"Taming Fenrir"
Word Count: 6200

Cool air blasted into the bar when the door opened, causing customers near the entrance to huddle closer to their drinks. Alex, sitting at the far end of the bar, crunched up between the old worn leather and oak paneling, barely felt it. Arguably, it was because of the long, thick overcoat she had yet to take off, despite the growing number of beer glasses on the table. The overcoat, in conjunction with the hat pulled low enough to obscure her eyes, marked Alex's profession and family line clear as if it had been written on her forehead.

She peered out from under her cap into the rest of the dimly-lit room. It was smoke-free, astoundingly, so that even from her corner, she had an unobstructed view of the door, and thus of the person who had just come in. She was a tiny slip of a woman, eyes darting around the establishment, trying to find someone. Her face had the vaguely tired and haunted look that Alex had seen far too many times. She knew what this woman was here for, but made no outward sign of it.

Finally, the woman's gaze settled on Alex's little corner, and she wove her way through the bodies and tall oak chairs and tables until she stood at the edge of Alex's table. Alex took a long pull from her glass, the dark stout disappearing as she finished the drink. She put down the glass and waited. She didn't have to wait long.

"Mr. Kalmikov?"

Alexander Kalmikov was the latest in a long line of Inquisitors. For various reasons, the Inquisitor Kalmikov had always been male. This had hit a snag when Alex was born, seeing as how she was female and that, due to complications, she would forever be an only child. "Complications" meaning her father, an only child himself, had died in an accident the day she was born. Grandfather, faced with the prospect of the end of a centuries-long dynasty, did the only thing he could: Alexander Kalmikov was legally a man, and was raised into the family business. Her birth certificate even said so, genetics be damned.

"Yes?" At least her voice was naturally a tenor.

The woman licked her lips, and twisted the ends of her scarf between her hands. "My name is Elaine Tanner. We spoke over the wire?" They had. It's why Alex was sitting here, after all, instead of off to visit Mother and Grandfather on the family estate on icy Enceladus.

It was New Year's Eve.

Alex motioned to the bartender as the other woman sat down at the other side of the table. Tanner's pale skin was sharply contrasted with the shadows playing off walls and furniture. She still twisted her scarf around her fingers. They sat in silence until the bartender brought over two glasses of the house brew. Alex took a sip.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Tanner?"

Tanner opened her mouth quickly, and then closed it again, swallowing hard. She pulled a datacard out of her purse and laid it flat on the table, covering it with her hand. "My son, Nathan. He is missing. He was sent to Sabazios."

Alex eyed the other woman suspiciously. "Sabazios's on the Fringe. That's Praetorian jurisdiction." Elaine Tanner did not look old enough to have a son that could be sent out that way, at the edges of Imperial space where only explorers and the Emperor's vanguard reach dared to tread. Then again, appearance had stopped being a good indicator of age a long time ago. Still, the last thing Alex wanted to do was step on Praetorian toes. Well, one of the last things she wanted to do. She *could*, but it was a bad idea in the long run. "Universal Jurisdiction" meant jack when staring down the wrong end of a rifle.

Tanner was shaking her head. "No. They will not help. They cannot help."

"So you want to hire an Inquisitor."

"Yes. They said...they said 'talk to Kalmikov. The Keeper can help you.'" She lifted her hand from the small piece of plastic and slid it across the table.

Oh. Oh, well *shit*. *That* changed everything. Most Praetorian hated Inquisitors, except one. The small card that Tanner had just pulled out confirmed her story. Not everyone could get an

official Praetorian seal on their requests, and Alex had seen enough of them to recognize them on sight. She tapped the table, running her finger over old bullet holes, as she considered her options. She didn't have many, not really.

"5000, up front. We'll discuss the rest when the job's done."

Tanner nodded, and tapped the Praetorian card. "7500 is here. Take it."

The hairs on the back of Alex's neck rose. There was way more going on here, if the Praetorian were actually paying, and twice the going rate at that. Still, she gave her word. She hoped wouldn't end up giving more.

Alex took the card. Tanner nodded, and stood. "Thank you, Mr. Kalmikov."

She left. Alex didn't watch her go. Idly, she noticed that Tanner hadn't touched her drink. She slipped the Praetorian card into her coat. Looked like she had some research to do. Something weird was happening at Sabazios.

