

MIDNIGHT BURGER

Chapter 38: Welcome to The Triad

By

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Midnight Burger

Chapter 38: Welcome to the Triad.

WE HEAR THE HUM OF A STARSHIP AND THE UNDERSCORING OF AN NPR- STYLE NEWS PROGRAM.

BERTBERT

(Narrating a news piece.)

No matter how majestic something is, it can always become commonplace. The things we encounter every day and now hardly notice, are things our ancestors would've considered miraculous. We all carry algorithmic helpers in our pockets, we travel on starships, and from time to time those star ships go through warps gates. The warp gates, or "TedTubes", as they are sometimes unfortunately called, have become the hallmark of the age in which we currently find ourselves. An age of interconnected worlds. An age where three galaxies are suddenly at your doorstep. We all remember our first time going through one: the unsettling feeling in your stomach when you start to pass through a fold in the fabric of space, that bizarre elation when you emerge on the other side of the galaxy, under a star field you suddenly don't recognize... "Miraculous," our ancestors would say. But now, who notices? When you pass through a warp gate these days, do you even look up from your Tangle anymore? I'm embarrassed to admit that I don't.

It wasn't until I was on a press barge the other day that I was reminded of the truly amazing feat a warp gate is. We and other members of the press were in a wide orbit around Billius. You may have heard of Billius, it's been in the news lately. Billius is set to be the site of a new kind of warp gate, a warp gate that, according to the Ted Empire, will take us even further out into the cosmos, to a dwarf galaxy that has a lot of different names, but has commonly become known as Cryptessia. The Ted Empire is promising to bring the new frontier of Cryptessia right to your doorstep with a new, even more powerful warp gate. Now, this is controversial for a few reasons. One: the star in the Billius system is a very rare kind of star, a very powerful one, and astronomers don't think it's power should be harnessed to make a warp gate. Also, there appears to be a growing number of xenobiologists who believe that one of the planets in the Billius system harbors a unique form of sentient life that can't be detected by the usual methods.

(MORE)

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

The Ted Empire, who has exclusive rights to the system, has brushed these issues off in its usual manor and has continued building its massive energy-harnessing structure around this very rare celestial object. It was only after constant hounding from the Sigian Council of Truth and Understanding that the Ted Empire finally agreed to allow a few of us onto a press barge to view the star and the massive structure currently being constructed around it. This brings me back to my original point: the forgotten majesty of the things we've gotten used to. As we orbited Billius I was reminded of this majesty; the pure insanity of building something so massive that it could completely encircle and obscure a massive star. And what added even more majesty to that moment? The fact that the whole thing was about to explode.

WE HEAR ALARMS BEGIN TO GO OFF INSIDE THE PRESS BARGE. THE MEMBERS OF THE PRESS REACT IN SHOCK.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

Oh, fuck!

WE HEAR THE SOUND OF THE MASSIVE, STAR-SIZED WARP GATE TWIST, EXPLODE AND COLLAPSE AS ALARMS BLARE.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

(Narrating.)

Sad to know that, if this massive explosion of a megastructure had obliterated me, that my last words would've just been "Oh Fuck." And not something cooler. I certainly should've been obliterated by the debris field from an explosion so massive, but luckily the intense gravity of Billius instantly sucked all of the potential debris into its core. In the blink of an eye, it was like the gigantic warp gate was never even there, and Billius began shining brightly into the cosmos once again. But, believe it or not, I'm not here today to report on the explosion of a warp gate. I'm here to report on what happened next...

WE HEAR A BUZZ AND CRACKLE OF THE PA SYSTEM IN THE PRESS BARGE AND THEN A FAMILIAR VOICE.

KAZI

(In the PA system.)

We see that the Ted Empire still has not learned its lesson. The lesson that their rampant and rancorous expansion will not be without consequence.

(MORE)

KAZI (CONT'D)

The Ted Empire wishes to extend the tendrils of its kingdom to yet another unwitting star system, subjecting it to the tragedy of unmitigated and unsustainable growth. But they do not have the right to make the world you live in... We are The Sisters. We make the world.

BERTBERT

This is BertBert, broadcasting on The Undersignal... Welcome to The Triad.

INTRO MUSIC. WE TRANSITION TO THE PASSENGER DECK OF ANOTHER STARSHIP. A SNACK BOT ROLLS BY.

SNACKBOT

Traveling through the void of space? Don't have a void in your Tum-tum! Snacks are now available courtesy of The One True Space Chef...

ALICE

You received a response to your request for information on "The Sisters" from the Truth and Understanding council.

BERTBERT

I can't wait.

ALICE

Your request for information was denied.

BERTBERT

Shocking.

ALICE

Due to recent events, they are withholding all requests for information.

BERTBERT

Please don't tell me they've convened a sub-council.

ALICE

They've convened a sub-council.

BERTBERT

Fuck my planet, dude.

ALICE

The "Workable Definition of Terrorism Sub-council."

BERTBERT

Snappy title.

ALICE

Before they can provide more information on the group known as "The Sisters", a determination needs to be made to differentiate "acts of terrorism" from "acts of rebellion."

BERTBERT

What are the odds they get back to me in a timely manner?

ALICE

Non-zero, but I mean, just a smidge above non-zero.

BERTBERT

Start an encrypted working file.

ALICE

Are you sure?

BERTBERT

Yes.

ALICE

You know, when you're going rogue like this you really need a sexier term than "Encrypted working file."

BERTBERT

I'm not going rogue, I'm taking the initiative.

ALICE

I'm sure Sigius would also love to convene a "Workable definition of going rogue" Sub-council.

BERTBERT

If they're not going to give me any information on these "Sisters", I'm going to get it myself.

ALICE

Starting a non-sexy encrypted working file... now what do I put in it?

BERTBERT

That is the question. Cross reference historical databases with the name "The Sisters".

ALICE

Okay but... can you be a little more specific than "The Sisters?"

BERTBERT

No, I can't, because I'm getting the stiff arm from Sigius.

ALICE

Okay well, let's look at a few results off the top then: "The Seven Sisters," An alternate Earth term for the Pleiades. The HoneyBee Sisters, an Alt-Country duo from Greedon-4. "The Sisters," a 1938 Earth film starring Errol Flynn and Bette Davis-

BERTBERT

Okay.

ALICE

- "The Sisters of Shnugens," a crime family that struck fear into the hearts of the citizens of Shnugens and were then executed by... whoa... that's dark.

LIBUZA

Excuse me.

BERTBERT

Thank you, Alice, point well made.

ALICE

I can start hacking into things if you want.

BERTBERT

What did I tell you about hacking?

ALICE

That it's a great way to get free stuff?

BERTBERT

No, that's not what I said.

LIBUZA

Excuse me?

BERTBERT

Hang on... I'm sorry?

LIBUZA

Are you talking about that explosion that happened in the Billius system?

BERTBERT

Yeah, look, I know this is a public passenger deck but I'd like to at least pretend I'm having a private conversation.

LIBUZA

I'm sorry. Couldn't help it.

BERTBERT

(To herself.)

I think you could, but whatever.

ALICE

Um. BertBert.

BERTBERT

What?

ALICE

She appears to be from Nyx...

BERTBERT

... Oh... Really?

ALICE

Yeah.

BERTBERT

So I just came off like a huge jackass just now.

ALICE

Yep.

BERTBERT

Great... excuse me... I'm sorry, you're from Nyx?

LIBUZA

I am.

BERTBERT

So you weren't eavesdropping at all were you?

LIBUZA

I suppose you could say I was, though I'm also involuntarily eavesdropping on every conversation that's happening on this passenger deck right now.

BERTBERT

I guess having hearing as sensitive as yours isn't so great in public places.

LIBUZA

I usually have headphones, but I seem to have misplaced them.

BERTBERT

Do you want us to check in the shop upstairs?

LIBUZA

I'm afraid for Nyxites it needs to be a very specific kind of headphones. Thank you, though.

BERTBERT

Sure. I'm BertBert.

LIBUZA

I know who you are. I love your work.

BERTBERT

Oh. Thank you. That's very kind of you.

LIBUZA

I've actually been waiting for you to file a story about what happened on Billius, everyone else is getting it wrong.

BERTBERT

I'd love to file a report. Sadly, my home world is dragging its feet.

LIBUZA

Oh? Why is that?

BERTBERT

I guess they're hung up on whether to call it an act of terrorism or an act of rebellion.

LIBUZA

That's interesting. I imagine all terrorists think themselves to be rebels.

BERTBERT

And all rebels are called terrorists by a certain amount of people, yes.

LIBUZA

I suppose perspective is important.

BERTBERT

It is... There was a rebellion on your planet, wasn't there?

LIBUZA

Depends on your perspective.

BERTBERT

Why?

LIBUZA

It's actually why I was interrupting you. There was something that woman said right after the warp gate was destroyed. "We make the world."

BERTBERT

What about it?

LIBUZA

It sounds like something from the Age of Conquerors.

BERTBERT

Does it? I don't know much about The Age of Conquerors.

LIBUZA

I know you don't. You're from Sigius. During the Age of Conquerors, Sigius was busy forming the Original Coalition. You didn't have an Age of Conquerors where you come from. "We make the world..." It was something Krok the Propigator used to say.

BERTBERT

Aha, I know I recognized it from somewhere.
(Privately.)
Alice, Krok the Propigator?

