

Sabrya 'Reaper' Smith

The hooded figure waited in the shadows of one of the many now-closed food vendors, watching the two men hunched over their drinks. At this hour, only a few of the seedier alcohobars remained open. The bar chosen for the meeting was at the lower side of the rambling market closest to the river—though from the stench, the river was more of an open sewer. Sabrya checked her chrono; four hours to first dawn, with the second sunrise forty-three minutes after.

With a final exchange of words, the two men nodded and parted. One remained and began swirling the ice in his drink with a finger. Checking the area was clear, the woman approached, slinking closer like a predatory animal until she pulled up a stool beside him.

“Hey, Brutus.”

The lone man at the bar nodded. “Sabby. Glad to see you made it. A Supanova for my friend,” he ordered the bot-tender, before taking a sip of his own. “I gather you saw?”

“Make it a double Aeirlon-X Starburst,” she said, amending the drink order before answering. “I did. Who picked this venue?”

“Not me, but the stench keeps most people away. Doubt they can find anyone desperate enough to work here—hence the bot-tender.”

“Do you trust him?”

“Who, the bot-tender?”

Sabrya thumped Brutus on the shoulder.

“Yeah, I trust him.” The big man shrugged, looking down the alley where his contact had disappeared. “More than some.”

Sabrya chuckled deeply. “I’ve seen some of the crowd you meet, so that’s not sayin’ a lot.”

With a whir, the bot-tender returned. On its chest-plate was a screen indicating a warning, in several dialects, about the dangers of the liquor. “Do you accept these conditions?” it asked. “The Demiron Bar and Grill will not be liable for any injury—physical or mental—caused by the consumption of this product.”

She nodded, reaching for it.

The bot backed slightly. “A verbal acceptance is required. Please articulate concisely.”

“Yes, I fraggin’ accept the consequences.”

“Indemnity clause actioned. Please enjoy your refreshment.” It deposited her drink on a Demiron-themed coaster and departed swiftly.

“You sure that’s safe for you?” Brutus eyed the glowing liquid swirling in the glassteel tumbler dubiously; normal glass deteriorated in too short a time to be practical with such a beverage.

She took a long swig. The alcohol content would have rendered most people unconscious after half a glass but her nanites swiftly took care of any effects, making her virtually immune to poisoning, but she could never get drunk; it was one of the few drawbacks with them, in her eyes.

“I’ll be fine,” she answered.

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re here,” Brutus continued when she didn’t topple into the mud. “How much time have you got?”

“They weren’t specific.” The warrior woman shrugged, wiping the foam from her lips with the back of her gloved hand. The fabric immediately began to deteriorate where the liquid had touched it. “As long as I rock-up before the next tourney, they don’t care, which means I’ve got two weeks. Want to try a sip?”

Brutus shook his head vigorously. He cleared his throat.

She chuckled and took another swig.

“No tabs?” he continued.

“Pfft. I always lose them within minutes. You’d think they’d learn.”

“Or they should use micro-trackers.”

“They tried that too. My nanites keep destroyin’ them.” She laughed again. “My sponsors aren’t all that fraggin’ bright. What’s the gig?” Sabrya finished her drink and she tapped for another round.

“Ironskin Mining is pulling out from Grindstone, leaving the dregs to whatever vulture syndicate clan that can pay for it. Since you came from there, thought you might be interested.”

Sabrya nodded, taking another swig. “Ironskin? Those Imperial fraggers have a contract which should run for another decade.”

“Unfortunately for them, the price of xionium has plummeted, and the running costs have increased.”

“I’ve heard the ore they’re pullin’ out now is much lower grade than what my Da worked on.”

“Hence their early departure. No doubt they’ll get a few stellars for the remaining infrastructure; might even toss in a few workers to get the ball rolling for whoever takes over.”

“And our part?”

“The price for experienced workers is better than that of the ore. The populace is being shipped out to other more profitable Ironskin interests; some on pretty unsavory worlds—”

“Ha! It’s not like Grindstone is a paradise.”

“True, but it’s better than some of the other places Ironskin infests. They’re moving further and further rimwards each contract. That’s why they need more workers—the attrition rate is high.” He paused. “You said ‘Imperial fraggers’. Are they working for them?”

“Ironskin is a front for their minin’ ops. They’re almost as Imperial as the frackin’ emperor.”

“I see why you hate them so much.”

“No. No you don’t.” She drained her glass, slammed it to the bar and ordered another. “Who’s runnin’ the show?”

“Nobo Aphiwe runs the Sunfists.”

“I’ve heard of her; she can be reasonable. Why is Sunfist gettin’ involved?”

“No doubt the same reason why you are; to piss-off the Imps, show them the people won’t be pushed around.”

“Nice sentiments that’s gotten plenty people killed. Any details?”

They paused as the bar-bot delivered another glass of the beverage banned on all Class III worlds.

“Details are scant,” Brutus continued when the bot departed. “Ships will depart with the bulk of the workers. They could be heading to various locations and dropping them off on the way—not that it matters, they won’t get there. The Sunfists will be lurking in the asteroid belt as the cruisers move through, latch onto them before they jump, penetrate the hull and take over before they reach the next waystation.”

“Tricky but doable if the teams are insane and have hull-breach experience.”

“You’ve done this before?” Brutus asked.

“Pfft. No fraggin’ way. It’s crazy, but I like crazy. It could be ideal trainin’ for the next tourney. What about opposition?”

“Believed to be mercenaries. Intel says about 20 crew each ship.”

“Mercenaries perhaps, but loyal to the empire.” She worked on her beverage. “Any idea of the ship class?”

“No, but they’ll need to be large if they’re going to take enough passengers to make it worthwhile.”

“So, they could be armed behemoths or junk haulers. How many in the Sunfist crew?”

“At the moment, the best they can manage is eight onto each ship.”

“That’s it?” Sabrya shook her head. “Any of them augged?”