She cleared her tab, and headed out of the bar. The transition between the softly-lit bar and harsh overhead lighting was jarring, and she pulled her hat down further over her forehead. Her boots echoed slightly on the metal plating beneath her feet as she made her way to the docks. Sabazios was out in Sector 38, several days travel away, and if Alex was to have any chance at all of finding Tanner's son, she needed to leave now. She'd swing by her hotel to pick up her bag before heading out on the next ship out. Alex made a mental note to also call Grandfather to tell him that she would not be coming home for New Year's this year.

Inquisitor Alexander Kalmikov, 23rd Inquisitor Kalmikov, the Keeper of Precepts, had a job to do.

Sabazios was a new world, barely terraformed, and out on the edge of the Gdon system. Only within the last hundred years was a Skadi gate found in the system, which was the only reason any ship in the Empire could reach it. The Empire relied exclusively on the ancient relics left

by the "officially" long-dead race for inter-system travel. Intra-system could be done at sublight, but the gates, as they were commonly known, were the only way to travel between systems in the galaxy. Not much else other than their technology was publically known about the Skadi, and even that was rare.

As was common with worlds like these, the people who lived there mostly worked for a single corporation, Ziodyne Heavy Industries in this case, with a fairly light Praetorian presence to keep general order. Also typical was that the corporation and the Praetorian barely tolerated each other, but danced around in a detente for the sake of appearances.

As if this wasn't irritating enough, the data card failed spectacularly to explain why, exactly, Alex was needed there. Odd enough that they went through a supposed third-party to do it, and she had her doubts about Tanner's "third-party" status. But not even a hint or any sort of subtext to indicate why the Praetorian were so desperate to get Inquisitor Kalmikov out in the literal edge of civilization?

Alex pulled the collar of her coat tighter as she walked from the transport to the headquarters building of the Praetorian regiment on Sabazios. The planet was an ice ball, and it was a good idea to act like it in front of the people with the guns. She could barely make out the guard's face, wrapped up as he was in a coat, scarf, and goggles. He stood at the entrance, blocking her path.

"Inquisitor Kalmikov, here to see Commander Valis!" she said over the wind.

The man snapped to attention at that, and stepped aside to allow her passage. Well, at least she was expected. Upon entering the building, which was much warmer than outside, a young woman caught her attention.

"Inquisitor? I'm here to take you to the Commander."

Alex nodded and followed the aide through the gray hallways, boots echoing off the metal. She was lead to a door that opened to reveal man bent over a desk, working. His dark hair was streaked with gray, but even writing, Alex could see that he was powerfully-built: broad-

shouldered and moving with a certain economy of motion she could appreciate.

"Commander? Inquisitor Kalmikov to see you," the aide said before leaving.

The man looked up and smiled. "Ah, Inquisitor. I'm so glad you could make it this quickly. My name is David Valis." He offered his hand.

Alex shook his hand; his grip was strong, even through her glove. "Alexander Kalmikov."

"Please, have a seat," he said, gesturing to the chair on the opposite side of the desk. "Drink?" he offered, as she sat down.

Alex nodded. "Please." As he poured out two glasses from a decanter of liquid, she spoke. "I must admit, I'm somewhat...curious as to why you requested I come all the way out here. The data card your agent sent was remarkably lacking in actual information."

Valis raised an eyebrow and leaned back into his chair. "What makes you think that Ms. Tanner was my agent?"

Alex eyed him over the rim of her glass. "She wasn't hysterical enough. If she had a son old enough to be a Praetorian who had disappeared and the *Praetorian* couldn't do anything..."

Valis started laughing. "You live up to your reputation. She is my best agent. I did not expect you to catch her. Really, was that all that it took?"

Alex shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. I do need to keep some secrets, Commander." That was an understatement if there ever was one. Alex's secrets were *state* secrets.

"I suppose that's true for all of us." He eyed her speculatively. "To be honest, you are nothing like what I expected."

"How so?"

"I was expecting someone older-looking, for one thing. Also, I have heard...rumors and such. Of the supernatural abilities of the Inquisitors Kalmikov. That there is geneering in your blood."

"You were expecting perhaps someone with claws or fangs?"

Valis's dark face colored slightly. "Possibly."

