

• EDITED BY ALANA JOLI ABBOTT & JULIA RIOS •

BRIDGE TO ELSEWHERE

AN ANTHOLOGY

• FEATURING STORIES FROM •

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ELSEWHERE**

AN ANTHOLOGY

**Edited by
Alana Joli Abbott
and Julia Rios**

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— THE ATROX KILLBOARD —
A “Static over Space” story
By CG Volars

Izo Lopez woke with a start. He was in a place he didn't recognize, strapped to a cot by both wrists. The room was tiny, made of metal, and poorly lit. Izo pulled at the straps. They were strong but maybe not impossible to break. Izo's stomach curdled with confusion—and something else about the room he couldn't put his finger on. Shoving down a swelling pit of cold fear, he lifted his head to survey the area.

A single light flickered on the far wall. Across from him lay three cots, bolted into the wall with thick metal beams, each with just enough room for one person. Above him, there were two more—six bunks in total. Behind him was a wall of cabinets, twelve in all and stacked in rows. In front of him was a door. On the ceiling was a large metal grate.

There was nothing else.

Izo's eyes returned to the metal grate. He was trying to remember how he'd gotten here, or how long he'd been. But there was nothing. The last thing he remembered was getting ready for work.

Had someone grabbed and locked him up? If so, who? And why? Off the top of his head, there were a few reasons someone might have beef with him—he was a nineteen-year-old homeless Latino with dozens of parking tickets and thousands in unpaid payday loans. Those infractions didn't seem big enough to warrant anything like this though. Could he have pissed off a gang or Homeland Security without knowing it? He supposed anything was possible.

It might have something to do with the fact that he could fly faster than a jet plane. But he hated to jump to conclusions. It really could be those parking tickets. Some were more than two years overdue.

Izo frowned. Wait...was he going to miss work over this? If so, this was bullshit! He'd worked his ass off at the resort pretending to be a model Latinx—meek and hard-working as melty-face golfing-assholes with too much money and screaming sunburns made jokes about his height and the female employees. The fact that he might never get the chance to flip a table and quit already made him want to scream. But the idea that he might never get his last paycheck too?

Fuck. That. Izo yanked on his straps. He was getting out of here. Failing that, he was getting a paycheck's worth of hellraising.

Izo swung his gaze to the door while twisting his wrist and experimenting how to get leverage. The door was close to his cot and tall—eight feet high and made of a single length of pock-marked metal. There was no knob or handle. If it was locked, it was locked from the outside. Relaxing his jaw, Izo set his head back down and tried to fight a growing sense of panic mixed with fury. He didn't have enough information to panic or rage. Not yet anyway.



Tearn tried to swallow the lump in his throat. Inside the locked cabin was their latest “guest”—another rare Avarian, born with the ability to fly and unfortunate enough to hail from an uncharted planet. They’d been searching for propellants to refuel on the little blue planet when they’d discovered an especially nitrogen-rich lake. It was a lovely spot, full of clear, deep waters and flanked by magnificent mountains on every side. Settling in for a long refueling process, they’d been hovering over the waters in a thick fluff of cloud for barely an hour when the native Avarian had suddenly sailed by their window without warning.

Tearn’s best friend, like all Strungians, was far too entrepreneurial to let money that easy get away. Kicking the Atrox into its electric thrusters, he wheeled the ship around and followed the flying youth silently.

Tearn frowned but didn’t speak up. Of all their questionable money-making schemes, kidnapping and extorting Avarians was his least favorite. It was also the best paying, though. Tearn did his best to make the morally grey area a little brighter, standing up to Glongkyle when he was being too aggressive, putting his foot down before anything truly horrifying could happen. As long as everyone went home in one piece, he could sleep at night. Was it still immoral, taking people from their homes and refusing to return them until money appeared out of the aether? Sure. But so were most things.

This Avarian proved harder to catch than first appearances indicated. He wound back and forth through the clouds in a fast, unpredictable pattern. Incredibly fast, in fact. The Atrox Killboard, an old but powerful ship capable of crossing galaxies in a few months, struggled hard to keep up. Tearn’s eyes widened as the youth slowly began shrinking on their radar. He glanced at their speed. He sat up sharply in his chair.

“Zippy little shit, isn’t he?” Glongkyle grunted.

“Yeah,” Tearn agreed, impressed.

“Where the hell is he going?”

“I don’t know,” said Tearn, confused. But then, almost as suddenly as he appeared, the youth stopped. Unaware anyone was following, he

paused to hover deep within a thick cloud. Ahh, Tearn realized. He was diving around for cloud cover, same as us. That's pretty clever.

"Got you now, flyby" whispered Glongkyle triumphantly. Sneaking up behind the Avarian, he nailed him with a giant electric blast.

