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MARIE **THE WRATH** WEEMS
OF MARGONDIA

RECONNAISSANCE, DECEIT AND THE BATTLE FOR OXYGEN



Marie Weems

The Wrath of Margondia

«Издательские решения»

Weems M.

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НЕЗАКОННОЕ ПОТРЕБЛЕНИЕ НАРКОТИЧЕСКИХ СРЕДСТВ,
ПСИХОТРОПНЫХ ВЕЩЕСТВ, ИХ АНАЛОГОВ ПРИЧИНЯЕТ ВРЕД
ЗДОРОВЬЮ, ИХ НЕЗАКОННЫЙ ОБОРОТ ЗАПРЕЩЕН И ВЛЕЧЕТ
УСТАНОВЛЕННУЮ ЗАКОНОДАТЕЛЬСТВОМ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬ. First
contact has been officially declared a catastrophe. Not that humanity even
noticed — too busy celebrating the changing of calendar digits. Margondian scouts
Dorian and Marex arrived on Earth to see if there was anything worth stealing.
Instead, they stumbled into the epicenter of New Year madness. Taking fireworks
for artillery, the aliens enter an unequal battle with reality. Will they manage to save
their planet before Earthly hospitality finishes off the Margondian mind?

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Содержание

Chapter 1: Strategic Initiative	6
Chapter 2: Atmospheric Pressure	11
Chapter 3: Negative Growth of Stealth	16
Chapter 4: This Was Definitely Official First Contact	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	23

The Wrath of Margondia

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Chapter 1: Strategic Initiative

The harsh, sterile light of the compartment lamps pierced eyes and made a nose itch. The faint, barely perceptible scent of processed wood drifted through the air — a dry, papery aroma of home that evoked almost no memories. It didn't affect the crew the way it was supposed to, but nobody was planning to test that.

Marex, whose body resembled a rusty, compressed spring, was cooped up in his cabin. It was a tiny space, looking more like an abandoned warehouse than living quarters. The floor was littered with scraps of paper and wrappers, as if a portal from a Margondian garbage dump led directly here, and the walls were plastered with "trophies." Scraps of foil, nuts, and colored glass shards — a special, almost sacred meaning was invested in each "treasure." At least, so it seemed to Marex. He didn't try to explain; he merely stared mysteriously into the distance.

Right now, he was nervously twitching his hand, his fingernail rhythmically tapping out an impatient tap-dance on the metal table, making even the green coins bounce in time. Of course, he could have gone to his partner and helped research the mysterious golden discs, but why study them when he could just rely on his own strength?

Either way, the closer they got to the coveted planet, the more anxiety washed over him. At the thought, everything inside twisted into a tight knot. Marex himself no longer understood what exactly he was feeling: whether it was the primitive thrill of a pioneer or a dull dread of the unknown. Muffled sounds of a working transceiver drifted from the main compartment — Dorian, as usual, had dived headfirst into studying the golden discs.

Marex began rapidly sorting through the treasures on the table, tapping each piece as if playing a piano. This music of chaos calmed him down a bit.

"Dorian!" Scooping up the greenish coins, he bolted from his seat, unable to bear his thoughts alone any longer. The cabin walls felt as though they were closing in, pushing their owner out into the common space. "Are you playing those recordings again? I can feel them drilling into my brain, you know that!"

Passing through the narrow, dark corridor and stuffing the coins into his pockets on the go, Marex burst into the main compartment. His partner sat hunched over the control console. His face wore that ultimate expression of academic pedantry that always drove the impulsive Margondian to a white heat.

Without waiting for an invitation, Marex snatched the golden platter out of the transceiver with a sharp movement. The metal burned his palm with cold and surprised him with its weight. Turning the disc over in his hands, he began examining the strange engravings, trying to discern a hidden threat in them.

"Give that back!" Dorian snapped upright, his ear locators pinning back against his head in disapproval. "This is an important assignment; we've barely touched the second platter."

Dorian opened his palm demanding, leaving no room for argument, his heavy gaze practically pinning his partner to the spot. Marex hesitated, but ultimately dropped the disc into his partner's hand and crossly folded his arms, making a show of how bored he was.

"They're clearly up to something," Marex forced an intellectual look, sincerely trying to help. "Why send the exact same thing on two different platters?"

Dorian sighed heavily and, without looking at his partner, slammed the disc into the slot with a practiced motion.

"You've been slacking off in your kennel for the whole flight," he still didn't turn around, his locators frozen, greedily catching every rustle from the transceiver, "why all the fuss now?"

Marex froze for a second, staring at the near-mirror floor, but then immediately snapped his head up and jabbed a finger at his partner.

“For your information, I was monitoring the perimeter! While you were here studying everything for the tenth time!” He threw his hands up dramatically, as if surrendering at the barrel of a heavy and highly efficient Karonov. His locators spread wide in a grand gesture of peace. “But I don’t want to fight. After all, for the duration of this mission, you are my brother.”

At this admission, Dorian winced, as if static interference were being transmitted directly into his neck.

“Thankfully, the mission is peaceful and short,” he stared anxiously at the gauge, where the red line of oxygen was inexorably sliding toward the critical mark. “They could have pumped more wood into the oxygen bay.”

The Emperor was clearly stingy, flashed through Dorian’s mind. He instantly shuddered inwardly: on Margondia, such thoughts were equated with treason. He glanced sideways at his newly-minted “brother,” who was already plastered to the viewport, greedily peering into the darkness of space.

I hope we never learn to read each other’s minds.

In Marex’ head, like a malfunctioning calculator, a plan for a “strategic initiative” clicked non-stop. The thought was simple and daring: he would bring wood to Margondia first. Before the Istambian suppliers could raise their tariffs yet again. Before any of the other scouts. Quietly, in his own way.

They had been informed that there were trees on this planet. And if they were told, it meant it was true. Marex, admittedly, hadn’t studied the golden platters — he had enough with his wistful fantasies of arriving and stealing a couple of groves.