“Augmented like you? Doubt it. I guess we’ll find out.”

“Still, it’ll be fraggin’ fun times.”

“You have a strange perspective of what ‘fun’ is.”

“Kickin’ Imp’s asses—soldiers or low-life mercs—is always fun. When do we start?”

“There’s a skiff at the base lifting off at first dawn to rendezvous with the Sunfist ship.”

“Time for another round then.”

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When Sabrya boarded she recognized the other man from the meeting. He greeted them when they strolled up the rear ramp. As soon as their gear was aboard the ramp started raising immediately and the rumble of the engines grew louder as the pilot prepared for lift-off.

“You bring that everywhere?” Brutus asked as some of the crew eyed the crate Sabrya was strapping down to the deck.

“A girl’s gotta have her toys.”

Once everyone was seated securely the skiff accelerated, quickly leaving the spaceport and within a minute penetrating the thick clouds perpetually enshrouding the small city.

Sabrya noted with approval none of the four crewmembers were affected by the dual glare of the binary suns as Rixan and Kiraz flashed through the viewport, and no one threw-up when zero-G hit.

At least they have some fraggin’ space cred.

Thirty-minutes later they closed in on a sleek ship looming ahead.

“Is that a refurbished Astro class Interceptor?” Brutus queried as the skiff drew closer. He continued at the nod from the pilot. “I’ve seen worse. What mods has she got?”

“The *Mulan* has updated jump-drives—twin Cerbrinka-Zaners; enduro-armor, four tri-barrel plasma canons and new supra-drive launchers for the AM missiles.”

“I see you’re not taking any prisoners with that lot.”

The man shrugged. “Not really what we’re about. You know engineering?”

“Some. That’s real ballsy stuff; what about sensors?”

“Nothing as sensational. Wheinmarht scanners that’ll detect something as small as this skiff at three-k clicks, and half that in hyper. A Barrunta AI runs the show.”

“Mark 5?”

“Mark 3.2. It’s not as if we’re rolling in stellars. Maybe we’ll get some serious backers after this gig.”

After docking, they were ushered through the passages to the Ops room behind the *Mulan’s* bridge, where quick introductions were made. The four other passengers of the skiff were known to the Sunfists already.

“A pleasure to finally meet the star of the Surreal Tournament.” Nobo shook Sabrya’s hand firmly. “You’ve done Sector 22 proud—especially the last seven matches. Gives us plebs hope for a better future knowing there are those like you that can give those puppets of the Imps a swift kick in the gonads. Glad you could make the time to join us.”

The other’s nodded at their leader’s words, some more enthusiastic than others. Sabrya’s heightened senses detected no animosity; more like a hint of curiosity tinged with apprehension. And jealousy.

“Last tourney on Evangelista was damn evil. Glad you made it through,” one of the Sunfist members praised.

“I had a fraggin’ good team...while they lasted. Next tourney is on Sigmarix 7 orbital.”

Nobo continued, saying, “Food if you’re hungry over there, and filtered water to wash it down. No alcohol until the gig is done.” She pointed to the side table.

“Fine with me.” Sabrya grabbed a loaded bowl passed to her. The gathering sat down or leant against the bulkheads and various workstations. The “food” was as she suspected, a variety of different textures and flavors—but essentially it was a combination of protein concentrates, fatty acids and vitamin supplements. Real fruit and vegetables out here were prohibitively expensive.

As soon as the bowls were cleared the talks began in earnest.

The Sunfist leader stood and the various conversations around the cramped room stopped. “Our contact at the Grindstone space-dock confirms there are two Quasar class bulk cruisers with tight security. They’ve monopolized the lifts for the last week around the clock. She can’t get close enough to ensure who or what’s being transported and the cam feeds in those areas have been blanked.

“Astronav has mapped the asteroids’ paths and our AI has calculated several flight trajectories these cruisers could take based on that info. There’s an eighty-five percent chance the optimum window will bring them here.” Nobo pointed to a dotted orange curve denoting the trajectory, then pointed to pale yellow ones. “And these are other possibilities, dependent on the time the ships move out. They are approximately thirty-six minutes for path B, and

seventy-two minutes for path C. As you can see, if they miss the first window, we'll need to move fast if we're to intercept them at B."

Each dotted line curved along a path through the morass of asteroids, some almost as large as the ship. A green light indicated where the teams would be situated in each scenario.

"And the first optimum window is when?" Sabrya studied the maps closely.

"Another seventeen hours. After this briefing, we'll jump to that sector and drift in slowly, using the asteroid field to hide our presence."

"Didn't you grow up there?" Thoz asked, turning to the warrior. "Any local knowledge would be a big help."

"Grow up? I was a kid. I spent my days scroungin' through trash to find a meal or make a stellar or two—half the time bigger kids stole what I had. When I got older, my Da started trainin' me; soon, the older kids learnt to keep away. When I wasn't doin' that, I was patchin' up my Da from his fightin' bouts—win or lose, there were always injuries. Space hazards and astronavigation trajectories wasn't part of my upbringing'. I can't help you there."

"Ah well, woulda been good."

"To continue—assuming they take the optimum flight path—our AI has also determined the best time for teams Alpha and Bravo to deploy."

"Do we know yet who or what the crews are?" Brutus asked.

"No. Could be mercenaries or could be Imperial troopers; either way, we'll modify our tactics to suit. Any advice from you?" Nobo turned to Sabrya.

"Makes little difference. I reckon for this op they'd only use their most trusted operators. Either way, we'll be facin' a fairly organized group. Who's on our teams?" Sabrya sized up the Sunfist crew.

"I'll lead Alpha, with Zintam as my second, Fezi, Thoz, Khole, Aseka, Nandethy and Mamerke as hacker. Bravo will have Reaper as leader, Brutus as your second, Bairya, Phabood, Miemus, Livitre, Drucha, and your hacker is Euloster. Once we clamp onto the hulls, the hackers will patch in and gain entry."

"And if they don't?"