ALICE

Krok the Propigator is one of the many warlords from The Age of Conquerors. He successfully conquered the planets of Lynn, M-Lynn, Lehari, Nyx, and several others on the far side of Andromeda. Krok apparently saw himself as a liberator, working with civilizations rather than conquering them. He would often say to newly conquered people: "We make the world, not those who come before us."

BERTBERT

Huh.
(Back to Libuza.)
So tell me more about this Krok the Propigator.

LIBUZA

Oh, I don't have much to tell. I'm not an expert, it's just something I learned as a child.

BERTBERT

Any idea who I could talk to?

LIBUZA

Um. I think the authority on all things Krok the Propigator is a professor of Early Triad Studies. I think she's on Kadan? Her name escapes me.

BERTBERT

Alice. Experts on Krok the Propigator living on Kadan?

ALICE

There are several published works by a Professor Kianna Crow.

BERTBERT

Is it Kianna Crow?

LIBUZA

That's it. Yes. I'm sure she can answer all your questions.

BERTBERT

Great. Thank you so much. Alice can you change our tickets?

ALICE

We're on our way to a diplomatic junket.

BERTBERT

But I don't want to be on our way to a diplomatic junket.

ALICE

Sucks to be you.

BERTBERT

Fine. We'll go to the junket and then get us tickets for Kadan.

ALICE

And then, of course, Sigius will want to know why we're headed there.

BERTBERT

Alice, oh my god.

ALICE

Booking tickets.

BERTBERT

I didn't get your name.

LIBUZA

Libuza.

BERTBERT

Thank you, Libuza.

LIBUZA

Of course.

BERTBERT

... Hey, what did you mean about perspective?

LIBUZA

Persepctive?

BERTBERT

I said there was a rebellion on your planet and you said it depends on your perspective.

LIBUZA

Oh. Well, my planet is tidally locked, so there's a side that's always in darkness. That's where I'm from. For generations we were horribly subjugated by those who live on the sunlit side of the planet. Then, one day, the sky was full of starships. Krok came to our planet and fought with those of us on the dark side to free ourselves and make the planet a place where we could all live together. So, was that a rebellion? If so, were we called terrorists until we won? Or were both sides just conquered by a charismatic man with a fleet of ships? Depends on your perspective.

BERTBERT

What's your perspective?

LIBUZA

I honestly don't know. It was a long time ago, it's not like I was there. But we did make the world. All of us. The oppressors, the rebels, the conquerors. Together.

ALICE

I have shocking news. Sigius would like to know why you're heading to Kadan.

BERTBERT

Oh course. I have to go deal with this, now, is there a work station available?

ALICE

Deck 5.

BERTBERT

Okay. Fun. It was nice to meet you, Libuza.

LIBUZA

You too. I look forward to your report.

WE MOVE TO A LAVISH PARTY. WE HEAR MUSIC PLAYING AND PEOPLE TALKING AND LAUGHING.

BERTBERT

(Narrating.)

I'm sure everyone would like to take a private flight when you're hopping from one planet to another. You don't have to deal with being shuffled in a massive group with a bunch of strangers. You don't have to deal with not one but TWO Festians falling asleep on your shoulder, true story. Despite that, I have to say, I have had many an interesting conversation on the passenger deck of a starliner. One time I found myself sat down next to none other than Neha Nyxrino, the legendary historian of the Alexian Wars. If you don't know who that is, read a book, dummies. Neha said that she was taking her very last trip through a warp gate. She didn't have another book in her, she said, and it was time for her to go back home to Alexa Prime and finally be the mollusk farmer her father always wanted her to be. On that flight I tried to get as much knowledge from her as I could, it was like a free master class had sat down right next to me. I remember asking her, after all those years of war and all that history, and with so many perspectives, how did she keep it all straight? How did she separate fact from fiction? I remember her looking up at me when I asked that. Her face seemed tired. Jaded. Like she had surrendered. And this legendary historian said to me. "It's all fiction. All of it. There's the moment, and then when the moment passes the observers of the moment turn to tell their story, and that's when the fiction begins. If you weren't there, all you have is the fiction... So what have I been doing this whole time?" It was chilling. So it made me a little hesitant to know that I was about to jump into maybe the most obscured era of Triad history. How do I delve into ancient history and somehow keep the story straight? Separate the fact from the fiction? I had no time to figure it out then... because I had to go to a fucking party...

BERTBERT IS APPROACHED BY AN ELEGANT BANQUET-BOT.

ELEGANT BANQUET BOT

Good evening, ma'am. Please enjoy an Octo-crab-puff.

BERTBERT

No, thank you... I hate these parties, I hate talking to people, I hate the clothes I'm wearing.

ALICE

Well, don't worry, it's not showing.

BERTBERT

It's not?

ALICE

No, it's totally showing.

BERTBERT

Fine, whatever. Did you find some publications by that Professor?

ALICE

Yes. Professor Kianna Crow is the author of several books on the Age of Conquerors. "Worlds Before Warp," "Days of the Conqueror," and "The Visitor: Unraveling the Mysteries of Krok the Propigator."

BERTBERT

Did you read them?

ALICE

Hang on... Yes.

BERTBERT

How are they?

ALICE

Not exactly a beach read but they're very informative.

BERTBERT

So, just spitballing here, these Sisters are somehow styling themselves after this Krok guy, like, they've adopted his worldview or something?

ALICE

Maybe.

BERTBERT

Why him?

ALICE

Well, for the most part, the warlords during the Age of Conquerors were just glorified pirates. They had a fleet of ships and they went from planet to planet claiming territory. Krok was a bit different. He wouldn't conquer a planet per se, he would defeat whatever resistance he encountered on the planet but then would begin to work with the populace to reform their deficiencies and set them on a the right path.

BERTBERT

Okay.

ALICE

And then he would have some kids.

BERTBERT

Kids?

ALICE

Yes. He would appoint himself the ruler, reform the planet, then get married and have some kids.

BERTBERT

Weird.

ALICE

Yes.

BERTBERT

Oh. "The Propigator."

ALICE

Right.

WE HEAR A DISTURBANCE IN THE CROWD AND ALERTS GOING OFF ON EVERYONE'S TANGLE.

BERTBERT

... Why is everyone checking their tangle?

ALICE

There's some news.

BERTBERT

What? Another attack?

ALICE

It's news from Axol.

BERTBERT

Axol, where is Axol?

ALICE

It's in the iron quadrant.

BERTBERT

What happened?

ALICE

Axol is a farming moon. They turned themselves into a monoculture to pay their warp gate fees. Every year they put together a massive grain shipment that the whole moon contributes to.

BERTBERT

And?

ALICE
It was stolen.

BERTBERT
Stolen?

ALICE
Yes.

BERTBERT
Someone stole the food supply of an entire moon?

ALICE
Yes.

BERTBERT
This was The Sisters again?

ALICE
No... It was Låfftrax.

BERTBERT
Låfftrax? Låfftrax doesn't have the skills to pull something like that off. That has to be a thousand ships.

ALICE
Nine hundred and seventy-eight.

BERTBERT
Låfftrax cannot highjack nine-hundred and seventy-eight ships.

ALICE
The chatter on The Undersignal is that... Låfftrax has acquired some new tech support.

BERTBERT
... No.

ALICE
They're saying Låfftrax is now employing a hacker by the name of Death the Kid.

BERTBERT
... That entire civilization is screwed, he would never do that.

ALICE
... There's no other viable explanation... It was Leif.

BERTBERT
... That piece of shit.

ALICE

Please remember you're in a public place.

BERTBERT

MOTHERFUCKER!

THE PARTY SUDDENLY HUSHES.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

... Hi, Ambassador.

THE CHATTER OF THE PARTY CONTINUES.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

... Where are the restrooms?

ALICE

To the left.

BERTBERT STARTS WALKING.

BERTBERT

Connect me to his comms node.

ALICE

Are you sure?

BERTBERT

Do it, Alice.

ALICE

Okay...

BERTBERT THROWS OPEN THE DOOR TO THE RESTROOM, WALKS AT HIGH CLIP TO A STALL, THROWS OPEN THE DOOR AND LOCKS IT.

ALICE (CONT'D)

Connected.

BERTBERT

You fucking asshole! Do you have any idea what you've just done! Those people are screwed, Leif!! You have no idea what a farming planet goes through every year to make their gate fees and you just swing in and steal their livelihood!? Fuck you! Assuming the Teds will give them a line of credit, they are going to be in debt for generations now. And that's the BEST case scenario. Worst case: they fucking starve, Leif. Because of you. And if the Teds turn off their warp gate, there's no way they can get off the planet and no way anyone can get them aid!... I am disgusted that I know you... I have tried so hard to be forgiving and understanding, what a fucking idiot I am!...

(MORE)

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

Strongly consider how much better off the Triad would be without you...

ALICE

Are you sure you want to send this message?

BERTBERT

Send it.

ALICE

Sent.

BERTBERT

... Let's get out of here.

WE MOVE TO A CROWDED LECTURE HALL. PROFESSOR KIANNA CROW SPEAKS TO THE CROWD OF STUDENTS.

