

Prelude

330.1.1 2:88 –Saiph Colony

Anitra looked down at her pulse rifle. Three shots left. It was the end of the line.

On the other side of the corridor, Testarosa counted her munitions. Her pulse rifle was dead, but she had two grenades and her knives.

Around the galaxy this was the most watched event in the Arena's brief but brutal history. Two of the greatest gladiators the sport had ever known in a fight to the finish. Anitra, a twenty-year-old up and comer and extraordinary tactician, versus Testarosa, the "Berserker with a Heart." And while these two fighters prepared for their final assault, on the other side of the world, in a small and unassuming bank office, an old man walked in and asked, "How much for both of them?"

Inside the nearly empty room, the screen of a very old computer turned on.

The AI behind the screen was perplexed and annoyed that it couldn't access any of the cybernetic implants on the old man. He clearly wasn't from this world. Worryingly, somehow, the old man knew about the AI running Saiph, and interestingly he wanted to trade.

On the screen read the words: BOTH OF WHAT

The man answered, "Anitra and Testarosa."

The AI mused how it was possible for this foreigner to know the true location of the Arena and its true owner. How could he know to try to make this deal, here?

"I know you're there Cerberus."

Project Cerberus, the original name of the AI's programming. The AI hadn't heard its own name in a very long time. Not since it had killed its creators.

"And before you have your forces kill me. You should hear my proposal."

The local military was already en route, only a few minutes away.

The screen read: TALK

“You give me,” he was interrupted by a violent cough for a moment. “Sorry, my health isn’t what it used to be.” He looked at the blood on his hands from this latest coughing spell. He wasn’t sure how much longer his body would hold out. Hopefully he could make it three more months. “Give me those two slaves, and I can bring you the cloak of Kordat Orana.”

Cerberus ran the numbers. Was it worth it? Yes. It wasn’t motivated by money or power directly. But the fact that this outsider knew of its existence? It needed to know who else knew. Being an AI meant being hunted. And considering it had organized and was actively running the galaxy’s largest pay-per-view blood sport, it had more than the usual need to keep its existence secret. Money and power are useful for keeping secrets.

Then it calculated the more obvious questions. Does he really know where it is? Why should I trust him?

Cerberus typed onto the screen: WHO ARE YOU

The old man pulled out an equally old ID card. It was stamped with his name and encoded with his DNA. He held it out toward the computer. Its RFID was scanned and analyzed by the AI. The old man’s name was Malik Orana.

“Think about it. It will take three months to get to the cloak. So, you have three months to plan your double cross and keep your secret existence safe.”

The screen read: DEAL

Back in the Arena, Testarosa was about to land the finishing blow when she hesitated. Her melee skill had earned her the moniker Berserker, and that single breath of hesitation before the kill was why they said she had a heart. Anitra knew that split second pause was

coming, and it was her only chance to survive, let alone win. She reached for the grenade on her opponent's belt, ... and missed.

In a brilliant flash, Cerberus remotely ignited Testarosa's last stun grenade. The live stream ended simultaneously, and, despite the publicity liability of the lie, payouts were ordered for all those who had bet on "No survivors."

330.2.23 9:17 –Uncharted Debris Field

Exploring a derelict ship is always nerve-racking, and it was no different for Testarosa. She had earned her reputation as a fearless warrior after surviving a record seven consecutive gauntlets in the Arena. But here, as she looked back at her commander stepping through the fog and smoke onboard this ship, even Testarosa was feeling her nerves tighten.

She wondered why or even how there was so much fog and smoke inside this ship. The first question she voiced, however, was more ethereal. She asked over the coms, "Why did we come in here?"

Anitra came slowly, silently up to her fellow Giantess. She never stopped scanning with her pulse rifle. "Come on Tess, it's fun."

A few days after their showdown at the start of the year, both Anitra and Testarosa woke up from medically induced comas to find they had been sold. While it was certainly a surprising transition to go from mortal combat to crewmates, they both welcomed the change gratefully. In fact, Anitra was shaping up to be a great commander, and Tess counted herself lucky to be on this crew.

Tess spoke again after lifting her rifle and resuming her scans. "Alright, so the old man had a good star chart. He brought us to an ancient battleground, positively littered with abandoned craft, most of them trashed. The starfight that happened here was one for the ages, but no one wrote anything about it?"

Anitra stepped silently to the side of the next junction in the corridor they were exploring. She signaled for Tess to move to the other side to be in position to offer cover fire. And nonchalantly she responded to Testarosa's question, "First weird thing."

"Right? Then he finds this one ship totally intact."

"Rebuilt. That's what the old man said." It was Anitra's turn to go first through the open bulkhead, and she did.

"Rebuilt by whom, or what?" Tess followed her in.

"Don't know. Second weird thing."

"Yeah." As her rifle wafted through another layer of haze, she had to ask, "And what is with this smoke? Fog? Gaah, what is it? Can air be sticky?"

"Third weird thing. Is the life support on?" She glanced at the screens on her right arm. The readouts had changed. "It is on. Tess, the ship is becoming habitable."

Tess simply stretched her left hand and resettled her trigger finger. Two deep breaths, and she was the only one who knew her amygdala was trying to make her afraid.

Five minutes later, the pair arrived at the ship's command center. Arian's voice came over the comms. "We have a problem. Several problems, actually."

"Hit me, Ari." Her voice steady, Anitra's mind was immediately racing, looking for escape routes, checking her memory for anything she might have missed on their ingress to the starship.

The problems Arian had to report, however, had nothing to do with the away mission. The big problems weren't aboard the derelict, but aboard the ship that brought them here. Arian spoke with trepidation, "The old man is dead. You'd be captain if you were here. I'd treasure my time as acting captain, but uh..."