"We'll get you in no problem," Mamerke stated confidently.

Nobo continued. "We'll wait until the jump, then jam their transmissions. The contingency plan is to blast in and get dirty. Drucha and Aseka have the charges for that."

Sabrya looked to the two in question. "Which are?"

"AM capsules." Drucha grinned wolfishly.

“You don’t want to play with anti-matter in space. Whoever thought it was a good idea is fragged in the head.” Sabrya shook her head. “Leave them. Used them once or twice. Effective on land—as long as you’re far enough away—but too unstable for space combat.”

“I think I’ll keep mine,” Drucha growled back. “Weren’t so easy to get.”

“Not if you’re on my team. You wanted my space-combat experience? I’m givin’ it. Back in Sector 7 tourney when—”

“Plenty of time to relive the games later,” Nobo interrupted. “If we’ve got the timing right, we’ll attach to the hull and the hackers will commence the security override immediately. Once they jump, we’ll have about fifteen minutes to take control of the ship.”

As a discussion quickly ensued with various ideas to do this, Sabrya slowly dragged her blades down a bulkhead, making a hideous screech to get everyone’s attention. She turned to Drucha. “If we’re doin’ this, the AMs don’t leave this ship.”

“My captain—”

“Drucha, the AM capsules stay on the *Mulan*,” Nobo ordered. “Same with you, Aseka. We’ll use the HE like we’ve done before. Is that clear?”

Aseka nodded immediately, looking somewhat relieved. With the briefest hesitation, Drucha also nodded.

“Where are we breachin’?” Sabrya filled the silence, blades retracted and any animosity forgotten. “We better be close to the command center, otherwise someone’s bound to fraggin’ spot us.”

On the screen flashed the schematics of the cruisers.

“Best intel we have so far is the cruisers are Mk3s,” Nobo replied.

Brutus cleared his throat. “I’ve worked on vessels like these recently. They have several large holds. I reckon around four to five hundred pax—any more and they risk overdoing the air recyclers.”

Nobo waved her palms at the screen and the schematics changed.

Brutus continued. “Here’s the bridge, and here’s where we get in. This access hatch is one deck above and two frames behind the Command-and-Control compartment. We get in there quietly, the ship’s ours in three, maybe four minutes.”

“Can’t breach the C-and-C directly?” Nandethy queried.

“Too well-armored.”

“What exactly is the C and C?” Thoz asked.

Sabrya rolled her eyes at the seemingly inane question.

“Command and Control,” Brutus informed him before his friend said something better left unsaid. “It’s the nerve center of a ship where everything from weapons to damage control is initiated. They tend to keep it separate on warships so one can concentrate on flying while others can look after it if needs be.”

“What’s your plan if we’re spotted?” Sabrya continued.

“Unlikely to happen,” Nobo resumed the talk. “Mamerke and Euloster will remain on the hull. Once they’ve hacked us onto the ship, they’ll patch us into the Imp’s internal comms. We’ll eavesdrop and know if the grunfer-shit clogs the scrubbers.”

“Imp comms will be relayed on channel 5. Sunfist’s on 3, Alpha team—channel 1, Bravo—2,” Euloster added.

“So, with those two remainin’ outside, we’ve now seven to breach?”

Drucha coughed and grunted. “Is that a problem?”

“For me? Nah. I know I can handle anythin’ the fraggin’ Imps throw at me. I’m more concerned for you.” Sabrya looked around at the group huddled around the workstation. She had been observing them without being too obvious, and only Bairya showed the hallmarks of any significant auging. “Anyone of you augmented?”

Seeing the scrutiny, Bairya nodded, pointing at his scarred face. “I got an auged eye and left ear; Nandethy had her ears done. And Phabood has muscle implants.”

“Bairya, stay close to the front to scan what you can—specifically sensors and beam security.”

“Fezi and Miemus are our heavy weapon experts,” Nobo said.

Sabrya turned to Miemus. “You know how to use a BFG?”

“Sure do.”

“Then you get the heavy artillery. Just don’t go breachin’ the hull.” Sabrya looked to the others. “What else we got?”

“Thoz and Livitre are our back-up hackers. Last resort to get into the C&C.”

“If we need them, then someone fragged up. Is that it?”

“Euloster and Mamerke are also heavy-G,” Drucha smirked. “Twins. They’ll give you a run for your stellars.”

“Yeah. I’m sure some techno-boi can best me,” Sabrya said dismissively as she checked the crew again. The hackers, sitting in shadow on the far side of the cabin and hardly moving, were hard to discern, which is why she’d missed that detail.

“We’ve no other augmentation,” Bairya continued. “Just various militia experience. But we’ve some of the most advanced vac-suits with full-function bio-monitoring. Armored and

exo-nanned, with an in-built autdoc to patch and repair everything up to amputation. Air is good for six hours—extended to eight in emergencies, and they’ve modified stabilizers and thrusters.”

“Cool. You got the Kimichi Mk7s?”

“What? The Mk4s haven’t even *officially* been released yet. How the flux do you think we’d get our hands on Mk7s? You got it?” Livitre asked, incredulous.

“Nope. No doubt the tourney sponsors have some high-level military connections. We use a lot of gear most military dream about.”

“Guinea pigs testing R&D,” Drucha muttered.

“No argument from me. I’m lovin’ it. I reckon the Mk4s will be good enough for you.”

“What are you bringing to the party?”

“Apart from my vast experience? I’ve got these beauties.” She extended the three twenty-centimeter blades from between her knuckles on each hand. “You’ll note I’ve brought along some of my own toys.”

“That container in the hold?” Livitre asked. She was one of the four on the skiff.

Sabrya nodded. “I might have brought my own Kimichi Mk6.”

“Can we see it?”

“Not now,” Nobo cut in as several of the group were about to shift from their positions. “Focus. We’ll have time to play with the toys later.”

