

INQUIRY'S

ARIA

Living Starship
Series: Book 1



LAYMAN KINGSFORD

“This novel hearkens to the utopia and extropia we’ve become accustomed to through Star Trek, The Orville, and other humanistic speculative fiction, while creating a template, not just for a society that doesn’t remark upon gender, but a language that no longer has use for it. It’s a bold story, loaded with compelling characters, “office” politics, energized action set pieces, and lively dialogue that may just make you wish you could enlist in the Fleet Service.”

- **Nate Ragolia**, author of “The Retroactivist”

“Clever, and deeply engrossing, *Inquiry’s Aria* builds a wholly unique world that leaves you wanting more. Such a great read!”

- **Brian A.S. Byrdson**, author of *The Queerest Touch*

For 1,000 years, the varied residents of the Situdel have been exploring, terraforming and colonizing their galaxy. Not once have they come across a single cell of foreign life. Until now.

Inscrutable aliens lay waste to one sector while unscrupulous seditionists take advantage of the invasion in another. The crew of the *Noisee Nuun* must take their hastily re-commissioned starship to infuse stability in the region while contending with their own internal discord between citizen officers and civilian enlisted.

And then there’s that pirate planet about to explode...

Inquiry’s Aria launches an epic saga that will not only touch every corner of a galaxy, but will eventually link back in time to a single planet’s denizens and how they shape a cosmos.



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Inquiry's Aria

a Living Starship novel

Layman Kingsford

Character artwork by

Angela Schmer

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Graphic Design & Layout

Layman Kingsford

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generated by A.I.





This, my first published novel, is dedicated to my parents,
Stan and Joan.

Not only are theyz my most ardent cheerleaders but theyz are
the underpinnings of my entire support system.

This world is a far, far better place for having themz in it.

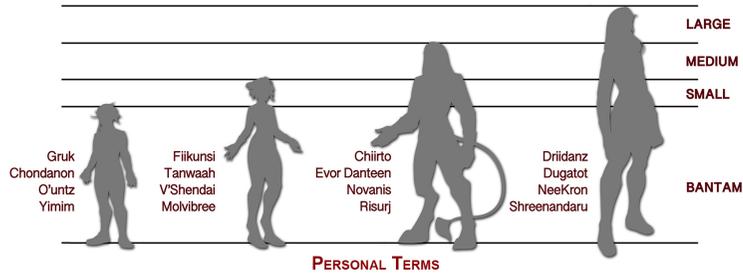
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persons , living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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PERSONAL TERMS

Genome or **Species** is the term used in place of **RACE**

Hominid(s)/Hominidity is the term used in place of **HUMAN(s)/HUMANITY**

Culture or **Ethicity** are terms referring to groups of people sharing common lifestyle or background

REPRODUCTIVE ANATOMY

Insem: has only a penis (derived from *inseminator*)

Jestat: has only a uterus/vagina (derived from *gestator*)

Amalgron: has both Jestat & Insem parts (derived from *amalgamation*)

Androjin: has neither Jestat nor Insem parts (derived from *androgynous*)

PHYSICAL ANATOMY

Ungulate: evolved from gazelles • have 3 fingers + thumb, hooves, reverse-articulated legs

Primate: evolved from monkeys • have 4 fingers + thumb, toed feet, forward-articulated legs

Agregate: has qualities of both Ungulates & Primates

Quadragon: 4 fingers • hooves and/or reverse-articulated legs

Tripagon: 3 fingers • toed feet and/or forward-articulated legs

New Alphabet for Proper Names

utilizing a customized phonetic version of English

Note from the Author:

My limited attempt at codifying the English language, at least in part, is to develop a set of rules for names of people and places. To that end I have structured a new alphabet. Every letter or letter group (such as double vowels) in this 33-count alphabet has one, and ONLY ONE, pronunciation - without exception. There are no silent letters in words.

That means I have done away with the letter "C" as the letters "K" and "S" cover the two sounds the letter "C" produces. Gone also is the letter "X" as the letter "Z" or the combination of "K+S" (as in marks/mark) cover those bases.

a {short vowel as in *cat* or *black*}

aa {long vowel as in *stray*}

b {as in *boy*}

ch {as in *cheddar*}

d {as in *dog*}

e {short vowel as in *bet*}

ee {long vowel as in *geek*}

f {as in *funk*}

g {as in *gap*}

h {as in *hope*}

i {short a vowel as in *spit*}

ii {long vowel as in *hide*}

j {as in *jacket*}

k {as in *keep*}

l {as in *lamp*}

m {as in *market*}

n {as in *never*}

o {short vowel as in *hot*}

oo {long vowel as in *hello*}

oi {as in *toy* or *hoist*}

p {as in *pepper*}

r {as in *riddle*}

s {as in *sacred*}

sh {as in *sheep*}

t {as in *tumble*}

th {as in *thick*}

ü {as in *book* or *wolf*}

u {short vowel as in *but*}

uu {long vowel as in *ooze*}

v {as in *victory*}

w {as in *wet*}

y {as in *yes*, sounds like "yuh"}

z {as in *zipper*}

“Clever, and deeply engrossing, Inquiry's Aria builds a wholly unique world that leaves you wanting more. Such a great read!”

Brian A.S. Byrdsong, author of *The Queerest Touch*

"Inquiry's Aria is a bold, ambitious imagining of a pseudo-utopian space endeavoring sci-fi future where gender no longer exists. Kingsford develops an intertwining of cultures, human and alien, hierarchical and individuated, that's both intricately detailed and accessibly effervescent.

This novel hearkens to the utopia and extropia we've become accustomed to through Star Trek, The Orville, and other humanistic speculative fiction, while creating a template, not just for a society that doesn't remark upon gender, but a language that no longer has use for it. It's a bold story, loaded with compelling characters, "office" politics, energized action set pieces, and lively dialogue that may just make you wish you could enlist in the Fleet Service.”

Nate Ragolia, author of *One Person Can't Make a Difference* and *The Retroactivist*

Primer & Guide to Language Structure *within the Living Starship stories*

Note from the Author:

When I decided to un-gender my science fiction series I realized there was an opportunity to depict a society that had moved past the notion of gendering. Clothing, behavior, romantic involvement - none of the gendered concepts we, as humans, utilize in our personal interactions with people are at play in this fictional galaxy.

So, obviously, the language used to tell these stories has to reflect that. These are not stories where one or two characters operate outside the gender binary; there is not just one or three species of aliens described herein that have an “alternative gender structure”. The ENTIRE civilization, every single individual, every single species, every single culture has evolved beyond the binary.

I have chosen to utilize **THEY • THEIR • THEM** as the exclusive singular pronouns:

*With what had been given to **them**, **they** needed three things from the store before meeting up with **their** friends at the theater.*

I have chosen to utilize **THEYZ • THEIRZ • THEMZ** as the exclusive plural pronouns:

***Theyz** all had more than **theirz** fill of the berry juice. Whoever had given it to **themz** was cruel.*

Similarly, **you/your** is singular and **youz/yourz** is plural. For those with a classical sense of English grammar, some of the subject-verb agreements are going to ring weirdly in your ear, but trust me, you'll acclimate.

Other Linguistic Practices

Additional Capital Letters

The use of “camel case” capitalization is something utilized in Living Starship. Coders already use this in computer programming and it has even leaked into common language usage - *iPhone*, *eCommerce*, *PowerPoint*.

For the most part, I use it to highlight a newly-constructed word made from either two entire words or two or more word segments. Sometimes these represent the Fleet’s propensity to abbreviate terms, but it might also be reflective of words that have gained common usage across the galaxy.

For example: gravity sled become *gravSled*; data calculators (personal computational devices/interfaces) are called *dataCalcs*; simulated diversions (i.e. holographic movies/books) are *simDivs*.

Apostrophe Usage

One element that is still somewhat in flux is my use of apostrophes, especially in proper names of people, species and places.

My current thinking (as of Feb 2022) is that it denotes accent/stress for the following syllable as in *M’Hatz Kee* (pronounce *muh • HATZ • key* with the accented syllable being HATZ).

There might still be a few words where I was simply using it as a syllabic separator, but I have tried to tidy all that up.



7 Years Ago
Stanjoo City
M'Hatz Kee Zifr

“I THINK WE’RE IN TROUBLE,” lififu Skast groaned as they placed both hands on top of their swollen belly.

Hiimros chuffed through their protruding lower canines. “You’re just fine, lififu, my love. This is going to go smoothly as long as our faith is strong and you remember your breath work.” Hiimros reached down to place one large hand upon lififu’s bare, green shoulder as they rode the cargo lift up to the clifftop mesa of Stanjoo City.

lififu smacked Hiimros’s hand off their shoulder in irritation. “Not me, you big boulder head. The city, the planet. That’s what I meant by ‘we.’ That last quake shook every cave and crevasse for

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miles. I'm not even sure we should be riding this elevator right now."

"Oh. I thought you were talking about the birthing," Hiimros replied softly.

lififu smiled, craning their neck back to look deeply up into Hiimros's eyes. They placed their own four-fingered hand ever so gently on the Dugatot's furry arm. "I know you're concerned about the birthing, especially after last time... "

Hiimros wasn't sure if they should hug lififu right now. They wanted to, very badly, but the Nahijin jestat was swinging wildly between sugary, emotional sappiness and irritable snappishness without warning or signal. Hiimros was amazed that lififu seemed so unconcerned now that their water had broken and contractions were coming faster. Their first child had been stillborn last year, and Hiimros did not feel emotionally recovered from that loss. lififu had persevered through this second pregnancy with such bravery and verve that Hiimros wondered if their consort had simply managed to forget the trauma entirely.

