

JORM NA'TRET

EXCIDIVM



SKY'S THE LIMIT

The girl named Mynx laughed clear as a bell and clutched her patron's thick arm tighter, either undaunted by the musky stench of the fur or faking it expertly. Wagglehorn, owner of the arm, didn't bother as long as she didn't try to sneak a blade between his ribs. *Although that dress has delightfully few hiding places.* On the other side of the couch they shared, Tryx filled his cup with a fine Dantooinian cider, fresh and prickly while mild on the alcohol.

Opposite of him, Bale Andros lounged in an enormous armchair, swarmed over by the triplets Jyn, Syn and Lyn. Their combined dresses had approximately enough tissue to sew a single T-shirt - for a skinny person.

To the Lasat's left, a simple folding chair served to seat Jorm Na'trej. A single girl stood in attendance to the Kiffar's right, although Wagglehorn couldn't remember her name at all. *Something with a Y though.* Jorm's left hand rested on the bald head of a Human man, bound and gagged in silver tape. The prisoner squirmed and whimpered whenever Jorm pet him, but to no avail. He only bled harder from his blown ears.

The sound of sucking air and steaming bubbles drew Wagglehorn's eyes back to the low table set between him and Bale, the waterpipe on it, and then to the woman in the recliner inhaling the smoke. A tall human looking younger than her over forty years, the blond hair partially braided, partially loose falling onto fur-trimmed jacket shoulders.

Wynryn Kathnyck, owner and matron of Wynryn's Waterhole, a bar and brothel taking up a fair-sized building on Ulress' inside. The gathering took place in the building's inner courtyard, a well maintained garden.

"So, let's recapitulate," she began. "You folks are obviously new here. You burge in, start asking questions, tick off the Howling Hawkbats bikers who celebrate a gang war victory big-time in my bar, then mop the floor with the whole posse before throwing them out. When the Nayamans show up, you smack them around and tape one of them to the front door with the 'Private Party' sign around his neck. Next you drop the bikers' cash on my counter and ask for my time. And now we are sitting here while a few of your juniors guarantee our privacy."

She passed the pipe to Bale and leaned back, eying each of the three men cautiously.

"I don't know what to make of you. You look positively rag-tag, but you fight like a unit. Then again," she shot an angry glance at Jorm, "you do *that*."

Her finger pointed at another gang member. Like the aforementioned Nayaman at the door, he hung taped to a wall in a silver cocoon. More strips of tape blinded and gagged him, and even more held a set of earphones immovably fixed on his head. If one was inclined to be quiet and listen closely, an observer might have recognized the music blasting into the poor soul's ears as the latest debacle by some teenage holonet starlett famous for debacles.

The man's wailing had stopped a few minutes ago.

Jorm shrugged, singlehandedly drumming a melody on his captives' head.

“True enough. But what do you care when your time’s paid for and your loss of clients this evening compensated?”

“I care about them, and others, not coming back tomorrow,” Wynryn responded icily.

“If they don’t, I know a whole bunch of other guys I’ll point this way, and they’re nicer than me. You’re set.”

He accepted the pipe from Bale, who took the word.

“So, to get to the topic at hand... what do you think is worth telling about Ulress? What are its parties, who are the power players?”

Wynryn eyed the Zabrak, unreadable and set for business.

“How much do you need to know,” she asked, “how large are your ambitions?”

Bale smiled. “The sky’s the limit,” he quipped, then his smile derailed and he peeked upwards.

Wynryn laughed, gruff and harsh, a complete opposite to Mynx’ earlier outburst.

She leaned back on her recliner and stared into Ulress’ sky, prompting her guests to follow suit.

Ulress had once been a normal moon, but a wealth in minerals had seen it mined and completely hollowed out during the past millennia. The UCE had then used its artificial gravity technology to compress the leftover debris and the moon’s crust to a solid shell. Thanks to their efforts, life on Ulress thrived on the inside of the hollow moon. A spectator looking up could see roads, buildings and structures, an endless city sprawling the whole inner surface.

Wagglehorn could not help but feel small. Bale looked exactly the same, but there was no telling what went on behind Jorm’s smile.

*Nothing good as far as I can tell. Typical Jorm.*

Wynryn pointed up towards a dark metal hemisphere hanging at the core of Ulress.

“I’ll give you the short tour. That metal sheet is the Night. If you squint, you can see the spires holding it - North Pole and South Pole, anchored at Ulress’ rotational poles and stretching inwards through minimal gravity. Grav doesn’t expand very far here, same as atmosphere - only a kilometer or two. Between these spires, in the vacuum, is an unshielded fusion reactor which gives us light and warmth. We nicknamed it Cagerion. Some folks call it the Death Star Core though, because it looks like the thing as depicted in New Republic history programs.”

“Apt,” Jorm commented as he passed the pipe to Mynx.

“I guess the Night rotates?”

He pointed to his right, behind Wagglehorn. The Lasat turned his massive head. While the city over Bale’s had had been dark as the courtyard, the urbanized sky behind himself was lit like day.

“Indeed,” Wynryn confirmed, “set to match Seraph’s cycle. Those people coming here like to settle in areas corresponding with their home time zone, and those areas get named accordingly. For example, we’re in the East Elaria district, close to the borders of the Nayaman enclave.” She shrugged.

“Of course, that’s just a rule of thumb. There’s a lot of mixing up here. Still, see that part up there, a few hours from morning? With the one very bright spot? That’s Moonside Meraxis, and the lightshow is Norbus’ compound. He’s an ex-Colonel from Adoniram’s father’s intelligence service. Old as time itself, but sharp. I wager you’ll run into his operations sooner or later.”

She accepted the pipe from Wagglehorn and drew deeply.

“So, gentlemen. You purchased my time for the whole evening, and we barely got into it. I say we have a round of drinks while you mull over what you learned, and you ask your questions as they come. What say thee?”

Her proposal was met with cheers and the soft clink of glasses.