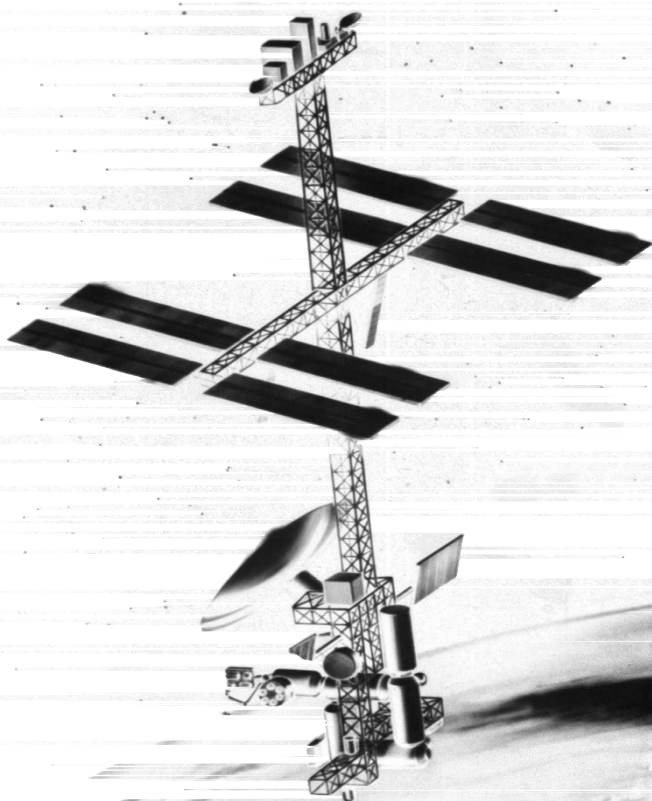


CROSSLANE

STATION



Slightly edgewise to the rim of Imperial Collective-controlled space is a three-planet system orbiting a main sequence star.

One of those planets is a gas giant, designated Chronias by the astrogators of the Imperial Collective. And just outside the orbits of Chronias' moons hangs Station CL-7X-PSY.

The locals - traders and junkers, worldly techs and would-be heroes, wardens and wanderers and system transfers - call it Crosslane Station.

Or, more simply, "home".

Raf watched the nanotiles interlock themselves into place on the Tiny Wing's hull with more satisfaction than he'd felt in months.

Miserable months of taking scut-jobs and cryo runs, hold full of secondhand cargo and mail drums and worse, until he scraped together the credits (digital and wafer) to repair Tiny's blown jumpcore, then auxiliaries ...

All while looking like a junkheap.

The last stripe filled in; orange, red, violet against the white hull.

Tiny Wing was back.

★//: ways and means

"That's a lot of norr-pods, Ku, you sure about this?"

Ku couldn't see Janis, on his left, past the sack on his shoulder; that was fine.

"Food's food. It doesn't matter where it comes from as long as it's edible. It processes into gel like a dream, too.

"You need to buck those homeworld prejudices, Janis, you know?"

Into the storage cubby; back for a sack. The fifth. Ku grinned.

"Fancy ships and fussy suppliers don't want it, but I know what to do with it."

THINK GOOD THOUGHTS :\\★

Nothing to inspect here. Just pods of cryscorn and a disassembled mill. Nothing here to care about.

The thoughts circled through Skye's head like a mantra—and attracted the attention of the Inspections Psi-Officer on attendance.

He waited, silent, while IPO goons rifled through every last freight-pod—finding nothing but grain and mill-parts.

"Your cargo is clear, Captain."

The officer looked dour. Skye saluted, kept his mind still.

The distraction had worked.

★//: BY ROLE

Rory had just enough time to yelp something about 'not in the manual!' before his training armature collapsed in a heap of twitching limbs and misfiring impulses. Alas, the short didn't affect sensors, so he saw the look on his instructor's face juuust fine—

At the armat's feet (more or less), Divine crossed his arms, glowering.

"That's the second short in a standard week, cadet."

"I know, sir! Sorry, sir!"

"New prisms, coded by orbit's end, cadet!"

"*Sir!*"

Baran jolted awake, slammed his head against the light-panel's dimmed ridge, and sank back into his bunk with a groan that had zero to do with the bruise he just promised himself.