Sure, the excitement of bringing your child healthy and whole into the worlds was incomparable. MedScans showed the fetus—no, child now—to be perfectly well-formed and strong of heart. But so had the scans from last time. Something had happened during the birth process, Hiimros still blamed the doctor; one of those Fleet-trained medics who should have known better. Maybe the doc had spent too much time luxuriating in retirement with their new Dugatot citizenship to keep up to date on proper body-birthing techniques. Never mind that the child had been of mixed genome parentage, the first ever in the known galaxy.

"I still think you should have asked that Ved'Onrek doctor to help us before they left the planet," lififu said, bringing Hiimros out of their reverie.

In a moment of panic, Hiimros surreptitiously checked their long open coat to make sure all the blood spatter had been rinsed off. They had not told lififu what had happened when Hiimros and their escort of devotees confronted the departing Ved'Onrek

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residents—the last of their species on the entire planet. The details might prove disturbing, and lififu did not need to worry themself with such things right now. “We have been ordained by Dii and Omi to bring this child forth. We don’t need any meddlers in the process. Trust me, I’ve got this. As do you.”

The heavy double doors of the cargo lift clanked open when theyz reached the top of the massive plateau inside which the freeFolk city of Stanjoo was built. It wasn’t until the fresh outdoor air wafted into the metal container that Hiimros noticed how much the lift smelled like cattle, dung, and sweat. The bright sun, teal sky, and yellow clouds created pastoral lighting for the wide-open mesa top covered in loose grasses, waving weeds, and blooming flowers in at least 10 different colors.

Hiimros took a deep breath of air, filling their broad chest and holding their arms out wide as they and their consort exited into the open. A dozen other folk stood lazily nearby awaiting the arrival of the lift to take themz down into the city. The small crowd was comprised of all four of the remaining colonial species on this freeFolk planet.

“Spring is a most auspicious time to introduce our new child to the people of this fair planet,” Hiimros announced grandly. lififu kept their head down, face covered in a curtain of tightly woven, long, thin braids of black hair. Being the center of attention always made the Nahijin uncomfortable, but Hiimros figured they would need to get used to the scrutiny, as the spotlight of the entire sector would soon be upon themz both.

The Dugatot stopped briefly to address the people as theyz shuffled into the lift, only paying glancing attention to the couple. “The dawn of a new era begins today, my friends. Tune in to my channel, the Divine Duality, within the hour to be witness to the arrival of our people’s future. A future free from the classist strangulation of the Situdel and the enforced servitude of its Fleet. We freeFolk, the privateer denizens of this planet, shall pave the stars with a new and balanced approach to life and equitable living.”

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The elevator doors were nearly closed and still only one person appeared at all attentive to Hiimros' words. The Dugatot raised their voice without realizing it. "Prepare to behold a true miracle and witness divinity at work!"

The grinding of the lift engine, a rough sound implying the need for an engineer's attention, was all the response Hiimros earned. They turned about noticing lififu had walked a fair distance away toward the edge of the mesa's precipice where theyz had agreed to let the baby come. They hurried to catch up, barely taking note of the unusual number of shuttlecraft winging overhead to and from the landing zone a couple kilometers away.

Trying to sound light-hearted, "Are you planning to go have our child without me?"

lififu did not turn around to speak but continued resolutely marching forward cradling their stomach, which distended far out over the flexible waistband of their shorts and under the stretchy fabric of their bra. Hiimros wondered why the Nahijin even bothered with top clothing, as their breasts had swollen to near Dugatot proportions, an admittedly ridiculous look on their slim figure which barely reached Hiimros's chest, and that only when lififu's hair was unbraided and teased into a massive black poof. It was a wonder lififu could even keep their balance with all that breast and baby weight at the front of their body and only two toes on the fore of each foot with a flexible third toe in place of a primate heel.

Deciding to forge on with an air of upbeat positivity, Hiimros unslung the pack from their shoulders and pulled out three small gravDrones in one large hand. Each was mounted with a simple camera and lighting gear that would 3d-sync with each other to transmit a live feed onto Hiimros's holoFeed for all the faithful to bear witness to the momentous occasion. Not a great many people had come to be convinced, despite the medScans the couple had freely shared, that this mixed-breed child was a real thing. Many non-believers claimed Hiimros and lififu were falsifying all the data as a popularity stunt to garner a bigger audience for their feed, since neither had any citizen votes to spend to make it more

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popular. Hiimros hoped that the people who *had* steadfastly come to believe in Balance would help promulgate the truth more widely and emphatically once the baby was born.

“See, my love,” Hiimros announced proudly brandishing the devices. “I splurged and got two more so that we can broadcast proper holograms and document the arrival of our child with all the grandness it deserves.”

lififu grunted, doubled over slightly, and held one hand up for Hiimros to be silent. “Ggrrrg. I think this child is going to have all of your size, and I swear I can feel hooves digging into my pancreas.”

Hiimros smiled. “You know it doesn’t have hooves, my love. The scans clearly showed feet like yours. They do have my legs, however.” They simpered to an audience of none, lifting the hem of their skirt to show off more flesh. That usually got at least a chuckle from the Nahijin, but right now they seemed intent only to grumble.

As if in sympathy with lififu, the entire mesa quivered with a low vibration. Hiimros tried to help lififu stand up straight but was brushed aside once more. “I can do this myself, Hiimros.” They continued to walk to the cliff edge together.

The scene stretching out below never ceased to be breathtaking. Vast swathes of forest carpeted the steep canyons. The sheer vertical drop from where they stood was enough to make many folkz dizzy, but neither Hiimros nor lififu were so affected.

Slightly out of breath from the walk and from continued interruption of pain, lififu looked up at their partner. “I hope you remembered to bring the lounger. There is no way I’m going to do this without a doctor *and* squat in the dirt like a goat.”

Hiimros pulled out the largest item in the pack, the collapsible gravRecliner which unfolded at the press of a button. It looked soft, sturdy, and was equipped with medScan gear to monitor both the baby’s and the birther’s vital signs. lififu didn’t

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know it, but Hiimros had “acquired” it from the Ved'onrek doctor's office.

lififu let out a prolonged series of sighs as they slowly lowered themselves onto the recliner. Luckily the gravSupport feature prevented most of the awkwardness at getting down onto the lounge. “Ahhh. Thank you. I feel better are... *hrrrrrk...*” lififu squeezed their eyes closed as another contraction ensued.

“Spoke too soon, my love,” Hiimros said. They pulled out a medKit and took a trans-dermal injector from it. Hiimros double checked to make sure the sedative was formulated for Nahijin and hoped its chemistry was not too detrimental to the baby who shared only half that genome. Since this had never occurred in all the existence of Situdelian colonization, there were no reference files to read to learn what to do. Another reason Hiimros had decided against bringing a doctor. None of themz would have any greater understanding either. This was all uncharted territory.

Hiimros proceeded to get the drones flying and prep themz to record and transmit. Hopefully the feed would get out across this continent, at least. Lately, there had been plenty of weird and unexplained interruptions to transmissions on and around the planet. Any data stream sent from orbit out into the cosmos was fine, but more and more feeds inside the atmosphere of M'Hatz Kee seemed to be getting garbled with greater frequency. That, combined with unprecedented tectonic activity, had much of the populace on edge these days and staying glued to their comsFeeds.

Hiimros spent the next hour making sure lififu had plenty of water and was as comfortable as possible. By the time the medScaner confirmed it was time for lififu to push the baby out, Hiimros had started the live holoFeed and had nearly 5,000 people watching the birth happen live.

Not wanting to look like they were grandstanding, Hiimros kept their commentary to a bare minimum. Besides, every time they started talking too much to the cameras, lififu yelled at them to pay attention to what was going on here and now.

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There was one last earthquake coinciding with the baby's emergence into the world as it took its first screaming breath. Hiimros released a monumental sigh of relief at the sound. The cameras zoomed in on the baby wetly lying cradled in the palms of Hiimros' two big hands. It had light green skin and black hair like lififu, reverse-articulated legs, and small, pointed ears like Hiimros, but its legs ended with three-toed Nahijin feet. The child was a beautiful example of physical traits from both parents.

Covered in sweat, lififu sat up to wipe afterbirth from their thighs. They turned weary eyes to the child, who still wailed at its exposure to sunlight and cooler temperatures than inside the womb. Hiimros gently placed the baby in lififu's arms and wrapped a sterile blanket around themz both.

"Blessed be this occasion," Hiimros intoned solemnly, only partially for the cameras. "The first child ever of mixed-species parentage now breathes in the cosmos. We are witness to the beginning of Balance being redressed upon the universe, as we are no longer beholden to the ministrations of the Situdelian Parliament or our colonial oppressors. This child whom lififu Skast and I—Hiimros Hindot—named Guu'Doony, shall be a beacon for hope and the symbol for all the change that is to come. Soon every person shall live free and equal no matter where or how they choose to accord their life."

lififu was crying, likely from exhaustion and emotional overload. Hiimros rested one hand on their consort's back while leaning over to check the transmission stats from one of the drones.

"Blarking shit stains!" Hiimros roared. Baby Guu'Doony stopped crying. Hopefully the outburst had not scared the babe. lififu was still too caught up in the moment to react and continued to hug the baby to their chest with their head nuzzling the tiny green face.