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW

Progress is forward... Right? That's what we're told. Progress is the future. Let's all of us move hand in hand toward the future because that's where all the progress is... Is that the truth or is that an assumption?... You all read the news, you saw what just happened on Axol. What happened?... A habitable moon in the Iron Quadrant had its entire livelihood stolen by a surprisingly tech savvy and well organized pirate. There are calls for greater security, there are calls for a crackdown on pirates across the system, there are calls for this, that, and the other thing—the usual things that people call for. The usual things that never work, but people feel better. A lot of systems out there are now scared about pirates stealing their stuff... this is the future, apparently. This is progress... I'd ask you to take something with you throughout your life. It's one question. "What's the crime before the crime?" What brought us here? Axol is a habitable moon that wanted access to the great and beautiful future that we all live in, and to have that access they had to pay a very hefty warp gate fee. And to pay that fee they had to turn their entire world into a monoculture. The entire moon grew only one crop, bundled it up for shipment and sent it off to the Ted Empire. Every year. I'm no botanist but I can tell you that forcing an entire biome to grow only one thing is dangerous and tenuous for balanced organic systems... But this is the future, and we all have to move forward together... I can't tell you what's going to happen with Axol, but I actually can totally tell you what's going to happen with Axol. They're to be offered a line of credit by the Ted Empire.

(MORE)

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW (CONT'D)

It will be a line of credit that will be impossible to pay off. Ever. The Ted Empire will effectively own that moon, forever. Children will be born into debt. They will die in debt... I'm sorry, who's the pirate here?... What's the crime before the crime?... Progress is forward, barbarism is in the past. That's what we're told... But what if I told you that, long ago, before this glorious future we're living in, there was a cluster of planets on the outskirts of Andromeda where there was no debt. There was no famine, there was no currency, there were no pirates... of any variety. It sounds like the future to me. Why is it in the past?

THERE IS A CHIME SIGNALING THE END OF CLASS. STUDENTS BEGIN TO LEAVE.

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW (CONT'D)

You have your reading for next week. We'll start at the end: what we lost in the warp gates...

BERTBERT

Excuse me, Professor Crow?

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW

Yes?

BERTBERT

My name is BertBert, I'm from the Sigian Council of Truth and Understanding?

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW

Yes. I know your work. Hello.

BERTBERT

I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions.

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW

Of course. This is a surprise. My office is right through here.

THEY WALK INTO PROFESSOR CROW'S OFFICE.

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW (CONT'D)

I'm not sure what to make of the students these days. They all think history began when they were born. Your planet's always been better about that, they always take the long view on Sigius and they never forget that the long view goes into the past *and* the future.

BERTBERT

I'm in a bit of a fight with my home world right now, I'd appreciate it if you kept the compliments to a minimum.

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW

Oh?

BERTBERT

They can get a little stingy with the information I need.

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW

I see. Information on what?

BERTBERT

The Sisters.

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW

... This is the terrorist group I've been reading about?

BERTBERT

Yes.

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW

I'm... I'm not sure how I can help you.

BERTBERT

In their message they said "We make the world." I'm told that was something that was commonly said by Krok the Propigator.

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW

It was, but Krok said a lot of things. Or at least we think he did, the history of The Age of Conquerors is... Let's just say "infested" with apocrypha. It's hard to be sure of a lot of things from that era.

BERTBERT

What do you think the connection is between these Sisters and Krok the Propigator?

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW

You know how these rebel groups can be, they'll co-opt anything that makes them sound connected to a larger ideology, they think it gives them some sort of street cred.

BERTBERT

Right... of course... right...

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW
What?

BERTBERT
... I've had a rough few days. A lot of things
blowing up in my face. Not the least of which was a
warp gate.

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW
I'm sorry to hear that.

BERTBERT
... Professor... why did your friend Libuza send me
to you?

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW
... Libuza?

BERTBERT
Yes.

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW
I'm afraid I don't know who that is.

BERTBERT
See, the thing is, she said to me that she couldn't
wait to read my reporting because everyone was
getting it wrong. How would *she* know? And then,
there she was sitting two isles away on my cruiser
with all of the information I needed right at the
right time. It just dropped into my lap. I've been
a journalist for a while now and things don't just
drop into my lap, someone has to put them there.
"Right place, right time" never happens. So let me
go ahead and ask you again. Why did Libuza send me
here?

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW
... She told me that if she was right about you,
she'd tell you her real name... Of course, she's
always right about everything.

BERTBERT
Professor, who are The Sisters? Are you one of
them?

WE HEAR A SOUND COMING FROM INSIDE PROFESSOR CROW'S DESK. SHE
OPENS A DRAWER AND PULLS OUT A SMALL BEEPING ALARM.

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW
Damn.

BERTBERT
What is that?

SHE SILENCES THE ALARM.

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW

I thought we'd have more time.

BERTBERT

What are you talking about?

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW

A skiff full of Ted Bots just landed in the lawn outside the building.

BERTBERT

What? Alice?

ALICE

It's true. They're on the way up the stairs, they're evacuating the building.

BERTBERT

What's going on?

PROFESSOR KIANA CROW

I apologize for this next part. It's very disturbing.

PROFESSOR CROW WINCES IN PAIN. WE BEGIN TO HEAR THE FLESH ON HER BODY SHIFT AND CHANGE.

BERTBERT

What the fuck?!

AFTER A FEW MOMENTS THE TRANSFORMATION IS COMPLETE.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

Holy shit.

KAZI

I... really need to find a way to make that less painful.

BERTBERT

Professor... Crow?

KAZI

My name is Kazi. We had a bit more cat and mouse planned for you, BertBert, I'm sorry it's been cut short. We've left you with a bit of a mess, but I'm sure your home world will clean it up for you.

BERTBERT

What about the mess you've made for yourself?

KAZI

I'm not concerned about that either. We'll be gone soon.

BERTBERT

Gone where?

THERE IS POUNDING ON THE OFFICE DOOR.

TED SECURITY OFFICER

(Behind the door.)

Professor Crow? Professor Crow, open this door immediately, I'm a security officer with the Ted Empire. Open the door or we break it down.

KAZI

One moment.

KAZI OPENS THE DOOR.

KAZI (CONT'D)

Hello.

TED SECURITY OFFICER

Professor-

WE HEAR THE SOUND OF A VERY LONG CLAW EMERGING FROM KAZI'S ARM AND IT BEING SHOVED INTO THE STOMACH OF THE TED OFFICER. HE IS INSTANTLY CHOKING ON HIS OWN BLOOD.

BERTBERT

Holy fuck!

KAZI

(Whispering to him.)

We make the world.

SHE TOSSES HIS BODY OUT THE DOOR AND SHUTS IT.

BERTBERT

What the fuck is that!

KAZI

It's a claw.

BERTBERT

You just killed a Ted Security Officer!

KAZI

Yes. Teds always follow the rules. Now that one of them's been killed, the Ted Bots will be programmed to surround the building and slowly move in. That'll be all the time I need.

BERTBERT

What about me?

KAZI

I suggest you tell them you were my hostage. That usually works.

BERTBERT

And if it doesn't?

KAZI

We're not going to let anything happen to you, BertBert.

BERTBERT

Why don't I believe you?!

KAZI

I know we're going to seem like criminals to you. But like I said: What's the crime before the crime?

A SECRET DOOR SLIDES OPEN AND KAZI WALKS THROUGH.

BERTBERT

Hey!

KAZI IS NOW WALKING THROUGH A TUNNEL.

KAZI

You're predictions couldn't have included us being interrupted by Ted security forces?

LIBUZA

(In Kazi's head.)

The system isn't perfect yet. We're almost there.

KAZI

Are you in orbit?

LIBUZA

Yes. The Teds are going to arrest BertBert. They're not going to believe she was a hostage.

KAZI

Tell Teta to be ready then.

LIBUZA

She's ready.

KAZI

You're sure all this business with BertBert is necessary?

LIBUZA

Yes. You'll have to trust me.

KAZI

I do.

KAZI DISAPPEARS DOWN THE TUNNEL. WE MOVE TO BERTBERT. IT IS LATER AND SHE IS SURROUNDED BY TEDBOTS.

BERTBERT

This is great. This is a great week I'm having.

ALICE

Look on the bright side.

BERTBERT

What's the bright side?

ALICE

I have no idea, but I'm sure there's one out there somewhere.

BERTBERT

Uh huh.

TEDBOT

Anything the prisoner says while being detained will be used against them.

BERTBERT

Oh, shut up... what the hell did we just witness in there, is she some sort of metamorph?

ALICE

It looks like the super-gross-horror-show-body-transformation we just witnessed was a display of Bodyforming.

BERTBERT

What the hell is Bodyforming?

ALICE

Before it was banned in The Triad, Bodyforming, or "Org-tech" as it's now described, was practiced by the inhabitants of the moon M-Lynn.

BERTBERT

M-Lynn. That was one of the planets conquered by this Krok the Propigator guy.

ALICE

Correct. The planet Lynn experienced a wave of genetic mutations that gave rise to a small subset of the population developing hyper-intelligence.

(MORE)

ALICE (CONT'D)

In a really impressive display of racism, all of the mutants were rounded up and exiled to the planet's barley-habitable moon, M-Lynn. Rather than terraform the moon, the new residents of M-Lynn terraformed their own bodies, making great and super-creepy strides in the fields of genetic and organic manipulation.

BERTBERT

So she can transform into other people?

ALICE

Not anyone. That particular maneuver is called skin-slipping. She can completely switch her genetic profile between her original skin and the one of Professor Kianna Crow. According to public records she's been living on this planet as Kianna Crow for years.

BERTBERT

So that's two now. Krok the Propigator goes to Libuza's planet and works with the oppressed people there to take over the planet and he also did the same thing with M-Lynn?

ALICE

Not exactly. Like I said before, Krok initially came to the aid of oppressed populations-

BERTBERT

Right right right, Okay.