The old man was on life support when they embarked, so his death was not a surprise. “Ari, you’ve never run out of words before. What’s the story?”

“The old man lied about the quality of his ship. We can’t get out of this sector. In fact, we’re scrubbed. I hope you’ve found something amazing, because our scans show you have power, and our reactor is about to blow. The rest of the crew is prepping for evac.”

Testarosa sat down at a control panel on the right side of the room. All the eeriness of this derelict was fading as she soon found the user interface highly intuitive. She was in complete control of the ship’s systems. Unless the ship was lying to her? With that thought floating up from her subconscious, the eeriness was now being replaced by uneasiness—if it seems too good to be true...

A few minutes passed as Anitra cautiously analyzed the whole of the bridge. She kept her weapon at the ready while Tess worked at the ship’s controls.

“Commander?”

“What have you got for me, Tess?”

“We honestly appear to have complete control of the ship.”

“Excellent. Did you hear that Arian? If the old man’s ship is really so bad—.”

Arian cut her off mid-sentence as he and the rest of Anitra’s crew floated through space. “The ship’s gone. The reactor blew.” He laughed a little at the absurdity, “If you have some time to pick us up, the evac seems to have gone well. Four slaves in cheap EVA suits just casually drifting through a ship graveyard.”

“Glad you all made it.” She switched her comms to private mode. “What are our options, Tess?”

“Lots of options honestly. We even appear to have a couple of shuttles available. If either of those is working, we won’t even need to do

another EVA to grab them. ... No fighters though.” There was a definite note of disappointment over that lack.

“Are you seriously going to complain about the find of a lifetime? We can worry about stocking our ship after we have our crew back.”

Testarosa smiled. “Our ship? I like the sound of that.”

330.6.17 6:82 –Farpoint Station

“Good luck, Kordite.” And with that the hologram disappeared, leaving Alexander to watch as the unmanned shuttle returned to the Obsidian.

The Obsidian was a legendary ship in his own right, and the hologram was the manifestation of its AI—known as Aaron to his friends. Aaron watched closely with his sensors as he left Alex behind. If he had more of a physical form, he wasn’t quite sure if he would have given his friend a hug goodbye, a reassuring pat on the back, or perhaps he should have shot him? Aaron’s feelings were quite mixed on the matter, but in spite of everything, he was pretty sure that he wished Alex no ill will. So, he simply left. It was time for him to take the now barren Obsidian into hiding. He knew it would be a long time before he saw another human, and if his luck held through the end of the day, it would be even longer before he saw the Orangu again.

Alex thought for only the briefest moment about his call sign, Kordite. The Unbreakable. As he looked back toward the shuttle—it was already docking inside the Obsidian—he was more concerned for his friend Aaron than for himself. While he appreciated being dropped off here, he hoped it hadn’t delayed Aaron’s escape any more than necessary...

“Goodbye, Aaron. I am sorry the coup failed,” he expected the AI was still scanning, watching, reading his lips. He really meant what he said. He needed Aaron to know, ... it mattered to him that Aaron forgive him.

As he turned and began his ingress to the station, he was stopped inside the second airlock. As he removed his helmet, a friendly looking sprite appeared and chimed, “There are no weapons allowed at this site.” It gestured toward a storage locker for him to conveniently divest himself of anything dangerous. “I’ll keep my swords, thank you.” Ignoring the locker, he placed his hand on the scanner that would grant him final access to the station.

“Welcome back, Fleet Admiral! Is there anyone I may help you locate on the station?”

He looked down at his hand on the scanner. *I guess it is the same as the last time I was here.* Three centuries had passed, but his hand was the same. His body had barely changed in all that time, but he was still surprised by the sprite’s recognition of him. He had almost forgotten this place, why hadn’t it forgotten him?

He winced but took some small comfort in thinking, *Who monitors this security feed anyway? No one here will care about some old man looking for a job.*

330.6.17 6:97 –The Twelfth Fleet

“Sir!” The corporal handed a small tablet to the Executor.

The tablet displayed a readout from Farpoint Station. The First Legend, Alexander Rho was aboard. Perhaps now was the time for a miracle.

“Hey Twelfth, your wager.”

The Twelfth Executor handed the tablet back to his corporal. “I fold. Sorry my friends, I am needed elsewhere. Cash me out. Next round is on me everyone!” A brief cheer went through the Officers’ Club.

As he walked up to the bridge of the Valencia, he took the corporal’s tablet briefly and typed out new orders: Take a runner class scout ship to Farpoint, tail Alexander Rho.

“Godspeed, corporal.”

Upon arrival on the bridge, he noticed the usual bustle of activity. Coordinating the resupply of a ship of this size, one of the Twelve Dragons, it was never a small task. But he also noticed an energy in the room, an unusual sense of urgency. Like clockwork he announced the same order he always did when stepping on deck, “Report.”

His executive officer, Marcus, responded with his usual machinelike precision, “Ship’s systems at full, general resupply around 90% complete. The fighters from Gamma Wing were due for upgrades, targeting scanners, they seem to have been misplaced.”

“Thieves?”

“It is possible. Although, I prefer to think it was sabotage.”

“No, if a shipment was destroyed, we would have heard of it before now. But stolen tech? I bet we’ll be able to find it all on the black market in the next few weeks. Unfortunately, this is not out of the ordinary, so why the urgency here?”

“I asked for it.”

Marcus handed him another tablet. It was an intelligence report from his deep range scouts. The Tenth Fleet had started bombing their own outer worlds—putting down a rebellion in the most brutal fashion.

“It seemed prudent to be finished with our necessary business as soon as possible.”

Jason, the Twelfth Executor, finished flipping through the report. The Tenth Executor had a long history of abusing power. The blood on his hands was immeasurable, and the time for reckoning had finally come.

ACT 1: Beginning of the End