



# Angelfyre

## LOST

In a quiet corner of the planet Alerean-6, one would find a curious little mining town known as Fuldarnus. Nothing special, or even futuristic for that matter, just an ordinary, somewhat boring place that doubled as the local cultural dumping site, sporting a beautifully melancholic fusion of colourful but highly questionable bipeds, quadrupeds, and any-other-peds from most of the planets in this corner of the galaxy. The town had a distinctive flavour, grown from a diverse mixture of outstandingly uninteresting alien specimens all trying to get through yet another crappy day on yet another crappy planet. With a regular supply of work in the mining industry just outside of town and the nearby Alern asteroid belt, there was a living to be scraped, so here they were.

If you were to visit such a place, a few hours of general wandering may find you in one of the many large alleyways stashed between the plain square brick-and-mortar buildings making up the town, filled with a curious array of market stands. Assuming you happened to find yourself here at this very moment, standing in the evening downpour and watching the rain warp the holographic stand frontage into a mind-melting array of colours, you may be lucky enough to spot a hooded humanoid figure arguing with a less-humanoid counterpart. As you observe the rather entertaining exchange of words that are best not described here, the voice emanating from the hooded figure may suggest that this is, in fact, a young human woman. But a glint of bright colour from her eyes as she affords you a fleeting glance might make you doubt this assertion. In fact, we can see the curiosity getting the better of you. We see the suspicion that there is more to this person than meets the eye. And indeed, you can be forgiven, for this unassuming individual has an incredibly fascinating story to tell. So let us begin her journey.

The humanoid concludes her altercation with the stall owner with an obscenely animated gesture before spinning around and winding down the row of market stands and out of the alley. Entering the main stretch, the figure darts down the street before entering a busy corner café and promptly slumping onto a stool by the bar.

Next to her was a very solid human by the name of Elissa Hart, a rather large and hardened character with short, wiry grey hair, not unlike the sort you might find working in the local butchery. She sported a rough ensemble of leather pants, a loose shirt, ragged jacket, and a hat that could have once belonged to an archaeologist but now wanted nothing else but to be left alone to self-

destruct in peace after years of being kept alive against its will. Elissa fancied herself a cunning trader of rare and exotic items, and just so happened to be minding her own business by the bar when she was interrupted by the newcomer.

“He says the Curivil traders won’t give it back.”

Elissa looks down at the small yellow puddle at the bottom of her glass and chuckles.

“Forget about it, Casey. You really shouldn’t have expected much out of that scum. He played you for an idiot. You should’ve seen it coming.”

“That was our best shot. What was I supposed to do?”

Elissa turns the glass in her hands.

“Risk is part of the game. But you have to judge the players more carefully. Never you mind about this one, we can always try again.”

“Damn it. Why should we keep letting them get away with it?”

“Trust me, my girl, you don’t want to risk getting entangled with the wrong people. And that little twerp is clearly classified as wrong people.”

She lays a hand on Casey’s wet shoulder.

“Good idea to use a bit more common-sense next time.”

Casey removes her hood and glares at her.

Any normal person from 21<sup>st</sup> century earth looking Casey in the face would have had a hard time comprehending what it was they were looking at. Of course, Elissa, and everyone else in the same century, for that matter, knew exactly what it was they were looking at, and it just so happened that this was pretty normal for what it was at that.

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Surely by now you must have figured this story takes place in the future. It is a time when, against all logic, a seemingly vacuous bunch of Terran bipeds inhabiting some poor little blue world orbiting a G2V star somewhere had miraculously survived a carbon party so wild that it came dangerously close to sending their rock into planetary liver failure. But it was the perfection of superluminal drive technology that gave these humans the excuse they finally needed to get out and seek a better life in the greener, starry pastures of the Milky Way galaxy. Curiously enough, it turned out that this superluminal tech was a massive improvement to the other highly questionable forms of interstellar travel in use by other civilizations at the time, fast becoming the de facto form of light-year space travel for those that preferred to reach their destination before their great grandchildren did. But no sooner had humanity finally settled on their first extra-solar planet than did a bunch of passing alien pricks, lovingly known as the Traxens, consider this a prime opportunity to do some Terran bashing. Taking the tried and tested approach of the classic species smash and planet grab, this misguided

view was quickly corrected when the Traxens unwittingly discovered the human's knack for exceptional military tactic.

It was after this essential course-correction to the Traxen philosophy and settling on a nearby system that the humans met what would become their closest extra-terrestrial allies: the Fel. Humans and Fel got on like a planet on fire, since... well... they both almost set their planets on fire. The Fel were the classic humanoid: two arms, two legs, hands, feet, one head, you know the deal. They were notably more heavily built than humans, towering over the typical Terran with their muscular blue-grey skin. Their heads were noticeably flat on the top with not a single hair, but otherwise the usual one mouth, one chin, two ears sort of thing. But their eyes were where things went slightly off the rails. Although only a touch larger than one might expect, their irises were enormous and insanely colourful. And, as if their social lives weren't interesting enough as it was, the assortment of colours in their eyes changed drastically depending on their mood, which sucked for them when humans taught them fun pastimes such as gambling and poker.

Looking back at Casey, one might not help but notice that she was your typical, garden variety 17-year-old human girl. A fairly attractive one at that, slim with short dark hair, and all the usual human accessories in the right amounts. But one might also notice the optional extra that this teenage model shipped with: the large, colourful, mood changing irises of the Fel. Not completely human then.