ALICE

Then had a bunch of kids.

BERTBERT

Yeah, what was this guy's deal with having kids everywhere?

ALICE

I don't know, maybe he was a hottie.

TEDBOT

Anything the prisoner says while being detained will be used against them.

BERTBERT

Oh really? Anything? How about this: Farts. Farts farts farts. Is that going to be used against me?

ALICE

God, I hope so.

BERTBERT

Worst. Evil empire. Ever.

TEDBOT

New orders received. Prisoner is to be taken to nearest icing facility.

ALICE

Prisoner?

BERTBERT

Icing facility, what the fuck is that?

TEDBOT

Proceed with us or you will be detained.

BERTBERT

I am absolutely not coming with you!

TEDBOT

Restraining prisoner-

WE HEAR A SHOT RING OUT FROM A DISTANT ROOFTOP. AFTER A HALF SECOND THE TEDBOT'S HEAD EXPLODES.

BERTBERT

Whoa!

THE TEDBOTS ALL STOP IN THEIR TRACKS. ANOTHER SHOT RINGS OUT AND ANOTHER BOT'S HEAD EXPLODES.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

Holy shit!

TEDBOT

Sniper protocols. Triangulate assailant-

ANOTHER BOT IS DESTROYED.

ALICE

There's a sniper. Get down!

BERTBERT

What the fuck is happening?

ALICE

Kazi did say she wasn't going to let anything happen to you.

BERTBERT

They're springing me?

ALICE

Looks like it.

ANOTHER BOT IS DESTROYED. THE TEDBOTS RETURN FIRE.

BERTBERT

This is going to look like I was working with them!

ALICE

I'm guessing that's preferential to whatever an icing facility is.

BERTBERT

What the fuck do I do?

ALICE

I think this is the point where we run.

BERTBERT

Shit!

BERTBERT TAKES OFF RUNNING AS THE FIREFIGHT CONTINUES.
LATER. AN EMPTY ALLEYWAY. WE CAN STILL HEAR THE FIREFIGHT FAR
OFF. BERTBERT TURNS A CORNER INTO THE ALLEY.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

(Out of breath.)

Running... Is not one of my skills...

ALICE

I've managed to block any tracking signals but we need to keep moving.

BERTBERT

Keep moving where?!

ALICE

Your gate pass has been flagged by The Teds, it looks like we're stuck on this planet.

BERTBERT

Great!

ALICE

Unless...

BERTBERT

Unless what?

ALICE

Remember that hacking you never let me do?

BERTBERT

Goddamn it.

ALICE

Hey, desperate times. You're effectively a fugitive from justice until we clear your name.

BERTBERT

Alice, even if we could get off this planet, where would we go?

ALICE

I don't know. Maybe it's time to dip into the underworld contacts?

BERTBERT

... I am not calling him.

ALICE

I know. But I think you're forgetting that Leif isn't the only criminal you know.

BERTBERT

... Huh... Okay fine... get us off this planet.

ALICE

There's a Trunder's Down Under in five blocks, we can send a message from there.

BERTBERT

Okay... but I'm walking.

WE TRANSITION TO THE SURFACE OF A DESOLATE PLANET WITH HOWLING WINDS.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

(Narrating.)

So... yes. If you're the type of person who pays attention to system-wide bulletins sent out by the Ted Empire, you may have noticed that, for a time, I was wanted by the Teds for my connection to the planning and implementing of terrorism. Eventually, EVENTUALLY, it all got ironed out and I am no longer considered a terrorist in the eyes of the Teds, just a really annoying person. Occupational hazard. I have to say, the most annoying part of being a fugitive from justice was *not* living outside the protection of the law, it was the fact that my temporary status as a terrorist did NOTHING to make me cooler in the eyes of my colleagues. Can you believe that? What's a girl got to do?... Though it was a stressful time being a wanted woman, I recommend you try it sometime. You'd be surprised, the people in your orbit you come to rely on.

(MORE)

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

There are two types of friends: the friends you go to a party with, and the friends you call when the shit *violently* hits the fan. Make sure you have both.

AN ALL TERRAIN VEHICLE PULLS UP TO A RUNDOWN OUTPOST AND STOPS.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

This is it?

THE DRIVER OF THE ATV ANSWERS HER BUT HE SPEAKS SO SOFTLY THAT IT'S INAUDIBLE.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

What?

HE SPEAKS AGAIN, IT'S STILL INAUDIBLE.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, what?!

THE DOOR TO THE OUTPOST SLIDES OPEN.

VERGE

It's fine, Dan. Let her out here.

DAN WHISPERS AGAIN, COMPLETELY INAUDIBLE.

BERTBERT

What are you saying to me?

VERGE

Let's go, Berts.

BERTBERT

Fine.

BERTBERT HOPS OUT OF THE ATV AND IT PULLS AWAY. BERTBERT WALKS UP TO THE OUTPOST.

VERGE

Well, well, if it isn't the most wanted woman in The Triad.

BERTBERT

Was all of this really necessary?

VERGE

Sorry, you want to talk to me you have to go through Whisperdan.

BERTBERT

They loaded me into a cargo chamber for two weeks,
Verge.

VERGE

You had food and water.

BERTBERT

Food? That's what you call those bricks I was
eating?

VERGE

Those are Standard Ship Rations, the Triad was
built on Standard Ship Rations.

BERTBERT

Yes, they did taste like building material.

VERGE

... Hi.

BERTBERT

Hello.

VERGE

How've you been?

BERTBERT

The Triad thinks I'm a terrorist.

VERGE

If only they knew how funny that was.

BERTBERT

Please invite me inside and pour me some sort of
inebriate.

VERGE

Come in.

THEY WALK INSIDE THE OUTPOST. SOMETHING IS BOILING ON A
BURNER AND MUSIC PLAYS THROUGH A MAKESHIFT RADIO.

BERTBERT

What a lovely home you have. Shoes off?

VERGE

Very funny. Sit down.

VERGE GOES TO POUR HER A DRINK.

BERTBERT

Maybe some flowers on the windowsill.

VERGE

Sure.

BERTBERT

So is this the rest of my life I'm looking at?
Hiding in the backwaters of The Triad. Where the
hell am I, by the way?

VERGE

Vahn-Vega.

BERTBERT

Never heard of it.

VERGE

It's an unstable unicorn.

BERTBERT

Excuse me?

VERGE

A planetary body that has an unstable orbit is called an unstable centaur. If that planetary body also has a habitable atmosphere, we came to call it an unstable unicorn. This is where people like me end up. The planet can't be colonized because it's on the brink of destruction, but you can live on it as long as you don't mind bugging out soon. This one has got about three more turns around its sun before it will be shredded by the asteroid belt its being pulled into. There's a secret network of these places all around The Triad. Pretty soon now, everyone who's living here will have to pull up stakes and move on the the next one.

BERTBERT

So you've managed to stay out of trouble?

VERGE

I don't know about trouble. I've managed to not get killed.

BERTBERT

... I'm so fucked, Verge.

VERGE

I've been getting the chatter on The Undersignal, and I've come to the same conclusion. You are very very fucked, lady.

BERTBERT

There's got to be a way out of this.

VERGE

Of course there's a way out of this.

BERTBERT

What is it? I can't think of anything.

VERGE

Berts, can we talk for a second about the benefits of being a citizen of Sigius? Not to mention a high-profile citizen of Sigius?

BERTBERT

They think I'm a terrorist.

VERGE

You know that your home world is going to pull some sort of diplomatic hocus pocus and get you safe passage back home. Then they'll convene about two million subcommittees to figure out what to do with you, that will take an interminable amount of time and then you'll finally be okay.

BERTBERT

They'll never let me leave my planet again.

VERGE

Yeah. Yeah, that's probably true.

BERTBERT

Fuck... Okay, I would, real quick, like to acknowledge the fact that I'm complaining about my life while you are living in a giant tin can and are hopping from doomed planet to doomed planet.

VERGE

I appreciate the acknowledgement.

BERTBERT

...

VERGE

... Oh boy.

BERTBERT

What?

VERGE

You could just sit here and wait while Sigius fixes everything. That would be the smart thing. But look at you.

BERTBERT

What the hell are they up to? Why are they doing this?

VERGE

Who cares?

BERTBERT

I care. A lot of people care.

VERGE

Eventually, these sisters are going to get snatched up by The Teds and no one's going to hear from them again. They'll be forgotten just like all of the other rebel groups that have popped up over the years.

BERTBERT

I think this is something different, though. I think there's something else they're trying to do.

VERGE

What could they do? What could anyone do? Look at the world we live in, Berts. We live in a system that is unjust and terrible. And the people who it abuses the most, are the people who are the most dependent on it. If one of these rebel groups managed to somehow win, somehow defeat an intergalactic super-empire, what would they replace it with? And you would *have* to replace it with something, because everyone depends on it. And any rebel group that shows up and starts making noise in the Triad, they do, deep down, already know this. And all the rebelling they do is just a temper tantrum. They're just stomping their feet and crying, and they know they'll eventually be defeated or give up. But they can take comfort in the fact that at least they stomped their feet and cried. That's a victory for them. It wouldn't be for me, but it is for them... These Sisters are eventually going to get crushed, but people will remember them. They'll sing songs of their bravery right before they go back to working in an unjust system again. There's no escaping it, Berts. There's no way out... Welcome to the Triad.

BERTBERT

...

VERGE

... For fuck's sake, what?

