

The Strange Case of Starship Iris

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AGENT

The Strange Case of Starship Iris, report number four.

Following the increased priority status of this investigation, I have spent the last few days bringing the rest of the new team up to speed. Including my new partner in this case.

JUNIOR AGENT

(This is their first real case and the job hasn't crushed them yet.) Junior Agent R.J. McCabe here, codename Andrews. I just want to say that I look forward to working with Agent Park, and I want to once again thank General Jahansooz for trusting me with this opportunity to help defend the Republic.

AGENT

(Already so done with this.) ...indeed. Note: this is an ongoing investigation. All agents reviewing this case should begin with Report One: Violet Liu and proceed chronologically. In accordance with regulation, a brief summary follows.

CONNORS

No—line—safe. Mission's—designed—to—eliminate—us—but—wrong—violet. Find—right—one. She—knows.

ARKADY

there was another Violet Liu, another scientist who went to the same school.

VIOLET

Why is there an ALIEN in the cockpit?

SANA

You know, most of them didn't even support the war?

KREJJH

'Course, I did fight in it.

ALIEN ROBOT SWARM RADIO

Thasia korkvanchad jre-gesh?

BRIAN

We just made contact with speakers of a long-lost alien language.

VIOLET

Uh, and an entirely new form of consciousness

SANA

We agreed as a crew to go off course and intercept the Iris...They want this to stay buried. If we can

unbury it without going out of our way...

VIOLET

...I am gonna help you get to the bottom of this. And in the very likely event one of you gets busted up in the process, I am gonna put you back together, okay?

JUNIOR AGENT

As we discussed in our most recent briefing, time is of the essence. Thus, this and all future reports will only concern the audio deemed relevant to our goals. The roughly three days of footage following transmission three are available in the archive, filed as transmission four, should anyone wish to review them.

AGENT

It is still unclear where the crew of the Rumor intends to land. As such, we've increased security across Jemison system, with checkpoints at every port. For now, we can only wait, and continue to gather data when possible.

Transmission five, begin.

KREJJH (over the speakers)

(smooth delivery, absolutely loving this) Folks, this is your pilot speaking, here with our daily flight report. We are currently less than twenty four earth-hours from our dropoff point in good ol' Jemison System. A little creative flying has put us ahead of schedule, despite those challenging conditions we had back there. Hold your applause. Or, I mean, applaud all you want, if you're feeling it.

Current in-ship time is...twenty-five past sixteen hundred hours. Consider this your five-minute reminder for today's crew meeting in the mess hall. Oh, and scanners remain pleasantly clear of any alien robot swarm-clouds. I know that's what we like to hear. In the meantime, sit back, relax, and I will see you in a few. Krejjh out.

(A very awkward conversation in the mess hall)

VIOLET

Brian.

BRIAN

Hey Violet. Sorry, I thought I'd be the first one here.

VIOLET

I was just—going over some stuff before the meeting. I'm sure the others will be along soon. Any minute now.

BRIAN

Yeah, Krejjh is probably gonna be late. Takes a while to set up the autopilot. Especially if you won't admit you find human technology kinda confusing.

VIOLET

(Taking the bull by the horns) Look, Brian, can we—clear the air between us?

BRIAN

Is there...air to clear?

VIOLET

I'm sorry I reacted so badly to meeting your fiancée.

BRIAN

Well, I appreciate it, but talk to Krejjh.

VIOLET

Yeah.

BRIAN

You're still not comfortable chatting one-on-one with a Dwarnian.

VIOLET

...yeah.

BRIAN

Man, in theory I get it, but we are talking about probably the chilliest person on the whole ship.

VIOLET

I'm trying, I really am, but (dropping her voice a little) knowing Krejjh has killed people—

BRIAN

So's Arkady.

VIOLET

To be honest, Arkady also makes me nervous.

BRIAN

(Laughing a little) Nah, she's harmless. Well, not generally—for sure not *generally*—but you got nothing to fear. Context is everything, you know? Case in point, we really should've prepped you first about Krejjh. Like, for both your sake. Even just a quick 'Hey, purple dude in the cockpit!'

VIOLET

(laughing a little with relief) Honestly, that would've been nice. It's a lot to try to get over, but. Maybe there would've been. A little less screaming.

BRIAN

While I'm at it, um. Sorry I accused you of being a government mole. That was uncool.

VIOLET

We're all operating outside of our depth right now.

BRIAN

Well, you know what they say: "Scandendum Est Spiranti."

VIOLET

The Harmony school motto?

BRIAN

Yeah I, uh, I actually went there for like 95% of my freshman year. That's how we got the idea in the first place, for Arkady to pose as Kay.

VIOLET

You transferred right before finals? Must've been stressful.

BRIAN

Mm, probably.

VIOLET

"Probably"?

BRIAN

I mean, it was the same week I came out to my friends and family as trans, so. At that point, stress-wise, you're kinda grading everything on a curve?

