



FEDERATION OF
UNITED REPUBLICS

DATA SLATE - GN01 The Last Crusader

SAMSUN LOBE

The Last Crusader

Ecclesiarch Srisk Montellar. It was his name, but spoken out loud it sounded strange. Perhaps it was because that few alive knew he existed and of those who did, few of them knew his name.

The voice that had stirred his thoughts directed him to sit.

“The Lords of the Balance will be with you momentarily” instructed the Cleric.

Srisk sat on the luxurious chair and chose not to acknowledge the Cleric's presence. He could hear the faint sounds of the chair groaning under the weight of his power armour. It was hard to discern over the whirr of the servos as they aided his aging body into the chair. He turned his gauntlet over and flexed the fingers. He wondered whether he would still be alive if it were not for the life-giving suit that helped to sustain him. Claspings two pressure sensors on either side of his left wrist, he squeezed. A short exhale of pressurised air vented as he removed the gauntlet. Srisk stared at the veins in the back of his hand. His skin was pale, almost white and his long taloned fingers showed the wrinkles of his age.

His thoughts aimlessly darted through his past. To healthier days. At least in the physical sense. It was his strength and tenacity that had helped him to join the prestigious ranks of the Serengal. They had been the first to stand against the plague of the Moretti as the alien race descended from the stars. He remembered those early days with pride. He and his brothers had cut swathes into the vile enemy. They stood invincible. Immoveable. At least for a time. Their victory was brief as no matter how many Moretti lives they took, more replaced them. Thousands more.

After only three months of war Srisk and several other handpicked brothers had been given the dire duty of leaving their stricken home world of Ventor to find salvation. To search for hope for their dying race. They had been called the Crusaders.

If only they had known.

Crusaders. What an empty word. There was no nobility in their actions.

Srisk felt the pang of cowardice despite his honourable intentions. What did it matter now? That was almost two hundred years ago. The Moretti had wiped his people from the universe and continued to swallow space with their insatiable need for dominance.

The Crusaders had failed in their mission. Srisk had spent his life trying to atone for his perceived failings. Ecclesiarch Srisk Montellar. The last Crusader.

His memories clouded and receded as a chirping voice stabbed into his mind. He opened his eyes and automatically re-attached his gauntlet. From under his heavy hooded cloak his yellow eyes glared at the fidgeting creature.

“I told you not to leave the Apocris” demanded Srisk.

The small scaled animal leapt from one foot to the other. Its small body seemed to move independently of the loose fitting clothing it was wearing.

“I know Master. You have been gone for ages. I was worried” It explained.

Srisk reached out a gauntleted hand and placed a single finger on the creature's head in an attempt to stop its incessant moving.

“My instructions were clear Liktus. You must remain hidden upon the ship. If the Noxvata learn of your existence then neither of us will leave this place.”

“Why Master? Why do they hate me?”

“They do not hate my friend. They seek only to keep the balance of things. Sometimes innocent lives are forfeit in those plans.”

“You saved me” stated Liktus. “You did not follow their plans.”

“Exactly” replied Srisk. “That is why it is imperative you remain hidden, now return to the Apocris and prep the ship. Whatever the reason for my summons, I would imagine a quick departure will be needed.”

The red scaled creature reluctantly dragged its heels as it slunk back down the corridor, its tail snaking out behind it.

Srisk knew saving its life had been a mistake. It was just another error he would add to a long list.

His attention was drawn as the two huge black doors in front of him began to open. His armour whined as he stood. He thumped his fist into the side of his knee and the sound vanished. Srisk looked into the vast room beyond. It was ornate, ostentatious bordering on pompous. It had no place on a star-ship. The delicate fretwork and moulding that clung to the rows of pillars offended him. They served no practical function or purpose. Perhaps the Noxvata had constructed this decorative obscenity to instil awe and mystery in those who were deemed worthy of an audience. It could be argued that was a kind of function thought Srisk.

The overtly decorative surroundings were a stark contrast to the warrior that strode towards the Chancel. Everything about him had justified worth. His power armour was one such example. It was old technology by the current standards, but it had proven its reliability in countless situations. The black causite surface was cracked and pockmarked but the super-hard Graphene under-structure remained in pristine condition. Over his armour Srisk wore a thick black cloak. The oversized hood hid his face and the folds that flowed out behind him concealed the weapons that were mag-locked to his back.

The Noxvata or the Lords of the Balance as they were commonly known, had summoned the Ecclesiarch on numerous occasions over the decades. Srisk was part of an elite albeit clandestine organisation. He had been conscripted to their cryptic ranks over fifty years ago.

After leaving his home world he found the council of F.O.U.R. The Federation of United Republics. He had joined their combined effort to stop the spread of the Moretti across the Shakari Galaxy. After years of campaigning he had been approached by the veiled Noxvata.

