

Sample file

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## CHAPTER ONE

“Raaaaaawwwrrrr!” Marrl was furious; his soft fur bristled. The door to the security chief’s cramped quarters was open, his personal communicator was smashed, and he was hanging upside down from the ceiling. “When this trip is over, Talus, you will face me.”

But Talus, the ship’s mechanic, was nowhere to be found. In fact, no one else was close by either. Not even a single robot.

“Grrr... Dishonorable wretch...” Marrl forced himself to calm down. A couple hours ago, the Ryjyllian security chief was meditating on the floor of his quarters. His boss, an Arsubaran cyborg named Cass Leary, all but commanded him to get on his knees and pray. According to her, Marrl needed to think more and claw less. When Marrl stood his ground, the cyborg shut him up by saying: “*We only have one more day until we reach Illya, Chief Marrl. Can’t you put up with Talus for that long?*”

The burly Ryjyllian snorted at Cass and returned to his quarters. When Marrl reluctantly knelt down to regain his focus, he pictured his kills over the last ten years. The memory of so much blood and so many victories calmed his warrior’s nerves. *Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three.*

Unfortunately, he never made it to twenty-four. All the security chief could remember was a sharp pain followed by a deep blackness. Someone not only burst into his private quarters, but knocked him unconscious, too. Marrl never saw who—or what—hit him.

When he finally came to, Marrl found himself swinging upside down from the ceiling. Whoever attacked him tied him up with an e-mag grapple. To cut through the material, he required a knife—not his sharp claws. Brute force would not be sufficient to free him.

“I should never have agreed to join Redwing Securities,”

Marrl groaned and let his muscular body hang freely. Truth be told, the Ryjyllian was feeling sorry for himself. He was a fighter and a former slave, not a detective.

Or a nanny.

“Finally!” Marrl spotted a small vibrodagger lying on a nearby desk. Jerking his body back and forth, the security chief managed to shove the dagger off the desk and catch it before it fell to the floor. Marrl immediately flipped its switch. The blade hummed as he sawed it through the cable’s tough fibers. It was tedious work, but after a few minutes the wires snapped and his body fell to the hard cabin floor with a loud thud.

Wasting no time, Marrl snarled and buried the blade into a stack of reports on his desk.

“Redwing Securities will ~~lose~~,” Marrl huffed, smoothing out his grey fur. “Security will be done my way, on *my* terms.”

Immediately, the chief regretted his words and added: “*When* I am free.”

Most Ryjyllians belonged to a clan, but not him. Although he was born on an icy planet, Marrl grew up in a slaver’s pit on Arsubar. The agency he worked for, Redwing Securities, bought his contract almost ten years ago. So, until he paid off his very large debt—the company owned him, body and bank account.

“GrrrrrrRRAAAWWRRRR!!!” The chief threw back his head and let out another, much louder roar. He wanted to run to the back of the ship and challenge Talus right then and there. Deep down, Marrl knew he could not. His impotence was driving him mad.

Maybe Cass was right. Maybe he should simply...think. Was that even possible?

Collapsing on his narrow bed, Marrl wondered if he had the patience to ignore Talus for another day. Space travel always gave him a headache. Unlike the rest of the crew members onboard the Haldis, Marrl’s narrow quarters were modest and its contents

sparse. The cold steel and rigid lines felt more like a prison cell than a room on a spaceship. Luckily, the *Haldis* was scheduled to land in New S'laas, the capital city of Illya, tomorrow.

Marrl sighed. Barging into the engine room without any hard evidence was not an option. He would have to answer to Cass and, no doubt, the rest of the crew. The chief knew exactly what the cyborg would say if he provoked the mechanic: “*Are you certain it was Talus who knocked you unconscious?*”

If he had to be honest with her—he wasn't positive it *was* Talus, but who else could it be?

The security chief quickly ran through the crew's roster in his mind, searching for a worthy opponent. Whoever knocked him out needed the strength to do it. Ryjyllians did not go down easy. Especially former slaves like Marrl.

Most days the *Haldis*'s Tetsuashan pilots, Splish and Oogle, were either confined to the cockpit or sleeping in their quarters. It would have taken several miracles for the slug-like creatures to knock him out. That left Cass, Doctor Dunn, her assistant Edna, Talus, and their new client, the green-skinned politician named Vincent Twist.