VIOLET

(As an anxious person, trying to imagine this leaves her temporarily speechless.) Wow, uh. Busy week. (Belated realization) Also, to change schools, you would've had to move to a different planet--

BRIAN

Which felt, like, kinda uncomfortably metaphorical while I was packing.

VIOLET

Yeah. Jesus, that's rough.

BRIAN

Mm, I don't regret it, though. My parents and most of my friends were great about the whole "coming out" thing, but sometimes you want a clean slate, y'know? Plus, Wexler had way more support for trans kids.

VIOLET

Sorry, when I asked you guys for a brief medical history, I did read what everyone wrote. You mentioned the year you came out and started transitioning, I could've put that together.

BRIAN

Eh, doing the math on that wouldn't've helped you. I, uh, started college at sixteen.

VIOLET

Brian, are you a genius?

BRIAN

(laughs) Everybody's a genius at something.

VIOLET

Yeah, but. You went to Wexler?

BRIAN

For the rest of undergrad. Uh, I've also got, like, half a Ph.D. from Brightwell.

VIOLET

(Blown away. Brightwell is like Super Harvard. Super Ultra Space-Harvard.) Wow. Uh, linguistics?

BRIAN

Xenolinguistics, yeah.

VIOLET

You were studying Dwarnian.

BRIAN

Medieval Dwarnian, kind of? I was translating this epic poem, it's like, their *Le Morte d'Arthur*. But then, with the war and the coup—funding was tight, the departments were all fighting—my whole program sorta fell apart.

VIOLET

I'm really sorry.

BRIAN

Eh. I loved my topic but I didn't love grad school. It was all politics and legacies, people sabotaging each other—after a while, it started feeling kinda grubby, y'know? Like, ethically?

VIOLET

(Not accusing, more trying to connect the dots.) So instead you became a smuggler.

BRIAN

I mean, that skips a few steps, but you're not wrong.

VIOLET

Huh. As somebody who also went to grad school, I really wish that made less sense to me.

BRIAN

Yeah, if only we'd all known about that "life of crime" option, right?

VIOLET

Fleets of tired, broke space pirates in sweatpants, pillaging ships for—pizza, snacks, noodles--

BRIAN

(Laughs) I dunno, though. Wasn't all bad, made some cool friends. That's how I met Krejjh, actually. I'd been doing fieldwork out in Neuzo, and—

VIOLET
Neuzo?

BRIAN
The Neutral Zone. It was a cluster of stations in C-sec, founded by this very weird Libertarian billionaire. Technically outside any government.

VIOLET
So none of the decrees—

BRIAN
Yeah, it was one of the few places humans and Dwarnians could trade, talk, whatever.

VIOLET
Even during the war?

BRIAN
Especially during the war. Shady place. We're talking arms dealing, gambling, drugs you've never heard of. Like, name a vice, you know? Crawling with spies, too. People used to say that's why both sides kept it standing; they had intelligence assets or something.

VIOLET
That sounds incredibly dangerous.

BRIAN
Not like you'd think. Not at first. There were these rival mafias, and they kept the peace. Kinda. I mean, everyone's fortune was built on keeping Neuzo out of the war, keeping the war out of Neuzo, so there weren't, like, laws, but nobody was allowed to kill anyone. At first.

VIOLET
So how did—I assume Krejjh wasn't there to study poetry.

BRIAN
Man, now *that* is a story. So, like, first of all—

[FX: door open noise]

SANA
Hi Violet! Oh hey, Brian's here, right on time!

ARKADY
Does he get a gold sticker? [FX: door shut noise]

SANA
Brian, do you *want* a gold sticker?

BRIAN
Wouldn't turn it down. Krejjh said not to wait.

SANA

Are you sure? We could hold off a minute or two.

BRIAN

Brian Jeeter to Krejhh [intercom sound]. Hey bud, how's it going with the autopilot?

KREJJH (over the intercom)

(a little strained) Really good, Crewman Jeeter.

A STRANGELY FAMILIAR GRATUITOUSLY PLEASANT FEMALE VOICE (also over the intercom, in background)

I'm sorry, I didn't quite get that. User name?

KREJJH

Um, not actually—not actually all that good, Crewman Jeeter.

BRIAN

(sympathetic) Yeah.

VOICE

I'm sorry, I didn't quite get that. User name?

KREJJH

Krejhh.

VOICE

It sounds like you said—"Craig." Is that correct?

KREJJH

No, no!

VOICE

It sounds like you said—"Momo." Is that correct?

KREJJH

(slower, louder) *Krejhh*.

VOICE

It sounds like you said—"Stretch." Is that correct?

KREJJH

(interrupting) Yeah, but DOES IT? Does it REALLY?

VOICE

...I'm sorry, I didn't quite get that. User name?

KREJJH

Fellas, get started without me. And maybe keep me in your prayers.

