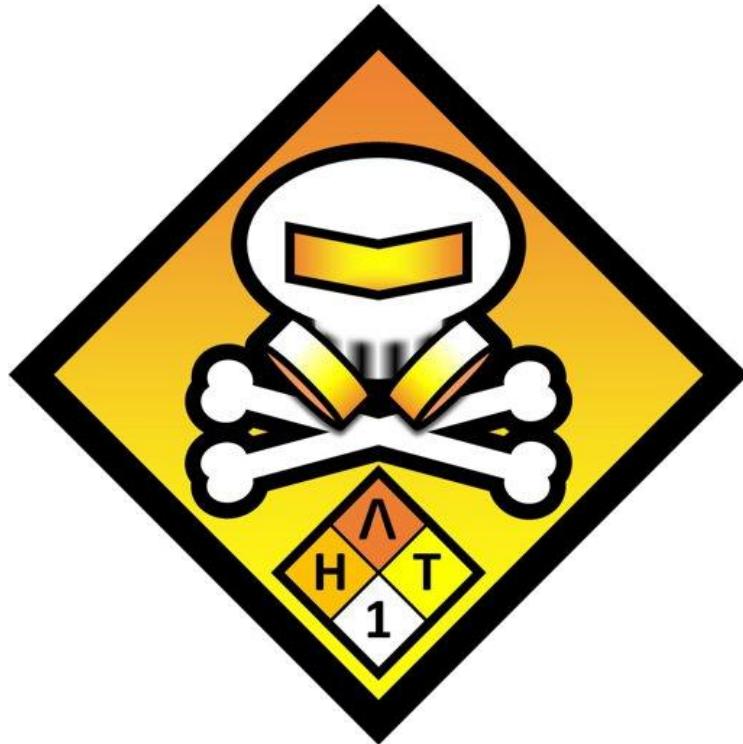


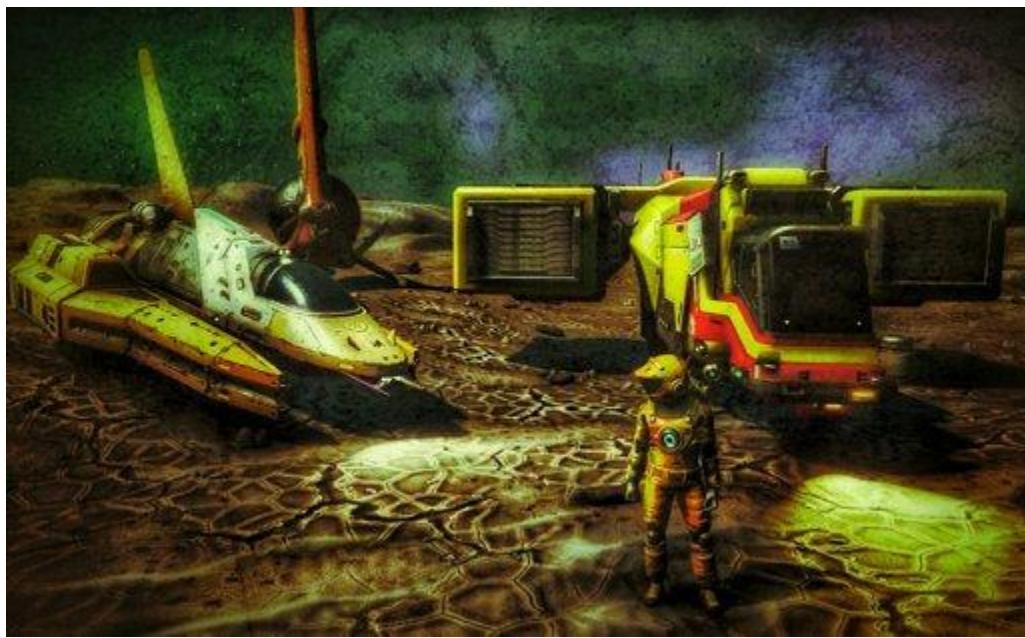
Action HAZMAT Team 1

Business Ad

Have pesky giant creatures trampled all over your uranium storage container? Have biological horrors left residual goop in your nomad? Are you stranded on a toxic planet with dwindling life support? Call Action HAZMAT Team 1 today!



We respond to any dangerous situation with experience, expediency, and, most importantly, affordability.



Just dial 0000:0004:OFFA:0118 (extension 3) from your nearest signal booster, starship communicator, or waypoint, and we'll be on our way within minutes!



Billing begins at time of dispatch. Standard rate is 1.3K units per minute, plus 10 nanite clusters per light-year. Additional surcharge may be required for planets with extreme conditions. Quicksilver hazard pay required if biological horrors require extermination. Hazardous material collection and disposal provided at no extra charge. Only Euclid galaxy supported.

Part 001

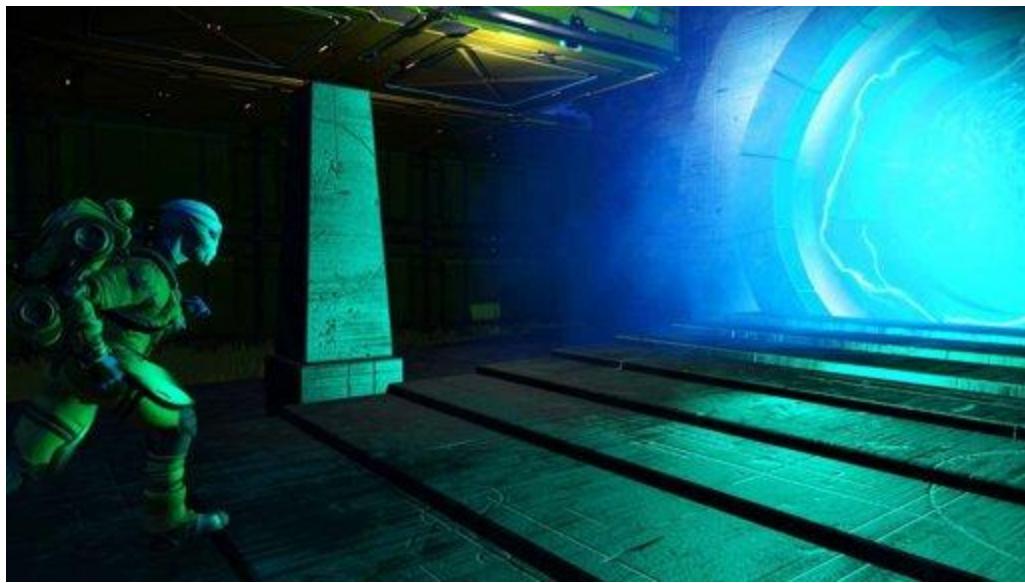
//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

Within minutes of posting the ad for AHT1, we got a call from a potential client in a system on the other side of the galaxy. It said it was a Gek trader on its very first trading mission. It said its progenitor, a wealthy magnate on the Gek homeworld, would be very disappointed if it found out it had become stranded on a planet on its first mission, so it needed to keep this under wraps. I said ok. Nothing I haven't done before, and the rest of the team didn't care as long as they got paid. Bunch of miscreants, every one. And I wouldn't have it any other way. We got the coords from the client, converted them to glyphs, and headed through the portal we have here at headquarters.



I rush to the portal room.





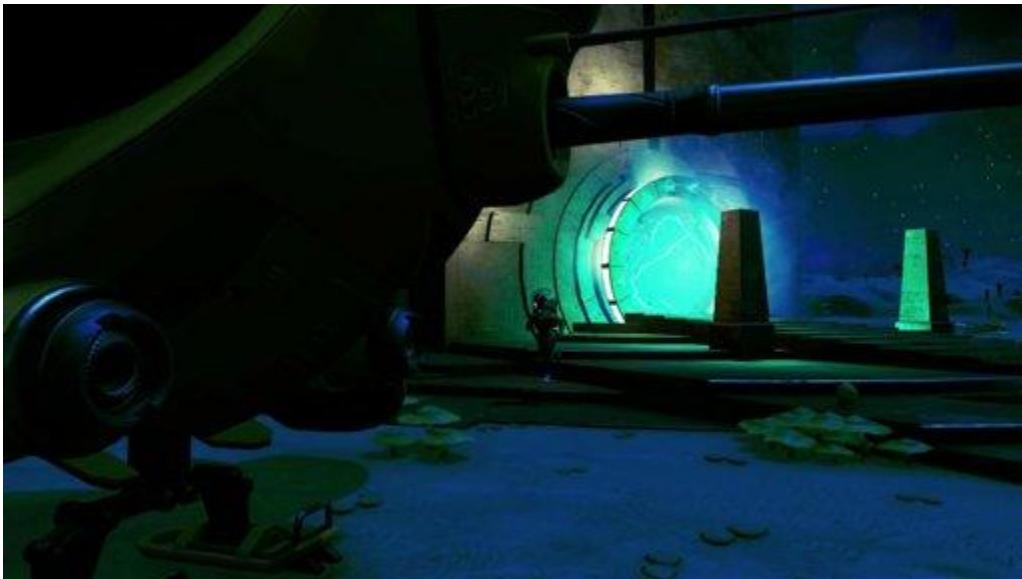
Qopret rushes into the portal ahead of me.



When we arrived, it was immediately apparent this was a dire situation. The planet was extremely radioactive, and the sentinels were frenzied. We had to hurry. Praxa got in his exotic immediately because the ion bombardment was getting around his hazard protection and starting to mess with the circuitry in his Korvax husk.



Praxa starts having issues.



My protection was working fine, and so was Qopret's (the team Traveler), but we had to trek to the other side of the planet within the next 13 minutes, so I hopped in my fighter and she got in her hauler.



Qopret's hazard protection is fine.



Qopret gets into her hauler.

We made it to the client's location in no time. We had 5 minutes to spare out of our 20-minute guarantee. Whew! Didn't have to give out that discount this time!

Once we arrived at the coordinates, my heart dropped a little: it was an abandoned facility. That meant there were biological monstrosities around. I could see them swarming around the entrance, which meant the client was inside.



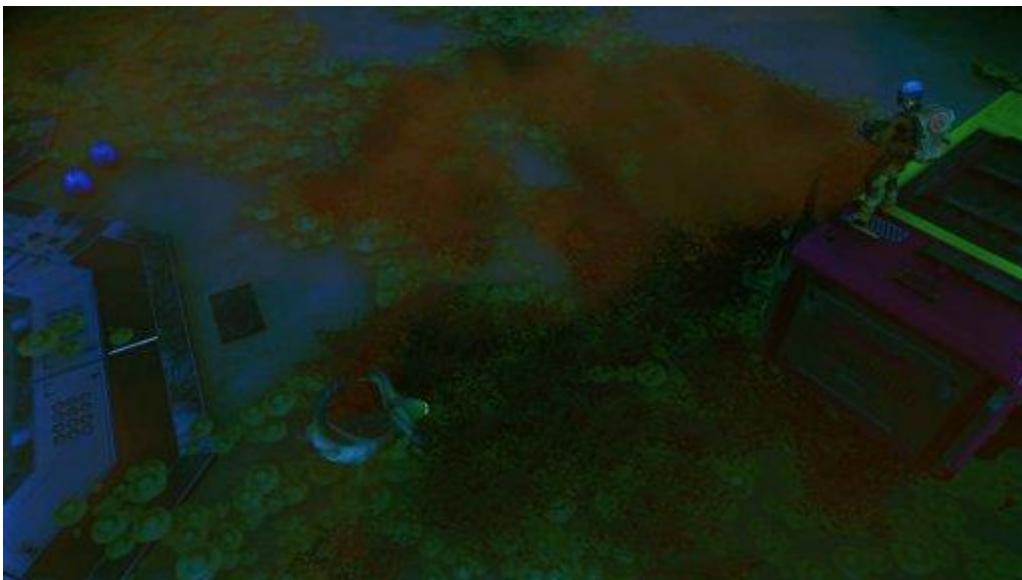
I could already see the 1,000-quicksilver bonus at the end of this (because of the swarm bonus), but I just always hate dealing with these things. They're horrifying to look at and irritating to kill. Whoever littered them on every single planet in this stinking universe needs to be found and fed to them. Alive.

We made pretty quick work of the swarm, and somehow did it without a single sentinel spotting us. Praxa had repaired his hazard protection on the way over, so he was ready for the fight. I don't know why, but he always seems to love killing them. Anything, really, but especially these horrors. He doesn't have facial expressions that I know of (probably just because he doesn't have a face), but his lights seem brighter when he gets a chance to exterminate living things. And his voice...well it almost sounds like he's smiling. Kind of disturbing if you ask me. Qopret, on the other hand, has a very expressive face, and it displayed many expressions during this battle. She kept yelling, "YEE HAW!" in her squeaky voice (which always seems somehow more distant and mechanical than Praxa's). She just loves being able to use Helix, her highly modified multitool, whenever she can. Me? I just had a job to do, so Vera and I went to work (Vera's my multitool, if you couldn't guess). We cleared out the swarm near the door, drew their attention toward us instead of the client, and let them subside while we stood on Qopret's hauler. Easy peasy. Even with the battle, we still had 1 minute left. Not that it mattered, but it did give me a modicum of real satisfaction.



Drawing their attention.



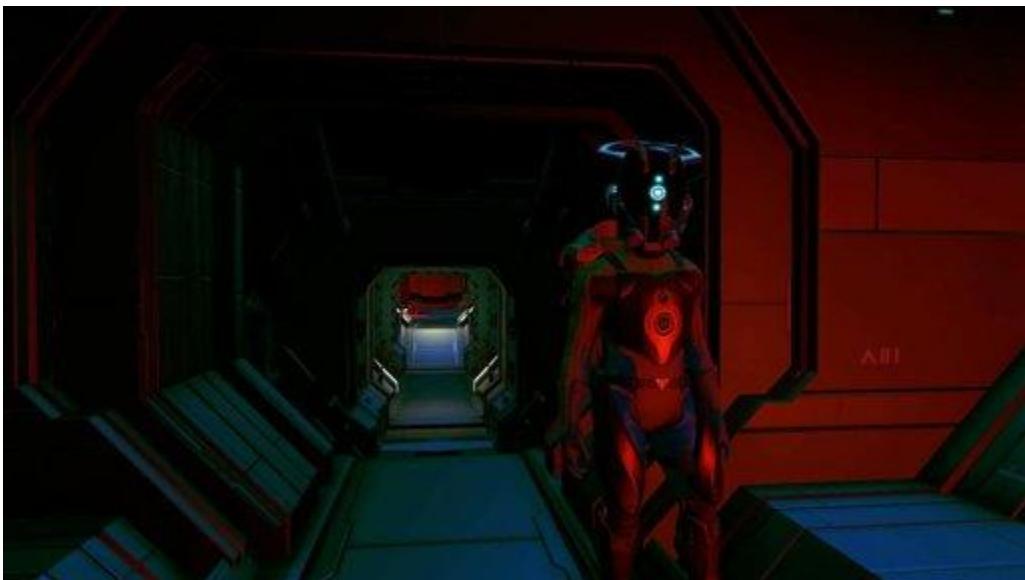


We walked into the abandoned facility, triumphant, but we couldn't find the client, so I walked into the connecting chamber. I had to stifle a laugh and swallow a little lump in my throat at the same time. There it was, cowering in the corner, looking up in fear at a hanging whip plant.



I knew this Gek was young because of our initial communication, but seeing it like this, scared out of its mind because of a whip plant, well...it was funny in a sense (because the plant could do no real harm and it was completely safe from the swarm in here), but it was also pitiful. It was frozen in fear. Real fear. What do the Gek call their young again? Brood? Well, it was a kid at any rate. A kid frightened out of its mind, and my heart went out to it.

I approached and introduced myself while Praxa and Qopret approached behind me. I waved for them to keep their distance.



"I'm Tomcat. Agent Tomcat of Action HAZMAT Team 1. That's Agent Praxa and that's Agent Qopret. We're here to help. Let's get you out of here." It looked at me, the eyes on the ends of its stalks open as wide as can be, and then it seemed to relax.



The Gek starts to relax.

It spoke slowly, and told me its name was Injuet. I shook its hand and it finished relaxing. I helped it up, careful to avoid the plant, and we headed out to our ships.

I asked where its ship was. It said it was near a cave about 500u from here, partway up a mountain. It pointed, and I could just make the ship out in the distance.



Its ship is barely visible on the hill.

I asked why it was so far away, and it started stumbling over its words, like it had something to hide. It told us it ran out of launch fuel, and its multitool broke before it could get enough resources to make more. It needed some quick units to buy some, and it had read once about the valuable orbs you can get from the nests of biological monstrosities. Unfortunately, it didn't read enough to know the price you pay for taking them.



What Injuet saw when he tried to collect those orbs.



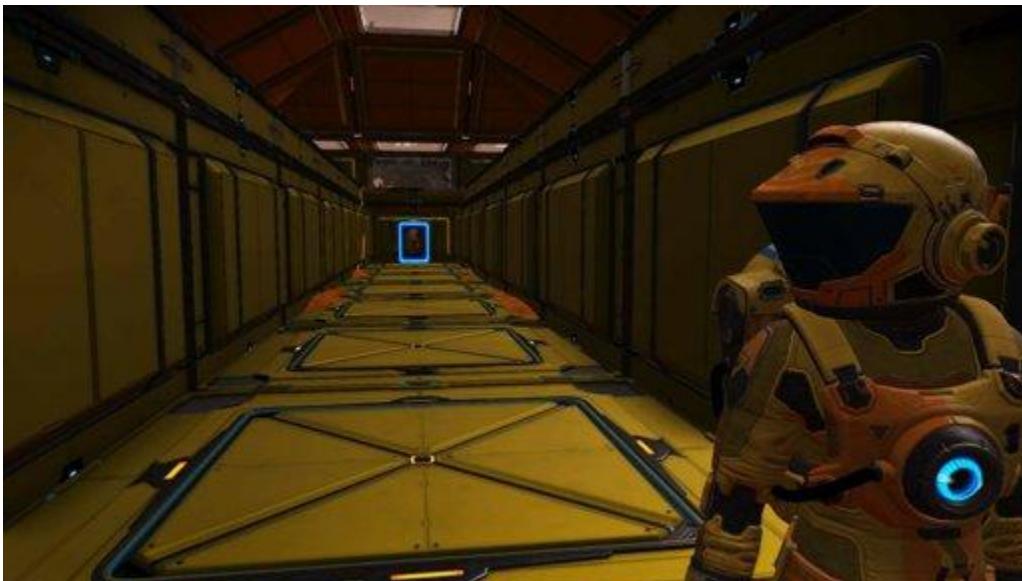
Something seemed off about its story, but as long as we got paid, I didn't care. Injuet couldn't pay at the moment, but it said if we could just take it to the nearest trading post, it could get us all of the units it owed us. I reminded it of the quicksilver fee since we fought off the swarm, and it promised us it could get that, too. We took it to the nearest trading post and somehow, from somewhere, it got enough units to pay us. It said the quicksilver was being transferred to our account presently. I checked, and sure enough, 1,000 quicksilver. Source: anonymous. This kid's story was just not adding up, and I was eager to get out of there. Praxa and Qopret indicated to me they smelled a rat, too. We had our payment, so we headed to our ships. Against my better judgment, I asked Injuet if it needed a lift to its ship. I was relieved when it said it would be fine at the trading post. It was meeting someone there anyway. This was fishy as all get-out. And not just because it was a Gek.

Qopret and Praxa climbed in their ships, and just as I was about to close the cockpit on mine, I saw Injuet waving, a mischievous smile on its face. Or maybe it was an earnest smile. I couldn't tell.



Injuet waves.

We high-tailed it out of there and headed back through the portal. I'm back here at HQ still scratching my head. That was a weird job. We've had plenty of jobs before, but all in our local cluster. Never have we advertised galaxy-wide. We only did that because we found a portal and realized it could open up all sorts of opportunities. If all of our jobs are going to be like this, then maybe the ad was a mistake. Oh well. We'll see. Oh wait, I have to go. There's a knock at the door.



Someone is at the door.

Part 002

//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

Never trust a Gek. That's what my dad always said. "You can't put your faith in something that can't even decide if it's a boy or a girl." I just thought he was racist. Actually, never mind, he was. I've had just as many good interactions with your average Gek as I have with your average Korvax, Vy'keen, Traveller, or Anomaly, and nothing my dad ever said about any race ever came true. Not as a rule, anyway. But this particular Gek, this kid, Injuet, isn't your average Gek. I don't much trust it, not even as far as I can throw it (I can throw it pretty far: the squirt's so small). We saved it from that swarm, but it doesn't look like the units it gave us will be enough.

That knock at the door last time? Well, it wasn't Injuet, like you might think after that intro just now—but it was someone looking for Injuet. Two someones, really, even though the big one never spoke. They smelled like big trouble, in the way Injuet smelled like fish.

Praxa answered the door after we heard the knock. He's pretty big, even for a Korvax—the biggest member of the team, in fact—but the Vy'keen on the other side of the door dwarfed Praxa by a head and a half. It stared down through the newly opened door, then grimaced and bared its teeth, letting out an intimidating grunt.



Grah!

Praxa can't feel intimidation, but for a second I thought his knees were going to buckle. Then a voice came from behind the Vy'keen. "Thank you, Miss Gravot. We'll keep working on your introductions later, but that was another good attempt." Gravot stepped out of the way, and behind her appeared the Traveller entity who had just spoken.



As soon as Qopret saw who was at the door, her expression changed to one of caution. She has a tendency not to trust other Travellers, so it wasn't abnormal, but this expression was more grave than usual.