“I wouldn’t advise it, anyway. Each weapon and the suit are biometrically attuned to me. Anyone else touches ’em, they’ll be lookin’ for prosthetic arms—if they survive.”

A few of the crew looked disappointed. Drucha shrugged with indifference and the twins spoke quietly to each other.

“Okay, so assumin’ we succeed and the situation doesn’t go tits-up, then what?” the warrior asked. “We’ll have a lot of people to look after.”

“We stop at Waystation 57, notify the *Namitch*, a refurbished bulk carrier waiting in hyper for the transfer of the refugees. We’ve got a couple of places picked out to hide them until more permanent arrangements can be made. We’ll hack into the system and get the data on everyone we can, match them up with other family members and then find suitable places where they can all be utilized to their fullest.”

“You want to use them for your own agenda? Maybe they just want to live peaceful lives.”

“They’d owe us—” Fezi started.

“Stow that shit!” Nobo snapped. She turned back to Sabrya. “They’ll have that option, but if they choose to help us, we can use it.”

“And if they don’t; they’ll still be treated equally?”

“Of course. We aren’t like Ironskin, but—”

“Glad to hear it. I’ll hold you to your word. Forget I said anythin’.”

Nobo was about to add something, then thought better of it, saying instead, “That’s it, people. Files all uploaded to your tablets and suit’s armpads. Study them; get to know the layout so we get this done with minimum casualties.”

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The airlock was too small for both teams, so the group of sixteen rebels gathered in the cargo hold, squeezing between the two skiffs. Most of the Sunfists gathered around Sabrya to check out her Kimichi Mk6 and compare with their Mk4s.

“It’s got everythin’ your suits have, but improved alloys make the Mk6 lighter and stronger. The enhanced nanites are able to repair most suit breaches in a matter of seconds; thrusters and stabilizers like yours but faster for longer with better control.”

“You’ve even got slots for your blades?” Livitre noted.

“A personal mod.” Sabrya demonstrated by extending her gloves through the skin. “The nanites instantly seal around the blades. Along with the bio-metric security, all the limbs are augmented for greater strength and agility, hi-res armpad, upgraded comms and HOD.” She retracted the blades as she finished.

“Why do you need the extra strength?” Livitre asked. “Aren’t you high-G born already super strong?”

“Yep, and now I’m even stronger. Lucky for you guys I’m on your side.”

Everyone split up to don their suits, then used the tried-and-true buddy system to ensure everything was doing what it supposed to do.

Sabrya noted a terse conversation between Drucha and Euloster.

“You two havin’ a tiff? Stow it until after.” Nobo had given her access to the codes to link with the Bravo team members. Once her helmet was on, she activated the link and did her own assessment of the team’s readiness. So far, all was in the green.

The lights overhead flashed the one five-minute warning. Everyone readied themselves and moved towards the hangar doors.

“Here we go, people. The first ship has left the space-dock,” Nobo updated them with the latest intel. “We’re in luck, the second ship is as well!”

Leaving the *Mulan*, team Alpha, followed by Bravo ninety seconds later, pushed lightly from the large opening. The two groups drifted away from the craft, which veered slowly towards the outer edge of the asteroid field a few kilometers distant. The AI would go dormant and await further instructions, or failing that, carry out one of the various options in its programming.

“Schematics are up,” Euloster informed them.

“Right. Bravo team, move out.” With Brutus a couple of meters to her right, Sabrya checked her armpad to see her team moving to their assigned positions as she kicked off. Her suit, tailored for her specifically, floated in a graceful arc towards the ponderously slow rock they’d be using to conceal their presence.

“It’s plain to see you’ve had years of training.” Bairya, slightly less graceful, followed several meters behind.

In her comms she heard muffled swearing. Her armpad indicated one of her team drifting out of position. “Drucha, what the frag are you up to?”

“Got a slight glitch...with my fracking...thrusters!” The distant figure was moving erratically and too fast. “If I...can...reach...” He slowed and stabilized. “Got the fracker!” He was now further out, in a large clear area, parts of his suit reflecting the light from the distant super-giant star, Fury, as he spun around.

“Told you not to muck around with it,” a voice jibed over the comm.

Stupid grunfer shit. Sabrya refrained from berating a team member on-air, but cursed to herself at the amateurish nature some of the crew were showing. “Get it checked.”

Other than Drucha, the green dots on her armpad showed the rest of her team in position, as was Alpha team. After analyzing the movements of the known asteroids, the AI determined the first ship would navigate through this section of the field. Some of the data included in the assessment would be based on the ship’s class and the likely tech that particular ship would be using. The data not included was the ability of the crew, the AI, whether the ship had any mods, and the final departure time. Intelligence from the spacedock was limited.

Essentially it was an estimate, but without knowing all the details, it was the best estimate they could rely on.

Along with everyone else, Sabrya waited. She hated it; being inactive for long periods made her nanites go dormant.

Tucked into the shadow of a large rock, Sabrya slowly rotated to observe the spectacular scenery surrounding her. She might be a fearsome warrior, but she had witnessed—and admired—some of the rarest and exquisite scenery the galaxy had to offer.

But then, she had also seen and experienced things from nightmares.

The *Mulan* was a mere dot now, but she lost sight of it as a large asteroid slowly drifted across her line of sight. Other asteroids, ranging from the size of her helmet to the proportions of large ships, drifted gracefully, and spinning ponderously in their orbits around her much-hated homeworld.

She was fourth-gen, so her denser bone structure and strength were the only things of benefit Grindstone provided. Anything else to do with it only created heartbreak and trauma; raised in the slums of one of the worst pit mines the planet had to offer, the constant distrust and the lack of friends, the death of her Ma and Da, did not create the ideal structure for a wholesome outlook on life.

When her father killed his opponent in a death-match, the opponent's family bribed the guards to beat him up, and record it for their viewing pleasure. She was also to be taken to the sex-shops. Having been taught a few moves, she tried to help fend off the guards, but a twelve-year-old was always going to come off second-best when hit in the spine with a shock-prod.