No one really knew how her kind came to exist, apart from the fact that about 17 or 18 years earlier several human couples mysteriously gave birth to them. While the exact reasons this happened was still very much a mystery amongst the general population, many believed that they were genetically created, since humans and Fel were not, in even the remotest of ways, sexually compatible, and every one of their parents was completely human.

The felsians, as they became known, were quite an attractive lot, a hybrid of the best human and Fel traits. Since any genetic splicing or unnatural hybridization of sentient alien species was strictly prohibited, and most just felt uneasy when they were around the place, felsians were considered outcasts and not well regarded by many humans. Felsians were always cautious in the wild and did their utmost to avoid any unnecessary attention by way of special glasses or contact lenses.

Fortunately for Casey and the other felsians living there, Fuldarnus was a town that, quite frankly, didn't care about all this nonsense as time is better spent making a buck or two. Casey was a particularly resolute humanoid that fought her way through life like most other felsians, something that kept her going strong even after losing her parents when she could barely walk. Elissa used to do business with Casey's father back in the day, and although she never had kids of her own, she developed a small attachment to his daughter. Elissa was a garden variety human that had about as much experience with raising a felsian child as a construction crane had with raising a giraffe. Nevertheless, she seized the challenge after the death of Casey's parents, treating her more like a grown adult, something that should be able to deal with its own problems, with the notion that it is a hard world for a felsian and Casey needs to be hardened appropriately to deal with it.

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"Common sense?!"

Those big, unimpressed eyes of Casey do little to hide her annoyance. She retreats, throws back her head and stares at the ceiling.

“This sucks.”

Elissa downs the last of her drink and launches off the stool.

“Cheer up. Could be worse. They could be wearing those pretty little eyes of yours for earrings. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Casey swings off her stool and follows Elissa out of the café and into the street. The rain had subsided by now, with a few small muddy rivers in the street dealing with some unfinished business before retreating into the gutters for the night.

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The morning followed like most mornings do, and in Elissa’s world, this meant another opportunity to trade some wares and sort some stores. Elissa had many storerooms scattered about in hidden places around the town with a plethora of goods that many a law enforcement official would be eternally grateful to have a closer look at. Casey’s typical daily routine involved moving items between stores or, occasionally, dealers. It was a spectacularly boring life, but then again, Fuldarnus was where spectacularly boring was invented, and it absolutely excelled in it. Everyone and everything that lived there did so to make ends meet, period. They kept their dreams safely stashed away in a small, dusty, rarely used box in the corner of the cupboard. Not having much in the way of a personal life while constantly dealing with the more nefarious types on a daily basis tended to eat away at Casey’s sociability. All her childhood friends were gone, most having moved away to other towns in search of a more fulfilling life. Casey had no one except for Elissa. But unlike most other specimens found in this universe, she was driven by purpose. It might not have always seemed it, but she always put purpose above hope, and this was something that kept her strong over the years. It’s not that she resigned herself to the less-than-exciting dead-end life of the artefact profession, but rather that she knew exactly what had to be done and did it. File *Hope* away in the folder labelled *Nice* and do what needs to be done, regardless.

Despite Casey’s impressive determination for execution, she could feel the void inside her soul, that stubborn emptiness that refused to be filled. Sometimes it would creep up and make her day miserable, plaguing her seemingly at random. Some days would be good, some better, some not so much. The result was a constant barrage of unpredictable mood swings that seemed specifically designed to make her life more interesting than it really needed to be. But the thing that would really get her grinder going were the less considerate specimens of the planet. Casey was the type that fervently disapproved of bullies of any shape and size, a typical fed up felsian response given they were not the most well treated species in this particular day and age. Seeing another at the perils of the budding wannabe tyrant would send Casey charging in with little consideration of the potential facial aftermath that inevitably ensues. Although this did little to impress Elissa, it usually resulted in a stern word of warning rather than a full-blown lecture on how disappointed she was that Casey wasn’t a good little girl. Elissa may have been tough on her, but she gave Casey more respect than most parents would.

Although most of Casey's life was otherwise consumed by daily errands and routines, like any other intellectually evolved biped, she needed the occasional escape. She would always find some spare time to spend at one of her many special places. Her favourite was on an old, abandoned military laser comms relay tower near the end of town. It was taller than anything else in Fuldarnus, offering a spectacular view of the surrounding farms, fields, mines, and, on clear days, the distant mountain ranges. She would often climb up the old rusty access ladders to a service platform near the top to watch the sun set. With such an incredible view, her imagination would flex its wings and fly to faraway places. On some days during the autumn months, when thick banks of low-lying fog would roll in, she would feel like she was flying high above the clouds. It was something she dreamed about regularly - flying up into the air, soaring over the mountains, escaping it all. The tantalizing taste of breaking free from the system. She wondered what it might be like, but being the realist that she was, she knew full well it was something that would remain forever locked inside her imagination.

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The sun, known in these parts as Alern Alpha, tries with unenthusiastic resolve to haul itself up from the horizon as yet another boring day yawns itself into existence. Casey had woken up with her mood barometer somewhere between *RAIN* and *STORMY* and was spending the morning diligently helping Elissa organise boxes of fascinatingly uninteresting bits in one of the small storerooms in the basement of their home. Elissa always endeavoured to keep such spaces within their home free of anything considered legally dubious should an officer of the law decide to pop in for a quick and friendly nosing around.