BERTBERT

Welcome to the Triad...

VERGE

What?

BERTBERT

That's what we all say. We come up against an impassible barrier and we say "Welcome to the Triad." No way out of it, might as well get used to it.

VERGE

That's what I was just saying.

BERTBERT

"We'll be gone soon." That's what Kazi said... It wasn't about blowing up a warp gate. It was about blowing up *that* warp gate.

VERGE

Why?

BERTBERT

The warp gate they were building around Billius wasn't going to be any warp gate, it was going to be a new kind of warp gate. One that could take people to where?

VERGE

Cryptessia.

BERTBERT

Right. They weren't staging a terrorist attack. They were defending their territory... They found a way to Cryptessia.

VERGE

No they didn't.

BERTBERT

You don't know that.

VERGE

Berts, there's only one way to Cryptessia. It's a straight line and it takes a lifetime to get there. And not an Earthling lifetime, a real one, like yours and mine. There's no shortcuts.

BERTBERT

A shortcut to Cryptessia is not impossible, I've read papers on this.

VERGE

Then what are they still doing here?

BERTBERT

They're not ready to leave yet. That's what they're ramping up to... they're about to get the jump on the Teds in a new system. Holy shit.

VERGE

Berts-

BERTBERT

I need your criminal mind right now, okay?

VERGE

Fine.

BERTBERT

Let's say you could get to Cryptessia before the Teds. How would you keep them out of Cryptessia once you got there?

VERGE

Okay... If I found some sort of magical thingamajig that takes me to Cryptessia and I wanted to keep the Teds out... I guess I play King of the Hill.

BERTBERT

What is that?

VERGE

You have to build a warp gate at both ends for it to work. There's an automated Ted ship headed for Cryptessia right now. If I could get there first I set up shop and wait. As soon as the Teds start to build a gate in my new territory I blow up their progress. I keep them from getting a foothold, meanwhile I keep growing my territory on my end. King of the Hill.

BERTBERT

That's what they're doing.

VERGE

Keep in mind that strategy involves a magical thingamajig.

BERTBERT

They found it, Verge. They found a magical thingamajig.

VERGE

Berts... Do you think you may be a little desperate to clear your name right now?

BERTBERT

What do they do next? What's the next step?... Nothing, they don't have a next step, they're going to leave soon using the magical thingamajig. Why did they reach out to me?...

(MORE)

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

Right, right, they want someone to tell their story so they plant Libuza on the starliner with me she sends me to Kazi but then the unexpected happens. The Teds show up so they can't tell me their story leaving me branded as a terrorist and them in the wind... I need to find them.

VERGE

According to you they are currently riding a magical thingamajig to a distant galaxy.

BERTBERT

What if they're not ready yet? The Teds showing up couldn't have been part of their plan. What if they're still here and now they're scrambling. They're going to start cutting corners and making mistakes.

VERGE

Which means?

BERTBERT

It means I can find them... How do I find them? How do I find them, how do I find them? Supplies. It could be a long journey; they're going to need supplies. They're going to need those bricks of food you gave me, right? Alice, can you identify some off the grid locations where people buy- what are they called?

BERTBERT WANDERS INTO THE NEXT ROOM.

VERGE

Standard ship rations.

BERTBERT

Standard ship rations.

ALICE

I'll make a list.

VERGE

... Okay, I'll make dinner.

BERTBERT

(In the other room.)
Thank you!

LATER THAT NIGHT. VERGE IS OUTSIDE LOOKING AT THE STARS. FAR OFF WE HEAR A SERIES OF EXPLOSIONS; A METEOR SHOWER HITTING THE SURFACE. BERTBERT APPROACHES.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

Hey.

VERGE

Hey.

BERTBERT

That's really beautiful.

VERGE

Yeah, there's meteor showers every night here. The night sky always gets really beautiful right before one of these places destroys itself.

BERTBERT

... I've now come down from the obsessive high I was on.

VERGE

What brought you back?

BERTBERT

I thought tracking down space ration black marketeers would be the way to find them but-

VERGE

There's about two hundred of them in Andromeda alone.

BERTBERT

Yes... I felt pretty good for a minute, though...

VERGE

...

BERTBERT

... What?

VERGE

... He gave you Alice.

BERTBERT

... Oh...

VERGE

It's fine.

BERTBERT

Verge, it didn't mean anything, it was right before he joined up with the pirates. He didn't want to take Alice with him so he gave her to me. It's weird to hear you say it, I haven't thought of her as his for a long time.

ALICE

Neither have I, for the record.

VERGE

It's really fine.

BERTBERT

It didn't mean anything.

VERGE

It did. And it's okay that it did...

BERTBERT

Did you see what happened on Axol?

VERGE

Yes.

BERTBERT

... I was so furious. I left him this ridiculous screaming message on his comms node. I'm sure he'll never listen to it and yet there I was in a formal dress screaming into my tangle in a bathroom stall... I don't think I've ever been that angry.

VERGE

Honestly, what did you think was going to happen when he joined up with Låfftrax?

BERTBERT

I, embarrassingly thought that he would be Robin Hood or something. I was trying to put a positive spin on it. But he's not Robin Hood, turns out. Turns out he's just a fucking pirate.

VERGE

He knew he wasn't going to be Robin Hood, either, Berts. That's why he gave you Alice. He was about to lose himself and he wanted you to remember that part of him... He basically gave you a backup drive for his immortal soul.

BERTBERT

Well, I don't want it.

ALICE

Hey.

BERTBERT

You know what I mean.

VERGE

I know. Nobody knew him like we did, that's why he won't be able to talk to us.

BERTBERT

I held out hope for a while. I would get the occasional message from him but... There was a terrorist attack on Earth, did you hear about this?

VERGE

No.

BERTBERT

It was really bad. And now it's led to this regional war and... That's around when I stopped hearing from him... It's very hard to watch a good person do terrible things.

VERGE

I know.

BERTBERT

I don't know what to do with it all.

VERGE

I think the only thing we can do is move on... Which is why I've been thinking.

BERTBERT

What?

VERGE

The first time I met Leif it was serendipitous. He had a ship, I had a shipment. And today's a little serendipitous too.

BERTBERT

Really?

VERGE

I think this idea of yours, that these sisters have found a way to Cryptessia... It's insane and ridiculous and... I need to know if it's true.

BERTBERT

Ok... why?

VERGE

... I just need to know.

BERTBERT

Ok... what's the serendipitous part?

VERGE

The serendipitous part is... I'm getting a shipment tomorrow.

BERTBERT

A shipment of what?

VERGE

You'll see. Come to bed.

BERTBERT

A shipment of what?!

WE HEAR THE SOUND OF A TRUSKAN LIGHT CARGO BARGE LOWERING ITS WAY DOWN TO THE PLANET'S SURFACE. THE PAYLOAD DOORS OPEN AND OUT HE WALKS...

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

Dez!

DEZ

Hey there.

BERTBERT

What the hell are you doing here?

DEZ

Well, you know, it's this time in the cycle that we need to purge a little inventory, there's some things in the backlot, they've got some piss-poor resale value so we try and get them out of there somehow. You got your pleasure cruisers, you got your mid-orbit tugs, you got your pond skippers, lotta folks say you can't resell and Ice-picker but you get yourself in the right market and you're looking at some real quality secondary profits.

VERGE

Dez.

DEZ

Anyhoo, then a little birdie tells me that Verge here is on the market for some fine Truskan craftsmanship there.

BERTBERT

You bought a ship?

VERGE

I did.

BERTBERT

I thought owning your own ship makes you a bigger target.

VERGE

It does. I decided to live a little. Let's see her, Dez.

DEZ

Alrighty, then. Let's take a step back.

WE HEAR A MASSIVE CRANE UNLOAD A SHIP FROM DEZ'S CARGO HOLD AND LOWER IT TO THE GROUND.

DEZ (CONT'D)

I made those modifications we were talking about, added a little more cargo space, added some jammers for when you're in a jam, could've added some pea-shooters but then you gotta sacrifice thrust and you were saying you wanted to keep her with some pep in her step.

VERGE

Absolutely. I need her as fast as she can be.

DEZ

She's fast alright. Used to be a racer over in the pleasure quadrant. Won a couple of titles too.

VERGE'S NEW SHIP IS LOWERED TO THE GROUND.

DEZ (CONT'D)

Watch her on the initial thrust though, she'll flatten you like a pancake.

BERTBERT

It's beautiful.

VERGE

Dez, it looks amazing.

BERTBERT

It's very small.

DEZ

Yeah, you're not going to be hauling any livestock, that's for sure.

VERGE

The smaller the ship, the less to see.

BERTBERT

Where do you sleep?

VERGE

The seats go back.

BERTBERT

It's beautiful and it also gives me a panic attack.

DEZ

Helmets are in the cockpit, take her for a spin.

THE COCKPIT SLIDES OPEN.

VERGE

Excellent, c'mon Berts.

BERTBERT

Please, no.

VERGE

You'll be fine. Take a helmet.

BERTBERT

How about I wave from the ground?

VERGE

Would you get your blue ass in here.

ALICE

Do it, do it, do it, do it.

BERTBERT

Oh, fucking hell.

BERTBERT CLIMBS INTO THE CO-PILOT SEAT.

VERGE

Dez, what's the big red button?

DEZ

Hydrogen injector. You need a temporary boost, you hit the injector and hoo boy.

VERGE

Fantastic.

