

Beads of sweat formed on Mxpan's head and trickled down his face. He exhaled to blow a drop from the crusty corner of his mouth. As their ship neared the satellite, other droplets found their way down his forehead and into his eyes. He angrily brushed them away. He was an analyst, not some devil-may-care field operative; he cursed The Overseer for subjecting him to this torture.

"Okay, I'm as straight as I can be. Punch the reverse thruster button on three."

"One..." The ship silently slipped closer to the satellite.

"Two..." Mxpan realized he'd been holding his breath. He inhaled sharply and exhaled quickly.

"Three!"

At the sound of the designated number, Mxpan's left hand shot out as though it were spring-loaded. His finger stabbed the button that controlled the forward reverse thruster... on the training ship!

Both Glieseians stared in dismay as their Survey Craft continued moving towards the satellite. Then the dismay morphed into abject horror as the docking extension unfolded and made contact with the metallic surface of the solar collection panel that powered the satellite with a clang followed by a cracking noise that was transmitted directly through the metallic arm onto the bridge of the ship.

"Maybe no one noticed," Zerpall suggested as the clanging sound faded into memory and the shards of glass floating away from the damaged solar panel refracted Rigel's light in a prismatic display. "Sir! There's been a collision, Sir!"

Surface communication once again filled the interior of the Glieseian ship.

"What? Where?"

"That debris I've been tracking just cracked the solar collector on the transmitter-responder satellite!"

"Is it still functional?"

"Let me check, Sir." The soldier typed in a command, his console refreshed. An image of the Glieseian Survey Craft appeared on the screen, transmitted from a security camera on the satellite.

"Get the Rangers on this! Now!"

"Let's make a run for it!" Zerpall's excitement was clear.

"I do not think this vessel is equipped to evade space rangers, even for a short time. I suggest we wait and explain."



"Enemy vessel! Power down immediately! Failure to comply will result in disabling of your ship!"

Zerpall instinctively slide the power bar towards his body. Unfortunately, Mxpan's reaction was less productive—his hand jerked, his finger jerked and depressed the control button for the reverse thruster he'd missed before. Once activated, the force of one the reverse thrust sent the ship backwards, away from the satellite. It looked to any objective observer as though the craft was about to "make a run for it."

"Fire!" One burst of an energy beam flashed through the bridge. Lights flickered and went out. Navigation and flight control were lost as the beam degraded all power couplings. The Glieseian ship floated helplessly in space.

Without further communication, Rigelian Rangers locked on to the Survey Craft and towed the disabled vessel to the military docking module of the Supreme Rigelian Command Space Station. The ship was secured to the deck. The grating of the ship's hatch against bulkhead was followed a crunching, squealing sound as the hatch was forced open. Two Rigelian Rangers bent at their waists and stepped through the doorway, weapons at the ready.

"Stand down!"

"We have no weaponry onboard this ship," Mxpan responded verbally as he twisted his amorphous bulk to better view the interlopers.

"What in the name of all that's holy are you?" the larger of the two sizeable Rigelians demanded.

"I am Mxpan and this is Zerpall. We are Glieseians."

"Never heard of you." A clicking sound indicated an incoming message on the speaker's communicator. "Yes. No, they are definitely not a threat at this time. They did what? Hell's bells! We'll bring 'em down."

"Am I safe in assuming you intend to escort us to the surface of your planet?"

"If by escort you mean 'take you to the high security prison,' then yes."

"Is your weapon plasma-based?" Zerpall asked as he was rudely dragged off his pilot's chair and carried to a Rigelian military transport.

"What?"

"Your weapon—is it plasma-based?"

"I heard you. I can't believe you asked that."

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