

Chapter 1

The Lops had a small ring of planets buried between Federation and Revert space, far away from the bugs. They were the smallest of the five Council members in terms of economy, yet their population thrived all across the allied space. The famous Lops libido and the sheer amount of children they produced meant their floppy ears were a familiar sight across the galaxy.

Mostly because they left the Lops Aureola, as their small ring of planets and moons were termed, as soon as they could. Even as the TRYSTA swung towards the green planet at its center, surrounded by four white populated moons, they were passed by huge transport ships, taking more and more of the Lops young away.

Not necessarily to a brighter life — Lops stereotypes and a never-ending prejudice against alien races meant they often worked as sex workers. Lops strip clubs and brothels filled the galaxy — Nate had seen some, like Madam Arlington who owned Genesis Girls on Serrush Mining, the corporate owned and named planet, who had become quite wealthy.

And there were many who found other walks of life — Mitsky, of his Bad Company, was as fierce a soldier as any he'd seen. There had been Lops candidates trying to become Judges too — they held an easy grace to them, a natural gymnastic ability that meant they ducked, dodged and jumped over many of Nate's attempted punches in Judge spars.

"Gonna pick up another sister for us, Nate?" Ana teased as she settled on his lap as he sat in the Captain's chair, ignoring his "Oof!" at her sudden weight.

"I have quite enough girls to deal with, thank you."

"Yeah, you do." Talia sighed happily, tracing her swollen tummy. What loads that weren't dispensed to a jug for Sofia were granted to Talia instead — the perks of being the brand new girl.

That morning, in the bedroom, she'd worn her famous pastel pink swimsuit from the Federation Foxes holoshow, the one she'd catwalked to victory as the number one meka pilot.

On the ceiling, Isabelle helpfully projected the viral clip of her jiggly ass and her hip-swivel at the end of the catwalk as Talia bobbed on his cock. The clip played on as she slipped her thong bottoms to one side so she could ride his cock, her bikini top pulled under ample milky breasts, her nipples soon swollen and red from his eager lips.

"Would you have voted for me, Captain?" Talia sighed into his ear as he filled her, her thighs trembling as she came down from her orgasm.

In the bridge, Nate gave her a fond smile. “See? Talia knows. I have my hands full.” Ana shot Talia a dark glance.

“Uh, not that we don’t need more numbers to keep you protected.” Talia added quickly. “And who doesn’t love a Lops girl? Those ears—”

“They have the largest average breast size in the galaxy.” Isabelle chimed in helpfully.

“Cute little fluffball tails.” Cora said from the pilot’s seat, head bowed in concentration as she dove towards the main planet of the Lops Aureola.

“I am not a part of this joint delusion.” Sofia said from her seat, where she cradled an empty beer mug. Talia had been kind enough to drip a little of the massive load Nate had given her. “I don’t see the worth in Lops, in general.” Her lips pursed. “My people always think them rather weak, their submissiveness nauseating.” She tilted her chin up. “However, the Judge program held *some* Lops candidates with excellent fighting capabilities.”

“Nate is very aware of the attractive attributes of Lops girls, aren’t you, Nate?” Ana smirked.

“Hey, that was a different life.” Nate defended.

Isabelle put her hands on her hips, her holo-projection changing to a Lops girl, floppy ears and a one-piece bodysuit emblazoned with the words A LOPS IS FOR LIFE, NOT JUST FOR THE HOLIDAYS. “When I first integrated with your armguard, Lops girls were one of your top three visited porn categories—”

“Okay, okay.” Nate laughed. “Stop ganging up on me. We said we’d try to be more restrained with Sofia as our guest, remember? We literally just had this talk.”

“Sorry, *Master*.” Ana said, not sounding sorry in the slightest, as she reclined his seat and stretched languidly over his body, her hair splayed across his face. “But we all need to be on the lookout for suitable candidates.” She rose her head a little to glare at Talia.

“I don’t want—” Nate protested.

Isabelle flickered as she changed into a perfect representation of Skyla, the Lops stripper who Ana had paid to fuck him, way back on Acropolis. Her white fluffy ears contrasted with her black hair. Nate stared, remembering how Ana had fed his cock into the squealing stripper.

“No fair!” Talia grumbled. “My black hair is the only thing I’ve got going for me.”

“That’s not true—” Nate tried.

“That’s okay, Nate can change the color with a load or five.” Cora giggled, holding the controls tighter as the ship shook as they began entering the atmosphere. The main planet of the Aureola was called Cornea — it was a green splash of paint against the black space, covered almost entirely in verdant farmlands.

Out in the galaxy, the Lops were sex workers, soldiers, shop workers. But back at home, the Lops were mainly known for their farming exports, grains, seeds, crops, for they didn’t have the economy, the investment or the technology to support much else.

Which was why most of their people migrated away.

The ship rumbled as they descended through pure white clouds. Below, fields and

fields of grass, but the pastures were a constant up and down of rolling hills, like nature's roller-coaster.

"It's so hilly." Talia observed.