[Qopret displays abnormal caution.](#)

I pressed on cautiously. "Welcome to Action HAZMAT Team 1 Headquarters. What can we do for you?" The Traveller replied, "My name is Chev. I'm in need of your assistance."



[My name is Chev. I'm in need of your assistance.](#)

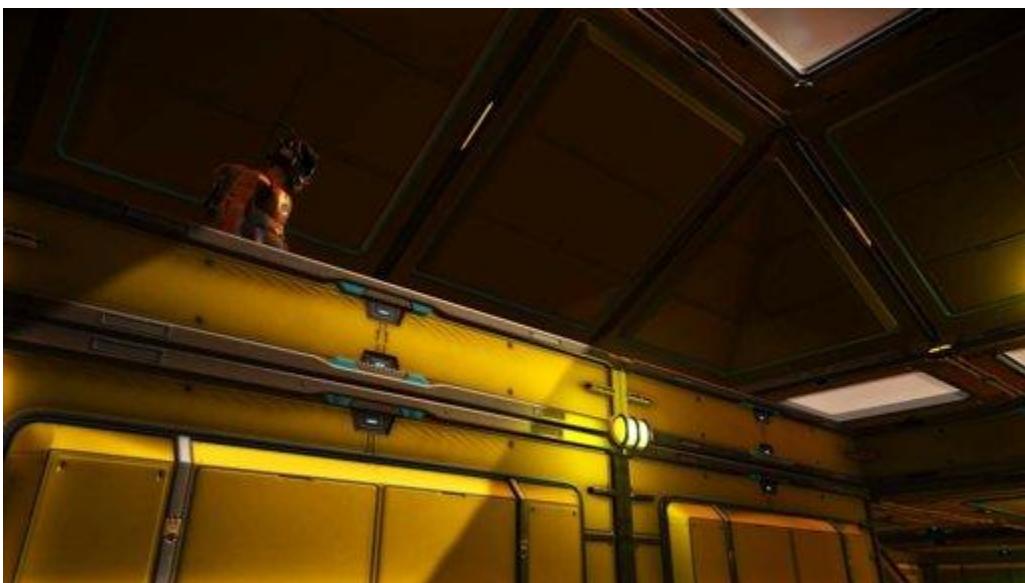
Yep, you heard that right. Chev. The Infamous Chev. As in the biggest crime boss in the Delta Quadrant. And he was at my door. I knew all about his influence, and I'd heard the stories of his unsavory deeds, but I guess I never realized he was a Traveller; not that I ever cared to find out.

"How can we assist you?" I foolishly asked, trying not to let on that I knew who he was. I already knew the answer. It was no coincidence he was at my door the same day we helped a fishy Gek.

"Apposite request, sir, but first, may I come in? There's a heated rainstorm incoming and my hazard protection is mostly drained at the moment." I hate that: the stupid well-mannered-villain-with-abnormally-large-vocabulary-and-fancy-accent trope. It's overplayed. Yet here he was, standing in my doorway. I already wanted to leave him and his enforcer to the storm. I should have.

They came in and took a seat on the couch. Well, okay, Chev took a seat. Gravot wouldn't fit, so she stood next to it and stared uncomfortably. Qopret sat at the desk across the lobby, within earshot, and looked busy. Praxa went upstairs.





Chev continued in his irritating accent, "There, that's better, wouldn't you say? Hardly fitting to conduct business from a doorway. But no matter, I didn't come for idle chit-chat."

Too late for that. This prick talked too much. At least too much for me.

"You helped a juvenile Gek earlier today," he said.

"I can't discuss my other clientele," I retorted.

"That wasn't a question, Mister...Tomcat, is it?"

I never told him my name. He was playing his intimidation game. He wanted me to think that he knew all about me. Big whoop. My name's on the official business listing, which is a matter of public record. "Agent, please."

"Agent. Yes. Agent Tomcat, I already know you helped him. I know this because I sent you 1,000 quicksilver and a substantial sum of units for saving his life from a swarm of monstrosities."

Wait, "him"? I thought Gek were genderless. Or did this one just decide on a gender at some point?

"I know why he was there, and I know what he was supposed to be doing. The only things I don't know are why he didn't complete his task, why he called you, and where he's gone. Did he tell you anything, Agent Tomcat? Anything interesting?"

If he was the one who paid us, then he was technically privy to information on this case. His payment was anonymous, so I couldn't really confirm, but I decided to play along. I actually knew nothing about this Gek kid, and with any luck that would satisfy Chev's curiosity and prompt him to move on. Tough chance. "Only some cover story about running out of launch fuel and having a broken multitool. It didn't add up, but we don't ask questions. I have no idea why he was there or what he was really doing, and frankly, I have no interest in knowing. I don't need to believe him in order to bill him. We left him at a trading post. He said he was meeting someone there."

"I see." He looked thoughtful for a few moments. "Well, it seems poor Darf truly had an emergency, then."



Well, it seems poor Darf truly had an emergency, then.

Darf? So he didn't even give me his real name. Though to be fair, with a name like Darf, I'd probably use a fake name, too.

"Agent Tomcat, thank you for your time. I'm sorry to have imposed upon you like this, and inquired about your clientele. Of course you must protect their interests and yours by maintaining confidentiality. I bid you adieu. Please tell agents Praxa and Qopret that you've all performed a good deed by saving poor Darf."

Ok, their names aren't on any public records. How did he know them? Obviously he had the right connections. What kind of trouble was this kid in? Whatever it was, it was none of my business. Chev seemed like he was about to leave, and this whole thing was going to be over. But then, of course, it wasn't.

Just as Chev and Gravot reached the door, Chev snapped his fingers and turned around. "It just suddenly occurred to me. I can't believe I almost forgot about this. I need to hire you for a job."



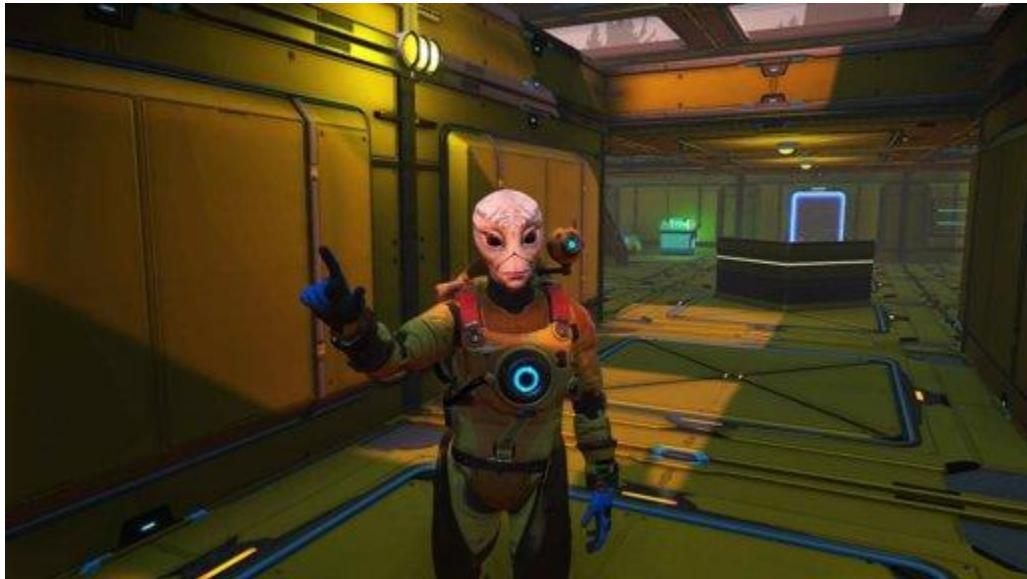
["It just suddenly occurred to me."](#)



["I need to hire you for a job."](#)

Before I could object, he continued, "I need you to figure out what Darf was really doing on that planet, and find out where he went. He wasn't doing what I sent him there to do, and he ended up costing me more than I earned."

Qopret spoke up. "We're not detectives. We don't do missing persons or investigations. I can give you the names of a few detec—"



"We're not detectives."

"So sorry to interrupt. Did I give you the impression I was asking?"

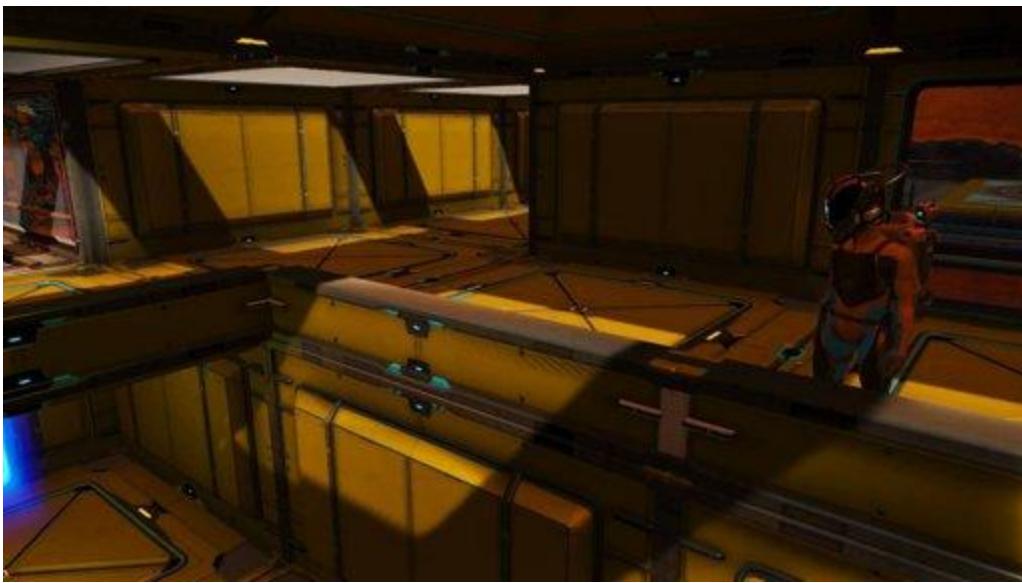


"So sorry to interrupt. Did I give you the impression I was asking?"

Jeez, what a cliché little prick! Chev continued. "Qopret, you of all people should know that's not true. It may not be part of your little job here, but you at the very least are capable of completing both of these tasks with ease. You were all the recipients of my lost revenue, so as I see it, you're on the hook to help me find out why it happened."

Qopret doesn't talk much about her past. She's always done her job, and I've never pried. But maybe we have something to talk about now.

Chev continued. "You can choose to complete this job, or you can choose to never take another job again." Praxxa spoke up from the balcony. "That's not a choice, that's an ultimatum."



"That's not a choice, that's an ultimatum."

"However you choose to see it," replied Chev, "but you do still have an opportunity to do the right thing here. I leave it up to you, Agent Tomcat. I'll be back in three days to check on your progress."



1 "I'll be back in three days to check on your progress."

He and Gravot left. I stared at the closed door for a few seconds, and then I saw the gaudiest, blingiest exotic ship I've ever seen land in front of HQ, pick them up, and tear off into space, destroying a few trees in the process.

"We have landing pads, you idiots," I said as I watched their ship disappear above the clouds.

And so that's pretty much it. Now we have this job none of us want, and we can't get rid of it. We're working for free. We all know the kind of influence Chev has over the galaxy, not just in the Delta Quadrant, and we know he can make good on his threat to ruin the business. We also know we can't run. Even if we go to another galaxy, Chev is the kind of entity who would send every bounty hunter in that galaxy after us, just for the laughs if nothing else. Besides, Euclid is our home. If I'd known what this job was going to bring, I'd have left Injuef or Darf or whatever his name is in that abandoned facility. Once I find him, I have some questions for that stupid Gek.

Part 003

//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

That ad was the best thing that ever happened to us. Since I posted it, we've had a steady stream of new clients with simple, uncomplicated tasks like clearing runaway mold growths, fixing broken tech in stranded shuttles, and delivering much-needed spare parts to wayward frigates. Or at least that's what I would be saying if the ad hadn't landed us exactly one problematic job, cut us off from receiving new clients entirely, and in all other ways been the absolute worst thing that's ever happened to us.

Note to self: get payment up front. Always. No more of this rescue-now-pay-later shtick. It's not worth the trouble. Sorry if that seems callous, but we're not the only agency like us out there, so people have other options, and we can't afford the trouble if payment comes from a strange place. Like a slimy crime boss and his mountainous enforcer, for instance.



Yep, this guy right here.



Mountainous, I tell you.

Another note to self: require a little more background information when hiring agents. I get it: people have secrets; there are things they want or need to leave buried in the past. But if there's something back there that could...oh I don't

know...resurface later and threaten not only your own employment, but the very existence of your employer and everything that you and all of your acquaintances and friends have come to hold dear, you might mention it.

Of course, in Qopret's case, if I'd known she had a previous connection with Chev, I probably wouldn't have hired her, so I can't really blame her for keeping it a secret. I like her, though. I'm still glad I hired her. She's a deft pilot, a crack shot, and a reliable handler of hazardous materials. I can always count on her in times of danger. I came to trust her, even considering this recent revelation about her, and I thought she had come to trust me—at least enough to discuss relevant and team-jeopardizing issues candidly.

After Chev and Gravot left yesterday, I asked Qopret, "Why does Chev seem to know you already?"
"I can't talk about it."

Okay, maybe she didn't trust me as much as I thought. Or else the secret really was that big. If it involved Chev, whom I was starting to realize represented a much bigger threat than I'd originally surmised, I could see that being the case, but I still don't get being so tight-lipped in a situation like this.

"Well, this affects the team. I need to know anything that might be relevant. We just received a clear ultimatum and threat from someone who seems to be very familiar with you and your work."

She quickly became defensive and tried to deflect. "Well he mentioned Praxa's name, too. What's his history with Chev?"



["Well he mentioned Praxa's name, too. What's his history with Chev?"](#)

Praxa immediately replied from the upper level, "I have no previous interactions with this person. I am uncertain why or how he knew my name."

I didn't want this to turn into a blaming match, and I didn't want Qopret to feel attacked, but we were definitely in a tight spot. I needed answers fast, but it didn't look like I would get them standing here at headquarters. "Qopret, I'm not going to press this. You're entitled to your secrets, but if you know anything that would help, now would be the time to sing it. You'll tell me if you want to tell me. It seems like a big deal for you, so let's just be about the business of finding Injuet."

"Darf," corrected Praxa as he descended the stairs.

"Whatever his name is. The sooner we find him, the sooner we'll be done with this stupid job. Qopret, please stay here and check bounty listings for any missing persons matching the kid's description. Praxa and I will head back to the trading post and see what we can dig up."

Man, this is shaping up to be quite the cliché ride. Next thing you know, we'll find the kid, find out he's in even bigger trouble than I imagined, take pity on him, help him escape from or defeat his evil overlords, and then recruit him onto the team. Please tell me it doesn't unfold that way.

With a three-day deadline (possibly a poor choice of words), I didn't want to waste time, so we immediately hoofed it back through the portal, which still had the coords punched into it. Praxa had to rush to his ship again because of the ion bombardment from the planet's atmosphere.



I don't know what's going on with him, and neither does he, but he repaired his hazard protection as we flew to the trading post. When we arrived, we asked around and found out that Darf had left in a shuttle about an hour before we arrived. A Traveller named Fiz, who happened to be at the trading post, said it was "the most beautiful shuttle I've ever seen". I immediately didn't believe him. There's no such thing as a beautiful shuttle, even by comparison to other shuttles. He also said Darf had introduced himself as Badlo. What's with these fake names? I'm just going to call him Barflet from now on. Seems fitting. So Barflet left in a "beautiful" shuttle an hour before we got there. We couldn't get a consistent description of the shuttle outside of very general features common to most shuttles, so we were kind of at a dead end. That is, until Praxa suggested seeing if Barflet's previous shuttle was still there.

We headed to the abandoned facility, and sure enough, there was Barflet's shuttle, still sitting on the hill. I opened the cockpit and almost puked! It smelled like someone combined ammonia, coprite, and Gek urine in a large refiner and actually got something in return. Praxa was of course unaffected, so I asked him to look for anything of value inside. He found lots of trash, like empty GekNip packets, rusted metal scraps, and some pools of fluid he couldn't identify. Why was this kid such a slob? He checked the ship's navigation archives, and to our luck, there was only one previous destination: the space station in this system.

It didn't take us long to get there. I sometimes marvel at how easy it is to get from one planet to another. Our tech makes us so fast that we can travel an entire solar system within minutes. We take it for granted too often. Another thing we take for granted is the willingness of some people to divulge information. It's not until you encounter an entire group of people with steel traps for mouths, like the ones on this space station, that you really appreciate just how chatty everyone else is. I couldn't find any information about Barflet from any of the Vy'keen stationed here. Neither could Praxa.



No one was talking.



There was no one from any other race here, so you'd think an exceptionally short Gek kid would have stood out. They were all hiding something, whether because they were intimidated into silence or because they were in on the secret. I didn't have time to find out. I had to find the next lead, and I knew it was here. The only option I had was to access the station security camera feeds.

It was Praxa who finally came up with the plan that worked. He initially tried to hack in through a galactic trade terminal, but someone had upgraded the security on this station, and they were kept on a completely separate network. Then he tried connecting through a data line behind a loose wall panel, but even that was physically separated from the security network. He decided the camera feed must have been fully black-boxed, meaning the cameras and their data lines were contained inside nearly indestructible housings, and the feed was stored locally, not even attached to a network. It's strange to see something like that done since the purpose of a security feed is to, well, feed to someone who wants to watch remotely. Whoever monitored this station did so from within the station itself, and that meant someone here had an access pass to the monitoring room. Praxa's plan was to find that person and steal the card. That simple. It sounded like a plan I would have come up with. Maybe that's why it's the one that worked.

After much waiting and monitoring, we finally saw the Vy'keen who had the card. He went into the only locked door in the station several times, and during one of those times, we managed to catch a glimpse of the server and monitoring equipment behind it. We were already sure it was the security room, but that confirmed it. The next time he came out, Praxa distracted him with conversation while I snagged the pass, which hung loosely on his belt. If I had known it would end up being that simple, I'd have done that from the start.



Once we entered the server room, we didn't have long. The guy with the pass kept a 15-minute rotation, and we had to find him and slip the pass back on his belt before he noticed it was missing. We needed the pass to get both in and out, so I couldn't even return it while Praxa looked at the security feed. We didn't want a situation here. Getting nicked at this stage would have spelled the end for us. So both of us needed to sift through footage.

We had no idea where to start. Barflet could have been here at any time before we got his call. The navigation data from his shuttle had no timestamps, which is very odd. I asked Praxa, "When do you think we should start looking for Barflet?"

"Who?"

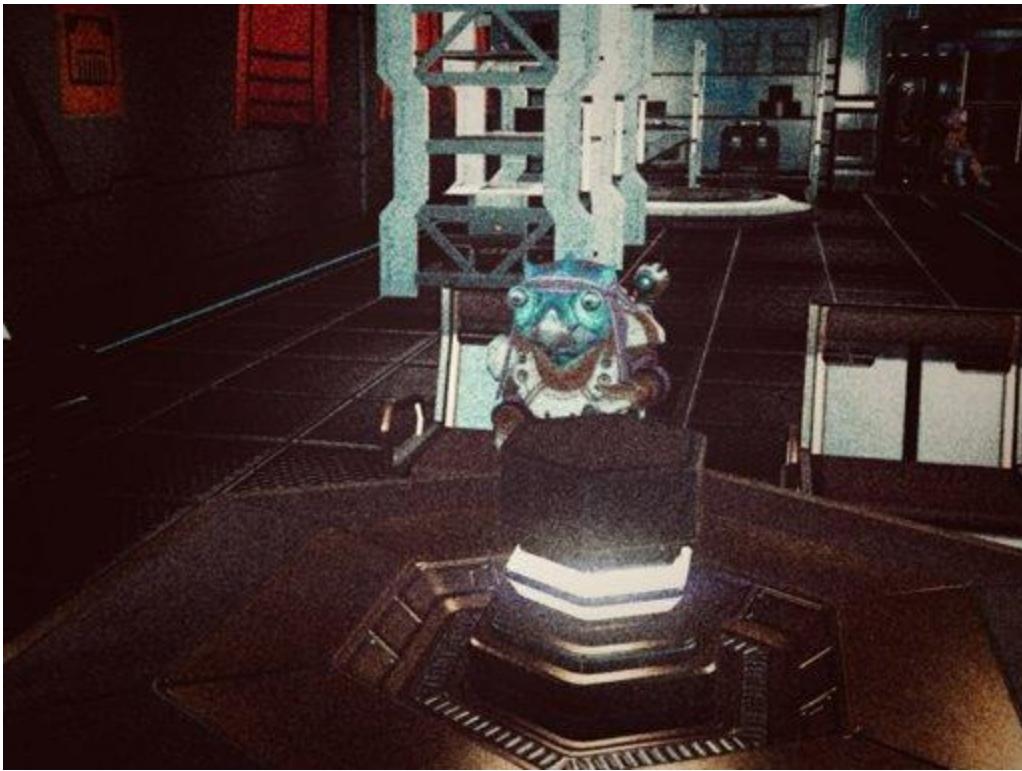
"Oh, Barflet. I made that name up for Darf since he kept coming up with fake ones."

"I see, well..." replied Praxa emotionlessly, yet still with an almost imperceptible air of annoyance. "Perhaps we should narrow down the search parameters. We know when he was on the planet, and approximately how long he would have been there at minimum to complete the actions he managed to complete. The shuttle had no fuel, and no pulse engine upgrades, meaning it would have burned through fuel faster—"

Oh great. Praxa doesn't talk much unless you get him started on nuanced data analysis like this. We didn't have time for the explanation, and I knew he already had it worked out, so I had to interrupt. "Just the summary version, please."