Hiimros took a small listening device and placed it inside their ear so as not to disturb lififu's bonding with Guu'Doony. The birthing transmission had been preempted 20 minutes ago by a

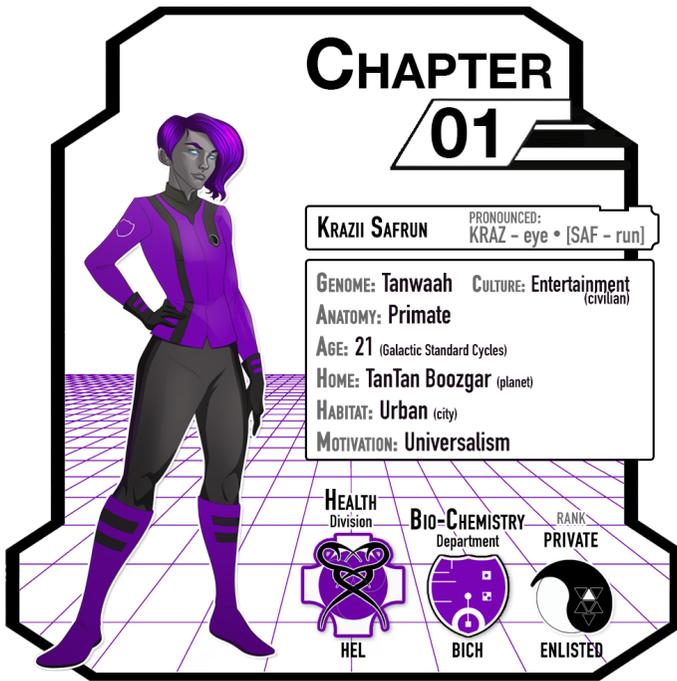
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broadband news message sent from an orbiting freeFolk ship. The tectonic activity felt on the Stanjoo City side of the planet was a mere fraction of what transpired on the other side of the world. Quakes so massive and catastrophic that the very crust of the planet had broken and torn. The entirety of the Helted Ocean was in the process of draining away *into* the core of the planet itself.

Entire enclaves, towns, and at least one city had literally been erased from the face of the world. Hiimros gasped, realizing their siblings and birth parents lived over there and might now be dead. They had not spoken with themz in several years, and now it would be too late to rectify that.

Hiimros quickly scanned the data stream to make sure their home village was alright, and so far it appeared to be. It was so far north on the planet that it had seen as little disruptive activity as Stanjoo City. At least their grandparents would still be alive and safe in that cold little village.

Hiimros turned around to their consort and theirz first child. Somehow, just seeing the tiny little creature was enough to soften the loss. Never mind that no one had gotten to watch this miracle happen. Hiimros could share the recording later. For now, it was probably a good idea to get packed up and take their new family of three back indoors. Maybe they would check in with their followers to see what could be done to aid the folkz on the other side of the world. Or maybe it would be nice just to curl up with lififu and Guu'Doony for a while and get used to the new normal.



I don't know what I'm supposed to say in these entries, but regulations require it, so here goes...

I wasn't around when my litterlings decided to join the Fleet. I suspect it was Soofee who hatched the notion; they're the most empathetic of the six of us. It's been two G.S. cycles since the invasion, and even though we were far removed from the devastation, it's hard not to feel some compunction to lend a hand.

All six of us are verifiable, if not yet registered, geniuses. Soofee made the effort to convince the rest of us that the best way to lend a hand would be to enlist and put our brains to work for the Situdel. Personally, I was well on my way to gaining citizenship through my own angle, what with my acting career and notoriety. However, after my fourth mate Union fell apart, I didn't want to end up feeling left out on all the adventures my litterMates would have, so I chucked my life in the recycler and went to boot camp with the whole dam fam.

- excerpt from Private Krazii's [Safrun] Fleet Duty Journal

Day 4: B-Shift

S.F.S. Noissee Nuun

“IF YOU AND YOUR LITTERLINGS ARE SO SMART, why didn’t y’all just make something of yourselves back home?” queried Ensign Danner.

Safrun bristled at the veiled, presumably unintentional, insult and chose to take a deep, slow breath to manage their rising blood pressure.

Safrun’s work partner, Ensign Danner, as newly a commissioned officer as Safrun was enlisted, blithely talked away as theyz both attended theirz very boring duty assignment. Watching code scroll across the display screen, theyz checked to make sure there were no conflicting control algorithms in the geo-thermal and biogenic scanning programs of the *Noissee Nuun’s* fresh batch of scanDrones. Theyz had been instructed to get this work done quickly, as the ship would soon be emerging from streaming space in the Seerfor Sector, where a pirate planet was on the verge of actually *exploding*, or maybe imploding. No one knew for sure.

Ensign Danner ran a blue-gloved hand down the side of the smooth, drooping fan of fins around their head and continued, “I totally could have finished school back on my home station and gone to work for the government. I was told I would be fast-tracked into the mayor’s office, probably within two years. But I chose to take a commission in the Fleet before my last semester so that I could travel. See something of the galaxy before settling down into a routine life, you know? That way, I return home with my enhanced citizenship in hand, and the mayor’s office will put me in a far more prestigious position.”

The subtext of privilege that Danner’s “enhanced citizenship” implied did nothing to calm Safrun’s ire. Danner had been born with citizenship, likely imparted by their ancestors being founders of a colony. They seemed perfectly unaware of the elitist

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attitude they breathed with even the most casual of comments. The fact that Danner was allotted a new digital vote token every week by nothing more than virtue of birth and that Safrun and their litterlings had to spend five years of theirz lives in service with the Situdel Fleet before ever earning *one* vote token was galling, to say the least. Not to mention that every hour Danner spent working in the Fleet increased the inherent value of each of their existing vote tokens.

Danner turned in their seat at the sleek wall panel to look at Safrun across the tiny room, more of a closet, really. Sounds of pounding and heavy metal sheets banging against the hull came from the work room next door as engineering teams hustled to complete the ship's interior infrastructure. To Safrun's perception, the blue of Danner's Science Division uniform stripe, gloves, and undershirt was a jarring mismatch of cobalt to the light turquoise of text and iconography displayed on screen. Safrun knew a litter back home with hair of similar hues marred with a jolt of sandy puce and had always felt sorry for themz for having such displeasing tones.

"I thought you were the super social one of your... what term do you Tanwaah use?"

"Litter," Safrun responded with well-rehearsed amenability. "A group of same-birth litterlings is called a litter."

Danner *ah-ha'd* as if they fully grasped the concept. "And you all have identical hair, right?"

Safrun nodded but kept their eyes on their own screen. They had already spotted several oversights in Danner's work but were hesitant to point them out to the officer. "*Mmmm-hmmmm*. Same coloring, but individually styled. Every litter is unique in hair coloring."

"There are five of you onboard the *Noisee Nuun*," Danner continued.

"Six," Safrun corrected.

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“Oh right, there’s one in Engineering I keep forgetting about. The one in my department I haven’t worked with yet. That one is Sadlur, right?”

Safrun resisted a sigh once again. “Yes, Sadlur serves in the Science Division. Physics Department, to be specific.” Safrun surreptitiously made several quick entries that rewrote lines of code in the scanning matrix of the scanDrones, most of which were related to geothermal differential potentials. They were supposed to stick to their own portion of the code, the elements relating to environmentally-induced imbalances in flora and fauna biochemistry, but Danner seemed less than adept at doing their job, so Safrun fixed the issues so hoping neither of them would get written up for shoddy work.

Danner turned back to their screen and swiped through irrelevant control setups. “I feel like I’m the one doing all the talking here. I heard you were a child actor in Tanwaah teen dramas or some such?”

Safrun had hobnobbed at more than enough gatherings to see where this was headed. The ensign, clearly a chatter-mouth, was unlikely to relent on conversation. Safrun resigned themselves to the situation and turned on “party mode,” complete with a bright smile they knew showed off the contrast of white teeth with their smooth, grey skin. “Yes, I was *that* kid. Our parents put all six of us in acting classes, at great expense. They had to exchange precious gen2 food credits for the thespian training.” Safrun hoped that Ensign Danner was not sensitive to class disparity, but they continued on anyway in the most affable tone possible.

Danner chuckled appropriately, as if they were in on the joke of “that kid.”

“I was the only one of us that the talent agency gave work to, though Soofee got a couple advertHolo gigs out of it early on. I think our parents hoped that since we had such beautiful tones to our hair, as Tanwaah culture measures such things, we would all be instantly famous, and every production studio would put us in their holoSagas.”

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“Takes more than pretty hair to gain *that* kind of influence,” Danner chortled in a tone they seemed to think was friendly and conspiratorial. Safrun even imagined a *nudge nudge* from the ensign’s tiny Molvibreen elbow would have been delivered had theyz not been sitting back to back.

Ensign Danner’s comms bar lit up on their blue glove. “Excuse me for a moment; I should probably respond to this. It’s officer stuff, you know.” Danner smoothly rose from their kneeler. Safrun appreciated the seeming ease of standing for ungulates. Theirz chairs were designed from what a primate, like Safrun’s own species, would consider more of a kneeling stool. Ungulate thighs rested against a padded bar as their reverse-articulated legs folded underneath, slightly behind their central body weight as compared to a primate’s feet which generally were placed in front of their center of gravity when seated, their back resting against a support of some sort. An ungulate’s entire upper body was held erect when seated—no slouching for them. Safrun checked their own posture to make sure they were engaging their abdominal core.

Danner stepped out into the more brightly-lit hallway and allowed the workroom door to hiss shut. Safrun returned to scanning data and made two more adjustments on the bio-chemistry portions. They could hear the short-statured ensign chatting on an open comm channel out in the hallway, but Safrun did not pay enough attention to listen in. Instead, they scrolled back through the code on screen and checked over all the geologic stacks finding no alterations were needed. By the time Danner returned, now with a concerned look set on their dark complexion, all the work was done.

Danner rolled their shoulders, loosely interlaced the three fingers on each webbed hand, and flexed them producing a solid crackle. “Well, it sounds like our task here can be finished later.”

“No need,” Safrun assured their superior. “I finished all of it, and it’s good to upload to the scanDrone matrix.”

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Danner's small green eyes widened slightly. "Oh wow. Even the geo portions? That's way outside your specialty, Private." They didn't sound angry, just skeptical.

