*Well of Fears*A CRASH Canon Story written by Your Friend the Dragon:  
Using characters from Willie5000, I\_am\_THEdragon and PoliceOfficer07.

*Well of Fears*

The telephone rang in the office of the Admiral. The phone had been ringing all day. A digital tactical map on a monitor on the wall to the left of his cherrywood desk, automatically was programmed to indicate updates that were relevant to his calls received. In most cases they were updates from Imperial Forces present on the ground fighting against the Gossip, and the map would highlight the globe representing G-759-III. If it was a ship in the fleet the ship would be displayed, along with information about the ship and what it was calling for. Although the rest of the Guard Fleet had arrived early that morning, Itami was still in the process of transferring his command as he still retained effective tactical command while his superiors were debriefed. He had been in regular communication with the Admiralty and occasionally he had to make a call to either those who wore those stars, as did he, or to the Imperial Senate to placate the concerns of the heads of state that understood the circumstances of what was transpiring. He had felt those stars that he and the rest of the admirals had worn, so heavy on their shoulder lapels, the stresses of the command responsibilities, he felt them and their gravity on his shoulders and used every fiber of patience he had to maintain his discipline. He thrived on it. This is what he was born to do. “It has been too long,” he mused silently to himself, pausing before he turned his attention to the waiting call.  
 The phone had a red light next to a label that listed the bridge communications blister, meaning that the call wasn’t from forces from the Mediator, which would have been connected directly. Instead it meant that whoever was calling was being routed from either the rest of the fleet, or the Empire itself. Itami picked up the receiver and lifted the mouth piece to his head. “This is Rear Admiral Itami, go ahead.”  
 The soft hum of the computers aboard the Mediator’s bridge were heard faintly on the other end of the line.  
 “Mediator Actual, this is the Bridge. Incoming call from Mandarin. Secure transmission, priority one hail.”  
 Mandarin- Xuanyuan Huangdi. Itami had spoken briefly with the Harbinger upon his arrival, then met him more formally when he was tasked with providing him with a brief detailing what the situation presently was at G-759-III. Later he had a discussion with him about a Zeep refugee who had agreed to provide information about the Zeep Empire for the Office of Naval Intelligence. Itami knew that Xuanyaun knew more than anyone else in the fleet at that moment. Shortly after he arrived he ordered a number of prowlers out in part of a larger intelligence operation known as Grand Tour. The Mediator’s own reconnaissance Prowler, ISS Shadowveil had been reassigned to this operation. Itami was disappointed to hear that was to be the case. He could have used Alpha-Nine to run sabotage operations against the Gossip, but he knew that it was absolutely necessary; the Empire needed the full picture about this new galaxy. Blue Team could handle their own.  
 “Affirmative, connect call and secure lines, Mediator Actual out.”  
 There was a brief electronic noise from the phone as the call was rerouted, then a faint click.