"The planet's many valleys create ideal levels of precipitation to go along with their sunny days." Isabelle stroked her new floppy ear thoughtfully.

"Where are the cities?" Cora asked.

"They don't have many." Nate answered. His squad member Mitsky had told him a little about her homeland. "Their population is mostly farmers who stick to their farms, with few viable jobs found in the main city. But one farmhouse—" Nate pointed at a large farm building as they flew low. "That could hold a family of a hundred, at first. But the sons and daughters will leave almost as soon as they are of age, or they'll be a burden on the family."

"That doesn't seem sustainable." Sofia frowned. "How can they trade for the goods they need?"

"Lops out in the galaxy will send a large amount of income back to the family that remains at the farm." Isabelle told them. "Not doing so would be shameful, in fact."

"Hmm." Nate said thoughtfully. Now that he thought about it, Mitsky rarely had the gadgets and possessions the other soldiers did — she didn't purchase premium armor or black-market grenades, either.

"I don't know how such a race managed to get into the Council." Sofia crossed her arms. "There are many very small races who seem more developed."

"The Lops fight with us." Nate said simply. "I don't know a Federation squad that doesn't have a Lops inside. They've always been committed to fighting the bugs. I'm hoping they'll help us again."

"Hmmph." Sofia made no secret of her doubt.

Eventually, the rolling hills flattened down to reveal long stretches of flat farmland, and at their end, a city. Though it was like a city from a time gone by, wooden log palisades around rustic buildings of stone and log, their chimneys blowing smoke high into the air, gray smoke mixing with white clouds.

"Venhold." Isabelle announced. "The city where the Lops king resides."

"Do they like...not have technology?" Cora asked with wide eyes.

"They value different things." Nate said, feeling somewhat defensive. "They have the same metals, they have ships, but where we all look forward, they look to their past — it's a point of pride to keep things traditional."

"Really traditional." Cora murmured under her breath as they streamed over the land, the crops below swaying in the wake of their ship. The farmers below looked up from their work.

"I like it." Ana declared. "No skyscrapers, no palaces. Where's the king live?"

"No security, either." Talia said. "Where's the warning?"

"We have received no notifications about docking or requests for identification, Nate," said Isabelle.

That was odd. He thought to himself. Perhaps it would be best to approach the city

more carefully, lest they make a scene.

“Is there somewhere we can land and travel in like the natives?” Nate tapped on Ana’s hip absentmindedly. “I don’t want to make a scene, especially with Ana being the Princess. The media will wonder why we are here.”

Cora pulled the ship into a hover. “That’s a grass field which doesn’t look to be cropland. If I’m careful, we shouldn’t damage it.”

“Do it.” He ordered.

The ship settled with nary a tremble — Cora was getting comfortable at the controls. Their ship legs sank into the grass, blowing up steam. And, from the nearby farmhouse, a long oblong building built from white planks, someone ran towards them.

“Uh-oh.” Nate swung his legs off the chair and headed for the ramp. He took the electric baton, just in case.

“Uniforms on, girls.” Ana ordered.

Nate was already down the ramp, wearing the Judge’s uniform that Ana had made for him, without the jacket — it was far too hot.

“What are you doing? This is *my* land, you cannot land there!” A Lops woman raged toward him, hoisting up her long pink check dress so she could walk faster. Her floppy ears bounced in anger.

“I’m sorry.” He held out a hand. “We didn’t realize this was your farmland. Perhaps I can pay you for the use of your field for a day or two—”

“I don’t rent out my farm, you need—”

“A thousand credits.” Ana said, descending the ramp, holding a white credstick.

The Lops farmer’s eyes went wide. “A t-thousand?”

Ana tossed her the credstick and watched as the Lops farmer, her hair a platinum blonde, almost silvery, inserted it into a little opening in her pendant. When she looked up, the farmer was smiling.

“I, yes, please, welcome. You shouldn’t be flashing around that amount of credits, we aren’t wealthy here.”

“I’m Judge Clancy and this is Princess Anariel of the Lunari realm.” Nate bit his lip to stop himself from smiling when the woman’s ears perked up, straight, her mouth agape.

“Oh my goodness, I, it’s an honor. I am Gwenaelle but you may call me Gwen, your majesty—”

“Oh, none of that, please.” Ana strolled up to her and gave her a hug. “I’m just Ana. I love your dress, Gwen, what fabric is that? Gingham?”

“I-it is, yes, I made it myself—”

“So cute. Vintage. I wish I could pull that off. Cora, did you see this?”

“Not my vibe but I dig the aesthetic.” Cora muttered distractedly, a loud *schwing* ringing as she tested her knuckle-claws. Gwen stared.

“We’re here to visit the king and his command. I understand they reside in Venhold?” Nate asked, gesturing to the wooden palisade in the distance and the streaming smoke above it.

She nodded nervously, biting her lip. “He does, but y-you should leave. It’s not safe here, not anymore.”

Nate frowned. “What do you mean, not safe?”

