

"Taming Fenrir"

Word Count: 7300

Cool air blasted into the bar from the rest of the spaceport 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. Whether it was due to her distance from the door or the long, thick overcoat she had yet to take off, despite the growing number of beer glasses on the table, was anyone's guess. The soot-grey overcoat, in conjunction with the hat pulled low enough to obscure her eyes, marked Alex's profession and family line plainly. The Inquisitor insignia stitched onto the back of the coat in black guaranteed her a wide berth.

Just the way she liked it. People crowding meant less room to move. She'd chose this spot because of the bullet holes in the table; it had clearly stopped them once before and could do it again. A quick two steps would get her behind the bar and to the kitchen exit. Not only that, but it gave her no access to her back and a view of the rest of the room.

She peered out from under the brim of her cap into the rest of the dimly-lit room. It was smoke-free, thank the Emperor, so that even from her corner, she had an unobstructed view of the door, and thus of the person who had just come in. It was a tiny slip of a woman, clearly searching for 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 allowed 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?"

She nodded. Alexander Kalmikov was the latest in a long line of Inquisitors. The Inquisitor Kalmikov had always been male. This had hit a snag when Alex was born, unfortunately female,

and forever an only child due to the "complication" of her father dying in an accident on 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?" Her voice was naturally a tenor, which helped with the ruse.

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 Enceladus.

It was New Year's Eve.

Alex motioned to the bartender as the other woman sat down across the table. Tanner's pale skin 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 old enough to be sent out that way, at the edges of Imperial space where only explorers dared to tread, and the only safety was in the Praetorian, the Empire's vanguard. Then again, appearance had stopped being a good indicator of age a long time ago. Not to mention there was something *off* about her.

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 'Keeper of Precepts', the 'keeper of laws'. And if she wanted to keep it that way, it really wouldn't do to reject something they were requesting. 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. Just to go. 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 more than she expected. And *just* to go to Sabazios? 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.

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 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 hoped the data card would have some further information on it, otherwise she'd have to do whatever research she could enroute. 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.

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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 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 if this wasn’t irritating enough, the data card failed spectacularly to explain why, exactly, Alex was needed there. Oh, this was a Praetorian job, no doubt about it, but they went about it in such a way that set her teeth on edge. Odd enough that they went through a supposed third-party to do it, and she had her doubts about Tanner’s “third-party” status. She’d checked for any information on an Elaine Tanner, and while while the woman did exist and she did have a son, there hadn’t been an ID photo.

Alex pulled the collar of her coat tighter as she walked from the transport to the squat metal building that housed the headquarters of the Praetorian regiment on Sabazios. It was huddled right up against a mountain, in an effort to provide some sort of windbreaker against the howling winds. The planet was an ice ball, and although she wasn’t bothered by the cold, it was a good idea to act like she was in front of the people with the guns. No sense in spooking them if she didn’t have to. 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 led to a door that opened to reveal man bent over a desk, writing. His dark hair was streaked with gray. Alex could see that he was powerfully-built: broad-shouldered and moving with a certain economy of motion she could appreciate.

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 noted the aide quietly slipping out of the room and closing the door.

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. She didn't bother removing her coat.

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.

"I suppose that's true for all of us." He eyed her speculatively. "To be honest, you are nothing like 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, which is why she favored wearing the black cap with her family insignia. However, the stark white hair was somewhat useful in situations like these. "I suppose this answers your question well enough."

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

Alex took a sip of her drink. "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. They never returned. According to reports that I managed to wrestle out of ZHI security, 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."

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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. The transport was nothing special: a large, boxy

vehicle on snowtreads, with the driver's cab connecting to the larger back end via a single door. Two long benches faced each other along the sides, with barely enough room for two men to walk abreast in between them. She was the only passenger.

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.

Correction, she *had* been the only passenger.

"So was there an actual reason why you couldn't just use your real name?"

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

Alex shrugged. "You smelled wrong."

If anything, her scowl deepened. Clearly, the woman didn't believe her. "Name's Sophie Delacroix."

Oh sure. "And why I couldn't know this before now?" The transport started moving.

"Standard operating procedure. Surely you've heard of it?"

"And that's why you impersonated a missing soldier's mother?"