The electronic voice of the Harbinger rang over the phone clearly. Itami turned around to peer out his window. His Majesty was aboard the Kamikaze, the dreadnaught directly outside his window. Seventy Kilometers away and it was still a massive ship. “Admiral Itami? This is Huangdi. I was calling you to let you know about how it turned out. Shadowveil sent me some interesting reports that I’m forwarding to your computer terminal now. You can read all about it when you get the chance moment.”  
 The computer, true to the Harbinger’s word beeped with a notification for the Admiral. The formal after-action report was encrypted with a security key that was required to open it. Itami plugged in his code-key and opened the file. He learned to quickly skim for the key notes that he needed. He knew where to look in the reports since they were prepared according to a standard format.  
 “Your Majesty, I’m glad to learn that Alpha-Nine and the Shadowveil have accomplished their goal. Repatriating these hostages will be quite difficult for us however, the circumstances of our arrival in this galaxy have made diplomatic contact hard to reach for the moment.”  
 “That is actually another reason why I wanted to contact you. I have a request of you Admiral, if you would permit it. I also would ask for your opinion as truthful as you can be.”  
 Itami was briefly taken aback. His scales were ruffled but he quickly returned to a resting position. The Harbinger asking for his opinion on diplomacy was unexpected. He wasn’t sure what he meant.  
 “I will do my best Harbinger. What is it that you ask of me?”  
 “First, I would like you to transfer the Navitian and the Ryu who finalized the treaty with the UC to my ship for transport. I wish to send them as envoys on a mission I have tasked the Shadowveil to embark on before they return to the fleet. Until such time that we can receive word on what the respective governments near the Belt wish us to do with their civilian populace that we are trying to repatriate, the Shadowveil will be otherwise out of reach. I apologize for not being able to reunite you with your reconnaissance vessel as soon as I had previously anticipated. I also apologize having to ask even more of you, when you are currently fighting against the Gossip. The two officers however, I feel would be more valuable with their efforts used elsewhere, as would the Prowler, at least for the moment.”  
 “That would be Ensign Coeus and Commander Inari sir.” Commander Inari belongs to my detail but Ensign Coeus is assigned to the Seaspray, Nike Class.”  
 Ensign Coeus and Commander Inari both belonged to Imperial Public Affairs, and at this point had more experience in speaking with the inhabitants of the Liskus Galaxy than any other Dragon in the entire Empire combined. By default Coeus served as Inari’s aide de camp and often handled most of the necessary paper work. The two were instrumental in signing the Horizon Accords with the initially reluctant Admiral Halsey of the UC Navy.  
 “The pair will be rushed for time sir but I can see to it that they will be transferred to your command shuttle.”  
 “Don’t feel the need to pressure them Admiral. I am willing to be patient as long as I need to for them to complete their task here. All good things for those that wait. I can sense that you yourself are anxious about our predicament. You excel as an officer Itami, I have read your reports; you are comfortable in a command role. I think that you should know however that from your new position and now on you are a representative of the Empire. You shouldn’t fear having to be a diplomat. Your training has made you ready.”  
 Itami sat in his chair again, sensing the tone of the conversation to come ahead. The Harbinger, a dragon that previously the Admiral had never met in person enthused flawlessly all the traits that were said to be true of him. Itami had never even considered even conceiving of an encounter with someone as high as he, but the way that life flows isn’t so predictable. His voice and his tone could have made the Admiral mistake him for his father.  
 “Yes sir. What was it that you wished to ask me of, of my opinion-speaking freely?”  
 “Yes Admiral, please relax. I am not acting here in my role of Lord Commander. I wanted you to tell me what I think the goal of the Empire should be in this New Frontier of space. It has been a long time since we have involved ourselves in the affairs of powers beyond our borders, and this is new territory, for all of us. We have history only as a guide to our efforts and it can only serve as an example of how to avoid the mistakes of the past, a past bore long before you were born. You have met the UC, you have met some of the Zeep, tell me, how should we make ourselves and our name known to them? Should we disassociate ourselves and act in secret or should we directly involve ourselves?”  
 Itami lowered the phone away from his mouth. He looked up at the door and then down at his terminal. He shut off the terminal and then with a remote command locked the door and monitor. Him locking the door was to be understood by security posted just outside that he wanted to not be disturbed. Then he pressed another button on his console and shut off the interior lighting and closed the shutter blast door for his window. For a brief moment the room was black, but then the emergency chemical lights began to react and cast a dim red light over the office. His shadow peered over him and he began to doubt himself. For the first time in his command. Itami was truly afraid. He didn’t have a coherent answer for the Harbinger.   
 This was one of the fiercest debates between the great scholars in the Imperial Capital. The senate was divided into two major parties. One that believed that involvement in the affairs of other species was a dangerous mistake, and that the Empire should remain isolated for its sake, and for the sake of others, these were known as the Determinists, while the other maintained the opposite as true, that the Empire had a responsibility to interact with any and all species that could reasonably contact the Empire in their own right-the so-called Nebulists. What that meant though, was debated even among those who identified as nebulists, and they all disagreed on what such a threshold was. For this reason, the Determinists commanded the Senate as a whole, but their influence was far from absolute. Liskus was a powder keg for this debate. The Mantle, the key piece of legislation that determined and governed all of this, came under scrutiny yet again. There was a danger here in Liskus that reared its head that couldn’t be ignored. Itami knew that the Senate would rather quibble over the details later than refuse to intervene until it was too late, but it was quickly becoming more and more complicated-his decision to invoke emergency military powers was justified, there was no question in that, but the consequences of using such powers had yet to be seen. He knew that when he returned to Takama-Ga-Hara, he would certainly be compelled to speak before the Council of Ten Thousand. This question was an extension of what the Admiral had just been asked. And he had no time to decide which answer was right.  
 “I…Apologize, your Majesty, but I’m afraid I don’t understand why you are asking this of me. Could you explain if this has anything to do with you asking for the Ensign and the Commander sir?”  
 A long pause followed and then the Harbinger began to speak. “It is perhaps unfair of me to ask this of you without you understanding the contexts of what it is that I, and the Emperor and Empress are wanting to do. I am now forwarding onto you the details of a plan that we have for dealing with the crisis in the Azedi Belt. Elysium as I’m sure you know is our larger concern, ever since we confirmed the veracity of the intelligence from ONI, and so we are preparing to act. There are those in this galaxy who fear us, who distrust us, but the Admiralty needs an answer, and with my judgement, your wisdom is the best to guide us in this time. If we are to solve the crisis in the belt, we need to know if we should act on our own or try to gain the trust of those who live there. Please read over the plan as best as you can and call me in the morning tomorrow with your opinion on what is contained within.”  
 “And what is it that I should be looking for sir? What specific notes should I look for? I can assemble Public Affairs and have them conduct a review for you, my PA team aboard the Mediator can document their experiences here in Liskus and-“  
 “Please Admiral. I do not expect a formal review from the Navy. Goodness knows I’ve already received countless of those from my own crew aboard the Kamikaze. No. I want your opinion, true and honest. I want your experiences with the UC and the Zeep you have aboard to shape what you tell me. I want you to show to me how you feel we should act. For once, I want emotion to guide us. I predict that in the coming hours, you will come to learn exactly what I require. Fear not Admiral, you will know what I am looking for soon enough. Huangdi, out.”

There the Admiral sat, the dim red light illuminating the back of his head. The recycled purified air circulating through the cabin, and the sound of the life support systems and ventilation unit serving as the only noise in the otherwise silent chamber. The Harbinger’s advice was cryptic, no clear meaning to be found from his words. But there was no doubt in the meaning of his question. Instead, Itami realized that he would have to discover another way to interpret what the Regent-Lieutenant had meant in the brief call. Itami grabbed his cap and walked for the door. He fitted his cap smartly on his head, then using the panel near the door, he opened the door and stepped outside. The Master-at-Arms stood at attention and snapped to a salute.   
 “At ease Master Chief. Would you care to accompany me on a walk?”