VOICE

I'm sorry, I didn't quite—

KREJJH

Krejjh out. (FX: intercom hang up noise.)

ARKADY

Godspeed, Stretch.

VIOLET

Why does that *voice* sound so *familiar*—

ARKADY

Haha, yeah, our old friend from the Iris. E.L.L.A. is a standard piece of software for long-distance ships.

SANA

It's very, uh. Budget-friendly.

So: let's get started? I think it's time to pooling our resources on this Alvy Connors thing. Working separately, we're bound to start getting in each other's way. Working t—

ARKADY

Working together, we are more than the sum of our parts. United we stand, divided we fall. No I in team. (Pause) Hang in there, kitty. (Pause. She is out of cliches. The last word is awkwardly mumbled) ...Mondays.

SANA

See, I'm gonna pretend that was 100% genuine and just move on. Good point, Arkady. Now—

ARKADY

(shameless) Thanks, Captain

SANA

—Alvy's recording left us with a lot of questions. Why did the IGR sabotage the Iris? How did Alvy find out about it?

VIOLET

How did he know the other Violet Liu? Why was he convinced she knew what was going on? If she does know, how did she find out? How long had she been living a double life? How did that start? Where is she now? How do we find her? (FX: paper rustling) (A little embarrassed) Um. I made a list.

SANA

No, that's great. Step one is to know what we're even looking for.

BRIAN

Violet sent me a copy of the other Violet's resume so I could compare it against Alvy's work history, maybe find some overlap. He did security consulting out of New Jupiter, had a lot of clients. But as far as I can tell, so far, no dice.

VIOLET

Also, it's hard to get a handle on the companies the other Violet worked for. The names are almost insultingly generic. Northern Enterprises, Incorporated Technologies, the most recent one's just called ADVANCE.

ARKADY

Shell companies? Fronts?

VIOLET

Whatever they are, I'm inclined to think they do real work.

SANA

Why?

VIOLET

Because the day after the Iris launched, her position at ADVANCE opened back up.

SANA

How do we know that?

VIOLET

It was a public job posting. "Senior lab technician, biomed-tech division. Must have prior experience."

ARKADY

Forward that to me. I might be able to trace it, get a little more info.

BRIAN

Y'know, if ADVANCE was involved in what happened to the Iris—the whole crew would've still been alive at that point. Openly hunting for replacements is a weird move.

VIOLET

Here's the thing, though. She wasn't sent, right? She wasn't summoned. I was.

SANA

So either she happened to be let go on that particular day, or—

VIOLET

I think she ran. I think she knew somehow what had been planned for her, she realized they had the wrong woman, and she fled before anyone could figure it out.

SANA

Does she have living family members?

VIOLET

Both parents and some siblings, I think.

SANA

In that case, we might want to check for missing person reports.

VIOLET

Yeah, there's nothing. I already checked.

SANA

(A little impressed) Really.

VIOLET

Captain, no offense, you gave me a full day to get familiar with your medbay? Your medbay is literally a closet with a first aid kit in it.

SANA

Well, good initiative.

VIOLET

There's not even a cot in there, just what looks like maybe an old beanbag chair?

SANA

When we're done here, write up a supply list and we'll see what we can do.

ARKADY

We are not losing that beanbag chair.

SANA

Hmm. Do we think the other Violet had time to warn her family and they're covering for her? Or do we think the IGR sold them a cover story?

ARKADY

You might wanna also—

VIOLET

Check the obituaries? Yeah, I did that, too.

ARKADY

How'd you know I'd say that?

VIOLET

Basic pattern recognition?

SANA

I hate to say it, but we only know the IGR failed to kill her once. We have no evidence she's still alive.

VIOLET

Well, except for the lack of an obituary. She was social, she was well-liked. If she'd died, you'd think people would've noticed. Friends, family. People would've—grieved and—um.

SANA

You okay?

VIOLET

Sorry, we can move on, I'm fine. I just—I keep thinking about what this must be like for my family.

SANA

I'm really sorry, but what Alvy said in his message, about no lines being safe—if the crew of the Iris was under some kind of suspicion, it's entirely possible your families are being watched, too.

VIOLET

I know, but I think of them finding out about the explosion...

SANA

Every day they don't know you're alive is a day you're protecting them.

BRIAN

If the IGR starts to suspect that someone you know has any information at all, they'll—well, let's leave it at “you're protecting them.”

VIOLET

(muttering) And breaking their hearts.

ARKADY

Okay, I guarantee you that your loved ones are not sitting around going, ‘Oh I hope if our dear little Violet is alive right now that she's feeling *very shitty about it.*'

SANA

Thanks, Arkady. Violet, if you want to take break...

VIOLET

No, I'm—fine. (She's not, but y'know.) So, something that's been bugging me about the other Violet. I can't canvas our mutual friends since I'm, um, legally dead, but as far as I remember, she had no radical leanings at all. No interest in politics, no criminal background. She'd probably heard some illegal music, but who didn't try out a censored band or two in college?

