

Nishin Reed swept aside the coarse cloth and stepped into the bar. The cloying scent of burned lusk immediately assaulted his nostrils and made him gag. A fog of violet fumes clung to the ceiling, rippling in waves as if trying to make its escape. He sincerely hoped that stench wouldn't be the last thing he smelled.

The Griefer's Muzzle was a shithole. A den of the lost and the looking, but never of the found. At least, not in Reed's experience. The Muzzle was one of thousands of dives on the rocky moon of Eridos, orbiting a planet so enveloped in poisonous gases that even the heaviest lusk users balked at anyone who dared to make planetfall. Two forgotten rocks nestled away in the farthest corner of the Lattice, conveniently ignored by the Conclave of Exalted Worlds because—Reed suspected—they found the thriving black market useful occasionally, too.

The music swelled with a sultry twanging that accompanied the sour smoke. The dim lighting fused with the haze, lending the dingy hole an air of mystery it didn't deserve. Typically, he would've considered a dump like The Muzzle to be a wholly unremarkable establishment. But not today. Today, there stood a damned fine chance it would become his final resting place. The buyer had a penchant for dismemberment and decapitation, and the job had been nothing short of catastrophic.

Reed swaggered to the counter, his gaze rolling over his first mate, Spencer, on the opposite side of the bar. One of the other customers had sidled up to her, leaning in to get her attention. Not the most sensible move. Not if he wanted to keep his lungs intact. Right then, Reed was glad she'd insisted on entering separately, and not only because it had allowed him to own a dazzling entrance.

Switching his attention to the barman, Reed noted the jagged scars criss-crossing the lout's rugged face. They weren't the sort you got from knife or claw. Those wounds healed. The angry red tissue writhed like a living thing dwelled beneath the surface. Blood magic.

Nasty shit. The fellow must've pissed off the wrong customer.

Reed offered the man a familiar nod; the sort you gave an acquaintance you knew well and liked, and you knew liked you back. He earned a fierce scowl in reply, probably because neither of those things was true. Reed beamed anyway. A simple smile had saved his sorry skin more times than he could count, though truth be told, counting wasn't his forte.

He knew he didn't cut a dashing figure, not with his wiry, fifty-something frame, his drawn face, or his wonky-toothed grin. But what he didn't have in physique or style he made up for in charisma and confidence.

Reed laid both palms on the counter. "How's business, miggo?"

"Buy a drink or fuck off."

So Reed's sunny personality didn't always work. "Your parents know you speak to folk that way?" He tapped his lips, thoughtful. "Although, I'd guess you never knew your father, so it's your mother I should address my concerns to in writing. Though she might be busy with her own customer right now."

The barman narrowed his eyes, the accompanying glare darkening his scars in shadows. "The fuck you say, spacer?" His voice sounded like a worn axle greased with phlegm.

"Too subtle for you, eh?" Reed cupped his hands around his mouth and spoke with clear intonation. "I questioned your mother's parenting skills and insinuated she's a whore." He dropped his hands, steadying himself on the counter, and shrugged. "Though to look at you, I'm betting she has to offer a steep discount."

The barman didn't take a swing as Reed had expected, nor did the scarred fellow hurl abuse. Instead, a wicked grin carved out a dreadful line through those blood-red scars, like someone enjoying a gladiatorial death match. He raised an arm.

Chairs scraped the dusty floors of the den, a dozen steely-eyed spacers rising from

their seats. None of them were the ones partaking of the lusk.

Spencer's face shouted louder than words. *Too many, Nish. Too damned many.* She gave him a slight shake of her head, her eyes tracking towards the exit. They hadn't factored in half the bar playing protectorate. Then again, Reed had never been keen on mathematics. Too many damned numbers.

Reed spread his hands for the barman. "Come on now, old boy. I don't think The Operator would appreciate you marring the goods. It'll be wanting to see me."

"Enough!" Synthesised speech emanated from somewhere in the murk. "Send that fool over here."