Itami’s personal body guard, the Master-at-Arms, was a Mosura who only stood up to the Admiral’s knees; the admiral at a little over three and a half meters towered over him. He carried an electrochemical gun and stun baton for security incidents on deck, which were practically non-existent. His fur was very clean, well-kept and his uniform immaculate. He was a near perfect example of a senior non-commissioned officer; there of course being no true, perfect example. Itami had hand picked him; he wanted a bodyguard other than another Ryu or Draconian because he wanted to have someone close that could offer a different perspective on events that concerned his command. Master Chief Petty Officer Makato was unafraid to do so; Itami deeply valued and respected his word. He could have easily have been the Command Master Chief of the Mediator if he ever desired, but he instead insisted remaining at the Admiral’s side. He was intensely loyal to the Admiral.  
 “Something troubling you sir? It has been some time since you went about a walk on deck. The last time I remember you conducting such an “inspection” was when you served as part of the Draconian Peacekeeping force over Suragou.”  
 Suragou was another similar intervention to the one against the Gossip, but it differed in several ways. The first was that the Imperial force was part of a larger effort conducted by the Aneulian Federation, which was one of the Imperial Client States. A border dispute involving the Nerausian Union led to a series of genocides on the planet involving several large mining consortiums that forced the Empire’s hand. They intervened to arrest those responsible and to stop the conflict; a security force had remained in system ever since. Itami was the executive officer aboard the Three-Body-Problem, the lead carrier that commanded the Imperial Fleet. Coincidently, it was also the first time that the admiral had met Commander, then Senior Lieutenant Nobunaga who now commanded Ronin Blue Team. Itami was only a Captain then, but as an executive officer of such a massive vessel, it was effectively treated as a command appointment. The other way in which the conflict differed was that there was a reason that the Nerausian Union did what they did, one that was levied against them when they were forced to answer for their crimes in the courts. They wanted the natives gone from the planet in order to begin large scale mining operations, even against the warnings from the Federation and the Empire itself. The Federation requested that the Empire act preemptively, but the law was clear. Unless the Union actually did attack, the Empire was prohibited from intervening. It was one of the moments that shook Itami’s previous beliefs in the Mantle held by the Determinists outlined by the Harbinger’s implications earlier. Countless lives could have been saved if the law permitted intervention sooner, before the Union invaded. The Mantle, which was meant to prevent such loss of life by limiting the actions of the Imperial Military and Government, at least theoretically, had failed in its intended role. Some had argued that their threats should have been construed as enough of a justification, but the Senate at the time insisted on trying to find a peaceful solution as demanded by the Mantle. Many afterwards blamed the senate for its inaction, while others were left in fear of the Imperial technological might, overwhelming as it were and interpreted it as some form of larger statement. This interpretation is exactly what the Senate had feared would happen if the Empire had attacked first. History had shown that this wasn’t the first incident of its kind where the Empire found itself needing to balance its own moral code with the delicate balance of the politics of neighboring empires. And as the Gossip had shown, it wouldn’t be the last either.

The Gossip were different in a way, but similar in others. They acted without seemingly any purpose, and they indeed had already committed atrocities before the Empire had arrived. No one had predicted that the Nerausian Union would act in the manner in which they did, but everyone could see what the Gossip were doing. This was exactly why the Senate so quickly approved legislation enabling the military to act. It wasn’t yet a formal declaration of war, but that was no doubt being formulated soon. And yet the response from the Imperial Military, while it had saved lives created in many the doubt that their intentions were genuine. Some believed, even within the UC that the Imperials were there to prepare an invasion of their own, only using the effort against the Gossip as a front to establish staging areas for larger military forces. The Defense Intelligence Agency and Army Intelligence Branch had known full well that their bases on G-759-III for example were being kept under covert surveillance. Halsey didn’t still fully trust the Imperial Military, and he had reason to given its sudden arrival. The irony was that if the situation in the Belt had continued to escalate as it seemed likely to, this would partially be true.  
 “Its curious that you mention that history Master Chief. What I currently am musing on is such a similar conundrum to the one the Empire faced previously to the outbreak of war on that world. Namely our decision to not intervene sooner. You’ve previously expressed your opinion on the Determinists and our Mantle; yet again it presents challenges that must be grappled with. The Harbinger has asked me for his opinion on how the Empire should handle our diplomatic situation here in this galaxy. He wants me to give my thoughts on what we should do, and why.”

The two began walking down the corridor, heading toward the main transport hub on the dormitory level. Itami was intending on taking a transport to the bridge to distract himself by working from there. Immersed in the heart of the ship, he could deafen his thoughts while keeping its pulse.  
 “And what do you think that we should do sir?”

“I frankly cannot provide an answer. I have my doubts, no matter what position I take. And I fear that both have risks too great to quantify.”

“You know how I feel sir. Speaking freely, of course, I disagree with the standpoint of the Determinists, but understand why they stand where they do. Our technology and capabilities are dangerous. They can cause irreparable harm in the worst of situations, but that’s exactly the point; in the worst of situations. We can’t control everything, but we also can’t assume that nothing is in our control.”

The two reached the entrance to the tram terminal, the bay door was kept open as the ship was not engaged in combat. They walked to the platform and awaited for one of the monorail trains to arrive to take them to the command deck. The two continued with their conversation, both standing side to side looking forward.

“And what if we do lose control Master Chief; what then? Lets use the Gossip as an example, we know that both from the UC themselves and the ONI tap conducted into their local array that they steal, and reverse engineer alien technology. What if they did that with any of our own weapons? What harm could that then bring to the UC?”

