

Interstellar Transmissions
By Annika Krein

When he arrives, the emissary is pacing nervously. Damon, a human of unremarkable height and quite a remarkable face, eyes the man from under the brim of his hat, which is uncomfortably tight, dark blue, and has the emblem of some universal transport company. He didn't care to check what it was before he stole the freighter and uniforms for this job. A mercenary by trade, he tended to live from job to job.

The emissary finally spots him and turns with strained energy. He's an Eren'kas, a species most notable for the smooth, pearly sphere each create in a gland under their throat. While this created unfortunate double chins, they tended to be pretty good looking and hold onto their youth well. This one is dressed in civilian clothes that he wears with an unfamiliar stiffness. For all that at he wishes secrecy, he is rather conspicuous. He shuffles up to Damon.

"You've got a shuttle? A transporter?" he whispers furtively.

"Yeah, I got a ship. You got'cher special secret package?"

The emissary nods, and two burly, reptilian porters carry a large package from a corner where Damon hadn't noticed them.

He frowns. "Is that it? It's bigger than I thought it would be."

The package is seven feet long and three feet wide. It's about three feet tall at the ends and only two feet in the middle. It's covered in some sort of industrial wrapping that's been thoroughly tied down, as though they have to bind the atoms of whatever's contained together. Damon shrugs and gestures to his ship. It's nothing special to look at, just a typical freighter with a typical engine. His crew has been in it for a few days since they 'commandeered' it so there are a some mods, mostly relevant to the job. Damon watches the porters' backs as they strap the package to the floor. The emissary-- he can sort of remember the name, isn't it something like Voran?-- turns back to him.

"So, just like we agreed," he says, voice containing an admirable attempt to not quiver. "You take it to the coordinates, as fast as you can. Don't open it; don't let anyone know about it. When we're sure you've delivered it, we'll pay up."

Damon nails the small 'kas with a harsh stare. "Five million credits, no less, straight to my account."

Voran nods and the porters signal that the package is secure. Damon gives them a tip of his annoying hat, and then strolls up the ramp and into the hold of the ship.

Gyrus is waiting in the co-pilot seat when Damon gets to the cockpit. He's a burly, humanoid avian who stands at about eight and a half feet tall and can fix or mod anything metal, is handy with computers, and a pretty fine pilot. Damon first met him at a seedy bar between jobs on Vetch-Mal three years ago in a bar fight neither had started, and they had stuck together since. Currently, Gyrus has ditched his stolen uniform for the clothes of his people: loose pants suspended by complicated sashes of knotted rope that offers plenty of spaces to stash items, small guns, and extra credits. The large avian is

concentrating on un-encrypting the coordinates sent to them by the Eren'kas. Damon sinks into his chair, tracing the unfamiliar stitching in the tough leather.

"How's it comin', Gyr? Code got your tongue?"

The avian shakes his head and laughs. "This code is as tough as a haquador's hide, but nothing can stand against this mind of mine."

"Alright. Plug 'em in when you got 'em, alright?"

Damon strolls back to the room he'd claimed as his to change out of the tight uniform. He dons cargo pants and a loose black shirt then cinches a wide belt around his waist, on which he holsters a small blaster and a universal-grade combat knife. Dressed again, he seeks out the ration re-synthesizer to grab some dinner. Savv, the only other crew member, is already eating when he gets there. She's short, hardy, and the best shooter you could ask for. She's also one of most well-connected people Damon's ever met. He's never quite stopped marveling at her abundance of 'friends' and questionable fashion style. They eat in relative silence other than Damon telling her that the package is secure and Gyrus is working on decrypting the destination.

An hour later, Gyrus cracks the code and Damon comes back in to plot a route. If they want to remain inconspicuous they have to take the industrial hyperlanes, which are unfortunately slower and used almost every company that's got a lot to ship to different planets. His crew may grumble, and probably will (behind his back, of course), but this isn't black work and the pay is far higher.