Casey stares the collection of strange items scattered around her, then reaches over and pulls a dusty cover off a large metal ornament.

"What exactly are we looking for again?"

Elissa was in the middle of a pile of open crates on the one side of the room.

"That sporgen thing I picked up some time ago. There's a Goran trader with a piece of tech that I need for an upcoming deal, but he wants one of those in exchange."

"What exactly is a sporgen?"

Elissa opens another crate and squints into it.

"No idea. Thought it was some kind of ceremonial thing, but it sounds like it is a piece of forgotten tech. The Goran black market is full of that sort of thing."

Casey sighs, pulls out another dusty box from under a cabinet and yanks out an oddly shaped round object.

"Like this?"

Elissa looks up.

"Nah, it's like a tall cylinder with round thingies off the sides."

“Tall cylinder with round thingies off the sides. But of course it is.”

Elissa kicks over another box, sending an army of small round objects scurrying across the floor in all directions.

“Ha! There’s the little sod!”

She lifts the object in her hands triumphantly. Casey looks at it in bewilderment.

“That’s it?! Thought it was supposed to be some fancy tech thingy.”

Elissa dusts off the artefact and heads to the staircase.

“Well, it is of no matter to me as long as I can trade it. I’m going to get this cleaned up. Pack some clothes in the meantime. We need to get to that trader before he changes his mind.”

Casey sags, rolls her eyes, and moans quietly to herself.

“What is she on now? Seriously, it’s always, ‘Drop everything and shoot off to some trader’ or something.”

She resigns herself to the reality of Elissa’s spontaneous world and skulks back up the staircase.

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An hour later, they made their way into the top hangar bay where Elissa’s rickety old space hopper was parked. It was common to have a hangar bay on the tops of buildings these days, considering the primary mode of transport could usually fly. Some hangars had fancy roofs that slid open to make take-off and landing a bit easier. The one adorning this particular building had no such feature, instead sporting a rather normal-looking front garage door. Of course, if a normal 21<sup>st</sup> century earth car was to pull out of this particular garage, it would promptly find itself enjoying subterranean life beneath the pavement some 20 meters below. Even with more modern transport arrangements, this hangar design still promised a fun time for the whole family, especially when dad accidentally catches the port thrust assembly on one of the support purlins and promptly deposits the entire thing into the room below. Fortunately, Elissa was an old-fashioned woman and liked old-fashioned things like hangars with front openings, which offered little challenge to her spaciouly challenged spacecraft as it lumbered out and upward.

Elissa glares at the instrument screen.

“This damn thing drinks too much. Thought that fuel pod would last until next week.”

Sitting silently next to her, Casey stares out the side window. The little craft tilts up and gains speed as it climbs, zipping upwards ever faster as the atmosphere gradually thins out. Elissa grins and gives the instrument console a hearty slap.

“That’s it. Once the old girl hits max q, we’re all good.”

The last wisps of cloud disappear below them and the blue parts way to a dark and busy starry sight. Casey stares out the window at the curiously diverse collection of orbiting mechanical behemoths typically used for asteroid mining sitting amongst a swarm of smaller ships. They approach an enormous cylindrical vessel over 800 metres across, with huge rings around its port and aft sections. Elissa comes about, heading toward a large door on its starboard side and slowing near the entrance.

“Managed to scrounge a one-way ticket just yesterday. Better be legit.”

Casey frowns at her.

“What do you mean, ‘legit’?”

Elissa ignores her, slowly bringing her little spaceship through the hangar door. She looks up and glares at a display panel above her that lights up red and fills with some symbols, appearing to politely inform the occupant to kindly go away.

“Come on, damn it.”

She slaps the display console a few times, then stares straight ahead and grinds her teeth. After about 20 seconds of awkward silence, the display makes a small jingle as it flips to a far friendlier colour. Elissa’s expression doesn’t change as she pushes the little craft through the door into the large ship.

“Would’ve had words with that slimy toad. Lucky.”

Casey considers this comment best left alone and sits quietly to herself.

Inside the enormous vessel, at least a few dozen other smaller ships were all parked in their own little bay. It was painfully obvious that someone had been absolutely determined to squeeze in as much parking as possible throughout the entire volume of the ship, the eye-watering array of platforms and cables giving the impression of what a high-speed collision between several suspension bridges inside a large cave might look like.

Elissa looks at the screen above her.

“Bay E9-12-C-4. Where in the hell?”

Casey leans forward, looks up and points.

“There. Below that Scarmen cargo ship.”

Elissa brings her little ship up to the platform, promptly swinging it around and carefully reversing it in. Two arms extend out, latch onto the craft, and pull it into the bay before locking it down. Elissa flicks a few switches and fingers a few symbols on an instrument panel screen, looking up as the engines spool down to a halt with an unnervingly loud mechanical clank.

“I am going to pretend I did not hear that.”

“Think it’s time you got a new one.”

Elissa smiles enthusiastically.

“She got us here, didn’t she? Come on, let’s have some lunch.”

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The rather large ship that Elissa and Casey found themselves in was a superluminal, or SL, carrier. Since superluminal drives were notoriously big and expensive to run, the only real way for smaller ships to move around the galaxy was to pick up a ticket and hitch a ride on one. SL carriers ran along designated SL carrier lines between certain systems, which would eventually loop back round again, kind of like an intra-galactic railway of sorts. And just like a typical railway, getting to any given system would require a few stops. The lines usually serviced the prime planets, the administrative capitals of their respective systems. Watching any SL ship launch was quite something, for about a second or so at least.