“We know that we have fail-safes for that sir. Remote destruction of the equipment using preprogrammed nanites embedded in the manufacturing process, all designed to destroy themselves in the process-without harm to anyone in the immediate vicinity, you know how strict the Acquisitions Corps is and how rigorous their requirements are, hell its half the reason the government owns SysTech. It would take a massive leap for the Gossip, or anyone for that matter to copy our technology. And that’s not just a statement about the capabilities of the Gossip, its more a statement about how complex our materials science is. Our official documents are outright lies. Molecularly engineered Titanium Plate? Our armor is much more than that. We literally have altered the crystalline structure of the armor at a Quantum Level. The whole atomic structure has been rearranged, fundamentally there’s an argument that its not even Titanium anymore, its technically a metamaterial.”

“Maybe. That discussion has been held before though. I wish I could tell you more but I’m afraid I cannot. Even if it would help to explain why I am so afraid of the possibility.”

“Need-to-know basis then. This wouldn’t have anything to do with Elysium would it? Does the Admiralty see potential issues that mirror your current concerns?”

Itami looked down at the Mosura that stood next to him.

“Yes, without a doubt Makato. That’s what bothers me. It might make everything else pale in comparison. If we come out publicly about the weapon, if we reveal it to the galaxy, it might create a panic, or worse, a rush for the belt that would just exacerbate the whole conflict. But if we don’t… and some power gets control of it without knowing what it is capable of? Or even what it is? We and the Zeep are the only ones who have an understanding of it, and the Zeep’s view is clouded and incomplete, fragmentary.”

An automated announcement came over the intercom warning for personnel waiting at the platform to stand back, a monorail train was now arriving. “Now arriving, monorail for central command deck, please stand clear of the platform.” Itami looked at the monorail and stepped back as the doors slid open. He had a feeling rise from his back and he twitched his wings. He then stood and waited for the monorail to close its doors again and depart the station.

“Changed our mind sir?”

“Yes. But I’m not sure why. We will wait for the next monorail. If I’m not mistaken, the schedule will have it be for the officer’s mess hall. I think that’s where I need to be now.”  
 “Allow me to ask you something, sir if you will. I think that I have a point to be made. We both know that there are differences to this compared to Suragou. But I think you might be missing something greater here. On Suragou the decision to act wasn’t yours, you were ordered to by the Senate. Here the choice was yours and yours alone. You could previously stand aside from the debate, here you cannot, and here I think you showed yourself truly. I believe that its telling that you did decide to act. Your standing orders had nothing explicitly to do with the conflict here in this Uranian Wing, but you intervened anyway. I’ve read your official statement explaining your conduct. I remember little of it and truthfully, that doesn’t matter since most of it was technical notes about the order of battle, tactical analysis of the Gossip and the UC, but I do remember one thing that stood out, that was out of place from the rest of the writing. I think it was a brief moment where you spoke from your heart sir. Do you know what you said?”  
 “No Master Chief. I acted in the moment. What did I say?”  
 “I remember it word for word sir, I made sure of it, you said: I refer to my experience as executive officer aboard the Three-Body-Problem during the Suragou conflict. The decision to act when the Empire did act resulted in the murder of untold thousands, a tragedy that should have been prevented. We were simply too late. I was not going to allow the same mistake to be repeated, not now while I had the ability to prevent it. We only have from history the evidence that the indecision and inability to act has caused such loss, such perverse violations of nature as to justify what has been done here and what has needed to be done. I make these biases and beliefs clear and am fully prepared to accept all responsibility for these actions when all is said and done. But there is a real crisis that must be addressed first. I therefore urge the Imperial Senate, the Admiralty, and the Imperial Chancellery to accept the terms outlined in the treaty prepared for a delegation to the United Creatures, and to make all the necessary legislation to expand upon the treaty to guarantee the military commitment to defend them from such abominable horrors of the Gossip. We cannot repeat the same failures as we had made at Suragou; we need only convict ourselves to the traditions and values which we claim to abide. The rest shall follow.”  
 Itami quickly glanced at Makato. His eyes widened in astonishment. Again there was silence, again the hum of the life support systems serving as the only distraction, even as quiet as they were. He felt the light from the artificial lighting as a spotlight on the two of them. The white-blue lighting was harsh in that moment. Itami had realized just what he had been told, but he couldn’t believe it.  
 “Did I really write that?”  
 “You did sir. It speaks for itself. I think you already have your answer for the Harbinger.”  
 Itami looked forward again. He rubbed his temples and sighed.  
 “I don’t believe so. The Gossip are only a special circumstance; I cannot apply the same reasoning across an entire galaxy.”  
 Makato frowned. The announcement came again. “Now arriving, monorail for dormitory section G, officers mess, level one, please stand clear of the platform.”  
 The two stepped onto the monorail and sat down near the corner of the car. An announcement played indicating a warning of the doors closing and then the train accelerated away from the platform and into the service tunnel. The red lights of the maintenance access way fluttered along the side of the train and reflected along the windows of the train and in the Admiral’s eye.  
 “No. It isn’t the same. Elysium and the Gossip are very different. The Gossip are a clear danger that is apparent to the whole galaxy. Our presence would not have changed that. But there are too many variables to account for in the belt. We should use Prowlers and the Office of Naval Intelligence, deal with the Elysium Problem in secret and then simply leave that region of the galaxy. The Mantle was written specifically because we can control our technology and our actions, but not the actions of others. The Mantle was written after the Great Panic. My great-grandfather was there. It was just before the current Emperor and Empress took the throne. He was an Ensign then, aboard that very ship outside my window, the Kamikaze. The lights of the cities on the planet were so quickly extinguished; there was only a ten second window between conformation that they had launched missiles from the surface and that the counterfire program responded. We put safeguards in place to prevent something like that from ever happening again, but the chaos that followed after? No words could have excused that. The surface of the planet was turned so quickly to ash because it was so readily assumed that the Empire would be heralded as heroes. The evacuation of the planet was a tremendous failure. They had refused to board any of our ships after that. Even those that thought we were truly there to help them. We were lucky that the Stellar-Engineering Corps were able to prevent the Supernova as they did, or the Empire would have been responsible for the extinction of an entire race. Draconians live a very long time and it seems so long ago but to many it was only yesterday. It only feels like it was yesterday when he tells it. I do empathize with the plight of the natives in that region of space but I have my reservations as to whether or not our presence would simply enhance the danger. Millions of lives in that belt. So many voices. *So many lights*.”