"Very well. If I just..." His fingers flew over the input panels. "And then..." They flew faster. "Yes, that's it. Here he is." Dang. He's a genius.

I looked at the feed he pulled up, and there was Barflet, sitting nervously on a chair. Praxa sped up the feed. The timestamps showed he was sitting there for hours. What was he doing?



[What was he doing?](#)

Suddenly he moved, and Praxa returned the playback speed to normal. I watched as Barflet walked over to a supply crate, looked around, and then quickly opened it, took something out, ran down the ramp to the docking bay, jumped into a shuttle, and flew off.



It was the same shuttle we investigated, the stinky one. A Vy'keen ran onto the docking pad and started pumping his fist at the shuttle as it flew away. I'm betting Barflet stole that thing.

We had what we needed. We got out of the security room, slipped the pass back onto the guy's belt, and headed toward the crate we saw in the feed.



It was still there, so we opened it, and wouldn't you know it? It was empty. I mean, sure it makes sense because Barflet took something out, but I figured there might be some more somethings in there that would help us out. It did at least have a soft insert with a shaped hole cut in it. You know, one that's specifically cut for the object it's meant to hold? I took a look at it to see if I could make out what that intended object was. And then I looked again. I looked a third time just to make sure. I knew that shape. I hadn't seen it for quite a while.

And it gave me our next lead.

This part of the job took all evening and night yesterday (according to our chronometers), so it's today now, and I'm tired. Tired enough to craft a phrase like "it's today now". We're heading back to HQ to give Qopret the information, see if she's found anything, and get some rest. I'm going to need her with us because we're heading to see an old friend later, and that means we'll need an extra hand in case things go south.

Oh great, I just realized this is the visit-the-old-frenemy trope. The whole oracle business and everything. Jeez, Chev's tropeyness must be rubbing off on me.

Part 004

//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

She's gone. Qopret is gone. No note, no communication, nothing. HQ was just empty when we returned. Was I too hard on her before we left? Nah, she's a tough cookie. The toughest. There's no way I drove her away with something like that. So where did she go? Did she get a lead? She was supposed to be looking for leads on the kid while we were gone. She's the best at it. Praxa is a computer wiz, but not very intuitive, and a search like that required intuition. But we've been here the entire night, and she's still gone. Praxa doesn't need sleep, so he just worked on his hazard protection, but Qopret didn't show.

Our logs are kept confidential by design, so if she left a personal log, I can't see it. Unless...I have to ask Praxa to hack her logs. He can actually delete the memory of seeing them, thereby maintaining confidentiality if there's nothing important there. I feel like a complete sleaze prying like this, but there's no other choice. This is of grave importance to the team, and it's in our bylaws that logs can be accessed under dire circumstances if they might contain pertinent information. This is pretty dire. And hey, we're miscreants anyway, right? I still feel like a sleaze.

.....

Ok, Praxa checked, and he found something important. And holy crap, I had no idea. I'm recording it here for the time being.

//HAZMAT Agent Log//

Hey, Agent Qopret here. I don't normally leave logs like this. I've been on this team for a couple of years now, and I've had a great time. Tomcat and Praxa have been incredibly kind to me, and I've supported them however I can. They were especially kind in the way they helped me move on from my sordid past. They didn't pry or ask too many questions, and they were satisfied with the vague answers I gave them. But now my past has caught up to me.

Chev was here. Staring me in the face. It was horrible. I tried to get some rest after the boys left, but Chev's beady, evil eyes bored into my soul once again. His spiny fingers gripped my heart and squeezed.



That devil.

I tried not to show it, but I wanted to shoot him right then and there, as soon as I saw him standing in the doorway. And then I wanted to cry my eyes out right after.

I've heard it said that your thoughts become clearer if you write them down, so here goes nothing. Chev and I were intimate once upon a time. There. I said it. Ugh, what a devil! And yet somehow still so dashing. Screw these emotions. They won't control me. But I can't just block them out either. Not only is that plain impossible, but it's incredibly stupid and unhealthy. Wait, I'm rambling. Let me start from the beginning.

My parents, not wealthy by any means, took up ranching and cactus farming before I was born. That's where I grew up. I learned to shoot, ride, rope, and farm by the time I was seven. They needed the help. We went hungry more often than I'd like to admit. When I turned 16, I met a man named Chev. He was dashing and upper crust, and, most importantly, daring. I had a crush immediately. He was only a few years older than I was. What I didn't know was that he was a criminal already. He was running guns for his father, but I wouldn't find out about that until much later. Cut to two years later, and I'm an adult. First thing I do? Leave home and pursue Chev. Even though my parents needed me, I just had to get out of that life. Before I knew it, I was his gal and he was my guy. It was great. He had units flowing in all the time, so I wanted for nothing. Big change from how I grew up. I sent my parents some units on a regular basis. That was my contribution. They always thanked me, but always asked me to come home. They told me Chev wasn't good for me, but what did they know? I was living the life.

I showed Chev what I could do with a multitool, and the skills I picked up on the farm. He was always impressed with me, and I loved the attention. Over time, he became very familiar with my skills, but I was never familiar with his work. It didn't matter that much to me, as long as he was home often and I was swimming in units.

At some point, though, things took a turn for the worse. Chev was never abusive—let me get that right out in the open. He was always kind to me, or at the very least civil. I never had to worry about my physical safety. Sometimes I felt like he was manipulating me, but he was so pleasant about it, I ultimately didn't care. One day, I got a call. Chev was in trouble and needed my help, so I sprung into action. All he told me was that he might need me to bring my multitool. I rushed over to his location, and there he was, on the ground, mouth bloodied, surrounded by hoodlums. One of them had a multitool barrel pressed right to his head. I had no idea what to think, but I was enraged! Who dared to mess with my Chev?! One of them whipped out his multitool and shot at me. He was a lousy shot. It just grazed my arm. I got even more pissed. I was scared out of my gourd, too, but more angry than anything.

So I killed them all.

I didn't even think about it. I let my emotions take over, and I outdrew all of them. They were down in less than a second. When I realized what happened, I puked. I'd shot many predators before on the farm, and in that moment, I saw those thugs as ravenous beasts attacking a loved one, but when it hit me that they weren't, well...it was a permanent change. I knew I could kill. At least for love.

After that, Chev told me about his job. He assured me I wouldn't be in trouble with the law because those were rival faction members, and their leader would never report their deaths to the authorities. He asked me to put my talents to use working for him. I was a natural with a firearm, and he said I was the best he'd ever met. I was a little numb from the whole thing, and I agreed to do it. I didn't even react to the revelation that my boyfriend was a gun runner. It didn't even faze me, even though it should have. Over the next few months, I went to weapon drops to act as an enforcer. Those months turned into a year. I don't even remember at what point I accepted the fact that I was a criminal.

And then it happened.

I got a call from my home planet. The sheriff was somber on the communicator, and I hoped against hope she wasn't about to say what I thought she was about to say.

My parents were dead.

According to the coroner, they had been shot by over 100 boltcaster rounds, and then their home, my home, had been ransacked and burned to the ground. In my grief, I sped out to the farm and asked Chev to meet me there. There was nothing left. The crops were all dead. The animals had either burned in the fire or escaped. Cleanup crews had already picked up anything salvageable and disposed of everything else. I had funeral arrangements to make, but first I wanted to find out who did it. I asked the sheriff for all of the evidence, and she of course wouldn't let me see it. Later the same day, I broke into the sheriff's office (they didn't keep it very secure) and took a look. One of the perps had managed to lose a weapon, and it was in with the other evidence. As soon as I saw it, I recognized it. It was one of the multitools wielded by the thugs who had threatened to kill Chev—the very ones I killed.

When Chev arrived, I told him about it, and his face dropped. I wanted to go get revenge, and I wasn't sure why he didn't.

This is the part of the story where I start to lose it in real life. I can't keep it together while telling it—or typing it. I just can't.

The weapons had come from those goons, yes, but those goons, well, they weren't from a rival faction. They were from Chev's faction. Well, his father's faction anyway, but they served Chev, too. I was confused. I demanded an explanation. With the saddest face I'd ever seen on him, Chev explained it all. The thugs who attacked him were part of a trial, an audition that Chev and his father held for me. Chev had mentioned to his father one day that I was a crack shot, and so his father, a controlling, bullying individual, manipulated him into setting up the audition. Chev tried to refuse, but his father had too much control over him. The good news is that I passed. Those thugs were ones who had crossed Chev's father, so this was their chance to either make up for it or be disposed of. I disposed of them.

That made the next bit of news even harder to take.

My parents were killed by more of the same goons. Chev's goons. Or his father's, but I've since stopped caring whose goons were whose. See, Chev told me my parents had taken out a loan. Unbeknownst to me, they stopped accepting my contributions because they could no longer take dirty money, even from their only daughter. But that meant they didn't have enough for the rest of their expenses, which had grown since I left (that's a long, boring story—maybe another time). There aren't too many options for unit loans on a barren, backwater planet like that one, so they went with the lender they thought was the cleanest. Turns out he was working for Chev's father, and operated like a loan shark. My parents paid off the original loan eventually, but the interest had been jacked up so much that they had more in interest than the original principal. They couldn't pay it off, so in retaliation, the shark called on those thugs to rough them up. My parents, rough and tumble folks as they were, fought back and killed one (that explains why he lost his multitool). Taking exception to that, the remaining goons killed my parents and torched the place.

I was devastated. My life had been a lie. I had a taste for vengeance yet again. I asked Chev how we were going to avenge my parents. His response was exactly the opposite of what I wanted to hear: "It would be best if you learned how to move on from this." What callousness! He was going to take his father's side after all of this?! His reply cemented just how evil he really was: "Q (that's what he called me), this is a fruitless endeavor. People live and die, many by your hand. Think about just how many lives you've taken; how many of them had children and families; how many were immature, lost children, just as you are. You cannot be in this business if you're not willing to accept that. You will die if you go after my father. And I will be the one to kill you. It's time to grow up. Either take your place by my side and let this go, or turn around and never come back."

So I ran. I buried my parents and ran. He made me into what I am, and I suddenly hated everything about myself. I ran far away, took other jobs, and never looked back.

Eventually I landed here, with AHT1, a team with people who didn't care where I came from, who appreciated my talents and didn't push me into anything I didn't want to do. And they were the good guys, saving people in need, cleaning up messes...it was a great place to be. They gave me my very own ship, my very own space, and my very own friends. I believed then (and believe now) I could trust them.



I believe I can trust them.

Now I've jeopardized that. I can't shake the feeling that this is another setup. Injet, or Darf, or whatever, he's just a pawn. Chev is after me. I just know it. I also know I can find Darf and make him talk.

I'm sure the boys will hack in and read this, which is why I'm leaving it. I want them to find it, but I don't want them to find it quickly enough to come after me. I already know where to start looking for Darf, so while the boys are away, I'll spend a little time arming myself, outfitting The Hammer of Truth (my hauler), and resting as much as I can for the long journey.





Boys, when you read this, just know how much I've grown to like you. This home you've given me, the camaraderie you've provided...it means everything to me. Right now, though, I need to finish this. I need to close this chapter of my life for good. Don't wait up.



//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

You're not doing this alone, Qopret. We're a team. We're coming after you.

Part 005

//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

"It's dangerous to go alone. Take this," said Praxa as he handed me a Vy'keen dagger, but I knew full well a blade would do me no good if things went wrong. I was also sure I couldn't even sneak it in. I'm no secret agent, just a public service agent. Ok, private service agent, but let's not mince words.



"It's dangerous to go alone."

It was a bad situation to be in. I needed to find out what I could about the object Barflet stole, where it came from, and where he took it, and this was the only way I could on such short notice. It was also the only way I could find Qopret, and the only way I'd find out what this mess was all about—and how to get out of it. The person I was about to talk to was my only lead, but she was unstable. Mentally unstable. I didn't know whether she'd say hi and give me a hug, or stab me through the heart. Or both. I didn't want to be here, especially not alone, but without Qopret to help even the odds in a firefight, diplomacy was the only option. It would have been the first option regardless, but without Qopret, I had no backup options. Praxa is good in a fight, but just the two of us are too heavily outgunned. If I'd had more time, I'd have chosen any other way but this.

"Thanks for the offer, Praxa, but you and I both know I'm not getting that in there. Relax. We're just going to talk. That's all. Here, hang on to Vera for me." I handed him my multitool.



"Relax. We're just going to talk."

Let's get one thing straight ahead of time: I was never in any kind of relationship with her, regardless of what she tells you.

The manufacturing facility I was about to enter was enormous, and well guarded. Its original security had been breached years ago, probably decades, and the person who breached it set up a base of operations. I approached the only door into the facility, where a Korvax guard stood at the ready, having seen Praxa and me land in our ships.



"Why are you here?" asked the guard, holding up a hand to stop me. She had a brusque tone and an indiscernible accent.



"Why are you here?"

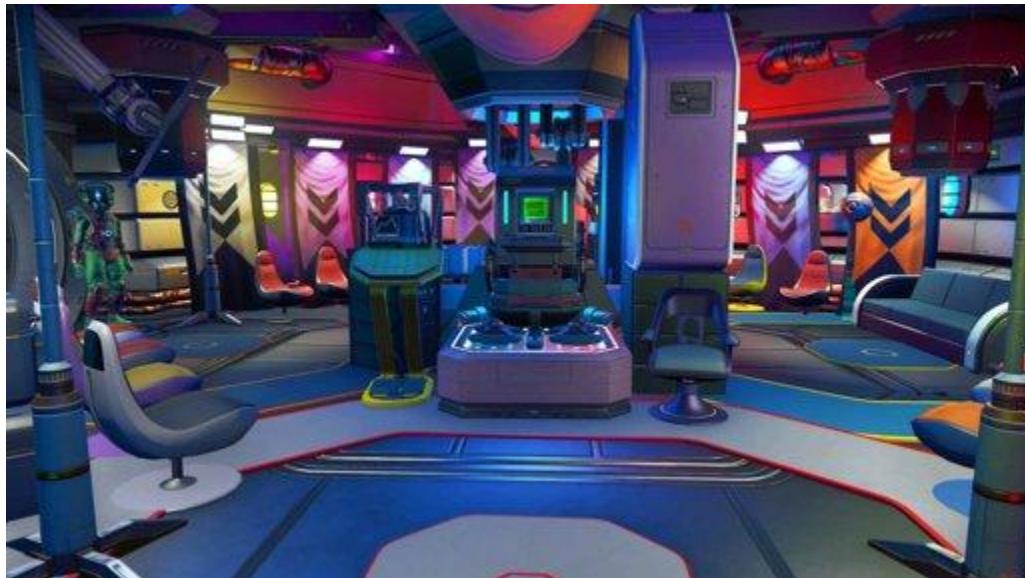
"I'm here to see Vandi. She should be exp—"

"Raise your arms so I can frisk you," she interrupted.

Rude.

I raised my arms and let her do her thing, and she escorted me into the first chamber, which had been converted into a waiting room.

"Wait here," she barked, and disappeared into the next chamber. There were two more Korvax guards stationed here, and I couldn't tell if they were staring at me.





I took a seat on the couch.



The original equipment in this room, including the interface terminal, had been disabled long ago, and everything that was removable was removed. The disabled terminal had a table over it with some odds and ends on it. It made the whole place look kind of...flea marketish.

The first guard returned a few seconds later. "She will see you now. Follow me." She walked me between the other guards into the next chamber, through more guards into yet another chamber, and another, and then I was in Vandi's chamber.



The guard leads me from the lobby.



Entering Vandi's chamber.

Picture the gaudiest, most nauseating, obnoxious thing you can think of, and then triple it. No, quintuple it. Then you'll start to approach an idea of what I was staring at. Vandi, an aged Traveller, had the worst interior design preferences I've ever seen. And she herself was just as nauseating to look at. It was...let's just say it was hard enough to be there, even without Vandi, and leave it at that. There's more story to tell, and I could fill up an entire novel describing the horror before me, so we'll move on.

"Tomcat! How's my baby?"



"Tomcat! How's my baby?"

"Vandi, are you referring to me, or do you actually think we have a baby?"



"Vandi, are you referring to me, or do you actually think we have a baby?"

"Hehe, you're so funny, Tomcat." She pulled out a Vy'keen dagger and walked toward me quickly. I backed up just as quickly, until I knocked against the wall, and I put my hand on the table next to me. She brandished the dagger in her hand as though she was about to stab me. I rested my hand on my multitool holster, remembering to my dismay that it was empty, when suddenly, and with greater speed than I thought she was capable of, she swung the knife toward my hand. It stabbed the table so hard it partially penetrated, and I moved my hand away as quickly as I could. Fortunately it was still completely intact. When she raised the dagger again, an arthropodal creature was on it, impaled clean through, its legs writhing rapidly.

"M. Telifendus," she said, examining the dying creature with morbid fascination. "Docile and easily startled, but always foraging for scraps inside of artificial structures. We call them butterbugs." She held it close enough to my visor for one of its legs to tap it a few times. Her face was almost as close to the butterbug as the butterbug was to me. "We've been trying to fight off an infestation, but they keep getting in. I just don't know what to do." Then in one move, so smoothly and speedily I couldn't make out exactly how she did it, she ripped the creature off of the dagger with her teeth, chewed it, and swallowed it. "They're delicious." She let out a loud belch and wiped her lips with her sleeve as she walked away.

This lady had a screw loose. I'm glad my suit has waste reclamation systems. My orange pants would have been brown otherwise.

"I'm talking about Vera, you silly man," she continued. "My multitool. How is she?"



["My multitool. How is she?"](#)

"Um...uh...she...she's fine. She's doing well." I lifted my hand off of my empty holster. "Van...Vandi, I have a question. It's why I called you."

"Really? You must be desperate. Oh don't look at me like that, I know you don't feel the same way about me as I feel about you, but I do hold out hope for the future." She grinned.

My expression hadn't changed. And I was wearing a helmet. I wasn't looking at her like anything. In fact, I was only looking at the twitching leg sticking out from between her teeth. I choked down my disgust and said, "I'm just in need of your expertise. Someone recently—"

"OH DO PLEASE GO ON," she interrupted, screaming. "IT'S NOT LIKE I'M BUSY WITH OTHER THINGS OR ANYTHING." I just wanted to get out of there. I zipped my lips until she spoke again.



"Go on. Apologize." She crossed her arms and put all of her weight on one leg, staring at me as one stares at a disobedient child.

I didn't know what I was apologizing for, but I had to play along. "I'm sorry."

"...and? Is that it? Just sorry?" She nodded her head as though she was irritated.

"I'm...really really sorry?"

"Sigh. Fine. Go on." She actually said the word "sigh"; she didn't literally sigh.

"Someone recently stole something you'd know a lot about. A quantum processor. I figured you'd—"



"Someone recently stole something you'd know a lot about."

"Actually no, you know what, Tomcat?" she interrupted. Stop interrupting me, lady! "That's not fine. That was an insincere apology. I want you to apologize like you mean it, and like you know what you're apologizing for."

I was seriously about to walk out and try my luck elsewhere, but I took a deep breath, mustered all of my acting chops, and started to apologize. "Vandi, I'm really truly sor—"

"A quantum processor, you say?" Never mind: one more interruption was ok. She took a seat on her couch. "Stolen? Yes, one was stolen from a shipment just yesterday. You say you know who stole it?"



["Stolen?"](#)

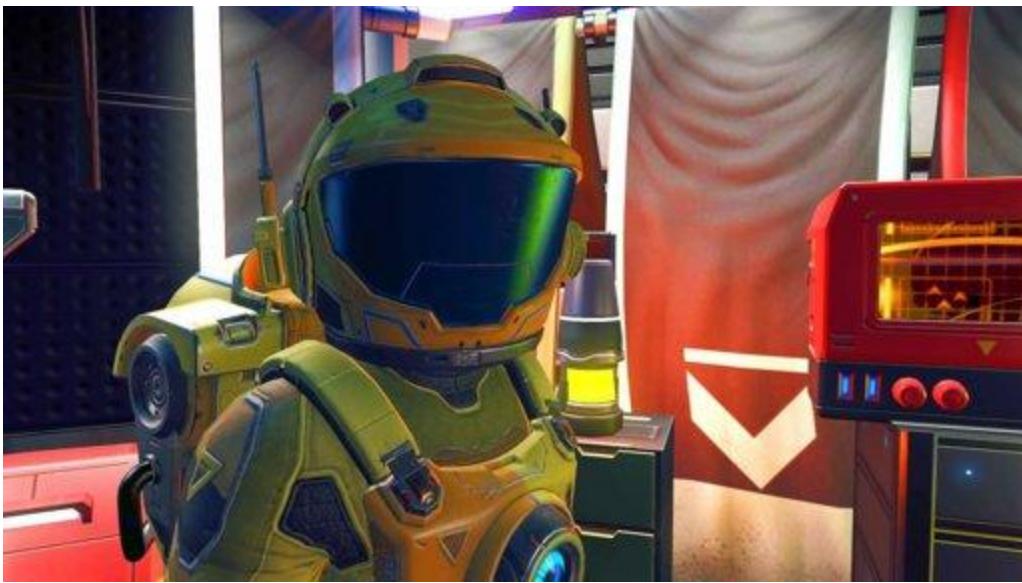
"No, I didn't say that."

"But you do know. Who was it? Come on, you can tell mama." Oh yeah, she referred to herself as mama, especially when talking dirty. It was really creepy.