"It was easy," Safrun shrugged with a smile and a casual wave of their four-fingered hand, hoping to keep any possible officer-to-enlisted tension from building. "The algorithms are all basically the same; they just target different protocols and sensor resolutions."

As if looking over the remaining code on the screen display, Danner nodded and made a soft sound in the back of their throat. "Sure, sure. Yes, it all looks good. Nice work, Private." Safrun was pretty sure the Molvibreen officer had not actually read more than a line or two. "I guess we can move on to our next assigned tasks, then. It was nice meeting you."

"A pleasure working with you as well," Safrun replied amiably. "I look forward to the next time. I imagine we'll see more of each other on away details when we get to that poor pirate planet. I find it hard to believe such massive electrical discharges can be manufactured by a planetary body, let alone enough to rupture the mantle and destabilize the atmosphere. The poor people living there must be at wits' end trying to survive."

"Well... theyz are going to have to wait a few more days," Danner said in a near whisper as they stepped into the reopening doorway. "Lieutenant Tak'Lel just called me and said that our ship is being diverted to the outskirts of the sector to investigate a couple suspicious deaths on some remote research station."

Safrun was taken aback. "And that's more important than tens of thousands of lives at risk on the pirate planet? Surely some other Fleet asset can handle a police investigation."

Danner shrugged dismissively. "I don't know, I'm just an ensign with no access to command decisions. I imagine it has more to do with the fact that the scientists on the station are citizens of the Situdel. Since the residents on M'Hatz Kee Zifr have turned their noses up at safe and secure living under the Situdelian

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Parliament, I should think we'll be sent to aid themz only after our own people's needs are met."

I thought the Fleet was meant to serve every person, not just the ones that agree with our ways, Safrun commented to themself. It was usually best to keep those sorts of opinions private, especially around officers already holding citizenship in the Situdel.

Theyz went theirz separate ways in opposite directions down the corridor from the work room. Safrun headed aft but stayed on Deck 3. Unlike the warrens of their hometown on TanTan Boozgar where all the civilian structures looked like labyrinthine nests of mass-printed vines, fibers, and rabbit warrens, the hallways and rooms of Situdel Fleet Starships were smooth, glossy, unadorned and uniformly deep charcoal, nearly black. Illuminated ribbons in various colors, rather like thin piping on a fancy shirt hem, marked pathways to different rooms in the ship indicating its division of service, though not its department. Every surface was interactive, digital space so crew members were not limited to the functions programmed into their uniforms and the display size limitations of their jacket sleeves. They could pull up any permitted work interface anywhere at any time. Crewpers also had the option of deploying the hoods of their uniforms to utilize the display capabilities of the "heads-up-display" face screen. For some reason, it was not considered proper, or maybe it was just unfashionable, to use hoods unless there was an actual environmental threat necessitating a vacuum seal for breathing.

Deck 3 seemed quite active as Safrun continued on their path. It was the middle of B Shift, and this deck housed much of the general work space for *Monitor class* vessels. Many of their fellow enlisted crewpers nodded at Safrun as they passed. Safrun cataloged uniforms in all seven division colors in the halls between the closet of their last task and the particle lab of their destination. They hoped their engineering litterMate, Samsun, was on duty there so they could have a quick chat. Clearly word had not gotten out about the mission alteration as Safrun overheard talk of

simple mundane personal matters with only a few snippets of conversation relating to the fate of the pirate planet.

Safrun followed the blue line on the wall and arrived at the aft-most hallway of Deck 3 where all the lines became blue. Every room here was a dedicated labs and offices for the Science Division. They stepped through the opening into a broad laboratory filled by four tables cluttered with apparatus for scanning, measuring and observing the physical phenomenon of the known universe. A massive particle collider dominated the back wall. Three crewpers were the only occupants of the lab; all of them enlisted. Two with sapphire Science uniform jackets and one with the copper of Engineering Division making Safrun's amethyst Health Division uniform add a touch more variety to the color palette of the lab.

Two of the crewpers looked up with crossed arms from the piece of equipment they had both been staring intently at. Safrun smiled knowing that the two near-identical folk had been running calculations in their heads, each trying to reach a conclusion before the other. It was indicative of the light competitiveness the Krazii litterlings shared with each other.

"SAFRUN!" they exclaimed in unison as Samsun, the copper-uniformed Krazii, tossed their long, flowing locks of violet-indigo-mauve hair over one shoulder.

Safrun marveled at their Engineering litterling's patience maintaining near waist-length hair. Both they and Sadlur, the blue uniformed litterling standing next to Samsun, kept their hair side-parted and barely chin length, though Sadlur brushed theirs in an upswept and somewhat mopish crown. "Are you two stuck on a problem?" Safrun greeted with a grin. "I'm sure I can solve it for you. I *am* the smartest of the litter, after all."

Sadlur quirked their mouth in a half smile. "Nah, you're just the most popular."

"And the loudest," Samsun added congenially. "We all know that I'm the most genius-est of us. That's why the Fleet assigned

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me to the Devices Department, so I can actually *make* the equipment that we conceptualize rather than you five, who just sit around and *think* things. *I'm* actually *doing* stuff." They gave another overly-dramatic hair toss.

"'Genius-est' isn't a real word," Safrun remarked.

"It is now. That's part of my genius. I thought it up, thus making it real by saying it aloud." Samsun bowed at the waist, flourishing one hand in a florid pattern over their head.

Sadlur quietly interjected, "The answer is forty-two."

"The answer to your dilemma, I presume?" Safrun asked. "Forty-two what?"

Samsun snapped upright. "Forty-two terahertz? No way! Not for both EM radiation and vibration amplitude." Sadlur looked cowed and dropped their gaze back to the device on the table, fidgeting with the blue bars of their glove. "I'll bet you 3cm of both our dicks and a labia flap of Safrun's that we have to calibrate this to at least 70 terahertz."

"Don't be crass," Safrun chided. "And don't bring my junk into your bet. Tell me exactly what you're trying to do here, and I'll settle it for you."

Sadlur recrossed their arms over their blue uniform and quietly said, "I'd rather bet one of my labia over any of my dick length." They looked exceedingly uncomfortable participating in Samsun's humor, but Safrun was pleased to note Sadlur's willingness to make the attempt. Safrun could tell their reserved sib was making an effort at fitting back into the interpersonal dynamics of the litter. Sadlur's enlistment in the Fleet had come about last-minute, having something to do with the terrible mateUnion they were in. None of the litterlings, not even Soofee, had been able to get the reticent Sadlur to open up about their sudden change of mind at accompanying the litter into Service.

"You Tanwaah certainly have a brash sense of humor," commented the other Science crewper in the lab, a Fiikunsi junior sergeant. The sergeant was peeking amiably from around the other

side of the collider. “Even if I had sex parts, I wouldn’t bet any portion of my anatomy on anything. I really hope y’all aren’t being literal.”

“Not even the tip of one of your horns?” Samsun asked with a suggestive smile. “Yours are so big and curly, you surely wouldn’t miss a tip?”

The Fiikunsi’s green cheeks actually blushed. They shut their mouth and exaggeratedly returned to their task. *Hhmmmm, maybe all androjins aren’t as sexually vacant as our dear sib, Soofee*, Safrun mused. “Anyway, my saccharine sibs, tell me what you’re working on.”

Samsun put their hands on their hips and struck a pose that Safrun recognized as a bad actor’s attempt at looking professorial. “I know you’re just a bio-chemist, but *we* are working to calibrate this sensor insert to more accurately measure the electrical phenomenon ravaging M’Hatz Kee Zifr. It’s all very mathy and stuff, so you’ll not be able to help.”

“We’ve all had the same training and education, Samsun,” Sadlur stated plainly.

“And we all test identically on cognitive exams, so don’t discount my input just because the Fleet chose to split us up into different Divisions,” Safrun said. They stepped close to the table and glanced over the calculations visible on the screen of the device theyz had been working on. Safrun mentally reviewed what they had read in the catalogs of data other Fleet vessels had accumulated—about the exploding pirate planet. They did a quick series of computations in their head and looked both their sibs in the eyes with a slow and deliberate gaze.

“You’ve already come up with an answer, haven’t you?” Sadlur asserted.

“Of course I have. I can even declare one of you the winner of the bet.” Safrun struck a pose, mimicking Samsun’s earlier airs.

The room was silent. Not even a bleep from any computer indicator. The Fiikunsi sergeant looked up from their task to watch the three litterlings as theyz stared at each other. The quiet held for

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half a minute before the junior sergeant asked, “Are all youz telepathic or something? Cuz I wanna hear the answer, too.”

“Telepathy isn’t real, my good, green Fiikunzoid,” Samsun declared in a pretend know-it-all tone complete with a wagging index finger. “People your age should know better by now. Our ancestors on the Cradle Planet, when it was still only a planet and not a stretched out series of interlinked ring worlds, believed in folktales and magic like that. At least we Tanwaah evolved out of our need to adhere to make-believe ideas explaining the unknowable. And here you are operating as a scientist. I should inform Second Mate Peethu that you need to be reassigned. Maybe even to Safety Department.”

The Fiikunsi looked moderately alarmed. “You can’t do that, I outrank you. All of youz.”

Safrun strolled over to the junior sergeant’s table and put a friendly arm around the crewper’s shoulders. “My littermate is just teasing. They fancy themself a clown and a jester, but they really haven’t even the talent to perform dramatic readings from a medical chart. So, please, don’t take anything they say to heart... you have just one heart, don’t you?” Safrun knew the answer already, but was hoping to put the sergeant at ease.

The Fiikunsi nodded and looked visibly relieved. “Yeah, we just have one heart, not like the NeeKron or anything.” They smiled up at Safrun. “My name is Aaloor Bern.”