In his dreams, he was already standing on the carpet in the Benefaction, receiving the Emperor’s personal gratitude. But the image of his partner kept crashing into this idyllic picture. Dorian, righteous to the bone, wouldn’t let him steal even a dry twig if the protocol didn’t allow it.

Marex felt in advance how his grand scheme would shatter against that stone-clad loyalty. Convincing someone like that that blatant theft was a “strategic initiative” was next to impossible.

“What about the second platter?” Marex broke the lingering silence, turning sharply away from the window. “Is there anything new after all? Interesting... or dangerous?”

At the last word, his ear locators hopped amusingly, and a predatory, adventurous glint flashed in his eyes.

“Unfortunately, no differences have been found,” his partner rattled off dryly.

“Then why stud — ”

“So far,” Dorian cut him off mid-sentence. He suddenly leaned forward, staring at the control panel where a new, unfamiliar indicator pulsed among the familiar green lights. “Wait, what on earth is this?”

With that specific degree of curiosity that was hardwired into the genetic code of every Margondian and had led their species to disaster more than once, Dorian pressed the button to launch the hidden file.

A deafening, space-tearing roar of a train whistle filled the compartment. This alien, metallic shriek, slipped into the data by someone’s calculating hand, literally knocked the ground out from under their feet.

“Turn it off! Turn it off immediately!” Marex shrieked in an uncharacteristically high-pitched voice. He lunged toward his partner, frantically pressing his palms to his locators.

“I’m trying! Dammit!” Dorian feverishly battered the buttons until the hum of the train gave way to a heavy, rhythmic thumping, and soon choked into silence entirely.

“Why did you run over and just jump around next to me?!” Dorian pushed away from the console with anger, wheeling his chair back, away from his partner. “You should have just kept standing by your window, staring into the void!”

“I was trying to help!” Marex threw his chin up, still furiously rubbing his ears. “I was providing psychological support!”

“Never come near me when you’re broadcasting your fear like that!” Dorian mechanically reached for his throat, checking the lines on his neck with his fingers. “Even without contact, I caught everything you were feeling. You made me start squeaking like Azurks! Why do you even switch to ultrasound when you’re scared?”

Clearing his throat, Marex decided to leave the question without a clear answer. He sidled over to the opposite wall, re-establishing a safe distance.

“It’s a family thing, don’t sweat it. It’s not contagious.”

Dorian grimaced — he knew from firsthand experience that in their cramped kennel, absolutely everything was “contagious.”

Staring at the wall, Marex murmured barely audibly, “And by the way, they don’t squeak. Don’t speak of them.”

Dorian had already opened his mouth to deliver another sarcastic tirade, but at that moment, the golden platter, as if waiting for a dramatic pause, spat out a new recording.

“Again!” Marex instantly forgot the offense and lunged toward the screen, almost crashing into his partner’s shoulder. “Do you hear that? They are greeting each other! Fools... we know their language now! We can easily blend into the crowd, and no one will even blink.”

“Well...” Dorian drew out, casting a long, skeptical look at his partner. “We do differ biologically, don’t you think?”

He pointed a finger at Marex’ long, pale locators, which were now frozen alertly, poking cheekily out from under his tangled hair.

“I don’t think the blueprints on the platter were just for decoration. These ‘humans’ are different, Marex. Instead of proper locators, they just have two stationary pieces of cartilage on the sides of their heads. Imagine: they don’t even move them! And you, with your antennas living a life of their own, will light up in their crowd like our main building...”

“Why do you call our Benefaction just a building?” Marex froze abruptly, his locators swinging toward his partner like two searchlights. His gaze turned dangerously loaded.

“If you haven’t noticed, I called our Benefaction the *Main* building,” Dorian snapped to attention instantly, gripping his emotions in an iron fist. His neck twitched barely perceptibly, suppressing an involuntary tremor. “The Main one! For our Emperor is there, may his cycles be prolonged!”

“And here I thought you were speaking against...” Marex pointed a finger at the ceiling dramatically, “...Him. Well, what about the humanses?”

“The humanses?” Dorian glanced at his partner with mild disgust. “Goldon ordered us to use the terms ‘humans’ or ‘humanity.’ Be so kind as to stick to the protocol.”

Marex’ face contorted into a grimace of extreme displeasure — he clearly hated being corrected according to the regulations, especially if those regulations were drawn up by Goldon. Waving his hand as if brushing off a bothersome insect, he turned sour:

“Fine, these hu-u-mans,” Marex finally mastered his facial expressions, though his left locator was still twitching irritably. “Do you think it’s an ambush and they’re threatening us?”

Dorian didn’t answer right away. He brought up the image of that very golden platter on the central screen, where a man and a woman were engraved with raised hands.

“Look at them,” Dorian magnified the diagram. “They are sending a map of their home, their DNA structure, and the sounds of their world into space. Either they are boundlessly proud and are challenging the entire Universe to a fight, or...”

“Or they’re just stupid,” Marex interrupted, the adventurous glint flaring up in his eyes again. “They literally hung out a sign saying, ‘Welcome, please colonize us!’”

“Or it’s a trap,” Dorian cut in dryly. “Did you hear that metallic roar? Creatures capable of creating such a racket can’t be just ‘stupid.’ They surely have weapons or something of the sort...”

Marex approached the screen, unceremoniously shoving Dorian's hand away to get to the controls himself. A sticky, cold shiver suddenly crawled up Dorian's neck. His partner's fear was so distinct and thick that he wanted to scrape it off his skin like dirt.

"Are you afraid?" Dorian eyed him sideways. "I can feel it. Literally on my skin."

Marex' eyes darted around, but he forced his locators to freeze in stillness, desperately trying to hide his panic.

"No! It's just — » he hesitated, feverishly scrolling through the images on the screen. "It's just that I felt so-o-o ashamed for not helping you at the start of the shift. My conscience is eating me alive, you know?"

Dorian merely raised a skeptical eyebrow, about to reply, but at that moment, the frame on the screen changed.

Marex froze. For a second, absolute silence hung in the cabin, and then a sound tore from his chest, mixing religious ecstasy with burning envy. He glued his face to the monitor, where a dense coniferous forest stretched out against a backdrop of blue sky.