“Dragons are the physical manifestation of emotion.”

“What was that Master Chief?”

Makato was looking down at his hands he had placed in his lap. He rapped his fingers on his leg, obviously looking for the next words to say.  
 “I said Dragons are the physical manifestation of emotion. When I just joined the Navy, one of my first posts was on Avalon. I joined the Navy from a frontier colony, very much on the rim of Imperial Space. I was strange there as Mosura very much are from the interior. I had never seen a Dragon such as yourself before. I was thrown into the deep end and my first encounter were with the Avalonians themselves. I didn’t know how to approach them. A Kobold Sergeant sensed that was the case and explained to me that, Dragons are the physical manifestation of emotion. I had no idea what he meant. I think I’m only now starting to get it though. I’ve been in the Navy for a long time, longer than most, I just keep seem to be coming back to it when my service periods conclude. I’ve learned a lot in my time here and one of the things I’ve learned is how sensitive that you all are. You treat everything cautiously, and you look at things analytically, not emotionally. I used to think it was because you didn’t feel. There was a time I thought that sergeant was insane; truth be told, I thought all Kobolds were a little insane. You all fluctuate so randomly, from a completely lucid state to this, anxious and trapped in a loop. Its like the Universe talks to you, right? Let it sir. Don’t trap yourself in the loop.”The Admiral looked at Makato for a few seconds, then nodded*.* He then turned his head back to the window, watching the red lights go by*. So many lights.*

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***PONOS***

It was hard keeping still. Every sound, every sight, and every smell was new. When there was smell, it was sweet and pleasant, not anything harsh and industrial like he was used to. It was all so immaculately clean. Only the offices of the Executors were kept so clean in the Dominion, and none were even close to the conditions in which were seen here on this ship. He had only ever seen the office of a Doge this clean and that was on Dianduris itself. It was for a brief moment as his Executor was summoned for a meeting of the Board, one that ultimately led him to this place. It was practically anti-septic. It wasn’t so much the smell itself, but the lack of smell that alarmed him.  
The Ensign, he couldn’t remember how to pronounce his name, had told him that he would return only in a moment, and that his employer had been told that the UC had permitted him to remain as a negotiator on behalf of the company. It was a lie of course, but one that kept him safe. If they had told the truth though, it wouldn’t have mattered, there wouldn’t have been anyway anyone could hurt him, not now. He didn’t actually believe it. The title of citizenship cost hundreds of millions of Ducats in the Dominion, but he had simply just been given it.

He was a strange creature. He had large wings, but they couldn’t help him fly, they were purely vestigial, with what few biologists were employed by the company estimating that they eventually became part of ancient mating rituals. His skin was an orange tone that failed to blend in with the white interior of the room. He was a Zeep, and today he was going to become an Imperial.

The Ensign had returned, just stepping into the office that bore his name. He was taller than all of the others, including himself, he was a “Dragon”, he thought he heard correctly, but of those creatures, he was smaller than the others. He wore a dark blue uniform with a number of accessories that were related to his position. The uniform was similar to the one worn by the Carabineers Force who served as the Guard for the Grand Headquarters, or at least the ones who weren’t part of the Riot Enforcement Officers. He saw the uniform first usually, then the one wearing it second. It still made him react nervously, but he was beginning to become accustomed to it. In the office there was a large metallic desk that was adjusted to the Ensign’s height, and a bookcase that formed part of the wall to the left of the door. A number of curios and decorations lined parts of the office walls, but the bookshelf was left filled with a number of books, some of which that looked important, distinguished with a uniform set of spines with red binding.  
 The Ensign was a shark-like alien. He had rows of sharp teeth that frightened him, and his eyes were an intensely deep hue, impossible to read. But his hand was delicate and he took care to keep his distance, seemingly sensing the fear that was present. The Ensign walked over to his desk and sat down in front of the Zeep.  
 “I apologize, Ensign, but could you remind again please, how is it that your name is pronounced?”  
 “Coeus, its pronounced Key-awus. It means Intelligence. Please try to relax, you don’t have to treat me as a superior; I’m not. Have you read over the documents, do you understand them? We took our time to make sure that it is readable in your language. We can translate vocabulary readily with our translators, but paper still requires tried and tested methods. We think we got it right, but you never know.”  
 “I do Ensign Coeus. But I have a problem. I don’t have a name to sign it with.”  
 “Do you not have a name that you feel suits you, or do you feel uncomfortable providing yourself with a name? There is no wrong or right answer in this circumstance. If you feel unready, this is fine, we can still finalize the paperwork as it is now. Not having a name on the form will not invalidate this work.”

“I do have a name Ensign. But I wanted to ask your permission in using it.”  
 “As I have stated, you do not need my permission. What is it that you have in mind?”