ARKADY

(dry as the vacuum of space itself) Who indeed. It *boggles the mind.*

VIOLET

(Can barely deal with how ridiculous this fight feels) Look, I'm sorry if I *implied you like rock music*, can we move on?

BRIAN

Uh. That's not what she--

SANA

Not everyone on the ship went to college, Violet.

VIOLET

...how is that possible?

ARKADY

What.

VIOLET

I've already talked to Brian, Kreijh flies space ships; that's gotta take years of school. Captain, you're a mechanic, I have to imagine it's something similar. Arkady--

ARKADY

(brittle, upset) Has an eighth-grade education, but hey, thanks for playing.

BRIAN

Uh, can we maybe get back to--

VIOLET

I'm sorry.

ARKADY

That your safety's in the hands of a drooling idiot? Yeah, I bet.

VIOLET

No--I don't know your life story. Clearly, you're good at what you do. Clearly, that's what matters out here. It feels like I might've hit a nerve, and I am genuinely sorry.

ARKADY

(doesn't know how to take it.) Um. Okay? (remembers she has the option of being super suspicious) What's that look supposed to mean?

VIOLET

Nothing, I--it's *all* self-taught? The computer stuff?

ARKADY

Yes?

VIOLET

That's impressive. Really impressive.

ARKADY

(Super super super awkward, like suddenly that earlier conversation with Violet and Brian is the epitome of smoothness.) Uh. No, yeah, it's okay. Just (awkward awkward awkward) uh, just doing my job, ma'am. (the wince is almost audible.) Um.

SANA

“Thank you, Violet.”

ARKADY

(awkward awkward) I, uh. It’s not, like, a. (Defeated.) Thank you, Violet.

BRIAN

Hey! So maybe someone should go check on Krejhh?

SANA

Sana Tripathi to Krejhh. (FX: intercom noise.) Hey, how are we looking?

VOICE (over intercom)

It sounds like you said—‘Greg.’ Is that correct?

KREJJH

Computer. Stop. Computer, just—just—cool your jets or something, computer. Chill your beans. *Stop.* Computer—stop.

VOICE

Log-in paused.

KREJJH

Oh, things are—happening, uh.

SANA

Arkady, any guess what could be happening with E.L.L.A.?

ARKADY

...P.M.S.?

KREJJH

The computer menstruates?

ARKADY

(annoyed) It’s a joke, Krejhh.

KREJJH

How.

BRIAN

The program we use, E.L.L.A.? Ella is also a name, often used for women, many of whom--

KREJJH

Yeah. Okay. So...the joke...is that your ship software...has a womb.

Listen, fellas, for the record, I want you all to know, when / make jokes *you* can’t parse because blah blah

different species blah blah cultural divide, please keep in mind: my jokes are actually funny, okay? My jokes that you guys don't get are *hilarious*.

ARKADY

Uh. Sometimes when the software updates, we lose our old settings. I had an extension that recognized Dwarnian, I can dig it up again. For now, just put in any real word and I'll fix it tomorrow when I'm--

KREJJH

(More serious than Krejhh has ever been thus far.) My name *is* a real word, First Mate Patel. (Pause.) A lot of stuff gets lost in translation, and I accept that, because I don't have another option. (VERY upset) But my *name* is— (trying to calm back down, sad) I come from a place where my name is a real word.

SANA

Arkady, when we're done with the meeting, can you go in and figure out how to teach E.L.L.A. some new vocabulary?

KREJJH

Sorry, none of this'd normally get my goat but today—

BRIAN

(He'd totally forgotten. Shit) Oh no, is it June 12th?

KREJJH

Yep.

BRIAN

Dwajjhah Ferin, Krejhh.

KREJJH

(A little sadly) Dwajjhah Ferin, Crewman Jeeter.

VIOLET

What's—

BRIAN

Ferin is kinda like Dwarnian Hanukah?

VIOLET

Oh.

ARKADY

Uh, hey, Krejhh, I'm headed up to the cockpit, I'll help you with that autopilot.

KREJJH

Don't bother. I can, I'll just put "Stretch."

ARKADY

Don't be stupid. We'll call it my, uh, Ferin present.

KREJJH

Not really a...gift-giving occasion—

BRIAN

Help the poor girl out, Krejjh. She's got no other way to show emotion.

SANA

We could really use you down here, Krejjh. Plus, Brian looks so lonely without you.

KREJJH

Really?

BRIAN

Pining, dude.

KREJJH

Aw, you guys are just flattering me. (Pause.) And I kinda love it! First Mate Patel, get up here! Krejjh out.

SANA

Arkady, do you mind if we—

ARKADY

Go on without me? Yeah, do your thing. [FX: Door open noise] I can get this handled in like, five minutes, tops. [FX: door close noise]

SANA

So, Brian and I went over Alvy's stuff, from what we managed to recover off the Iris.