"They... they have THAT much wood?!" he shouted, his locators fluttering so furiously that their edges began to blur.

Hit by such a powerful concentrate of emotions, Dorian instantly recoiled into the opposite corner of the cabin. His neck burned, and his partner's rapture echoed in his head.

"What is wrong with you?!" he lamented, furiously rubbing his collar as if trying to shake off invisible dust. "Why are you broadcasting across the whole compartment? Why are you transmitting all this without contact?! Do you have any idea how painful it is to feel your envy mixed with greed?"

Marex lounged casually in the nearest chair, never taking his eyes off the photo from the platter. Opening his mouth, he was already preparing to lecture him on his superiority and the exclusivity of his family tree, but his partner cut him off with a sharp gesture.

"I know what you're about to say. Don't start."

Dorian twitched his shoulder nervously once more, checking if any more of this emotional garbage had "stuck" to him, and his gaze fell upon the viewport.

"Perfect timing to finally study the data, I must say," Dorian threw out dryly. "The planet is already visible to the naked eye."

At this announcement, Marex crossed the space in two bounds. He slammed his face against the glass of the viewport, his impatience flaring up with such intensity that his body temperature spiked by several degrees. Dorian winced and pointedly stepped away, feeling that dry, feverish heat with every cell of his skin.

"Dorian, I feel we aren't here for no reason!" Marex recoiled from the viewport sharply, his rusty curls bouncing in tandem with his words. "It's no coincidence they paired us up for this mission! It's a sign!"

Dorian merely twitched his eyebrows barely noticeably, trying his hardest not to drown in his partner's emotions flooding the cabin.

"It's just reconnaissance. A routine mission," he reminded dryly, straightening up tensely and showing with his entire demeanor that he had no intention of sharing this enthusiasm.

"No! I feel it, and you already know that this is what I do best. We'll make contact, take the wood, set up supply lines — and boom, done!"

Marex began slowly closing the distance, forcing Dorian to feel the feverish rapture with every cell.

"Just imagine!" Marex lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "If we return with a timber contract, we'll be promoted to Klurs. We'll become the elite ourselves! We'll oust that..." Marex literally spat out the name, "...Goldon. Ugh, it makes me sick to even pronounce it. That'll teach him to look down on us from his tall height."

Dorian involuntarily swallowed. The title of Klur granted almost limitless power at the Emperor's court, but the price of a mistake at that level was usually one's life.

"You're overreaching," he responded coldly, though deep down, for a split second, he too pictured himself in the white robes of the highest caste, far away from rusty decks and his partner's corrosive emotions.

"Come on, who's going to miss a couple of trees?" Marex' eyes flashed with a near-frantic gleam. "We'll take the readings, and snatch one along!"

"Sounds dubious. But there's a chance," Dorian hesitated. "The main thing is that it doesn't turn out to be a trap. The records say: 'nations are rushing toward a unified Earth civilization.' If they are developing as fast as they write..."

He cast a brief glance at the uranium decay data on the platter — their only chronometer, which now seemed mockingly imprecise.

"Do you think they'll attack?" Marex froze abruptly, a sticky doubt hanging in the air. "Wait, wait... What if they actually attack? What if we've already been tracked?"

Dorian glanced at his partner with weary bafflement.

"If we've been tracked," Dorian returned to the instruments, his voice becoming suspiciously level, "then we'll find out in the next couple of minutes. More than likely, they'll just want to talk. I just hope the translator's linguistic database doesn't fail us."

Without arguing further, Marex frantically rushed back to the golden platter, hoping to fish some kind of clue out of the greeting sounds that could guarantee their survival. And outside the viewport, the boundless expanse of space was already giving way to a blue planet. Which, of course, suspected nothing.

Chapter 2: Atmospheric Pressure

Inside the compartment, everything hummed and vibrated with belated alarm. The ship had already entered the upper layers of the atmosphere, preparing for ejection, and every moment of delay threatened to make the pod miss the designated sector completely. Dorian stood by the airlock, fully equipped in his drop spacesuit. The blue plating of the suit shimmered softly, soothing his inner aura — he sincerely believed that the color of the gear helped keep his emotions in check. Through the transparent face shield, his chestnut hair was visible, along with his eyebrows knitting closely toward the bridge of his nose in sheer exasperation.

From the cabin behind him came dull thuds and muffled swearing. Marex was desperately battling his gear: one of his legs was hopelessly stuck in a narrow pant leg, turning his every movement into an awkward hop, while his arm couldn't find its way out of the sleeve. Despite this chaos, he held the golden platter in a death grip, pressing it to his chest as tenderly as if it were not a relic, but the sole surviving creature on the ship.

"What are you doing?! Get dressed properly!" Dorian gripped the airlock frame, feeling his finely tuned aura begin to fracture at the mere sight of this mess.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" Marex exhaled, strained, and with something akin to a whistle, forced himself into the unyielding composite. A menacing crack rang out — the fabric tightly molded around his lanky frame. It felt as though the suit was about to burst, unable to withstand the sharp, jerky pressure, but Marex merely straightened up triumphantly, thrusting his hands through the sleeves.

"You should have studied the materials before launch, not at the moment of landing," Dorian snapped.

"I did study them!" Marex defeated the zipper and bounded into the corridor. At the last second, he tossed the platter onto the table, snatching up a small token in its place. "We did it together! I'm just... motivating myself. Reminding myself of their resources so my hands don't shake."

"Together"? You mean those five minutes?" Dorian jeered, rushing toward the descent pod. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed his partner feverishly stuffing something into his pocket. "What are you hiding there?"

"It's for good luck! A relic from my mother!" Marex squeezed past unceremoniously, trying to be the first to dive into the pod.

Once inside, he slammed his helmet shut with a clatter. The face section instantly fogged up from his hot, ragged breathing, and strands of ginger hair stuck to his forehead. Dorian, entering right behind him, froze for a second, staring into this impenetrable fog where his partner's face should have been.

"You don't happen to know why they paired us up, do you?" he muttered, settling into a deep seat.