Delacroix sighed. "It was in case you checked. Thought I could go for the 'distressed mother' routine and tug the infamous Inquisitor Kalmikov's heartstrings. You surprised me though." 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."

"I suppose you're going to keep playing the distressed mother, and I was just a practice run?"



Delacroix nodded. Well, at least that made sense. "I got the list of information on our missing soldiers. How about we start that sharing right now. What do you know?"

"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. And all of them disappeared at the same time while on leave." She shook her head. "It makes no sense. No corporate security force should have been able to get the jump on four Praetorian without a struggle"

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. The transport had shifted subtly.

"We're not headed to ZHI." Alex 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.

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*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, 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."*

*"The Kalmikovs have always had Skadi blood, but its effects are recessive. It is what makes us so valuable to the Emperor, able to do things no other human can. But in his arrogance, my son gave Alexander twice the effect. The Blood is too wild, too strong in her. 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."*

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

She was stuck in a cell, complete with iron bars. Delacroix was lying crumpled against the wall. She hadn't woken up yet, but shuddered against the cold.

Alex shrugged off her thick overcoat and draped it over the woman. Doing so left her standing in black pants and a loose collared shirt, with a thick vest over her torso to help further hide her gender and make her look a bit bulkier under the coat. And her hat, of course. It wasn't like she actually needed the coat. 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, saw them as little better than mercenaries. Which was *technically* true, but not the Kalmikovs. Never the Kalmikovs. "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. She rocked back on the balls of her feet, thinking. It was going to be tricky getting them all out of here, once she figured out exactly where 'here' was, without them trying to smack the shit out of her. That would end poorly, mostly for them.

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, shivering. "Captain Seta. It's good to see you are still alive." Seta nodded, but said nothing. She continued, "Commander Valis sent the Inquisitor and me 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, the only thing you and the other Praetorian shit are useful for is information."

"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 leave you out on the ice, and you freeze to death."

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?"

The man grabbed her by the shoulder. She had to restrain herself from ripping his arm out of its socket, otherwise this plan for getting out of the cell wouldn't work. "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. Really, was it too much to ask to stay conscious for more than ten minutes? "Yep, fairly certain."

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

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*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. She knows it means 'the king never dies', but that such a weird thing to say to a person. He's the Emperor, not a king.*

*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."*

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Alex's eyes snapped open.

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Wilson 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 useful information about Praetorian military movements out of them that'd further the People's Liberation Front's goals would be more difficult than anticipated. Maybe it was because Sabazios was on the literal edge of nowhere, but Lewis remained undaunted. 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? Marks?" he asked one of the technicians. If the boy had killed the man...

"Marks 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. He'd chosen Marks *because* the man wasn't the bleeding-heart type that'd save the kid. "Nice story, kid."

The boy shrugged. "Believe what you want. But, answer me this. Are you working for ZHI,

or are they just the scapegoat?"

Lewis laughed. "Work for ZHI? Fuck no. Those corporate bastards can burn for this."

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? What was the worse that could happen? "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."

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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*. They couldn't have sent — those were only *rumors*.

Kalmikov pulled back his arm to throw something.

*"REX NUNQUAM MORITUR!"*

*Thunk.*

Everyone in the cells dropped into a prostrate bow as an automatic reflex. Kalmikov dropped to a crouch, muscles tensing as if to leap at any moment. From his position on the floor, Seta saw the kid — no, *man* — blink a few times. Seta glanced up and saw knife embedded in the stone wall at roughly the same height his head used to be.

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

The Emperor's pet assassin had come to save them.

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Doctor Maria Navidson had arrived at the former rebel base with the second wave of Praetorian. She'd only caught glimpses of blood-splattered walls 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.

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. She couldn't think of him as anything but just a boy. 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."

"I'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. She could see why the captain and the others were wary. "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, typed a few things, then stopped. "Oh, the blue stuff. I thought it was called something else." 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 battlecruisers showed up at my doorstep?"

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

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Commander David Valis sat at his desk and eyed the mound of paperwork on it. This little incident had generated more work in four days than this little garrison in fuck-all nowhere generated in a month. He probably wouldn't be this preturbed about it if he knew just what the hell had happened.