Tearn turned to Glongkyle with a glare. "You didn't have to hit him that hard."

"Did you see how fast he was? I couldn't risk spooking him. It was hard enough catching him the first time. What are the chances—"

"Don't let him hit the water!" Tearn screamed.

He supposed that was the first time he saved this particular Avarian's life. Knowing what he did about his best friend, he doubted it would be the last.

Tearn blew out a huge breath of air. The first meeting with a new guest was always the roughest, a churning maelstrom of fear, confusion, horror, and rage—there was no getting around it with these uncharted types. Oh well. It had to be done. Best get it over with.

Tipping his head in assent, Tearn nodded for Glongkyle to type in the code to their guest's quarters.



Izo lifted his head at the sound of beeping outside. With a click, the door slid open. He prepared himself for anything: the government, the mob, a bevy of sadistic scientists. But as the person behind the door came into view, Izo let out a low and piteous moan.

It was a giant green monster. Seven feet tall and with an elongated head, it stared down at Izo with two vertically-slit yellow eyes. Its nose was a pair of twin nostrils at the end of a stubby snout, its lipless mouth filled with long, crooked teeth. On either side of its scalp were short horns made of craggy yellow bone, and its skin was forest green, scaly, and thick as a crocodile's.

"Aliens," whispered Izo breathlessly.

The beast responded, speaking in a raspy language filled with consonants. "Told you he'd be awake by now," the beast said to a second person coming in behind him.

To Izo's horror, he could understand it. *What the hell was going on?*

Short, bald, and bulbous headed, the second creature looked exactly like a textbook Martian. Annoyed, he chided his larger friend in a different language, something gentler and more reassuring. "Fine. You were right. He's awake. Now can you go before you scare him?" He indicated to Izo with two tiny arms. "He probably has a lot of questions."

The reptile turned to stare at Izo. His gaze was as cold and murderous as a snake's. Every instinct in Izo's body told him to stay still. The reptile blinked. A tiny wet *click* sounded as his movable eyelid slid back into place.

Izo blew out a slow breath to keep from trembling.

Eventually the monster left, slamming and locking the door behind him with a boom. The shorter alien rolled his eyes and put his back to the cot. Hopping up, he soared slowly into the air before landing next to Izo.

"Hello. My name is Tearn. As you can probably tell, I'm not from your planet. Please don't panic though. You're not in any danger. No one's going to hurt you. We just need you to do a couple of things. Errands, basically." Adjusting his dangling legs, the short alien smiled down at Izo with calm reassurance. "You're going to be back at home, safe and sound, before you know it."

Izo could only lay quietly and stare. Deep within his chest every bio-signal in his body was going haywire, screaming to prepare for battle, prepare for conflict, prepare for doom. But outside his face stayed flat, same way he'd learned to keep it cool as a picked-on kid.

It suddenly occurred to him what was wrong with the room. The gravity inside was too light.



Most uncharted Avarians that came aboard the Atrox were calm enough to talk within a few minutes. Sure, some screamed their heads off for days, hollering and howling because—surprise, surprise—theirs wasn't the only planet capable of sustaining life in the universe. Some tried to fight back or sank into despair and hurt themselves. Both amounted to the same thing—injury to the Avarian's precious form, which helped no one.

He still remembered how they'd lost their third Avarian guest. She was lovely, a shimmering Aurelian with a delicate frame and the most heart-breakingly beautiful face he'd ever seen in person. Convinced they were lying and had no intention of taking her home or leaving her unmolested, she'd charged the door, clawing at Glongkyle's face until the Strungian fell back. Hurling through the ship, she'd found an emergency suit, pulled it on, and blindly bailed out of the first emergency airlock she could find. Problem was, the suit was a mechanical counterpressure suit that utilized a uniform, full-body squeeze instead of a gas-filled pressurization. Bulky and designed for someone Glongkyle's size, it was an ill-fated-fit on her delicate Aurelian frame.

Tearn could still remember holding his breath as she'd twisted around in the vacuum of space, limbs convulsing as her body cavities collapsed under the pressure. It must have been excruciating. At least she hadn't suffered for long.

When they finally pulled her body back in, it was Tearn who'd taken off her helmet. A mess of white strands poured out, bright as a meteor's tale. Tearn remembered cradling her head and crying through almost two Imperial space-cycles. What had happened was such a powerfully harrowing experience. It was almost like something out of a tragic Ginarsian fairytale. Since that day, he'd promised to do everything physically possible to get their guests home safely.

Tearn shook his head and came back to himself. Their current Avarian guest was doing everything to mask the fact that he was freaking the hell out. Heart rate elevated, he was breathing fast and had taken on a funny,

defensive posture—arms and hands wide and ready to fight—ignoring the fact he was clearly strapped down and defenseless. Still, he'd managed to keep his muscles from shaking and had raised his chest enough to hide his rapid breaths.