Marex shrugged and slammed into the neighboring seat. Without waiting for the restraints to lock, he slammed his palm onto the pulsing launch button with fanatical eagerness. The panel responded with a short beep, and the monotonous voice of the system sounded above them — cold and detached, it seemed the exact opposite of the wildfire raging inside Marex himself:

"Target IST-213-CRF locked. Braking systems activated. Assume brace positions. Commencing descent."

The pod jerked sideways with such force that someone's teeth audibly clicked. The old tin can respond to the g-force with a strained shriek — the automation was clearly hinting that its reliability limit had been left somewhere in the previous decade.

“What do you think you’re doing?! I haven’t even buckled my straps yet!” Dorian yelled, trying to shout over the rising roar. With one hand, he fought frantically with a stubborn carabiner, while his other hand gripped the vibrating control wheel. “Give me a warning at least!”

He threw a quick glance at his partner, but Marex seemed to have slipped into a trance. He heard neither the shouts nor the wailing sirens; he jolted feverishly, his entire body sinking deep into the back of the seat. His aura flitted wildly between icy terror and wild, primal ecstasy.

The pod slammed hard into the dense layers of the atmosphere. A few minutes of deceptively smooth falling ended instantly: the instruments broke into a frantic, choking scream, announcing the beginning of the end.

“What is that?! Why is everything screaming?!” Marex broke into a shriek, trying to overpower the din.

Dorian didn’t hear his partner’s yelping. His fingers flew madly across the control panel, repeatedly missing the correct keys due to the violent shaking of the pod.

“Warning. Unidentified movement detected. Maintain composure,” the system sang dispassionately, as if mocking their predicament.

Marex, completely losing his mind from the roaring din, clawed at the fastenings at his throat. He yanked them with such force that a crunch of the mounts echoed.

“Do not remove helmets,” the cold voice of the automation chimed in immediately.

“Oh, damn you!” Marex squealed, shoving his head back into the protective collar at the last second and snapping the latches shut.

Suddenly, the howling of the instruments cut off. A dreadful, muffled silence fell. Dorian exhaled, feeling the blood pulsing in his ears. He had already opened his mouth to unleash all his accumulated resentment upon his partner, but the words caught in his throat.

“What... was that?” Marex found his voice. He slowly, almost mechanically, turned his head toward the viewport and froze.

Outside the thick, multi-layered glass, in the inky blue of an alien sky, giant emerald flowers were blooming furiously. Right behind them, toxic red and golden flashes tore the darkness to shreds. Stray reflections burst into the cabin, pulsing painfully in the dilated pupils of the Margondians. The spectacle was frighteningly reminiscent of the Emperor’s succession ceremony: the old ruler fading into oblivion, the air filling with the scent of hope, and the subjects rejoicing at the new face that swore allegiance to the exact same eternal truths.

“It can’t be...” Dorian breathed out, unable to tear his eyes away from the blazing sky.

“THEY ATTACKED US?!” Marex exploded into such ultrasound that Dorian’s eardrums resonated with sharp pain. His panicked broadcasting flooded the cabin, instantly crowding out any remaining logic. “We’re almost at the ground! Level us out!”

“I’m trying! There are too many of these salvos!” Dorian gripped the wheel until his knuckles turned white, the controls tearing out of his hands like a wild beast. “You have controls too, take the lever!”

With a deafening crash, the pod ploughed into the thick of the trees. Century-old branches lashed against the hull like steel whips, leaving jagged gouges in the metal. The craft bounced violently off the trunks, snapping trees, until with a dull, guttural sound, it buried its nose deep into a snowdrift. A thick silence fell over the cabin, broken only by the pitiful ticking of the cooling hull and the hissing of steam.

“No-no-no! Hirus!” Marex lamented, turning in horror to the mangled wreckage outside the glass. “We just destroyed so much timber! Dorian, couldn’t you have flown around them?!”

“Shut up!” Dorian furiously yanked at the jammed belt buckle. “You could have helped! What use are you in this cabin anyway?!”

Freeing himself, he tumbled clumsily out of the hatch straight into the snowdrift. The snow burned his fingers, but Dorian only buried himself in it more fiercely, continuing to grumble: “Just sitting there, maneuvering with his body!”

Marex slipped out right after him, already drawing breath for a scathing retort, but froze with his mouth wide open. A crisp, icy current struck his face, instantly sweeping all his prepared nastiness from his head. The ringing night chill filled his lungs, burning them from the within in a way no Margondian stimulant ever could. His head tilted upward on its own: there, in the bottomless sky, crazy lights were still scattering in showers of sparks.

“Look at that, Dorian!” Marex jabbed a finger at the sky. “They’re still firing into the void! Ha-ha-ha! What absolute fools! They lost us!”

In one movement, he closed the distance and threw his entire weight onto his partner, locking his neck and forcing his gaze toward the stars. Dorian was about to snap back, but suddenly felt the tight knot of tension inside him snap, releasing a wild, near-hysterical laugh.

“Ha-ha-ha! You’re actually right!” he choked out through laughter that burned his throat no less than the frost. “Fools... shooting at the clouds!”

“Do you feel it?” Marex suddenly fell dead silent, greedily catching his breath. A blissful smile spread across his face. “Dorian, my brain is dying and being reborn right now... How beautiful this oxygen is! Real stuff, from unprocessed trees!”

He spread his arms and froze, greedily swallowing the cold air as if afraid the Earth would suddenly change its mind and take this priceless gift back. His face shield finally misted over with a damp haze from his noisy, ecstatic breathing. Dorian closed his eyes too, allowing himself an impermissible luxury for the first time — a moment of weakness.

While his partner swayed in an oxygen nirvana, Dorian fumbled for the touch panel. A short pulse — and the pod responded with a barely audible electrical click. The metal shuddered, rippled, and in a fraction of a second literally dissolved into the surrounding landscape, leaving only a flattened imprint in the snow.

It seemed they could have stood there for an eternity, turned into two snow-covered statues, but the sudden paradise shattered to pieces at a foreign, frighteningly alive voice:

“Hello?”