“And my name, if you didn’t hear it upon my entrance, is Safrun. Krazii Safrun. You go by Aaloor, correct?”

Aaloor nodded. “Yeah, our surnames are placed second. Yours are first. I’ve learned that much about y’all.”

Samsun gasped exaggeratedly with a hand to their mouth. “We’re not the first Tanwaah you’ve met, are we?”

Aaloor shook their head. “No, there were a few litters in boot camp, but none were in my platoon. After boot camp I served at a tiny climate outpost in the Seriksun sector until now. This is my first shipSide posting.”

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Safrun felt the sergeant lean into their side a bit more so Safrun lightly tightened their draped arm into a soft hug. “You’re assigned to Meteorology Department, right?” Safrun had already confirmed this with a glance at the sergeant’s department insignia.

Aaloor nodded. “Yeah, I’m tasked with helping determine if there are any atmospheric explanations for the catastrophic lightning discharges the pirate planet is having. So far, I can’t find any meteorologic explanation for any of it. It’s not normal that a planet has so much ionic activity without weather playing a part.”

“And that, my friends, is what Sadlur and I are working on,” Samsun declared. “So, sib Safrun, which of us is right... in your estimation?”

Before Safrun could answer, Aaloor asked, “Have y’all been doing the math in your heads? I haven’t seen any of you use a dataCalc once.”

Samsun took a breath to say something but Safrun quickly cut them off, knowing they were likely to make a comment that would sound condescending. “It’s just a silly parlor trick we do with numbers. We learned it when we were children. It’s really just for show. We use dataCalcs just the same as everyone else.”

“That’s not...” Sadlur began but Safrun silenced them with a sharp glance.

“Anyway, I ran the math and Sadlur is correct. Forty-two terahertz should be an adequate range for what youz are trying to determine.”

“Blark!” Samsun reached down to drop their pants. “Looks like I’m losing some length. Someone get the laser scissors.”

Safrun hurriedly stepped back to their littermates’ side of the lab to restrain Samsun’s hand. Sadlur had a small smile of satisfaction on their face. It was nice to see them looking happy. Sadlur’s spouse back home had never been one to build up their confidence. Safrun was eager to see if the litterlings could get the old Sadlur back, the one theyz had grown up with, not this acquiescent, meek sliver of a sib theyz now had. “I’ll take you to the surgery center later, Samsun. I’ll make sure the cock-chop

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leaves you in recovery for a couple days. It'll give the crew some respite from your unwanted advances.”

“Sounds fair,” Samsun agreed with a serious pout of their lower lip. “My stick *has* been overworked this whole week, what with us being on the float in streaming space. Once we get back to normal space and fresh gravity, I'll be all rested up. I'm looking forward to putting it to use in the pirate planet's gravity well.”

“You can't really be expecting to get laid on a rupturing planet, are you?” Safrun asked.

“Why not? Think about the sensations we can experience with all that rogue electricity humming in the atmosphere. Sex'll be, well, shocking.” Samsun added a shivering motion with their shoulders.

“I suspect we'll be too busy rescuing people. I just hope we can get everyone off-planet before things get any worse,” Sadlur said.

“I read that there are an estimated two million people scattered across M'Hatz Kee,” Aaloor said. “No one knows how many have died so far, but some data puts it in the hundreds of thousands.”

Safrun sighed. “I just hope theyz can hold on a bit longer. I have heard, through the proverbial grapevine, that the *Noisee Nuun* is being redirected to a different assignment before tackling the pirate planet problem.”

“Wait... what?” Samsun took a genuine deep breath of slow consideration. “Are you sure?” Sadlur asked.

Safrun shrugged. “I don't know, but I just came off assignment with an officer, albeit a new ensign, who intimated they had been told as much. So take that for what it's worth.”

As if having been called, a soft chime rang from the entryway to the lab. A command officer poked their head into the room: a green-skinned Fiiikunsi, the same species as Aaloor but with smaller horns of less curl, wearing a black vest with the white stripe of Command but the blue undershirt of Science Division. The

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warrant officer stepped into the lab. Third in command of the *Noisee Nuun*, Warrant Mendy Peethu had a friendly face to look at but a notoriously gloomy personality.

“We’re just going on a walkabout to inform the crew about the impending mission adjustment,” Warrant Mendy announced to the four enlisted crewpers in the lab. “It looks like we’re not going to be helping the folk on M’Hatz Kee Zifr first thing upon reentry to normal space. We’ve been re-tasked to the *Vandooreen* Research Station to investigate some misdeeds against citizens there.”

Safrun had not seen who else accompanied the warrant officer, but a deeper voice interjected from out in the hallway, “No need to explain to them, Officer Peethu.” The owner of the voice was likely Third Mate Choor.

Officer Peethu appeared to take the mild rebuke in leadership style with poor grace, judging by the dour look on their face. “Just make note of it, crewpers, and pass it on. The Captain wanted us to tell the crew personally rather than announce it over the comms, so as to gauge yourz responses. So there you have it.” They turned on their agile, three-toed feet and strode back into the hallway to join their compatriots. Fiikunsi people had a stride that appeared as if every step were about to become an elegant leap forward, like a gazelle springing across the savannah. However, Officer Peethu’s canter emanated a sense of stolid malaise.

“Well, I guess we’ll have more time to fine tune this scan insert,” Samsun proclaimed with forced levity.



I know it's gauche to say so, even though I have my citizenship now, but I'm smarter than everyone. I outrank most all other enlisted, and even though I hold the honorific of "Officer," my uniform still telegraphs where I came from—the rank and file of basic crew and the welfare sponges of no-name civilians before that.

I have been rewarded with the responsibility of command now that I've put in my time and have continuously proven my efficacy over and over. But I still don't see where this will take me in the end. Sure, I can walk into an Officer's Lounge now and order a drink. I can spend my voteTokens on whatever cause I see fit (once my compulsory votes are allocated). One choice would be to retire and take a high-profile job increasing the value of my votes.

But I will still be seen as an up-jumper by the citizenry who mindlessly benefit from the endowment of their birth and as an iconoclast by the civys who choose to wallow in freeloading complacency.

- excerpt from Over Warrant Peethu's Fleet Duty Journal

Day 4: B-Shift

S.F.S. Noissee Nuun

MENDY STRODE SLOWLY BACK into the hallway to join their compatriots after informing the physics lab crewpers about the mission change. Deen Choor's long tail, with its white, brushy tip, waved slowly back and forth in a pattern Mendy had come to realize expressed frustration. Likely, the haughty fourth in command was bristling at Mendy's verbal gaff a moment ago. Mendy had suspicions that Deen chafed at being outranked by an enlisted officer—if the Risurj's tail language and ongoing acrimonious attitude toward them was any indicator.

Deen adjusted their black-and-gold uniform jacket then clasped their hands behind their back as the three senior officers continued down the hallway. "You need to be more aware of your tone and your delivery when addressing the crew, Mendy," Deen sniffed disdainfully, all while holding a pleasant smile on their dark-skinned face.

Mendy was irked by Deen's informality at using Mendy's given name rather than their rank of Over Warrant Officer, or at least their title, Second Mate. "This isn't my first command posting, *Third Mate*. I'm perfectly capable of handling things in my own manner, thank you."

"Now, now, Officers," Jaamz interjected pleasantly. "No need to ruffle each other's feathers. Just stay focused on delivering our orders to the crew without inciting any distress." First Mate Jaamz Dilaan's easy-going manner was infectious. Mendy found themselves breathing more evenly as their temperament settled after rounding the corner of the Science Division hallway where most of the offices and labs had yet to be rigged for operation.

The command trio turned toward starboard and strolled past the computer core where the digital and organic matrixes thrummed away providing hundreds of thousands of computations

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per second to keep the *Monitor class* vessel running. Theyz turned to head aft once more down another quiet, blue-lined hallway which shortly brought themz to a stop at the closed doors of the chemistry lab.

Third Mate Choor took advantage of their greater height and leg length to nonchalantly step in front of Mendy. They opened the door to relay the new orders to the one crewper and one officer in the room. Technically, Mendy should be delivering the orders in these departments, as the Science Division was their direct responsibility. Irritatingly, Deen made sure to speak loudly enough that Jaamz and Mendy could hear them out in the corridor.

“Captain Oofay wanted us to tell you in person that Fleet Command is re-tasking the *Noisee Nuun* to the *Vandoreen* Research Station as soon as we reenter normal space. Adjust your work accordingly, as we will be delayed in reaching the pirate planet.” Deen returned to the hallway with a self-satisfied smile and directed a piercing look at Mendy with their lambent eyes. “Nothing but the pertinent details. No editorializing.”

Mendy chose to dismiss the passive-aggressive lesson from their subordinate. Instead, they contemplated what it would be like to have bioluminescent eyeballs. *Did that effect alter how Risurj people saw the worlds? Were things brighter? Colored differently? Could theyz see in the dark?* Mendy was not about to ask Deen any of that but made a mental note to do a little research later.

As the three walked on, Jaamz made a thinly-veiled attempt at changing the topic. “Engineering has some concerns that the *Noisee Nuun's* gravity matrix is not fully prepared to handle the return to normal space. Chief Ging suggested we alert the crew to the possibility that some sections might go zero-g for a few minutes when we pass through the Seerfor gate. The matrix will have to prioritize propulsion over environmentalals, so everyone should be expecting grav fluctuations.”

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Deen Choor let loose a sharp guffaw. "I must admit that I take some small perverse delight in watching shipSide newbies get caught off guard by zero-g. All the flailing makes me chuckle."

Jaamz smiled in agreement. "It is a good indicator who is keeping their uniform matrices updated and who took to their space training effectively."