"I mean it," said Tearn, bending closer. "You're going to be just fine."

The youth nodded in a quick, sarcastic way, as if to say, Sure I am, Chief. A chuffing laugh broke out of Tearn's mouth. So he was a sarcastic little shit. Made sense; irony and humor were great ways to hide fear. Still, as much as he might want to cover it, Tearn could tell he was terrified, alarm and dread radiating off his body like a blistering light. And Tearn couldn't let him stay in here and stew in this current state. Not again.

Reaching out, Tearn gently grabbed and held the youth's arm in a comforting and encouraging way.

At first, the Avarian didn't respond. Widening his grip, Tearn gently moved his hand up and down the Avarian's skin, increasing the tactile contact between them. The Avarian's skin was soft and warm and filled with strong, healthy fibers, perfect for carrying plenty of neuro-chemical signals. Brushing the top of the Avarian's hand with his other one, he doubled the connection. He was soon rewarded with a fluttering of eyelashes and two widening pools of green as the Avarian's pupils expanded. Tearn tipped forward to examine the Avarian's chest and test his reaction to proximity. But he was fine. His breathing was soft and steady; his body had relaxed. Tearn nodded and shifted back to his initial position, a little sad to move away. The Avarian had smelled a lot like the wild forests of his planet.

Tearn crossed his hands over his lap. "How are you feeling?"

The Avarian sucked in a long, steady breath. Then he tipped his head to one side instead of answering, as if to say, Okay, I guess?

"Good. You won't be here long." Tearn assured him. He reached out to pat his leg, an easy placebo to cover any lingering questions. "We'll have you home in a couple of weeks, tops."



Izo grunted and pulled harder. The short alien, Tearn, had stayed just long enough to make a bunch of vague, bullshit promises before leaving him alone again. Izo trusted him about as much as he'd trust any alien who abducted him. Which was very little. Or was it? Izo hadn't met enough aliens yet to know how you were supposed to respond to their sworn word. Until ten minutes ago, he hadn't known there were aliens whose credibility you could assess. He supposed distrust of any stranger was normal, but was a little surprised by how little surprise he felt speaking with one from outside his galaxy.

Didn't matter. Point being, he trusted the alien's word about as much as a salad from McDonald's. He'd still nodded through their first encounter, though, and the little grey Martian had eventually left, clearly satisfied. If working at the golf resort had taught him anything, it was how easily people with a little bit of power could be tricked into assuming everything between them and the people below them was cool. Hell, they ate that shit like it was their main course in life.

Izo paused to shake out his wrist and check his progress. The pain from prying up the straps was fresh, but tolerable. The grate proved more challenging. Still thinner than the metal on the door, it was beginning to bulge and rip near the only two bolts securing it. Izo re-grasped the grate before flipping his feet against the ceiling again. Then, redoubling his effort, he pushed and pulled with all his stubborn teenage might. He didn't care what it took. This fucker was coming off the wall and then...well he didn't know what then. But there'd be more options.

"Come onnn!" he grunted between clenched teeth.

The bolts gave way, and Izo and the grate hit the ground with a thud. Cursing, Izo threw the grate clear. Then, hopping to his feet, he jumped and hauled himself inside the newly created hole.

Inside was dark, with air so cold that he could see his breath. Izo shivered and moved a thick metal coil out of his way to see better.

It was a long crawl space, a foot tall, slowly curving, and covered in a thicket of tangled wires and metallic columns. About fifty yards up, Izo could make out an adjacent crawlspace pouring light and heading vertically. With any amount of luck, it'd lead somewhere important.

Izo grunted and shuffled his hips and legs into the crawl space. Once inside, he began picking his way through the morass of complex wires. Piles of moist dust stuck to his elbows and under-side like fuzzy peanut butter. He grimaced and tried his best not to sneeze.



Heading back to the cockpit, Tearn was again amazed at how calm and pleasant his conversation with their guest had been. It kind of made sense though. After all, who wanted to spend their entire life on some backwater planet when there was a whole wide universe to see?

It was funny. Life, logic, and language had a unique way of evolving, didn't they? Experiences, ideas, and genes were all like tiny, metaphysical organisms, passing from one person to the next. Weak ideas buckled under them; the strong forged on. What made ideas strong? All the usual things: fit, constitution, general pleasantness. These were universal truths.

"So, what do you think?" said Glongkyle.

Deep in his heart, Tearn knew there was something special about the Avarian in the back of their ship. That's why he was going to make triple sure everything worked out for him. "I think it's going to be good."

