far too resourceful for our liking. The Army hasn't had any luck tracking her down, the SIA has been getting stonewalled by the Galactic Alliance Inter-Relations Commission, and she's even given the Wraiths the slip twice.”

“Uh huh,” Timothy replied dismissively, examining further into the case file.

“I was thinking considering the luck you've had tracking down people who otherwise seem to be one step ahead that you'd have similar luck with this woman. SIA and I agree that she likely has ties with Gregor Krennan; it's the only way to explain the protection she is getting from the Inter-Relations Commission.”

Timothy started, nothing more than a barely discernible flinch, as he scrolled down the file and came across the attached image of his target. He blinked repeatedly, and enlarged the image to scrutinize it more closely.

“Something wrong?” Niles asked in curiosity.

“No... I don't think so,” Timothy answered, not entirely convinced himself. “She looks rather familiar, but I can't place where.”

“Arcadians all look the same to me,” Niles dismissed. “I'm impressed you can actually tell the difference between any two of them.”

Timothy regarded his father coldly. He knew that Niles was planning something... the only thing to do was play along for now and keep his ears open to news from Solaria. “Very well, consider this... Miss Bonamede in our custody. I'll leave immediately.”

“Dismissed.”

Niles's eyes followed Timothy as the younger Knight departed. SIA had reported a couple staryears back that they could find no evidence of anything illicit occurring between Timothy and Rumil, but Niles remained unconvinced. There was something about that woman that caught Timothy's eye, even if for a short while, and Niles intended to find out exactly what that was.

* * * * *

“Father, I think I'd be suitable for this mission.”

Joseph Feroz regarded his son carefully. “Justin, she's a mere hacker. Granted, a wily hacker, but hardly a priority case for my successor. Let the Phantom Regiment handle it.”

Justin stopped his father with a raised hand. “Father, the Solarians have issued Knight Commandant Timothy Honore to find Bonamede. I just found out from Interstellar Intelligence.”

This was news to the Supreme Commander of the Kiros Knighthood. “They are certain of this?”

“Knight Commandant Honore was seen on Xanas, Bonamede's last known location. Our contacts within Xanas Peacekeeping tells us that is his target, as well as being identified at well known 'hacking offices' in the area. I think its safe to say that locating Bonamede is his goal.”

Joseph took the information in... this definitely changed things. As much as he was reluctant to send out his son on *any* off-planet mission (in fact, the next time Joseph did so would be the first), it would look badly on his family and the entire Knighthood if the Kiros did not meet such a dispatching of power with an equal demonstration of their own. Besides, the Phantoms would be completely outclassed by a Knight of the Honore family.

On the other hand, Timothy Honore was already a notable figure, with considerable combat and mission experience under his belt. Justin was not, and Joseph had intentionally kept him out of the fray. A direct confrontation between Justin and his battle-tested Solarian counterpart would likely not end well. Justin was all the family Joseph had left, and couldn't afford to risk him.

“Father... this is my opportunity to prove myself to the Knights you say I will one day command,” Justin argued. “I know... what they say about me. I know they think that I'm unprepared

and unmotivated to lead. How can I demonstrate that I can lead them if I'm never allowed to leave Kiros?"

"Justin... you know how valuable you are to the future of the Knighthood. I can't risk you unnecessarily," Joseph countered.

"The Solarians obviously don't have the same concern with Knight Commandant Honore."

Joseph snapped, "The day we aspire to be like those heretics to all that is good and godly will be the day I die!"

Justin took a deep breath. "What I am saying is that I am more than capable of handling anything the galaxy throws at me. The Kiros have never had a psionic of my caliber. I'm trained, I know what I'm doing. But I need the chance to demonstrate that. Let me go head to head with their best. You know I'm capable, you know I can do it. Let me prove it... please."

Joseph slowly sat down at his desk, twirling the datapad with the data on Rumil Bonamede between his fingers. This woman must have either found something very important to the Solarians if they had dispatched the "Scourge of the Blood Hawks" to apprehend her. And anything important to the Solarians was important to the Kiros to know. Justin *was* their best chance to counter the Solarian Knight Commandant.

"Very well," Joseph relented. "I'll transfer the data to your datapad by the end of the tenth-cycle. Use that time to prepare for your dispatching. Honore will have a head start both in information and connections, I would recommend you remedy that advantage as quickly as you can."

Justin didn't even try to maintain his composure, grinning like a lunatic as he snapped to attention. "Yes, sir! I won't let you down!"

"Just don't do anything foolish and get yourself killed. I don't want to have to bury my son like I had to bury your mother."

"Understood... father."

As Justin left, Joseph worried. The excitement his son was showing reflected his inexperience. The Supreme Commander of the Kiros Knighthood hoped his Knight Commandant would live long enough to have a better understanding of the burden, rather than delight, serving as a Knight really meant.

Provided Honore didn't kill him first.

* * * * *

Rumil had learned Krennan was a creature of habit oddly enough; there was a certain procedure that things had to be done, a clearly defined way to proceed within the structure of his vast information empire.

Due to that, she knew the best way to get his attention was to break that established protocol. With that knowledge in hand, she speed walked past the receptionist, ignored the security guards posted at the scanning booth, and dutifully stepped into the lift that would lead to the utmost floor of the Krennan Media Building. Fortunately the receptionist recognized her from the profile Rumil gave the woman... it was what prevented a most unpleasant resistance to Rumil's prompt and swift entrance.

Unfortunately, she wasn't able to make the surprise visit she had intended, because Krennan was prepared, likely getting word that Rumil had barged in, and that logic dictated she'd be coming his way.