As the huge carrier winds up her SL nacelles, the two large rings on the port and aft sections, a red and white glow slowly covers the ship. Relative to the casual viewer, anything sitting behind the ship would appear like it was being slowly but lovingly melted with a large blowtorch as light folds around the hull. Then, in an instant, a blinding white flash is accompanied by rippling waves of colour as light tries to figure out where the hell that gigantic ship that was just here a moment ago went.

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The Solfarnen System was only three SL stops away from the Alerean System. After a seven-hour trip, the carrier drops out of SL at its final destination. Elissa fires up the engines of her little hopper, detaches from the dock and joins the queue exiting the carrier. As they make their way outside, Casey stares at the large brown and green planet called Kustogus as it sits lazily amongst three very large, overpopulated moons, each with its own swarm of small, busy ships.

“So how much further?”

“We’ll need to get some clearance and fuel pods at the moon, Kustogus-C, so we can access the forest hemisphere of Kustogus. He should be there, if he is by his word, which may be a stretch.”

Casey was well on her way to having second thoughts. But then again, Elissa was always a touch weird in her ways, and doubly so in her responses. This time was no different, and there was no real point in trying to convince her otherwise.

She sighs deeply at the thought of impending boredom on yet another trip more drawn out than it could have been. Best to put up with it a little while longer.

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The moon below was covered in impressively massive, pressurised structures housing its various buildings. Elissa manages to land the rickety little space hopper with surprising grace into one of the



many visitor hangars near the Goran Home Sector Administration Buildings. After the hangar pressurises, Elissa turns to Casey as they climb out.

“Right, I might be a while in there. Gorans are a bunch of bureaucrats if there ever were, so I don’t expect it will be quick.”

She passes a wad of red bills to Casey.

“This should be enough to purchase at least four fuel pods. That should be able to get us to where we need to be.”

She pulls a small data tablet from her pocket and hands it over.

“Directions. On there. A shortcut under ‘Fuel’. It should tell you where to go. Ask them to do an onsite refuel.”

“Wash the windscreen too?”

Elissa ignores this.

“See you back here in an hour. I hope.”

Elissa marches out of the little hangar with a light bounce in her step.

Since Kustogus-C was a moon smaller than your typical day-to-day planet, its lower gravity meant that such behaviour should not be unexpected. This was especially amusing with a stockily built character like Elissa making her way like she was trying to walk over a bouncing castle.

Casey stares at the bills in her hand, sighs, and pockets them somewhere in the depths of her jacket. Her general appearance might incline one to say that she was part of a stylistically dissident rebel group. This was not by choice but necessity. As Elissa had put it, to be unnoticed these days is the best option for a felsian. The unfortunate result was that it detracted considerably from her otherwise attractive face and figure. She pulls out a pair of obnoxious sunglasses to cover her eyes, a completely unnecessary precaution in such a dimly lit structure, and walks quietly and carefully out of the hangar, down a promenade and into the busy streets full of bouncing alienoids below.

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Just over an hour passes and Elissa half-walks, half-bounces out of the administration building with a large folder full of documents. She steadies herself on her space hopper and stares in annoyance at the Casey-less hangar.

“Damn that child. Be the death of me.”

She yanks open the hopper’s door, throws the files into the back and pulls herself into the cockpit. She punches a few icons on the comms screen, flips a switch, and a speaker crackles to life.

“Casey, where the hell are you? Why haven’t you done the damn fuel pods yet?”

Nothing but the quiet crackling of the speakers occupies the moment.

“Casey?!”

A few seconds later, the passenger door flings open and Casey swings herself into the hopper. Elissa glares at her.

“Where the hell were you? Why are we not fuelled up?”

Casey leans over and prods an icon on the navigation screen. The image on the screen flickers to reveal four completely lit fuel gauges. Elissa grunts under her breath, a universal sign dedicated to the acknowledgement of smartasses everywhere.

“Fine. Let’s just get out of here.”

The hopper lifts off and flies out through the hangar bay doors and into the black of space. Casey pulls a packet from her pocket and empties its sole content into her hands. Elissa turns to look.

“What did you waste money on this time?”

Casey picks up the small sparkling gem and holds it up.

“Some trader says these diamonds are special. They’re from earth, apparently.”

“Probably one of those grown things. Natural earth diamonds are stupid rare these days, humans dug ‘em all out centuries ago. If it was real, it’d be beyond the spare change you had from those fuel pods.”

Casey examines the gem carefully.

“It doesn’t matter. I still think it’s beautiful, even if it’s artificial.”

She stows the gem back into its bag and places it in her pocket. Elissa nods, pushes the throttle lever forward and her little space hopper zips toward Kustogus.

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The round planet grows until its horizon flattens out. The hopper slowly descends into the atmosphere, Elissa grabbing a belt from the top of her chair and strapping herself in.

“Better tighten that buckle for this one. This rock’s got weather with a bad attitude.”

Casey pulls down on the belt and locks it into the side of her seat. The hopper vibrates and jerks suddenly to the side, reeling upwards and tumbling sideways before finally righting itself as Elissa pulls hard on the flight stick.

“Damn this planet. Nice little bumper we had there, eh?”