"Had the same thought when I first saw him," Glongkyle said, glancing at their output levels. "This one definitely looks expensive."

Tearn twisted his head to glare balefully at his best friend.



Izo looked up into the vertical chasm. He'd made it to the source of light, two small windows cut out just above him. The vertical

crawlspace had been indistinguishable from the first one except for its pitch, shallow for a dozen yards then growing steadily steeper. All in all, he'd probably crawled across three basketball courts and up two stories on his stomach.

Izo poked his head up to look through the windows. They were again covered with grates and led into a room. The difference was these grates were on the floor. The room was small, half living room, half cockpit, one hundred percent covered in discarded trash. A grey seating area attached to the wall on his right, with an orange coffee table bolted to the floor and a black console blanketed in blinking buttons and dials to his front.

Seated before the console were his alien abductors in matching orange chairs, one positioned far higher than the other. The scaly abductor was saying something to the short one, Tearn. Tearn looked on disapprovingly, tiny arms crossed at his chest. *Alien spat?* Izo wondered with a grin.

In front of the two captain chairs stood a giant, panoramic windshield. Outside of that was an expanse of starry nightscape. Izo frowned. Mierda. They were in outer space.

He tried to spot the sun, the earth, or the moon. But it was no use; he couldn't pinpoint anything. From out here everything looked like brightly colored clusters and shimmering cloudy trails, a boundless miasma of celestial bodies hanging in infinite space. The idea of locating any one star or planet was like trying to find a single diamond on the California coastline.

Izo frowned. It was brighter and more beautiful than he ever could have imagined. Tipping his forehead against the grate, he let his eyes search over its magnificence. Izo had always been curious about space, wondering what it might be like to view the great, wide unknown in person. But now that he was finally able to live out his childhood dream, it was from a bitter, shackled prospect. He wondered how many times humans had experienced this type of irony before: reaching America's fabled shores...as a prisoner;

entering Tokyo, New York, or some other long-sought-after metropolis...as a victim of human trafficking. Izo sucked in a long, mournful breath through his nose. Then he sneezed.

Two alien heads swiveled toward him.

Izo sniffed and wiped his nose. "Excuse me."

"You sneaky motherfucker..." The scaly one lunged out at him.

Izo dropped down the vertical shaft, away from the grate and toward the lower floors below. A second later the reptile ripped the grate off the wall, reached his head and one arm in, and immediately got stuck. Struggling and shaking his fist, he yelled down after Izo. "Get back here, you little shit!"

"Calm down," came Tearn's plaintive voice from behind him.

"He's in the lining of the ship, Tearn!"

"So? What's he going to do? It's not like he has anywhere to go."

Izo stopped short. Something about the short alien's calm confidence burned his insides. They'd kidnapped and trapped him here because they didn't think he could do anything about it. But they were wrong. There was something he could do.

Izo turned blankly to a handful of wires next to his head. They were converged at some sort of central relay. Tilting his head to one side, he gathered them in his palm. "Me pregunto..." he mumbled before yanking them free. Above, he was rewarded with the cockpit light blinking out. The reptile bellowed into the darkness.

Izo smiled and continued moving down, blindly pulling cords and ripping out metal boards as he went. Closer to the bottom, he paused to knock a thick metal coil loose with both feet. The space filled with a freezing white gas. Alarms suddenly went off all around him.

Emerging from the bottom of the hissing cloud, Izo continued his indiscriminate rampage. Halfway down, he realized he was laughing his ass off.



“How the fuck did you let this happen, Tearn?”

Tearn widened his eyes at Glongkyle. “You’re blaming me!?”

“Duh! This isn’t a difficult operation: I fly the ship; you keep the Avarians calm.” Glongkyle pointed at the front windshield. “The ship’s going to IA, Tearn.” He pointed at the grate. “Why the fuck is he freaking out?”

Tearn’s mouth twitched. “Because he’s obviously upset about that fact. It’s not complicated, Glongkyle. Put yourself in his shoes—he doesn’t like what’s happening. He’s doing whatever he can to push back.”

“I don’t give a shit about his feelings. He’s fucking with my ship. You’ve got about ten minutes to calm him down before I drag him to the nearest airlock.”

Tearn straightened his back sharply. He’d never been so callously insulted and threatened in his life. Glongkyle knew how long Tearn had been tormented over the loss of the Aurelian female. Tearn stared at his friend, eyes searching for some semblance of decency. But there was none. In all honesty, there probably never had been.

Tearn glared with disgust. “You really are that heartless, aren’t you?”

“No, Tearn. I really am that broke.” Glongkyle pointed between the two of them. “Us? We’re smugglers. We survive by scouring the universe and finding rare things. If those things happen to be sentient, I try to swing them home afterwards. Mostly because I know you’d annoy the shit out of me if I didn’t.” He shook his large, scaly head. “This was never a free interview though. If he can’t get on board with this plan, he can’t stay aboard this ship.”