She'd woken several hours later in chains, in a cage. After a week with no news of her father or mother, she was transported to the spacelift. As it turned out, the vid—like ninety-nine percent of anything at that mine—found its way into the hands of the low-life pit-mine warden Grogan Phipps. He had his talons into everything that could earn a stellar or six.

One of his seedier backers was a talent scout. Impressed with the way she'd fought, Malazi Phakani recruited her with the hopes that with some serious training she'd be good enough for the Surreal Tourney. She rebelled tooth and nail at first, sending some of his security staff to the medbay.

When she became too wild, he gave her an offer she couldn't refuse: do the training to his satisfaction, and he'd allow her to return to Grindstone to seek out the guards responsible for her Da's death—

One of her personal mods immediately shut down her music when receiving an incoming message. The heads-up-display flashed, bringing Sabrya instantly to attention, and she rapidly checked her HOD.

"Bravo, with me." She activated her thrusters and began making her way to the updated intercept point on her screen while Nobo continued talking.

“Remember, watch your speed. Too fast and you’ll either bounce off the ship’s shields or their CIWS will target you as a threat.”

Other than her own, Sabrya counted fourteen clicks of acknowledgement. A quick scan showed her the missing culprit. One of her green dots wasn’t moving. *Fraggin’ Drucha.*

She switched to the channel Bravo was assigned. “Drucha. Get your useless ass into gear.”

“Thrusters offline...”

Thinking of all the things she wanted to say, she snapped off her comm. Better that Drucha stay behind and summon the *Mulan* once the cruisers had jumped. Cursing to herself, she concentrated on the remainder of her team. On her HOD, a line of faint green dots angled towards a point in space where the ship would pass.

She flipped her comms back on. “Don’t bunch up. Too large a groupin’ will show up as an obstacle.” Gradually the dots spread out.

Drucha, now a dim dot almost a click behind, started accelerating and veering erratically. *Idiot.*

One minute he was flying towards them, then he’d spin off on a random trajectory.

If there was one thing she’d give him credit for, he wasn’t continuously bleating about his fragged situation on air.

Her priority at this point was getting her team on the ships, vague grey masses now close enough to make out. To board, the teams would stay close to the projected trajectories and as each vessel neared, would accelerate and match relative speed as they angled closer to the hulls and latched on.

This plan was workable only because of the asteroid field; most civilian and merchant ships lacked the armor plating and heavy-duty shielding of a warship, so had to proceed with utmost caution until clear of the debris. While the medium to large asteroids had been charted for decades—their paths were well-known—a myriad of smaller rocks could cause havoc. Taking time to navigate a safe path through was better than risking obliteration from even a minor hull breach. Many a captain had lost his position when their vessel accumulated too many days in spacedock for repairs.

Several clicks away, the dull gray hull of the first ship slipped through the gaps between the massive rocks. A line of yellow dots towards the edge of her HOD indicated Alpha team was on track to rendezvous with their ship.

Sabrya watched her HOD intently. “Thirty seconds, people. Get ready.” She could feel the nanites energizing; her body tingled.

As they waited for the approaching second ship, a lone figure suddenly burst from the shadow of the asteroid and accelerated across the ship's flight path. No plasma cannon took it out, so either they hadn't noticed, or the sensors didn't take it as a threat. The ship continued.

Fraggin' Drucha!

The wayward suit slammed into one of the many large asteroids.

Drucha's dot on her HOD abruptly went out. At the same time, her faceplate dimmed in response to the intense light from a massive explosion.

"That was no HE explosion," Brutus declared.

"Reaper. Report. What the hell was that?" Nobo demanded.

"Drucha is toast. The asshole brought his fraggin' anti-matter grenades!"

The detonation was sufficient to break open the large rock, sending fragments of every size in all directions. What remained of the original asteroid was bumped off its ponderous course with a slightly increased speed and more spin.

Seconds later, in response to the new expanding debris field, the approaching ship veered to starboard as it took evasive action. Laser fire lanced out to take out some of the shards posing imminent threat.

"Trajectories changed." As Sabrya spoke, static swept her comm and her HOD flickered before resuming. She tapped frantically onto the keypad in the off chance her team's comms were down, though her readouts still indicated the integrity of the other suits was good.

"Do we follow?" Bairya asked, though his signal was scratchy.

"Fraggin' oath we do. I'm not leavin' those workers in the hands of the Imperialist dogs."

Some of her green dots weren't moving fast enough. She ground her teeth and slowed, not risking leaving them behind.

"Make a line. Everyone tether to the suit in front. You've got thirty seconds. If you can't make it, return to the *Mulan*. Bairya, tether to Brutus, Brutus to me."

As she waited impatiently for acknowledgement, she quickly tapped her armpad to recalculate the new rendezvous point. The seconds ticked by.

The ship, initially approaching bow-on, was now showing its port side and angling away. Ten seconds.

The one upside to this dilemma was that the ship slowed, as it was now turning into unknown territory.

Five seconds. Six clicks of acknowledgement.

"Nice and easy, people." She started slowly until the slack of the tether was taken. Any sudden jerks could put a tear in a suit, killing its occupant in seconds.

Her advanced suit was faster and twice as powerful as the Mk4s. Not something she readily disclosed to the others. As each member confirmed their tethers were taut, she gradually increased the speed, knowing that at some stage she'd be towing the lot of them. The Mk6's power supply was also bigger, but she hoped they'd be clamped to the hull before losing too much charge. She felt the strain increase on her belt. Her HOD readout showed she was at 68 percent power. As the other suits gradually matched her speed and the drag on her belt lessened, she increased her velocity incrementally while adjusting her angle to remain on track with the updated flight path. A quick glance behind showed her team spread out at ten-meter intervals; six white shapes diminishing in size with the distance.

“Don't shorten your tethers, leave them as they are. If we bunch up, we might become fraggin' targets.”