"All I know is it was someone working for Chev." I decided to name drop. Hopefully that would help get things moving in the right direction.

Her expression changed instantly and she rose and walked toward a wall. "Ok, you've piqued my interest. What does Chev want with my quantum processor?"

"I was kind of hoping you'd know."



I was kind of hoping you'd know."

She looked thoughtful for a moment. That moment became many seconds. She looked at me, then looked down, then at me, then down. This went on for an uncomfortably long time, until finally she said, "I'll tell you if you agree to rekindle our relationship. The love seems to have just sapped right out of it."

"We don't have a relationship. Not even a business relationship. I only ever bought the one weapon off of you, and that was it."

She looked hurt. "Fine. I'll tell you if you agree to sleep with me."

I'm not proud to say I actually thought about it for a split second. I was already running out of time, and this place made me feel desperate. "I...I..." I stammered.

"Nope, too late. That ship has sailed. You ain't gettin' into these britches, sailor." She pushed her pelvis forward and pointed at it with both hands. Yuck. Just the thought... "Know why? Ask me why. Go on. Ask."

"...uh, why?"

"Because once you go Korvax, you never go...bax." I couldn't believe it. She actually looked uncomfortable after uttering that phrase, as though she had never said it aloud before. It almost seemed to match my own discomfort. "I'll tell you anyway. Come here and let mama tell you a story." She held out her arms for a hug. I reluctantly approached. She put her arms on my shoulders, then leaned over and whispered, "I'll never tell." She started laughing. "A girl's gotta have her secrets," she chuckled, smiling from ear to ear, unaware of the piece of leg still in her teeth. At least it had stopped twitching.

"Well is there at least something you can tell me? I told you who was ultimately responsible for your theft. Isn't that worth anything?" That was bold of me. I don't know what came over me. Surprisingly, she appreciated it. "You're right. You don't deserve the shaft. I do." Gawd. Shoot me already and get it over with. "The shipment was headed to me from someone looking to make some stasis devices. Lots of 'em. Thousands upon thousands. I can make that many, as you well know." I didn't know that. "That's all I can tell you. Now leave."

As if on cue, one of her guards entered the room and pointed a rather large rifle at me. I couldn't wait to leave, so I started out the door without a fuss.

Just then, she yelled, "WAIT!" I turned around as she approached. She started behaving strangely, almost drunk, but more...dare I say...sultry, if that word could even be applied to what she was doing. I think she was trying to look seductive. It failed so spectacularly I had to fight just to avoid a chuckle. "There's still time for a romp in the sack if you want." I vomited in my mouth a little. The Korvax guard made a strange grunting noise. She looked at him and said, "Oh cool it, Rox. It's a joke." She looked back at me. "Get him out of here."

I happily left without incident. Back at the ships, Praxa asked if I got any information. "She wouldn't tell me anything really useful," I replied. "Only that she had a buyer who wanted thousands of stasis devices. It was really vague."



"She wouldn't tell me anything really useful."

"Perhaps that information is more useful than we know," he speculated. "We know what is required to make stasis devices, so we can find out through trade network contacts if there are abnormal amounts of quantum processors, cryogenic chambers, and iridesite being purchased, transported, or sold. Even if they're being transported through illegal means, they have to leave traces in official channels. Even I would be hard-pressed to complete such a cross-reference and investigation within our allotted time, however. If only we could find out who her client is through a more direct method, then we might have something."



"Perhaps that information is more useful than we know."

"I know," I smugly replied, "which is why I planted a tracker on her."

//SUPPLEMENTARY DATA FEED//

He woke up, but had no idea where he was. Everything was dark. He could feel something rough touching his face. Then the grogginess cleared and he started to remember: someone had grabbed him and put a bag over his head. He could tell he was now sitting in a chair with his hands and feet tied down. He didn't remember anything in between. He heard footsteps around him, pacing quietly. Just one person. If anyone else was there, they weren't moving. He was peeved, with a hint of genuine anger in there somewhere. He called out, "Who's out there? Do you know who I work for? Do you know who I am? You've just sentenced yourself to death by grabbing me."

A woman's voice replied, "Under normal circumstances, what you just said would be true, but this is different. You're not going to tell anyone about this."

He knew that voice. It was somehow familiar. He couldn't quite place it, though. Not while his head hurt this much. "Wait, you sound familiar. What's your name? Wait wait, just talk some more."

She continued, "You won't tell anyone because you won't want to. I'm not someone you want to cross, but that's only part of the reason."

He remembered! At least he thought he did. "Wait just a minute...by Atlas, is that Q?!" It was no longer dark. The bag was gone. Before him stood a ghost from his past. It was none other than Qopret herself: someone he once admired, but now feared. He hoped he would never see her again, but his hopes had just been dashed.

"Hello, Fly," she said as she straddled the chair in front of him, multitool in hand. "We have a lot to talk about. What do you know about a kid named Darf?"

Part 006

//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

Tomorrow. Chev is coming back tomorrow, and not only do I need to find out where the kid is, why he didn't do whatever Chev sent him to do, and why he ran, but I also need to find my missing team member. I'm still reeling a little from the revelation of Qopret's past. It's pretty heavy. It also makes me more than a little concerned about what she's capable of doing as a result of this situation. So far, no one has died, and I'd like to keep it that way. On one hand, it's important because it involves the business, the team, and our ability to continue to operate in this galaxy ever again, but on the other hand, it's only a business. It's not worth a life.

Why am I thinking about this right now? Why am I even logging it? I guess it's because I'm bored. I've been sitting here for a couple of hours waiting for Vandi to leave her little fortress. It was exciting at first because I've never been on a stakeout before, but it got boring really quickly. Praxa is in his ship, also waiting, and doing some analysis for me, but he doesn't succumb to boredom.



I planted the bait; surely Vandi will take it soon. See, since she knows that the person who stole her quantum processor worked for Chev (she doesn't need to know that the theft wasn't done under Chev's orders), she'll need to confer with her buyer and see what he or she wants to do. Her operation with the stasis devices was definitely not on the level, and that means they're not going to risk any spying by holding conversations about it over any kind of long-distance communiqué. That means either the buyer will travel here or Vandi will travel to the buyer. No way will the buyer come to her facility directly, so they'll pick a spot to meet. We can listen to the meet through the tracker I placed on her, but its short range, meaning we have to be close to listen, as in 200u or less. The signal degrades too quickly for it to be useful at even medium distances, and the transponder signal is given higher priority at longer dist—you know what? That's the technical stuff I don't want to bore anyone with. It's a relatively cheap tracker. I bought it back when I thought I wanted to be a spy. A real spy would probably consider it more of a toy. Still, I hope I get it back.

Suffice it to say we can track her location from a safe distance, but we have to be close to listen to her conversation. From that meeting, we should be able to find out who her buyer is and who might want to steal quantum processors, and then we'll have another lead.

The more I describe this plan, the less promising or well thought out it sounds. I just don't have another one.

//SUPPLEMENTARY DATA FEED//

"What are you doing here, Qopret?" Fly looked around and realized he was in a small wooden shack with a single door and a low ceiling. The only furnishings were a single table and two chairs. A single light hung above him, and a health station hung above the table. "And where is here?"



["What are you doing here, Qopret?"](#)



["And where is here?"](#)

"I already told you, Fly. I need to know about this kid, Darf. Or maybe it's Injuet. He tends to give out fake names."
"No, I mean what are you doing? Why am I tied to a chair, why did you hit me over the head, and why are you waving a...a very fine multitool in my face?"

"I don't know if I can trust you, Fly. When push came to shove, when I needed someone on my side the most, you weren't there, and then you sided with Chev. I always thought people who said you could never trust a Gek were just stupid. Do they have something after all?"

"No. Even if that were true, I'm not your average Gek. I didn't side with Chev, I sided with you. Q, I'm truly sorry you think I sided against you, and I'm truly sorry about what happened to you. I never got the chance to say that. I figured you thought I had taken Chev's side, and over the years, I expected you to come for revenge. I actually came to fear you, thinking I'd see you around the next corner gunning for me, but I still did what I could to make sure you were safe from

Chev and his father. Why do you think you were able to get away from them unscathed? Because I ran interference. And I lost their trust in the process."

"What do you mean unscathed?"



["What do you mean unscathed?"](#)

"The kind of organization we were part of wasn't the kind of organization people just got out of, Q. Chev's father wanted you dead. He didn't want you running to another faction and spilling the beans about his operation."

"Why should I believe you? That's not very pragmatic for a Gek. It's downright sentimental, and you'd say anything to get out of that chair."

"Because I'm still your friend, and like I said, I'm not like other Gek. You know that. Plus, you need information from me. I know exactly where to find Darf, and you won't get it from me while I'm tied to this chair. I'd have told you freely if you'd merely walked up and asked me, but not like this."

Qopret rose from the chair and walked over to the table, keeping her back toward Fly. Without looking at him, she asked, "Why didn't you ever contact me?"



"Why didn't you ever contact me?"

"If I had, they would've found you. On top of that, I was kind of afraid you'd kill me. I needed to let some time pass first. I was being watched because of my association with you. Fortunately, my interference worked, and you got away. That was satisfaction enough for me. By the time I thought enough time had passed, I genuinely couldn't find you, even to spy and check up on you. I thought I'd never see you again, but if you were still mad at me like I thought you might be, then I hoped I never would."

Qopret was quiet for a little while.

Fly broke the silence, "So...are you going to kill me or untie me?"



"So...are you going to kill me or untie me?"

Qopret immediately snatched a dagger from the table and marched toward Fly.

//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

Ok, it worked. Vandi finally left to meet her buyer (in her very ugly ship), and Praxa and I followed her transponder signal to another system. We landed a safe distance away and made our way on foot to their meeting location. When we got close enough, we overheard the last parts of her conversation with her buyer.

"So what do you want to do about this, then?" asked Vandi.



["So what do you want to do about this, then?"](#)

"One processor won't delay production. I'll add an additional one to the next shipment. Continue production as normal, and I'll deal with the thief."

The buyer's high-brow accent sounded familiar, but his voice didn't. I carefully snuck a peek at him through my analysis visor. He was a Traveller, but my visor didn't know who he was. He had no records in any databases that my analysis visor could access. He looked a little like Chev, but white and gray instead of red.

"Do I have anything to worry about here?" asked Vandi.

"This won't affect you. Are you having doubts, Vandi? I know of other ways to make the stasis devices I need."

"No, no no, I'm not saying that at all." There was actually alarm in her voice. "The job is as good as done. I just need to know if I should get some extra protection."

Wow, who was this guy? Who could put Vandi on edge like that?

"More protection is always advisable, but you should know this thief poses no threat. He's a harmless porwigle barely out of the spawning pool."

"Wait, he knows who the thief is?" I asked Praxa quietly.



"Wait, he knows who the thief is?"

"Wait, you know who the thief is?" Vandi asked the buyer.

I just asked that, Vandi.

"As I said, he is of no threat to you. He no longer works for me after this and will no longer be afforded my protection. Proceed as planned." The buyer got up and walked away as he spoke.



"As I said, he is of no threat to you."

Before he got into his ship, he turned and said, "Vandi, don't tell my son anything. I know I can count on your discretion in this matter. Or at the very least your empty pocketbook should you talk." He climbed in, closed the cockpit, and launched away.



"Vandi, don't tell my son anything."



His son? Wait a second, his accent, his appearance, his involvement in nefarious goings on, he knew who the thief was, and the thief worked for him...



[Wait a second...](#)

"Praxa," I whispered, "Do you know what I'm thinking?"

He replied, "I believe so. The pieces fit together. The buyer is Chev's father."

Part 007

//SUPPLEMENTARY DATA FEED//

"There. Now don't make me regret it," said Qopret as she cut the ropes binding Fly's hands and feet. "Now I just need to find Darf so we can figure out what's going on. If someone is involved in Chev's affairs in any way, you're the one who knows about it, so where is he?"

"Well, for starters," said Fly, rubbing his wrists, "those bindings were really tight. Ow. But thank you for not killing me." "I'm still not entirely sure I can trust you, so I have my eye on you. Thanks for complimenting Helix, though."

"Helix?"

"My multitool. I've highly customized him over time," she stated proudly, patting Helix.

"Ah, yes, he is very fine. I'm quite envious. But no matter. It's a prudent measure to be wary, I suppose. If I were in your situation, I'd do the same. Smart as always, my friend. I suppose we should get down to brass tacks."

"Yes we should."

"First, his name isn't Darf."

"There's a surprise."

"It's Nix."

"I'm not sure I care what his real name is at this point. Injet, Darf, Nix...where is he?"

"I hid him away. I can take you to him."

"Just like that? No guile? No resistance?"

"I'm too old and tired for that, Q. And besides, I want to earn your trust back."

"Why would you hide him? What's his story. Who is he?"

"I...should let him tell you. Let's be on our way, shall we?"

Fly gave Qopret coordinates for some ancient ruins in a nearby system, so she flew them both there in her hauler. Once they arrived, Nix ran out to greet Fly, but his face dropped as soon as he saw Qopret.



"Why did you bring her here?" asked Nix, irritation and fear in his voice.



"Why did you bring her here?"

"It's okay, Nix," replied Fly. "She's an old friend. You can trust her."



"She's an old friend. You can trust her."

The trio entered the ruin to get out of the incoming storm, and took seats on makeshift chairs. Qopret spoke first. "Who are you really, kid? What has Chev put you up to?" she asked sternly.

"I...uh..." Nix stumbled over his words. He looked at Fly.

"It's okay, you can tell her," said Fly reassuringly.

"Ok...well, from the beginning, then. It'll make the most sense that way. Back on Balaron, I was spawned into a poor family."

"You told us your progenitor was a wealthy magnate," Qopret interjected. "More lies. Go on."

"I'm sorry I lied," he said sheepishly, looking down. "I didn't know what else to do. I kind of panicked." He sniffed away a tear. "Anyway, as soon as I was old enough to understand the dire straits I was in, I ran away from home. My progenitors

weren't abusive, but they were so negligent that I had no problem leaving them behind. I spent time on the streets, and decided to lock down a gender and be male. Most Gek decide on a gender to ease relations with other races or, like I did, earn favor with certain street gangs, but we're still genderless."

"She knows, Nix," said Fly.

"Right. Well, I learned a few useful tricks along the way. I eventually left Balaron on a trading ship bound for the Delta Quadrant, and ended up falling in with Chev. I called myself Darf to distance myself from my past and help hide my identity. I couldn't do much, but my few skills made me a good delivery boy and messenger. I eventually made a little name for myself in the faction, and Chev's father noticed me."

"His story sounds similar to yours, Fly," said Qopret.

"Yes. It's part of why we bonded so quickly," said Fly. "Chev's father was in need of a good, expendable errand boy, and so he had Nix carry out a couple of delivery missions for him. I was his bookie for all of them. That's how we met. I knew of him already, of course, but we had never met."

"And you also managed to become a friend," said Nix, smiling at Fly. "I was already tired of this life, though." His smile faded. "I wanted to get out. You could say I was desperate to. During this last delivery, I peeked at the goods. A quantum processor. They sell for a lot, so I got the bright, stupid, knee-jerk idea to sell it, take the units, and run." He clinched his fists in anger at himself. "It would have been just enough to get back home. I sat near the shipment for hours, trying to work up the guts to take it. Then, I thought I had the right opportunity, so I took it and stole a ship. The space station I stole it from was operated by Chev's father, so I couldn't sell it there. I had planned to warp to another sector, but the ship I stole had no hyperdrive fuel, and only had enough charge in the pulse engine to get me to the nearest planet. It also had no economy scanner, and I didn't have the materials to build one, so I flew around for hours looking for a trading post."

"Sounds like a horrible string of luck," mused Qopret.

"You're not kidding. And it gets worse. I happened upon an abandoned facility. I hoped there would be a trade terminal or communication station inside, or something even remotely useful, so I got out and checked. I was kind of in a panic at that time, and a bit out of my mind from all the aimless flight, so as I approached...well, I'm not exactly sure what happened. I squeezed the trigger too hard or something, and my multitool went off and struck one of the eggs you always find around those things. Suddenly I was surrounded by those biological horrors and ran inside the facility. I couldn't get out. There was a signal booster inside, which I guess someone had left behind at some point, and your ad was playing on one of the broken screens, so I called. I couldn't tell you who I was or what I had done, so I made up a cover story really quick, and then sat down to wait."

"And got cornered by a hanging whip plant?" asked Qopret, incredulous.

"Yeah, I didn't see it there, but as soon as I sat down, it unfurled and I was just...done. I had no idea what I was going to do, and I was scared."

"Yeah, Tomcat thought your story sounded really fishy. There was no signal booster in there when we arrived," said Qopret.

"I took it with me, of course."

"After your team rescued him," said Fly, "he called me from the trading post in a panic. I transferred the units and quicksilver, and told him I'd come get him. I didn't know he had stolen the processor at that point, so I told Chev about the transfer, and that I was going to retrieve him. Before I got there, Nix sold the processor to a pilot at the trading post."

As soon as I arrived, I learned all of this and realized how much danger he had put himself in. I stashed him here at these ruins until I could help him disappear. I told Chev that he had flown the coop before I got there, and I guess that's when Chev decided to tell his father what was going on and pay your team a visit. I'm sorry I had anything to do with getting you dragged into this mess."

Qopret looked at Fly, then at Nix, then back at Fly. "That's it? That's really it? You just made one horrible decision after another, had the least credible string of bad luck I've ever heard of, and then ran?"

"You sound like you don't believe me," replied Nix.



"You sound like you don't believe me."

"Mama didn't raise no fool," said Qopret, her rural drawl sneaking in. "Chev is behind this. All of this. Mark my words. And you two are in on it somehow." She stood up. Fly and Nix stood up, too, but as soon as they did, Qopret drew her multitool and aimed it at Fly. "No, don't get up. Either of you." They both sat down.

"What are you doing, Q?" asked Fly. "This is the second time today you've pointed a multitool at me."

"And it won't be the last until you start making sense." She pointed Helix at Nix instead. "He's on his boltcaster setting. I've maxed out his upgrades." She leaned closer to Nix and half-whispered, "No ricochet."

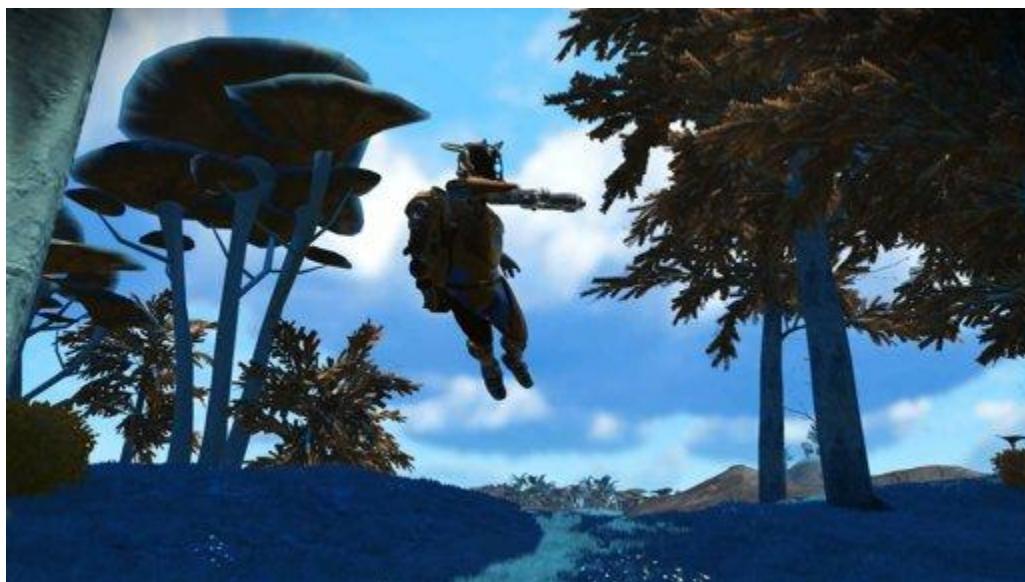
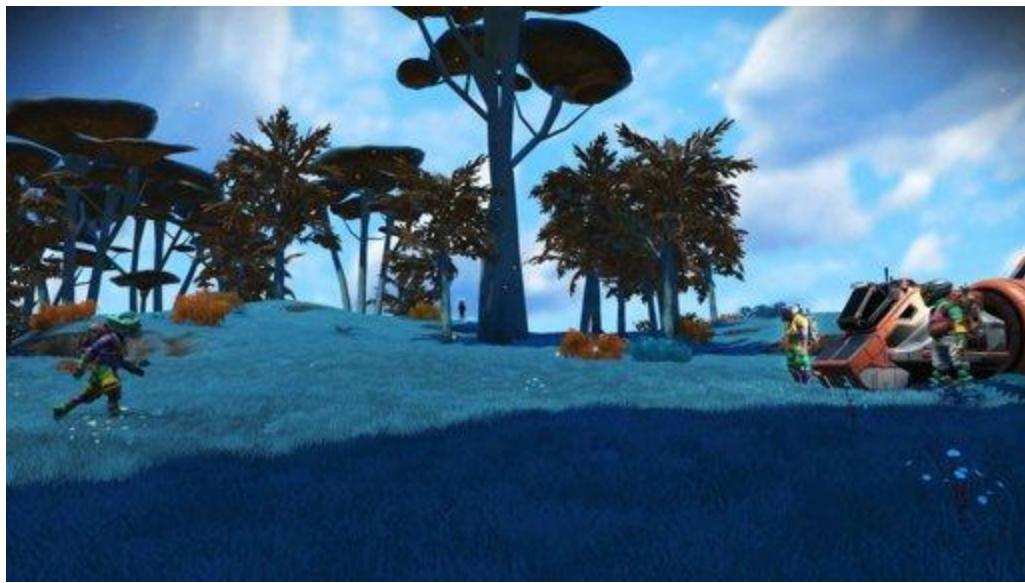
"This is insane, Q!" yelled Fly.