She glances at Casey, firmly lodged in the corner with her hands and feet wedged against the console and roof, her expression not dissimilar to that of a sky diver that had just realized that parachutes work best when put on before jumping out of the plane. Elissa bursts out laughing.

“Little jolt not gonna get to ya’ now, is it?”

She pushes the stick forward and the hopper suddenly drops. Casey rolls her eyes, her stomach clearly having none of it, leaning forward as it unburdens itself of its contents. Elissa considers this course of action anything but of high regard.

“You gonna clean that up when we get there.”

The hopper bashes around for a bit before clearing the cloud layer. Everything suddenly calms, with only the clanky engines left to provide audible entertainment for the ears. Casey pulls herself upright.

“Please tell me we’re there.”

“We’re there, Pumpkin. The lower atmosphere is dead still today. We’re lucky.”

The landscape opens up below them to reveal a vast expanse of trees, rivers and lakes. Elissa leans forward and looks carefully out the front window.

“This place is mostly a planetary reserve, so only a few small settlements here and there. Enforcement officials rarely come out here, except for poachers. Lots of places to hide otherwise questionable business practices. My kind of place.”

The hopper glides gently along a green valley, passing through small clouds of mist clinging to the forest below. Casey stares out of the window in awe, her uncomfortable introduction to *A Practical Guide to Suicidal Spacecraft Piloting* long forgotten. Elissa turns and looks out the side window.

“Knew you would like this place. Was last here when your parents were still around. We’ll be there shortly.”

The valley opens into a small plain with a large lake in its centre, a small settlement glittering momentarily in a ray of passing sunlight. Elissa swings the hopper around and brings it down on a landing pad with a bit more enthusiasm than intended.

“Sorry. The old girl is a touch tired after all the fun, clearly. Atmospheric pressure is lower than normal here, but I set this bucket to deco on the way in. We’ll be at pressure by now.”

Elissa carefully opens the door, and a brief rush of air is accompanied by a loud pop in their ears. Elissa frowns and taps a gauge on her console.

“Well, almost. We should be good.”

Casey, not entirely convinced, grabs her forehead in a panic. Elissa grabs her head, pulls it up and stares at her eyes.

“You’re fine, no blood spots. Let’s go.”

Casey falls back into her seat as Elissa releases her head and jumps out of the hopper. With all the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old going to the dentist, Casey opens the door and climbs out before catching up to Elissa as she heads into a small building on the edge of the pad. Inside, Elissa places the pile of documents onto the desk of a waiting administration official, who promptly picks them up for examination. He was your typical Goran - short, round, and reddish-brown like a caramelized snowman.

“Ah, yes... well... hmm... yes... right...”

He carefully flips through the pages, then looks up.

“Okay. Seems to be in order. Welcome to the forest hemisphere reserve of Kustogus. How long do you expect your wildlife research trip to take?”

Elissa stomps on Casey’s foot just as she manages the words, “Research tri...?”, then looks back at the official with a pleasant smile.

“Just a day or two. Just checking some image traps in the nearby Guranti Swamps and we will be on our way.”

The official hands the papers back to Elissa.

“Well, good then. I wish you the best of luck. Those swamps are nasty work. Tell you what, if you need an extra day, don’t sweat it.”

Elissa gives the official a bright smile.

“Very kind, thank you. Come Casey.”

Casey trudges along behind Elissa as she leaves the building and follows a small road to the edge of the settlement. Elissa gestures to the forest ahead.

“It’s a half day walk from here. Can’t risk using a vehicle or we might be spotted. The Goran trader I am meeting is very skittish, doesn’t take much to scare him off. You up for it?”

Casey stares disapprovingly at the path leading out of the town and into the forest and sighs.

“What choice do I have? Someone’s gotta look after you if you get in trouble.”

“That’s my girl. Let’s do this.”

They both set off down the winding path and disappear into the depths of the forest canopy.

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Casey's enthusiasm for the small ad hoc adventure began to wear thin by about the time she got out of bed the previous morning. By now, that enthusiasm was in need of some serious maintenance lest its occupant was to fall straight through it.

The pair had long left the winding open road and were having trouble finding their way through some rather thickly overgrown brush. Elissa was not the type to give up easily, and despite Casey's own tenacity for getting things done, it was not a trait that was particularly cherished at this moment. Right now, a warm bed with a book from one of Elissa's more enigmatic literary collections sounded like a course of action that would immediately solve all her imminent problems. Unfortunately, that solution was several light years, a few uncomfortable hopper excursions, and one old and determined artefact trader away.

Elissa pushes aside another bush and suddenly bursts out.

"Ha! Knew it was here! Come on, Casey. Almost there."

Casey follows, now baring the appearance and enthusiasm of an underpaid housekeeper that had just fallen into the garden refuse compactor. They follow a narrow path winding between the trees and stop outside a small dumpy looking shack, a sight that did not serve any better to impress Casey than an outhouse would a starship engineer. Elissa hammers heavily on the rickety front door.

One could not help but notice a very faint yelp emanating from somewhere below their feet, which Casey found rather odd. A few seconds later, this was accompanied by a small thud, which then invited a few louder crashes to the party. The door eventually cracked open to reveal a rather short and fat Goran. His grubby appearance, pale round face, narrow eyes and thin spectacles suggested he was clearly not entertained by thoughts of spending any time outside in the fresh air. Or in the company of any other living thing, for that matter, as the smell proved to be such an effective deterrent that it even helped keep the swamp polygators away.