Grunting in response to Brutus's wave, she concentrated on the angle and speed of their approach; too fast and the shielding would bounce them, too direct and the Close-In-Weapons-System might deduce them as a threat and start blasting away. Her suit was good, but not enough to withstand direct fire from a ship's plasma cannon.

Her HOD suddenly started flashing and beeping.

The new course of the ship brought it close to another debris field. The plasma cannons were firing at those rocks the AI deemed a threat. Her HOD was registering another debris field ahead.

“Frag me!” Sabrya had about fifteen seconds before rock fragments showered her team. She rapidly but methodically searched the Kimichi Mk6 capabilities and selected the Mimic function. As designated team leader, this allowed her suit to slave compatible suits in range to hers; essentially what she did, they did. “We've got incomin'!” she warned.

Sabrya angled more towards the ship, estimating the ship would see the larger asteroid field in front a greater threat than a slow-moving object on its flank. It was a risk she was willing to take over being peppered with shards of rock at speed.

“Hey. What the drock's happening?” she heard several members query.

“Okay people. We've got this. Let me handle it in silence.” She all but muted their voiced concerns. Her sensors picked up some of the larger approaching rocks. Several of them were twice her size, others fist-sized—definitely something to avoid.

One way or another, it would be over in less than ten seconds.

She increased the speed as best she could, feeling the tension on her belt.

The ship—not as massive as some she had seen—filled the view to her right. At this close range, it looked worse for wear; a real workhorse.

“Aren’t we getting too close?” someone asked.

“That’s the plan.”

“I mean, too quickly.”

“How about shuttin’ the frag up and let me do my job.” Things were happening fast, and she didn’t need the distractions. She trusted her nanites to get her, and therefore her team, through this.

“You’ve done this before?” Bariya asked.

“Of course. Everyone chillax.” She could have sworn she heard Brutus chuckle.

They didn’t need to know she thought boarding a ship as it was navigating through an asteroid belt was a fraggin’ absurd idea.

It was an eerie and uncomfortable sensation, seeing this cloud of spinning, razor sharp shards flash past silently. Her suit pinged as she shot through a cloud of tiny particles. A slight tear appeared along her left arm. The suit’s nanites moved in to repair the breach.

She heard a muted cry. Her orange strobing readout showed her two suits were compromised.

“Phabood, Bairya. Report. Where are you hit?”

“My leg,” Bairya groaned. “Nanites taking care of the rip; autodoc...taking care of the leg. I’ll think I’ll live.”

“Good. And Phabood?” she asked as his readout blinked red. Like the other Mk4s, the suits were geared to take care of the occupant in most expected events. The red light indicated the task was beyond the suit’s abilities.

Activating the slave controls, she began winding in the tethers before and after Phabood.

“Phab’s unconscious. Miemus and Livitre, when you two reach him, see what you can do.”

Just as she said this, they crossed the threshold of the ship’s shielding. “Not fraggin’ soon enough,” she muttered, but relieved the ship’s shields would take care of the bulk of the debris.

Bravo team was now several meters from the hull and approaching quickly. Too quickly for normal reflexes, but her nanites boosted her already augmented body to superhuman speeds.

“Brace yourselves.” Sabrya fired her thrusters, carefully edging closer to the hull. She didn’t want to risk anyone breaking bones or bouncing off. The moment it was within reach, she reached out and used her blades to dig into whatever they could in an effort to secure her team.

“Clamp on and when secure, release tethers,” she ordered, releasing hers from Brutus.

Various acknowledgements came through over the comm.

“Euloster. You need to get your ass up here and earn your keep.”

“We ain’t near the C&C.” Euloster moved up once his tether unhitched.

“Change of plans. Find an access panel and get us inside pronto. There’s a maintenance airlock a few meters below and to my right.”

“More than likely engineering access,” Brutus offered.

“At this stage, I don’t give a frag. Anywhere inside is better than out here.”

“But how far are we from the C&C?” Livitre asked.

“Too far, but on the upside, these debris fields have created a distraction. They’ve got other things to worry about.”

The hacker angled over to what appeared to be an engineering maintenance hatch about ten meters from Sabrya’s position. He hummed a discordant tune as he plugged his armpad into a data port. In less than two minutes the hatch slid open.

“Good work,” Miemus praised, being the closest to the entry point.

Livitre pulled Phabood in as soon as she entered.

“Move in, people.” Sabrya remained outside until everyone had entered. “You too, Euloster,” she said as she popped her head in, seeing some of the crew grouped around the figure on the deck. “How’s Phabood lookin’.”

“I’m starting to organize comms.” Euloster kept his head down, working. “I’ll be in after.”

Sabrya bit off her retort. The maintenance airlock, with its built-in tool chest, was cramped. Probably just as good to leave the hacker outside anyway.

“Don’t take all fraggin’ day.” Sabrya left him and climbed inside.

“He’s not responding,” Miemus said, looking up. Her suit made kneeling awkward beside the body with Livitre on the other side. “We’ll know for sure once the airlock is pressurized.”

“My readin’s say he’s gone. But I wanted to be certain. Grab his ammo. We’ll head forward as soon as the doors open.”

“You’re all heart,” Euloster grunted as the outer door cycled closed.

So used to seeing death and mayhem in the games, Sabrya realized belatedly these people weren’t as accustomed to it as she was. “Phabood was no doubt a great comrade, but he’s gone. Simperin’ over a corpse won’t get the job done. We’ll come back for him once we’re done.”

The light above the door had been red but began blinking green once the air pressure equalised.

Euloster gave them a thumbs-up through the small porthole. “See you on the other side. Comms patching through any sec.”

Again, Sabrya decided to keep her opinion to herself. From early experiences, she'd learnt to despise coders, deciding it had something to do with them being physically inert—all cerebral, her type so physically active.

As soon as the doors cycled open, Brutus stuck his head out to check. The passageway was lit with orange strobing lights. "Air is good. It's all clear," Brutus informed them.