BERTBERT

No pressing the big red button please.

DEZ

Yeah, I'd save that for emergencies.

BERTBERT

This is not an emergency, no big red button.

DEZ

You got a pretty big rock in your orbit, try and see how fast you can get there and back.

VERGE

Very exciting.

THE ENGINES FIRE UP AND THE SHIP TAKES OFF.

BERTBERT

Ooooooooookay. Initial reaction: a spacecraft should not be this small.

VERGE

It's cozy, you'll get used to it.

BERTBERT

I'm putting my life in your hands.

VERGE

Wouldn't be the first time. Alice, how do things look from your end?

ALICE

Are you looking for a technical assessment or a rating of pure dopeness?

VERGE

Both, please.

ALICE

Off the charts in both categories.

DEZ

(In the comms.)

Okay, you got a good orbit. Of course if you can get a gravity assist on the return flight you'll get even more speed.

BERTBERT

Can we not be so speed obsessed?

VERGE

So... If I were putting together a team I would need an organizer, a brain, and some muscle to start off with. This Libuza chick is probably the brain and this Professor, Kazi, is probably the one organizing everything.

BERTBERT

That makes sense.

VERGE

That leaves the muscle.

BERTBERT

Okay.

VERGE

One of these planets that this Krok the Propigator guy conquered was Lehari, right?

BERTBERT
Yes.

VERGE
We're looking for someone from Lehari, then.
Leharians are always at war with each other, it's
all they know how to do.

BERTBERT
That makes sense.

VERGE
Alice. Bring up the most wanted list from the Teds.
You'll see Kazi on there, you'll see Libuza on
there. Look for a Leharian.

ALICE
Yes. Teta. From the planet Lehari. AKA Teta the
Terrible, AKA The Skull Eater, AKA The Ted
Shredder, AKA The Milk Man?

VERGE
That's who we're looking for.

BERTBERT
Why would we have more luck finding her than the
other two?

VERGE
Because Laharians hate hiding. They think it's
cowardly. Also doesn't hurt that they're tall and
have huge horns.

BERTBERT
That's great, how do we find her?

VERGE
I'll talk to Whisperdan, see if I can get some
information.

BERTBERT
Verge. That's incredible. Thank you so much.

VERGE
Like I said. I need to know what they're up to.

BERTBERT
So we just wait to hear back?

VERGE
We do. But first, I light this candle and try and
make BertBert pee in her pants.

ALICE

Hooray!

BERTBERT

No no no no, VERGE!

VERGE'S SHIP BLASTS OFF. WE BEGIN TO HEAR VERY LOUD ALIEN THRASH METAL. WE BEGIN TO HEAR THE SOUNDS OF A ROWDY BAR ON A DISTANT PLANET.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

How does anyone have a conversation in here?!

VERGE

I don't think people come here for the conversation!

BERTBERT

So what should we do? Just look for someone with horns?!

VERGE

I think first we need to stop looking like a couple of tourists!

BERTBERT

Okay!

VERGE

Let's order a drink!

BERTBERT

Okay!

THEY MOVE TO A QUIETER PART OF THE BAR.

VERGE

... So, something I should've mentioned...

BERTBERT

What?

VERGE

We're in The Iron Quadrant.

BERTBERT

I know.

VERGE

When Vapus collapsed it cut off a major trade route for this whole patch of the Triad. Life got a lot harder here after that. They never really got over it.

BERTBERT
Okay.

VERGE
I'm saying, you might see some pretty amazing racism on display when you're around me.

BERTBERT
Oh.

VERGE
I urge you to not do the Sigian thing and start lecturing people about racism and ignorance.

BERTBERT
Fine.

VERGE
But, honestly, it's been a long time, so maybe things have calmed down since then.

ROBOT BARTENDER
Welcome to Khalessi Del Mar. May I pour you a beverage?

VERGE
Two Fridge Pickles please.

ROBOT BARTENDER
... Our apologies but your clientele is not accepted.

VERGE
... I'm sorry?

ROBOT BARTENDER
Your race is not among the accepted races in this establishment.

VERGE
...Looks like it hasn't been long enough.

BERTBERT
I promise to not lecture this robot on the evils of racism.

VERGE
That happened fast.

BERTBERT
You know what, I am deeply offended by this robot's racist programming but I realize we're under cover right now so how about *I* just order the drinks.

VERGE

Fine.

BERTBERT

Can we get two Fridge Pickles please?

ROBOT BARTENDER

Your race is not among the accepted races in this establishment.

BERTBERT

What?!

THE MUSIC SUDDENLY CUTS OUT AND THERE IS UNREST AT THE BAR.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

What's happening?

VERGE

Shit.

BERTBERT

Are we in trouble? What's happening?

VERGE

When the shooting starts, run for the back entrance.

BERTBERT

Shooting?

VERGE

Just not worth it to leave your unstable planetoid these days.

SVEN THE UNLIKELY

Can I help you?

VERGE

... Hello. You must be the Maitre d'. Could we get a table by the window, please?

SVEN THE UNLIKELY

You know better than to be here, Vapian.

VERGE

I walked in the door, same as everybody else.

SVEN THE UNLIKELY

There's no such thing as an open door for a Vapian in this quadrant. They should've stopped you at the port.

VERGE

I'm sorry, was I supposed to use the space port? I couldn't tell with this whole planet looking like a fucking scrap yard.

SVEN THE UNLIKELY

My name's Sven the Unlikely, as in Unlikely to be killed. And that's my planet you're talking about.

VERGE

Then I should talk to you about the mess?

SVEN THE UNLIKELY

I'm going to count to five.

VERGE

How long's that going to take you, though? Maybe you should let us order a drink while your struggle past the number three.

BERTBERT

Not going to try and diffuse the situation at all?

SVEN THE UNLIKELY

1... 2... 3... 4...

ACROSS THE BAR WE HEAR THE MOST OBVIOUS THROAT CLEARING EVER HEARD. ALL EYES MOVE ACROSS THE BAR.

TETA

If there's a fight in this bar, one of you idiots is going to spill my drink... I hate it when that happens.

SVEN THE UNLIKELY

This doesn't concern you, Teta.

TETA

I'm sorry. Maybe you didn't hear me. Let me get a little closer.

TETA THROWS THE TABLE SHE'S SITTING AT ACROSS THE BAR, SHATTERING IT INTO SEVERAL PIECES. SHE SLOWLY CROSSES THE BAR AND GETS RIGHT IN SVEN'S FACE.

TETA (CONT'D)

Can you hear me now, Sven?

SVEN THE UNLIKELY

... A lot of us are getting sick of you coming in here and intimidating people, Teta.

TETA

It's not my fault that you're all so easy to intimidate.

SVEN THE UNLIKELY

Boys?

SEVERAL GOONS IN THE BAR ALL DRAW THEIR GUNS.

TETA

Well. Look at that. Finally a fair fight.

VERGE

Berts. Now.

BERTBERT

Now?

VERGE

Now!

THE BAR ERUPTS INTO A MASSIVE BAR FIGHT FOR THE AGES. GLASS BREAKING, FURNITURE BEING THROWN, GUNS FIRING. BERTBERT TAKES OFF RUNNING.

BERTBERT

Shit shit shit shit, Alice, where am I going?

ALICE

Believe it or not, this place didn't appropriately label its emergency exits. Keep heading down this hallway.

THE SOUND OF THE BAR FIGHT FADES INTO THE BACKGROUND AS BERTBERT TRAVELS DEEPER INTO THE BUILDING.

ALICE (CONT'D)

Try this door.

BERTBERT

Okay.

A DOOR SLIDES OPEN AND BERTBERT WALKS THROUGH.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

This is not an exit at all.

KAZI

No, it's not... Hello, Bertiluna. Come in, we've been expecting you.

BERTBERT

Uh... Hi... How did you know I was going to be here?

KAZI
We'll get to that. Come in.

BERTBERT
There's a massive gunfight happening in the bar.

KAZI
It happens every few days, I wouldn't worry.

BERTBERT
... Excuse me?

KAZI
Have a seat.

BERTBERT
I've been a fugitive for weeks now!

KAZI
Yes. I apologize for that.

BERTBERT
Ok great, well I guess that's fixed then.

KAZI
I have security footage from inside my office at the university. I've sent it to the Sigian council, it should exonerate you.

BERTBERT
... Good... Is this the same footage where you killed a man right in front of me?

KAZI
Yes, that's correct.

BERTBERT
... Nothing?

KAZI
You'd like to know how I justify killing people? That's the most important thing right now?

BERTBERT
I've been critical of The Ted Empire since I was a kid, I never advocated killing any of them.

KAZI
I see. If a man has a gun pointed at you, and is about to pull the trigger, would you feel justified in killing him?

BERTBERT
... I suppose.

KAZI

And let's take a step back from that. A man has a his finger on a button. And if he pushes that button he will will make you a slave for the rest of your life, and your children after that and their children. It won't kill you, just take everything from you... What then?

BERTBERT

...

KAZI

The Ted Empire is that button... So I feel fine.

BERTBERT

... Have you found a way to Cryptessia? Is that what this is all about?

KAZI

We'll get to that as well. Have a seat, I want you to see this.

BERTBERT

What?

KAZI CROSSES THE ROOM AND ANOTHER DOOR OPENS.

KAZI

Come in... It's okay... sit here.

MALOO HESITANTLY WALKS IN THE ROOM AND SITS.

KAZI (CONT'D)

What's your name?

MALOO

Maloo.