He looks up at the enormous woman towering over him and swallows heavily.

"Er... I... Yes? Hello."

Elissa looks down at the little round figure.

"Yes, hello! You Stopen? I'm Elissa. I contacted you regarding the ..."

She coughs, glances to the side, and lowers her voice.

"... artefact."

Stopen squints for a moment. Considering his eyes were thin to begin with, this left his face with two perfectly straight horizontal slits just below his bushy eyebrows, giving one the impression he was either an organic slot machine or snowman-shaped dual-action parking meter. He adjusts his glasses.

"Er... Ah!"

He leans out the door to look at Casey.

“She with you? Wasn’t expecting another.”

Elissa glances at Casey.

“My daughter. Will take over the business one day, so showing her the ropes.”

“Er... Right. Must be careful, risky business this is. Well then, do... do come in.”

He pulls the door open, which nearly removes itself from its hinges, and gestures them inside before glancing around quickly and carefully placing it back into its frame.

The inside of the shack was filled with a dusty collection of old boxes in random stacks about the room. A small fire was keeping itself busy in a fireplace next to what looked like a small kitchenette filled with a pile of moulding dishes. The smell was of a character and bouquet best left to itself in a lead-lined container buried 20 kilometres under a mountain. Casey was having a bit of a hard time with it, since her sense of smell was ever so slightly more sensitive than that of your average human. From years of dealing with traders with clearly less than ideal education in the hygiene disciplines, even the most determined of nasal offensives were lost on Elissa.

“You have it?”

Stopen fiddles nervously in his top pocket.

“Er... Yes... Well... No. Um...”

This does little to elicit a favourable response from Elissa.

“What do you mean, no? Do you have it or not? We came a hell of a long way for this thing. Don’t mess me around now.”

A look of mild panic crosses Stopen’s face.

“Well, you see, the thing is... I never actually had the artefact. I mean, I sourced and paid for it from one of my usual supply chains, but it never arrived.”

Elissa eyes him critically, considerably unentertained by his response.

“So, let me get this straight. You said you had it, but you didn’t have it, and never had it, but said you had it?”

Stopen’s expression turns wooden.

“Well... er... this is usually how I do business. Thought you knew that. Sorry. Maybe we can make some other arrangement?”

While all this was unfolding, Casey was poking around the various old dusty boxes filled with many weird and unrecognizable things scattered within their depths to provide some relief to her

worsening condition of acute boredom. What struck her as odd was the impression that neither the boxes nor their contents had been touched in years. Something didn't quite add up here, but surely Elissa, with her years dealing with the less than stellar types of the galaxy, was a better judge of scummy black-market character than this.

She notices Stopen retreating to the corner of a very dusty bookshelf and reaching somewhere behind it. The shelf suddenly slides back and a hatch opens in the floor, revealing a spotlessly clean and well-lit staircase disappearing into the depths. Stopen makes his way down and beckons them to follow. Below, they found themselves in an enormous storeroom. In contrast to the small and slowly self-destructing spectacle above, this was a vast and immaculately maintained space filled with rows upon rows of carefully arranged shelves, the contents of which were meticulously organized into a plethora of boxes, enclosures and crates, all neatly packed and labelled.

Stopen briefly glances at a few broken crates in the corner of the room, some of their contents strewn about.

"Sorry about that. Gave me a fright when you knocked. Was busy repacking a few odd items."

Elissa and Stopen amble down an aisle as Casey looks about in amazement. She notices something, like a flat, dark blue stone covered in faint markings, lying on the floor near one of the broken crates. She walks over and carefully picks it up. It had a slight glossy tint, and one could just barely make out some intricate patterns below its slightly transparent surface.

Stopen reappears near the entrance of another aisle.

"Ah, yes. Interesting artefact, that. Actually, not sure what it is."

He walks over and examines the object in her hands while adjusting his glasses.

"It came with a crate of goods I secured from another trader. He had no luck offloading any of this stuff, so I got it all for a bargain."

Casey gently turns the stone-like object in her hands. It was surprisingly light and felt like polished glass. Elissa emerges from another aisle and makes her way to the ad hoc gathering near the broken crates.

"What are you two up to?"

She looks down at the object in Casey's hands.

"Still have a good eye for worthless things, I see."

By now it should be blatantly apparent that Elissa had little in the way of eyes for glittery, shiny, pretty, or anything filed under the same category, for that matter. She traded in hard goods that earned hard cash. Whether it was nice and sparkly or closer to a lump of mud, it made no difference provided it paid the bills.

Casey looks up at Elissa, a few sparkles drifting through her puppy dog eyes.

“Can we buy it?”

Elissa considers this, then turns to Stopen.

“You know, I do think Casey deserves a little something for putting up with this miserable excuse for a business transaction. So what do you want for it?”

“Well, haven’t had a chance to get it appraised properly yet. I would consider it a fair deal for about 200 SCUs.”

Elissa scratches her chin while giving him a highly concerned, bordering on annoyed look.

“Stopen, we dragged ourselves out here to the middle of nowhere to buy an artefact that does not actually exist in your collection. I’m not really certain if this business transaction, or any future transaction for that matter, is salvageable. Perhaps you should consider some form of compensation as a gesture of good will in the spirit of maintaining our professional relationship?”