Marrl immediately ruled out Cass and the doctor. The cyborg detested crude antics and the doctor could not afford to be mean to anyone on board. To her, every crew member was a patient. The chief doubted she knew how strong his feelings were for her. Of course, why would she? Arsubarans were unlike Ryjyllians. Yes, they both had two arms and legs. They both had two eyes and ears. They both ate, slept, and bled.

That was where their similarities ended.

Ryjyllians had the face of a lion, the body of a man, and the thick fur of a winter beast. Arsubarans were less compelling to look at; some had peach skin and brown hair, but no other interesting features. Doctor Dunn's skin was colored like the earth after a thaw and her snow-white hair glittered with silver strands. She was, by far, one of the most beautiful females he had ever seen.

Marrl shook his head and set aside his feelings for the doctor. She was a distraction and one he did not need right now.

Besides Cass, Doctor Dunn, and Talus, the rest of the crew were strangers to him. Marrl did not know much about Edna Keene, the new Arsuburan medical assistant with sickly pink hair. He quickly ruled her out. She was too skinny to be a threat to him.

Vincent Twist had a reputation for causing trouble, even before he was elected Illya's planetary leader, but Marrl did not want to point a finger at the Ken Reeg unless he had to. Although Marrl despised intergalactic politics, he understood all too well that his Ryjyllian sense of honor was unique among most races. Many politicians were also excellent con artists.

That left Talus. Even though the Dolom's file was several pages thick, Marrl had never found anything incriminating. An experienced spacer, the blue-skinned mechanic lived from job to job and was well-liked by his former employers. Despite his large size and trio of eyes, Talus's tentacle-like fingers could disassemble and reassemble an entire robot faster than anyone Marrl had ever met. From what the chief could tell, the mechanic's criminal record was spotless.

Marrl sighed. This exercise in "thinking" was not helping his mood, either. What time was it, anyway?

Glancing at his digiwatch, the security chief swore under his breath. *Three-thirty*. Another reason to despise space travel: it was impossible to tell what day it was. With no suns to mark the passing hours, Marrl kept a strict schedule so he would not lose track of time.

Not today. Talus's trick forced him to miss afternoon rounds. With a high-ranking politician on board, Marrl could not afford to screw up, even if he thought their client was a moon lizard. Fearing the worst, Marrl hopped up and hit the ship's intercom to check in with their main pilot, a Tetsuashan named Splish. Talus would have to wait. How long? Marrl was not sure. He could feel his blood growing hotter. He needed to hit *something*, but what?

“Splish, are you there?” Marrl pressed a squat button by the side of his door.

As far as species went, the Tetsuashans were terrible fighters, but great pilots. Their one-eyed, slug-like bodies were either a colossal accident or a stroke of galactic brilliance. Completely sexless and covered in a slimy mucous, the single-minded creatures had a higher mission success rate than any other known alien species or robot.

“Splish. I repeat: are you there?” Splish was the older of the two pilots; Marrl had never worked with this Tetsuashan before but, like Talus, the alien had great references. If the rumors were true, Splish navigated a cruiser through the heart of the Frontier Zone with a broken engine and hardly any fuel.

“It must be time for a break.” Marrl clicked the button again. The com sputtered.

“Oogle? Are you around?”

According to the pilot's file, Redwing snatched Oogle right out of spaceflight school. If Oogle picked up, Marrl would hear a never-ending stream of happy gurgles, snorts and cackles. This time, though, he did not detect a sound. Not one giggle or even a hint of static.

“Anyone there?”

Marrl frowned. He was about to mash the transmitter one last time when he noticed something strange: a brown residue smeared all over the casing. The chief wrenched the cover off with his claws; a puff of black smoke escaped into the air. Most of the wires had been cut and the inside of it smelled like burnt rubber. He inspected the gunk. It tasted like engine grease.

“By the sons of...” Marrl swore in earnest. First, his personal communicator was smashed and now this? Redwing would, no doubt, dock his pay for the broken equipment.

The thought of going deeper into debt sent Marrl into a rage. He could feel the fur on the back of his neck bristle and his