They had offered him a bigger role in the mechanisms of the universe. Their position in the war between the Federation and the Moretti was one of neutrality. Their goal, or at least how they had explained it to Srisk, was to ensure neither side achieved ascendancy. In the time Srisk

had been seconded to their organisation the conflict zone had fluctuated in both directions but the devastating tide of the Moretti had been halted. Srisk deduced that whatever other agenda the Noxvata may have, in their primary objective they were successful.

Srisk entered the Chancel. He lowered himself to one knee and bowed his head.

"My Lords" he incanted.

In front of him were five black monoliths. A faint glow started to intensify from the central slab. The obscure features of a face could be seen in the smooth dark surface. It spoke.

"Rise Ecclesiarch Srisk." The voice was mechanical, completely without emotion.

Srisk had never managed to discern whether the Lords of the Balance were entombed inside the monoliths or simply used them for communication. Maybe they were watching him from a distance. He had often thought of extending his mind to search for the answer when in their presence, but common sense and perhaps a twinge of fear had stopped him.

The central stone spoke again.

"You are aware of our rules on weapons within the inner Sanctum?"

Srisk stood, but his head remained lowered.

"I am my Lords. I can assure you that you have nothing to fear from me." Srisk was well aware of the flippancy in his tone.

"You are not beyond reprimand Ecclesiarch Srisk. Ensure that your weapons remain with the Servitors the next time you have audience."

"As you command my Lords." Srisk bowed lower. He smiled inside his hood. The expression vanished as he stood up straight. "How may I be of service my Lords?"

It was one of the stones to the left that now illuminated.

"Travel to the Riplarr region, and the Govan Star system. There is an outer planet away from the Prime world. It is called Ordan. They are an advanced race but have not yet connected to the Federation. Moku-Prime have left them to evolve naturally, but it is time we intervened. Go to their central city, Frellinore. Seek out the individual known as Mistrict. He must be balanced."

"You mean you would like me to kill him?" replied Srisk.

"You are aware of what we mean" came the non-committal answer.

"What is his crime? Or are his people on the cusp of discovery?" probed Srisk.

The stones remained blank. There was a moment's silence. The central slab glowed.

"You have your orders Ecclesiarch Srisk. May the balance guide your way."

The stone faded. His audience was over.

With a theatrical swish of his cloak Srisk walked from the Chancel, his metal-clad feet clanking on the titan-steel floor. He was used to the lack of information. Nothing he did for the Noxvata was ever clear. He had followed their instructions without wavering for many years. Only once had he strayed from his direction. That reason now awaited him on board the gunship Apocris.

Unlike Srisk's armour the Apocris was the very incarnation of modern technology. It resembled a giant wasp with its forward drooping nose and large back end mirroring an ovipositor. As interstellar craft went it was one of the smallest ever built that was still capable of light travel. It had a compacted density drive and fusion reactor for travel across the vast expanse of space. For interplanetary travel it had three molecular turbines. The most distinguishing features of the craft were its armaments.

There could be no mistaking its purpose. To kill. Volt cannons hung either side of the nose, and a rapid magno-rail gun occupied the chin mount. Another twin Volt cannon occupied a glass blister under the rear fuselage and slung under the thin structure joining the cockpit to the rear was a lethal array of missiles and mines. The Apocris was designed to carry a crew of six, however Srisk had firmly resisted the 'team' approach that most other operatives of the Noxvata had adopted. His only unofficial crew member eagerly awaited him. The Ecclesiarch could see the red scaled creature jumping up and down through the tinted cockpit glass.

As Srisk walked towards the gunship a door unfolded to provide a walkway into the prow. The stairs bounced under his weight as Srisk climbed into the restrictive cockpit. He reached around to his back. His fingers found his whisper-rifle and with an instant switch within his mind the suit released the weapon. He stowed it in a custom made rack. With his other arm he curled his fingers around the hilt of his melee weapon. The mag-lock clicked and he carefully placed the huge power-sword on the floor.

"Prepare us for take-off" said Srisk.

Liktus was already strapped in. He was sitting on three cushions of e-foam so that he could reach the controls. Despite the creature's primitive appearance he was adept with technology. He had quickly learnt the controls to the Apocris and had proved an accomplished pilot. He had a natural affinity with electronics. Perhaps this was the reason the Noxvata had wanted him 'balanced'.

"Where are we going Master?" asked Liktus.

"Take us out to the ninth gate."

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Gate travel was central to the Federation's infrastructure. It provided almost instant travel over vast distances. It was how the Federation continued its exploration and expansion into deep space. The colossal gates were towed by unmanned tugs out into the void. At suitable locations they were activated and then provided a jump point between it and any other gate connected to the system. They had been in use for

thousands of years and now spanned almost a third of the galaxy.