"Or maybe just more *recently* brought shipSide," Mendy countered.

"Fair point," the First Mate acceded. "There are a number of crew for whom this is their first shipSide posting even though they've been in Fleet service for a few years."

"Junior Sergeant Bern, back there in the physics lab, is one of those, I believe," Mendy informed.

Jaamz nodded. "Ah yes, they work in the Meteorology Department, correct?"

"Yes ser," Mendy said. They were impressed with the First Mate's knowledge of the *Noisee Nuun* crew roster. The ship had been pulled out of the proverbial scrap heap only a week ago and rushed back into service. As a *monitor class* vessel, it had a crew of 170. Lieutenant Commander Dilaan seemed to have already memorized the entire manifest. Mendy didn't think they could do that themselves, not without some effort, despite their prodigious intellect.

Most of the crew's current duties on the ship were to get the vessel in full working order. With so much of the Fleet's resources being sent to the war front, many sectors of the galaxy were understaffed and lacked vehicles to patrol the colonies. Local stations and outposts were picking up what slack they could, but with fewer ships to ferry crewpers about, there was only so much they could do.

"I still think we should be outfitting the ship's rigging as a terraformer," Deen mused, sounding forcibly casual as they rounded a sharp corner into the alcove near the last room on Deck 3, the lab referred to as the "Think Tank."

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“We’ll be lucky to be functioning under basic sedan rigging,” Mendy said. “Though I do agree with the Third Mate that we ought to try to implement as much terraforming, or at least research rigging, as possible. Especially given that our primary mission is to figure out why a planet is coming apart.”

Jaamz *tsk’d* playfully. “I needn’t remind you two in the midst of this whole walk ‘n’ talk that our new primary orders are to support and investigate the *Vandoreen* Research Station and only after that to lend critical aid to *all* portions of the sector. To that end, an all-purpose sedan rigging is the fastest path to being fully operational. It gives us the most flexibility to address whatever we face when we get into the thick of it.”

“Eventually we’ll be helping that poor planet, though,” Mendy reiterated, hoping to sound upbeat.

Jaamz halted in mid-stride and turned to face their two subordinates. “In all likelihood, yes we will. But in the meantime, the captain wants the *Noisee Nuun* and its crew to be flexible and prepared for anything. Tonight’s briefing will get us all up to date on the current climate situation in the Seerfor Sector. After we dock at the *Hobin’Robin* station and the Commandant there updates us, we’ll have a better idea of how best to proceed. So I expect you two and the other senior officers to maintain decorum and stick to the captain’s wishes.”

“Understood, ser,” Mendy and Deen responded in crisp unison.

“You and Captain Oofaa can count on me, ser,” Deen added ingratiatingly.

Yeah, to brainlessly tow the line and suck up, Mendy thought to herself.

“The captain’s name is pronounced *Oh-v-fay*,” Lieutenant Commander Jaamz corrected the Risurj officer. “Short for Oovfaazaau, which is short for something even I can’t pronounce correctly. You’re leaving out the “V” sound. Driidanz names are very long, complex, and intentionally specific. It has something to do

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with how names sound, tonal qualities and all that. Theirz hearing is far more acute than any of our three species'."

"I'm sure that's how I've been saying it," the Risruj Third Mate said defensively.

The First Mate nodded without any measurable facial expression. "Very good, then." They turned to face Mendy. "Officer Peethu, would you please inform the crew in the Think Tank of our mission adjustment?" Jaamz nodded toward the closed door. "We'll proceed to Deck 4 next, but let's go via the midship starboard lifts. We need to make sure we talk to everyone who might be wandering this side of Deck 3."

△ △ △ △ △

STEPPING OFF THE LIFT from Deck 3 onto midship, Deck 4 threatened to overwhelm the senses, at least for Mendy. Deck 3, where they had their own office and spent much of their on-duty work time, had no discernible scent at all. Perhaps the third deck's science labs and production facilities needed to keep the air scrubbed to exacting sterility.

In contrast, Deck 4 was the home of the biology labs, the plant and protein farms, the live gardens, the water system, and the majority of dining and recreational facilities. The entire deck was suffused with the smell of growing things and cooking things. Where the hallways and walls of the other decks were kept unadorned and smooth, here plant life was allowed, in fact encouraged, to grow from innumerable nooks and crannies built into the frame. There were even exposed panels where bioTech power lines and organic data storage grids were visible like glowing vines and root tendrils.

"Who's hungry?" Deen asked. "I'm starving. I spent all of last shift helping the captain and the Coms department try to figure out why chatter went silent from the Seerfor Gate right after we received our new orders. Hopefully it's just something routine like a hardware malfunction in the transmit tethers or magnetic

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interference from a local star outside the gate causing the communication outage.”

Mendy wrinkled their brow. How did anyone, especially someone as experienced as Deen who was director of the Operation Division of the *Noisee Nuun* and, to top it off, a Communications Department specialist, not realize that FTL gates could never be built, let alone function, within range of a star where electromagnetic fluctuations could affect it? It never ceased to baffle Mendy that the Fleet's methods of job training and assignment and even many of its choices in leadership tended to promote people to the level of theirz least competence.

Mendy had even published a thesis on the subject, replete with detailed mathematics, examining and explaining the concept. As far as they knew, no one higher up than one distant Sector Regulations Chief had ever even seen it. Deen was a textFile example of someone promoted beyond the means of their intellect and ability. They had probably gotten this far on their looks and their charm, charm that had never been directed at Mendy, for sure.

The First Mate chimed in, “I could go for a bite. It *has* been a busy day, and I haven't eaten a thing. Let's head to the officer's kitchen by way of the crew mess hall, spread the word there, and then spread the sauce on some nice whole-grain waffles.”

I wonder what they mean by “sauce” and what in all the stars' gravity is a “waffle”? Mendy thought. *Must be some weird Evor Danteen cracker or biscuit. What else does one spread sauce on?*

By the time they reached the Officer's Mess, having passed through the entire crewper mess hall, Mendy realized they were actually quite hungry. The officer's dining room was quiet, as no one else was there, not even a bio-chemist on duty to prepare any meals. Mendy checked their glove display and noted the time was definitively late in the shift so, of course, all the officers were either at theirz duty stations or had already eaten.

“Not one of us can cook, can we?” Officer Dilaan said. “At least not according to our Fleet records and assessments.”

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Mendy nodded in agreement, and Deen said, "Certainly not me. I'd likely poison one of you and not even know it."

They each made their way to one of four food printers built into the bulkhead. Mendy placed their gloved hand on the receptor pad of the printer so that it would recognize their biometric signature most clearly. "Stilton soup and sourdough toast."

Deen placed their order without touching the printer after glancing askance at Mendy's choice. "Ham sandwich, hot, on rye, no cheese. Extra mustard and potato chips. Water to drink." They turned to the shorter Fiikunsi and made sure to look down their nose with those glowing eyes. "You should steer clear of dairy, Mendy, though I know even cheese as bland as stilton adds a vast amount of flavor to Fiikunsi food. If you were able to tolerate it, I'd suggest you try some Risurj cheddar, sharp cheddar of course. It might make your soup actually palatable."

"We can eat Risurj food just fine, Third Mate Choor," Mendy retorted with only a slight snap to their tone... they hoped.

Once again striving to keep the mood light, Lieutenant Commander Dilaan piped up. "I think it's simply a safe idea to keep to one's own genome of food, regulations notwithstanding. Sticking to one's own species' dietary supplies makes sure there are no unintended mishaps or results in the work schedule. Can't have half the crew constantly running to the head." The First Mate retrieved a plate of off-orange protein that smelled fishy. Possibly Evor Danteen salmon, though maybe it was "waffle" *fish*? It was heavily garnished with sprigs of small, leafy vegetables and smelled rather compelling, at least to Mendy.

The three officers took up residence at a round table designed for four. The seats, two of which were configured for ungulates and two for primates, were softly cushioned and the legs of the chairs outfitted with gravity clamps so as to adjust to the g-measure of its occupant should they be out of uniform. The clamps would also keep the chair itself from detaching should gravity be lost or the ship be undergoing non-gravimetric maneuvers, such as now as they "sailed" through starless streaming space. In contrast,

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the table had old-fashioned bolts keeping it from shifting on the floor. The tabletop and theirz plates were all lightly magnetized.

Theyz ate in silence for a few moments before Deen spoke up. “I heard a rumor once that Evor Danteen can eat anyone’s food.”

Officer Dilaan scoffed and nearly inhaled a mouthful of partially-chewed food. When they finally managed to swallow, they said, “Hah! That’s a lark. I don’t think I’ve ever knowingly eaten a different species’ food. Maybe someone slipped me something one time in Academy as a joke, but I’ve never wanted any ill effects from my meals.”

“You’ve never experimented with the psychedelic or intoxicating properties of food?” Mendy asked out of genuine curiosity.

Deen gave a quiet laugh as they recalled a memory. “In the Academy, there was a senior cadet who was hoping to bed me. They talked me into eating a Peelolo cookie. They didn’t tell me it was Peelolo, and I made the mistake of trusting their judgment. Peelolo food is totally poisonous to Risirj, and I was in the med bay for two days.”

Officer Dilaan smirked over their next forkful of food. “So you left that poor senior cadet with wetStik?”

“For sure! I never talked to them again.”

Mendy wanted to change the topic of conversation back to something more appropriate to their duties. They gave it another couple minutes of quiet eating before saying, “I was thinking we could load up the shuttle and send a team to M’Hatz Kee Zifr when we’re back inSector. The *Noisee Nuun* can continue on to the research station. Just so we can get some boots on the ground and start collecting our own data, you know?”

Lieutenant Commander Dilaan carefully finished their current mouthful of food before answering. “We only have the one shuttle right now, though maybe the *Hobin’Robin* Base could lend

us one. However, I don't think it would be the best use of our admittedly limited resources at this time."