Gwen’s floppy ears rotated as she looked around, fidgeting. “The King is ill and the man who speaks in his place, his adviser...he’s a very bad man, sir. They’re coming every week to collect higher taxes, and his men, they are brutal. I-I was only just able to pay last week, and if I didn’t, they would have taken me away.”

Nate glanced around. Under the hot sun, the slight breeze cool on their skin, it didn’t feel dangerous. But he knew looks could be deceiving.

“You have few crops.” Sofia observed, still clad in her Voor robe that reached down to her thighs. Her long black boots with murder-weapon heels meant she stood out like a sore thumb in the Lops world, even if she had tied her black wrapping to hide her red glowing eyes. “How are you surviving?”

“Are you Voor?” Gwen stared, stunned.

“I am Sofia.” Sofia returned evenly.

“Oh.” Gwen didn’t know what to make of the blunt Voor, so instead she pointed up to the sun. “I survive with that.”

They followed her finger to see a drone hovering above, camera lens zoomed in. “My father died and my brothers migrated away, so I can’t manage the whole farm by myself. So I, ah, make content on the holonet. People who dream of living the traditional life, the farm life.” She blushed, pulling at her dress. “People that dream of having a Lops wife and a life outside of the city.”

“I’ve seen that stuff on the network!” Talia exclaimed. “It gets big views.”

“Sometimes.” Gwen admitted. “Enough to keep me here and alive, for now. But if the taxes keep rising...”

Nate looked around as she led them towards and into her farmhouse. It was a rustic barn, counters holding bowls of berries, fresh bread steaming from atop the oven, white daisies in a vase by the window. And beyond the window, a paddock of chickens. A little blue bird knocked its beak on the window.

He could see how all of it would be appealing, especially to the densely-packed soldiers on Federation ships, who’d go on leave into mega-cities, go home to apartments that were more like cargo containers.

Gwen herself was most of the appeal, he imagined — she was a beautiful curvy thing, innocent and homely, her eyebrows drawing together as she poured them glasses of of milk.

Ana winked at him. *Isn’t she lovely?*

Stop it, you. We need to get to the city.

“Gwen, how can we get to Venhold? Danger or not, Nate needs to talk to the King about Council business.” Ana said.

“You can take my hustler, if you like.” Gwen said brightly. “Just bring it back when you’re done.”

“We’ll pay—” Ana started.

“Oh, no, I can’t take any more of your money.” She blushed.

“What’s a hustler?” Cora cocked her head.

Gwen pushed open a door to her front garden and pointed. “That is.”

“Whoa...” Cora gaped. It was an ancient hover-car, open-topped and rusted beyond recognition, every shade of brown. Inside, four rows of worn and cracked leather seats, their filling bursting out. The hustler rested against a tree.

“Is it safe?” Ana said uncertainly.

“I take it into the city to sell seeds and berries and buy livestock.” Gwen assured them. “It ran well before I was born and it’ll still be running long after I’m gone.”

“What a unit.” Cora said in awe. “They don’t build them like this anymore.” She jumped inside and stabbed a button. The hustler spat, hissed but gradually raised off the ground, shaking more than hovering. “Listen to that?” Cora called over the loud engine growl. “That’s a four-piston flickstarter inside.”

“We’ll be sure to bring it back.” Nate assured the Lops farmer.

“I trust you.” Gwen tugged her arms behind her back. “Good luck in there. The King’s court hall is towards the other side of Venhold, but just follow the road.”

“Which road?” Talia asked.

“There’s only one.” Gwen said, looking amused as Sofia swept her robe underneath herself and sat down in the hustler reluctantly, nose in the air.

“You’re the best, Gwen.” Ana beamed. “Thanks for the milk.”

“You have a tiny little milk mustache.” Gwen laughed, her face rosy. “You too, Sofia.”

Sofia’s pale face reddened as she wiped her lips furiously. Nate winced. That wasn’t milk.

Cora zoomed their hustler out of the fenced paddock and onto the main road, their transport rumbling uncomfortably as they whipped along the road. “Whee!” Cora cried happily. “They didn’t add a base line to the hover sensor, so when you go over a rock, the hustler bounces too.” She explained.

“Wonderful.” Sofia muttered. “How are these people going to help us against the bugs again?”

Ana smirked at him from the row in front. Nate grinned as Lunar burrowed under his shoulder, enjoying the ride in the sun. His Mediator toyed with the hem of her battle skirt — she always seemed more horny in the warmth of the sun. Perhaps it reminded her of home.

“Their shield tech is different.” That’s what Mitsky and his old Lops regulars used to tell him. “It can dissipate part of the energy of plasma hits into shield regeneration.”

“That doesn’t help us if they bring their big tanker transport ships.” Sofia argued. “Their shields will still get torn apart, and they barely have any offensive weaponry.”

“But if they’ll give us some of that tech for our own ship?” Nate countered. “It could make the difference if we need to escape real quick. Besides, if every member of the Council is involved, then no one can back out. Like those not yet convinced, like the Voor.”