"You could set an appointment like anyone else," he glowered.

"Really? After what happened on Xanas, I couldn't be sure such an appointment would make it to your calendar," Rumil retorted with equal acidity.

Krennan leaned forward in his chair, dropping his elbows on his desk, and shrouded his mouth with his folded hands. "Meaning...?"

"Meaning our go-between nearly bailed on me!" she shouted. "I had the Kiros Phantom Regiment hunting me, and he wouldn't even answer my messages until I hacked into his system and

proved he was there!”

Krennan tapped his index fingers together. “Well, we can't have that, now can we?” But even as he said that, Rumil could sense his complete lack of interest and concern. “While you let me worry about our middle man, I suppose I might as well give you your next assignment right now.”

He then hit a virtual button projected from his desktop, and on cue the data pad in Rumil's right pants pocket chirped to signal a received message. Sighing in resignation, she pulled out the device, and started looking over the assignment before she paused. “Talos? What could possibly be there?”

“The Solarians have recently opened an embassy on the planet. I suspect it would likely have access to sensitive information, and possibly direct access to other classified servers,” Krennan noted.

Rumil shook her head, “You don't get it. I've been trying to tell you for the last staryear, and you keep ignoring me. It's futile to keep doing things this way. The Solarians don't transmit highly secured information electronically, not even to planets within their sphere of influence. I'd have to get within Solarian space at least, and even then I'm not sure I'd have much luck.”

“Oh, then patronize this old man,” was his dismissive reply as he turned back to his work. “Go to Talos, see if you get lucky.”

“Or what?” Rumil asked. “I'll 'disappear' like Limak did?”

Krennan regarded her with an annoyed, steely glare. “Limak did some things that were... ill-advised. He should have known better than to cross me and our mission.”

“You mean like wanting out of your blind crusade?”

Krennan's expression didn't change. “I had assumed you had my same zeal. I would be very careful if you don't. There is no getting out at this point. We will pursue the truth until the end.”

Rumil saw that for the empty words they were. Gregor Krennan's first priority was to save his own hide, and would easily sacrifice 'his own' if he felt so inclined. The only person who was risking anything was Rumil.

Meanwhile, Krennan was beginning to implicitly show his annoyance. “Well? Get going. I expect a progress report in three cycles. If our go-between doesn't reply, leave the report anyway. Rest assured I will get it.”

Knowing there was nothing else that could be gained from this meeting, Rumil stormed out, feeling cornered and helpless. There was nowhere she could go at this point. She knew the list of grievances the Kiros and Solarians had listed about her... she couldn't expect anything less than a summary execution if the Adjudicates of either sect got a hold of her. Everywhere else was within Krennan's reach, who would snuff her out with all the compassion he would have for a bug if she crossed him.

Once the lift doors closed to take her back to the ground floor, she allowed herself a good cry.

On the other side of those doors, Krennan regarded his top hacker thoughtfully. He had sensed she was losing the desire to continue her mission before the debacle of Xanas, and the test he had set up for her there confirmed it. She would have to be dealt with. A shame really, as he rather liked the young lady. Her inner fire had been quite refreshing at first, and reinvigorated Krennan's own waning hopes of ever bringing those religious murderers to justice.

Fortunately for him, he had the means to dispose of her and leave no real ties to himself. Tapping on his desktop, the virtual interface flared to life, opening the speed link he had come to find very useful.

> *Welcome to Sentinel – please input User Identification*

Krennan had found this network almost by accident, informed by his programmers of a high amount of seemingly random data flying about in certain sectors of the GalNet. Upon locating the source of the flow, he immediately saw its usefulness. He set up several accounts of varying identities to help him manage and survey who knew what, while giving him a quick, anonymous way to get his

own information into the hands that would help him best.

It was through this network that he learned that the Solarians had assigned their Knight Commandant to the task of locating and apprehending Rumil, a man who *also* had an account with this network. He was, by all reports, noble and no nonsense, with a strong idealistic streak and a bit of an edge to grind against the leaders of his antiquated society. For a short while, Krennan entertained trying to recruit him, but found that he could be put to use just as well without ever making contact.

This would prove to be one such time.

Krennan went through the verification process, using pre-programmed ID screens to bypass actual identification. For a network that carried such valuable information, they really didn't defend it very well at all.

> *Identification confirmed. Greetings Mister Reggor; Query, Add, or Amend?*

> **Add.**

> *Please input any key words or search tags.*

> **Bonamede, Rumil, hacking**

> *Please input as detailed information as possible.*

Taking a deep breath to compose his thoughts, Krennan put in the information that Timothy Honore would no doubt latch onto.

> ***Rumil Bonamede has been confirmed to be taking a shuttle from Pinnacle, Arcadia to Hoff, Talos as of 3421/9/9. She was packed rather light, which tells me she's not planning for a long stay.***

Krennan didn't want to provide more information than that right away, trying to keep up appearances of a casual observer. That would surely be enough for Knight Honore anyway, if his previous exploits were any indication. Krennan would subtly provide more if that proved to be the case. Once in Solarian hands, she would be terminated like all the other hackers under Krennan's employ that those freaks had apprehended.

The media king leaned back, content that, for the time being, everything was under complete control. He would eventually have to find a new hacker to replace Rumil, but those sorts were like the rodents in the Pinnacle sewer system... they were everywhere and even the outstanding specimens weren't all that unique.

From a chilled compartment at the bottom of his desk, he pulled out a bottle of 2550 Merron and poured himself a glass. "To my very good health," he said to himself, and slowly savored the smooth yet tart vintage.

Yes, things would be just fine.