Tearn opened his mouth to respond, but Glongkyle had already turned to leave.



Izo paused to listen through the wall. They’d been arguing hotly about him on the floor above, but the argument was cut off as someone left to thunk their way down the hallway and away from

the cockpit. A second later, the same person started sliding down a ladder outside, followed by a clunk as they hit the ground below.

Tightening his grasp on a metal pipe he'd pried from a wall, Izo listened silently to see which direction they'd go.

The person outside seemed to be listening too. After a long pause, they crossed to a nearby wall. A loud beep sounded throughout the ship, followed by a crackled voice over an intercom.

"Tearn, are you still in the cockpit?"

Izo smiled. *Well, if it isn't El Capitán himself.*

"I'm still here," came Tearn's terse reply.

"I need you to flood the inner walls with fire suppressant on the upper levels—"

Oh shit, thought Izo, eyeing the walls around him.

"I want to try and corner him in the last level," explained the lizard. "Once I get down there, I'll check the storage compartments, lower engines and then the assembly room. After you're done upstairs, you and Yula check the cryo tanks and docking bay."

"Okay, but be honest," said Tearn, sounding worried as an elementary teacher. "You're not going to hurt him if you find him first, are you?"

"Tearn, he's fucking with my ship—"

"Your brother's ship," interrupted Tearn.

"He's going to be lucky if I don't sell him for parts," finished Glongkyle. Then, cutting off the line with another loud beep, he took a few more thinking steps to the left before sliding down another ladder.

Izo stuck his tongue in his cheek as the walls in the level above him slowly hissed and spat orange gel from either side. *Okay, come-mierda*, he thought to himself with a nod. *Let's do this.*

Swinging his pipe over his shoulder, Izo floated down to go look for an assembly room in the lower levels.



Tearn shuffled across the floor to the other side of the console, counted to ten, and then started the fire suppressant protocols for the third floor. He considered having Yula help him do them simultaneously, forcing the Avarian to pop out of a random opening rather than fall into Glongkyle's trap. But he ultimately decided against it. Much as he was worried about Glongkyle taking his anger out on their guest, he was more afraid of discovering the youth drowned in a wall because he got tangled in a wire trying to escape. It'd be a terrible way to die, suffocating and trapped in a small, dark space, no one there to hear you banging and kicking from inside. No, much as the Avarian might catch hell from Glongkyle, it was still better than the alternative.

"Yula, you ready to go?" he called to their Wuljerian guard.

"We are going?" asked Yula.

"Downstairs," Tearn explained to the new hire in a voice like a mother's. "We're going to go protect our new guest."

"Yula protects Avarian?"

"That's right," Tearn reassured the big female. Hurrying out of the cockpit beside her, he turned to lock the door before climbing into the Wuljerian's arms. "We may have to protect this particular Avarian more than usual too."

"Glongkyle hates Avarian?" asked Yula before sliding down the ladder, one furry hand grasping the rung, the other holding Tearn to her chest.

"No." Tearn squeezed his face into an awkward grimace. "They're just a little annoyed with each other right now."

The Wuljerian nodded with a keen expression as they continued to drop, floors flying past all the way. "Avarian hates Glongkyle too."



Izo grinned as another grate hit the ground with a clang. He was starting to get good at that. Dropping in his new metal pipe, he watched as it clattered and bounced under a nearby shelf. Then,

quickly lowering himself through the opening, he eyed the dark room.

Inside, a maze of conveyor belts zigzagged the floor, filling the space with sharp corners and hard edges. Walking beside the nearest one, he ran his palm over it. A trail of spinning metal pins gently twirled beneath his fingers. Tall ceilings. Wide space. A virtual amusement park of hard metal surfaces. “Perfecto,” Izo said to himself.

Picking up his pipe, Izo continued strolling toward a set of large shelves. They looked heavy, but it was fine; he wouldn’t need to move them far. Izo hummed and whacked a metal pin loose. Outside he could hear the big lizard pausing and redirecting to follow the sounds of ringing metal.



Tearn was getting worried. He and Yula had searched less than half of the cryo tanks so far, but besides their own echoing steps, the place was silent as a mortuary. There was something about the quiet—its weighted, almost pensive stillness—that made Tearn’s insides itchy.

“Did you remember to lock the cockpit?” Glonkyle blurted over the coms without warning.

Tearn jerked at the noise and nearly dropped into one of the gaps between the half-suspended tanks and the magnetic stabilizers surrounding them. Pushing off a supply tube wider than his arm, he regained his balance with a grateful whistle. Deep and constrictive, the gaps were known for shifting for little or no reason. He quickly crossed to the side wall to respond. “Are you serious?”