"Unlike certain examples of the population, the Kalmikov family prefers discretion in all things. However," Alex sighed, and took off her cap. She ran her fingers through her short, white hair, making it stand up in spikes. She wasn't fond of her hair, finding the quirk of geneering far too conspicuous. It did have its uses however. "I suppose this answers your question well enough."

He nodded. "Yes, I suppose it does."

Alex took a sip of her drink. It was quality whiskey, probably imported. That alone told her just how important Valis felt this meeting was. "I don't believe you brought me here just on curiosity. And in such a roundabout manner. As I said, your data card was somewhat lacking in information."

"And yet, you came anyway." He cleared his throat. "But yes, there are things I need you for that I could entrust no one but myself to tell you personally."

"Such as?"

"I am in a bad position, Inquisitor Kalmikov. With the exception of this small outpost, Sabazios is the property of Ziodyne Heavy Industries.

"Approximately two weeks ago, four of my men took a small leave, and went to one of the civilian centers. According to reports that I managed to wrestle out of ZHI bureaucrats, there's no record of my men being detained, or ever being there."

Alex raised her eyebrows. "Four men just disappeared? "

Valis smiled bitterly. "You share my disbelief. But yes, that is what I have been told. It's not that I don't trust ZHI, it's just, well..."

"They're your people," she murmured.

He nodded, grateful that she understood entirely. "And since they are in ZHI territory, my hands are tied."

"So you called in an Inquisitor."

He nodded. "I would like you to find out what happened to my people. I'll double what my

agent already gave you."

Well that was nice to know. It wasn't like she could actually refuse.

"Very well. I accept. I would like access to your records and to your people, just to get a sense of what these missing soldiers have as a history. You do understand that I have to see all sides."

"Done."

Alex nodded. "Then I shall get to work." Valis stood as she did and offered his hand. He towered over her. She had to crane her neck to keep eye contact as she took the offered hand. Shaking it again, she thought of something. "By the way, Nathan Tanner. Does he actually exist?"

He nodded. "Yes, he does. And he is one of the missing. Please, Inquisitor, find out what happened to them."

Alex set her jaw. "Oh, I intend to."

Sōsuke Seta.

Erik St. Clair.

Daniel Redfield.

Nathan Tanner.

Alex ran over the list of names again in her head as she sat in the transport that would take her to ZHI's main compound on Sabazios. True to his word, Valis had been extremely forthcoming with information about his missing soldiers.

She was interrupted by the transport door slamming open. Alex raised an eyebrow as the woman from the bar climbed in and shut the door behind herself.

"We meet again, 'Elaine Tanner', although I doubt that's your real name."

'Tanner' scowled. "I still would like to know how you figured that out."

Alex shrugged. "You smelled wrong."

If anything, her scowl deepened. "You don't need to screw with me if you don't want to answer. Name's Sophie Delacroix."

Oh sure. Like Alex believed that. Well, whatever. The transport started moving.

Delacroix shook her head. "You look like a kid, you know."

Alex frowned. Damn her height. "I'm over twenty, you know," she shot back.

"If I hadn't seen your records, I wouldn't believe it. You barely look old enough to start shaving."

There was clearly no way she was going to win this one, so why bother? Alex cleared her throat. "So, Agent Delacroix, why are you here? ZHI isn't exactly going to welcome a Praetorian intelligence agent into their grounds."

"I know. Valis wants me to go do more legwork in the civilian area, while you take care of the main issue. We'll meet up later to collaborate. Share information."

"Makes sense. I got the list of information on our missing soldiers. How about we start that sharing right now. What do you know?"

Delacroix nodded. "All of them were outstanding soldiers, although all younger than forty. Beyond that, their records with the Praetorian seemed to have little in common. Each had been on different assignments prior to Sabazios. They were assigned to the same squad, under Captain Seta, when they transferred to Sabazios five months ago. Yet, each of them disappeared separately while on leave." She shook her head. "It makes no sense."

Alex folded her arms and leaned back against the wall of the transport. "Good. That's what I've got. I think..." she trailed off as the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. They were headed in the wrong direction. She stood up, but before she could take a step, she caught the scent of spice in the air. She snapped her head to face the front.

She caught a glimpse of the driver wearing a gas mask before he slammed the cab shut.

Delacroix was standing as well by this point, but she stumbled and fell. Alex caught her,

but she stumbled back and smacked her head against the metal bench.