The Zeep looked at the book that lay at his feet and bent over to pick it up. He placed the book on the Ensign’s desk. The cover bore a script which he was not familiar with, but he had spent time trying to deconstruct it. The Ensign was able to read it, The Epics: The Myths and Legends of The Navita. The Zeep opened the cover and flipped the pages to a marker he had placed. Remembering where the name appeared, he pointed at the page. He had only half a reason to believe it was a name, in truth it was a random guess, but he thought it looked enough like a name, something about the lettering and the way it appeared in the text made him at least think it was.

“Ponos? It is interesting that you choose such a name.”

“So it is a name? What does it mean?”

“It means Hardship. In the myths of our people he was the child of Eris who was the goddess of discord and strife. This section in this book is quoting Theogony, the origin of our gods. He and his sisters all, they were all personifications of that which is wrong. Murder, theft, cruelty. Such a name would serve as a reminder of ZeepCol’s cruelty.”  
 The Zeep frowned.  
 “That name has a horrible meaning. If the name is what identifies me as who I am… I’m not a murderer, I’m not a criminal.”  
 Coeus walked over the shelf built into the wall and pulled out another book. He brought it back and quickly opened it to a page. At the top of the page read the same name that the Zeep had found: Ponos.

“This is the text that the book you have is citing; Theogony. It means Genealogy of the Gods. These texts are mythical of course, but in some regards are also historical, as they are an important part of my peoples’ culture. As for the name Ponos, if you will, I have something that you might want to consider. A number of historians and archaeologists believe that these stories are supposed to represent the hubris of our existence, that if our gods are fallible, then so too can we be. In that way, the name Ponos if you chose it would be a reminder to your former masters that you have been liberated, and that they are fallible; They are not perfect.”  
 The Zeep still kept the same expression. It wasn’t exactly a frown but Coeus knew that it wasn’t approving. Evidently he hadn’t convinced him.  
 “Are you hungry? You haven’t eaten anything since you came aboard the Mediator.”  
 The Zeep’s stomach growled in affirmation. It was protesting his fast quite audibly.  
 “I don’t have any money. I couldn’t pay.”  
 “That’s not an excuse, you don’t have to, no one pays for food in the Empire. Come on, lets go to the mess hall. Its just down the corridor from my office.”  
 Coeus rose from his chair and walked to the door. He led the Zeep out then locked the door as he followed him out.  
 “Its this way, follow me.”  
 Coeus began walking down the corridor. Several painted lines on the wall indicating destinations aboard the ship guided crew to locations aboard the ship. The Zeep knew that they were following the red line, he had followed and traced it before, on the way to the office of the Ensign. He had done it in case he got lost or he needed to find his way out to the lavatories, they were located just at the end of the hall.  
 “How many crew are aboard this ship? The Mediator? We saw it was over five kilometers long when we first encountered it aboard our ship.”   
 “ISS Mediator has a crew complement of six thousand naval personnel with a Division of marine-army forces; 22,000 personnel including support headquarters, plus three cruiser naval attack wings of Demon Class Interceptors divided into three squadrons each. Each squadron is made of 24 craft meaning that the Mediator has 216 Demon class spacecraft aboard assigned to those squadrons. Twice that number, or six squadrons of defensive fighters and interceptors, the two wings of Archangel dropships, all organized in the same fashion, and finally there is also a cruiser spacelift squadron with 24 of the Helios heavy lift SSTO craft. The whole of this force is an additional two thousand personnel, meaning that the Mediator has a total crew compliment of thirty thousand.”  
 “This ship is incredibly large. And the Admiral is in command of all of it?”  
 “Yes, along with an Executive Officer who acts as the commanding officer in his absence, another Rear-Admiral, lower echelon, Brigadier General Tsu, who is in charge of the ground forces, and a Captain who’s in command of the cruiser craft compliment. The navy wings technically are part of the command structure for the cruiser but they operate independently in principal. He can’t do it alone. Draconians are capable, but not omnipotent. The crew *is the ship*.”  
 “You talk as if the Mediator has a soul, as if its alive.”  
 “In a way, it is. It’s a city, just as alive as any other. The numbers I mentioned don’t account for the civilians aboard, or the auxiliary support crew, and it fails to account for the onboard automation. You account for the automated systems and then you could swear by it that the ship is alive. That it has a breath of its own. The reactor is its heart, the life-support systems, its lungs, the Rear Admiral its brain, and the crew, its blood. The Empire has a very proud spacefaring tradition, and now, with you being aboard the Mediator, you are a part of it.”

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The monorail slowed as it approached the end of the platform. It came to a smooth stop and then the doors opened. From the cabin stepped out the Rear Admiral and his personal guard, Makato. They began walking toward the mess, following the red guide marking the wall.  
 “We’ll need to prepare the ship for transit to the Kamikaze. Have the Ensign and Commander been informed?”