“My people do not back down from a fight.” Sofia muttered, but she said nothing else.

The city grew closer and eventually, the large log walls were in front of them. There was no gate, no security, they simply streamed through, following other rustbucket hover-cars and old speeders. Inside, the streets were busy.

They sped past food markets and livestock auctions, farmers coming from far and wide to sell their wares. One large shelter in particular had a large queue of young Lops, and behind the shelter, a huge worn ship transport, like a warehouse of rusted steel outfitted with twenty fuselarium engines. Each of the Lops were waving credsticks in their hand, trying to catch the favor of the disgruntled manager.

Taverns too, some loud and buzzing with activity, others seedy and worn-down, but all of them wooden, structured by hefty tree trunks. The order to represent an ancient traditional city went a long way — Nate spotted one tavern which had a wooden sign painted with the classic upside V to show the type of services it offered, instead of the usual neon sign with a flickering pair of panties.

Towards the end of the city, the King’s court hall was evident. It was a vast domed building of gleaming bronzed wooden, like an upside down long-boat, only ten times larger. It could have been mistaken for a fancy drinking hall, if it weren’t for the long cloth banners that hung from the barn tops, each emblazoned with a white and blue emblem. The ships parked around it were far nicer, too. Modern carriers, gleaming with the same emblem.

Nate felt almost embarrassed as Cora neatly swiveled their rusty hustler alongside them.

Cora caught his face. “You were the one who wanted to park up early.”

“Something feels off, no?” Nate paused. The court hall had guards at the large opening doors, but they were on edge, hands on their guns already. He’d expected the court hall to have a long stream of lobbyists coming out of the door, but all was quiet.

“I can investigate while you wait, my Kyrios.” Lunar promised, her hand on the gunblade on her back.

“That’s okay, Lunar.” Nate tugged her hand back into his own grasp. “You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, right?”

She looked at him blankly. “I do not catch flies. I slay them with my blade, using their erratic movements to test the speed of my swings.”

Nate coughed. “Okay. Let’s try it my way, first?”

“Your wish is my command, Kyrios.”

Ana bit her fist to stop from laughing.

The guards only grew more tense as Nate and his girls walked up to them.

“Judge Clancy requesting an audience with the King, by order of The Council.” He said plainly.

The guards looked at each other but said nothing.

“Is there a problem?” Nate frowned.

The doors opened behind them. A Lops man dressed in magisterial red robes, his

smile pained. He clapped his hands. “Greetings, Judge Clancy. Please, come in, come in. What an honor this is.”

“You know of me?”

“Well, of course! Who dares to be ignorant in the face of the galaxy’s hero. Forgive me, please, we weren’t expecting you.” The man placed his arm at his waist and entered an ostentatious bow. “I am Delfael, Acting Minister of the Order of the Aureola. Such a pleasure to meet you, and for our humble home to welcome such warriors.”

“Thank you, sir.” Nate exchanged a quick glance with Ana as the man led them through the hall, over the red carpet and toward a high table on an elevated stage. On either side of the red carpet, Lops buzzed around tables, pointing at computer consoles or arguing over documents. They wore dark green military uniforms.

Records show this to be a ceremonial hall for the King to greet visitors. Isabelle hummed thoughtfully.

“Is there a military operation going on?” Nate asked the minister.

Delfael sighed. “Civil unrest, unfortunately. Nothing to worry about.”

“It looked pretty peaceful on our way in.” Cora said.

“Not in the city, but the farmsteads which make up much of the planet. There is some troubling anti-monarchy sentiment growing,” Delfael’s ears pressed against his head sadly. “Some who blame the King for the economic troubles which affect us all.”

“I’d like to meet the King, if I can.” Nate asked.

The Minister settled into his seat at the high table, hitting a switch to defuse the holoscreen of his console. “I’m sorry to say he’s ill, currently. Indisposed while he is cared for by our medics. He’ll be back in the next few weeks, we hope and pray.”

Nate studied the odd man. His graying hair, his oily smile, the furrows of his face. But he couldn’t detect any lies in his confident voice.

“As a Council Judge, I need to speak to the highest commanding officer. It relates to the Lops relationship with the Council and to military matters of great secrecy.” Nate said slowly, looking around the hall.

Delfael stretched his arms out, his smile sheepish. “Well, that’s me, I’m afraid. I *am* the Acting Minister, given command of our Order until the King recovers.”

“I see.”

I don’t trust this guy at all. Ana muttered in his head.

Neither did Nate. But what choice did he have?

“Oh, how silly of me.” Delfael pressed a switch under his desk to create a bubble shield around the high table. “We need some privacy to speak, don’t we? I’ve just had this shield installed for such an occasion.”

“Thank you.” Nate hid his grimace. “I’m here to request the Lops command and all available ships aid us in a military operation against the bugs. I’m...a little reluctant to share details, with respect to your position, but I’d like to assure you that Federation, Lunari, Revert and Voor forces are already on board.”

Delfael sucked in a breath, wincing. “Forgive me, Judge, but there is quite a difference between the other Council members and us. The Lops do not prioritize our

military force but the way of life of our people.”

