

“Life form identified: Dan Sargin.”

Eva jolted and missed the ship she was aiming for. There on the viewing screen was a little blue dot among all the red dots and she forgot everything she had been doing and turned her ship toward it. She had been searching for Dan for nearly two years and this was the first time she'd seen or heard anything about him. No one seemed to know where he was, but her computer thought he was right in front of her.

The ship her computer had identified was swerving in and out of the battle and Eva followed it carefully. Although its transponder marked it as an enemy ship it was being shot at by both sides. It was a Semian IV, the same kind she was flying, and clearly piloted by someone without her skill. A shot grazed the ship and she wouldn't be surprised if a thruster had been damaged. She punched a button and brought up the program she had written that been searching all nearby space for Dan's life signs for the last year.

“End program.”

“Program 'Find the bastard' ended.”

“Start program.”

A chiming sound indicated the program had successfully started.

“Life form identified: Dan Sargin.”

Okay, maybe the profile she'd bought was wrong. Maybe she had been sold someone else's vitals by accident.

“Request private channel with targeted ship.”

“Requesting channel.

“Channel accepted.”

“Hey, I'm on your side! Stop shooting at me!” The voice was scratchy and clearly male.

“Who is this?”

“Dan Sargin.”

“You're a hard man to find, Dan.”

“Who is this?”

“Eva Pondassa.”

“Channel closed.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What are you up to, Dan?”

They were now on the edge of the battle and several ships on both sides had followed them. Dan opened a hyperspace portal and disappeared.

“Follow that ship!” Eva shouted.

“Searching for hyperspace patterns calculating route opening portal tracking ship.”

Eva exited hyperspace on Dan's tail but the first thing she saw was the enormous red and pink planet looming in front of them. It was Intari-6, a large, completely uninhabitable planet with a huge gravitational pull and a surface covered with gas so noxious it would eat through a Semian IV's hull within an hour. Her scanners indicated that he was skimming the outer safe region of the planet, just barely close enough to feel the gravitational pull, flirting with danger. Eva would get him. He would tell her what happened to her husband if she had to pull every tooth from his head.

Going to hyperspace like that had been a last ditch attempt. Just another minute and she could deploy her grapplers and reel him in. She angled gently above him and slightly off to the left, where his outer screen appeared damaged so he couldn't visibly see her. Come on...

Dan's ship dove toward the planet.

“No!” She screamed, and punched the comm, broadcasting on the open channel.

“Don't you dare! Get back here! You'll only kill yourself!”

The comm was silent, and Eva cursed again. She only had a moment to decide. Dan's ship approached and passed the barrier at which it could exert enough thrust to break clear of the planet. He was as good as dead. Eva pulled about in a tight circle. Another few seconds and she would lose him. Was this how she wanted it to end?

Yes. Well, no, technically, but he was the only person who knew what happened to Alex and she had to learn the truth. She angled her ship toward the planet and dismissed the warnings that popped up on her screen. This was it. Her ship followed him down and a hull damage marker appeared on her screen. 1%. He was just barely in her sights.

She broke through the lower cloud layer and saw that he had landed on a large, flat plain. She landed heavily and close enough that their wings were almost touching. After struggling into a suit that could withstand open space for many days but would spring a leak in minutes here in this horrible atmosphere, she flung her door open wide (hull damage: 4%) and made for the other ship. Flipping the outside latch she pressed herself inside and shut the door quickly behind her. The atmospheric shield stripped the deadly particles from her suit and didn't let any of the atmosphere in after her. She ripped open the suit and looked around. Dan was sitting in the pilot's seat, head in his hands. Eva grabbed at his hair but it slipped through the loose gloves of the suit, and she had to pause and struggle awkwardly back out. Then she grabbed his hair again and dragged him into the back.

“You bastard! What do you have to say for yourself? You've just killed both of us!”

Dan had a cold, calculating look. “I can't be held responsible for your actions.”

Eva threw him onto the bench where he sat, heavily. “You knew I would follow you.”