"Get to sleep, Gyrus. I can watch the ship for a while." The avian nods and trudges back to the crew quarters, durasteel floors creaking under his considerable mass. The pitiful noise only reminds Damon of the cheap build. This ship was built for transport, and he hopes they won't have to get into a fight. The walls have no shielding and the primary blaster is only there to ward off space-faring beasts.

He shakes his head and turns back to the screens, carefully watching the readout.

There's nothing coming for a few hours, so he decides to get some rest. Damon sets the autopilot to high alert and walks back to his quarters. The package is not gone from his thoughts.

Gyrus wakes him up five hours later, worriedly talking about a storm. Damon waves him off, then slides into pants and scrambles up to the cockpit, snatching a cup of caf from a napping Savv on the way. Gyrus is again hunched over in the copilot chair, when Damon arrives, tapping away at a screen.

"No good, boss," he says. "Storm's coming in, fast."

"Ion?" Damon asks, settling into the familiar indents of his leather chair.

"Yeah."

He sighs. "We gotta have some sorta shield buff enough to go through it."

"Nothing good enough. We'll be shredded if we try to plow through."

Damon nods. "How many others 'r stuck?"

Gyrus goes back to typing at the monitor for a minute, then replies, "Quite a few. Enough to make a few roadblocks. Sitting won't add more than.... twelve hours to the operation."

"And you're *sure* we can't avoid it?"

"No. The storm will hit before we can find a reliable exit to the hyperlane."

Damon swears, then sinks back in his chair to think. There isn't much reason to jump out of the lane, but he isn't sure how well the ship would take it. "I 'spose you could fix anythin' that broke... Alright, let's get locked down."

Three hours into the storm, Damon notes that the ship is doing an admirable job of holding up. The durasteel rattles alarmingly, but stays solid. He is checking over his blaster, a habit he picked up after neglect had stalled a shot and nearly left him for dead. As usual, everything's shiny clean, but he still scrubs at the familiar dents and dings. Some of the external systems are blaring their sirens as if to encourage Gyrus to fix them faster. Damon ignores them. Savv has headphones clamped over her aural canals while she checks her own weapon, her feelers bobbing rhythmically.

"Hey bird boy, how's th' ship?" he calls out to said avian.

"It's mewling like a babe who already has milk. I've fixed her, but still she howls."

Damon reattaches the flash dampener to the barrel. "Sure 'bout that?"

Gyrus clambers over to the control panel. "Yes. Nothing is in such a shape as to cry about."

"Beeps are in the hold," chirps Savv. She had removed her headphones enough to hear her crewmates.

"What?"

"Whatever that nasty put in here is beeping, yeah?"

Damon glances at Gyrus, then grabs his blaster, now reassembled, and strides to the hold.

The beeping escalates the closer they get to the package. Damon draws his knife and starts cutting through the heavy packaging, ignoring the incessant noise. With help from Gyrus, they tear the rest of the wrapping off.

A one-person cryotube rests on the hold floor. Damon brushes ice and condensation from the glass cover as Gyrus inspects the generator, which is making the noise. "The ion storm has harmed it as a Parthan mauls its prey. We must revive whoever rests inside."

Damon nods, then searches for the emergency thaw. Finding the lever, he pulls it. Immediately the beeping stops, replaced by the hiss of the remaining working parts of the generator. The cover begins to clear, the melting liquid channeling out as steam. Slowly, the true "package" is revealed; a young woman with smooth grey skin like a dolphin and long black hair. Her hands and feet are covered in a jagged kind of carapace, and her long tail is curled politely around her ankles. She's clothed in simple wraps and draping swaths of dark, glimmering fabric.

"She will be revived in about twenty minutes. The thawing process will ensure her vital systems are preserved," said Gyrus.

"I'll see if Savv knows her." Damon stomps out of the hold. Savv is exactly where she was when they left. "Beeps are gone, yeah?"