She straightened back up, looked at Fly, and pressed Helix to Nix's temple. "Start talking or the kid is toast."

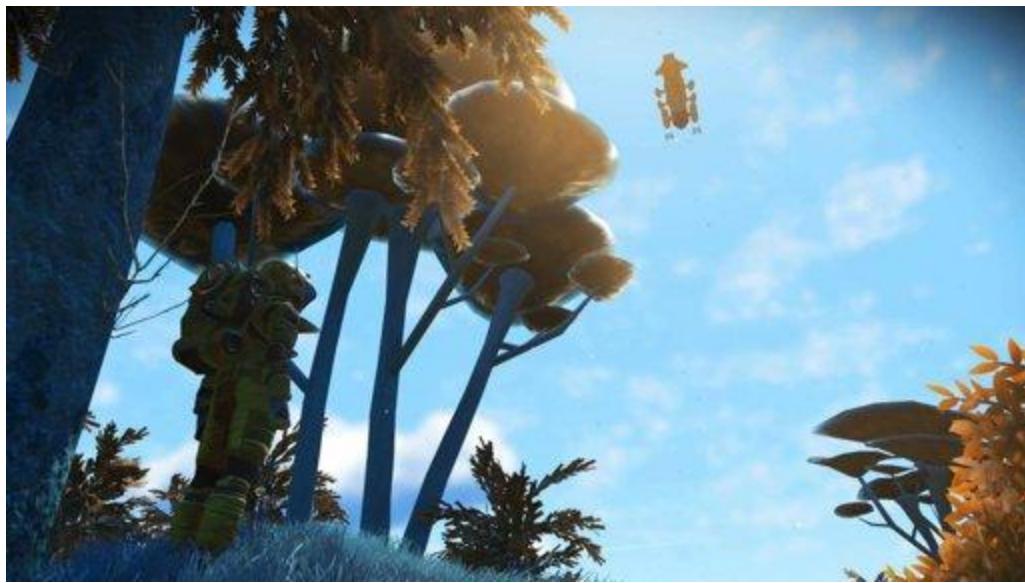
//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

Praxa really is a genius. After spying on Vandi's meet, we learned that her buyer was Chev's father, but we didn't have a next step. With time running out, the buyer escaping into space, and no other options or plan, he looked at me and said, "Time to put your tracker to use again."

"Well, ok, but wh—" Before I could even finish the question, he stood up and melee-jumped toward Vandi. I watched in awe as he shot her, disabled the Korvax guards she brought with her, took the tracker off of her body, stole her ugly ship, and took off after Chev's father before he got completely out of sight.







I made my way back to my fighter, turned the tracking receiver back on, and took off after him.

So here I am warping around, keeping tabs on the tracking signal, hoping I have enough warp cells on me to keep up. I'm reeling from the fact that Vandi and two Korvax are either dead or permanently offline because of this crazy situation. I didn't want anyone to die here, Praxa. You weren't the one I was afraid would go on a killing spree.

I'm sure his plan is to let himself be captured so I can track his signal to their base of operations, but then what? Launch a one-man assault on their compound and hope that Barflet is in there somewhere? Jeez, he really is a genius.

Why does everyone else on this team get to be an action hero but me? I guess I'll have my chance soon.

Part 008

//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

I'm going to run out of warp cells, and I don't have the luxury of stopping long enough to buy more or collect supplies to make more. Most of these stops have been too short. I've been warping so long, I'm pretty sure Chev and his thug will be at HQ any time now.



I believe Praxa has been captured already, unless Vandi's shuttle just had a whole load of warp cells in it. I have no idea what Chev's father is doing now. I don't even know his name, so I'm going to have to keep calling him Chev's father. He just seems to be warping around randomly, aimlessly. Is he trying to shake a tail? Deliver goods? Meet cohorts?

I just hope I don't run out of warp cells before I find out.



//SUPPLEMENTARY DATA FEED 1//

"I said hello! Is anyone home?" Chev stood outside of AHT1 HQ and yelled as loudly as he could.

"Sir, why are you calling out like this? Why did you knock so much if there was no answer? Why not just break a window or ask me to break down the door?" asked Gravot.

"We're not heathens, Miss Gravot. We must stand on certain ceremonies or we risk joining the uncultured in their filthy dens. But the timing of your question is appropriate. I believe we have exhausted our available avenues. Please, Miss Gravot, if you would be so kind...." He gestured toward the door.

Gravot approached the door and forced its sliding panels open, breaking them off of their guides. She forced them all the way into their respective cavities, leaving the door stuck wide open, then motioned for Chev to enter.



Once inside, Chev stood in the foyer and called out again. "Is no one here? Qopret, if you're going to strike, now is your only opportunity. You will not have another chance."



"Is no one here?"



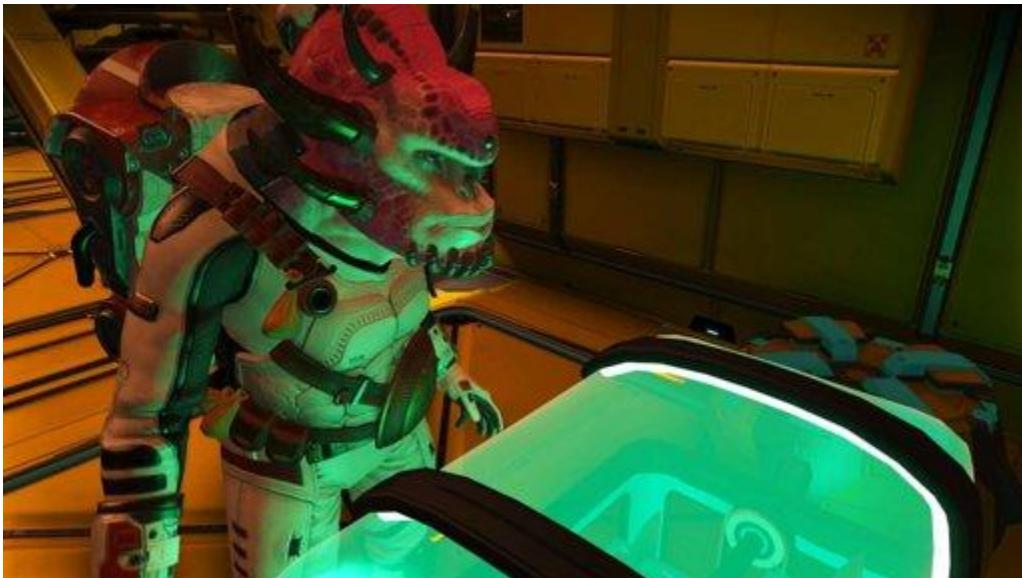
He waited for a few seconds, then turned to Gravot and said, "It seems, Miss Gravot, that our quarries have vacated their burrow. Please have a look around and see if you can discern the whereabouts of our delinquent desperados. I will wait outside."



["Please have a look around."](#)



Gravot headed deeper into HQ and began looking around. She found herself distracted by many things, but finally determined there was no physical evidence to indicate where the team went.





She turned to their digital logs instead. She began with Praxa's station, but there were no logs. She moved to Qopret's station, but there was only one log, and it was encrypted, so she couldn't access it. Then she moved to Tomcat's station, and there she found what she needed. She returned to Chev where he waited outside. "They're not here," she started.



"They're not here."

"That much I've gathered," replied Chev, a little snark in his voice.

"But from the logs of their leader, Tomcat, I learned that he and the Korvax member, Praxa, left to find Darf immediately after we left. They returned to the planet where they found him. They did not find him, but they did infiltrate the space station in that system and found that Darf stole a quantum processor from a shipment. Tomcat indicated he knew someone he could talk to about it. When they returned, Qopret had already left. She left one encrypted log, which I couldn't access, but Praxa accessed it and Tomcat posted it in his log. I did not know you and she were involved, sir."

Chev looked down and remained silent for a moment. When he spoke, he started with a quiver in his voice. "Now you know. Continue."

"She's coming after you by finding Darf first. She believes you are enacting a plan to bring her back in."

"Hmm...piddling."

"Sorry, sir?"

"Inconsequential. Anything more?"

"That's just about it. Tomcat left three additional logs that haven't synced yet. I'm guessing he wrote them remotely, probably from his ship."

"That would mean they haven't returned since setting off to trace the quantum processor. Come, Miss Gravot, we must pay a visit to Vandi, then to my father's space station."

//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

I take back part of my sarcasm regarding Praxa's genius. While I warped through this last system, I picked up a spaceborne pack of warp cells with a note attached to them. "Hiding aboard freighter. Managed to sneak in. Leaving supplies for you where possible. Korvax crew, easy to avoid scrutiny. Almost to final destination."



At least his plan wasn't to get caught. If Chev's father is going to "take care" of Barflet, then we should be able to enact some sort of plan to...rescue him? I'm not sure. We didn't have a plan for this. But I'm working on one.

//SUPPLEMENTARY DATA FEED 2//

"Q, I'm telling you the truth!" exclaimed Fly with desperation.



"Q, I'm telling you the truth!"

"Then why does this all stink like lies?!" Qopret pressed Helix deeper into Nix's temple.

"D-d-d-don't let her kill me, Fly," whimpered Nix.

"I don't know what you want to hear, Q," said Fly. "I've told you everything I know, and what I've told you is true. I'm not holding anything back from you."

"It doesn't make sense, Fly," continued Qopret. "No one is that unlucky. He just happened to accidentally squeeze his multitool trigger long enough to rouse a swarm? Then after experiencing one bad thing after another, he just conveniently happens to find a signal booster in an abandoned facility?" She turned to Nix. "Never mind that even a sniveling, green little porwigle like this wouldn't be stupid enough to steal a quantum processor from the likes of Chev or his father without having some powerful friends. Or masters. Who are you really working for, porwigle?"

"I....I...." stumbled Nix.

"Don't answer, Nix. Q, he's on the level. I can vouch for him. If my word means nothing to you, then kill me, but spare him."

Qopret continued to stare at Nix, eyes wide with anger.

"Qopret!" yelled Fly. "QOPRET!"

She didn't respond.

Fly lunged forward. He grabbed Helix and stuck its barrel directly on his forehead. "Leave the kid alone! If you're going to kill someone, kill me, but I'm telling you the truth, and so is he! I'm your friend, Q! Doesn't that mean anything? You're not the Q I used to know, who could sniff out the truth from the meagerest of clues. The truth is staring you in the face and you can't even see it!"

Qopret was stunned. She knew something was wrong, but if Fly, someone she once trusted more than anyone in the universe, was willing to risk his life to protect Nix, then perhaps she had changed after all. Maybe she had become paranoid, where her suspicion was once based on clarity. She lowered Helix slowly. She didn't know what to say, so she just sat down.

"Fly?" asked Nix sheepishly.



"Fly?"

"It's okay, Nix. We'll get through this. I should have been more careful. I'm sorry."

"Fly, I..." Qopret was speechless.

"I know, Q," replied Fly. He approached her slowly and reached out a hand. "I'm still your friend. We've been through worse than this together."



"I'm still your friend."

Qopret shook Fly's hand, but Fly grabbed it harder and pulled himself in for a hug. Qopret didn't know what to do. She didn't care for hugs, but at this point, she didn't care that she didn't care. She awkwardly put her arms around him and started to squeeze.

Fly suddenly cried out, "NO!"

Qopret's world went black.

//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

We've arrived. The tracker has stopped moving, and it's on a frostbound planet in this system. I'm pretty sure this is where Chev's father's base of operations is. I'm flying down to look for a remote place to land. Wish me luck.



Part 009

//SUPPLEMENTARY DATA FEED//

Chev knelt over Vandi's body and ran his fingers lightly over one of her eyes, closing its lid. He repeated the step for the other eye. "Vandi," he said, "you were useful, and you will be missed." He stood and looked around the park where her body lay. "Rox, what can you tell me?"



"Rox, what can you tell me?"

Rox, one of Vandi's Korvax guards, replied, "Nothing, sir. When you arrived at the facility looking for Vandi, I checked her tracker and that's the first I knew of her whereabouts. We came here along with you, so we're just as in the dark. She didn't tell us anything about this meeting." He gestured to the other Korvax guards with him.



"Nothing, sir."

"As I suspected, of course, but I thought I should ask regardless." He kept looking around. He could see an impression in the grass where a ship had been, along with slightly singed grass from a launch thruster. Some distance away, he could see a similar, but much larger impression with darker thruster burns. He had difficulty making them out in the dense grass, but he could see Vandi's footprints leading from a deck that held a double-sided bench. It looked like a good place

to hold a meeting away from prying ears. He could make out slightly larger footprints leading from the deck to the larger ship impression. She had a meeting with someone, and the other person made it to his or her ship and launched away. Vandi didn't make it to hers. Was that who killed her and her two guards?

He walked to the bodies of the guards. "Miss Gravot, remove their cores and give them to Rox. Perhaps there's something useful in their memory."

Gravot grunted and approached the bodies.



"Sorry, sir," said Rox, "but Vandi instructed them to turn off all recording before they left. There will not be any useful information in their cores."

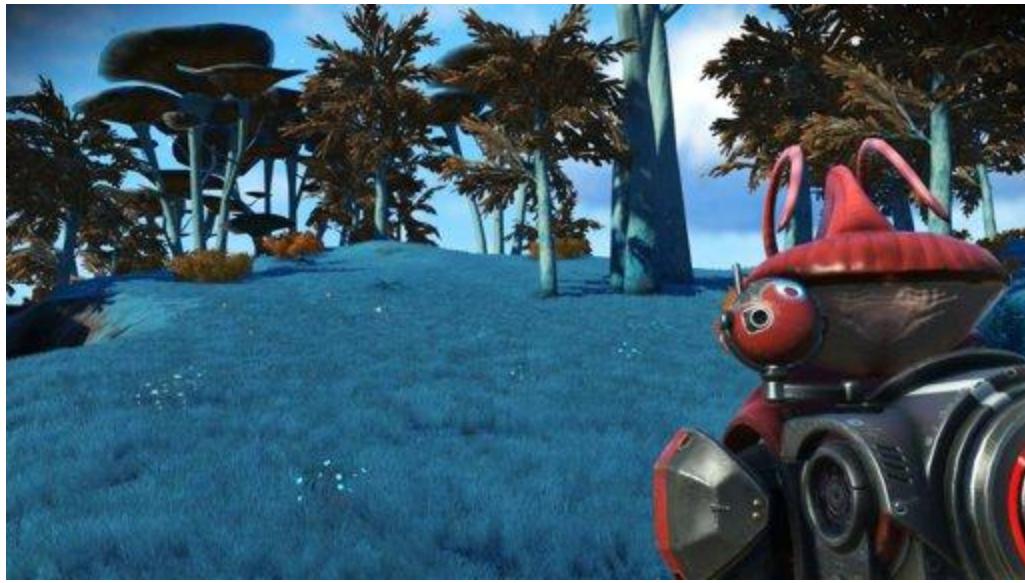


["There will not be any useful information in their cores."](#)

"Understood. At least you'll be able to reactivate them in different husks. Carry on, Miss Gravot." Chev saw that both of them were facing the same direction, so he started walking that way. He could see much activity: the ground was turned up in several of the footprints, indicating sudden changes in direction; there were deeper footprints with long strides

between them, indicating running. This was the person who killed Vandi, no doubt about it. "So," he spoke aloud, "this person killed her, killed the guards, then stole her ship. Perhaps an empty starship is still nearby."





He walked up the hill and found a location behind a bush where two people had been sitting, and then found two sets of tracks leading from the bush.



He started following them, but as soon as he crested the next hill, he could see where they led: there, in the distance, sat an exotic starship he immediately recognized as Prax's.

//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

As soon as I landed on this frostbound planet, I started walking toward the tracker signal. If this was indeed where a crime boss's operation was based, I didn't want to chance being spotted, even if I was landing on the night side, so I landed about 3000u from the signal. It took a while, so I'll spare you the boring parts, but I eventually arrived and saw Prax sitting on top of Vandi's very ugly shuttle. I launched down to him as quickly as possible.



When I made it to him, I exclaimed, "Prax! It's good to see you. How was the trip? Did you sleep well? See all the sights? Kill all the people? By the way, why'd you kill Vandi? How did you make it onto and off of the freighter unnoticed? Oh I have so many questions for you! How are ya, pal?"

Prax seemed confused, and asked, "Was that a joke of some sort?"

"Some of it was sarcasm, but I genuinely want to know what you were thinking. I was worried Qopret would be the one to murder a bunch of people, not you."

"We should get moving. We don't have much time. I've already located Darf, so if you'll just call your ship—"

"No, Prax," I interrupted. "This is more than a little important. I need to know if I can trust you first." "Of course. You're right to inquire. It was the most logical course of action given the circumstances. I did not intend to kill Vandi, nor did I shoot her in a vital location. In fact I was unaware until this moment that she was deceased. It makes me wonder what killed her."

"Hmm. What about the guards?"

"As I'm sure you're aware, Korvax cores can be inserted into new husks. Their husks may have been damaged, but their cores remained intact, meaning I left them unharmed."

"Huh. Well, I guess we'll be off then. Where's Darf?" I called my ship while I waited for an answer.
"Chev's father captured him and has him locked in a cell in his tower."

"Wow, that sounds a little more fairy-tale than I was expecting."

"Sorry?"

"Evil overlord keeping someone locked up in his tower? Yes? No?" I cleared my throat. "Let's get going." We climbed in our ships and flew partway around the planet, where dawn was starting to break. On the way, I thought, "Is it just me, or does Praxa seem even more humorless than usual?"

Praxa contacted me on the starship communicator as we neared our destination. "As we approach this facility, keep your altitude low. I've found a cave nearby where we can land and prepare for infiltration. If you stay low enough, you won't show up on their systems until you get much closer to the tower. Just follow me."

We flew extremely low, as in almost touching the ground, through trees and past small, naturally formed rock towers. We reached a large cave and flew into it, landing in the center of its outermost chamber. "This will be fun to fly out of," I mused as I climbed out of my fighter.





"Indeed it will." Praxa pulled out his multitool, mock-cocked it, and looked at me. "Let's do this."



["Let's do this."](#)

Oh boy, he looked even more like an action hero than ever. I pulled out my multitool and mock-cocked it the same way.
"Let's rescue this Gek."



"Let's rescue this Gek."

Ok that sounded cooler in my head.

//SUPPLEMENTARY DATA FEED//

Chev walked back toward Gravot and Vandi's Korvax guards. "I know who killed Vandi. Who would like a chance at revenge?"



["Who would like a chance at revenge?"](#)

"Actually, sir," said Rox. "I've examined her more closely, and it does not appear she was killed by the boltcaster wound. It hit in a nonvital location. Her heart stopped on its own due to increased stress levels. She had a heart condition."

Chev stared at him. "Well then, who would like to get revenge against the Korvax who increased those stress levels?" All of the guards raised their hands.

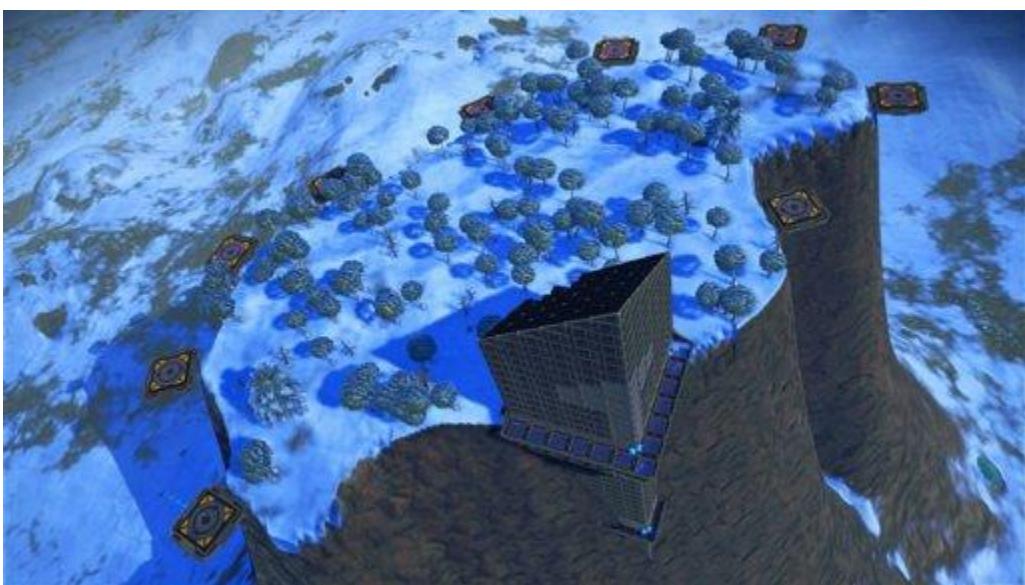




"Let's be on our way then. We must stop at a space station first. There's someone I need to talk to."

//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

Wow, this base Chev's father built is amazing. Just look at it!



I'm intimidated straight away. But there's no time to dilly-dally. According to Praxa, Barflet is being held in a cell on one of the basement levels. He discovered a reliable way in while he was in here, before he came to meet me. It's a drain at the base of the mesa. It's always a drain, isn't it? When is it ever a back door or secret passage any more?