'Oh fuck,' she thought before the world went dark.

Alex woke up to what felt like a jackhammer pounding in her skull. She was lying on a cold, stone floor. Although the place looked clean, underneath she could smell the old sweat and blood. She cracked her eyes open and stared at the single overhead light.

She was stuck in a cell, complete with iron bars. Delacroix had been thrown into the same cell, against a wall in what looked to be an uncomfortable position. She hadn't woken up yet, but shuddered against the cold.

Alex shrugged off her thick overcoat and draped it over the woman. It wasn't like she actually needed it. As she did this, she felt eyes boring into the back of her skull. Slowly, she turned around.

Across the hall in another cell, Sōsuke Seta stared back at her.

"Boy, you better have a good reason for having that coat."

Ah hell. Yep, Praetorian *hated* Inquisitors. "Because I earned it." She glanced off to the sides. In the cells framing Seta's, St. Clair and Redfield were openly glaring at her.

Seta's voice remained calm, but there was the unmistakable edge of steel in it. "Wrong answer, kid."

"I'm not like the others."

Behind her, Delacroix stirred. "Ugh, Kalmikov, where are we?"

Alex didn't take her eyes off Seta. "It appears we've been taken captive. On the positive side, we seem to have located the missing Praetorian."

Delacroix gasped and stumbled over. She clutched Alex's coat tighter around her shoulders, but said nothing to the fact that she had it. "Captain Seta. It's good to see you are still alive." Seta nodded, but said nothing. She continued, "Commander Valis had sent the Inquisitor and

myself to locate your whereabouts and extract you and your men."

"The Commander *hired* an *Inquisitor*?" He spat the last word.

Delacroix spared Alex a glance. "I've been assured that Kalmikov here is, ah, *different* from others in his profession."

Before Alex could open her mouth to defend herself, the door to the cell block slammed open. Five men entered, the leader clearly in the front and the other four flanking. The leader had a rifle slung across his back; the others were wielding machine guns. They stopped in front of Alex's cell and opened the door. The leader stepped into the cell while the other four leveled their weapons at Alex and Delacroix.

"I see our newest guests have woken up. Welcome to the People's Liberation Front." He leered at Delacroix. "I hope you'll find your stay...enjoyable. But you probably won't." The men behind him grinned. They smelled greedy and twisted. Alex wrinkled her nose in disgust. "You see, we'll wring every last bit of information out of you and the other Praetorian scum before you die."

"Oh lovely," Alex muttered.

He turned his attention to Alex. "And that leaves you in an interesting position, boy. We know you're not Praetorian. Your ID says you're Alexander Kalmikov. Named after your famous uncle, huh?"

Seriously, *damn* her height. "I *am* Kalmikov," she ground out.

The man laughed. "If you say so. What are these idiots paying you?"

"Fifteen thousand."

The man nodded. "How about we make you a deal? We pay you twenty, and you work for us."

"Twenty thousand, huh. And what happens if I refuse?"

The man shrugged. "We throw you out onto the ice roughly ten clicks from here, and you freeze to death ten minutes later."

Well, then. That made it easy.

Alex grinned. "Fuck off and die. You think I'm going to break a contract, especially one to the Praetorian and Emperor, you've got another thing coming." There was a sharp intake of breath at all the Praetorian present at that. She *told* them she wasn't like other Inquisitors.

"The 'Keeper of Precepts'," Delacroix breathed. "The title's not worth that much, kid."

Alex turned and smiled sadly at her. "Yes, it is." She took off her hat and tossed it at the woman. "Hold onto that for me, will you?"

"So, you're sure about that, boy? That your final answer?"

Really, was the threat of ice supposed to scare her? Because it didn't. At all. Although this next part was going to be irritating. "Yep, fairly certain."

"Pity." He brought the butt of the rifle down across the back of her head, and she knew no more.

She's three years old, scrunched up into a ball on the floor of a closet. She squeezes her eyes tight and clutches the stuffed wolf closer to her chest. The voices on the other side of the door are yelling.

"What the hell do you think you were doing?" Granpa sounds mad.

"She's been locked up in this house since the day she was born! It was just going to be a quick trip to one of the other moons, only a few hours at most!" Mama's crying. "She's three years old! No one would figure out she's not a boy!"