Quick as ever to shut down one of Mendy's ideas, Deen interjected, "Besides, with how few Fleet ships remain in these frontier sectors, I doubt even the gate base will have anything to spare for us. Theyz have undoubtedly committed everything in theirz arsenal to keeping things covered across the entire region."

Officer Dilaan nodded their agreement. "Yes, quite likely. I commend your devotion to the people of that pirate planet, Officer Peethu, but all the information we have so far points to themz having caused the entire problem in the first place."

"We have few enough facts, ser. Barely enough to reach the point of conjecture, let alone substantial concrete evidence. It is quite unscientific to declare the problem self-induced," Mendy defended.

"But if theyz did try to re-terraform the planet without Parliament permission and Fleet implementation, as many reports suggest; maybe theyz deserve to sleep in the bed of theirz own making," Deen said, probably hoping to appear as a team player in front of the First Mate.

"Well, I would like permission to make the proposal to the captain in any case," Mendy requested.

Officer Dilaan shrugged as they scraped the last portions of fish onto their fork. "Feel free to do so, Officer Peethu. It's well within your rights as Second Mate." The tone of their answer led Mendy to believe there was little hope for their idea getting the commanding officer's permission.

After theyz finished eating, theyz deposited theirz plates and food remnants in the recycler. It gave a low beep and a soft *woosh* each time it activated. As theyz stepped back into the hallway to head further foreShip, a loud and heated conversation drifted from a short distance away just inside the Aviary's entry door. The door was clearly open as bright light spilled onto the floor of the dimmer hallway. At least one person had to be standing directly in the door frame preventing it from closing.

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"I'm tired of you giving me the slip every time we try to do something together," one twangy, high-pitched voice said, frustration the distinct emotion. Mendy glimpsed the back of a silver enlisted uniform and a head of pale blond barely neck-length hair. *Looks like that Novanis navigator. I figured they'd be on duty at the helm in these last hours of unpowered sailing to the gate. They're the best pilot we have.*

As the figure took two more steps backwards, it became clear that it was indeed Arlana Lok, the navigator. They were in a heated, finger-pointing, octave-rising squabble with someone.

"Officers, let's keep moving and get back to task," the First Mate suggested. "That's none of our business."

Not necessarily true. Your primary task as First Mate is crew relations. That's why I hated being First, even on a small Cutter class ship. People-pleasing is not my forte.

A second figure could now be clearly seen, a person of slightly lesser height than Arlana but with wider shoulders. They wore a matching silver Flight Division uniform but had grey skin and a spiky mass of violet-indigo-mauve hair. One of the Krazii siblings, though Mendy could not remember which one was which other than Sadlur who worked under their purview in the Science Division. Neither Deen nor Mendy made a move to leave the scene.

"I'm not giving you the slip, Arlana," the Tanwaah crewper standing in the doorway contended in a much more conciliatory tone than the Novanis crewper's.

Arlana crossed their arms in a huffy manner. "Well, maybe not, but ever since we got posted on this little ship, it feels like you've been spending every waking minute with your litter."

"It's not even been a week," the Krazii countered. "And this ship is only little in comparison to that monolithic dreadnought we were on before. My sibs and I are trying to figure out what's wrong with an *entire planet*, so excuse me if doing our job interferes with your zero-g basket weaving in the Aviary." Now their voice was

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starting to sound defensive; it was scaling up in pitch closer to Arlana's.

"You're not the only ones working on the problem, Siimun," Arlana retorted.

"But we're the smartest ones working on it, so we'll probably be the ones to solve it," Siimun declared. "If you'll excuse me, I've got to go get some sleep before my next duty shift. I'll talk to you later."

Arlana muttered something indecipherable pushing their way back inside the Aviary while Krazii Siimun walked out to head down the hall aftShip.

"Don't make me make it an order, officers," First Mate Dilaan's voice said from a short distance away. Mendy and Deen turned back to face theirz superior and found that they had moved on without themz and had to call back over their shoulder.

Just as theyz started moving to catch up with Officer Dilaan, a ship-wide alarm sounded. A deep voice spoke loudly over the hallway speakers as well as the coms devices built into theirz uniforms.

"Silver Alert! Silver Alert! All hands to action stations! Repeat, silver alert. All hands to action stations."

The internal lighting system of the entire ship took on a bright silver hue infusing the hallways with a glow that made Deen Choor's shining golden eyes appear dim.

Without so much as a word or a glance, the three command officers sprinted to the nearest lift. As theyz stepped in, theyz heard a high-pitched voice from down the corridor. "Hold the lift; hold the lift!" Officer Dilaan's four-fingered hand shot out in a blur to prevent the lift door from closing.

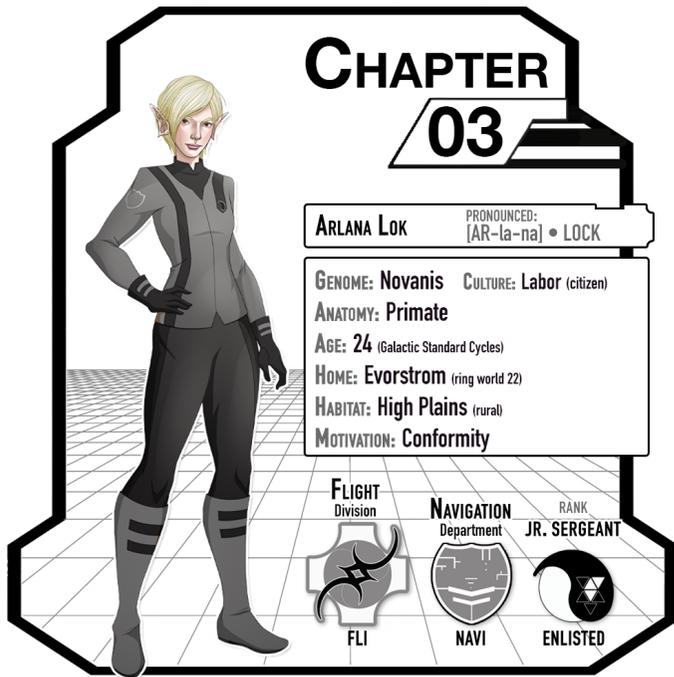
The pale-skinned, pale-haired Novanis navigator hopped full speed into the lift with the officers. "Thank you," they said rather breathily. "I presume you're all heading to the Quarterdeck?"

"You are correct, crewper," Officer Dilaan confirmed.

"Niiicce," Arlana said with an eager smile. "Silver alerts mean I get the helm!"

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“Yes indeed,” Officer Dilaan nodded. “As our highest rated pilot, I expect you to keep us in one piece.” The First Mate managed to talk amiably even while scrolling through alert information on their sleeve display making sure they would be fully briefed by the time the lift reached the *Noisee Nuun's* command center.



My favorite place on mid-size and bigger Fleet ships is the garden quad. Even though theyz are never like the high plains back home on Evorstrom (way too much foliage), I still can go there and close my eyes, take deep breaths (sure, it's recycled air) and have a few moments with nature (even if I can hear my crewMates tromping about).

I get the feeling that some people look at me like I'm some sort of weirdo once they find out where I'm from. Maybe they think I should be wearing a cape like some fashionable Evor Danteen on the ring worlds. Sure, that's my home too, and sure I get mistaken for an Evor Danteen at first glance sometimes, but I'm just a simple country kid that loves the Situdel.

I just wish everyone out here in the colonies could feel as free as I do. Theyz shouldn't feel shackled by theirz situation. I wasn't. Look at me; I enlisted and now I get to fly big 'ol starships around the galaxy through streaming space and along elaborate gravity highways. I'm seeing new places all while helping others open theirz eyes and minds to the possibilities granted by the freedom all around themz. If only theyz all would simply put theirz hand out and take it.

- excerpt from Sergeant Lok's Fleet Duty Journal

Day 4: C-Shift

S.F.S. Noissee Nuun

THE LIFT DOORS HISSED APART opening to a panoply of activity on the Quarterdeck. A dozen voices all talking at once, though none so loud as to drown out another. Every display panel was alight with fluctuating graphs, data streams, control icons, and flashing pink alert messages.

Arlana and the three officers stepped onto the midTier of the command center with its transparent walkways making a giant “+” from aft to fore and port to starboard. The imposing figure of Captain Oovfaa stood in the exact center at the command seat; long legs braced wide apart as if rooted to the deck plating like an implacable tree facing hurricane winds. The captain, with hands clasped behind their back, was virtually aglow in their predominantly white uniform, a beacon radiating calm, clarity and competence to all three tiers of the Quarterdeck.

As the officers took theirz respective duty stations, Arlana realized they were the only enlisted crewper on the midTier. The captain glanced at Arlana, noting their entrance and gave a small tilt of their head toward the helm seat. The leafy growths from the Driidanz's brow ridges seemed as unflappable as the captain's stance.

Keep cool. I'm trained for this. Put your feelings away. Forgot about the tiffle with Siimun. Focus on the job.

Arlana strode around the outer rim of the walkway passing the three gold duty station seats of Operations Division and took the middle of three seats in the silver Flight Division section at the forePort quarter. Arlana's direct supervisor, Lieutenant Smiith, vacated the helm seat without a glance at their subordinate and shifted briskly to the empty duty station at Arlana's right, the Astronomy seat. Smiith made a brisk swiping gesture across the

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smooth, curved wall routing all the Flight Division command functions, except Navigation, to their station.

The Flight Division wall of the domed command center had screens illuminated with silver trim to denote their department functions. The indirect lighting of the entire tri-level Quarterdeck was also currently awash in the glare of silver alert lighting denoting the ship's current travel conditions were under threat.