We shouldn't be spotted, and I can act as his prisoner when we reach the cell block. I'm not going to lie: this is going to be kind of fun for me. It's real espionage! Spy stuff! All the intrigue and glamour and such! I'm trying to hide my excitement.

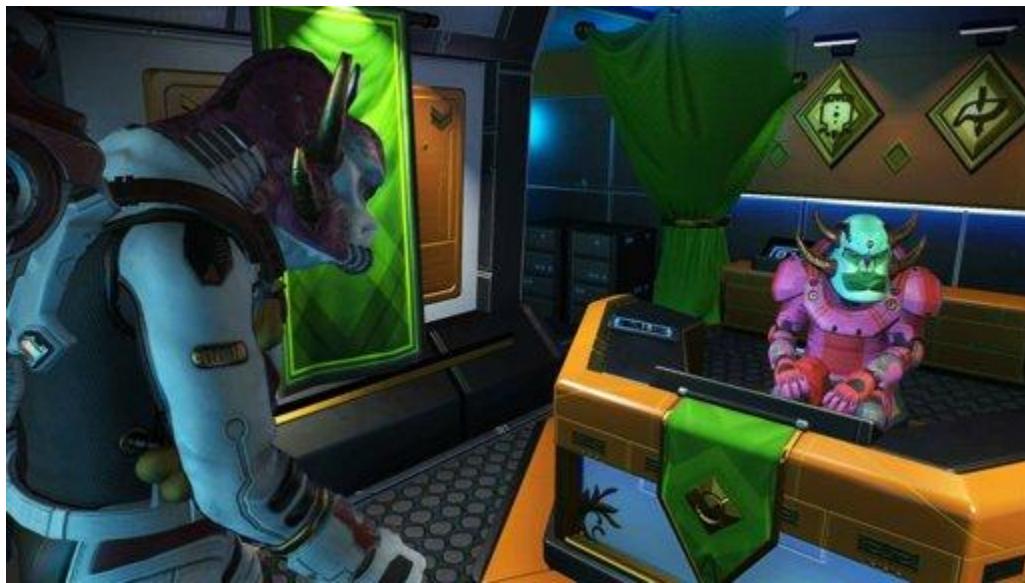
The only thing that could sully this experience is if we're about to climb into a sewer drain. Oh please tell me it's not a sewer drain. That wouldn't be glamorous at all. I guess I'll see you on the other side.

Part 010

//SUPPLEMENTARY DATA FEED//

Chev stepped out of the space station teleporter, Gravot close behind him. He turned around and watched as Rox and the rest of Vandi's Korvax guards followed. Once they were through, he said, "Please have a seat in guest reception. I need to check on one thing, then we'll be on our way." Rox nodded his head, and the group of Korvax marched to the next room. "Miss Gravot, let's visit with Security Chief Banen and discover why he's letting Gek thieves steal cargo from my father's space station."

Gravot approached one of the Vy'keen merchants and asked, "Where is Banen?"



"Where is Banen?"

The merchant pointed to a Vy'keen standing nearby, dressed in teal armor. Gravot walked up behind Banen and grunted near his head.



"Grah!"

Banen turned quickly to confront her, irritated, but lost his irritation when he realized who it was, and that she wasn't alone. Chev stood beside her. "Who the—oh it's you, sir. How can I help you?"

"First, Mister Banen," said Chev, "you can explain how a juvenile Gek stole a valuable item and a ship right from under your nose. Second, you can take me to the security room so I can see the feed from the past 48 hours." He leaned close and whispered, "Third, if you value this job or your life to any degree, you can give me a very good reason not to report this to my father."



"First, Mister Banen..."



"You can give me a very good reason not to report this to my father."

Banen became flustered and replied, "Y-y-yes, sir! Right away! Please follow me." They began walking as Banen explained. "Darf was here escorting a shipment for your father. I hope you understand I'm under strict orders not to discuss the contents."

"It's quite alright. I already know it was a quantum processor," replied Chev.

"He arrived with the shipment and was waiting to transfer the crates to another ship, like he's done several times before, but then he stole an item and a shuttle. He did it so quickly, he was in the shuttle and launching away before we could either catch him or shut down launch permissions."

By the time Banen finished explaining, they were in the security room, and Chev said, "Pull up the feed, please." After he watched the security video, Chev said, "So Tomcat and Praxa were here. Banen, there are parts of the feed missing. How did they know to check the crates?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't know. They must have deleted part of the feed while they were in here."

"They were in here?! In the security room?!"

Banen cringed, "No, I mean...uh..."

"Miss Gravot, would you please escort Mister Banen to a holding cell?"

"Sir, please, no!" pleaded Banen.

"In the space of three days, you have displayed unforgivable incompetence. A juvenile Gek stole a quantum processor, a shuttle, and perhaps something else; an Anomaly and a Korvax entered your security room without your knowledge; you deleted parts of a video feed to cover it up. I cannot dispense punishment to you since you're on my father's payroll, but I can hold you until he can deal with you."

"Please! I have a wife and kids to support!"

"You're a bachelor with no living relatives. It made you a perfect fit for security chief on this space station because you would be available at times when others would be occupied. But you're also apparently lazy, you can't cover your tracks, and you lie poorly. Miss Gravot, please get him out of my sight."

Gravot grunted and escorted him out of the room.

//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

Well this sucks. I'm in prison. Wait, let me back up a little and explain.

After I found Praxa in my last log, he and I geared up and headed to rescue Barflet. I mean, we weren't really trying to rescue him, we were just trying to find him and see if we could get out of this ultimatum from Chev, but we were on a mission to find him. Anyway, we made it to the pipe he told me about, and you guessed it, it was a sewer pipe. It was only an overflow pipe, but it definitely still smelled like a sewer.



We climbed in and Praxa led the way through the tunnels. "When did you have time to scope all of this out?" I asked while we progressed.

"Shh, we're almost there. We must remain silent now. Give me your multitool."



"Shh, we're almost there."

I looked at him strangely. "Why?"

"You're my prisoner. It would look wrong if you had one on you."

"Oh. Right." I handed him my multitool and we continued in silence. To keep up appearances, I walked in front and he kept his multitool trained on me. He led me with "left", "right", and "straight" when we came to junctions.

Before long, we turned a corner and found an unguarded cell. "Where are the guards? There's been no one here the entire time."

"There must be something pulling them away. There were many guards down here earlier. Here, Darf is in here, so I will disable the barrier."

He approached a control stand next to the cell entrance and tapped a few buttons. The energy barrier fizzled out and I walked in. I looked to my left, and there was a Korvax prisoner held in a restraint station. The prisoner called out, "No, it's a tra—" but was cut off when the restraint station shocked it into unconsciousness. I looked to my right and there was an empty restraint station. Barflet was nowhere to be seen. I turned around and said, "What gives, Prax?"

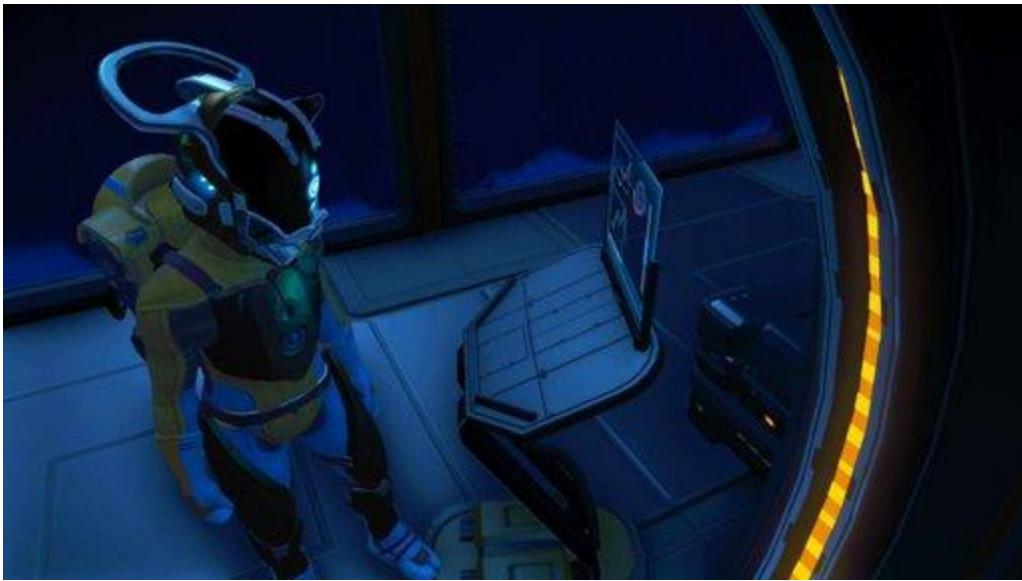


"No, it's a tra—"



"What gives, Prax?"

He tapped the control stand and the barrier reactivated. He held his hand up and said, "Stay here. Cormac will be down to talk to you soon." He walked away unceremoniously.



"Stay here."

"What? Who? What are you doing, Praxa?!" I yelled after him. I felt a vice-like grip on my left hand, then a strong tug that pulled me off of my feet. The same vice-like grip grabbed my right hand, and I realized I was being pulled into the restraint station by its robotic arms. I felt a horrible shock that made all of my muscles clench, and I went into a stiff standing pose as the robotic arms twisted me around and locked me into place. The shock relented and I was left there staring at the other prisoner, wondering what just happened.



So this sucks. At least I have the ability to leave verbal logs like this.

//SUPPLEMENTARY DATA FEED//

Gravot walked back into the security room and approached Chev where he sat at the monitor station. "Sir," she began, "why did I just lock Banen up? Why is he in trouble at all? Didn't you send Tomcat and Praxa to find Darf, thereby placing them here on your orders? Why punish Banen because Tomcat and Praxa successfully tracked him like you wanted?"



"Sir, why did I just lock Banen up?"

"I didn't know at the time their task would take them here. All I knew was that Darf was escorting a shipment of some sort for my father. Yes, they were successful, but had those two not been here at my request, any other faction could have infiltrated the station just as easily."

"I don't understand why you sent them on this task in the first place."

"As opposed to you, for instance? We were busy, and they were expendable."

"So it had nothing to do with Qopret?"

Chev was silent for a few moments. "Miss Gravot, I encourage questions because they often assist in clarity. In this case, however, they do not. Let us be on our way. I contacted my father to alert him about Banen, and he asked me to come to his base of operations. He said he's caught a couple of rats I might be interested in disposing of."

Part 011

//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

I don't think I'm making it out of this situation. My logs will eventually sync back to HQ (eventually), so if you're reading this, just know I led the life I wanted to lead and did the things I wanted to do. Mostly. I never got to do an orbital dive or get rich beyond my wildest dreams, but...no, there's probably more I wanted to do. Never mind. I hope I get out of this somehow.

Moving on: so there I was in this prison cell underneath Chev's father's base, a Korvax prisoner in the other restraint station. I didn't pay attention to my suit's chronometer, so I don't know how long I was there before it eventually woke up and started talking to me. The Korvax, not my chronometer. I'm not going crazy.

In a voice I didn't recognize, it said, "Tomcat, I'm sorry."



"Tomcat, I'm sorry."

"How do you know my name? Who are you?"

"I'm Praxa."

I thought about it for a few seconds, then said, "You don't sound like him."

"Korvax voice modules are attached to the husk, not to the core. My core was switched out with one of Cormac's enforcers. He took my body and voice module and put my core into his husk, which was locked up here before my core was reactivated."

"Ok, sure, if you're Praxa, then what's my middle name?"

"You've never told me."

Dagnabbit. I never told him. I only told Qopret. But I figured only Praxa would have known that. New question.

"Um...right. How long have you been employed by me?"

"Five years, seven months, twenty days, seventeen hours, and forty-two seconds."

Show off. I was only going to say five and a half years. "Fine, but I bet someone could have retrieved that information." "It's not public, so in that scenario, it would have been through illegal means. Considering where we are, however, I see what you're saying. Sir, if I may, I will volunteer information no one but I could know."

"Sure. Go ahead."

He proceeded to tell me some personal information I'm not about to record here. It was information I had told him and never recorded anywhere, but suffice it to say I was pretty sure he was Praxa. "And furthermore," he continued, "I am truly sorry you were locked up here, and that my husk was employed in the subterfuge used against you."

"Well...I'm convinced it's you. I asked the other you about this, but I'll ask you: what were you thinking? Why did you kill Vandi and disable her guards? I was afraid Qopret would go on some killing spree, not you. And why did you run off so suddenly with no plan in place?"

"You're right to inquire. It was the most logical course of action given the circumstances. I did not intend to kill Vandi, nor did I shoot her in a vital location. In fact I was unaware until this moment that she was deceased. It makes me wonder what killed her."

"The other you said that same thing. In fact, I think he said it verbatim."

"That makes sense. They copied my recent memory before sending their agent to meet you. They only managed to copy 72 hours. It would be how they knew you were following, and how the impostor was able to convince you that he was me."

"Huh. And the brash plan?"

"It was only logical, but I overestimated my ability to avoid detection amongst those with high intuition. Shortly after I dropped the warp cells and note, I was noticed, apprehended, and questioned aboard the freighter. I have multiple protocols in place to prevent my memory from being read or my core from being taken, but Cormac has access to technology I've never seen before, and it allowed him to break through my defenses in a very short time. I have already noted the upgrades I need to make. Fortunately they were only able to break into recent memory. The 72 hours I just mentioned. Long-term memory has higher encryption, but I'm convinced they would have broken through that, too, given enough time."

"You said that name earlier. Cormac. Who is that?"

"Cormac is Chev's father."

"...Ooooooh, that makes sense now. What do you think is going on here? Cormac said that Barflet would be of no threat to Vandi, almost like he was protecting him. Do you think they're in cahoots?"

"I do not understand this fascination you have with calling him Barflet. His name is Darf."

"Right. Injet, Badlo, Darf...I just decided to call him Barflet since it's sort of an amalgamation of his fake names."

"I see, but I still do not understand. Regardless, perhaps Cormac suggested his lack of threat because he planned Darf's demise. He did still agree with Vandi's suggestion to increase her security."

"Only passively. I can't tell exactly what's going on here, but I haven't trusted that Gek since the start."

"Sir, are you referencing the prejudiced idiom 'Never trust a Gek'?"

"No! I'm talking about that specific Gek."

"Perhaps it would be wiser to adopt a policy of default distrust, regardless of species."

"Just...hate everyone equally?"

"If you must assign an emotion to it, then not hate, but merely apathy."

"Praxa, is this how you wax philosophical?"

"I'm merely stating a pragmatic course of action to prevent harm."

"This isn't a conversation I want to have right now. I'd rather be talking about how we're getting out of here," I replied, irritated that we were having this conversation in a cell that was certainly bugged, and that I didn't think about that fact before Praxa divulged so much of my personal information.

"Do not worry," said a voice from outside the cell. "You're not leaving. You're my guests, and based on what I just heard, you know too much for me to even entertain the notion."

The energy barrier dropped and in stepped Cormac. Now at least I know where Chev got his fancier-than-thou accent, because this guy had it in spades. He was followed by Praxa's impostor, who immediately walked over to Praxa and triggered the restraint station to knock him unconscious.



Cormac walked closer to me and said, "It's such a shame, this: if circumstances were different, I'd be hiring you right now. You're quite a good investigator. You followed your leads all the way here, and had I not been a step ahead of you, I'm quite certain you would have found a way in here on your own. It's unfortunate that the Gek you're looking for isn't here. After I access your logs, I can fill the gaps in Praxa's memory and perhaps locate him myself. Perhaps not, but it's still worth investigating."

There goes my theory about them being in cahoots. If he doesn't even know where Darf is, then they're surely not working together. I started to ask, "Cormac, what are your motivations here? Why are you building thousands of stasis devices? Why is Darf so important to you? Why did your son send us to find him instead of someone he trusted? The bit about us being on the hook for his lost revenue seems like a weak reason, and I'm not convinced it was only because of

Qopret. Why didn't you want Chev to know what you were doing?" But all I got out was, "Cormac, what—" before he had the restraint station shock me into silence. Then he had it fill my helmet with a gaseous sedative. I fell unconscious within seconds.

When I woke up, Cormac pulled a cord from my helmet, and said, "Rise and shine, sleepyhead." I was really groggy, and couldn't see much past Cormac's head, which itself was partially blurred. He reached behind me, then turned and took a step away. He was completely blurred at that point.



"Rise and shine, sleepyhead."

"Did you talk to Fly?" I heard him ask someone. I couldn't make out who else was there.

"He still has not returned." It sounded kind of like Chev. "The last time I saw him was when he returned from picking up Darf. If I'd known then what I know now, I would have held him for questioning."

"I know about Qopret, son." Yep, it was Chev. "I know you tried to hide her whereabouts from me."

"Father, she moved on. She never talked about our organizations in all the years she was independent. There was no reason for her whereabouts to be made known now."

"For what it's worth, I understand why you did it."

Chev paused for a few seconds, then, with a slight quiver in his voice, replied, "I just didn't want to give her incentive to rat us out. That's all. Nothing more."

"But you still wanted to keep her close. That's why you hired her team."

"No, sir. That's not it."

"You keep telling yourself that. Let me know when you're done with these two." My vision was starting to clear up, so I could see that Cormac walked to the cell door. Before he left, he turned and said, "Never forget, my boy, that I loved your mother the same way." Then he walked down the hall until I could no longer hear his footsteps.

I heard a sniffle. Was Chev crying? I couldn't tell. Before my vision cleared up all the way, he stepped into my field of focus, stared into my helmet, and said, "It seems, Agent Tomcat, that my father believes you to be in possession of more knowledge than what is contained in your logs or in Praxa's memory. Ergo, I'm tasked with extracting it."



"I'm tasked with extracting it."

I replied, "This is so trite."

"Pardon?" he asked.

"Torture? Really? You know that information extracted under duress is unreliable, right? Plus it's so overdone these days."

"No, Agent Tomcat, I don't know this. Please elucidate for me." He reached over to the control panel on the restraint station and tapped a button. It sent an excruciating shock through me, but I had enough muscle control left to scream in pain. After a few more shocks like that, he asked again, "Please, Agent Tomcat, will you enlighten me?" He seemed to be doing it for fun. I don't think he believed I knew anything. I was actually starting to feel for him for a minute there, but then he revealed how much of a sociopath he really was. He shocked me yet again, and I screamed yet again. "Agent Tomcat, I'm not hearing anything useful from you." No, strike that. Not a sociopath. Psychopath. In the most clinical way possible.

I'm not sure how long he spent shocking me like that, but before long, he apparently received a message from his suit's computer. "Hmm, this is an inopportune time for a malfunction, but this is one I cannot ignore. You have a moment's respite, Agent Tomcat. Stay here," he said to me pointlessly. He walked into the hall, activated the energy barrier, and walked around the corner.



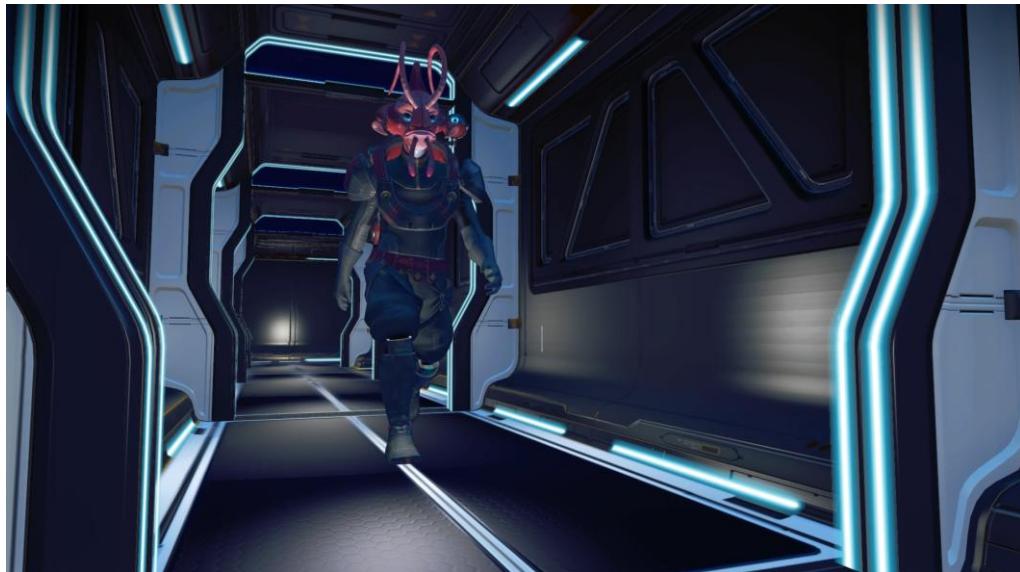
So that's my life now. Being tortured to death. I'm taking this time to record my final log before Chev returns to finish me off. I wonder which system is malfunctioning. First it was his hazard protection, maybe it's his waste reclamation system this time. Maybe he had to visit the bathroom. Please be constipated, Chev. Or better yet, have an aneurysm from trying to push one out and just die on the toilet. Do us all a favor.

I never should have trusted that Gek.

Part 012

//SUPPLEMENTARY DATA FEED//

Chev was irritated. How could his hazard protection have malfunctioned at a time like this? And why did it alert him while he was indoors, where there were no hazards? His suit's voice kept speaking in his ear repeatedly, saying, "Technology damaged. Technology damaged." It was like it was stuck in a loop.



"Technology damaged. Technology damaged."

His hazard protection was indeed damaged, but how? It was working fine just a minute ago. And why was the computer repeating so frequently? As he looked through his inventory for the items to repair it, he heard a sound from behind him.