The main jump gates were truly enormous. The size of small moons. They had to be able to take the monstrous star-cruisers, colonisation craft and the ungainly Forge-ships that required interstellar travel. There was also a plethora of smaller jump gates that linked the colonised worlds.

As far as the Federation was concerned there was no ninth gate. Whether it was an oversight from ancient times, or a long forgotten superstition, the main gate numbers went from eight straight to ten. The fact that it did actually exist was known only to those that served the Noxvata. It prevented unwanted visitors to the Ninth Cloud and to the home system of the Lords of the Balance - Sangelon.

As the Apocris neared the jump gate, the Recit crackled to life.

"Destination?" asked the automated voice.

"Gee three, Riplarr System" answered Srisk.

"Confirmed. Stand by for jump."

The gunship was lost in the gate's cradle, like a tiny speck of space dust against the mammoth structure. Long metal fingers protruded downwards from the top of the construction resembling a crude ribcage. Light flared and the pressure built inside the cockpit despite its shielding. Liktus leant forward and selected a button. The glass in the cockpit darkened further. The Apocris was still moving forward and the outline of the craft blurred under the effects of the gate combined with its own motion. Without a sound the gunship vanished.

Srisk's ears popped as the new sight of Gate Three became visible through the tinted glass. Ten thousand light years in less than seven seconds.

Liktus pressed a couple of switches in rapid succession and a holographic map fizzed into being. The small creature rotated the hologram. He zoomed in on the Govan star.

"Shall we use the gates to take us to Moku?" asked Liktus. "The

planet Ordan is some way from the Prime."

Srisk looked at the star system and then at Liktus. The blue and green light reflected in the creature's large eyes.

"No. Engage the density drive. The less they know of our arrival the better." Srisk reclined his chair. "Wake me when we are in orbit."

Liktus collapsed the holographic map and tapped on the console. Red lights flashed and the creature thumped a button confirming the activation of the density drive. The Apocris jolted forward and then space rushed past in a constant streaming blur.

"Master?" inquired Liktus quietly.

"What is it?" replied Srisk.

"Why don't you ever remove your hood? I have never seen your face. Is it that hideous?" continued the red skinned creature.

Srisk chuckled.

"There are many reasons why I do not bless this universe with my visage. I am sure there are those that would consider me hideous. However, I have found that having a hidden face provides an awkward target."

Liktus seemed satisfied with the explanation. Despite his outward jovial response the truth stung the Ventorian. He had covered his face on the day he had learned of the annihilation of his race. Whenever he had caught sight of his reflection after that point, all he could see was shame.

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Ordan was a blue planet. Being so far from the star it orbited, this was unusual and slightly surprising. At the outer limits of the Govan star system it should have been covered in ice at the very least.

The spark of life for the world of Ordan came from two sources. The heat and radiation from the Supernova Maaga reached to touch the remote

planet. That coupled with an overly active core provided a temperature range that supported life.

In most category three planets the population would have achieved a level of technology that provided its people with a comfortable standard of living. Although the Ordanians had not yet achieved space travel, Srisk's deployment to their planet meant they were probably close. Most star systems that contained a Prime world would have seen the dominant civilisation colonise or at the very least inject technology into the less developed planets. In this particular case Moku-Prime had intentionally left the world of Ordan to progress at its own evolutionary pace.

Since the dawn of Gate travel the galaxy had become a smaller place, yet thousands of star systems and a hundred thousand more planets remained unexplored and uncategorised. The diversity and ingenuity of life had always impressed Srisk.

The Apocris entered the Ionosphere at a shallow angle. The dense make-up of Ordan's atmosphere automatically activating its heat shields. The density drive had been disengaged and as the gunship entered the Mesosphere the turbine rotors hummed into life.

"Scans?" asked Srisk.

"We are not being tracked. Initial scans of the surface do not indicate that capability" answered Liktus.

"Strange. Scan for power sources."

Liktus kept his large eyes focussed on the HUD.

"Nothing" he determined. "No wait!"

"What is it?" enquired Srisk.

Liktus double checked.

"No. My mistake. I thought I saw a trace signal. The surface is clear."

"This is a class three civilisation. They should be at a fission level if not fusion. Maybe they have harnessed the planet core in some way? Do our maps have habitation detail?"

"Yes Master."

"Engage cloaking and set a course for Frellinore. One thousand metres altitude."

The Apocris slid silently into the alien world. Two thirds of the surface was ocean. The remaining land was mostly forested. As they sped over the luscious green canopies Srisk noticed clearings with primitive buildings. Their frequency increased as the city of Frellinore appeared on the horizon.