Another hag. Another memory.

The hags were supposed to be gone, damnit. The psipsych at Cygni-14 promised, put it in his record to boot. Memory filter successful.

Then why did he still see that hell when he dreamed.

Mow them down. Irradiate the outposts. Leave nothing.

I want my new life...

★//: WASTE NOT WANT NOT

The fifth chime echoing from the tinny speaker overhead reminded Ku that he needed at least a little sleep before it was time to open shop again. The station regulars were going to be looking for their usual starters.

He'd just have to say the decanting ran slow, or the gels took longer to set.

Surrounded by piles of teased-out fibres, Ku worked steadily.

There'd even been wool in the reclaimed rags, real wool; and that was something he'd get good credit for.

On-screen.

There they were.

After cycles of tracing skip-echoes and flux across a dozen systems, he had them: six ships hiding behind Chronias' bulk, siphoning fuel from its cloud decks. One more skip and they'd be outside Collective reach.

Not if he had anything to say about it.

Tanager rose from his seat; the bridge tracked his every move. He raised a hand; dropped it, bladelike.

"Scramble the Armigers."

His expression hardened.

"No quarter to apostates."

★//: LIES-BLEEDING

"Hey, Ku?"

Surprised by the rough warble, the Six-Stitch's erstwhile owner stopped halfway to the kiosk's rear, blinked, and ambled back.

Baran, still slumping at the counter? Not that odd. But with that look in his eyes...

"Something wrong?"

"You think I can love, Ku?"

Oh. He leaned on the counter.

"What's love if it isn't covering that family's passage? Pulling extra shifts to get that vaccine moving? Donating cells? Tutoring?"

"You already love, Baran."

Janis watched the last junker of the cycle—a miracle repair named Tiny Wing—leave its berth along the fifth clockwise strut and didn't bother hiding the sigh of relief that crawled up from her toes.

Maybe she'd even hit her bunk without carnage erupting from one end of the station to the other.

Guilt for the thought twinged as she punched her time-wafer. It wasn't the independents, really; it was that damn looming IPO clipper.

What were they looking for?

★//: SCRAMBLE

Everything collided at once:

Billowing sickly shimmering waves of psiactive spores; pale fires spreading flickering tongues of flame.

The screaming din of a dozen klaxons sounding. The stranger, shrieking like a dying demonwing.

A dozen IPO squires and their psi-active lieutenant swarming the station's market core --

Captain Skye saw the collapse. Ku, the fleeing saboteur. Lily threw herself at the fires. All hands, from all sides.

Save them all.

EMPTY CYCLES :\\★

"Credit for your thoughts, Janis?"

Janis blinked, lifting a brow at Ku, distracted from the maze she'd been tracing through her plate. The bark of laughter that ratcheted up her throat was laced with exhaustion alongside the humour.

"What, not a glasslug?"

"Credit's more use right now. Something's up. Station problems?"

She stared into her cryoflask.

"Don't know. I keep hoping the IPO mess will taper off, but... It feels like homeworld politics leaking out."

★//: INFESTATION

SLAM —his storage door slid hard enough to vibrate the wall --

"LOCK DOWN EVERYTHING -"

Gel cylinders flew one way, mother scobys flew another way, and Ku drew a wild breath—

"Don't make me change the codes, Baran -"

"Kish, get your carcass out of the doorway."

From behind Baran, Janis in full uniform and grimly resigned.

"Newest ship was infested with vorr, Ku, lock down *now*. They're already spreading."

Vorr. Ku's skin twitched.

INFILTRATION:\★

Tanager. Captain Iver Tanager. Just the name on her tongue tasted foul and bitter; staring at his hollow face, Janis was tempted to land a right hook in it and damn the consequences.

Even Crosslane's local IPOs look like they hate the bastard. Wonderful.

Oh but Janis Farleighn kept all of that out of her expression and more. She was a Professional, damn it, with a reputation to uphold and people that looked to her.

Her smile was as icy as it was formal.

"Welcome to the station."



2025 Fanged Moon

E. A. "taichara" Bisson

fedi @taichara@turnipheap.loneknight.quest

email khuriya @ gmail

blog <https://taichara.dreamwidth.org>