

Within One's Shadow

Within the cold prefab walls of a military starship's 4-bunk bedroom, the girl sat on a plastic stool, feet flat on the floor in front of her, hands held together politely in her lap. Desert-red hair sat pulled in a loose bun behind her, and she wore the uniform of the Imperial navy. She was young - still a teenager - but her freckled face bore clear marks of stress, and she spoke in a low, weary tone, staring dead-eyed into the camera pointed at her from across the room.

If I am going to die six quadrants from home with no heir, I will at least leave behind some tangible record of my life.

My name is Roza Bazayev. I was born on the third planet in the Taraz System, oldest daughter to Ullis and Tolkyin. I was the first of four. When the imperial conscription service came to our township I refused to let them take any of my siblings.

At first I considered it a duty, perhaps even an honourable one, but now I have served several months and I know the true nature of war. I know now the limitless depths of its cruelty, and the gruesome appetites of its architects.

They do not care about any of us. This battle we are hurtling towards here, within the Zonaris Stellar Region - it is meaningless, and us troops know we will be cut down. We know we are chattel, being used to make a political point.

My name is Roza Bazayev. This is my final will and testament, as I await death in battle tomorrow. Curse the Empire! Curse the Empress and her guard! On my immortal soul and the name of my family, curse the Empire to Hell!

When I watched messages I watched them on repeat; I took my time to poke around what was recorded, observe carefully the movements of the actors involved.

I thought about them over and over, the young teenager's words. Her voice - tired but strong - echoed through my head as I sailed full-speed through the Carsium Lunar Highway.

It was a pretty standard job: deliver a small personal drive, which held one video message, with transcription, to a post office box in the capital city of a planet at the fringes of the Empire. It would be a short overnight trip, quiet and well-paying; my favourite kind of job, the kind I searched for.

Still, the morbid shadow that hung over the delivery stuck with me. She couldn't have been older than 17 or 18 - that was how the Empire did it. That was how they'd nearly gotten me, so many years ago. If not for medical exemption I would've been a charred corpse on the *Merle* when it was sunk in the battle for Dacia, or blasted into space dust in a

frigate like so many other faceless teenagers from the colonies. But they don't want you when you can't pass their mental exams, which - hilariously - meant I was allowed to live, for being not useful enough.

So now I had the port on the side of my head, underneath the waves of thick dark brown hair, that allowed me to view messages like Ms. Bazayev's. Sticking a drive into my skullport wasn't a feeling I enjoyed, but it was one I got used to, and as far as quality goes you can't beat beaming a message directly into the brain. These days most of my work as a courier revolved around these messages, little cyborg errand girl crisscrossing all over space, making pickups and deliveries and contacts where and when the app told me to.

It's a remarkable piece of technology, the skullport. Everyone has a handheld nowadays, but this sort of augmentation is much rarer. In the case of Roza's message, watching it was like stepping into a snippet of her life hours before her death, which she awaited knowingly, and feeling the same all-consuming hopelessness that she had in those moments.

Most of my classmates growing up went out that way. It'd been centuries since the Empire had added scores of outer rim planets to its collection, all of which now functioned as a cheap and steady source of lives for the government. People had grown used to the scything cycle of the Empire's many wars and drafts, and conscription was only for a minimum of 18 months, 3 of those being training - so if you were lucky, you could get out with your life still intact, if not all your limbs.

Growing up it was hard not to be a little bitterly fatalistic about it, being just a couple years off from draft age and seeing the procession of funerals day after day, the coffins being delivered in bulk to the funeral home, watching the big excavators make additional space in the cemetery on my way to school. And now, ever since I'd fallen into courier work, I felt like I was rolling the dice on my life each time I picked up another gig. Space travel was safe on its own, but my work took me to some pretty lawless places, and as a result I stayed armed.

Given all this, I kept myself from getting too sentimental. I had no parents to worry about, most of my schoolmates were dead (and the ones that weren't I hadn't seen in years), and I floated around the galaxy wherever the work took me, the pay from one job enough to cover the costs getting to and pulling off the next one - ship repairs, boosters, food - and so on. No roots, and no ties to anything except my ship, an old modified imperial cop model I had named the *Velenoso*. Gray and red, an angular and sleek conical design that had aged, in my opinion, like fine wine. And sitting in the cockpit, small for some but just right for me, with the instruments and controls laid out in front of me in a compact, concave dashboard array, I felt more at home than I ever had on any planet, in any city.

On really long hauls, when I felt confident enough, I'd hit the lights and lay on the cot behind the pilot's seat, letting the ship drift as I listened to the cold silence of space expanding ceaselessly around me.