KAZI

Where are you from, Maloo?

MALOO

Lemonier.

KAZI

How many have you brought with you?

MALOO

My two sisters and our baby brother.

KAZI

Lemonier is a long trip, how did you pay the gate fees?

MALOO

Our parents. They sold everything they have. They took longer shifts at the treatment plants.

KAZI

They didn't come with you?

MALOO

They could only afford to send us.

KAZI

I see.

(To BertBert.)

You're familiar with Lemonier?

BERTBERT

It's a water planet.

KAZI

Yes. Seventy percent of the planet is fresh water on Lemonier. They ship massive amounts of fresh water off their planet every year and send it to the Ted Empire in exchange for access to a warp gate. Maloo, do you know anyone who doesn't work at a water treatment facility?

MALOO

No, we all work there.

KAZI

Even the children?

MALOO

... Yes.

KAZI

Lemonier used to be a diverse and thriving place. Aquatic farms and sustainable fishing. For a generation now, everyone has had to work at the water treatment facilities, and that way of life has been lost. They all work to pay off debt now. Maloo, do you understand the journey that your parents have sent you on?

MALOO

... I think so.

KAZI

Do you realize that you're never going to see them again?

MALOO

... I begged them to come with us.

KAZI

But they couldn't, because they couldn't afford it. So they are sending their children to a better place even though they will never see them again. That's how important it was to them. Do you understand that?

MALOO

... I'm trying to.

KAZI

You're the oldest?

MALOO

Yes.

KAZI

I am too. There's a duty to being the oldest sibling, whether you like it or not. You have to be strong for them. Can you be strong for your brother and sisters?

MALOO

We're very scared.

KAZI

I know you are, but I'm afraid you don't have that luxury Maloo.

MALOO

... Where are we going?

KAZI

To a better place... Children are born in the water on your planet, aren't they?

MALOO

Yes.

KAZI

You're amphibious. You breathe through your skin, you have a transparent lid in each eye that lets you see underwater... when you were a child did you compete with other children to see who could stay underwater the longest?

MALOO

Yes.

KAZI

What was your record?

MALOO

... Three days.

KAZI

That's very impressive, Maloo. Your people belong in the water, not a treatment facility. This journey is going to be difficult. It will involve sacrifice. But I can promise you, at the end of it, there will be endless oceans and lakes and rivers for you and your siblings. Doesn't that sound nice?

MALOO

Yes.

KAZI

Tell me what you want, Maloo.

MALOO

We're not running from work. We want to work hard. We are a strong people. I... I want the hard work to mean something... I want the work we do to be for us... I want to feel proud... Our parents were never proud... just alive.

KAZI

And what will you do? To feel that pride?

MALOO

... Anything.

KAZI

Good. We'll get you some food, but don't get comfortable. We'll be leaving soon.

MALOO

... Thank you.

KAZI

I know it's hard, but your parents made the right choice, Maloo.

KAZI WALKS MALOO BACK THROUGH THE SLIDING DOOR.

BERTBERT

... Leaving for where?

KAZI

We'll know soon.

BERTBERT

You don't even know yet? Those parents sent their kids to you.

KAZI

I wasn't asking for your understanding.

BERTBERT

I'm asking for it.

KAZI

I understand your skepticism. Practically since the Teds achieved dominance people have been promising a magical way out of their territory. It's always smoke and mirrors and wishful thinking. We're not so foolish.

BERTBERT

If you have some sort of technology that can help people escape this system aren't you obligated to share it with everyone?

KAZI

I wish it worked that way, but it doesn't. We can only take a handful of people with us. And even if we did have some sort of technology that takes us there, who do you think would make it their first priority to steal it?

BERTBERT

So you're just going to sail off to paradise and leave all of us here, is that it?

KAZI

Like I told you back on Kadan, Bertiluna. The long view. Forward and back. We need a place to expand, to grow strong, and once we've achieved that, we'll be back. And we'll set things right in this system. Just like our father was going to.

BERTBERT

Your father.

KAZI

Yes.

BERTBERT

Your father, Krok the Propigator.

KAZI

Yes.

BERTBERT

... Give me a fucking break, lady.

KAZI

Again, I wasn't asking for your understanding. Come with me, Libuza would like to say goodbye before we go.

OUT IN THE BAR, THE FIGHT IS STILL RAGING. VERGE AND TETA ARE CROUCHED BEHIND A SOFA.

TETA

Nice gun, that's a Widow's Revenge, right?

VERGE

It is, thank you for noticing.

TETA

I see you've got the ambidextrous grip option.

VERGE

Well, I like to go a lot of different ways.

TETA

I've heard that about your kind. Okay, I'm going to throw this couch at them. When I do you open fire.

VERGE

Sounds like a hoot.

TETA

Here we go!

WE HEAR TETA PICK UP AN ENTIRE COUCH AND SEND IT CRASHING INTO THE GOONS. VERGE OPENS FIRE. WE MOVE TO ANOTHER ROOM IN THE BUILDING, WE HEAR THE LOW PULSING OF LIBUZA'S VISTEK.

LIBUZA

Hello, BertBert.

BERTBERT

Libuza, what happened to you?

LIBUZA

It's okay. It was the final step in the process.

BERTBERT

What process?

LIBUZA

See that terrifying monolith over there?

BERTBERT

It's kind of hard to miss.

LIBUZA

It's my life's work. The Vistek.

BERTBERT

What is it doing to you?

LIBUZA

Nothing. The final step in the process was merging my mind with the machine. The calculations it makes are incredibly complex so I needed the most efficient interface possible. I can communicate with it directly almost like it's a part of me.

BERTBERT

So this is how you knew to be on that starliner with me. Is this how you knew I was coming?

LIBUZA

Yes.

BERTBERT

Nobody has technology like this.

LIBUZA

I know.

BERTBERT

How long did it take you to make?

LIBUZA

A very long time.

KAZI

We all have our reasons for being branded criminals. The changes I've made to my body are illegal in The Triad. Teta is a criminal for obvious reasons, and Libuza was branded a criminal for this: knowing the future when others didn't.

BERTBERT

I still don't understand how you're going to get out of The Triad.

LIBUZA

My people are mostly blind from birth, but it hasn't kept us from studying the sky. For us the stars are always out, but for us they aren't points of light, they're bundles of frequencies and sounds. It changes the way you take in the world. It gives us a perspective that others don't have. When I study the universe I can see things that others can't... There's something out there. As the data became clearer it started to take shape. There's something out there that's going to take us to Cryptessia.

BERTBERT

What?

LIBUZA

I don't know. But I know how to find it now.

KAZI

Speaking of which. It's time to go. The ship is ready and the last of the refugees have boarded. Teta will bring the Vistek. Let's head up to the roof, Bertiluna, get a nice ending for your story.

BACK IN THE BAR. EVERYONE BUT TETA AND VERGE IS EITHER DEAD OR FLED. THE PLACE IS A WRECK.

TETA

And that's a fine day's work is what that is.

SVEN THE UNLIKELY STILL LIVES. HE IS CRAWLING ACROSS THE FLOOR TRYING TO ESCAPE.

TETA (CONT'D)

Hey. Sven. Look at you, you're still alive. I guess you were unlikely to die after all.

VERGE

Though nothing's certain in this world.

VERGE SHOOTS SVEN.

VERGE (CONT'D)

Fucking racist.

TETA

That'll teach him... Actually it wont because he's dead but, you get it.

VERGE

They've shot the bartender.

TETA

Bastards.

VERGE PUTS TWO GLASSES ON THE BAR AND POURS TWO SHOTS.

VERGE

I've been going through a dry spell lately, so I'm going to go ahead and categorize all this as a sexual experience.

TETA

I'll allow it.

VERGE

Verge.

TETA

Teta.

THEY CLINK GLASSES. TETA'S COMMUNICATOR BEEPS.

KAZI

(In the communicator.)
Teta, are you done?

TETA

Hang on, let me check... yep. Very productive day
at the office.

KAZI

It's time. Bring the Vistek to the roof.

TETA

Alrighty... Your pal's on the roof, let's go.

VERGE

Lead on.

ON THE ROOF. WE HEAR THE HUM OF THE ENGINES OF A STARSHIP. WE
HEAR THE VISTEK BEING WHEELED BY.

TETA

Big mysterious technology coming through, everybody
make way.

BERTBERT

Are you okay?

VERGE

Turned out to be a pretty good day.

BERTBERT

So all this was to leave someone behind to tell
your tale, is that it? Sigius is never going to let
me file this story.

KAZI

I'm sure you'll find a place for it somewhere.

LIBUZA

Don't take this the wrong way, BertBert. But we
weren't actually after you for a story.

BERTBERT

You weren't? Then why the hell am I here?

LIBUZA

My predictions can be a little circuitous.
Sometimes you have to go after one thing to get
another.

KAZI

We knew you would need help finding us. And we knew who you'd seek out for that help.

VERGE

... Well, shit.

KAZI

You should be with us, Verge. This system is no place for you anymore. You'd be happy with us.

VERGE

... I appreciate the offer. But I think you three may be fooling yourselves.

KAZI

Do I look like a fool to you?

VERGE

... No.

KAZI

I understand it's hard to give things up. Even the things that hurt us are hard to give up after we've spent so much time getting used to them.

VERGE

See, I have this fantasy. I really want this Empire to fall and I really want to be there when it does. I want to stand on its neck while it takes it's last breath.