"You sentimental fool! Do you think that is all I care of? The child's sex is not important –"

"Then why keep her here, on this godforsaken place!"

"Because to not do so would ruin her!"

Alex curls up tighter.

Granpa stops yelling. "Are you blind, Natalia? Can you not see the truth? Alexander cannot

leave Enceladus, not yet. My son, he wished for a strong heir. The Blood has always set us Kalmikovs apart from other Inquistors, and he wanted what he did not have.

"And I was too complacent to stop him. The treatments he gave you before her conception were to guarantee an heir, no matter what. But he was too arrogant to consider that the child could be female. The Blood runs too strongly in the child."

"I don't understand."

He sighs. "It is the Skadi blood. She is imprinting. Every person she comes in contact with now is considered Pack. To introduce the child to random people who would exit her life would destroy her psyche."

"No, no, stop this nonsense."

Granpa sighs. "Natalia, Alexander's brain is not wired like ours."

Granpa smells like frustration and helplessness. Mama just smells sad. It's too much. Alex hates it when they act like this, when they fight. She exits the closet, still clutching the stuffed wolf.

*"Stop! Just stop already and pick **one**!"*

Mama looks down and blinks. "What?"

"She wants us to pick an Alpha." Granpa's talking softer now.

*But he's wrong. Granpa told her who the Alpha was. She shakes her head. "No, Emperor Alpha. Pick **second**." At that, Mama makes a strange noise in her throat. "Mama, why you crying?"*

"I'm not crying."

"But you smell sad."

Before she knows it, Mama's holding her in a tight hug, running her fingers through her hair. "Oh, my poor child," she mutters softly, rocking them back and forth. "My poor, sweet, damned child."

She's four years old, and Mama's kneeling in front of her, straightening out her collar for the hundredth time. Alex can smell the nervousness sticking to her skin. The suit is scratchy. She wants to pull at the stiff fabric, but Mama will just slap her hands away. Again.

"Alexander." Alex focuses on Mama's face, because Mama only calls her that when it's really important. "Remember what you're supposed to do when you meet the Emperor."

She's supposed to meet the Emperor for the first time she can remember. Mama's been making her remember this. "Say 'Rex Nunquam Moritur', and bow," she recites, saying the strange words carefully so she doesn't make a mistake.

Mama nods and stands aside, brushing imaginary dust from Alex's shoulder. Alex walks past her into a long hallway. As she walks down, she feels like people are watching her, but when she turns, she only sees her reflection. But that doesn't explain the light sounds of breathing and the smell of nervousness and something sharp and tangy she can't figure out coming from either side of her.

The hallway ends at a doorway, and Alex steps through. Looking at the floor, Alex dutifully recites "Rex Nunquam Moritur." And stops.

Something's strange. She sniffs the air. There's a familiar scent, triggering something deep inside her. Alex looks up. There's a single man, sitting in the middle of the room. His hair is the opposite color hers is, and even though his mouth is a straight line, his eyes are always smiling.

"I know you."

His mouth smiles now. "Indeed you do. I met you before, when you were very small."

She knows who he is. He's the Alpha. She trots up to him, and looks up into his face. "'m bigger now."

The Emperor laughs and ruffles her white hair. "Yes you are, my little wolf. Yes you are. Soon, you'll be big enough to fight for me."

Alex's eyes snapped open.

Richard Lewis was frustrated. The Praetorian sitting in the cells of his base were proving to be highly uncooperative with the interrogation team. Even the woman who'd come in three days ago was resisting. The men had been in the rebellion's "care" for the last two weeks. If anything, killing the kid might have been a mistake. Despite the boy being from a well-known Inquisitor family, the Praetorian captives had become even more defiant after watching the unconscious boy be dragged from the cell block.

Getting the information out of them that'd further the People's Liberation Front's goals would be more difficult than anticipated. He sat in what was jokingly called the War Room with a bunch of technicians watching the cell block on security feed, trying to figure out a way to break the prisoners.

"That was amusing. Care to try again?"

Lewis whirled around. The Kalmikov boy was slouching against the doorframe. His hair was dripping from the melted snow and ice. Lewis blinked. "Where's the man who dumped the boy out there?" he asked one of the technicians. If the boy had killed the man...