BRIAN

Unfortunately, people tend to travel pretty light in space.

SANA

And also we can't do a thorough search of his quarters since they—exploded. But we did find a Beluga in his room.

VIOLET

Uh, sorry, what?

SANA

The tablet computing device, not the--extinct water mammal.

VIOLET

I know, but that's weird, I thought he took his with him.

SANA

I'm sure he took something with him. We found this one hidden under his mattress.

VIOLET

Okay, that's—weirder.

BRIAN

Oh, we are just balancing on the tip of the weird iceberg right now.

VIOLET

What?

SANA

Brian figured out the password this morning, and--Violet, when you say Alvy was the only person on the Iris who was nice to you, what do you mean?

VIOLET

I don't know. There was this feeling like—maybe I'm being sensitive, but have you ever talked to someone, where you can just taste in the back of your throat that they don't respect you?

SANA

(quiet but immediate) Yes.

VIOLET

People kept to themselves, too. Very closed-off. I didn't get the impression any of them were friends. Alvy at least made conversation. Asked me quest—(sudden realization in the same breath) Of course. He knew right off the bat I was the wrong Violet.

BRIAN

Yeah. The Beluga's weirdly empty. A lot of stuff's been wiped. But it looks like he double-checked everyone's personnel files pretty closely. That's not the only thing he was looking into, though.

SANA

Violet, did you know there were four other missions like yours, ordered by the IGR, thrown together on the same kind of timeline?

VIOLET

Launched at the same time?

SANA

Within an hour or two, yeah. Alvy was keeping tabs on all of them, and the crew members.

VIOLET

Scientists and programmers.

SANA

Mostly. As far as he could tell—and as far as we can tell—they're all still alive.

VIOLET

So, what, it was a test and we failed? They're next? What does it mean?

SANA

We should probably get out the big guns. Sana Tripathi to Arkady Patel. (Comm connection sound) When you get the chance—

ARKADY

Uh, Captain, we'd actually love to see you all up here at the cockpit. Now.

SANA

On our way over. (FX: Footsteps) What's the situation?

KREJJH

We're being hailed.

SANA

Out here?

BRIAN

By what?

SANA

Any sign of the swarm?

KREJJH

That's a no, Captain Tripathi.

ARKADY

I don't think it's IGR, either. It's coming from the direction opposite Jemison, and for a signal to carry this far, this clearly—

SANA

Dwarnians?

ARKADY

That's my guess.

SANA

Lemme just get the— (FX: door beeps four times, opens) So where are they hailing from?

KREJJH

Right there.

ARKADY

Out of gunning range. For us and them. For now.

VIOLET

What can they do to us? The war is over.

BRIAN

Depends on who we're dealing with. Back on Neuzo, I, uh, might've made some enemies in the Dwarnian mafia?

VIOLET

YOU'RE A GRAD STUDENT.

BRIAN

Was, man. (More serious) Do we accept the hail?

SANA

Krejhh, if it's anything but a family of vacationers, they're gonna be better armed than us, right?

KREJJH

Yep.

SANA

If they're looking for a fight, we need to resolve this before they bring the fight to Jemison, start another war.

KREJJH

Besides, maybe they just—swung by to say howdy.

SANA

All the same, Arkady, prime the particle beams. Krejhh, be prepared to run. Brian, let's tell 'em howdy.

BRIAN

Accepting the hail. I may need to adjust—

(FX: a little bit of static, and then)

EEJJHGREB

Krejhh? Krejhh? Sa le-fsekre-thimch-dlah, sh'thlehepp?

KREJJH

(amazed) Eejjhgreb. (Amazed laugh) Dwajjhah Ferin, sh'th Eejjhgreb.

SANA

Krejhh, I take it you two know each other?

KREJJH

(Still amazed) Yeah.

EEJJHGREB

Dwajjhah Ferin, Krejhepp. (Krejhepp means "li'l krejhh")

KREJJH

Haversh-le, iblix glu'u?

EEJHGREB

Ve gl'thay, u gl'thay. Le o?

KREJJH

U gl'thay! (very rapidfire, almost giddy) Nweymreh le-issimch, sh'th Eejjhgreb?

SANA (as Krejjh is still talking)

Brian?

BRIAN

(Quickly, concentrating hard) Sorry. So, uh, that's Eejjhgreb. The name suggests a diplomat. They're addressing each other as sh'th, which--Dwarnian family structures are pretty different from ours--

KREJJH

(still so so happy) *Nweymreh, thay bwedliss gless, bwedliss--lequezzek!*

BRIAN

--but, think of Eejjhgreb as an aunt or an uncle--

EEJHGREB (in the background as Brian keeps talking)

Krejhepp. Sh'th. Nwimch fsah gress o quegga pwell ktayr o nwey th'nwegless. Blray dlih fselsh le'owth, pwellssa le'owth.