“Did you remember or not?”

“Yes,” Tearn gritted between clenched teeth. What if he hadn’t though? The possibility of getting into and locking them out of the cockpit would tempt most of their Avarian guests, much less an unholy terror like this one. Tearn let out an exhausted sigh filled with years of simmering frustration. It never failed to amaze him Glonkyle’s sheer failure to

understand—and consequently discount—other people’s feelings and thoughts. It was almost as if it never occurred to him that other people had feelings and thoughts.

He shouldn’t have been surprised though. That’s just who Glongkyle was. “I locked and double-checked before coming down,” Tearn agreed.

“Good job,” Glongkyle answered. “I didn’t want the Avarian sneaking in behind us.”

Tearn closed his eyes. “Mhmm. Good thinking.” His best friend was a certifiable moron. “How’s the search going?”

“Nothing so far. I thought I heard something in the assembly room though. Going to go check that out, then maybe I’ll start in the—”

“That’s great.” Tearn interrupted. “We should probably get off the coms.”

“Right. Let me know if you find anything.”

Tearn rolled his eyes before glancing sideways at Yula. He couldn’t be sure from this distance, but she seemed to be purposely avoiding his gaze.



The assembly room’s wide doors slid open. The lizard stepped slowly into the room, his clawed feet carefully clicking on the floor. Following one wall, he flicked on the lights. The space was filled with dingy yellow luminousness.

Izo let out a slow breath. Beside him fuzzy shadows covered the ground in flickering stripes where the light dispersed unevenly through the assembly line pins. An ominous hush filled the room. Both enemies strained to hear the other. Eventually the lizard huffed loudly and strolled to the center of the room. “I know you’re in here,” he called out. “There’s no point in hiding. Come out now, and I won’t hurt you.”

Izo smiled with satisfaction as the lizard paused to inspect his gap in the pins. Confused, he leaned down to investigate. “Why the hell are you messing with my ship?” he asked the silent room.

He was still musing over this mystery when Izo swung around and surprised him with his first hit.



Tearn jerked up at the clanging sound and shriek that followed it. Twisting his head toward the noise, he realized with no small amount of horror that it was definitely Glongkyle who'd been hit, not the Avarian.

Oh shit.

It had never even occurred to him the Avarian might get the upper hand. If he managed to incapacitate Glongkyle—or worse—they'd all be floating dead people soon.

Yula whined with alarm.

"Come on," said Tearn, hustling for the doorway. "We've got to go."



The attack was vicious and clearly unexpected. Falling into and over the metal platform behind him, the lizard let out a belated shriek.

Izo turned and risked a look. A second passed before the reptile lashed up, flailing and sputtering with a look of crazed confusion. The blow, squarely hitting one side of his head, had already grown into an ugly purple welt. The reptile staggered toward the door, clutching the conveyors as he went. Spotting Izo's second attack, he managed to cringe in time. The flying hit smashed into his shoulder and forearm instead of his face.

Izo curved around and returned to his hiding spot, the sweet ring of his strike still vibrating in his hands. Hunkering down, he savored the sound of the lizard-man's confusion.

The monster was still grappling to climb to his feet. So the reptile couldn't take too many hits. That was interesting. Izo wiped down the end of his pipe, slick with blood on one end and nervous sweat on the other. Rounding the corner, Izo flew forward to crack

the pole across the back of his abductor's head this time. The hit connected so soundly its recoil stung the inside of Izo's palm.

The lizard screamed. Izo arced up to return to his spot behind the shelf. The sound of someone shuffling on their hands and knees filled the room, followed by the spinning of pins.

Izo stepped out of his hiding spot to look. The gutless wretch was huddled under a conveyor, sorry sobs coming out in tiny, panicked hics. Izo gave a derisive snort. This was the monster he'd been scared of? He gave a disappointed head shake before letting his pole slide to the ground with a loud tap.

The beast jumped and spun toward him. Reptilian eyes locked with Izo's. The Earthling crossed to the reptile, pipe dragging the behind him in a slow, even scrape.

"You know who I am, pendejo?" Izo asked, pointing his pipe at the beast. "I'm the last human you're ever going to bother."

The reptile cowered and didn't answer. Izo angled his head, astonished and disgusted. Lifting his pipe over one shoulder, he wrapped his second hand around it. The urge to smash in the lizard's face filled his veins. But it wasn't in his nature to strike people on the ground. Lowering the end of the pipe, he jabbed at the beast until he backed out from under the metal belts.

He indicated for the lizard to rise. The alien slowly obeyed, using the conveyors to stand. He was still hunched over, shoulder clutched in one clawed hand, back of his head in the other. Izo frowned at him, as disappointed as God.