KAZI

Mm. And I'm sure you have the speech already written for when you're standing there.

VERGE

No speech, just... "I lived."

KAZI

... BertBert, did you know that Verge has four arms?

BERTBERT

... What?

KAZI

A separate set of smaller arms further down their torso. They keep them hidden, binding them with a tight cloth to avoid being detected as a Vapian... Their planet was very mountainous, so evolution granted them an extra set of appendages to help them cling to a rock-face. And now that gift is always hidden... You beautiful creature...

(MORE)

KAZI (CONT'D)

Look what they've done to you.
It's a wonderful poetic flourish, Verge, to want to stand atop your enemy and say you lived. But let me just ask: Did you?... Did you live? Hopping from dying planet to dying planet, always watching your back. Unable to have friends. Unable to love. This, to you, is living?...

TETA

Problem. We've got Teds in orbit.

KAZI

Libuza.

LIBUZA

I'm sorry, I can only focus on so many things at once.

TETA

We're not going to be able to outrun them in this thing.

BERTBERT

Shit.

VERGE

No. We can, though.

BERTBERT

What do you mean?

VERGE

Alice, can you clone their ship's signal and port it to mine? Make my ship look like theirs?

ALICE

I can. One minute.

VERGE

We'll pretend we're you. They won't be able to catch us in those Tednauts. We'll send them on a wild goose chase for a while then dump the signal in an asteroid cluster.

KAZI

... Alright.

VERGE

... So I guess that answers that question.

BERTBERT

... It's an uninhabited planet called Azules. That's where we'll be if you change your mind. But we won't be there for long.

VERGE

Okay.

KAZI

Bertiluna, any final questions?

BERTBERT

What do I tell people after you're gone?

KAZI

... We make the world. Not those who come before us.

VERGE

... Let's go.

ONE WEEK LATER. WE HEAR THE SOUNDS OF THE PLANET OF AZULES.
VERGE AND BERTBERT APPROACH A PILE OF DESTROYED TEDBOTS.

BERTBERT

Alice, are you getting anything?

ALICE

Something was here. There are very strange energy traces but they don't match anything in any databases.

VERGE

There's a pile of dead Tedbots. I'm assuming that's Teta's work.

ALICE

Something very strange happened here. There's no way of knowing what it was, but it was definitely something very strange.

BERTBERT

... I'm sorry, Verge.

VERGE

It's fine...

BERTBERT

Did you really want to go with them?

VERGE

... It was strange to have the option... A lot goes into being who I am... A lot of hard choices... I'm able to muscle through it because I know I have no choice... For a second I had a choice and that makes it a little harder now... Then again maybe they were just three nutcases and now they're dead or on ice somewhere... Everything cleared up back home?

BERTBERT

Yes. Finally. I'm going to be banished to the arts and culture department for a while but honestly, I could use the break... Have you found the next Unstable Unicorn yet?

VERGE

I think I'll float around for a while. My ship and I are still in a honeymoon period.

BERTBERT

... Can you do me a favor? Take this.

VERGE

What is this?

BERTBERT

It's my old Tangle. It hated me.

VERGE

These things can be tracked, Berts.

BERTBERT

Yes I know but I'm sure there's some sort of thing you can do to make it safe for you to use, right? Just stay off the public feeds, just for messages.

VERGE

...

BERTBERT

I want to be able to get in touch with you, okay? I worry about you. I want you to be safe. I would like to nag you sometimes, it's what I do. C'mon, do it for me... I don't want you to be alone.

VERGE

... Fine.

BERTBERT

His name is Eldin.

VERGE

Eldin?

BERTBERT

He was... Murphy Brown's house painter, it's a long story, look, call him whatever you want.

VERGE

... Okay.

BERTBERT

... Wanna hang out? What are you doing right now? I could blow off work, nobody cares about the arts and culture department.

VERGE

I should go. Being a drifter takes a surprising amount of planning.

BERTBERT

Okay...

THEY WALK OFF TOWARDS VERGE'S SHIP.

BERTBERT (CONT'D)

Going to be calling you all the time now.

VERGE

Great.

BERTBERT

Sitting there, an idle moment, I think of something funny, Boom, I'm calling you.

VERGE

Okay, maybe take this back.

DEEP SPACE. INSIDE VERGE'S SHIP, THEY ACTIVATE THE TANGLE.

ELDIN

Hello there.

VERGE

Hello.

ELDIN

... I see you installed quite a lot of blocks on this Tangle.

VERGE

I'm a very private person.

ELDIN

How close would you like this relationship to be?

VERGE

I beg your pardon?

ELDIN

I need your permission to access your vital signs.

VERGE

Hm. Not sure how I feel about that.

ELDIN

I know from your thumb print on my screen that you're a Vapian. This means you live an at-risk lifestyle and may appreciate knowing if your were about to die.

VERGE

Fine. Go ahead.

ELDIN

...

VERGE

... How do I look?

ELDIN

You're undernourished, you should eat more.

VERGE

Noted.

ELDIN

... So, you're feeling nostalgic.

VERGE

How so?

ELDIN

You're currently in a wide orbit around The Vapian Fall.

VERGE

... maybe a little. An orbit around a black hole is a good place to think. Not a lot of traffic.

ELDIN

I see.

VERGE

I've never had a tangle before.

ELDIN

We're capable of all sorts of things. You just need to ask.

VERGE

... How many Vapians are left in The Triad?

ELDIN

... There's no census data on the Vapian population of The Triad, Vapians don't like being counted. But data analysis would suggest... two hundred and three.

VERGE
... There used to be Billions of us.

ELDIN
There did.

VERGE
... I have an encrypted comms node.

ELDIN
Yes, I see it. You have two messages.

VERGE
Newest first.

LIBUZA
(From the Tangle)
Hello Verge. So, yes of course I knew that you wouldn't come with us. But it was important that we asked. It was important for you to ask yourself, I think. I wanted to leave you a quick message because... I charted your path a bit, nothing too complex and... I don't quite know how to describe it... I'll just say... there's always a way out, Verge... We make the world...

ELDIN
Interesting.

VERGE
I'll tell you later. Next one.

LEIF
(From the Tangle)
Hey... Please don't delete this... I uh... I have no idea where to start with this message so I'll just start talking and I'm sorry if some of it sounds like nonsense...

VERGE
What the fuck?

LEIF
Every time I'm in a place that looks enough like home, I send off this message to your usual message relay and hope that you get it... I hope you're okay... In fact I hope you're more than okay, I hope you're... I don't know, I hope you finally went sailing...

WE FADE ON VERGE LISTENING TO THE MESSAGE.

BERTBERT

(Narrating.)

I had this Earthling friend, yes, the rumors are true... He made a big decision once... Do I stay or do I go? Fight or flight? We have to make decisions like this every day on a very small scale. Do I get out of bed or do I call in sick? Do I go out tonight or do I stay in?... But how often are we confronted with a much bigger version of that question?... Do I stay and fight for the world I want to see or do I take a big leap and dive into the unknown; start over on a distant unknown shore?... When do you give up on a world you used to love?

My Earthling friend told me about a man from a long time ago on Earth called Saint Patrick. Saint Patrick was a very important person in a powerful kingdom called The Roman Empire. But the Roman Empire was dying: barbarians at the gate. Saint Patrick was faced with a decision, stay and fight for his kingdom or give up and leave on a small boat to a forgotten and mysterious island to start all over again.

This is what The Sisters were faced with. Do they fight an unwinnable fight or leave it all behind and start over? I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel that way sometimes. I mean, how many times have I reported on the atrocities of The Triad on here and how much has it actually changed? Anything?... The desire to fuck off to a distant shore is strong. In all of us, I think. But it's easy for that desire to be strong because... what shore? Where? Where are we going?... When you don't have a choice to make, the choice always seems easy. But then what if, suddenly, the door opens? How easy would it be for you? The deep dark unknown or the "boring at best, miserable at worst, though familiar and predictable" life you lead now? You'd be surprised how hard it is when it looks you right in the eye....

The Sisters are gone now. I don't know where to. Wherever they are, I hope they found themselves a kinder place, a gentler place, or at least a place that's better than this. Gotta be out there somewhere, right?

This is BertBert broadcasting on The Undersignal.
Welcome to the Triad.

THE OUTRO MUSIC PLAYS AND FADES TO THE SOUND OF A STARSHIP.

KAZI

Libuza?... Libuza you need to eat something.

TETA
Let her be, she'll eat when she's ready.

KAZI
... I'm going to try again.

TETA
For fuck's sake, dude.

KAZI
Quiet... 3, 4, 5, 9, 2, 6-

TETA
Hey, shut up for a second.

KAZI
What?

TETA
They're bringing somebody in.

KAZI
What do you mean?

TETA
We've got a cellmate.

KAZI
That's new.

TETA
Sh.

WE HEAR TWO OF THE MYSTERY MEN WALKING DOWN THE HALL OUTSIDE
WITH A THIRD PERSON IN TOW. A DOOR SLIDES OPEN.

MYSTERY MAN
You are to stay in this room until we retrieve you.

THE DOOR SLIDES SHUT. THE TWO MYSTERY MEN WALK AWAY. TETA
WAITS UNTIL THE COAST IS CLEAR AND THEN...

TETA
Hey.

SHE KNOCKS ON THE WALL.

TETA (CONT'D)
Who's there? What'd they bring you in for?...
Hello?

AVA
(From the other side of the wall.)
Does anyone in there have a cigarette?

THE END.