He turned around just in time to see a small flash of light, and then he felt his body convulse as an electric shock travelled through it. He slipped violently into unconsciousness.

//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

I know I acted like my last log would be my last ever, but Chev hasn't returned, and I'm regaining my strength. I'm going to record this in real-time so there's record somewhere that I made an effort to escape.

These restraints are immovable, but maybe, just maybe, I can get my hand or leg over to the control panel. The clamps are around my suit, not around me directly, so perhaps I can get out of my suit...nngh...shimmy...out...just...wiggle—wait, wait, someone is coming. Crap. Chev is coming back. Why is he walking so slowly? It sounds like he's dragging something behind him. Ugh, it's so dark out there, and my vision is still messed up. I can't tell what's going on.

I need to whisper so he doesn't hear me. The dragging noise has stopped, and he's outside the cell. The barrier just dropped. Sounds like he's struggling. Uh...wait, that's not Chev. Chev's body just landed on the cell floor. Who's doing this? Is someone rescuing us?! Another body just dropped on the floor. It's a Gek I've never seen before. Orange skin, stripes, teal suit. More grunting from whoever this is. Lifting another body?

Qopret! Qopret wake up! Who's out there? Who just threw Qopret's body on the floor?

//SUPPLEMENTARY DATA FEED//

Nix stepped into the cell and said, "Who were you just talking to?"



"Who were you just talking to?"

"Darf!" yelled Tomcat.

As he reached back out into the hall, Nix said, "Actually it's Nix." He carried Helix in and set it beside Qopret's body. "I don't believe you," replied Tomcat.

"Probably a good idea." He reached into the hallway again, brought out Praxa's multitool, and set it beside his restraint station.

"Wait, Praxa got his own husk back," said Tomcat. "I can't believe I just now noticed that."

"I asked you a question, Agent Tomcat."

"Who am I talking to? I was just...talking to Praxa."

"He's unconscious."

"I know. What, you've never talked to a plant or something? Or a pet? Or thin air?"

Nix stopped and looked at Tomcat. "Praxa is like a pet to you?"

"No! He's just unconscious. Since he can't hear or understand me, it's the same principle."

Nix walked over to Praxa's station and tapped a button. Praxa immediately woke up. "Hey, Praxa, did you know Tomcat thinks of you like a pet?"

"That's not what I said! What the hell is going on here, Barflet?"

"What did you just call me?"

"I mean Nix. Or whatever. I got tired of keeping your fake names straight, so I came up with Barflet as an amalgam. Badlo, Darf, Injuet."

"Oh...heh. That's funny. Anyway, Praxa, just keep in mind that you're his pet."

"Nix, I know very well what he said," replied Praxa sternly. "My audio receptors still function and record during periods of unconsciousness."

"Hmm," replied Nix. "Well, joke's over." He walked to the cell door again and retrieved three more multitools: Tomcat's, Chev's, and Fly's. He set Chev's and Fly's next to their bodies, and put Tomcat's next to his restraint station.

"Agent Tomcat asked you a question, Nix," said Praxa. "What is going on here?"

"And why do you have Vera, and why are you setting her beside me?"

"Please, it's not time for exposition yet. I'll explain everything once the others wake up. I'm sorry you two got mixed up in this," continued Nix, motioning to Tomcat and Praxa, "but it was unavoidable."

"Mixed up in what?" asked Tomcat. "I don't even understand what's going on here!"

Nix silently bent over each body and pressed something into each one's arm, then walked to the cell door and raised the energy barrier. He stood silently.

"Nix?" prodded Tomcat.

"ShhhhHHHHHHH. They're about to wake up."

Almost at the same time, the eyes of each unconscious person began to blink.

"I'm back in the cell. Why am I in the cell?" asked Chev. He made some grunting noises, then asked, "Why can't I move my arms or legs?"

Qopret asked, "Fly, are you alright? Where am I?"

Fly replied, "I'm not sure if I'm alright, let alone you."

"The last thing I remember is you yelling no in my ear, then something hitting me from behind," said Qopret. "I can't move anything either. And is that Chev's voice I hear?"

Chev replied, "You're correct, and it seems that we've all arrived in the same predicament. If you will remain silent, perhaps our assailant will speak."

Nix leaned forward slightly, clapped his hands together, and said, "I suppose you're all wondering why I've gathered you here today."

"Is that Darf?" asked Chev.

"Yes, it is," said Fly, "but his name is Nix."

"In reality, Nix is another pseudonym," said Nix. "My real name is inconsequential at the moment, though, so keep calling me Nix. I chose that name because that's exactly what I'm here to do: nix all of you from existence. It's your payment for what you've all done."

"And what have we done, Nix, or whatever your name is?" asked Qopret.

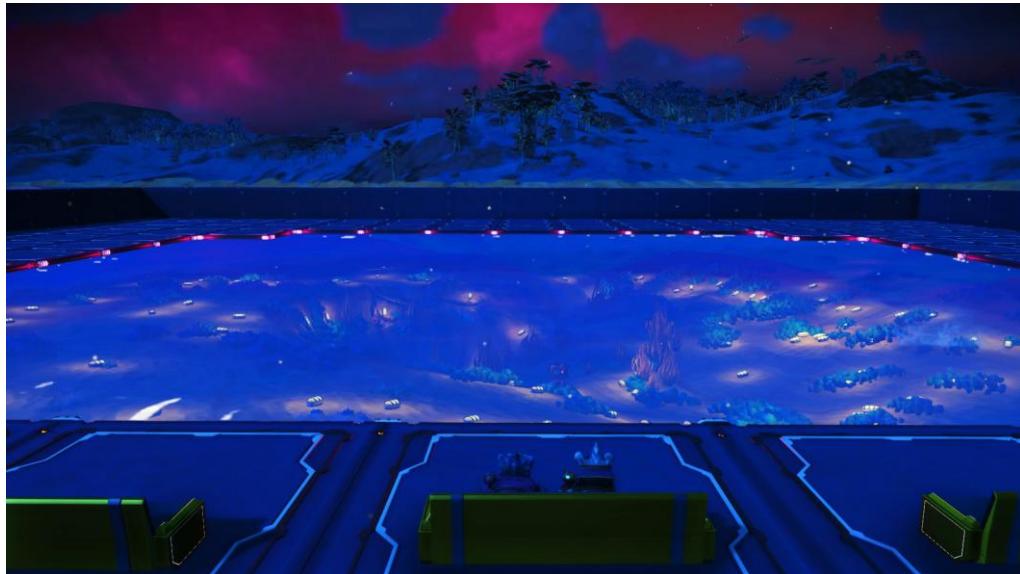
"I'm glad you asked me that," answered Nix. "I'm eager to jog your memory. Let's begin, shall we?"

Part 013

//SUPPLEMENTARY DATA FEED 0//

"Here's where it begins, Cepa," he said as he stared into the murky pool before him. "Our progeny. They're beautiful." "Yes they are, Malow," replied Cepa as she rested her head on Malow's shoulder. "Sooner than we know, they'll be off on their own adventures."

The Gek couple sat together for the rest of that night, staring into the pool of spawning syrup that held their newborn porwigles.



...

"Darling, have you seen Gim and Porva?" Cepa asked. "I haven't seen them come home yet."

"When did you see them last?" asked Malow.

"A few hours ago. They went to play at the park with the others."

"I'll go check."

...

"Gim! Gim, where are you?" Porva called out for its sibling.

Gim hid behind a small tree, using its eye stalks to peek around it and keep an eye on Porva. Gim's abnormally small size made it easy to hide from all of its many siblings during games like this.

"Porva! There you are," said Malow as he approached the park. "Where's Gim?"

"I don't know, papa. Hiding. The game is over. Everyone else already headed home, but Gim won't come out."

"Gim!" said Malow loudly. "The game is over! You can come out now!"

But Gim wasn't ready to come out. It still wanted to play.

Malow spotted Gim behind the tree, and said, "I can see your eye poking out. Come on out."

Nuts. Gim wasn't hiding well enough. It resolved to hide better in the future. It came out and they all went home.

...

"Malow, we can't pay. We just don't have the units."

"Then...where will we live? We can't just uproot the entire family. We have dozens of progeny."

"I know. I guess...take the offer your brother gave you? We can't wait for another solution, and we'll never be approved for another loan."

"Cepa, we can't. He's a criminal."

"What choice do we have? Oh no." Cepa looked past him.



["What choice do we have?"](#)

Malow turned in his chair and saw Gim's eye stalk peeking around the corner. "Gim, what are you doing up? You're supposed to be in bed."

Gim stepped around the corner, clutching a stuffed animal doll under an arm. "I'm sorry. I heard you talking."



"I'm sorry. I heard you talking."

"Oh let's get you back to sleep, sweetie," said Cepa as she rose and walked toward him. She picked Gim up and turned to Malow. "If you can think of another option, I'd like to hear it, but we do have a family to worry about. I don't want our progeny growing up as poor as we are now. This little shack is too small as it is. We can't afford it to get any smaller."

"We could have made it if we hadn't spent so much finding out why Gim is so small."



"We could have made it if we hadn't spent so much finding out why Gim is so small."

"Don't blame Gim! Gim, honey, it's not your fault."

"No, I didn't mean...no, you're right. I shouldn't have said that."

Cepa sighed. "I know. It's stressful. It's getting to all of us. Just...consider the offer at least. We could really use the units."

...

"I'm sorry, Malow, I should never have pressured you into this."

"You didn't pressure me. We didn't have any choice. Where else would we have gotten the units?"

"Yes, but we both knew your brother fell in with Cormac. It shouldn't have been an option at all."

"Shut up, you two," said the Vy'keen who just walked into the room. "I'll take this jewelry as collateral for now. It should buy you a few days, but Cormac wants his units back with interest. You've had months to collect it, and he feels he's been more than generous so far. You have three days to come up with the rest."



["Shut up, you two."](#)

"But...that's my father's ring. It's all I have to remember him by," said Cepa sadly.

"Then you should have paid by now. Three days. We'll be back."



["Three days. We'll be back."](#)

Gim stared around the corner and wondered what they were all talking about as the Vy'keen left. It was getting better at hiding, so no one noticed it was there this time.

...

"We really need help here," said Malow. "I never should have taken the money from you, but you're my brother, and we needed it."

"I only offered it to try to help. Now you're telling me it's some kind of burden? Ugh. Fine. You're my brother. I'll see if I can buy you more time, but don't say I never did anything for you."

Gim peered around the corner as it always did. Uncle Wif came by for a visit. That's not usually a good thing.



...

"Okay, my sister says she'll watch the kids until this blows over. Malow, how did it come to this?"

"It's going to be fine, Cepa. Wif said he would talk to Cormac and buy some time."



"It's going to be fine, Cepa."

"Wif." Cepa spit. "I know he's your brother, but we never should have...I never should have..." she started crying and collapsed into Malow's arms.

Malow held her and said, "Shh, shh, it's okay. It's okay. We'll get through." Then he started crying.

Gim watched from hiding, as usual, but this time, it walked toward its progenitors and asked, "Why are you crying?"

"Gim! You're always hiding nearby, aren't you?" asked Malow as cheerfully as he could through tears.

"Come here, sweetie," said Cepa as she reached out for Gim. She said, "We're just...we're just a little sad, that's all. It happens sometimes."

"Why?"

"Gim," said Malow, "you and your siblings are going to stay with Aunt Poma for a little while. Won't that be fun?"

"No. I want to stay with you."

"But Aunt Poma really wants to see all of you," said Cepa. "And it'll only be for a little while. Then you'll be right back here. Okay?"

"Okay," lied Gim. It was not okay with this.

...

"Where's Gim?" asked Cepa.

"Gim should be at Poma's, why?" replied Malow.

"Poma just contacted me and said Gim wasn't in the transport."

"Oh, oh, oh, if he's hiding again..."

"He? You're just going to assign a gender for it?"

"No, slip of the tongue. Let's just start searching, okay?"

At that moment, they heard yelling from outside. It was too muffled to make out clearly until it was just outside the door.

"I'm sorry, Chev! I didn't mean it! They can pay if they just have enough time!" It sounded like Wif.

"Open the door," said a voice neither of them recognized.

The front door swung open and Wif stumbled in, followed by two Travellers. The white-skinned Traveller held a multitool to Wif's head.

"Come on, tell them," said Wif. "You can pay if you just have a couple more days. Right? Tell him, Malow."

Before Malow could reply, the red-skinned Traveller spoke. "Time is up, Mister Wif. It's up for you, and it's up for them." "Sir," started Malow, "if you'd just allow me a moment—"

"So sorry to interrupt," interrupted the red-skinned Traveller, "but did I give you the impression I wanted you to speak?"

"Chev, please don't do this," pleaded Wif.

"Mister Wif, what you did is inexcusable. On top of asking for more time from my father, a man from whom one does not ask for more time, you had the audacity to treat him like he was beneath you, even going so far as to yell and make demands. Your brash and unhinged behavior might offer some advantages when it's necessary to intimidate a debtor, but when it's necessary to beg, it becomes counter-productive. In order to demonstrate this to you, the debtors on whose behalf you were begging are to be made into examples. In this way, their debts will be paid and you will have your lesson. So orders my father. Miss Qopret, please hand Mister Wif a baton and bring one of the debtors to me."

Qopret handed Wif a short, but heavy metal rod, then escorted Marlow at gunpoint over to Chev and instructed him to kneel. He complied.

"Now, Mister Wif, use that baton," instructed Chev.

Wif looked up at Chev. "What?"

"You do know how to use one, correct? You've used one many times before."

"But..." replied Wif.

"If you do not," said Chev, "I will shoot you, and then I will beat them myself."

Wif looked down at the baton and paused. Then he looked slowly up at Marlow. "I'm so sorry, brother." He raised the baton to strike, but as soon as he brought it down toward Malow's face, Malow's hand caught it, stopping it dead. Malow lunged toward Wif, knocking him to the floor. The brothers struggled for a few seconds, but Malow ended up on top of Wif. He delivered a blow with his fist that knocked Wif out, then, without hesitating, he grasped the baton and turned toward Chev.

"YOU BASTARD!" he screamed as he took his first step.

Then a deafening shot rang out through the room. Chev lowered his smoking multitool. Malow felt a sudden jolt of pain from his chest and stopped in his tracks to look down. He saw his blood slowly soak into his clothing, and then all he could see was black.

"MALOW!" cried Cepa. She ran to Malow as his body fell to the floor. "Malow!" she cried. There was no response. She shook his body. Still no response. His eyes were wide open, but there was no life in them. She hung her head, then noticed the baton. Slowly, she gripped it, her rage growing the longer she held it. All at once, she stood up and silently ran toward Chev. Another shot rang out, and she felt a horrible pain in her side. She wanted to fall over in pain, but she was determined to make it to Chev. She stopped and clenched her side, but took another step, and then another, but her knees gave out. She crawled forward, still unwilling to give up, until she was at Chev's feet. She could barely see them, though, as her vision darkened, and she finally passed out.

Qopret lowered her multitool, which was smoking just as Chev's was. She looked at Chev, who looked back at her with surprise on his face.

"This was unfortunate," said Chev.

Qopret nodded silently.

"Let's clean up. Please carry Wif to the ship, and I'll begin mopping up in here."

Gim stared out from its hiding place in stunned silence. Were its progenitors just sleeping? Who were these other people and what made those loud noises? Before long, the other people cleaned everything up and left. Gim climbed out of the hiding place and looked around. There was no one else here anywhere. Gim stood where its progenitors had lain and called out, "Mama? Papa?"

Part 014

//SUPPLEMENTARY DATA FEED 1//

No one in the cell spoke for a little while after Nix finished his story. They were all stunned—for different reasons. Tomcat finally broke the silence. "Holy Atlas, that's heavy. So you're Gim."

"Gim died that day," replied Nix. "I was born."



"Gim died that day."

"Who trained you?" asked Qopret, still immobile on the floor next to Chev and Fly. "No one acquires the skills required to do this without training."

"I'm surprised you asked that question first," said Nix. "Of all questions you could have asked...you really are single-minded, aren't you? I'll get to that in a minute. As you already know from listening to my story, most of what I told you at the ruins was true. I really only changed a few details and left out names. I was born to a poor family like I said, but my progenitors were loving and doting. It pained me to call them negligent, even for the sake of avenging them. I did spend time on the streets, but I didn't tell you everything. Not long after I hit the streets, I was aimless, but then he found me."

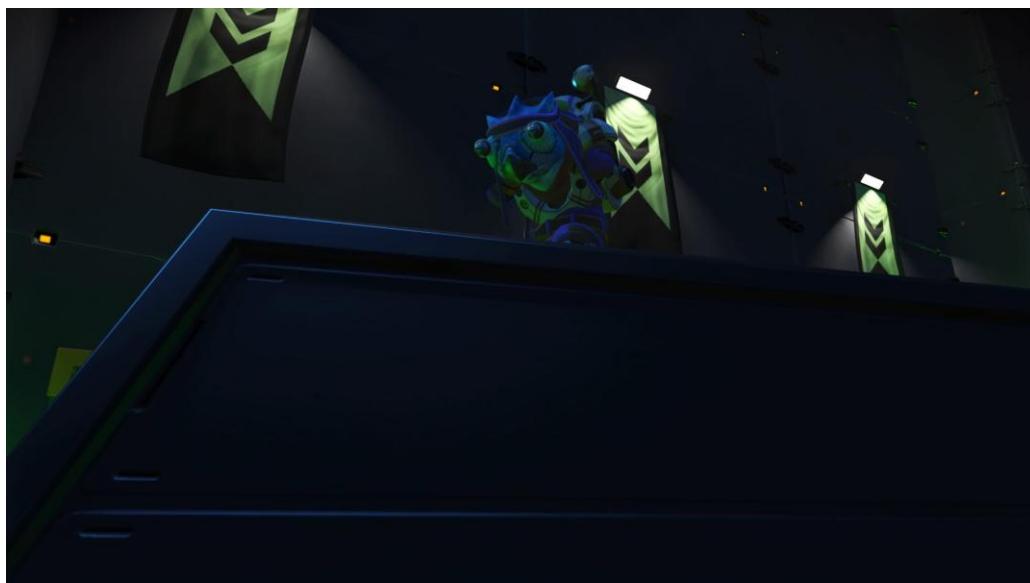


"I'm surprised you asked that question first."

"Who?" asked everyone.

//SUPPLEMENTARY DATA FEED 0//

Gim rummaged through a waste bin looking for anything useful: cans of food, jewelry or other valuables to sell, weapons, clothes. He was used to this by now. He'd been living on the streets for...well, he wasn't sure exactly how long...years, maybe, and in that time, some of the other street kids had taught him where to look for useful things. He wanted to do fun things like run and play like he used to at home, but every time he tried, the image of Malow and Cepa dead on the floor, blood pooling around them, emblazoned itself on his mind. It was the same reason he couldn't begin looking for his siblings or other family. His experience had taken him from a naive and coddled child to a world-wise and weary (and traumatized) young being in a very short time. He called himself a "he" now, mostly because his father had called him that the day he died.



He found a discarded pack of GekNip with a little bit left in it, but that was all this bin had to offer. He turned to leave the alleyway and ran straight into a soft wall that wasn't there before. He craned his neck to look up, and realized the wall was actually the legs of a being at least thrice his height. This being looked down at him with what he first assumed were great, round eyes and a wide mouth, but quickly realized were the features of a helmet.



He craned his neck to look up.

"What's the matter, child?" asked the being in a slightly muffled, gravelly voice.

"S—sorry, sir, I'll get out of your way."

"You're not in it, young one. If you were, I'd have said as much. I'm here to see you."

"Me? You're here to see me? Why? Who are you?" He backed up and got ready to run in case the man was here on behalf of the red man.

"My name is Alexir."



"My name is Alexir."

He had heard that name before. The other kids talked about him. "Alexir the Boogeyman? I thought you were just a story the older kids told the younger kids to scare them and keep them in line."

"I am certainly not a story, and I'm no boogeyman. I have an offer for you, Gim."

He knew his name? How? "How do you know my name?" he asked, worried.

"I've been monitoring you, Gim. I know where you came from, and what happened to you."

Did he know everything? How? "Did the red man send you?"

"Chev. No. In fact, quite the opposite. I'm here to give you the chance to get back at the red man and clear those horrible images from your mind."

How did he know about the visions? Gim was confused. He didn't know what to do. He started to run.

"Gim! There's no running from the visions," Alexir said more loudly. "They will only get worse."



"Gim! There's no running from the visions."

Gim stopped running. He didn't want them to get worse. This man knew his name and everything about him: maybe he could actually trust him. He turned around and walked back.

"Why do you know about the visions? Why do you know so much about me? Why have you been watching me?"

"That, young Gim, is a story for another day. I will take you in. I will provide everything you need to survive. No more foraging for scraps. No more running from authorities. No more wondering if you'll eat or drink today. And along the way, I'll reveal how much I know about you, and how I know it. If you come with me, you'll learn everything you need to know to nix the red man and his friends from existence."

Gim stared at Alexir for a few minutes, just thinking. Alexir stared back, the eyes on his helmet unblinking. Gim finally took a step forward and nodded slowly.



Alexir raised a gloved hand and held it out for a handshake. "There will be no coming back. I must warn you."

Gim didn't care. His fear and worry had turned to anger in the short time he had been considering Alexir's offer. He wanted revenge. He shook Alexir's hand, and the pair walked out of the alley.

Part 015

//SUPPLEMENTARY DATA FEED//

"Are you serious?" asked Tomcat, obviously incredulous. "The Alexir? The legendary spy and assassin Alexir watched you, recruited you, and trained you just so you could get your personal revenge?"