"Yeah." He sat down on a couch. "It's a cryotube. I was wondering if whoever's inside is one of yer 'friends'."

Savv nods and walks to the hold, human companion in tow.

"Oh, pretty bird got herself a cage. Some bigwig is gettin' a prize."

"So, y'know her?"

Grinning with a wide, serrated smile, she replies, "Nah, but pretty birds don't have cheap feathers, right? Glittery stuff always eats credits. She's got to be important *somewhere*."

Gyrus paced by the far wall. "So why is she here? What is the purpose of being frozen and sent to some mysterious planet with a band of mercenaries? Would it not be better to simply traverse the distance yourself?" He shook his head and continues pacing.

"I dunno, but we can ask 'er when she gets up," Damon decides.

They resolve to wait until the thawing is complete. Damon sits by the cryotube, again inspecting his blaster. Savv retreats back to the common room and Gyrus is still pacing, albeit slower. The cryotube gives one last small *ping* and a hiss before falling silent. Damon stands to watch as the woman's eyes slowly flutter open. She shivers and sits up, carding a clawed hand through her hair. Damon opens his mouth to say something when she jerks, hand flying up and eyes flashing luminescent gold as hundreds of small, similarly-colored particles begin shining brightly across her skin. An iron grasp suddenly closes around his neck, incorporeal but no less impeding of his breathe.

"Wait--"

Another flash and this time a bang, the familiar shot of a familiar pistol in the hands of an angry bird. Damon sees a dent in the crate behind the woman between black spots. She freezes, and the pressure abates. He can breathe now, but it's not exactly easy.

"Stand down," Gyrus orders. "We're not here to harm you."

The woman lowers her hand, and Damon can breathe again. "What th' hell, lady?"

She gives him no answer, instead turning to Gyrus. "Why am I here? Where are we?" she demands. Her voice is strong and elegant and melodious, like she knows herself and is confident against the two males.

His steely gaze does not waver. "We were hired to transport you to a set of coordinates, and upon landing your cryotube was to give us the final destination." He gestures to the broken machine.

"Unfortunately, an ion storm hit and it broke, so we had to revive you. I'm sure you know what would happen if you awoke incorrectly." Damon briefly thinks of soggy corpses so saturated with water they drowned, lungs filled like balloons (the news channels love that sort of thing). The woman flinches ever so slightly at the thought of such an end. Damon slowly rises from the floor, holding his hands out non-threateningly. Her head snaps to look at him, but nothing else happens. The gold speckles across her skin have dimmed back out of existence.

“Mind tellin’ us why y’ got stuck in th’ freezer?”

“My name is Averia Kethrylli, and if you must know, I am a... messenger.” she coughs into her hand and climbs out of the tube, brushing lingering crystals from her wraps. Her claws click gently against the durasteel floors.

“I’m Damon, and this Gyrus. Our companion Savv is currently in the common room.”

She nods, and then breaks into a coughing fit. Damon steps closer to offer support, but she waves him off.

“Averia, I am afraid you were in unsanctioned thaw for over two and a half hours. There may be residual water in your system.” Gyrus came closer, pistol tucked away once more. “The medbay should have the equipment necessary to ensure you suffer no lingering damage. If you’ll follow me,” he gestures to the hallway and begins to walk slowly. Averia pauses, and then follows. Damon instead treks up to the common room.

“Savv, th’ girl’s up.”

She looks up from her holopad. “Got the popsicle out?”

“Yep,” he says as he plops down on the couch. “And she nearly choked me for it.”

Savv giggles. “Told ya ‘y shouldn’t be so forward.”

“No fair! I was saving her hide, not flirting!”

Savv laughs uproariously and her comeback is indistinguishable from the cackling sounds. Damon huffs and goes to find out how their new acquaintance is doing.

In the medbay, Gyrus is pouring over screens of data while a large clinical curtain hides the scanner from view. Damon can barely make out the silhouette of Averia’s lithe form behind it.