The Margondians snapped their eyes open instantly. Right in front of them, on the exact spot where their invisible ship had been shimmering a second ago, a figure materialized as if from thin air. A human. In one hand he clutched an axe, while with the other he scratched the back of his head in puzzlement, staring into the empty space.

“That’s English,” Dorian breathed out barely audibly. His voice sounded level, but his hand jerked betrayingly, locking onto Marex’ elbow in a death grip. Dorian wanted to keep his partner from panicking, but achieved the exact opposite: a shock of the other’s sticky fear shot through his fingers instantly, tangling his own thoughts.

“Do they only communicate with one word?” sputtered the second Margondian, whose red-and-green suit now seemed an absurd blotch against the winter forest.

“I don’t know. Maybe this one is defective,” Dorian suggested.

“I can hear you, you know,” the stranger interrupted their bickering. A wide, terrifyingly genuine smile spread across his face, which was overgrown with thick stubble. “So, it turns out, ha-ha-ha, aliens really do fly only here? I had a feeling!”

“Here? Aliens?” the partners exhaled in unison.

“So, others have already flown to them! That’s why they were shooting at the sky!” Marex blurted out, backing away with feline caution, as if every step he took in the snow could trigger an explosion.

“The only question is... were those guests able to fly back?” Dorian grimly lowered his hand to his waist. His fingers settled habitually onto the cold, ribbed metal of his paralyzer. The man, catching this movement, immediately gripped the axe with both hands.

“Hey, no-no, I don’t want to fight,” he said quickly, glancing at his weapon as if he were afraid of it himself. “As for this... I just came to chop a fir tree.” He hesitated, a guilty, almost childish smile appearing on his face: “Lost a bet. In cards.”

“You chop down a tree... on a wager?” Dorian’s voice faltered. The linear vents on his neck pulsed painfully — he could physically feel his partner’s panic drilling into his own mind, crowding out the remnants of logic.

Before the man could even open his mouth, Marex, completely blinded by fear, whipped a bizarre, glowing device out of his pocket.

“Bow down, madman!” he roared so loudly that frost showered down from the nearest branches.

“O-o-oh...” Instead of collapsing into the snow in terror, the lumberjack leaned right toward the barrel of the paralyzer with a sort of reverent trance. His eyes gleamed feverishly. “Look at that shine... Just like in those Roswell specials! Listen, we have things that look like that gathering dust on the shelves in toy stores, but this one... this is real! Can I have a look?”

“Know the wrath of Margondia!” Marex broke into a squeal and pressed the trigger all the way down.

Wave-like beams slammed into the Earthling’s chest with a hum. He merely grimaced amusingly, as if from a light tickle, and continued to advance: “Guys, I come in peace! I moved to the States just for... for you guys! And everyone kept telling me, ‘You’ll ruin yourself, Bobby, they won’t fly here, it’s just hallucinations.’ And look how it turned out! It came true! Will you let me feel what kind of device this is?”

“Dorian, what do we do?! Why is he still standing?!” Marex’ voice turned into a thin, barely audible whistle. “I’m starting to get anxious; I’m not supposed to!”

“Just shut up!” Dorian roughly shoved his partner aside with his shoulder and stepped forward, trying to seize the initiative. “We... we too... come in peace!”

“Then why was he screaming about wrath?” Bobby nodded his axe amiably toward the shaking Marex. “Listen, I’ve got a good offer here. Business!”

He reached masterfully into the deep pocket of his greasy down jacket, desperately fishing for something inside.

“Let’s take a selfie, otherwise the guys won’t believe me. I’ll go back with both a tree and a photo — now that’s what I call perfect! Beautiful!”

“Oh, I don’t like this at all...” Marex exhaled. His pupils dilated, drowning the iris in blackness. He caught Dorian’s arm in a death grip and bolted into the thicket. The pure Earth oxygen surged into his muscles, turning the Margondian into a living projectile. “What is a ‘selfie’?! ” he shrieked, leaping over fallen logs. “Dorian, that is clearly the name of some kind of execution!”

Dorian wanted to yell, “Where are you going?!”, but the question caught in his throat. Marex’ fear flooded into him like molten lava, instantly burning away the remnants of his self-control. His mind still tried to cling to logic, understanding that this terror was foreign and imposed, but his body had already given up, submitting to the shared rhythm of panic. The rational “stop” was definitively replaced by the instinctive “run.”

“Y-you’re right!” Dorian panted, feeling his heart launch into a gallop in tandem with his partner. “Who knows what he was pulling out of there! Accursed translator!”

“Blame Goldon!” Marex resolutely dragged his partner behind him, breaking through the deep snowdrifts. “He set us up!”

Meanwhile, the man finally fished a smartphone out from the depths of his pocket.

“Phew, it got stuck, the damn thing... Well, shall we take a picture? Guys?”

He froze, watching the two bright figures crashing through the undergrowth. The Margondians were racing away, stumbling and looking back at him in such terror as if the devil himself were chasing them. The silence of the winter forest swallowed their cries, leaving Bobby alone with a flashing screen and an uncut fir tree.

Chapter 3: Negative Growth of Stealth

To the Margondians, the sky over Earth felt like an endless battlefield. The deathly pale light of the moon drowned time and again in “cascading bursts.” The scouts, utterly convinced they had caught the brunt of an artillery barrage, sprinted forward, choking on clouds of their own steam that grew thicker beneath their helmets in rhythm with their death-rattling gasps.

Despite the considerable distance they had covered in this mad gallop, Margondian vision allowed them to clearly discern details even from afar. Marex, looking back on the run, jerked as if struck. In the distance, at the very edge of their perception, the silhouette of the man in the down jacket still loomed. Through the falling, sparkling ash, he could be seen clutching the device in his hand. Watching the fugitives run, the pursuer raised this “something” upward, and a steady, pulsing glow emanated from the device.

“Dorian!” Marex nearly ripped his companion’s shoulder out of its socket. “He’s still holding that apparatus! It’s a beacon! He’s painting a target on us! That’s why they’re firing at us!”