Sighing, Izo tossed the pipe to the other end of the room. The lizard watched it clatter to the ground, brow drawn down in confusion.

Raising his fists, Izo waited for the reptile to turn back to him. Then he gave a single upward nod.



Tearn paused. The struggling noises had stopped. What had been fear and rage echoing off the ship's walls was now a quiet, simmering tension—an animal crouch just before an attack. The thin grey skin on Tearn's arms pimpled with alarm. He'd only ever registered this type of steely resonance once before while refueling on a war planet.

"We need to get over there now," Tearn told Yula.

"We must hurry?" asked Yula.

"Yes," Tearn said breathlessly. "One of them is about to die."



The reptile slowly mimicked Izo's fighting posture, sizing him up, scanning Izo's light frame and slender limbs with cold calculation. Nodding sideways, Izo eased them out into an opening where four aisles met, his steps light and measured beneath him. The reptile followed.

Extending his claws suddenly, the reptile lunged forward, swinging fast. But he barked in surprise as Izo connected a heel with the back of his head. Thrown forward, he flew into the conveyors, thighs slamming into unforgiving metal.

Izo waited as his abductor pushed himself up, one clawed hand gingerly going to his latest bruise. Izo grinned; his head probably felt like he'd stuck it in a bucket with fireworks.

Spinning to hurl himself forward again, the reptile charged, claws swinging wider this time. He was rewarded with a flutter of cloth as one talon passed just under Izo's arm. But Izo twisted around and nailed him in the side of the face with a hard hook, sending the beast sprawling into the conveyors again. The reptile managed to catch himself and spin faster this time though, spotting a momentary look of pain as Izo shook out his fist.

Izo hissed. The lizard had noticed his injured left hand and vulnerable left side. Izo couldn't wait any longer. This needed to end.

The reptile, seeming to sense his mood, stretched to his full height and threw open his claws almost as wide as they would go. Izo, for his part, brought his right side forward, did a quick calculation, and took two steps back.

Misjudging this, the dumb beast broke into a third charge, which Izo goaded on by widening his eyes. Truth was, with his attacker's top set wide and all his weight thrown forward, Izo was almost giddy.

One of the only martial arts moves Izo knew was how to throw someone over his back. It was a simple move that rewarded the quick and short over the large and heavy. By waiting until an attacker charged, Izo could kneel and wrap up his assailant's leg and take off, tossing them into the ground face first. The faster and bigger the attacker, the harder the landing. As a middle-schooler Izo had perfected the move. By now he could do it in his sleep.

Popping down and back up, he threw the giant lizard-man into the conveyors behind them, savoring first the *wham* and then *oof* as the creature tumbled clear onto the other side.

Izo didn't have a moment to waste though. Hurling over the conveyor belts, he clambered onto his attacker's back, legs going around the reptile's waist as he snaked his left arm under the monster's neck. Secure, Izo grabbed his own wrist and began choking the reptile as hard as he could.

The beast fought to reach him, swinging his elbows then his fists back, trying to connect with anything. But Izo had been here before. He knew how to feel his attacker's intentions and shift away without giving any slack. Throwing his head back, the lizard did manage to scruff Izo's cheek with his bony horns, but it was nowhere near enough to make Izo let go.

The alien tried to get up; Izo attempted to prevent this, swinging his back to keep the lizard off balance. But he'd forgotten about the conveyor belts. Grabbing one of the rails, the beast managed to

haul the two of them up in a single yank. Izo could only tighten his grip and pray reptiles passed out faster than humans.

The beast shoved off the conveyors, throwing them both into the next row of metal bars. Izo tried to brace himself, but it was no use. Even in the weakened gravity, their combined weight and force was too much. He smashed into the metal rails with a painful grunt. Wind knocked clear and stars twinkling, Izo fought to regain his grip. But it was too late. The reptile was already turning to pin him down.

Izo twisted to get away but was hauled back. Trapped on his stomach between the lizard and the metal bars, Izo swung, smashing an elbow into the beast's jaw. But a second later the beast had this same arm locked high and tight behind him. Izo hissed with pain. He was seriously regretting dropping his pipe.

Four large talons surrounded his skull with a pressure as unforgiving as a vice. The reptile yanked his head back. In a moment the metal pipes would come flying at his face and this would all be over.

"Stop!" Tearn screamed from the door. Shuffling into the room, the short alien hustled to reach them. A giant wooly alien followed closely. Izo gaped at the yeti-like monster. Ducking under the door, it was easily a foot or more bigger than the reptile. *There's an even bigger one on board?!*

"Glongkyle, let Yula take him," said Tearn.