“How’s it going, bird boy?”

Gyrus doesn’t glance at him. “Most of the water and ice is centered in organs that naturally require or contain excessive moisture. We’ll have to dry some of it out, but there are pills for that. I took the liberty of doing a physical scan, just in case she’s injured. It seems she’s just got heavy scarring on her back and a disabled tagging chip.” the avian turned closer to Damon, head bent close and his voice low. “It’s a slave ID. Someone busted her out, and we’ve probably been tricked into smuggling her out. What should we do, boss?”

Damon frowns. “I dunno. She might turn hostile and do that freaky mind trick again.”

“Oh, about that. She’s also got a high enough psionic capacity to utilize her powers. She’s got implants of some kind too, but they don’t appear to be active. I’d guess they’re for increasing psi-potential when she needs it.”

“Alright,” Damon says, even though he has no idea to do with the woman. He’s heard of psionic individuals though, since other species had managed to develop usable high levels of psi-energy, unlike humans, who rarely developed anything remotely significant. He’s never actually interacted with any sort

of psi-user, though. He's never smuggled slaves before, either. Well, he did help a friend out once, but that's called a favor.

The machine beeps; Gyrus glances at the screen. "Scan's done," he calls out. Damon hears a noise of assent and some rustling fabric before Averia sweeps the curtain aside. She's put her lower sashes on over her wraps, but hadn't bothered covering her upper wraps. She seems unaffected by the display of smooth skin. "How am I?"

"All things considered, pretty good," Gyrus informs her. "You'll have to take some anti-moisture tablets, but other than that your body should naturally settle itself."

She nods. "Should I locate quarters or will I be on a couch?"

"Oh, take mine," Damon blurts. "Down the hall, left, third door on the right. I can get my stuff out if y'want."

"Is that the only one?"

"Nah, there's just limited space on here, and th' others aren't gonna share and I kinda like that couch anyway--"

"Thank you," she says, voice quiet, and then walks past. Damon glances as she passes by and notices several constellations inked on her back, but most is obscured by the wraps.

"Yeah," he murmurs. "Oh, and go easy on the 'fresher, would you? We didn't really load up the water tanks."

Averia flicks her tail at him and he hopes that was a yes.

When he gets to the common room, Savv and Gyrus are discussing something in low tones. Savv spares him a glance and waves him over.

"What now?" he asks.

"Popsicle's got a tracker, yeah? Someone buzzed it good but left it in there." Savv and Gyrus clearly have figured something out.

"Yeah..." Damon *hasn't* figured it out.

"What Savv isn't saying is that our initial coordinates are the same planet her chip is located to," Gyrus states.

"What."

"Mmm hm!" Savv chirps.

Damon is very confused and really tired. "Y' know what, we're all gonna sleep and we'll deal with this tomorrow.

Neither of the others protest, but Savv is deflated at the temporary pause to an exciting day. Damon wants more caf or more sleep. Or better information on what he's doing.

He sleeps about nine hours on the couch before his stomach wakes him. He resynthesizes a ration pack and eats slowly while sipping at a large cup of caf. The ion storm passed overnight, so he turns on the autopilot and goes back to the common room.

Gyrus is already fixing the ship, so Damon dedicates the day to helping him. Averia and Savv pass the time elsewhere, occasionally popping in to pester them.

The destination planet comes into range of the scanners while they are working the next day. Arktev three is a primarily water planet, splattered with vibrantly lush islands like spots of green paint. Before they can enter atmosphere, another ship launches up from the surface. Averia directs them to land in the hanger. Damon sets the freighter down with a lump in his throat. As the hold ramp lowers, Averia stands next to him, tense with anticipation. He scuffs his boot awkwardly, not quite sure what to say to the sudden companion. Damon opens his mouth to speak, but Averia shushes him and gently tucks her hand into his.

“There’s always more to be said,” she whispers, and Damon thinks he won’t need the money for next trip.