Dorian, though trying to cling to the remnants of his sanity, saw the flash as well. In their world, no technology radiated energy for no good reason. If a device phosphoresced, it meant it was either prepping a shot or transmitting data.

“Get off me already!” Dorian snapped, feeling his own panic resonate with his companion’s terror, while the ominous speck of light in the distance only confirmed their worst fears.

“I can’t see a thing!” wailed Marex. His helmet had turned into a personal sauna: condensation obscured his view and dripped in stinging beads directly into his eyes. “My face is crying from the inside, Dorian! I’m blinded by my own stress!”

“Stop!” Dorian wrenched himself away sharply, ripping his elbow from the iron grip, but their momentum was too great.

They flew forward a few more meters, breaking through thorny brush, until the thicket suddenly ended. Their boots skidded down an icy slope, and both Margondians tumbled head over heels, coming to a halt at the very edge of a clearing. Dorian panted heavily, ready to turn around and give a final stand against the “beam beacon,” but his gaze was pulled forward on its own.

Before them, cutting through the night darkness with millions of lights, sprawled a city. The streets pulsed. Crowds of citizens scurried between buildings, and despite it being midnight, a frightening, unnatural joy shone on their faces.

“Do they not need sleep at all?” Dorian whispered, staring at this electrical madness. “And they aren’t afraid of the flashes in the sky?” He cast his gaze upward. “I don’t understand... Deafening sounds all around, yet they act as if they don’t even notice...”

“They’re lunatics!” Marex cut off his companion’s musings and yanked the helmet off his head, exposing his damp skin to the sharp, frosty air. “Phew! I couldn’t stay in that thing a second longer. The feelings get trapped inside; it makes me sick!”

“What if there’s radiation?!” Dorian looked at his companion with genuine reproach, who was already slipping into an oxygen ecstasy. “Put it back on this instant, your face will peel off!”

“Doria-an...” Marex carelessly pressed a side button, and the heavy apparatus collapsed with a soft metallic click into a compact module right in his palm. “Without the filters, this world is even better. And as you can see, I’m not dissolving into atoms. There’s no contamination here. Only life!”

To prove his words, he spun on the spot. The fresh oxygen hit his brain no worse than Margondian liquor: the poor fellow swayed, and the sensitive appendages on his head wobbled drunkenly in time. Dorian waited a minute, checking to see if the violator would begin to suffer agonizingly, and only then, with doubt, pulled off his own helmet. The frost bit into his cheeks. The air was so pure that for a second Dorian forgot how much he hated all living things.

“I could stand like this for an eternity,” he squeezed out, feeling the spring of fatigue unwind inside him.

But the peace ended quickly. Snapping back to reality, Dorian realized that Marex had already been holding forth on the greatness of Margondia for a couple of minutes. From this torrent of pathos and incoherent wheezing, he managed to salvage only a single grain of “brilliant” strategy.

“We just need to take their trees!” Marex yelled, waving his arms. “All of them! Every single one!”

“They’ll drop dead on our second day, Marex. We’ll just feed them to the processing plant again and breathe dusty cardboard. Forgot about the dome and the leaky satellite?”

“Then we’ll take the trees, and then...” he faltered, his mental gears grinding as they turned. “Then we’ll figure something out!”

Dorian was about to reply, but Marex’ gaze snagged on an object in the sky, and a new idea flared up instantly. He jabbed a finger toward the lunar disc and solemnly proclaimed, “Then let’s just take their moon! How have our great minds never thought of that?!”

Marex hopped up, inspired by the scale of the theft, but Dorian cut his flight short immediately: “That is physically impossible. We don’t have that kind of technology.” He grimaced, looking at his dejected companion. “Come up with something... less planetary.”

Dorian turned back to the city. “Let’s move closer. We are here for reconnaissance. Please, just stay quiet. Let’s be honest: diplomacy is not your forte.”

He strode resolutely toward the thrum of music, maneuvering between the shadows of spreading pines.

“I beg to differ! I am terribly suave,” Marex hurried after him, wiping his face with his sleeve on the go. “That’s what my grandfather used to say. Maintained that I am the sole specimen of emotional equilibrium in our family.”

Dorian tripped on flat ground. The thought that somewhere on Margondia existed an entire nest of creatures compared to whom Marex was considered “balanced” momentarily paralyzed his will. He already had a toxic retort prepared about his partner’s defective genetic code, but bit his tongue just in time: Margondian etiquette strictly forbade mentioning relatives unless they had already been annihilated.

“Look over there, some kind of ice structures,” Dorian directed his locators toward the central square. “There’s a sea of people.”

“Dorian!” Marex clamped onto his shoulder in a death grip, pointing ahead. “Are they... worshipping a tree?! Look! It’s covered in lights!”

A giant fir tree in the center of the square, wrapped in kilometers of electrical serpents and studded with shiny spheres, beckoned to them.

“This is... sacrilege,” Dorian whispered, feeling the back of his neck begin to itch from his companion’s greed. “They’ve draped the timber in trinkets. Mocking the resource!”

“We must save it,” Marex had already taken a step forward, his pupils dilating to the size of coffee saucers. “We are absolutely obligated to take it home. This is a humanitarian mission!”

“Stop, you idiot!” Dorian deftly cut around his companion and blocked his path. “We need to analyze everything first!”

Turning back to the epicenter of the light madness, he squinted. His gaze caught on a massive wooden platform.

“There!” Dorian pointed at the structure. “There’s an empty cavity under the decking. An ideal sector for observation.”

Bypassing the crowds of citizens who, in the festive bustle, paid no attention to two strange creatures in “designer” suits, the Margondians ducked into the darkness beneath the heavy supports.

“Alright, it seems quiet here,” Dorian raised his head, listening to the thumping of footsteps above them. “Aside from this primitive noise. We can reflect on what actually happened...”

“Even this structure is made of timber!” Marex raised his voice to a dangerous limit and struck a nearby support with a short, frustrated fist.

“Quiet you!” Dorian pinned him against an icy beam. Through the contact, he instantly read the wave of extreme indignation radiating from his companion. “We need to try and get used to them flaunting their wealth...”