The Operator's guards retook their seats at the command, each one blending back into the crowd and into the smoke. Reed raised two fingers to his brow in mock salute to the barman, then leaned over the counter without looking. "Give my regards to your mother."

The man growled, but Reed ignored it. Insults lost their impact when you weren't sure if your insides would shortly paint the floor.

The smoky haze parted before his sauntering steps, revealing a jet-black sphere about the size of a Dozian beach ball. A tailor-made cushion propped up The Operator in the booth farthest from the entrance, out of sight from idle eyes. Grey tentacles bulged from its cybernetic shell, the appendages flopping haphazardly over the furniture, leaving slick trails of slime anywhere they slithered. The glossy midnight casing was plain apart from a series of transparent portholes dotting the upper hemisphere. Silver ringed each glassy window, the interior as dark as the surrounding metal.

The Operator was not a pretty puppy. Looking at the thing always made Reed want to scratch his balls. He slid into the booth, but only far enough to make a quick getaway if the need arose.

Three of the cyborg's circular ports swelled with yellow light. "You fucked me,

Reed.”

Scratching at his stubble, he made a show of examining The Operator’s housing. “The ladies tell me I’m gifted, but even for me, that would be some kind of feat.”

“Clever words are not worth much in The Muzzle. The most they will earn you is a blade in your guts.”

That voice always reminded him of an electrified guitar. One with rusted strings and a drummer in the driving seat.

He shrugged, sinking back into the booth with practiced nonchalance, levering his elbow over the back of the seat. “Cleverness isn’t the only thing undervalued around here from what I can tell.” He sniffed at the air. “Soap is another.”

“You slagged the wrong guy, you fool. Then you were dumb enough to show up here.”

“Wrong, right. Always a matter of perspective, I say.”

“You would be wrong about that, too.”

“Not if I was right.”

“The rebels have put a price on your head.”

The comment made Reed struggle to maintain his casual veneer. “Why would the rebellion give a shit about me?”

The Operator didn’t respond immediately. Several of its eyeholes flicked on and off in a curious sequence, like it couldn’t quite believe what it had heard. It emitted a noise in a familiar rolling strum that Reed had come to know as laughter.

“You do not know.”

“Know what?”

A pallid tentacle slapped the tabletop. “Did you bother to learn the name of the man you murdered on Apogea?”

The statement caused Reed's memories to stir, summoning an image of pristine blue irises staring blankly from an expression of agony. An expression evoked by the gaping hole seared through the man's chest.

Reed scowled. "I don't bother with names when someone kills one of my crew."

"Ah . . . justice was it? Or vengeance?" The Operator's voice took on an exaggerated sibilance at the last word.

"Who was he, then?" Reed tightened his fist to keep the strain from his face. "Go on. You know you'll enjoy the telling."

The Operator emitted an almost musical chuckle. "The Heart of Sol himself, you vacuous idiot. You slagged The Dawnstar!"

The words made no sense to Reed for a few discordant seconds, their meaning muddled by turbulent bewilderment. Then—

Oh.

Shit.

Shit shit shit.

Reed stopped himself from spinning in the chair to gauge Spencer's reaction at the revelation. He had no doubt she had slunk near enough to the booth to have overheard. He already knew what her response would be. Fury. Fear. And fucking outrage.

The Heart of Sol, Jethro Savistor. The Dawnstar. The rebellion's towering torchbearer, leading the fight for a Lattice free of the Clave. By Sol's Sweating Sack, how was Reed supposed to have recognised that bastard when he'd been dressed in rags instead of that garish battle armour he paraded around in on the widebeams? Even the man's signature golden locks had been wrapped in fraying cloth.

Reed rubbed his forehead between his thumb and index finger, not bothering to hide the gesture. He understood why The Operator mocked him, and perhaps he should even laugh

himself. He'd already been on the Clave's radar for all his smuggling and double-dealing, but now the rebellion had him in their sights for murdering their poster boy.

It hadn't been enough to have half the Lattice ready to string him up. No, Nishin Reed had needed to piss off the entire fucking galaxy.

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