None of the Commanders of the battlecruisers in orbit around Sabazios were forthcoming with useful information. Despite his levity with Kalmikov, the fact that the man's disappearance had brought a small armada to Valis's doorstep disturbed him greatly. All this, for an *Inquisitor*?

He poured himself a glass of whiskey and sipped it. Kalmikov would be gone within the hour, and Valis still didn't have any answers.

A knock on his door made him look up. Captain Seta stood in his doorway. "You wanted to see me sir?"

Valis waved him in. Seta shut the door behind him before sitting down. "Do you drink, Captain?"

"Sir?"

"I think both of us are going to need it to have this conversation."

Seta nodded. Valis poured another glass and handed it over the desk. Seta took it, then spent a few moments staring into it. "I suppose this is about what happened."

"Four men were abducted by rebels. They escaped, and returned to base. No further action is required."

"Sir?"

"That's what I put in my report. All that I'm allowed to put in my report." He nodded to the glass in Seta's hand. "What happened back there, son?"

Seta shuddered a moment, then slammed it back. "The rebels caught us with our pants down, sir." His ears turned red. "Literally. We were drunk, the boys wanted some entertainment, and the girls were willing. None of us were expecting a trap. Rebels fucking gassed us, then hauled us out of there."

Valis refrained from wincing. He made it a point to know the men under his command, and knowing Seta, the captain had probably beat himself up enough about this over the last two and a half weeks. Instead, he poured the man another drink.

Seta sipped it this time. "They tried to milk us for information. Troop movements, actions, whatever. They weren't that great at torture, sir. Basic stuff like limited food, slapping us around some."

"For two weeks?"

The captain nodded. "Until the spook and Kalmikov showed up. Sir, did...did you know who you called?"

Valis sighed. "I was hoping you could shed light on that. I knew that the only Inquisitors that the Praetorian ever dealt with come from the Kalmikov family. That's why I hired him to go look for you. I didn't...what happened there?"

Seta rolled the glass between his hands. "They tried to buy him off. He laughed in their faces, even when they threatened to kill him." His eyes took on a haunted look. "He tore that

place apart. I don't know where he got the knife. We didn't see any of it. But we heard it. They were screaming, and from all over the base, from everywhere. He killed them all. He so far deep, I though he was going to kill us too."

"How in the world did you know how to stop him?"

Seta chuckled mirthlessly. "I didn't. I needed everyone to drop to the ground because he was going to throw the knife. I just guessed that he was still there enough to realize no self-respecting rebel would wish the Emperor eternal life."

"You are an extremely lucky man."

"I...I'd heard rumors, you know, sir. From other postings, about the Emperor's assassin. Whispers, nothing concrete. Did...did you...?"

Valis shook his head. "No. But I think I know why. After Kalmikov gets on that transport, this entire thing is sealed. The higher-ups would like that it never happened, but they'll settle for us keeping our mouths shut." He glanced at his watch. "Speaking of which, it's about time. Care to join me, Captian?"

Seta nodded, and both men made their way outside, bundling up in cold-weather gear before exiting the building. An aero-astro transport was idling in the snow, waiting to take its passenger up to one of the battlecruisers and out of Valis's life.

Inquisitor Kalmikov was off to one side of the transport's ramp, speaking to a figure entirely dressed in black. Valis assumed it was one of the transport crew, because as he and the captian approached, the figure snapped a salute and jogged up the ramp.

Valis wasn't sure if the salute was to him or to Kalmikov.

Kalmikov turned. He had a small smile on his face. His cap was once again on his head, but the overcoat was left open. "Commander Valis, I wasn't expecting to see you again after you paid me." He tilted his head slightly. "And Captain Seta?"

To Valis's surprise, Seta snapped to attention and saluted Kalmikov. "Thank you, Inquisitor."

Kalmikov raised an eyebrow. "I can't say I expected that. You're welcome." He nodded to

Seta. "I'm afraid I can't stay longer, Commander. I have, ah, others who are demanding my time." He started up the ramp.

"Kalmikov!" The man stopped at the top of the ramp. Valis waited until he turned around. "What *are* you?"

Kalmikov grinned widely. "I told you before, Commander!" he said over the wind. "I do need to keep some secrets!"

Commander and captain stood in the snow and watched as the transport's doors closed and the vehicle roared off into the sky. Neither spoke until it was out of sight.

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"I think your report is good enough."