Nate turned to the rest of the hall. “But you do have a military, don’t you? Every ship will matter in this. It’s a huge operation.”

Delfael stood up, smoothing down his robe. “Our people are struggling and even with the best will, we couldn’t assist you. I understand you’ve come a long way and I hate to deny you aid, but with our current unrest, our economical situation...”

Nate paused. “You don’t think the King would send a force of some kind? I’ve fought alongside good Lops soldiers, I know you understand the importance of fighting back against the bugs.”

Delfael’s smile dipped a little. “I think the King and I both understand that we are only barely surviving, even separated as we are from the bug threat, even with the protection we maintain from our location behind Federation and Revert space.”

Nate felt a spark of irritation. Everyone could only think about themselves, but if the bugs kept coming, even if one Council member fell, so too would the rest. They were only as strong as each other. “That protection of the Federation, of the Reverts, its only as strong as they are. If we don’t attack the bugs, it’s only a matter of time until they make the move we don’t.”

The Lops Minister gave him a simpering smile. “I wish I had another answer for you, Judge. Of course, I will bring your concerns to the King. But we must think of our people first.”

Nate sighed, his fingers fidgeting, desperate to make a fist. Make a punch, even. But aggression would get him nowhere here. “I understand. Thank you for meeting with me. I hope you’ll reconsider when you see the reports of the force we’ve amassed. I hope the King will reconsider even.”

“Would you...” Delfael paused. “Like to stay in the city before you depart? I can arrange for something—”

“That’s kind but no, thank you. We’ll be on our way.” Nate stared around at the buzzing hall. And then, at the privacy shield around them. The shade of blue from the shield, the hissing...it seemed very reminiscent.

“By the way,” Nate said before he stepped down the stage steps. “I explored some of your beautiful farmland before I came to the city. I, ah, had to confiscate a strange and dangerous weapon from one of your farmers.”

The Minister raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Nate pulled the electric baton from his sleeve, showing the odd chrome stick. He activated it and watched Minister’s face as it lit up into a blue shield, the same shade as the shield around the high table. “Do you recognize it? I’ve never seen it before.” Nate said casually.

Delfael hesitated as he took the stick from Nate’s hands. “This is most irregular. No, I’ve never seen it before.”

“It can dissipate fire from a plasma rifle. Incredible shielding technology.” He commented.

“Is that so?” Delfael blinked. “You must tell me who this farmer is — I’m curious

where they got this technology, putting aside the fact that it is quite illegal by the laws of our Order.”

“This farm girl we met.” Nate shrugged. “Gwenaelle, I think her name was. About twenty clicks out of the city, to the south.”

“Thank you, Judge.” Delfael beamed. “You are most helpful.”

“*Thank you*, Minister. We’ll take our leave now.” Nate bowed his head and turned away.

What are you doing?! Ana said in his head.

Trust me. I’m laying the bait. Nate told her. He led the girls out of the hall, trying not to hurry, even as they asked questions.

“Cora?”

“Huh?”

“How fast can you get us back to Gwen’s farm?”

She grinned as she hopped into the hustler. “Best put on your seat belts.”

They all climbed in hurriedly.

“There aren’t any seat belts—whoa!” Sofia growled as they were thrown back against the seats.

“What was that about, Nate?” Talia exclaimed, her fingers digging into the cracked leather as Cora pushed the hustler as fast as she could. “Why would you set up poor Gwen?”

Ana answered before he could. “Nate wants to get her in trouble so he can rescue her and she’ll be so grateful, she’ll let that dress slip to her ankles.” She winked at him.

“Works every time.” Cora snorted, glancing back at him over her shoulder.

“Eyes on the road!” Sofia called out as they were thrown against each other, Cora taking a sharp turn.

The hustler spat sulfuric smells as Cora pushed it hard and fast.

“I’m gambling.” Nate admitted. “But I think Delfael knows more than he says.”

“I saw duplicity on his face.” Lunar added.

“You think all men other than Nate are shady.” Ana rolled her eyes.

“In comparison to our Kyrios, all men fade far away,” agreed Lunar.

“Thank you, sweetie.” Nate winced as they just barely dodged a Lops couple walking in the street. “Let’s try not to kill anyone, Cora.”

“I have it under control.” She bounced excitedly in her seat as she whipped the machine out of the city.

They all breathed a sigh of relief once they were back on the straight open road.

“So Delfael sends men after Gwen and then what? How does that help us?” Talia rubbed her chin, resting her knee on Nate’s. His new girls always needed a lot of contact.

Nate’s reply was drowned out as they were overtaken by two military trucks at full speed. Their horn almost deafened them as Cora swung over to give them more space.

“They’re in a hurry, sheesh!” Cora snapped.

“A panic, even.” Nate said thoughtfully as the trucks disappeared down the road in a cloud of smoke.