I've learned to enjoy what I can: the pleasure of spaceflight in a one-man yacht, the rush of pushing my ship to its limits and seeing the results of my mechanical tweaks and programmatic edits and slowly increasing skill. The weight of the pistol on my belt and the satisfaction of a good practice session or a good cleaning. The comfort and style of my flight suit, a black-and-white racer model I got secondhand that's warm, but breathable. The bemused and begrudging respect offered someone as small as me when she waltzes into dive bars filled with gutter scum from the most inhospitable planets in the galaxy.

I've learned to love being an outcast, a weirdo. But war weighs heavy on my mind. I always think of the kids, the ones I knew and the millions I didn't. I think about how I felt on my way to the medical examination I didn't know I'd fail that day after my high school graduation: like my life was over and I hadn't realized it yet, like I had died and the physical experience of death was just waiting to catch up with my body. And now I found myself pondering that little girl Roza's words, 17 or 18 years old - at the most - and how hardened they were after what sounded like just a few months' tour of duty.

Curse the Empire! Curse the Empress and her guard! On my immortal soul and the name of my family, curse the Empire to Hell!

Braver than most, but vaporized to oblivion all the same. I understand the appeal of justice in the form of an afterlife - so people like Roza can get a fair shake, or a fair reward, for being put through the meatgrinder - but all I see is the grinder, so that's all I find myself believing in, most of the time. Lately I'd found myself spending more and more time alone in the cockpit with a bottle of something cheap and strong, in the acrid way that sort of thing always is, and it was hard to know what I'd imagined and what I'd actually done over the past few weeks. Whether at a given moment in time I was talking to someone who existed or just myself.

So that made it hard to figure out what I believed sometimes.

I knew a girl in school once, Heather, who Roza reminded me of a little - long brown hair and a sweet round face. When she smiled my heart would skip in my chest. Our last couple years of school she barely spent a moment away from her man, and any time you got her in a conversation she'd talk about the family they planned to have. Then she got drafted, and after graduation nobody ever saw her again. I never stopped thinking about Heather, about the baby she'd wanted, how much she looked forward to being a mother and a wife. The odds that her ship were recovered are infinitesimally low, meaning the coffin they buried in the cemetery for her was empty, just a military uniform folded inside and the imperial flag draped around it. Last week was my 29th birthday and I spent it alone with a bottle of the same trash I always drink, and I thought of Heather - where was

her spirit? Trapped in that coffin, where her family apparently wanted her to be? Or floating aimlessly through space in whatever star system her ship was wiped from existence in? Heather had had an uncle who was a veteran, a longtime grunt, one of the few to serve like that and come out the other end in one piece, and he told her as a child that shooting stars were the spirits of comrades and enemies killed in old battles, melding together and traveling through space, warping together into such large masses that they leave fluorescent streaks in the sky. When I see nebulae out the windshield of the *Velenoso* that's what I always think of, Heather and her uncle and the old timers she joined out there in the infinite sky at age 18, nothing to leave behind but a heartbroken sweetheart and grief-stricken parents.

In high school I sat with my father through a long illness. My mother was never really around, so pop had raised me alone. He never liked me. He never liked how scared I was, how thin, how small, how jumpy. Then he got sick and wasted away in a forgotten hospital bed, and I sat with him and didn't flinch or turn away no matter how hard he coughed or how bad he pissed the sheets, and he told me how brave I was. I think he felt pathetic. I didn't care about that; I just wanted to show him I wasn't as weak as he thought I was, and that I'd still keep a dying man company even if he was a miserable bastard. I thought about telling him that, but I never did. He was a lot more pleasant in that hospital room than he ever had been before and I didn't want to ruin it, I guess. He passed away early one morning while I slept on the couch next to his bed. I woke up to the doctors responding to a machine alarm, but there was nothing left to do. I went back to sleep a little while after and didn't have dreams.

And after that I lived on my own in the apartment we had shared. I had always seen myself as doomed to military service, so when I was bailed out at the last minute by the thing that had long felt like it failed me - my mind - I felt a mixture of defiant and resigned, of proud and pathetic. It had taken me a few years to figure my life out, but I had, and now I was a properly established courier with most of my paperwork filed correctly. And this job, with its palm-sized cargo and generous timetable of a full week for a delivery that I could easily handle in a couple days, was a softball compared to some of the slogs I had been on recently, time-sensitive gigs hauling precious materials at unsafe speeds for pay that used to be better in a galaxy where everything was getting more expensive.

So why was a squadron of 3 imperial cruisers tailing me in an attack formation?

They hadn't issued a heave-to command, and I'd been listening since I first picked them up on my radar. I wasn't carrying anything illegal - and I generally tried not to - but still, the last thing I wanted was the attention of the police. I reveled in silence and excelled in being silent. But my headphones were on, my radio was quiet, and the ships were spread in a threatening arrowhead on my radar screen. And gaining on me.

They meant business.