BRIAN

Krejhh said, basically, "holy shit, how'd you find me?" Eejjhgreb says, "I recognized your flight path, nobody else flies so well or takes so many stupid risks."

KREJJH

Bl'dlithay vemchako! Lequezzek!

BRIAN

(translating) "I can't believe it! This is amazing!"

EEJHGREB

Thay thressuwe uwe iblix bl'glthay. Nwelenressa-ke? Nwelemreh-ke? Mressale fselsh quiblix fsekre?

BRIAN

(translating) "I have so many questions. Where have you been? How is it you survived? Why are you flying in that ship?"

ARKADY

Captain, you wanna cut in here?

SANA

Let's give them a moment. They haven't heard from each other in what, two years?

BRIAN
Maybe more.

EEJJHGREB
Vemressa Gwekk sh'blemreh iblix chren-o-chren chrivway thay'ench?

BRIAN
Uh.

SANA
What?

EEJJHGREB
Vemressa chren Gwekk sh'blemreh?

BRIAN
Eejjhgreb says, "Why is a human repeating everything I say its language?"

SANA
Tell Eejjhgreb—

EEJJHGREB
I speak your language, human.

SANA
Your Excellency, if you'd rather use Dwarnian, it's no trouble for us. We have a very good translator—

EEJJHGREB
Are the rest of you all humans?

SANA
We are, yes.

EEJJHGREB
Then it's surely easier to stay with Earth-English. It's a simple language, and I'm proficient. Assuming Krejjh will be able to follow along—

KREJJH
Uh, my Earth-English is way way better than it was. It's—it won't be a problem.

EEJJHGREB
Really.

SANA
Krejjh speaks about as fluently as the rest of us. It's good to meet you. I'm Captain Sana Tripathi of the Rumor, here with my crew. We are honored to know your kinsfolk.

EEJJHGREB

Of course. I look forward to hearing your stories of just what you've been up to, Krejhh. So, ah, Captain. I assume your ship has some sort of docking station? How do we manage this, logistically?

SANA

What?

EEJJHGREB

Getting Krejhh back onto our ship. Krejhepp, if we hurry, we can be back on homeworld before Mlossthay Nansh, and—

SANA

Seems like a decision for Krejhh to make. Your Excellency.

EEJJHGREB

Well, of course, but—

KREJJH

(Heavily) Eejhhgreb, sh'th. I can't.

EEJJHGREB

You can't possibly think anyone is still angry. We've barely heard from you for two years, and now to find you in good health, out here—

KREJJH

I ran away from the military. You can't tell me everything's gonna be aces—

EEJJHGREB

(confused) Aces?

KREJJH

Hunky-dory.

EEJJHGREB

(this has cleared up nothing) Hunky—?

KREJJH

(losing patience) "Good," Eejhhgreb! That things will be okay. Half the clan is politicians. Hell, two-thirds of the subclan. I'm an outlaw.

EEJJHGREB

Krejhh, you deserted six days before the end of the war. The last battle had already been fought, the treaty was practically a formality. I've come into a position of some influence. Everything that's happened--we can smooth it over.

KREJJH

(already knowing Eejhhgreb is wrong.) Eejhhgreb, I want you to meet my intended. (pointedly) *Brian*.

BRIAN

(awkwardly) Uh, hey. Dwajjhah Ferin.

EEJJHGREB

(audibly relieved) Oh, is *that* what all of this is about?

KREJJH

What?

EEJJHGREB

All this trouble just because you've taken up with some human? (laugh) Krejjh. Krejjhepp. Sh'th. *Nobody* is going to care.

SANA

Your Excellency, do you really mean to suggest that Krejjh and Brian would be safe living together in your territory?

EEJJHGREB

Of course. Our people have moved on. We bear no grudge. There would be—some gossip, but Krejjh is a pilot. A certain degree of eccentricity is almost expected.

KREJJH

And you're saying Brian could join the subclan? Attend all the festivals and ceremonies—

EEJJHGREB

Well, no, of course not. Those are sacred.

BRIAN

"No animals allowed in church."

EEJJHGREB

I'm not saying that.

BRIAN

Yeah, dude. You kinda don't need to.

EEJJHGREB

Krejjh, we love you and I'm sure you have fond feelings for this human, but we can't turn the entire social order upside down for the sake of your whim. Think about this. I can clear your name. I can get you a very respectable job.

KREJJH

Uh-huh. Yeah, I think—what's that phrase they got on Earth? "No way, Hector!"

BRIAN

What?

KREJJH

Uh. “No way, Jorge!”

BRIAN

(laughs, half from the break in tension) Uh, it’s “No way, Jose.”

KREJJH

Yeah, that is catchier. But if I can quick make a case for “Hector”—

SANA

Your Excellency, it sounds like Krejjh has reached a decision. I think we’re gonna respectfully—

EEJJHGREB

Krejjhepp. Sh’t. Are you honestly prepared to throw everything away for a human?