And as they pulled up at Gwen's farm, they saw both trucks at the road side. Gwen knelt in her front garden, hands behind her head, a dozen rifles pointed at her head. She was surrounded by Lops soldiers in dark green military uniforms. Tears poured down her cheeks as she cried. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

Nate leapt out of the hustler. "Leave her alone!" He ordered.

The soldiers' commanding officer pushed him back, scowling. He growled. "This is a law enforcement situation, back the—"

Nate brandished his Judge badge, but he didn't meet the man's gaze. Instead, he looked intently at the tools on the officer's belt.

It was as he'd thought.

"I'm a Judge, every situation is my situation. Lower your fucking rifles."

"What's going on here?" Delfael climbed down from the truck's passenger-side seat, his red robes creased, his face pallid. "Judge Clancy, what is the meaning—"

"I think we both know." Nate smiled coldly. He snatched a baton from the Lops officer's belt and activated it — the blue forcefield buzzed from the side. The same baton Nate had shown to Delfael, the same one he'd pretended to know nothing of.

As soon as he activated it, every rifle turned to him. But the girls weren't waiting — Lunar snatched her gunblade from her back and each of the girls brandished a pistol. Sofia grabbed a hidden gun from her thigh-holster.

A standoff.

But Nate was a Judge. "You lied to me, Minister." He spat in the ground. "And I lied to you. I didn't find this baton on this farmer. I only paid her to land on her field. I took this weapon from someone who made an attack on my life recently. Listen very carefully."

Nate advanced on the Minister. "As a Judge of the Council, I demand the truth. You know, as I do, that Judges play the same role across the galaxy." His eyes narrowed. "Judge, jury and executioner. Tell me where these weapons come from."

Delfael took deep, angry breaths. His skin flushed, his ears high and straight, nostrils flared. But, after only three breaths, he managed to give a strained smile. "I'm sure, certain even, that there has been a misunderstanding."

Nate glared. "I'm equally sure." He said sarcastically.

The Lops Minister gestured him away from the group of soldiers, toward the cover that was granted by the loud growls of the hustler engine. "A few days ago, we received a...delivery, from someone purporting to be an arms dealer, offering free samples of his weaponry, as an example of what he could provide."

Nate crossed his arms. "And you started distributing them immediately?" He said skeptically.

"You must understand," Delfael's hand shook. "We are at risk of civil unrest. Every farmer on this planet has a weapon, while our law enforcement works with rifles from five decades ago. This technology is so far beyond anything we can imagine — we've been able to take the same shields and apply it to our court hall, even, to protect the King."

“Then why lie to me?”

“Secrecy was the only condition of the deal.”

“What could be so necessary about keeping these weapons secret?”

Delfael took a handkerchief to mop his sweaty forehead. “Where it came from.” He hissed. “Who made it.”

“What?”

The Minister leaned forward, red-faced. “The arms dealer says these are bug weapons.” He said quietly. “If the Council, if our allies, if our trade partners, if anyone find out that we’re using bug weapons, our reputation, our *very position*, is destroyed. They’ll think we are bug sympathizers. Please, you must keep this a secret.”

Nate shook his head. None of this made any sense. They didn’t seem to be bug weapons, by any measure of the imagination. “Why risk it, just for batons?”

“The dealer said there was more coming. Much more. Not just batons but rifles, pistols, grenades. Weapons sold on the cheap to make up for the fact that they come from the bugs. You understand? Things that could make us strong, weapons to outfit our entire enforcement, our military.”

“Things you could use to strong-arm the farmers into paying your tax raises, you mean.”

“It’s not like that, we need to raise taxes to pay for infrastructure investment.” The Minister blubbered.

What do you think, Izzy? Nate said, studying the man’s face.

He is sweating, but that’s not abnormal in this heat. No looking to your right or left, no dilation of the pupils, no fidgeting, no cocking of the head. I would say he is telling the truth. Or rather, what he believes to be true. Isabelle declared.

Ana’s voice chimed in. *But this whole situation reeks of a trap, Nate, truth or not.*

Nate grimaced. They weren’t wrong. Why would a dealer offer the Lops free weapons for any reason? It was a set-up, certainly. But for Nate? Nobody even knew they were coming here.

This wouldn’t be a trap that he’d walk into, not again. The memories of that electric cage inches from his face, the panic they’d felt, they were all too fresh. But just because he didn’t walk into the trap, didn’t mean that they couldn’t set it off.

Nate just had to make sure they played it right.

“When’s the next delivery?”

Delfael swallowed miserably. “Tonight. We get co-ordinates of a crate delivery, a dead drop. Please don’t report this, it would only hurt the people of Lops more than it does me.”

“We’ll see. I expect your full compliance going forward.” Nate threatened. “We’ll be with you when you open it. I want to see what’s in it. And as for this farmer, I don’t want to see you bother her again, understand? I don’t want to call in reinforcements or notify the Council of what you’re doing here, but I will if I have to.”

“I understand.” The Minister said quietly. “I will pick you up in our convoy when we receive the co-ordinates.”

“Good.” Nate patted his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Minister. We’ll clear up this little *misunderstanding*.”