I had glanced at my ship chart, pinned next to the viewscreen, at least six times, repeatedly lining up the blips on the radar with the silhouettes on the chart. Yes, they were Paulsen 44s, the standard ship of the Imperial police. So I knew what I was dealing with at least.

I sighed and ran my fingers through my hair, absentmindedly wondering how long it had been since I'd washed it. I'd never installed anything more than a sink and a toilet on the *Velenoso*, waiting to dock at stations to shower and take care of stuff like that, but I hadn't felt up for docking anywhere larger recently. I tended to avoid crowds.

If I was desperate, I could hail them. That would assure that I had their attention, but it would also help them zero my position. And I feared with grim certainty that they were already coming to kill me, and that lighting myself up as a beacon was exactly what they wanted me to do. I feared there was no changing that fact. After all, why else would they be trying to sneak up on me?

I had been overly paranoid before, but it was strange to have 3 cops tailing me like this. Random patrols didn't act this way, and I hadn't done anything worthy of attention.

The *Velenoso* was a fine-tuned ship, but nothing special to the naked eye; and my cargo was a recording of no particular regard that fit in the pocket of my flight suit. I was flying to a mid-sized city in a fairly isolated region of space to drop something off at a post office. There was absolutely *nothing* I was doing to warrant being tailed, much less so aggressively. Thoughts boiling, I eyed the vastness of space laid out in front of me, and the iron black bows of the cops in my rearview screen.

With an agonizing slowness the blips grew closer on the radar. Gradually I tilted the wheel forward, slowly revving the engine up towards its full power. This was my secret: I didn't have the best equipment, but I had equipment *and* wits good enough to outmaneuver some imperial swine. And boosters.

I took my first dose of the day now, taking the glove off my left hand quickly and sliding my exposed skin up to the wrist into the circular port on my dashboard. I felt the twinge of pain of the application, and then the surge of the booster in my blood. My gaze settled on my speedometer, slowly increasing as I pushed the *Velenoso* harder and harder and began to plot my escape maneuver.

But before I could do anything, the urgent buzzing of the ship's alarm silenced my thoughts. My eyes darted to the small and well-worn keypad & monitor setup next to the dashboard - the ship's computer - to see the alert, and my eyes were greeted by a sidelong wireframe of my own ship, with one area highlighted.

They're firing at me? From this far away?

The shockwave of turbulence the ship received from starboard aft stunned me even more, nearly throwing me out of my seat and over the dashboard. I gripped the controls tightly, staring out the windshield: the remnants of a crimson laser trailed off into the distance, cutting through nearby cosmic debris, the unmistakable mark of an imperial .75 Gt Wellman frigate gun, a long distance weapon that made cruel work of metal and flesh. It was absolutely *not* standard issue for an imperial police cruiser.

What was a specialty craft doing all the way out here? And why was it firing at *me*?

With no desire to have my bones liquefied by the most vicious armaments Imperial research could develop, I continued pressing forward on the controls to speed up. I took mental stock of my armament: four guns on either wing plus two under the nose, all drawing from the same stack of cartridges stored in the heart of the ship, and a few mines I could drop behind me to try and break the tail. Enough to take out three cops; not enough to play around with them.

I didn't love my chances in an all-out dogfight - I was confident I could outpilot any of these goons 1-on-1, but the *Velenoso* wasn't a war machine, and I had no special desire to claim 3 lives, even those of imperial cops - but I was concerned I wouldn't end up having a choice.

Eyes darting between the array of meters on the dashboard and the viewscreen box showing me my radar, I felt my instincts - honed by experience and sharpened further by the booster - begin to take over. My hands were no longer shaking; my heart raced less from anxiety and more from excitement, as though the cruisers had whet my appetite for war; my thoughts raced, but with clarity and focus.

I'm not going to die for some stupid recording. And I'm certainly not going to be struck down by some two-bit patrol cops with guns they can't even use!

It was always dark in the *Velenoso* cockpit, unlike most other personal craft. I liked it that way. It was almost like it tricked my brain into feeling cooler in a space that could heat up quickly. I felt cool now, my dark hair resting in smooth waves around my face, the silent void of space transmitting through my headset in the noiseless wake of the Wellmann blast. My gloves were comfortable on my hands, snug and well-worn. As I began punching calculations and commands into the ship's computer, I considered when the last time I'd killed a person was.

It'd been a couple years. Space could be lawless, and the Empire was seeing its already tenuous control of several border regions begin to slip farther, but it wasn't completely barbaric. People were generally fair to each other, if occasionally unkind. But in particularly long, lonely stretches of the universe that certain ships - say, couriers - had no

choice but to sail through, pilots who were caught napping behind the wheel or happened to stumble into the wrong place at the wrong time could meet an unfortunate end at the guns of pirates and highwaymen. The empire was in on it, of course, just as much as they were in on all forms of crime that happened under their jurisdiction. It helped keep the wheels greased in one of the many ways the wheels needed it.