“The Commander has, he’s already making his way to the hanger for transit. But we haven’t sent a messenger for the Ensign yet sir. He’s still speaking with the Zeep aboard and finalizing his citizenship papers.”  
 As the Rear Admiral and Master Chief reached the mess hall, they stopped. They both saw Ensign Coeus and the Zeep sitting together at a table eating some form of food. They couldn’t tell from where they stood. They were sitting in a booth next to one of the many preservation and conservation gardens aboard the Mediator. This one in particular housed a number of exotic and bizarre alien plants that had beautiful flowering buds that hadn’t yet blossomed. The Mess hall itself was empty other than the two at the booth and the civilian chefs who served the kitchen. There were a dozen or so booths all padded with a soft padding. A wooden wall was placed just over the ship’s thick metallic structural walls. The mess was very well adorned with decorations and ornate lighting that hung from the ceiling. The light gave a soft, red-orange hue, reminiscent of candles in a burning lantern. The lights were even placed in lamps that evoked such an image. It could have easily been mistaken for a luxury restaurant and not a military mess. The Admiral knew it was probably much for the Zeep refugee to take in.  
 “Isn’t that the Zeep and the Ensign there sir?”  
 “Yes. I’m glad to see that he’s finally eating.”  
The Rear Admiral and the Master Chief walked toward the booth. Ensign Coeus noticed the two approaching and quickly stood up to attention and snapped a salute at the Admiral.  
 “At ease Ensign. How are the two of you this evening?”  
 “Fine sir. And you?”  
 “Troubled. Would you mind if I join the two of you?”

“Not at all, please.” The Ensign directed the Admiral to sit on his side of the booth with him. The Admiral took his spot on the right, closest to the garden and the Ensign then sat next to him on his left. Then the Master Chief sat with the Zeep on the opposite side.

“My name is Master Chief Petty Officer Makato. Please call me Master Chief or Makato. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

The Master Chief extended his hand; but the Zeep didn’t understand the gesture. Realizing his mistake, Makato retracted his arm, but not before the Zeep finally understood what it meant and took his hand. The two shook and then returned their arms.  
 “Sumimasen!” shouted Ensign Coeus. As he did, an attendant walked over to the booth the four were sitting at. “Yes sir?”  
 Admiral Itami looked over to the attendant and asked, “Sake Stonewall Select please.” Makato then added “Glass of water, no ice.” The attendant returned to the kitchen with their order.

“Have you decided on a name yet?” the admiral asked.

“No, I haven’t Admiral. I am grateful for your patience and your generosity. I’m sorry that I can’t give you that much.”  
 “You don’t owe me or anyone aboard this ship anything. What was done was what needed to be done. You have suffered enough.” Said Makato.  
 Admiral Itami frowned. Makato shot him a glance and they both nodded their head, understanding each other’s message.  
 “If I may ask you. I am looking for perspective. There is a problem that I pose to you. I am limited in my legal authority to intervene against the Zeep.”  
 “But in the meeting, you said that you would bring them to justice?”

The attendant arrived, just narrowly to break the momentary tension. He set the drinks in front of the Admiral and Master Chief. He then cleared the booth of the finished plates sitting before the Ensign and the Zeep.  
 “And the Empire will. I have already been assured by the Imperial Senate that legislation is being drafted to give powers to the military to deal with the Zeep as it sees fit to prevent them from finding and using the Elysium Weapon. My problem is the wider Belt. There is a piece of legislation that dictates how the Senate and the Imperial Military act with respect to other species. It is called the Mantle. The Mantle provides very narrow exemptions that forbid the Imperial Government from interacting with other species for a number of reasons. One of which is our technology. In this case, these exemptions apply, which is why we are intervening against the Gossip, and it is also why we are pursuing ZeepCol. There are some who believe that the Empire is too dangerous a factor in the lives of many species from outside its immediate sphere of influence and so there are concerns about whether the exemptions clause should be used. If they are not, the Empire will deal with to the best of its ability the crisis in the Azedi Belt without disturbing the native inhabitants.”  
 “What does that mean exactly? Why would you hide yourselves; why would you lie?”