“I didn't. Alex always said you were smarter than he was. He would never do something like this.”

“Yes, let's talk about Alex.” She was practically frothing with anger while Dan's attitude was apathetic. She'd only ever seen pictures of him, but he always looked full and healthy. Today his garish orange suit was baggy, his hair overgrown, and there were dark circles under his eyes.

“What do you want to know?”

“You know what I want to know. They never released an official report on his death. Everything they sent me was evasive and even his commander wouldn't meet me in person – you know, before he snuffed it under mysterious circumstances. I want to know how Alex died. The truth.”

“How sweet. You kill yourself to find out how your husband died.”

Eva grabbed the neck of his suit and shoved his head against the wall. He did not resist her.

“Cut the crap. We're not making it off this planet, but you don't have to die painfully. Alex was killed three days before the start of the Yatri-Vio war. Commander Heri said you were stationed with him that day, and that's the most I've gotten out of anyone. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see him die?”

“Yes.”

“Did our own people kill him?”

“No, he was killed by the Yatri.”

“Then why's this such a big secret?” Eva turned away in frustration and ran her hands through her hair. Dan was cooperating. She needed to calm down.

“The peace talks that day -”

“The talks didn't start until the following week.”

“I don't know what about, but there were talks that day. We met with the Yatri several times in small numbers. I got the impression they were secret. I'm saying this because, well, I'm pretty sure that Alex and I caused the war.”

Eva stared at him.

“But I don't know for sure because maybe it was the talks that caused it. There are so many intricacies in diplomacy that it seems unlikely a single incident would start a war. Maybe we were just scapegoats.”

“Of course it was the talks that caused the war. How could a pair of military grunts do such a thing?”

“Alex and I were assigned to stand at one end of a corridor and guard a group of rooms. We were given instructions to be especially watchful that day, so we were. We had a clear line of sight down the corridor towards the Yatri portion of the base, and we were also to focus on a group of meeting rooms primarily used by the Yatri elite. But there was a problem.”

Dan hesitated.

“There was a potted plant in the way. We couldn't see through the plant. There were always people beyond it but we couldn't see them clearly, so we decided to move it. It wasn't technically in our jurisdiction – décor and it's placement – but we figured it wasn't a big deal. The plant was this big ugly thing with thick leaves and orange flowers about twenty meters from us near a corner.”

“So you moved the plant.”

“Yes. We waited until the middle of the hour when everyone was in meetings. No one would see us move from our post, and hopefully everyone was too wrapped up in their own thing to notice the plant had moved to the other side of the hallway. We picked up the plant and began moving it. But we were wrong. Not everyone was in a meeting and a pair of Yatri saw us. They began shouting. We put down the plant in the middle of the hall and backed off, but the shouting attracted more attention. One of the Yatri ran to the plant and the other took out his gun and started waving it at us. Doors were opening and Yatri began pouring out. They were outraged, but we were guards and supposed to stop chaos from breaking out so we drew our weapons and told everyone to calm down.”

“Wait. Why were the Yatri pulling guns on you in a demilitarized zone?”

Dan was quiet.

“You were in the demilitarized zone, right?”

“We might have crossed a boundary.”

“Damn it, Dan!”

“It was just a damn plant! No one was supposed to see us. We were just doing our jobs.”

“Alex was killed over a plant? Over a fucking plant?” Eva kicked him in the legs and Dan curled up on the bench. “What the fuck is wrong with you? You think I believe this shit?”

A chime from the computer sounded. “Hull damage: fifty percent.”

Eva stood back and closed her eyes again. Calm down. She took a deep breath and wiped away tears on her cheeks with a shaking hand.

“Then what happened?”

“That's when the Yatri opened fire on us. He clipped me in the arm and took Alex down immediately.”

She was ready for this. Finally, the truth.

“I turned and ran.”

“You didn't check on Alex?”

“No. There was no time. I was going to be killed. I got back to my post and the hall was swarming with people. Shooting started and I was told to go to the med unit to get checked out. Hours later we were all evacuated when the Yatri started planting explosives. I can't confirm it, but we were probably planting them too.”