At the very least, it gave the police in various backwater sectors something to do besides traffic drugs and people around, planet-to-planet. The cost was, as always, lives. Specifically, the lives of the underclass.

Around two years ago I'd had to drop a mine as I darted into an asteroid field, and a bandit who'd proctored a particularly savage pursuit of me failed to avoid the full effect of it; it pushed him out of control and he spiraled off into an asteroid, exploding in a fiery impact. Some pilots wouldn't consider that a kill - they can do the philosophical backflips necessary to believe that it's the dead pilot's own fault for chasing so hard, that he was doing something far too risky and unwise and that it wasn't the mine that killed him, if he'd just been more in control in the first place he could've recovered - I don't buy all that. I've had more than a couple guys try to argue that with me.

It's always guys. The girls I've told the story to just get it. I don't know why. It always comes up after a few drinks, though. People always ask about that sort of thing. So I've thought about it more than I probably would care to.

I dropped another mine now, to my port side, a little blinking grey sphere that would explode if anyone buzzed too close to it. I'd set it in an area I'd calculated via radar and my own assumptions about imperial flight patterns to be in the vicinity of two cruisers' potential flight paths. Taking them both out at once would be a miracle; I was just hoping for one and taking my best shot at such.

Meanwhile the ship that'd tried to snipe me earlier had broken out wide to the far right. I wondered if he hoped to cut me down, or off, and trap me into the firing range of his two comrades. And, I figured, he couldn't shoot while his gun recharged, so he wanted nothing to do with me now.

Wolfish, I felt something shift inside of me. Suddenly, from my perspective, this little cat-and-mouse game became a hunt. There was something savage that rose out of me in these moments, and I always felt some hesitation to let it out - but let it out I did, let it out to prowl and stalk and pounce as far and wide as it wanted. I had to; this was how I survived. If this predator needed my body and mind for a while, that was ok. If the cost was my soul, let it have as much as it needs.

I imagined myself feeding a large wolf and stroking its head as I did so.

Breaking off my previous course I shifted hard to my back right. Spinning and rotating at the same time I adjusted the *Velenoso* to point at the sniper that had been tailing me so hungrily just moments before, and with gusto now I charged at him, eyes narrowing as I centered the aiming reticule over his ship.

He was clearly surprised by my aggressiveness, about as much as his near-snipe had surprised me. This time, being rattled would be fatal for the pilot. Coming upon him as he failed to change course, I fired three shots across his bow, and saw one hit the cockpit dead-on. The laser would have melted him basically instantaneously; he was dead before the ship exploded.

My focus retrained on the radar screen as I circled back around in the shattered debris of my first kill. The other two pilots hadn't fully readjusted yet; they were slow to respond to my movements. *Are you surprised I went for your leader first?*

I had outpositioned them from the start, and now I penetrated deep into the cops' flank. With space blurring around me I once again centered the distinctive blue-black cruiser of the Imperial police within my crosshairs. Responding to my movements the ship had changed direction, and as his engines revved in a desperate attempt to escape I pulled back on the trigger and fired off a volley of shots which I watched strike a glancing blow on the center of the ship. Scared but alive, he scurried away in the opposite direction I was headed.

Pulling off to my left, I circled back around right in line with the remaining cop, who had been attempting to catch up to me and his buddy; with two more trigger pulls and two more volleys from my guns, I treated his ship to multiple hull penetrations on either side of its chassis. It didn't explode immediately, but it was almost instantly disabled; I could see its pilot struggling at the controls, briefly, as I passed. It exploded within my rearview camera, a second kill in this chance encounter.

I had lost radar sight of the third ship, and I was pointed in the direction I needed to go, so I kept on going, seeing no more of the imperial police force as I sped, hard but in control, away from the sight of the skirmish.

After a few minutes that felt like a few hours the rush that had fueled my attack began to cool off, and a great drowsiness took hold of me as cruised, numbed slightly to the stimuli of life as I scrolled through the ship's onboard map looking for the nearest station, which would offer me a place I could rest, eat, and call the man I was working for.

Picking a place I leaned back in my seat and let the cruise control take over, and as time sank back into the background I began once more to feel at home in my cockpit, firmly settled at the controls, alone with the vast nothingness of space around me, radar screen empty and silent.

I like being a courier pilot. You get to spend a lot of time alone. It suits me.

The Smyrna Transit Portal was a mid-sized station, but parking was free, which felt like a miracle. My wallet was starting to feel alarmingly light, and I needed both a bite to eat and a refill on ship ammunition.