Stopen’s face wrinkles as he processes this, his head momentarily looking like it had just spent two years too long in a hot bath.

“Ah... Ok. Yes. Very well. No problem. Right.”

Elissa puts her hand on Stopen’s shoulder and leans into his face.

“So, are we good?”

Stopen was clearly having difficulty with this, considering Goran traders are not ones to easily part with anything without an agreed exchange of services. The concept of *gesture of good will* was quite lost on them. Being a rather large and intimidating woman, Elissa was quite persuasive when she wanted to be. Stopen carefully calculated any one of numerous outcomes should Elissa not be entirely satisfied with his reply. In his mind, there was a good chance that almost all of these would certainly involve not being able to eat anything particularly solid for a few days.

He eventually comes to a conclusion and looks up at the two with a pained expression.

“Right then. Please accept it in the hopes we shall do some real business in the near future.”

Elissa slaps him hard on the back and smiles brightly.

“There! Will be my pleasure to do business again.”

Stopen thought on this, wondering how business could be done again when it was never done in the first place.

“Glad to hear it. If there is nothing else, shall we make our way back up?”

Casey follows the two up the stairs, intently examining the new artefact in her possession.



Stopen yanks open the front door in annoyance, prompting the door to conclude it would be better on top of him instead of on its hinges. Elissa bursts out laughing, pulling aside the old wooden door and helping the agitated Goran to his feet. Stopen ushers them out, picks up the door, and gives them one last glare goodbye before slamming the door into its frame, only to have it collapse back into the shack again. Stopen stares silently out of the stubborn opening for a moment before quietly walking down the stairs and out of sight.

Elissa turns to Casey with a grin.

“So that was a bust. I’m really sorry. Hope that makes up for it.”

Casey gives her a pleasant smile, a rare celestial event that takes Elissa a bit by surprise. The pair make their way to the forest road and eventually find their way back to the hopper. Casey opens her door, her smile promptly disappearing. Elissa hauls herself into the cockpit and looks down at the floor below Casey’s seat.

“Oh yes, don’t forget about that now.”

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The ride back home felt brief.

Elissa carefully navigates the old rickety hopper in through the front of the hangar on the roof, and after a few colourful swear words, manages to park without instituting a rapid unscheduled disassembly of the building below. A short while later, after making their way back down into the living area, Elissa walks over to Casey, who was still staring at the freshly acquired round stone.

“You seem quite fond of that. Glad to see it. Doesn’t look like much, but maybe it will bring you some good fortune. Why don’t I make that into a necklace for you? I can whip something up in a jiffy, if you wish.”

Casey smiles and hands her the stone.

“I’d like that very much, thank you.”

Elissa enjoyed these rather rare moments when Casey behaved more like a daughter than an employee. She makes her way down to her workshop, a small room with a wooden bench and some tools hanging overhead. She clamps the stone into a vice and pulls a small portable drill from under the bench, powers it up and carefully tries to drill a small hole. The stone did not appear to enjoy this, flatly refusing to entertain the drill bit any further. In fact, much to Elissa’s surprise, the drill left not so much as a scratch on it. She considers this for a moment before muttering to herself.

“Maybe that Goran was right. This drill bit should go through anything. This thing is ridiculously hard and resilient for its weight, probably worth a bit.”

She places the drill back under the table and pulls out a jar full of woven coloured strands. She carefully weaves the pieces together, toiling away under the dim yellow light hanging above her workbench.

Casey was well advanced in her mission to demolish a Storen Leaf pickle sandwich in the kitchen when Elissa emerged from the workshop. She walks over and dangles the necklace in front of her. Around the edge of the stone an intricate woven pattern of strands held it in place.

“Used to do this sort of stuff when I was a youngen. Haven’t had time for it in many years, but I think I still got the knack.”

Casey nearly chokes, dropping the sandwich on the table and carefully taking the necklace. She caresses it with her fingers before looking up at Elissa with a fierce explosion of colour in her eyes.

“Thank you!”

She jumps up and tightly embraces Elissa, yet another rare event that takes Elissa completely off guard. She relaxes and puts her arm around Casey.

“I’m glad the trip was at least worth something, Pumpkin.”

Casey slowly strings the necklace around her neck and weighs its special passenger in her hands. Elissa smiles and gives herself a mental pat on the back for a solid effort of good parenting.

“Let’s finish this day with a drink down at the pub. Well, for me anyway. If you want to join, they still serve freshly squeezed Nurchin juice.”

Elissa had been very strict in not allowing Casey any opportunity to taste anything alcoholic, a habit from growing up in the shadow of an abusive alcoholic father that made her particularly cautious to ensure her teenage charge did not end up the same way.

“Thank you, but I am exhausted. Think I’ll turn in for the night.”

Elissa grabs her coat.

“I’m sure you must be. See you in the morning then.”

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The next day followed with all the vigour and intently patriotic style of every single day before it, ensuring the universal continuum of just another crappy day in just another crappy town remained unbroken. Casey had been running the usual errands for Elissa for most of the morning, delivering the odd item and picking up equally odd replacements. She spent the afternoon trying to organize one of the many remote and hidden storerooms around the town before locking up and meeting Elissa back at the Gronjon Pub.

“Stanper and Haigen say that the sale of last week’s items went well. They promised to finalize the transfers tomorrow morning.”

“Good news. Something going right for a change. That money should square us off for a while. Well done.”

Casey sits and fiddles with her necklace, Elissa looking up from her drink.