Itami took a quick drink of the small shot glass which already had a small amount of Sake Wine poured. He reclined in his seat, then pulled forward.  
 “When you first came aboard this ship, what emotions ran through your head, what did your mind think of first? Ensign Coeus noted in his report for me that you had actually believed that we were going to eat you. It was fear, wasn’t it?” Itami asked.  
 The small Zeep shuffled uncomfortably in his seat. He hesitated now to look the Admiral in the eye and looked to Ensign Coeus. His face became pale.  
 “I don’t mean to interrogate you. Let me explain. You walked through the hanger, you saw the weapons and troops preparing to deploy to the surface. Such was only a small percentage of our destructive capability. This ship has enough firepower to destroy an entire planet if needed. If we were to transfer this ship, right now to the middle of the Azedi Belt, what do you think the consequences would be? How do you think everyone would react? The UC don’t trust us. We deployed an overwhelmingly large fleet, too quickly. I protested against it, knowing what would happen. Now the whole galaxy is suspicious of us. We prepared for the worst for the Gossip and now have created the worst possible image of ourselves. We don’t want this. We want to bring peace, not war.”  
 “You are passionate, but fear what your passions will bring. You want to do right but are worried that your attempts to do so will create wrongs. And you are worried that those you intend to protect, will seek to bring you harm. Your Ensign was telling me about a story about his people, about a god of hardship. I too have a story to tell. There is a legend, that the root of all fears comes from a well. And in this well, there is a deep bottom that you cannot see. One day, a hero who is unnamed climbs to the bottom of the well and sees only a reflection of themselves. Nothing but their face mirrored on the surface of the water. The fear comes from within. We are afraid of you; and you are afraid of us. But the fear is our own internalizations of what we see ourselves to be. We are all our own monsters. Do not hide from who you are, and do not hide from that well and its reflection. If you do, you will die of thirst.”  
 Coeus, Itami and Makato all remained silent. The Admiral’s face had gone flush. As the lighting in the garden was dimmed to reflect the dimming of the sun according to the time, the flowers began to react and glow a bright blue color. The lights in the mess were dimmed in response to let the patrons observe the display. The Zeep turned his attention to the garden. “I have never seen such plants before. I hope that all of my people will one day be able to see such a sight.”  
 “Then we act. Makato. Could you please return to my office, I will need the transcript of the Harbinger’s plan. Print it out from the terminal and bring it here. I would rather work here.” Makato complied immediately, said “Yes sir”, then quickly turned away from the booth and left for the Admiral’s office.  
 “I think that you will find that you have helped much more than you have realized; you have given the perspective I require. I ask of you now if you would be willing to help me more.”  
 The Zeep simply nodded in reply.  
 Coeus shouted again, “Sumimasen!”  
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“This won’t work. Nor will this. There needs to be more caution.”  
 It had been over an hour since Itami began reviewing the Harbinger’s plans. In another, the dinner service would begin and the quiet of the mess would be disturbed. Anticipating this, the four now had moved to a private booth separated from the rest of the hall. This room was much more intimate and had a heating unit in the table that filled the partitioned area with a warm glow.  
 “Admiral? What is the Mantle? Why does such legislation exist, and why is it causing so many problems for your Empire?"  
 Itami placed down his pen. He turned to the Zeep, and then to Makato, who shook his head.  
 “There was an incident. A very long time ago. The Empire was evacuating a race of beings from their homeworld that was in danger of being destroyed. Its parent star, a blue giant, was at the end of its life and was nearing supernova. The species in question had only had just recently discovered space flight. They knew the danger themselves and had created a massive effort to try and evacuate the planet using a spacecraft propelled by the force of detonating nuclear weapons. The plan wasn’t far enough in completion to have saved them, nor would it have transported enough of their civilization for it to have survived. The Empire intervened. We had offered to save all of them. But there was a panic, one that resulted in the population of that world think that we were abducting them. So they turned their entire nuclear arsenal against us. Every single missile they launched was intercepted. All of them. And our ships launched a counterfire barrage that destroyed one side of the surface of the planet. It was a horrible tragedy caused by an arrogance which cannot be forgiven. The species nearly went extinct. So the Empire wrote the Mantle; that forbade us from ever intervening as we did again. It set incredibly strict standards and guidelines for our required operating procedures. We have technically violated it, but the Mantle has clauses that permit such violations in emergency situations. I am the first to use them. And now, we are concerned that another panic is arising. That is why we are here in this booth reviewing this plan.” Itami then quickly turned his attention back to his review. He did so without pause.  
 “So there is a reason then for it; but not a good one.”  
 Itami stopped and looked back up. “What do you mean?”  
 “You made a mistake, and so you banished yourselves from outside contact? Why would you do such a thing? You talk now very differently from when you do when talking about the Zeep, or the Gossip, when you know that you can act. So why don’t you act when you feel it is right? You’ve already taken the first step in this galaxy, why don’t you continue?”

Itami craned his head over the notes, and how many marks he had made. Makato knew what it meant and opened another folder with a clean set of the plans for the Admiral to start again. He passed the notes over the table and toward the Admiral, who took the sheets out and began anew.  
 The Zeep, confused, turned his attention to Makato. He asked, “Why did he do that?” To which Makato replied: “Its complicated. He’s not free in this state. He’s not himself. You made the comment about how the Draconians have acted differently according to whether or not they knew what they were doing was right or wrong. Well, the Mantle is the consequence of it.”  
 “Then why did they write it?”  
 “They didn’t.”  
 The Zeep, looking surprised, wanted an explanation. How could the Draconians not have written a law that governed their own Empire?  
 “I know what you’re thinking. It was written by the Council of Ten Thousand. It was demanded in the immediate aftermath of the Panic. There were concerns that the Draconians were too excessive in their ambitions and so the law was drafted and amended. The Admiral is under intense pressure because there is wording in the law that makes it explicitly burden them. Dragons always follow the letter of their law. Always. The exemptions and emergency clause was written in such a way that it was believed no Dragon would ever use it because it’s the only example of a vague law in the Empire. Even the members of the Empire were afraid of what had happened. But here’s the truth. No one actually truly understood what happened that day. I’ve written papers about the event for the Historical Archives because its such an area of interest. The Admiral has family who was present for the incident in question. The official investigation blamed the Draconian chain of command for their insensitivity toward the native population that resulted in an error of communication that caused the incident to occur. But I’ve reviewed every instance in which the two species contacted each other, all of which were documented, and I don’t see that. I don’t know what happened, but I have theories. I’ve never said them aloud however because I know how much trouble I could be for saying them.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It was a case of sabotage, but not in the way that we understand it. Let me rephrase it another way. What the Admiral has done is unprecedented. There is a reason that the Harbinger is so interested in the Admiral’s opinion. It might mean the return of the Old Empire. The *Forgotten Empire*. An era where the Dragons really and truly were Dragons. Something inside of them is awakening again. The Kobolds were right.”

Itami was lost in thought. He was staring intently at the plans that lay before him. He had lost his awareness of his surroundings and had not heard the conversation between the Zeep and his bodyguard. Or maybe he had and simply pretended to not hear them. It was impossible to tell. “This must work,” he thought silently. The Queen was the key to everything. He underlined the objective, and then again. He circled it and wrote at the bottom of the page: *Allune is the way*.

“Admiral Itami? I think I know what name I will choose for myself now.” All three looked at the Zeep and paid him due attention. “Please call me Ponos. I want it to serve as a reminder of what life is, and how we should not fear it, and, that we can all learn to accept failure.”

Itami smiled at Ponos. “Yes. Let us drink from the well Ponos. Let us drink it all the way.”