"Are they onto us?" Livitre asked, concerned with the flashing lights.

"No. Standard procedure for action stations—whenever there's any navigational hazard. Like I said, they've got other things to worry about. Stay suited, everyone." Sabrya moved to the front.

"The passage has blast doors at every frame," Brutus informed her. "They're closed because of the threat of decompression. As we approach—assuming pressure on both sides is equal—they should open."

"Automatically?" Bairya asked.

"Yeah. They're not for security specifically, though they can be. We're six frames back from the C&C. Lucky for us this passageway leads almost all the way."

Time was of the essence because they entered further back than planned. With Bairya limping, she would do the recon herself; her suit was geared for it anyway.

"I'll scout ahead. Keep alert, people." Sabrya started moving forward slowly. "Euloster, where're those comms?"

There was no reply, just static. *Fraggin' coders.*

She brought the schematics up on her armpad. Warily, she continued. This was the sort of scenario she had trained for over the years and her nanites were in overdrive. When she checked behind, the rest of Bravo team looked like they were in slow motion. And in her eyes, slow meant dead.

At the five-meter mark, the blast door swiftly rose. She moved through, and it closed just as swiftly once she was clear.

"No readings ahead?" Brutus asked her.

"Nothin' unusual. No threat detected. Move up."

It was a similar process when the group approached.

She continued moving forward until she came to a junction.

"Brutus." Sabrya motioned for him to join her. She had her own ideas but had read it was beneficial to allow the team some input.

Her engineer moved up beside her.

“I reckon the refugees would be in here.” She pointed at her armpad to what appeared to be several large holds within the center of the ship.

“Concur.”

“Wait here for the others.” Sabrya shot forward along the short branching corridor. At the end she adjusted her sensors to detect any indication of life, like heat signatures. From the HOD readings, there was a large mass of warm, motionless forms across the deck.

“Looks like they’re knocked out,” she reported on her return. “A logical step.”

“That’s...awful.” Bairya looked appalled at her words.

“It’s for their own good. Can’t have a couple hundred disgruntled passengers. They could get hurt, or worse, damage somethin’ vital.” Sabrya continued heading towards the C&C, muttering over her shoulder. “At least we know they’re onboard.”

“I wonder how Euloster is?” Miemus asked as Bravo team followed.

“I’m sure he’s fraggin’ busy.” *Fraggin’ coders.*

Beyond the frequent smattering of debris hitting the side of the ship, they could hear more massive objects slamming against the hull, sometimes hard enough to make the deck and bulkheads vibrate. Over the comms, the incomprehensible muttering of several of her crew became more frantic.

“Stay cool, people. You’ll know soon enough if and when there’s a hull breach.”

Moments later they all felt a brief moment of displacement and the strobing lights stabilized.

“See? Problem solved. Reckon we’ve cleared the asteroid field and jumped.”

“C&C is coming up,” Brutus said as they approached another blast door. “At the end of the next section.”

“I’ll check it out.” Sabrya stepped beyond the blast door and moved swiftly ahead.

The door closed as normal, but didn’t open when the remainder of her team approached.

“I can’t pick up anythin’ through the C&C bulkheads,” she reported. “Looks like there’s electro-shieldin’ in place.”

“Sabby, we have a problem here.”

Sabrya came back. The door remained closed, leaving her and the team separated.

“A trap?” Livitre moved up to see if he could hack open the door.

“No doubt. Thought it was too easy. I hate to say it, but I reckon your coder has fragged us.”

At the same time the lights were cut, as was the gravity. Within seconds, helmet lights came on.

The scene through the blast door window would have been comical in any other situation. Her inexperienced team were floundering in the sudden weightlessness.

“Frag it, people. Grab hold of somethin’, orient yourselves to the deck and activate your magboots.” She berated herself for not thinking of telling them from the beginning. “Brutus, check the schematics for anythin’ you can. Lev, keep workin’. Braiya, help him. Meimus, watch your back. See anythin’ come your way, blast it.”

The heavy-set woman turned and brought the BFG to bear, pointing back down the corridor. “Sure? You said not to breach the hull.”

“That was before we were fraggin’ crossed. Just in case, everyone tether to somethin’.”

“What about you?” Brutus asked.

“Me? I’m goin’ to earn my keep.”

A sense of relief ran through her as she turned to consider accessing the C&C. She was not used to leading a team, especially one not tourney-trained and geared for mayhem. Now, unburdened by them, she was free to cut loose.

Sabrya brought up her suit’s weapon inventory and ran through the short list—she hadn’t been able to replenish her armament before taking this “holiday”. She’d have to make do with what she had: one EMP, two HE, two plasma, one stun and several flash grenades.

She activated the launcher. The compact device sprang out of its housing behind her shoulder and she fired the EMP at the blast door. It was capable of taking out the electronics within a five-meter radius. Immediately after, she sent in one of the plasma grenades before kicking off and gliding, swiftly following. If her timing was right, she’d arrive just after the blast that would take out the doors. Any survivors in the immediate area on the other side would be disorientated and easy to take down.

Neither Sabrya’s attack, nor her swiftness, was something they had anticipated. She entered, gliding through the three floundering mercenaries gathered by the door. Killing them would have been outright slaughter, especially using her augmented suit.

With the jump to hyperspace, they had removed their suits, revealing wrinkled and mismatched fatigues.

“Fraggin’ low-life mercs.”

They posed little threat. She retracted her blades and simply rendered them all senseless by smashing their heads against the bulkheads. Turning towards the bridge, she recognized Euloster lurking at the end of the short passage, still suited but no helmet to be seen.

“The only thing worse than fraggin’ coder-scum is a traitorous coder-scum.”

As Sabrya leapt forward, a sudden surge in gravity slowed her down, pulling her to the deck. Protected by the armored suit, she landed heavily and rolled. Grunting with the effort, she strained to get upright. She was born to heavy-G, but this was far more. Even the modified suit struggled to cope with the massive pull.