“That’s one thing!” Marex hissed so loudly that it could hardly be called stealth. “Why didn’t the paralyzer put that man in the forest to sleep?!”

“I’m thinking about it...” Dorian drew the weapon, turning it over in his hands under the meager light rays filtering through the cracks in the decking. “Trying to find malfunctions, but the indicators are normal.”

“And they also walk around in the dark. Do they really not need sleep at all?” Marex dumped his thoughts all at once. His locators pressed tightly against his head, betraying rising fear. “And the one with the axe? He wanted some kind of ‘se-elfie’! What does that even mean?! A method of execution? We need to find their Emperor and find out why they attacked us!”

Why can’t he just handle things one at a time? Harping on the same thing, just winding me up! Dorian thought. Marex’ fear began to resonate with his own state. It seemed logical: if official representatives of Margondia, harboring no criminal intent, were openly attacked, it meant the planet was in a state of total mobilization.

“We need reinforcements! Hiding here like rats!” Marex swung with anger to kick a support of the platform, but was interrupted by a thin, ringing little voice.

“Aren’t you guys a bit too old for the slide?”

A young girl popped out from around the corner of their hiding place. She tilted her head, studying the uninvited guests with the unceremonious curiosity of a child.

“Oh, cool costumes! Are you from Santa? I thought he had elves, but you guys are tall.”

“WHERE IS YOUR EMPEROR?!” Marex tried to jump up, but instantly connected the back of his head with the massive boards above him with a dull thud. Bent double and rubbing his head, he leveled his shaking paralyzer toward the girl. “Answer! Or you shall know the wrath of Margondia!”

The air froze for a moment, and in the next second, it was torn by an ultrasonic shriek. Marex rocked back, nearly dropping the emitter from this sonic attack. A woman came rushing to the scream immediately.

“Alyssa! How many times have I told you: don’t run off!”

The mother scooped her daughter into her arms. Her gaze landed on the saboteurs frozen in the icy slush. There was no fear in it — only disgusted irritation.

“Have you no shame at all? Grown men, crawling under a slide and scaring toddlers! Drunkards! Ptooeey!”

Marex just stood there with his mouth open. “Drunkards”... The word lashed like an unfamiliar but clearly shameful title. In his head, it instantly formatted into the name of the lowest caste of suicide warriors. He slapped the paralyzer against his palm in frustration: “Should have shot them both. Dammit!”

“What are you muttering over there?” Dorian raised his apparatus, viewing it as a useless piece of junk. “It’s functional. Hear that? All systems normal. They just... don’t react to our frequency. As if these creatures have different vibrations.” He hesitated and added barely audibly, “Probably.”

Dorian’s doubts only spurred Marex on. His locators deployed with a whistle, assuming a combat stance. “Since technology fails, we go hand-to-head! We are stronger!”

“Marex, turn your brain on.”

“What was on the platters?” the latter interrupted, refusing to listen to arguments. “Where do we look for their leader?”

Dorian treated his partner to a heavy look.

“As I already told you, they are rushing toward a unified Earth civilization. That means they have an Emperor, but his whereabouts are unknown.”

“Then maybe it’s much simpler!” Marex paid absolutely no attention to his “brother’s” skepticism. “We saw a huge glowing tree, which means the Emperor is there! Let’s go there, and along the way, we’ll overpower anyone who objects!”

Dorian keenly envied his companion’s defect. While Marex was trying on the role of a world conqueror, Dorian was trying to gently ground his fantasies:

“Let’s go. But keep in mind: so far, no one has perceived us as a threat. Our task is to infiltrate their trust and locate the ruler. We’ll approach the sacred tree; the elite are bound to be concentrated there.”

They scrambled out from under the decking, shaking packed snow and sawdust from their suits. As soon as the Margondians left the shadow of their sanctuary, they were instantly engulfed by a many-voiced hum and the blinding radiance of string lights.

Making their way through the crowd, Dorian noticed people casting suspicious glances at their locators, which were involuntarily twitching from the abundance of foreign scents.

“Damn it! Marex, we need to lie low. We’re too easy to spot.”

They ducked around the corner of a market pavilion. By the wall, Dorian discovered a tall plastic bin, filled to the brim with a strange mush: rotting organics mixed with scraps of items that had once been the height of fashion. Without hesitation, he began to study this dubious treasury in search of a disguise.

“Well, what are we standing here for?! We should have approached the tree long ago; it’s just drawing me in... Do you think it’ll fit in our pod?” Marex squinted dreamily. “Maybe if we cut it into pieces?”

While he was calculating how to section such a massive bioresource, Dorian continued to rummage intently through the bin, displaying the ultimate degree of diplomatic indifference.

Drowning out the stench of rotting organics with his own focused snorting, Dorian momentarily felt a bright inner ping of joy emanating from his companion. Realizing that Marex hadn’t babbled for a good couple of minutes, he finally looked away from the container. His partner’s attention was fully arrested by a cluster of people in the center of the square. They were all crowding around a tall creature in a bright scarlet robe.

“Do you see that, Dorian?!” Marex shoved him in the shoulder. “The one in red over there! There’s a crowd around him, and he’s handing stuff out to them... Damn it, hard to see from here, let’s get closer!”

“Stop!” Dorian called out to him, holding out a strange scarlet item with a white pom-pom. “Here, found this in the bin.”

“What’s that for?” Marex arched an eyebrow in confusion. “If that’s their Emperor, let’s just go and take him by force!”

Dorian sighed and resolutely tugged Marex by one of his appendages.

“We don’t know anything for sure yet! Hide the ‘antennas’ under these covers to avoid unnecessary questions. Besides, it looks like everyone here is wearing these caps.”

“True...” In a burst of feeling, Marex grabbed Dorian by the neck in a brotherly fashion, transmitting emotions directly. “You are so smart! You and I — the perfect team.”

He began talking so fast that the words merged into a single stream:

“Listen, we put the caps on. Do you think it’s connected to that guy in the red robe? Then it all adds up! If he’s their Emperor, they wear this in his honor! Ooh, or maybe their Emperor never changes? I have a plan...”