KREJJH

(angry) You know, if we really wanna get into the weeds on this one, I met him after I deserted, so it’s not—I didn’t throw everything away *for* a human, as much as I threw everything away *with* a human.

EEJJHGREB

None of your kinsfolk wanted you to fight in the war.

KREJJH

I know.

EEJJHGREB

You were safe on Thlaskin. You had friends, you had—a career of sorts—

KREJJH

“Stunt pilot” is an actual job, you know. They paid me. In money.

EEJJHGREB

(continuing like Krejjh didn’t say anything) You had connections you could’ve levied into something more—substantial, down the line. And we knew how lightly you take everything.

You may be cozy with these humans now, but you left the military six days before the end of the war. You waited until after the Battle of Nreech-shlegga. You didn’t have any problem killing them. You just didn’t want to lose.

KREJJH

You know where I was, when news broke about the battle? I was on leave, at the outer edge of the Neutral Zone. It was that or go back to base and I just wanted some decent food.

Reports started coming in, garbled at first, but then around two A.M, it was clear beyond a doubt that the humans had taken Nreech-shlegga. There was so much talk and gossip in Neuzo that I think everyone knew what it meant, that the war was about to be over. Middle of the night, and all the humans were pouring into the streets, some of them half-dressed, staring at each other. They were so surprised, so

unprepared. And then someone started singing. And then they were all singing, and crying, and holding each other. Strangers.

And I thought, 'this right here, this is gonna be their history for the next hundred years. This is the story they'll be telling.' And I thought, "Back home, it won't even make the nightly news."

EEJJHGREB

Do you want a parade for losing a war?

KREJJH

I want my planet to quit being so *goddamn* superior and *look* at what we did to these people. And what we almost did to them. I knew we'd move on. We already had. I've gotta sit with the things I've done. But at least I'm trying.

EEJJHGREB

Really? Who did you help by fleeing?

KREJJH

I wasn't taking a stand. I made the only choice I could stomach. I don't even know how to pretend our hands are clean.

EEJJHGREB

It's so easy to be self-righteous when you're young. You had a responsibility to your unit, to your clan, to your subclan. But you didn't think about that. You turned your back on all of us, everything we stand for--

SANA

I don't think we need to hear any more of this. Krejjh, let me know when you want us to cut the line.

EEJJHGREB

Hiding behind your human Captain—

KREJJH

No. Let's finish this.

EEJJHGREB

All this time, you've sent your little messages, letting us know you were alive, telling us nothing else. I'm glad the rest of our subclan doesn't know what a disgrace you are. You are a coward and a fool. "Lwayik an vwayvin daw shiblix lwayikchan. Lwayik an eemchin'ke ulfuvway."

BRIAN

No. You know what? No, dude. You don't get to back up your point with the freaking Saga of the House of Zravshen.

EEJJHGREB

You presume to understand Dwarnian high art?

BRIAN

Book two, chapter two.

And Young Zravshen found their Commander at the edge of the still-smoking field, head uplifted in mourning.

“Commander,” said Young Zravshen, “why do you sing lamentations?”

“Today,” the Commander said, “I mourn the fallen. All of them.”

“Commander,” said Young Zravshen, “most are not ours to mourn.”

“If we do not feel their loss,” the Commander said, “then we lose something far greater.”

Eejhgreb, you want to fill in the rest? *Lwayik an vwayvin daw shiblix lwayikchan.* “We must weigh the consequences of our actions.” *Lwayik an eemchin’ke ulfuvway.* “We must feel that weight always.” *Ve iblix, ve iblix kessa bluvway.* “It is what keeps us from the abyss.”

EEJJHGREG

You understand that most scholars believe Commander Effrella was only referring to their own troops? By “not ours to mourn,” the Commander simply meant that the dead didn’t belong to the clan of—

BRIAN

Yeah, I understand they believe that. I guess because they skipped over that part in Book One that clearly states Effrella and Zravshen were from different clans. Or that when Effrella says “all of them”, the Commander is using a form of “all” so emphatically inclusive that it died out a thousand years ago because it was all but useless in everyday conversation.

EEJJHGREG

...how did you find an Earth-English copy of the Saga?

BRIAN

I didn’t. I wrote one.

EEJJHGREG

Why?

BRIAN

Because I loved it. Still do. Also, my thesis advisor rejected all my other proposals. Uh, my point being, Krejhh lives by Dwarnian ideals every day. Wisdom, compassion, bravery. Krejhh has saved our lives too many times to count. Hell, they saved my life the first week we met.

KREJJH

Oh pshaw, Crewman Jeeter, you saved my life first. It was going around. (small voice) Uh, but you can keep going if you—

BRIAN

Sacrifice. Selflessness. Hell, down to the battle poetry.

ARKADY

That’s really not just a Krejhh thing?

KREJJH

It’s cultural.