Standing in line at Smyrna's mess hall - a tiny, shabby cafeteria sequestered in a lonely corner of the station's promenade - I eyed the prices with hatred in my heart: twelve bucks for a helping of soup, the cheapest option. While I waited to order an old man who was passing by summed up how I felt, his boonies twang heightening the outrage in every word: "Twelve dollars for fuckin' slop."

It was this that rang through my head over and over as I sat down at an unbalanced plastic table and greedily dug into a thin vegetable gruel. The average Imperial diet had grown markedly poorer lately, and I thought of the military recruits on their huge battleships, and in their colossal planetary stations, getting real fresh fruit and vegetables at least a few times per week, or so the common wisdom went. It would've surprised me if it was more than once a week, but even that was an upgrade from what the peons got.

Twelve dollars for fuckin' slop.

After I'd dropped my tray in the garbage and found the station vendor - whose ammo prices were nearly as dire as that of the food - I skulked back to my ship, jumped up into the cockpit, and pulled out my handheld to make a call. Opening the courier app I pressed the button to contact my employer for this job, an older gentleman I'd worked for several times previously.

When he answered, I let him have all the tension and anxiety that had been bubbling up into a poisonous stew in my head ever since I'd first spotted the pigs on my tail. I'd been more spooked than I cared for by the crimson laser of the Wellmann, and the fact of the matter was I was very lucky that I'd outpiloted them so superbly. I could've easily been double-teamed by the remaining cruisers after my brave charge at the sniper; the fact that they were slow to respond was a big break. They might've been Empire-trained, but they were shabby pilots overall. Striking down two of them felt now like a grim, hollow achievement.

Yelling into my tinny handheld microphone I demanded to know who was behind this job, what it was he had given me, why in the world the Empire would have cops on my tail shooting first and asking questions never, all of these demands loaded with the release of tension after a life or death battle. At the same time, I felt proud of my piloting, and that only served to boost my courage and the force with which I made my demands.

The pale-faced old man frowned from the blurry handheld screen. "I don't know what you expect me to tell you," he said in a thin voice. "I can't reveal my sources. You've worked for me before, you know that."

I got angrier. "But if the fucking government's after it, I deserve to know what I'm getting myself into!" *And why the hell would you use the app and leave such an obvious trail?*, I thought, but elected not to say outloud. I wasn't sure a trail would matter, and at this point there were two pilots KIA and two cruisers lost in my wake; the fact that he'd used the app vs a back alley channel didn't matter anymore.

"The government's *not* after it. Or at least they shouldn't be." I glared at him; he worked harder to reassure me. "Listen, you're completely right. If you were carrying something hot, I'd tell you. I promise. As a businessman, I promise."

Spit on businessmen. I sighed, biting my tongue and sitting back in my seat. I ran my hand over my face, trying to ignore the stubble that greeted my fingertips. *Sometimes it's good to have an old model with a shit camera.*

I studied the old man's blurry face on my handheld screen, some old go-between who seemed more like a snake the more time passed. Somewhere inside me the wolf stirred again, and an idea slithered out from the darker crevices of my head.

"You give me forty percent instead of twenty-five for this, OK Derry?" I stared him down. He put on a face like a victim of some great tragedy; I refused to back off. "Forty instead of twenty-five. If I'm putting my life on the line here, I need to be compensated fairly for that."

I knew Derry well enough that I had a good feel of when I could strongarm him, and this time it was just the ticket. After Derry relented I badgered him out of some more information: that the job came from a "trusted source", and that he really was sorry he couldn't warn me about the danger. I decided to be nice and believe him, the extra commission helping to soothe my mood a bit. After we hung up I took a second to cool down, leaving my ship again to pace Smyrna's promenade, shabby from disuse and pockmarked with out-of-business shops. Once I found my way back to my ship I jumped into the cockpit, closed the top and curled up on the cot behind the seat, reading under a dim lamp until I fell asleep.

When I woke up it had been a few hours and I spent some time sitting quietly in the dark of the cockpit. Stretching achy limbs and climbing back into the pilot's seat I plugged some information into the ship's computer and read the output, scrolling around the map it gave me. I was a little more than a day from my dropoff point now, a solid thirty or so hours of cruising. It wouldn't be fun, but it also wouldn't be hard, provided no more imperial patrols started tailing me along the way. I wasn't so sure it would be that simple; I wondered briefly if I should've held out for 45%.

I wondered what Roza would think of the money I was pulling in on this job. The imperial grunt starting salary had been standardized at \$250 a month, but you didn't have to buy food or pay rent. Just serve on a battleship and die in space.

On my immortal soul and the name of my family, curse the Empire to Hell!

Sliding the key into the ignition and flicking the switches on the dashboard I started up the *Velenoso* from its place in dock, cockpit lighting up as the engine spun on. I hadn't been damaged in my scuffle, save for some blemishing on the side where the Wellmann had grazed me; when I saw the scorched metal from the outside I was impressed and horrified by its power, and once again proud of my piloting.