Captain Oovfaa's booming voice overtook the clamor to apprise the new arrivals of the situation. "We still have not reestablished communication through the Seerfor gate. We are within unScattered comm range of a lone drifting pleasure yacht. Theyz inform us that there are additional vessels ahead and all of themz are on the float as the gate to normal space is inoperative. We do not yet know how many ships are at risk, but we can assume that one or more, likely the nearest to the gate, might be suffering entropic decay to theirz hulls and power systems if theyz have been in streaming space past theirz durability rating."

Arlana retained outward poise but on the inside, they felt an acidic clenching in their gut. The shearing forces in streaming space could shatter a ship like a tuning fork striking a wine glass. No sort of energy output, from focused communication lasers to targeted plasma ejections to bursts of air released from inside a ship, retained atomic coherence for more than a thousand meters or so while in the "stream." A living person trapped outside a vessel would eventually drift out of the FTL "river" into the lustrous, flickering void and, presumably, cease to exist. At least that is what scientists thought happened outside the integrity of reality within the flowing rivulets of streaming space.

Arlana quickly assessed the *Noisee Nuun's* position and trajectory relative to the pleasure yacht designated onscreen as the *Satin Pilo*, a Chon'Danon barge with four hundred and thirty-three registered crew and guests. "Lieutenant, I can drift us to within 1,000 meters of them, starboard relative, in two minutes."

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Lt. Smiith relayed the information to the Captain's threat display.

"No need, sergeant," the captain responded, directly addressing Arlana. "They inform us that they are solid for the time being. We will proceed to the gate to assist others."

Right generous of them, Arlana thought. *I'm not sure we could easily fit all of themz aboard anyway.* Having been addressed specifically, they asked, "What are my orders, Captain?"

"Burn what void thrust you need to accelerate us in the direction of the gate." The captain turned slightly to face the copper colored wall. "Engineering, prepare reaction mass for use at the navigator's discretion. Is the gravity drive ready for implementation upon normal space transition?"

"Yes captain, gravimetric propulsion at 100%, though internal grav is only at 77% efficiency and may fluctuate," the engineer responded, another giant Driidanz.

Captain Oovfaa nodded and turned to their left. "Coms, coordinate with flight and launch drones with tightBeam messaging to every ship that comes within sensor range. Message to read: *S.F.S. Noisee Nuun* stands ready to assist with support, repairs, and evac upon request. Respond with your current status, and prioritized needs. End message."

Both gold and silver division officers chimed with a crisp "Yes, ser!" and bent to theirz tasks.

"Ensign Hatsükee," Flight Leader Smiith signaled to the young Jashintü officer on Arlana's left at the Dynamic Space duty station. "Watch for every incision wave coming out of the void and catalog it to central data. Coordinate with Coms to include the results in the drone's live feed, when possible. I want everyone out there to know *what we know when we know it.*"

"Aye aye, ser," the ensign acknowledged after giving Arlana a subtle nod and wink of support for the enlisted's harrowing job of keeping the *Noisee Nuun* on point and out of danger.

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Arlana marveled at the quality of Fleet training. A crew of complete strangers could be assigned to any ship and in no time be operating as a fluid, synchronized, singular, system that kept everyone onboard safe and ready to assist other ships and planets at a moment's notice. They felt deep pride at being some small part of this magnificent galactic machine servicing all the colonies and species of the Situdel.

With multiple drones having been launched moments ago, two new alerts, denoting vessels within scanRange, flashed onto Arlana's screen. Lieutenant Smiith was notified simultaneously on their own scopes and sounded out as it was not an enlisted's place to verbally inform command if an officer was available to do so. "Captain, we have two more ships coming into drone range. One reads as a diplomatic shuttle from Dugatot Prime and the other as an unaffiliated merchant scow."

Third Mate Deen chimed in from the gold-colored Coms seat across the quarterdeck. "Captain, I am reading discrepancies in the scow's registry. Digging into it now."

Captain Oovfaa nodded. "Get Infiltration looking into it too, Officer Choor." The statuesque Driidanz captain used commands initiated with a tap of their boot on the floor to smoothly rotate the command chair so it faced the blue-lit quarter of the midTier. "Science Division, what can you tell me about these two new ships' conditions?"

Over Warrant Peehtu replied while standing at the Physics station having made their seat fold away into the transparent deck plating. "The Dugatot shuttle is in rough shape, theyz must have been on a long trip. I estimate theyz have no more than 30 minutes of hull integrity remaining. It's burning a lot of voidThrust just to keep from drifting past the gate. A damage control team *might* be able to shore them up, but we wouldn't know for sure until theyz get over there. The scow is in slightly better shape from what I can tell, but maybe only has two hours? It's hard to get a clear reading on it."

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“What is the total crew of the ships?” Captain Oovfaa asked of Coms.

“Eleven on the diplomatic shuttle and, according to registry for the scow, *Jumpür's Bundl*, 88. That's a total of 99 between the two vessels, ser.” Officer Choor said.

“Officer Peethu, can you confirm on the scow?” the captain asked.

“No, the drone scan beams are bouncing too wildly off theirz hull for a clear read,” Officer Peethu responded.

Ensign Hatsükee added, “That's likely due to the energy entropy of streaming space.”

“Or could be due to alterations of the scow's hull itself,” someone from the Engineering quarter said. Arlana was too focused on lining up their trajectory with the new vessels to take the time to see who spoke.

Before they realized the error in protocol, Arlana asked, “Captain, which ship should we aim for first?” Arlana made a strained face at their screen with gritted teeth. They could almost feel a harsh side-eye glare coming from Flight Leader Smiith on their right. Arlana was too used to being on smaller vessels where they were the only voice for navigation concerns on the command deck. Operating on a larger quarterdeck and adhering to chain of command procedures was still something of an adjustment, especially under high pressure.

Captain Oovfaa did not sound put off by the error, but Arlana did not look to confirm if the Driidanz's immense body was telling a different story. “We head for the diplomat's shuttle, Junior Sergeant. What is our ETA, Lt. Smiith?”

Arlana let their breath out with a quiet sigh as the captain's smooth request served as a gentle reminder of proper decorum without calling attention to the matter.

“Seven minutes, ser,” Lt. Smiith informed.

“Very good.” The captain's voice projected their next command with enough volume to reach below to the “Pit”, the bottom tier of the Quarterdeck bubble where Tactical Division

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crewpers were stationed. “Engineering and Safety, assemble a damage control team in the shuttle bay. Tactical, I want a Mareendoo squad to join themz. Officer D'Treks, you are to skipper it. Be on standby to depart for the merchant scow on my order while we take the *Noisee Nuun* to aid the diplomat's shuttle.”

“Yes, ser,” came a big voice from the Tactical Division zone below.

The captain continued issuing orders. “First Mate Dilaan, I want you skippering the meet 'n' greet with the ambassador. Adhere to regulations without deviation, Lt. Commander.” Arlana heard no verbal response from the balcony over their head where the First Mate was stationed at the Agency boards on the upper tier. They imagined, since they were in no position to witness, that Lt. Commander Dilaan gave a crisp nod of confirmation.

If the captain is ordering commandos and not a Security detail to go to the scow, they must be thinking the ship could have privateers on board, Arlana mused, their heart beating a tad faster at the notion of potential conflict. I kind of hope theyz are pirates. We'll show themz that the Situdel Fleet is way better for theirz health than whatever “free society” faction theyz belong to. A moment later, the First Mate stepped off the translucent spiral staircase from the red balcony above and walked out the foreDoor of the Quarterdeck.

They could hear the heavy hoof-steps of Tactical Director Taree striking floor plates down in the pit as the NeeKron officer vacated their duty station and headed to prepare the boarding party. Arlana worked the helm controls, firing off just enough ionic discharge from multiple, tiny directional engines on the hull of the *Noisee Nuun* to get the ship sliding elegantly next to the diplomatic shuttle. Lt. Smiith pulled up a live camera view on their own monitor and mirrored it to one of the large overhead view projections in the captain's line of sight should the commanding officer want to keep an eye on the progress.

Crew continued to sound off with information and reports as Arlana stabilized the ship's docking alignment with the *Reflekshuns*

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of *Glooree* diplomatic shuttle from Dugatot Prime. The vehicle was too large to fit into the *Noisee Nuun's* own landing bay, though it still looked toy-sized in comparison to the long, four-deck Fleet ship. Someone in Environmental messaged the Flight board that all transit tubes stood ready for linkage with the shuttle.

Lt. Smitth took the time to glance up from their readouts to address Arlana. "Sergeant, line us up to use the Deck 3 Decon airlock in case they have injuries."

"Yes, Ser." Arlana had already been maneuvering for just that. Not that there was any expectation the decontamination station would be needed, but it was directly across from sick bay, surgery, and the pharmacy. So if there were injured folk, they would be in the immediate vicinity to provide rapid treatment.

Arlana sincerely hoped their fumbling of protocol had not damaged the opinions of their direct supervisor, Lieutenant Smitth, or with the captain. It would really be a blow to their confidence if they lost primary pilot status and weren't the first call for all the fun driving jobs.



Layman Kingsford
performing as Brock N. Alnite

Layman Kingsford grew up in the mountains of New Mexico (USA) and got a B.F.A. focused on music and creative writing. However, they have spent much of their adult life as a champion ballroom dancer, an on & off-again musician, game store/coffeeshop owner and glam daddy of the Denver drag troupe - Haus Alnite.

Currently, Layman designs tabletop games, some of which are set in the same universe as the Living Saga. **Cheeky Dingo Entertainment** is their game publishing company.

Layman Kingsford is a pen name derived from a paternal family name and a maternal family name, neither of which are being passed on in this or subsequent generations, so the name is them doing their little part to keep those two names going.