“Eno-cough-cough-ugh-gh!” Dorian interrupted him, roughly pushing his hand away. “You’ve already clamped all my receptors! You’re broadcasting across the whole neighborhood as it is, don’t touch the neck! All your feelings hit me in double format, brrr!”

He shook himself out, habitually stepping further away, trying to discard the sticky chaos of the other's rapture. *How do you even live in this constant storm?* Dorian looked over his partner with a trace of pity, who was already reaching out impatiently.

"Hand that thing over." Marex turned the cap over in his hands and remarked disapprovingly, "Full of holes, pff! Probably for cooling their tiny brains." He brought the fabric to his face and sniffed. "What is that reek?! A strange smell... like our food, but processed. Oh! And I catch a distant spirit of alcohol? Like our glint, exactly!"

Marex was no longer bothered by the holes or the origin of the disguise. The smell of « glint » acted on him like a powerful sedative, awakening images of his home world in his memory.

"Oh, glint, how I adore it..." He closed his eyes for a moment, greedily drawing the air into his nose.

Pulling on his find, Dorian looked at his companion with concern.

"What are you sniffing it for?! You won't happen to get tipsy from these vapors, will you?"

"If only a little bit, it won't stop us!" Marex resolutely pulled on the red headgear, hiding his locators, and strode confidently toward the "Emperor."

"Wait! Does your emotional instability not correlate with this 'little bit' of yours?"

"Everything's fine, don't worry." Marex froze dead in his tracks. "I have a feeling someone is staring at me... Dorian! Stop gawking!"

"I wasn't gawking. What kind of words are you even picking?" He mechanically touched his temple, checking the implant. "My translator is working in overdrive; the lexemes are practically pulling themselves from the local info-field..."

Suddenly, Dorian himself felt a sticky, bone-chilling sensation of a foreign presence.

"Do you still feel something?"

Marex became unnaturally composed. He turned slowly, peering at the backs of passersby:

"Yes. Do you think the disguise didn't work? What if they figured out who we are?" Anxiety began to flood his aura, staining it an unpleasant, muddy gray color.

"No! Please don't get anxious, or you'll pass it to me!" Dorian nervously adjusted his cap. "They didn't give a damn about how we looked before either. Just a couple of passersby looked at the locators, that's not it."

"It passed!" Marex shouted joyfully and once again surged into the thick of the festivities.

"And that doesn't bother you at all?! Although..." reflecting, Dorian added under his breath, "Better if it doesn't. There are still perks to your volatility."

Moving toward the target, Marex suddenly caught a snow-white projectile to the temple. Before he could swear, a company of young people surrounded them. They packed around the scouts so tightly that Marex had to literally "glue" himself to his companion. From such embraces, Dorian startled, barely suppressing the urge to strangle his "brother" on the spot.

"Sup, boys!" wheezed one of the strangers, exuding a thick odor of unknown origin. "We saw you cuddling by the dumpster, and then you put on these..." he jabbed a finger at the camouflage covers, "...caps! Full of holes!"

The gathering erupted into laughter. Dorian, already poisoned by Marex' bile and intoxication, aired thoughts he wouldn't even dare think on Margondia: "You're the one full of holes!" He pushed his companion away with force. "Look at your ears! Useless chunks of flesh with holes!"

Marex was taken aback for a second by such audacity, but immediately supported his brother hotly: "Yeah! Look at your ears!"

The human flow quieted down, but only to break into a new fit of laughter. One of the guys, wiping away tears, magnanimously offered: "You guys are brilliant! Come with us to the bar, hic... the festival's gonna end soon anyway!"

"Festival?" Dorian began to cool down, returning to his usual track. "What are you celebrating?"

"Ha-ha-ha!" came from the crowd. "They're absolutely wasted! Blind drunk!"

The situation was starting to frighten Marex. To all questions and even direct insults, these creatures answered with laughter. Taking a deeper breath, he practically roared:

“Where is your Emperor?!”

“Who? The Emperor?” The guy, still maintaining a semblance of balance, leaned forward with a predatory, drunken smile. “Ah, well yeah! There he is right over there!”

He turned, jostling his friends aside, and pointed straight at the figure in scarlet:

“Name’s Chris! Say hello! Let’s go, boys, leave Chris alone with these...” He pronounced the last word almost festively.

Bowing slightly, he indicated the path to the ruler and began to step away behind the Margondians’ backs. The crowd followed him at a measured pace, dissolving into the festive chaos. Around them, the brass horns of a street band blared louder and louder, and handfuls of confetti soared into the air, settling on the heroes’ shoulders like multi-colored paper snow.

Dorian directed his locators toward those leaving, catching snatches of conversation:

“We totally could’ve brought them along, they’re hilarious! Or have you still not forgiven Chris for that other time?”

Dorian strode resolutely toward the target. Now that the barrier had parted, the path to the “sacred tree” was open. Huge inflatable figures, illuminated from within, floated above the heads of the citizens, and the scent of pine mixed with the aroma of burnt sugar and gunpowder char from firecrackers. The entire city seemed like a single, pulsing organism, gripped by a strange joy on the verge of madness.

“They said we’re hilarious...”

“I heard!” Marex walked beside him with a skip in his step, deftly dodging children running past with glowing toys. “That means their Emperor is kind too!”

Dorian didn’t answer. He looked straight ahead, to where, in the radiance of thousands of lights, the majestic Chris sat upon his carved throne. Under the cover of holey caps and foreign merriment, the two scouts took their final step out of the shadow of the snowdrifts toward their great — and, as it seemed to them, quite successful — mission.

Chapter 4: This Was Definitely Official First Contact

Trying not to draw any more attention, they slipped closer, taking cover behind a massive snowdrift. Here, in the halo of the festive illumination, the “Emperor” looked even more majestic and intimidating, and the sea of people around him seethed with an incomprehensible rapture.

Dorian squinted, trying to organize this chaos into a coherent blueprint. His brain habitually latched onto the details: children approach, utter a coded cipher, receive the crowd’s approval — and only then does the leader extract a reward from the depths of his sack.

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