"Uh, that's Marks. He returned from patrol ten hours ago and went to the racks."

Lewis stared the boy. He hadn't moved, a bored expression on his face. "How did you get in here?"

"Caught a ride on one of your transports. Really, you aren't nearly as sneaky as you think you are."

There was a flurry of activity behind Lewis, as the techs tried to find the security feed of the base entrances. "Nice story, kid."

The boy shrugged. "Believe what you want. But, answer me this. Are you working for ZHI, or are they just the fall guys for you?"

Lewis laughed. "ZHI? Fuck no. We want all those corporate bastards out of power too."

The boy nodded. "Good to know."

"Um, sir? He's telling the truth." Lewis turned to face the tech who pointed at his screen. The video showed the boy coming out from under one of the transports. He'd apparently clung to the bottom as the transport drove into their base. Impressive. He'd misjudged the boy. Well, he guessed he wasn't a boy at all, not with Alexander Kalmikov's record.

"You obviously are the real deal." He watched the image of Kalmikov sliding out from under a transport in the loading dock again. How in the world had the man managed to survive out there long enough to manage that? No matter. Imagine what the People's Liberation Front could do with Kalmikov's talents at their disposal. "Our first offer obviously insulted a man of your skills, and for that, I apologize. Whatever it is that the Praetorian are paying you, we'll triple it."

Kalmikov frowned. "Hypothetically speaking," he said slowly, "if I were to accept, what would the job be? Why do you even need me?"

Lewis thought about it, then grinned. Why not go for broke? "We would be hiring you to kill the Emperor."

Kalmikov's face went blank. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I don't think I heard you correctly."

"I said, we'd be hiring you to kill the Emperor."

His face was unreadable. "That's what I was afraid you'd said."

Captain Sōsuke Seta watched the rebels guarding his cell fidget as the screams echoed down the hall.

He noted that his own men and the intelligence agent were looking nervous. He didn't blame them.

The screaming stopped and there was utter silence. Then, a few minutes later, on the

opposite side of the base, the screaming started again.

Then stopped.

Whatever eldritch horror these idiots had dug up, it moved fast.

When the screaming started a third time, this time from another location, the guards looked at each other nervously. "Fuck it. I'm not getting paid enough for this."

His partner nodded. Seta could smell the piss from the guard's uniform. The screaming stopped abruptly.

The two guards looked at each other again, and bolted from the room.

Not even ten seconds later, there were screams that ended in a strangled squelch, followed by the sound of two bodies hitting the floor.

Seta looked at his men again. They were all going to die, trapped like rats. Redfield and St. Clair were squaring their shoulders and Tanner was breathing shallowly. Even the spook was holding her shit together.

At least the kid had been lucky, freezing to death as a reward for loyalty to the Emperor. Seta shook his head.

He braced himself as he strained to hear Death's measured footfalls coming down the hall.

Alexander Kalmikov stepped into the room, covered in blood.

Seta reeled back in shock. What the hell? Seta's first impression of Kalmikov had been that the boy was short and scrawny, hiding under that big coat of his. Now, the only thing he saw when he looked at the boy was a predator. The red stood out starkly against the boy's white hair. His cold eyes tracked over the people behind bars.

Make that a *hunting* predator.

Seta ran through it all in his head as he stared into the kid's blood-soaked face.

Named the "Keeper of Precepts".

Undying loyalty to the Emperor.

Oh fucking hell, they *didn't*.

Kalmikov pulled back his arm to throw something.

"REX NUNQUAM MORITUR!" Seta screamed.

Everyone in the cells dropped into a prostrate bow as an automatic reflex. Kalmikov dropped to a crouch. From his position on the floor, Seta saw the kid — no, *man* — blink a few times. Seta was incredibly aware of the knife embedded in the stone wall roughly at the same height his heart used to be.

Seta met Kalmikov's eyes. He watched his face break out into a wolfish grin.

"Oh, you're a clever one."

Doctor Maria Navidson had arrived at the former rebel base with the second wave of Praetorian. She'd only caught glimpses of blood-splattered wall and tarp-covered bodies. Some of the soldiers from the first wave were white-faced as they stumbled around, shaking their heads in disbelief.