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After Nate had made profuse apologies to a shaken Gwen, they’d retired to their ship for the evening, waiting for the Minister to receive the co-ordinates and pick them up. Dinner was a tense affair — all of them were wary of another trap. Sofia had made dinner, to their surprise, and the spicy beef dish was good, even if the meat was a little rare for all their tastes but Sofia’s.

“I didn’t know you could cook, Sofia.” Lunar said.

The Voor woman shrugged. “Didn’t have much choice once I no longer had a clan. I couldn’t always find blood to feed on, after all. I don’t mind cooking — a woman has to be willing to work for her meal.”

“I’m glad you learned. This is really good.” Talia said after a mouthful.

“The last supper.” Sofia murmured pessimistically.

“We’re gonna be fine.” Nate protested. “We’re not going to any second location, we’re not going to open the crate. I just want to see what’s in it.”

“You didn’t need my training to realize this is shady, Nate.” Sofia said.

“It is, but if someone is fucking with the Lops, then we need to see this through to get their support. And if this really is the work of bugs, then we definitely need to see it through.”

“That Minister gives me the creeps.” Ana shivered. “He kept staring at us.”

“I can’t really blame him.” Nate admitted.

“Do you like us in our uniforms?” Talia teased, tugging her blue-gray short skirt.

“It’s the stockings and the high heels.” Cora smirked. “Men, they’re all the same.”

“They are certainly not.” Lunar protested.

Isabelle chimed in just after Nate’s armguard pinged. “That’s the Minister. They have the co-ordinates, they’re ready with the convoy.”

“But I haven’t given Nate his after dinner relief—” Talia protested, pouting.

“After we get home, Talia.” Ana promised. “Suit up, weapons and grenades. You need your meka frame.”

Nate dressed quickly, even with the girls’ wandering hands, making sure he slipped the plasma-shielding baton into his sleeve. In case there’s trouble, he thought.

After they were fully outfitted, they joined the Minister in his large truck, sitting on the benches on either side of the truck, along with Delfael and his soldiers.

Delfael seemed nervous, but he showed them the message from the mysterious arms dealer, which was only the co-ordinates. Above, outside of the truck, Talia flew in the dark sky, the backup he’d asked for, in case their truck was led into an ambush. He was determined not to get caught in a trap.

Their truck rumbled over the roads for almost an hour, heading away from the city into the rocky hills as Talia followed in her meka frame. Ana placed a hand on his knee,

crossing her stocking-clad legs to stop the Minister from staring up her skirt.

“He’s really got a problem.” Ana giggled into his ear.

“Want me to sort it?”

“It’s okay.” She pressed a kiss to his cheek. “I’m just glad I wore panties today. Sometimes I forget.” She smirked.

“You really want to tease me now, of all times?” Nate groaned.

“Just revving the engine.” Ana bumped his shoulder. “This Lunari Princess is very high maintenance.” She whispered. “And she needs a good hard fucking to keep her from being naughty.”

“And a spanking, maybe. It’s been too long.” Nate told her.

She bit her lip. “I do need a firm hand.” She said breathily.

“Keep teasing me and you’ll get more for your ass than a spanking.” Nate warned.

“Promises, promises.” She wrapped her arm around his elbow.

“Tonight? After I’m done filling Talia.”

“Sounds like a date.” She agreed happily.

Finally, the truck stopped.

Talia reports no ambush, no hostiles around. Isabelle told him.

Nate nodded to the others.

They exited it to find themselves on top of a rocky hill, lit by the four bright white moons that made up the other populated planets of the Lops Aureoleae, such that even though it was night-time, the hill was still well-lit.

It took them little time to find the crate, burrowed between two boulders, thirty feet away. The crate was a solid gray, large and unlabeled.

Nate was cautious. He wasn’t going to fuck up again.

“This is you, Minister.”

“I’m sorry?” The man stammered, ears pressed low.

“I want you to open the crate, just in case.”

“B-but I’m really not sure...I mean, I am a high value member of the Order, isn’t it better if one of my men—”

Nate slipped a pistol from his hip and pointed it at the anxious politician. “No, that’s okay.” He said firmly. “I want you to do it.”

Delfael took a deep breath. “Very well. This is not a trap, after all. I believe this arms dealer wants a long-term relationship with the Lops.”

He stepped to the crate and opened it with a button press. The front fell open with a hiss. Nate watched with bated breath as the Minister peered inside it.

He turned and gave a thumbs up.

The crate exploded into a thunderous boom, a flash of searing orange that washed over their faces, drying their skin.

Nate’s ears rung, as he blinked his vision back into focus.

“What the fuck?” Nate grasped his head.

“No.” Cora muttered. She’d seen what he had yet to. Delfael was blown into burning pieces, his body exploded, flesh burning and blackened.

The men he'd brought with him cried out in rage, their weapons up to point at possible threats.

But none came.

Nate stared, not comprehending. Had that been a trap set for him, that Delfael had been caught up in?