It doesn't matter how big the gun you come after me with is if you can't handle it.

I wondered if the empire had sent a crack team after me or an expendable group of grunts; they might've been a specialized unit, but maybe I was overestimating myself now. Maybe they were off the grid, lackeys of an officer within the army who had some kind of informal power in this sector? That felt too convoluted to be true; and even if a certain officer did have an iron grip on this sector, that's no reason to go shooting incineration beams at random courier ships.

They had to be after *me*, specifically. Maybe for a previous job? Was I barking down the wrong path -- were the answers for my attempted murder totally hidden from me?

I contemplated all of this as I left the station and hit cruising speed towards Tivoli, the backwoods planet I was headed towards. A nebula of purples and dark blues stretched out into the distance off my port bow and I thought about Heather, and about the two ships I'd destroyed previously, and - with a twinge of paranoia - the third ship that had gotten away. Would he return for me, eager for revenge? Would he bring backup? Was I flying into a trap?

Accelerating further I punched commands into the ship's flight computer to recalculate fuel cost and other metrics if I hurried a little more than I already was. I hadn't previously been rushing, but now the drive containing the bitter last words of Roza Bazayev felt heavy and hot in my pocket.

I slipped it out and examined it between my fingers as I leaned back in my seat, eyeing the drive in my hand and the nebula, stars, and ships twinkling lightyears in the distance. The radar was quiet, and before long I'd settled into the heavy hypnosis of a long distance flight, eyes fixed on the path ahead, brain humming something incoherent instead of thoughts.

Before not long enough, this leaden peace was disturbed by a hail from an imperial police unit. Like a powersaw through timber my headphones came to life, interrupting my daydream.

"Imperial Police hailing Registrar Number Two-Four-Seven-Four-Zero-Seven-Five. Identify yourself."

Two ships, the same kinds of cruisers as yesterday, lit up on the radar. *Hopefully no heavy artillery this time*, I thought bitterly as I picked up the receiver from my dashboard. "Courier ship *Velenoso* on a transport mission, destination planet Tivoli, over." I had nothing to hide - save the two cops I'd killed yesterday, although that was in self-defense and the Imperials tended to leave such matters up to the participants to resolve - and I wanted to avoid seeming like I had anything to hold back. Unfortunately they still gave me trouble, curtly demanding to know what I was transporting.

"You received my dispatch when I responded to your hail. It's in the files, over."

I waited a few moments for one of them to check their ship's computer for my dispatch, listing all the legal information for my ship and its full contents, "one personal drive" included. I felt that I should do a mental check to make sure I didn't have anything on board that I shouldn't, but my mind felt muddy and my spirit anxious, and I instead waited longer and longer for the all clear message I'd been hoping for but never really expecting. Antsy, the silence growing heavier by the moment, I shoved my hand into the boost port once more, feeling the painful twinge and the calming release afterward. After a breath I stuck my hand back into the port, receiving another dose. Running my hands through my hair and taking a deep breath I glanced at my rearview to see what the cops were doing.

The ships had backed off, and were readying their guns.

Pushing hard on the wheel I nosedove just as gunfire from both cops sent a burst of shots wide and one shot pinging off the backside of my ship. Sucking my teeth I looked at the computer and saw no alarms - hopefully that meant the damage was glancing.

I immediately dropped a mine behind my ship as I fled, hoping to catch one of my two pursuers acting overly aggressive, and frantically scrolling through the computer plotted a new course to zig-zag around a nearby planet and its moons - 3, average-sized all - hoping to lose or kill my pursuers by dragging them into difficult terrain.

A bit savage, isn't it? Like an apex predator dominating its prey.

Body and brain still oiled from combat several hours before, boosters saturating my state of being, the cops presented easy prey. One of them seemed to get lost near the pole of the first moon, where I took my ship on a feint in one direction before dropping a mine and

cutting hard the other way. In this manner I slipped between two large asteroids that masked my ship via sightline and radar, the only cost being some turbulence as I danced between large rocks. It was extremely risky, but it worked, and one pursuer was lost as my confidence increased.

The other stayed on my tail past the second moon, continuing to pepper the space around me with gunfire. With another difficult maneuver I spiraled down towards the moon, then with a hard cut spun around and flew towards the other ship. Trading bursts of fire with him as we arced over the dark side of the third moon, his shots flew wide past me as I watched mine connect. His cruiser imploded from the wing-in, cockpit evaporated by the chain of explosions, sparse debris left in my wake as I sped past.

With one ship down and the other off the radar I course corrected and, slightly delayed, was back cruising towards Tivoli within an hour.

In the quiet of space I replayed my interaction with Derry, and I thought about when I had made the initial pickup - had he acted strangely? I tried thinking if I had noticed myself being followed or targeted before this mission, but I had no way of knowing; if the government had been tailing me before now, I certainly hadn't noticed.