The two giants obeyed, switching positions. The wooly monster, Yula apparently, wrapped a frying-pan-sized-paw around the back of Izo's neck, pinning him as easily as one might pin a kitten to the floor. Izo struggled and swung. But it was no use. His strikes hit nothing but fur.

"Yula, take him out," said Glongkyle.

Izo's eyes widened, imagining himself in the vacuum of space: eyeballs boiling, lungs expanding till they popped. But Yula only increased the pressure on either side of his neck instead. Still

perfectly able to breathe and move, Izo cursed and struggled until his limbs grew too heavy to move and the room went dark.



Tearn shoved Glongkyle in his back. "What the hell were you thinking?"
"Don't look at me. This is all your fault." Glongkyle waved a hand at the
passed out Avarian. "You said he was fine. You said to give him a couple
of hours alone to adjust."

"I never wanted to kidnap him to begin with!"

"By the gods, not this crap again..." Glongkyle rolled his eyes. "You
really expect anyone to believe that anymore, Tearn?"

Tearn stared in horror. His frustration and anger overwhelmed his
senses until he broke into his species' penchant for super-tele-empathy,
fury shooting all over the room. Like most days, Glongkyle couldn't sense
it. It was part of the reason Strungians were one of the few species that
could move to Ginarsia.

Yula squirmed back toward the door as Tearn's disgust filled the room
like a rancid nausea. Tearn slammed his tiny fists down onto the front of
his legs. "I was the only one against all of this! I was the only one trying
to keep everyone safe. I'm the only one with a shred of moral decency."

"Sure you are." Glongkyle let out a loud fart. "There goes some right
now."



Izo was awoken by lights cutting on and the sound of beeping outside. He was back in the small, metal room, and had been in a heavy sleep for who knew how long. Groaning, he reached for his head with one hand, but stopped short. His right hand was shackled to the cot's frame with a short, thick chain attached to a tight metal cuff. It was wrapped so snugly around his wrist, he doubted if he could turn it 180 degrees without bruising himself.

Izo groaned and dropped his head back. Above him the dented grate he'd ripped down had been repositioned over the hole in the ceiling. It now sported over a dozen new bolts.

A moment later, the door slid open, and his shortest alien abductor padded inside, bowl of slop in one hand, cup of murky water in the other. Tearn set the meal on the ground before crossing his arms at Izo. "I had half a mind not to give you this; what you did was really shitty, mister. I honestly don't know what you were thinking." Annoyance clear, the short alien tapped his foot repeatedly. "Well? What do you have to say for yourself?"

Izo sat up as far as he could. "Fuck you," he spat before turning to face the wall.



Tearn made a high, offended noise. Though he didn't know what the Avarian had said to him (and wouldn't until they finished translating and compiling his language), he had a good idea of the feeling behind the words.

Tearn fumed with anger. Even the Avarian, whose life he'd saved, whose person he'd defended, didn't appreciate his efforts. No one did! They didn't care that all Tearn wanted was to keep everyone safe and do his best. No, all they cared about was what they wanted. Well everyone couldn't get what they wanted all the time, could they? It was people like Tearn that kept things from devolving into violence and chaos by balancing people's interests. Was it perfect? No. But what was? You did your best, woke up, and tried to do better tomorrow. This wasn't about right and wrong. This was about people always trying to get their way. Well guess what? Tearn NEVER got his way. And he was starting to get really sick of it too.

"Don't you turn your back on me. I just made you food!" Reaching forward he smacked the exposed part of the Avarian's leg with his hand, a sheer bolt of rage flowing out of his limbs and into their guest.

The Avarian jerked away, the emotional heat registering immediately. Tearn sneered and slapped him again. The Avarian managed to knock his hand away this time, but it was no use. The emotional energy transferred

anyway. Tearn could feel and see it now too—his infuriating frustrations lowering as the Avarian’s rose ten-fold, blood gathering in his bronze cheeks and limbs growing itchy with unspent adrenaline. But of course, because he was an Avarian chained to the wall, there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it.

Tearn grinned darkly. He hit the Avarian again and again, tiny hits that could never leave bruises but we’re just enough to connect and get an even bigger rise out of him.

Within minutes the Avarian was howling with fury. Tearn stepped back to watch from a satisfied distance as the youth tore at the chain and threw himself at the wall. His fingers ripped and bled; his elbows and shoulders ricocheted off hard surfaces and bruised; his voice cracked from screaming. But still he raged on, too lost in his emotions to even feel what he was doing.

Ironic, huh?

Tearn chuckled and turned to the door, pulling it closed as he stepped to the other side. It’d take a good couple of hours for the emotional excess to wear off. He’d come back and check on their guest then. In the meantime, there was no real reason he needed to be here for this.

“Try to calm down, sweetheart,” Tearn said before shutting and locking out the noise.