She'd been given a room to conduct her medical examinations. Whoever had cleaned it had done an extremely good job; her nose burned from the harsh smell of bleach. Captain Seta, Agent Delacroix, and the others had all checked out fine except for minor cuts and bruises, despite their captivity, and what looked like shell-shock. Navidson had only one last person to examine, and he was waiting outside her "office".

The boy was sitting in a chair. Someone had at least given him a washcloth to wipe the blood off his face and arms, but his hair and clothing were still covered in it. He looked so small sitting there. It was hard to believe that he had slaughtered an entire rebel base with his bare hands. But Seta and his squad swore up and down that's what had happened.

Given the wide berth and scared looks they were giving the boy, Navidson was inclined to believe them. She'd be lying if she said she weren't intimidated by the boy, but procedure was procedure.

"Alexander?" she said gently, trying not to startle the boy. He looked up. "Come on now. Let's get you cleaned up."

"'m fine," he mumbled.

Navidson frowned. "You most certainly are not. You're absolutely covered in blood. Even if none of it's your own, there's still a multitude of diseases that are transmitted via blood that you need to be treated against."

The boy stood. "What's the drug?"

She blinked. "What?"

He just stared at her. "It's a violation of at least five Imperial laws for you to actually examine me. *What is the drug?*"

Holy shit. How did he know a single drug? "Oh. Um, soma-triathalyne."

He frowned and strode over to the computer in her make-shift office. "Your login?"

At her hesitation, he once again just stared at her. His piercing gray eyes were that much more effective in concert with that white hair that was held up in spikes due to dried blood. She fidgeted under the gaze until she gave up and logged in herself.

He nodded, then turned back to the computer. He typed a few things, then stopped. "Oh, the blue stuff. I thought it was called something else." He looked up the trade name? How paranoid was this boy? He looked back at her. "Where is it?"

Dumbfounded, Navidson just pointed to her bag. The boy strode over to it and started digging around until he found the bottle of soma-triathalyne and a syringe. Before she could even move, he measured out *exactly the correct dose* for his height and weight and injected it into his left arm.

When finished, he stared at her as he dropped the used syringe in a container of bleach. "Is that all?"

"Um, yes, actually." The boy nodded. "Oh! The commander wanted to speak with you. He's in the next room." She pointed at the door.

The boy nodded again, and strode for the door. Navidson slumped against the wall after he left. That kid was downright unnerving.

The door was open a crack. She couldn't help but overhear part of the conversation.

"I put a report in that you were missing three days ago." Commander Valis sounded amused. "Do you know how many cruisers showed up at my doorstep?"

The boy's voice sounded strangled. "You reported I was *missing?*"

Alexander was late.

Bad enough the child had missed the New Year celebration due to work, but to then go missing as well? Michael Kalmikov had nearly had a heart attack when he got the news from a very worried Emperor Lei.

The Skadi part of his brain had been howling non-stop, demanding that he find the youngest member of his "Pack". Unlike poor Alexander, it was not a constant struggle to control the alien tendencies in his blood. But now, with his little one in danger...

He shook his head and resumed his pacing in the main hall of the estate. He could hear the *thunks* of Natalia's knife-throwing off in another room, acting as a counter-point to his own steps. The woman only practiced like this when she needed to take her mind off of something by keeping busy. She had been besides herself with worry, and had ended up taking it out on the walls.

They would be patching all the knife-holes for weeks.

He froze midstep as he heard the sounds of a transport landing. A few seconds later, the sounds of knives hitting the target also stopped. Ten seconds after that, Natalia came tearing into the hall and skidded to a stop next to him, all propriety thrown out the window.

Both looked expectantly at the door.

The large door opened slightly, and Alexander shuffled into the hall, bag slung over a shoulder.

Her hat was pulled low over her head, and her hands were jammed into her coat pockets. Poor child looked like she thought she was going to be read the riot act.

Michael could not say he was not tempted.

But the Skadi part of his brain quieted down immediately at the sight of the girl. He felt Natalia slump with relief by his side.

Alexander scuffed her toe on the floor, just like she used to do when she was small. They'd never actually managed to break her of the habit. "Um, sorry I missed New Year's."

That was all apparently Natalia needed before she flew to the girl and embraced her tightly. Alexander let out a startled squawk. Natalia started fussing over her. "Mother! Stop it!"

Michael started laughing. Well, that was punishment enough.

"*Mother!*"