EEJJHGREB

Krejjhepp, these humans, I don't think you realize how barbaric they can be.

KREJJH

Do you know how you sound right now?

EEJJHGREB

Remember what happened to Thasia.

KREJJH

Thasia *disappeared*. Nobody knows what happened, if humans were even involved. I don't need your ghost stories--

EEJJGREB

The Intergalactic Republic will *never* accept you as one of them.

KREJJH

Well yeah, I know *that*. We're pretty much on the run from them, too.

EEJJHGREB

What.

KREJJH

Yeah, we all hate the IGR here. Well, maybe Violet's still okay with them, but they tried to kill her twice so—probably not?

EEJJHGREB

This isn't a government ship?

SANA

We're more of a—freelance operation.

EEJJHGREB

Wait, which nation funds you? Who protects you?

KREJJH

A bit low on funding *and* protection 'round here, to be honest.

EEJJHGREB

Krejjhepp...

KREJJH

I know. I know.

EEJJHGREB

Is there. Anything I could do, to increase the odds of your survival? To—help?

KREJJH
Nothing comes to mind.

BRIAN
Are we close enough for a large-scale data transfer?

EEJJHGREB
What?

BRIAN
Written data. Could you send us a Dwarnian-to-Vree Chel Noke dictionary?

EEJJHGREB
...Yes? Krejjh, are you returning to your studies?

KREJJH
Absolutely not. That is alllll Brian. Uh, thanks, though. Look, I'll try to keep in better touch.

EEJJHGREB
That's probably not a good idea.

KREJJH
(crushed) Yeah. Okay.

EEJJHGREB
Alright, the transfer's sent.

SANA
That quickly?

EEJJHGREB
Remember, our technology is far superior to yours.

SANA
Right.

EEJJHGREB
And Krejjh?

KREJJH
(guarded) Yeah?

EEJJHGREB
Be safe. Dwajjhah Ferin.

KREJJH
Yeah. Dwajjhah Ferin.

[End of transmission noise.]

SANA

Krejhh, do you need anything?

KREJJH

(shaken up) I mean, feel free to keep telling me how good and brave and attractive I am.

BRIAN

Aw, c'mere.

ARKADY

I'll say this much, your kinfolk is a real shitheel.

SANA

Is the file coming through?

ARKADY

Looks like it. Man, Jeeter, a powerful Dwarnian diplomat offers us a favor and you opt for a *dictionary*? That's just embarrassing.

SANA

Have I mentioned lately, how proud I am to know you all?

ARKADY

Literally yesterday.

SANA

Well, it stands.

ARKADY

Jeeter. Hey, Jeeter. What, are you still in shock that your thesis was actually useful?

BRIAN

No. Well, yeah, but. "Thasia."

KREJJH

Yeah, I kinda thought it sounded familiar, before.

SANA

What?

BRIAN

That's one of the words the, uh, Vre-Chel-Noke nanoswarm used.

VIOLET

How can you remember that?

BRIAN

Guys, this is a language from an extinct alien race that's been borrowed by robots and *we've got a recording of it.*

VIOLET

You've listened to it a lot, huh?

BRIAN

You could say that. Uh, Krejjh would say that. I'm not allowed to play it out loud in our room anymore.

SANA

How certain are you that the robot cloud said 'Thasia'?

BRIAN

I dunno. Could be a false cognate. But let's just say I'm pretty psyched to pull up that dictionary.

SANA

Krejjh, if you want to take a rest, I'm happy to watch the controls for a while.

KREJJH

Yeah, that'd be—yeah. Thanks, Captain.

SANA

Hey, no problem. What are we here for?

AGENT

End transmission.

For security purposes, please note that some files refer to Violet Liu by the name Cindy Chu.

Our team is still working to find and tag every false identity connected with the fugitive Arkady Patel. Verified: Kay Grisham, Ishani Kanetkar, and Sister Theresa Margaret. Suspected: Duchess Calpurnia Higginsworth-Cobb.

Sana Tripathi is believed to have been involved with the uprising at Cresswin Landing, under the name Rukhmani Desai.

For more on Brian Jeeter, see file marked "Jamie Price."

For more on Krejjh, see file marked "Brittony LeFever."

Eejhgreb is the name of a known Dwarnian diplomat, active during the war. For more information, see attached file or contact Special Agent Rohani.

This report has been transcribed by Ensign Best. If you need to review a written version, please access procyonpodcasts.com. That's p-r-o-c-y-o-n podcasts dot com.

This is Agent Park, codename Apollo, thanking you for reviewing this report. Additional thanks to Agent Cohen, Agent Bauman and Agent Cross, and to the specialists at Procyon. Any agent who wishes to support the Procyon team should access kickstarter.com/profile/procyonpodcasts and click "created." Again, that's kickstarter.com/profile/procyonpodcasts. Please note the deadline is March 31st.

And thanks also to Agent McCabe, for their help.

Long live the Republic.