“One last thing I want you to do. Go down to Harver’s and see if the package from Quintentiana has arrived yet. It’s an important one and I really don’t trust that little worm.”

Casey looks over at a couple of Traxens laughing loudly by the door, some returning a menacing grin.

“I really don’t know why you keep dealing with those types.”

Elissa considers this and chuckles.

“Funny that, coming from you after last week’s little incident. Well, not much choice really. Only certain people can do certain things. Anyways, meet me back home when you’re done.”

Elissa gestures to the merry band of Traxens with her drink.

“And please don’t take too long. Never good to be on the streets late at night with these intergalactic hooligans lurking around.”

Elissa finishes her drink and dismounts the barstool with all the grace of a polar bear on ice skates. Casey jumps up and helps steady her.

“I think you’ve been at the whiskey too much again.”

Elissa smiles as they walk into the street.

“Don’t you worry about it. I’ll be fine. Go see if that package is here and get back to the house, okay?”

Elissa stumbles off down the road as Casey makes her way to a nearby alley.

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A short while later, Casey found herself at Harver’s. The entire building was locked up and dark.

She hammers the door for a while, with no response.

“Sod it.”

She huffs, spins around and quickly marches back down the road. The streets were dark and quiet around this time, the silence only broken by the occasional merry singing and ranting of distant voices.

Casey quickens her step, walking briskly through the cold air.

The distant voices get louder. She hears them clearly now but can’t tell from where. Not far now, keep going.

She briefly glances behind her before turning a corner, then stops dead as the source of the voices reveals itself. That same bunch of Traxens from the bar standing in a group some way off. She quietly steps back out of sight and listens to the slew of vulgar words emanating from the group before hearing a distressed young voice. She carefully peeks around the corner and notices the group towering menacingly over a young girl no older than Casey. A colourful glint from her eyes under the streetlight hinted that this was another felsian. The mob was taunting her, no surprise really as it is well known that Traxens have a special distaste for felsians. The Traxens' asses have been repeatedly handed to them by both the humans and Fel during a few botched military incursions. Felsians are both human and Fel, and are outcasts to boot, so few humans or Fel would ever be bothered to defend them. This made them attractive targets for Traxens, who figured it a two-for-one kind of deal.

Casey clenches her fists as a Traxen lands a kick on the hapless felsian, her eyes flaring bright red as her mind explodes with anger. A scream erupts as another kick hits its mark. The big red switch in Casey's head flips and she storms toward the mob, rudely interrupting the deployment of another *uncarefully* planned pedal assault as she yells at them.

"OI!! LEAVE HER ALONE!!"

The mob looks around and glares as one of its members taunts her.

"You bored? Looking for a good time?"

The group sniggers as they slowly move toward her, providing just enough distraction for the other felsian to spring up and run off. The supposed leader of the group looks back at the running girl and then at Casey.

"Look at that. And I worked so hard at getting to know her."

The group surrounds Casey as she grapples with the realization that another critical life choice error has just been made. The leader saunters forward and stares her in the face.

"Hmm... Them nice pretty Fel eyes will look super fine hanging in my astroracer."

A feeling of dread ran down Casey's neck, her eyes dulling to a darker blue for a moment. The leader lets out an obnoxious laugh.

"Wassa Matter? All that fire gone already? Damn, that's disappointing."

He lunges out and pushes her into the hands of the group behind. She pulls herself free and glares into his face. The Traxen rubs his nose while looking at the ground. He suddenly lands a hard punch square on Casey's jaw, sending her flying into a Traxen behind who grabs and holds her tight. The leader leans into her.

"Learn your place, stupid human Fel."

He slaps her across the face, then notices the necklace.

“Didn’t know stupid human Fels were allowed to wear jewellery.”

She tries to lunge forward as he snatches the necklace off her neck. The red reignites in her eyes, giving the Traxen some satisfaction.

“There she is! Just had to find the right button!”

He dangles the stone in front of her eyes before dropping it to the ground.

“Show us some more of that fiery goodness, Luv.”

He lifts his foot and brings it down hard on the stone. This did not have the desired effect, and the stone did not smash into millions of pieces. As he stumbles backwards, Casey lunges out of the Traxen’s grip and lets out a roar as she bears down on the leader with the full conviction of one very pissed off teenage girl. The Traxen leader, however, was faster to the punch, so to speak.

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Time slowed down. Casey gently arcs backwards through the air in a quiet daze of near coma. Her slow and otherwise relatively peaceful trajectory interrupted as the back of her head connects with the stone necklace lying on the ground. Unnoticed by the mob-at-large, faint figures inside the dark blue stone burst into a bright kaleidoscope of colours, and time suddenly returned with a relentless vengeance. Casey’s eyes snap open as an intense searing pain tears through the back of her head and into her brain. Her eyes flare bright white as she arches her back and lets out one of the most blood-curdling screams ever to leave her throat. The group stumble backwards and watch in horror as Casey screams and convulses on the road in front of them, the leader shaking his head as he stares at the disturbing spectacle in total bewilderment.

“This one’s finished, lads. Let’s scatter.”

The Traxens retreat as Casey’s body violently contorts itself into unfathomable positions like a demonic possession. Her vision goes all weird, pixelating and glitching like a broken computer terminal. The pain intensifies as it tears its way through her body, drowning her entire existence in excruciating agony before she eventually blanks out.