For the first time in a long time, he didn't have a play. He didn't know what to do. Delfael's soldiers shouted into their armguards, their suspicions turning on Nate and his girls.

He couldn't make sense of it.

"Nate...hovership inbound." Talia chimed through his armguard.

"Hostile?"

"No...royal. It's got the emblem that we saw on the King's court hall."

Nate stared up at the ship, a cold chill running from the nape of his neck down his spine, trickling down as the hovership slowly landed. The ramp descended. And, along with a large troop of soldiers, came the King, who looked very much *not sick*.

Nate's stomach sank.

The King was old, hair white, but he was stocky and large. The golden cane he used seemed to be for effect, as he walked easily towards them, adorned in a golden cloak. His ears were completely black.

When his voice came, it was deep and commanding. "Arrest that man." The King ordered.

"Whoa, wait, wait, wait." Nate holstered his pistol and held his hands up. "I am Judge Clancy—"

"We know very well who you are." The King snarled.

"Then you know that as a Judge, I stand above the law, all laws." Nate snapped. "I am a representative of the Council itself. The Minister has been caught in a terrorist trap —"

The man sneered. "You do stand above the laws. And yet, executing the Acting Minister of our people? Is that within the Judge purview? I think the Council will understand our position."

"I...what?" Nate said, bewildered. "I was with your own soldiers. They all saw what happened."

"As did I. Each of my soldiers carries body cameras." The King said simply, as his soldiers surrounded Nate and the girls. He tapped his ornate armguard and projected footage in front of him.

It showed Nate pointing a gun at the Minister, the defeated man walking slowly to the crate...and then the explosion.

Nate grimaced.

So much for not walking into a trap. But was this a trap of the King's making? Was he in on it? Or just another pawn, like Delfael?

It didn't matter.

"Nate," Lunar gritted her teeth. "Say the word."

He shook his head. He was surrounded by soldiers who were probably innocent, just receiving orders. He couldn't order his girls to fire upon them, couldn't order Talia to fire her meka's weapons. That, and the fact they were wildly outnumbered.

Even if they shot, they'd lose.

He held his hands high above his head.

"Nate, no!" Ana growled. "This is an outrage. I am Princess Anariel of the Lunari and I demand that you—"

"We know who you are, Princess." The King said sharply. "And it is only because of your position that we aren't arresting you too."

"Let all the ladies go and I'll come peacefully. Otherwise," Nate raised his chin up to the sky. "There's a meka frame up there who'll take bodies."

The King followed his gaze with mild alarm and then shook his head. "Very well. You are the only one who forced the Minister to the explosive, regardless. Your companions are free to go."

"Nate." Cora trembled, looking like she wanted to unleash her body-mod weapons.

"Go, please." Nate begged, kneeling on the ground, hands behind his head. "You know what you have to do."

Ana was crying, tears streaming down her face. "I'll be back." She promised. "I'll raise hell."

"I know you will."

Sofia, by his side, was silent. In a sudden snap of movement, she pulled her pistol and shot into the sky. Her blast of fire sailed harmlessly into the air, and abruptly, she was on her knees alongside Nate. "I surrender!" She yelled.

A plasma shot fired at her but Nate was quicker, cracking his electric baton open, the blue forcefield dissipating the shot before Sofia was hit.

"I surrender, I surrender!" She repeated. The soldiers lowered their weapons.

"What the fuck are you doing?" He roared.

She winked at him, hands behind her head. "Can't let you leave my side, *Doctor*."

Nate realized her thought process, shaking his head in admiration. She needed his seed to recover — and letting him rot in a prison would have meant she'd be on the path towards a slow death. Whatever happened now, they were together.

"Arrest these two fools already." The King demanded. The girls watched and protested as Nate and Sofia were shackled, forced to their feet and frog-marched to the waiting truck.

Get off the planet, Ana. He told her in his head.

But you're in danger! Whoever set this up will kill you while you wait in jail, defenseless. She argued.

Whoever set this up wants to see me suffer, not just die. I have time to get out of this and Sofia at my side. But you need to get back to Federation space, call in some reinforcements. Stay and the King will find an excuse to lock you up too.

...Okay, Nate. Ana said, and he could hear how miserable she was.

It's okay. I might have to delay our date a little.

She sniffled as she watched him thrown forcefully into the armored truck. *That's okay.* He had an image of her wiping her face, even as the truck doors slammed shut. *When I come back, we'll drown you in lovesick horny girls, okay?*

Ana promised.
Promises, promises.

They spoke until the truck drove so far that her voice was faint and finally, gone completely. Nate was left staring at the angry faces of the Lops soldiers, with Sofia at his side.

"This is going to be fun." Nate muttered to her. "I just *love* prison food."

Sofia snorted. "*You* can eat prison food. I've brought my own food." Her knee rubbed against his suggestively.

"Wait, what?"

"What?" She somehow looked innocent, even though he couldn't see her eyes through her black wrap. Her head fell on his shoulder, her ivory white long hair tickling his face. "A woman has to be willing to work for her meal."