What would I find on Tivoli? Would it be safe to drop the drive off at the arranged point? This issue troubled me deeply. I wondered if I could make some kind of arrangement through Derry to move the pickup for safety reasons.

Typing hurriedly on the ship's computer, I wrote a short message to Derry, secured it, and sent it via the courier app. At this point I was so far out that it would take a short time to reach him, and even if he saw it and responded immediately it would take some time for *that* message to reach me, and for him to contact whoever he would need to if he said yes...But I had to try to get in touch with him, if only for my peace of mind. I had, at times, found myself thinking: I'll never forgive you if you die stupidly. If I didn't lock the ship when I went to sleep in a station, or I didn't perform a rote but important maintenance check on it, or I didn't make sure my guns were as loaded as they could be when I had the chance - it fed into paranoia I knew I harbored, but I was powerless not to obey it.

Some people would call that paranoia caring. But who was there to care about me? I was nobody. I had contacts, not friends. I drank at bars and sometimes they were the same ones, sometimes there were regulars there who recognized me, and there were people I knew on the app who gave me good jobs. But they weren't watching out for me, they did business with me because I did good business. And the more time I spent drinking in my ship alone the less I felt like I needed those bars with those regulars and their increasingly steep prices. It was cheaper to get drunk in the *Velenoso*, so why wouldn't I? I could sit alone and think without interruption, or read, or stare out at the majesty of the universe, and when I was ready to pass out there was no commute necessary - I could get right in my cot, or just lean back in the pilot's chair, and close my eyes, and drift away...

I eyed the ammunition counter for my guns and checked some of the other meters along the register, mind ticking through memorized checklists and quick calculations. I sighed. *Three lives in two days.* I looked out at the twinkling stars and starships in the distance, following their paths with eyes sore and throbbing from stress, and pondered the fresh addition of blood to my hands.

I thought about the savage instinct I showed in battle.

The imperial military's loss.

Sometimes I wondered if that other voice was the old me. The me before the treatments and new clothes and all the other shit I still can't afford, all to slowly change into a new version of the same person with the same behaviours. Same over-reliance on alcohol, same sociopathic wall around the soul, same powerlessness in the face of temptation. The same flareups of cruelty, the malicious kind I felt like my father had passed down to me via his fists and tongue.

With trembling fingers I undid my glove and shoved my hand in the boost port again. After the loud hum and the prick of pain I leaned back, head and heart pounding. My eyes watered. I sniffed. The *Velenoso* had a third of a tank of fuel left.

There are so many rabbit holes to drop into from space.

With the radar clear and my mind reeling I grasped for the bottle I kept in the glove compartment and took 3 pulls, one for each life I'd erased out here in the stars since yesterday. Afterwards I fell asleep, and when I woke up my head pulsed absently. I took another couple of drinks and spent the rest of the ride nodding in and out, radar silent the whole time. I never saw another ship except in the haze of my dreams, *Velenoso* on autopilot the whole way to Tivoli.

When I landed I was mostly sober and I docked in port at the capital, receiving no special welcoming. Derry never responded and I decided that was fine by me: the fewer complications from here on out, the better, I just wanted to be done with this job.

Before hopping out of the cockpit I changed out of my flight suit and into something casual, slipped the drive in the pocket of my coat, and stuck my hand in the boost port once more.

The weight of the pistol on my waistband was less comfort than I wished as I walked through the city's surprisingly well-maintained subway, unfamiliar to me but navigable thanks to clear and thorough signage and maps. I liked the maps, and looking at them I found myself wishing I was visiting under better circumstances. Often on deliveries I spent time exploring the places I end up before I pick up another job, but not this time; I

was finding myself eager to get out of Tivoli once this job was done. I wanted to put the whole business far behind me, three dead Imperial cops especially.

Mind drifting on the train I watched the sparse crowd of commuters going about their days. I made a mental note to analyze the combat data the ship's computer would have picked up from my encounters; it was hard to focus on, but studying it paid dividends. Then I wondered why I cared so much. Was it because I wanted to live, or because I liked being good at something? Did I want to be good at killing?

I got off at the stop nearest the post office and trotted up the stairs and onto the streets of Tivoli. Checking the map on my handheld to make sure I was headed the right way I began to walk. The capital's streets were old and its buildings were skinny, long, tall structures, oddly shaped to my eyes but quaintly beautiful in their dark brown shades of brick. It was springtime, midday, and mild, and my coat began to feel a little too heavy as I strode down the deserted sidewalk. I balled my hands into fists in my pockets.

