

S T A R S C R A P E R

Vale stirred in the darkness of her cabin; it was nearly pitch black even for her. She sat on the edge of the bed, sheets undisturbed from the night, her gaze fixed on the shifting hues of blue littered with inkblots dancing outside the window. The drift is dangerous; a layer of space-time that exists under normal space, it is difficult not to lose yourself in the shifting Rorschach test it often presents its travelers. The hum on the ship's engines usually yielded rest for Vale. Not this time though, she was restless.

If feet could carve a path in the tritanium flooring of the ship, they surely would've done so by now. Sleep had never been more difficult to find after a successful scrape. What normally would've called for celebration only brought hesitation this time. Fear.

Her ears felt it before they heard it, and the twitch brought her back to herself with a jolt. The way the air shifts as someone enters it. The computer hummed to life with a ding. Someone was at her quarter's door.

Vale cleared her throat and with a simple gesture, gave permission to computer to open the door. Light from the hallway flooded her dark quarters, and Brig's large frame sauntered inside. The door quietly shut behind him.

"You keep it so dark on this damn ship." Brig said with a bit of a sigh. He was used to it by now. His feet shuffled, almost fumbling to find a seat.

"Small talk, really? Computer, increase lighting by 15%." Vale's order came with a smirk.

"You're worried." He said firmly.

"You would be too if you captained a scraper like mine."

Brig huffed a moment, pulling his interface from his pocket. A common point of fidgeting for him, and one of admonishment for her.

"You know that's not what I mean... you're worried about the K'enti."

It was true. The K'enti as a race goes, have little window dressing to what their preferences are. What anyone knows of them is largely speculative, save for a couple rare instances of escape. Otherwise, Galactic Society rules are to avoid K'enti at all cost.

"I'm worried why they were there. That star system. It's not anywhere close to their known territory." Vale lamented as she spun up a light diagram of where they were. The room became host to holograms, displaying their recent scrape of Eriadne, their course through the system, their course out of it, and several small red blips indicating K'enti presence.

"We got away, isn't that the important piece of info you're leaving out?" Brig said, standing up and highlighting the Rio, safely traveling out of the star system.

"Maybe.. for now. I just," Vale paused, staring back out at the drift, "I don't know what's coming anymore. And I hate the not knowing."

Brig bristled at the notion, he himself liked to think he was always a step ahead of everyone in the room. "We'll approach *Winter Is Not A Whimper* within the hour. Our engines we'll need an overhaul once we're within their drift. It's been many cycles."

Vale nodded, and with that Brig excused himself from her quarters. Her shoulders drooped as the door shut behind him. Maybe she was making too much of this, maybe it's normal behavior for K'enti. After all, don't all sentients explore? Wish for the idea of more?

Somehow, that didn't settle her stomach either.

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The Rio entered the local system at an unheard of velocity. The planet filled the viewport suddenly and without warning. The gravity well drew them in, and warning sensors blinked with menacing fervor.

The shuttle rattled in defiance, Vale's hands danced across the controls, a waltz of fury and guidance in sum, "We came in too close! Hold steady!"

Her belief held as strong as her voice. "We can make this!" There was more at risk than just another haul.

The stolen shuttle balked, then careened forward. Brig shuffled in his seat, his eyes keen to the sensor readings shining brightly and indicating everything about their approach was off. The whiskers on either side of his neck stood tall with the feelings of flight, but he knew he had signed up for worse, Vale knew what she was doing.

Or he hoped.

He knew they were too close to K'enti space for comfort. The drift signature was too strong, they were in danger. This wasn't a routine scrape, but everything had gone so well until they tried to hide from the last patrol. The warning klaxons about hull pressure brought his thoughts back to the moment. His whiskers were taut.

"Entry speed is off the charts, the hull won't hold at this rate!" His exasperated claim went unheard, Vale's hands held steady on the controls as much as her voice.

"It'll hold! We don't have a choice!" She knew they were beyond choices now. Gravity pulls all things in. They were in damage control now.

The ship plummeted through the thick atmosphere of clouds and varied particles, their ship's entry speed made apparent blasted across the viewport in bombastic sparks of orange yellow, and blue hues.

"Power entry thrusters to 110% normal, and yaw by seven degrees!" She called out, Brig fumbled through a failing inertial net to oblige. His massive hands fell across the dash and a quiet blip of acquiescence let him know... The Rio was done for. He knew it now.

Vale's purple hair flew across her face as the shuttle's internal systems exploded in a splash of sparks. Smoke filled the cabin, choking them both. Brig reached for the emergency clearance valve, but as the Rio careened through the stratosphere of Eriande-40c, his head of colorful hair met a metallic point and spilt purple blood across the displays before him.

"Come on!" The exclamation left Vale's lips as soon as the atmospheric disturbance lifted. The blast of colored lights and thick clouds gave way to an unfortunate view. The calm before the crash. Before her was revealed a tidally-locked world of ocean and desert. They were quickly plummeting toward hard, desert sand.

Twelve fingers gripped the controls as tightly as they would allow and demanded the last of what was left of the Rio's landing thrusters. They sputtered out the remnants of fuel and juttet the small vessel toward the sea. Vale's glance fell to her co-pilot as the grav-net gave out with most of the shuttle's primary systems. Brig's unconscious body laid limp as it hung suspended in cabin, an upsetting amount of bright purple blood floated among the air between them, smearing across displays and controls with empty abandon. They were in free fall now. They were helpless.

A brilliant fireball rocketed over the vista, The Rio, a flash of color over a desolate display of orange sand and faint blue sea. And as soon as it began it was over, a lonely display of smoke and vapor just shy of the horizon.

The impact shook the ship a part. And Vale's last fleeting thought was of hope.