"Are you serious?"

"Kind of," replied Nix. "Revenge was really just my fringe benefit. He was looking for a successor. I'm not sure what he saw in me, and I don't think I'll ever know, but whatever it was, it made me his prime choice. Out of everyone he recruited, he said I was worthiest to inherit his mantle and legacy. After this is over, after my vengeance has been meted out upon you, I will become the new Alexir."

"Sounds like quite an honor," said Chev, a little sarcasm in his voice. "Your history lesson is all well and good, but I'm curious to know how precisely you pulled all of this off."

"Ah, therein lies the most beautiful part of this tale. See, I needed to get all of you in the same place. I knew Qopret was working for Tomcat."

"How did you know that?" asked Fly. "Even I couldn't find her when it came time to check on her, and I have connections like you wouldn't believe."

"I was trained by the galaxy's top spy and assassin. How do you think I found out? Moving on...it was easy to find Chev and Cormac. They were in the same place as always. I knew Qopret and Chev had a falling out, so I only had to bring them together to rouse ample enough suspicion to set things in motion. I was also sure that Chev still loved Qopret, and that—"

"What are you talking about?" interrupted Chev. "That's ridiculous."

"Whatever you say, boss, but my sources are more reliable than yours. As I was saying, that was enough to act as a catalyst for everything else. I'm not a juvenile, as you might have worked out by now. I have Gekish Dwarfism. Looking like a much younger Gek made it easy to infiltrate Chev's outfit because he's always looking for inexperienced messengers who can be intimidated into not talking if necessary. It didn't take much to get him to hire me, or to convince him I was just a naive, scared little porwigle who was clueless enough to pose no threat, but naturally talented enough to handle more difficult jobs. It also didn't take much to do those jobs so well that Cormac noticed me. Once I

was in their good graces, I was in exactly the place I wanted to be, and it wasn't long before I was given a job important enough that, were anything to go missing, Cormac wouldn't send any old thug to investigate, he'd send Chev. Even though Chev has his own outfit, and is notorious as the biggest crime boss in the Delta, it's Cormac who's the big boss, the person from whom Chev inherited everything, a person who is so effective at what he does that no one knows who he is, yet everyone wants him doing their dirty work. All I had to do at that point was steal one of the items that was being shipped, call Action HAZMAT Team 1 (not a catchy name, by the way, Tomcat), put myself into fake peril, and have Fly hide me until Qopret tracked him down. I didn't even have to do much work in the end."

"The only reason I contacted Fly was to find you," said Qopret, "and the only reason I was doing that was because Chev applied enough pressure to make me realize he wasn't going away. He manipulated the team into looking for you. How did you know he'd do that?"

"I didn't know he'd do that, I only anticipated that he would apply enough pressure to put you right where I needed you. I placed trackers on all of you during our first meeting, so if you had run instead of tracking down Fly like I expected, I could have brought you here."

"Really?" asked Fly. "I was just a means to an end? All of that talk about us being friends..."

"Just a ruse, I'm afraid."

"So why am I here then?" asked Fly hopefully. "I've served my purpose."

"You're shrewd, Fly, not dumb. You know why you're here, and why I had zero problems playing you."

"I don't."

Nix sighed and said, "You handled all of the books for my family. You knew how Uncle Wif was going to use the money, and yet you still approved the loan. You knew that if my parents couldn't pay, it would put an entire family in danger, including dozens of kids."

"But I had no choice! I don't approve loans like that. All I did was process the paperwork."

"Oh but you did have a choice. Anything other than jeopardizing a family. But look around you. What makes you think I'm going to exclude you if Tomcat and Praxa are here just the same, and they weren't even involved? You were part of a criminal organization. You knew the stakes."

If Fly hadn't been immobilized on the floor, he would have hung his head in shame. "I'm sorry, Nix."

"Too little too late," replied Nix.

"I understand you, Nix," said Qopret. "You were devastated. Everything was taken from you in an instant."

"You understand me least of anyone, Qopret. Don't try to sympathize. It doesn't suit you."

"I'm not," she replied. "I don't even have to try to sympathize. What happened to you happened to me. Everything was taken from me because of Chev and his father. They reach into your life, find the heart, and squeeze. They deserve to die for it. So what's your plan for Cormac? He's notably not here."

"I have a plan in place for him, and it involves all of you. Don't you worry your little head."

"My hazard protection malfunctioned just before you knocked me out," said Chev, insensitively moving on. "Was that you?"

"You folks are kind of all over the place with questions, aren't you? Yes, that was me. It's a snifty little device I cooked up based on Atlas tech."

"So could that have been the source of my malfunction?" asked Praxa. "I surmised that ion bombardment caused a short in my tertiary reclamation capac—"

"Wait, Praxa," interrupted Nix, "don't get technical. Yes. That was me. I had to test some recent adjustments that let me direct the signal."

"But the second time it happened," said Praxa, "you had been gone from that planet for an hour."

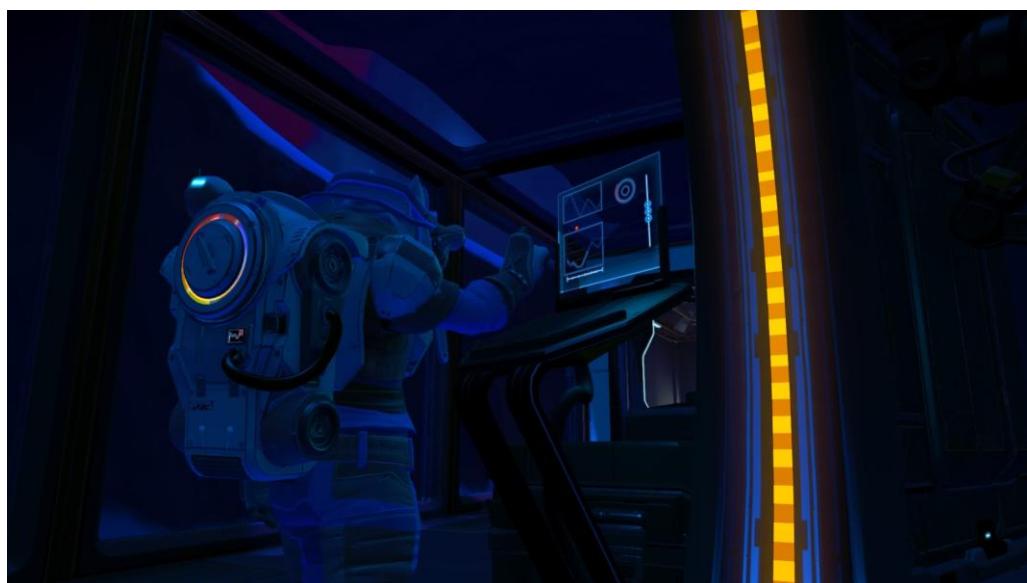
"Residual effects, I'm afraid. It's not perfect."

"How did you know I would be here, in this cell?" asked Chev.

"The tracker I placed on Praxa. Remember? Look, I'd love to stand here and answer all of your questions all day, but I need to get going, so let's get on with it."

"Get on with what?" asked Tomcat.

"I've just fed the gas emitters in this cell with my own special concoction derived from sac venom and other plant toxins. I managed to weaponize it and make it an aerosol. And I threw in a few extra ingredients to speed up the process. As soon as you breathe it, you'll convulse and die in a most agonizing manner. I call it Annihilation." Nix looked at Praxa. "It's even effective against Korvax." He produced a device from his pocket and tapped a button. "You'll notice your hazard protection has been disabled, so it won't save you from it. In fact in this damaged state, it'll be the thing that delivers it." The computer voice in everyone's suits started alerting them of damage. "Those of you on the floor should also notice that you can move your limbs now." He tapped a button on the cell's control panel and the restraint stations began releasing their clamps and magnetic binds. "Now," he continued, "pick up your weapons and kill each other. The winner walks free. If anyone refuses, I'll release Annihilation."





"Now pick up your weapons and kill each other."

Part 016

//HAZMAT Lead Agent Log//

I don't mean to sound all doom and gloom here, but it's hard not to. This whole situation with Chev and Barflet (I'm never not calling him that) really didn't turn out the way any of us expected it to, and overall, it sucks. It pretty much escalated out of control, going from a simple whodunit to a full-blown tragedy where everyone died. Well, only a few died, and it really wasn't out of control because there was a puppet master behind it all, so...wait, let me start over.

So there I was, held by robotic arms in an inescapable restraint station, listening to the rantings of a madman (madGek?) named Nix (that's Barflet's name now), along with Praxa, who was also in a restraint station, Qopret, the evil Chev, and a Gek named Fly, who were all partially paralyzed on the floor, when all of a sudden, our restraints released, their paralysis wore off, and Barflet basically told us to kill each other or he'd kill us with this supertoxin he developed. He had disabled our hazard protection, so if we'd breathed it, we would have died quickly. Keeping up so far? Good. Well, everything at that point happened so fast I couldn't really tell what happened, but I'm pretty sure it went down like this: Qopret sprung to her feet, grabbed Helix, and started blasting away at the forcefield on the cell door. Chev stood and yelled, "No! Q! You'll get us all killed!" I hated to admit it, but he was right, so I ran to Qopret and put my hand on Helix. Praxa did the same. She pushed us both away, using her apparent rage as fuel for some extraordinary strength, and kept firing. Right after she pushed us away, I saw Barflet slowly approach the control panel and raise his hand while staring past the blast impacts and directly into Qopret's eyes. It was in that moment that another boltcaster shot joined Qopret's existing flurry, but it didn't hit the forcefield. As soon as it hit its target, Qopret stopped firing, arched her back, and fell over while letting out a horrible scream.

Chev stood behind her holding his multitool, which was still smoking from the shot. He approached and knelt by her side while she writhed on the floor in pain. "I'm sorry, Q. There was nothing else to be done."

She stopped writhing and, through an extremely pained grimace, looked him dead in the eye and said, "You ruin everything you touch, Chev. You destroyed who I was, you destroyed who Gim was, and you put monsters in our places." She let out another scream of pain, then said, "It's your turn." Before anyone could react, she pressed Helix to his abdomen and pulled the trigger.

Now they were both on the floor, but only Qopret was moving. I started to approach them. She pulled herself closer to Chev and turned him to face upward, but as she did, his multitool turned with him, and he pressed it against her forehead and shot without hesitation. She fell back immediately, silent and unmoving. Before I could get to him to wrestle his weapon away, he turned it around and shot at Fly, who had pressed himself against the back wall of the cell, as far away from anyone as he could get. The shot went through his right knee and lower left thigh, sending him screaming to the floor while I jumped on top of Chev and grabbed his weapon. It didn't take much to pull it away. His arm fell back down and reached toward Qopret's body. He started saying something, but I couldn't quite hear it, so I leaned closer. Whatever he said, the only part I could hear, right at the end, was "...disappointed my father. I know I've wronged you, but I still love you. I'm s-s-sor..." But then he had no breath left. He closed his eyes and stopped moving.

I was enraged. I stood and walked to the door. "Haven't you seen enough here, Nix?! No one else has to die!" "Actually, Agent Tomcat, everyone does. No one escapes a tragedy like this." He again raised his hand toward the control panel, but at that moment, a series of sounds came from the hallway. They sounded like shocks and screams. "Oh, please excuse me. I have something to take care of." He listened for a moment, looked at a device on his arm, then, once there were no more shocks, he said, "Come on out, Cormac! There are no more traps between us, and I've just enabled all of the ones behind you. They'll kill you just as effectively as they just killed your guards. Come here and face me."

After a few seconds, I heard the sound of a multitool being reloaded and prepped, followed by slow, methodical footsteps. Cormac rounded the corner alone and, in his haughty accent, said, "You have done well, Nix. I did not see any of this coming."

"That's exactly how I planned it, Cormac. Let's have a classic shootout. I've killed your son like the cockroach he was, and after I kill you like the two-dimensional villain you are, I'll finish tying up these loose ends." He gestured to Praxa, Fly, and me.

"You believe I killed your progenitors? I know exactly what happened that day, and they got themselves killed." "They wouldn't have been in that situation without you, you piece of trash. Stop talking and draw!"

"Your progenitors were not the squeaky clean innocents you believe them to be. Wif was not the reason I knew your father."

"You're stalling. Draw in three or I'll gun you down where you stand."

"Aren't you the least bit curious about this?"

"Three."

"Malow..."

"Two."

"...was working..."

"One." In a single deft movement, Barflet drew his multitool and put five boltcaster shots in Cormac's body, collapsing him to the ground almost instantly.

He managed to finish his sentence before he died, though. "...for me."

Barflet approached Cormac's lifeless body and pointed his multitool at it. He shot several more rounds into it, then said, "I know, villain."

At that moment, the sounds of more traps went off in the other hallway. Barflet turned to look, and then looked at the device on his arm. Every time a trap went off, his face gained a little more surprise. Obviously he was seeing something unexpected. The sounds got closer, until they were just around the corner, then they stopped. After a brief pause, a barrage of Pulse Spitter rounds entered the chamber where Barflet stood, and ricocheted off of every wall. They practically filled the chamber. Barflet began a spectacle of acrobatics I have never seen before, dodging every blast with an incredible deftness, but several shots hit his left leg. I was surprised considering how small a target his leg was. He fell to the floor as the remaining shots ended their ricochets and dissipated.

From around the corner, Gravot emerged, her suit singed and still smoking from taking so many electric shocks. She ducked to make it through the door, then took a couple of large steps, putting her over the diminutive Gek instantly. She reached down and hit him over the head with a fist almost as large as his head, knocking him out.

She walked over to the cell door and let the forcefield down, then silently walked in and knelt beside Chev and Qopret. She put a finger on Chev's throat, then on Qopret's, then hung her head and closed her eyes. After a few moments of silence, she picked up Chev's body in one hand and Qopret's in the other, and stood, holding them both up effortlessly. She looked at Praxa, then at me, where I stood, stunned, and finally at Fly. She said, "Help him up and follow me."

I did so without hesitation. Praxa supported Fly's other side.

As we left the cell, Gravot stopped and looked at the location where Barflet had been. "Nix is gone. He could return. We should move."

I peeked around her, and sure enough, where Barflet had been moments ago, he now wasn't.

This was quite an ordeal, and we couldn't risk Barflet attacking again, so we all left the premises as silently and stealthily as possible. I had many questions for Gravot, but I figured they could wait until we were gone. Suffice it to say she saved our tuchuses, and I was grateful.

When we reached my ship, I loaded Qopret's body into it, and Praxa prepared Vandi's shuttle for departure. There wasn't enough room for Chev's body or (and this should go without saying) Gravot, so I said, "Thank you for your help, Gravot. There's not enough room in our ships for you. What will you do now?"

She replied, "Qopret's hauler is stashed around the back of the complex. Nix used it to get here. I will bury Chev myself, take Fly home and bandage him up, and then I will return the hauler to you. After that, I don't know. This organization is in shambles. I will look for a new one, I suppose."

"You know," I said, "we could really use someone like you on the team. What you did back there was incredible. You're really good in a hazardous situation. Plus, not to be insensitive, it kind of looks like you're out of a job." I still have no idea why I said this. As far as I knew at that time, she was still an enemy, and I knew nothing about her. I guess I just felt grateful, and I was probably coming down from an adrenaline buzz, which impaired some of my reasoning skills. However it happened, I made the offer.

Gravot was silent, then replied, "I will consider it." She lumbered away, Chev's body in one arm, Fly sitting on the other.

...

Cut to about a month later, and here we are. A brand new team. We had a nice funeral for Qopret, and we've had some time to heal. She has no family that we could locate, so we gave her the nicest burial we could. There's still some recovery time needed after such an ordeal, but we'll get there. Eventually. It's hard to move on after losing a team member like that, but it's necessary. Life doesn't stop, and people still need rescuing and hazardous material disposal.

When Gravot returned Qopret's hauler to us, she brought Fly with her. They said that after they buried Chev, they figured out they wanted to get out of their lives of crime, and everyone probably thought they were dead, so it was a unique opportunity to get out. I don't know anything about Fly, but he did come clean about his history with Chev's organization, and I suspect he's been straight with us. He can't use his legs yet, so he's confined to a desk, but his experience as a bookie makes him ideal for managing jobs and looking for new opportunities. Still, I keep an eye on him. But I did find a new ship for him to use when he's feeling better! Just don't tell him. It's a surprise.



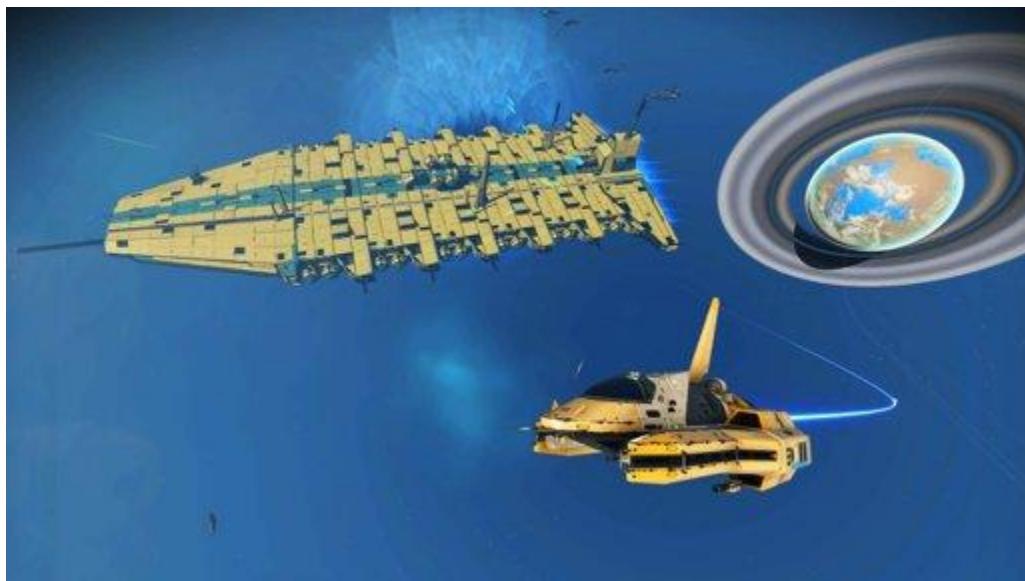
Gravot is now an official team member, with a new suit and everything. She took over flying The Hammer of Truth, Qopret's old hauler, and she's been going on jobs with us. It's working out well so far. She's not some big dumb brute, and I like to think she appreciates being treated as an equal instead of a subordinate. I also keep an eye on her, but she's been nothing but earnest.



While we were out, HQ became infested with scuttlers (what I call them) because the front door was wide open, and it's been quite a chore getting them to go elsewhere. It's a minor complaint, and a work in progress, but it serves as a daily reminder to me of how much changed in such a short time.

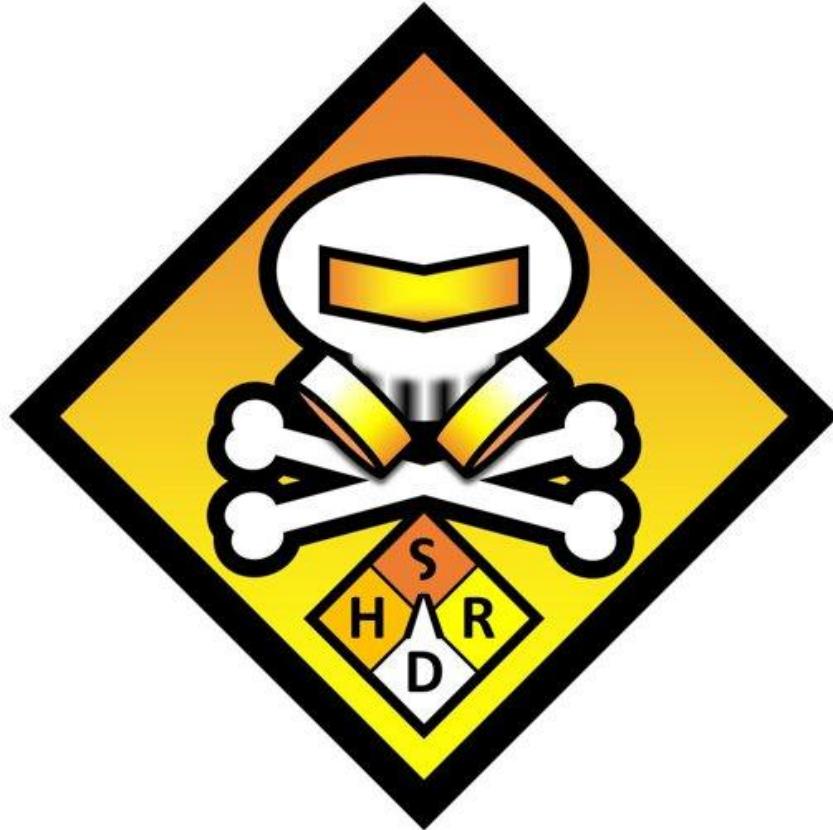


But the good news is we're better than ever. I found a freighter to haul us around. It already has equipment on it for handling hazardous materials, so it's a perfect fit, and I'm outfitting it with even more. It'll be our mobile HQ.



Oh, and that name...Action HAZMAT Team 1? Barflet was right. It's not a great name, so we brainstormed and came up with a new one. Say hello to...

**Space Hazard Action Rescue Division Or...
SHARD**



Catchy, right?

I'll have to update the marketing materials, but it's worth it.

Barflet may resurface one of these days, or some new threat may emerge from our collective sordid past, but for now it's just one job at a time. Wish us luck!