After a couple of minutes, almost as soon as the post office came into view, a man approached me from towards the entrance. Hand twitching towards the pistol concealed at my belly, I eyed him warily. Dark bags clung to the bottoms of his eyes, which were steel-grey and seemed to chill the air around them. His hair was a short, recently buzzed greying blonde.

When he spoke his voice was clear, carrying with it an air of authority.

"Are you the courier?"

I figured there was no sense in lying and I nodded. He nodded back. He was thin, even by Imperial standards, and there was a neurotic twinge in his voice.

"There's been a change of plans. The Empire knows about the drive, and if you drop it in the post we'll never see it again. You're to hand it off to me instead."

I felt something fierce and hot light up in my chest.

"The only thing I've been told is to drop this in a PO box. You need to tell me who you are, who sent you, a name, something. I can't just hand it over to someone I've never even seen before, that's completely out of the blue."

He was right; dropping it in the post would be foolish, from the perspective of a person who cared about the contents of the package itself. At this point, I mostly just wanted it out of my hands, under the assumption that cops would stop trying to kill me once the package was out of my general vicinity. This was basically why I had tried to reach Derry again, although that was mostly out of concern for my pay. But I had to maintain some

kind of standard, and I had fought and killed for this package; I couldn't just fork it over to the first person who came calling out of the blue.

On my immortal soul and the name of my family, curse the Empire to Hell!

I spit on the ground behind me. *Well, now blood has been spilled in your name, girlie. Only posthumously, like so many of history's pivotal figures.*

The man, agitated, sighed. "I thought couriers didn't want to know their clients' business."

"Yeah, well most business doesn't require me to kill for it."

A heavy silence hung between us; I scowled. He wore a deep frown and stared me down before speaking again. "We can't risk the empire getting their hands on that drive."

"I've been chased by multiple police squadrons on my way here and they were more than happy to use me for target practice. They don't want this thing; they just don't want *you* to have it. Now: who *are* you?"

He sighed again, looking up at the clear sky above us. Clearly eager to get moving and annoyed by my questions, he relented. Leaning towards me now he dropped his voice to a murmur. "I'm a member of an underground political group. We want the recording to use as evidence of anti-war sentiment rising throughout the empire."

My mind flitted through a million questions at once, like I was tuning a radio. I hit upon one: "Are there others like this? Other recordings?"

"There's other artifacts like this, yes. Stuff from soldiers that affirms anti-imperial politics. The Empire works hard to suppress its existence." He laughed, bitterly. "That's why they tried so hard to stop you from getting here."

I turned this news over in my mind, and finding my appetite met I reached into my coat and pulled out the drive. I held it out to him.

"It's yours. It's brought me nothing but trouble, and quite frankly I don't have the time or energy to investigate any part of your story for being true. At the very least, anyone pissing off the empire's goons is fine by me. Just leave me out of it from now on."

The man smiled, a glimmer passing through his storm grey eyes as I took the drive from me. "Thank you, comrade. You've done an important deed getting this to us." He did a curt examination of the object and then stuck it in his pocket.

"If you ever meet someone from the movement and need a favour, mention Dmitris. They'll know who you mean."

I smiled, a little sour, and with a handshake we parted ways. As he hurried on farther down the street I eagerly reached back into my coat, grabbing my handheld to look up directions to the nearest bar.

Turning through the wide cobblestoned streets of the I headed in the exact opposite direction I had come, somewhat wary of being tailed but also feeling less penned in than I had a few minutes before.

I thought about how many people had tried to kill me, how many people I had killed, and what the delivery of the recording to the thin man in Tivoli would do for any sort of resistance movement, or any of the teenagers whose bodies were vaporized instantly by ionizing radiation a hundred thousand lightyears from home.

My name is Roza Bazayev. This is my final will and testament, as I await death in battle tomorrow.

As I passed through the bar's heavy wooden door I felt grateful to be done playing with my life, yet no less weighed down by the matter than I had been during my dogfights with the police.

I sat down at the bar and ordered my drink. Checking my handheld I saw that I had received a new notification. I opened the courier app to check the alert: Derry had rated me 5 stars for the job I had just completed.

Curse the Empire! Curse the Empress and her guard!

I put the handheld away and raised the bar glass to my lips and thought about how the app used to let clients tip you. I closed my eyes as cool liquor touched my tongue and stung the back of my throat.

Ordering another round I could see reflected in the many glasses behind the bar the crest of the Imperial Police on the jacket of a man at a table behind me, looking down at a handheld of his own, beer untouched on the table.

On my immortal soul and the name of my family, curse the Empire to Hell!

I drank the second shot and ordered a third as quickly, plus something I could sip on. In the center of my waistband hung my pistol, with a full mag and a round chambered, and in the center of my chest now warmed by alcohol sat the weight of what I had spent a lifetime running from, yet always brushing up against.

I wondered how many drinks I could afford before I had to go, and I signaled to the bartender to pour me another.