She climbed to her feet and took a step forward, eyes rivetted on the coder now only a few meters away.

The smug look on his face wavered as she took another step. Frantically, Euloster worked hard on his keypad.

By the time she reached the end of the short passage, she could barely breathe, let alone move.

Euloster looked up, the smirk returning.

“That’s 9Gs. I’m impressed. Any more and the structural integrity of that section would collapse.”

Sabrya saved her breath, straining to lift her arms higher as if reaching for his throat.

He moved closer with confidence, fishing something from his utility belt. “Your fans up there said I couldn’t do it.” He flicked his thumb behind him, towards the bridge. “Can’t wait to show the boys how a *mere* hacker brought down the great Reaper Smith with a keypad.”

“Fraggin’ coders...” Anything after that was lost.

“I’m almost feeling sorry for what they’re going to do with you after they see your role in this. Once I code your suit and its nanites, I’ll control your every move.” He leaned forward and attached a node to her suit.

“Not every fraggin’ move.” Her blades extended swiftly.

He dodged, but not quickly enough; her righthand blades took him in the throat, cheek and right eye.

As he collapsed, his mass pulled her forward. She toppled, landing awkwardly on top of him. Now, partly out of the intense gravity field, she laboriously dragged the rest of her suit off the grid.

After a moment to catch her breath and for her nanites to re-energize, she spied movement. Looking up she saw her team enter, and she waved them to stop before they were crushed.

Sabrya picked up the pad gripped in the coder’s dead hand. Fortunately, though cracked, the screen was still active. It took a few taps on the pad to normalize the gravity field.

“Come through.”

“What happened?” Brutus asked, seeing Euloster’s body.

“I decoded him,” Sabrya quipped. “Liv, the controls for the refugees should be here somewhere. Do what you can, then open a channel to Alpha team.”

“And you?” Brutus asked.

The fighter turned to the bridge. “I’m about to meet some fans.”

“We’ll—”

“It will probably be bloody, but those refugees will need your help more than me.” Sabrya strode forward. “Take the rest of Bravo with you. This won’t take long.”

Brutus paused for only a moment before turning around, taking the other members with him.

As bridges go, she’d seen worse. Nav and Comms to port, Weapons and Engineering to the starboard side. The swirling opalescence of hyperspace filled the screen. Smack in the middle was the occupied CO’s chair. It swiveled at the sound of her boots. The shock on the old man’s face told her he wasn’t expecting to see her.

The other personnel looked at her, their consoles now forgotten. Their uniforms were in better condition, but they were definitely mercs.

She summed the group up as devout Imperialists but with less than Imperial standard haircuts.

“I’ll see you rot on a prison world for this!” the commander blurted in outrage.

“Been there, done that. Even got the tattoo.” She looked at them with disdain. Their side arms would barely scratch her armor. “Do you want this to be bloody, or would you prefer to simply space yourselves?”

“You’re a traitor to the Empire.” The XO found the courage to blurt his indignation.

“There’s no Empire around here. Besides, you think I give a frag about your little empire?”

“We know who you are.” The commander drew his weapon. “Even you can’t hope to succeed.”

“Hope? No. I’m so fraggin’ confident. You lot are all that’s between me and freeing these refugees. And you pose no threat whatsoever. Here, I’ll demonstrate.”

As she strolled over to the commander, he aimed and fired. The occasional hit merely scorched her suit.

Her punch rocked his head back and lifted him off the deck, sending the crumpled body sliding to the feet of the XO.

There was a stunned silence from the remaining bridge staff at seeing their leader dropped so easily.

Sabrya's menacing smile unnerved them. "Run."

Her simple statement was all it took to break them out of their shock. As one, they bolted towards the one doorway, shouldering each other in an effort to escape.

She tutted. "But where will you run to?" she muttered, following. *If only I left the heavy-G on.* She tossed the stun grenade after them.

In the corridor past the C and C, their slumped forms lay sprawled on the deck.

"Prisoners?" Brutus asked.

Sabrya shrugged. "It's a new concept to me. Seal them in the airlock before I change my mind. We'll let Nobo decide." She turned to Levitre. "Speakin' of which, you get through to Alpha?"

"I hear you," Nobo's voice came over their headsets. "We're good. Only the one casualty this end. Sorry to hear about Phabood and Drucha."

"Scratch Euloster too. He fragged us out."

"Seems there was something going on with those two. Mamerke tried too as well. Luckily Thoz sussed him out. Liv has the coordinates for the rendezvous at Waystation 57. See you there and we'll organize the refugees."

#

Several hours later, both cruisers were docked at the waystation and as many medics as possible were on hand to assist with any injuries.

The crew were scattered around one of the station's lounges, talking quietly among themselves, mourning the loss of Phabood—not so much the twins or Drucha.

Nobo was sitting back sipping a glass of dark, bubbly liquid. "Those ships should provide enough stellars to refit the *Mulan* completely as well as taking care of these poor sods." The screen in front of her showed images of the two holds. Medical personnel were sorting through the array of men, women and children, determining their needs.

"What about you, Brutus?"

"This sort of thing isn't for me. I'll find a quiet world, grow food and tinker on whatever ship comes my way."

"You could fit out a good workstation with your share of the takings." Nobo tilted her glass in his direction. "And Reaper will have enough to go wherever she wants, do whatever she wants."

“I doubt it’d be enough for my backers to let me go.” Sabrya toyed with her drink. “Besides, if not for the tourney I’d skewer the first fragger I saw out of sheer boredom. I’ve got the tourney finals comin’ up soon. Let’s see how it goes after that.”

“And your stellars? We did well, so there’ll be a good haul. What do you want done with them?”

As star of the Surreal Tournament, she had never required any wealth. On the rare occasions she ventured into the public eye, everything was simply given to her; sometimes out of admiration, sometimes out of fear.

“Let Brutus hold it for me. Never know when I’ll fraggin’ need it.”

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