“That was the start of it.”

“That was the start.”

Eva turned away and stared out of the small window in the hull. She could already see some of damage to her own ship; her beautiful, expensive ship she took so much pride in maintaining and was still paying off. Alex died because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. That was the answer she had been searching for the last two years. Dan could easily have been killed and Alex wounded, but no. Alex got all the luck.

“What was the deal with the tree?”

Dan stared blankly past Eva. “Our commander later told me that it was a prized Yatri tree, all but extinct on their home planet. Apparently there's a history of us going in and stealing or harming those species, and we're a big part of why the tree was dying out.”

“You started a war over a misunderstanding.”

“Alex and I started a war over a misunderstanding.”

“Hull damage: seventy-five percent.”

“And why couldn't you tell me this? Why did you have to drag me all the way down here and be threatened with torture before you'd spill? I've been searching for you for nearly two years. You must have known that.”

“You really don't know where I've been?”

Eva crossed her arms. “No. No-one knows where you've been. You disappeared from the universe.”

“For the last two years I've been doing hard labor in a Yatri mining camp.”

“You were captured by the Yatri?”

Dan gave a small laugh. “Hardly. I was traded.”

“What the hell for?”

“For three days. The day Alex died could have been the first day of the war. The Yatri were all set to go at it, but they wanted the instigator they hadn't killed. They said that if I was handed over there might not be a war. One more might than we'd otherwise get. So Commander Heri made the decision and I've been with them ever since. I didn't know you were looking for me until you came on board.”

Eva's narrowed her eyes. “You make it sound like we were trying to avoid a war. We have twice the firepower they do! Why were the Yatri making demands from us?”

Dan laughed again. “We've been fighting a war for two years and you still think we have the upper hand? The government's really good at keeping secrets, apparently. We never had superior fire power. Since the Yatri came onto the scene we've been bending over backward to keep them appeased. The Alaska Concord? The Red Planet Treaty?”

Eva shook her head. What was he getting at?

“We've been desperately trying to keep the Yatri satisfied. We aren't winning this war and we never will.”

The computer beeped again, and Dan glanced at the screen.

“Oh, shit. They're coming. They're coming for me. I knew they would, but, so soon? Eva, please.”

“What? No! Dan – I just found you! You're not getting away from me yet!”

“Eva, they brought me onto their ship as a bargaining chip, for a trade, but we both know our government wouldn't trade for me or maybe they would to make the Yatri happy but they wouldn't let me live! They weren't supposed to hand me over in the first place; the population would rebel if they knew their own government were trading its people when we're supposed to be the powerful ones in the first place! I escaped, but the Yatri... they have the resources to do anything. They want me back, they'll get me back. Please, Eva, I can't go back there. Do it yourself or give me your gun and I'll do it. I'll understand if you don't want this on your hands.”

Eva stared out the window, her mind racing. The Yatri following them must have gone back for a larger ship, one with enough power to break free from the gravitational pull. The ship was much bigger; a Ratou Special edition, judging by large windowed area and painted a forbidding gray with a few extra guns and – no. She shook her head. They had only minutes. This was not the end, then, although being at the mercy of the Yatri scared her. Who knew how long they'd keep her, or if she'd get as cushy an assignment as Dan's mining punishment. If they didn't trade him, however, he was sure to get a much worse one. The Yatri were not known for their benevolence. There was a loud thud and a door opened. Decked out in large, flexible suits, eight or more Yatri spilled from the ship. They hurried toward Dan and Eva. Eva took out her weapon.

“No, I'll do it. You'd better be telling the truth, though.”

“I am.”

She studied Dan's sunken, pale face and considered the amount of trouble she was about to get into. As the door slid open, she aimed carefully at Dan's head and fired.

The Yatri who entered had to duck his head in the small ship. He surveyed the scene.

Eva lifted the gun but it was torn from her hand.

“Eva Pondassa, you have committed a violent act against Yatri property. You are hereby imprisoned pending review. Put on your suit.”