Srisk instructed Liktus to set the gunship down next to the tree line to the North of the city. Leaves and branches blasted out in a wave of downdraft as the swivelling turbines halted its descent. Despite the noise of its landing the arrival of the Apocris went unnoticed by the local population.

The city of Frellinore was walled. Giant defences at least five metres in height. Behind these bulwarks, tiered pagoda towers soared into the sky all surrounding a central stone spire. A towered gateway provided an entrance to the city where its citizens moved with urgent purpose.

The Ordanians were humanoid in appearance. They were similar to most category three genus varieties, average height and weight, bipedal, two arms and forward facing ocular abilities. Their skin had a blue-ish tinge.

Under normal circumstances Srisk would have waited to nightfall before entering the city, but something was nagging at his subconscious. This was not a class three world. Something was amiss. Grabbing his weapons and activating his suit's own video camouflage, the Ecclesiarch disembarked.

Choosing his timing with care the invisible figure slunk through the gateway and into the inner city. Everything he saw confirmed his suspicions that this was not a category three planet. They did not have power, distant communications or any functional form of transport

other than beasts of burden. He estimated that this civilisation was half a century away from those discoveries. Why then had the Noxvata sent him here?

He listened to the locals as he entered the central complex, his implanted aural feed instantly translating the alien dialect. He heard the name he was searching for and honed in. A petite serving girl was complaining about her treatment. There. He heard it again. Definitely. Mastrict.

He followed the girl into a vaulted chamber. It resembled the Noxvata's Sanctum only on a much smaller and less ornate scale. Stone archways hugged the ceiling on either side and showed a walkway in behind. Ahead was a long sturdy wooden table. A tall blue skinned man was flicking through the pages of a large book. He didn't raise his head as the servant girl placed the tray next to him. He ushered her away with the flick of his hand.

Srisk waited until the girl had left before de-activating his camouflage. His shadow suddenly plunged the seated leader into darkness. The man looked up disorientated by the change in the light. The Ordanian looked confused. It was not the usual shocked response he was used to receiving as he visited upon alien races.

"Your name is Mastrict is it not?" His voice box overlay translated his words into fluent Ordanian speech.

"Yes" came the stammered reply. "I am Mastrict."

"Do you lead this world?" asked Srisk.

"This world?" The leader was clearly confused. "I am the Magister of this province if that's what you mean?"

"That will suffice" assured Srisk.

"Who are you?"

"I am Ecclesiarch Srisk. I would imagine that would mean little to you though."

"You are correct sir. I am afraid I do not know of you. Are you from across the sea? I have heard tales of giants from those distant lands."

"Something like that" replied Srisk. "Tell me Magister. How do you power this city? Is there a heat source of any kind?"

"We have the hearths." Mastroict stood and turned to point at the large fireplace set into the wall. "That is it, in the way of heat. May I ask how you got into my chambers unnoticed, and what it is that I may do for you?"

"Despite my size I am unnaturally stealthy" lied Srisk. "As for what I am doing here." The Ecclesiarch flicked his cloak to one side and his whisper-rifle slid into his hand. He hefted the large weapon onto his shoulder. "I am here to kill you."

"Please no. I have no idea who you are or how I could have wronged you. What is my crime?"

"I am not sure. Maybe this is a mistake."

Srisk levelled the long barrel at Mastroict's head. The Magister could not hide his fear and cowered from the gun.

Srisk paused.

"How do you know what this is?" probed the Ecclesiarch. "I could be waving a cooking implement at you." He didn't wait for an answer. He stretched out with his mind and dove into the thoughts of the Magister. Something was definitely wrong. Mastroict's neural network should have been as easy to read as the book in front of him. Someone or something had beaten him to it and mental locks were in place preventing him from finding the truth.

"There are other ways of discerning the truth" informed Srisk.

Before he could grab the Magister his suit's sensors started to alert him to movement from above. He swivelled to see figures pouring in behind the elevated archways. They were armed. Not with the primitive weapons of Ordan but Federation pulse rifles. He rolled behind the desk

as white hot bolts exploded around him. Shards of flagstone erupted into the air. Mastrict tried to run towards the rear doors but Srisk's long fingers clenched his ankle and dragged him backwards.

"What were you promised?" growled the Ecclesiarch.

"I don't know what you are talking about" stammered Mastrict.

"I think you do. Tell me, who is behind this?" Srisk rammed the barrel under the Magister's chin.

"Last chance."

The Ordanian shook his head and closed his eyes.

Srisk pulled the trigger and a single tectonic round punched through the top of the Magister's head.

The table had been vaporised during the short exchange of words and several rounds thudded into Srisk's armour as he ran for cover. He held the whisper-rifle against his chest.

'Auto'

It was a thought command. The gun, like all of Srisk's equipment was connected to his mind.

The rifle had several modes of operation. It was essentially a magnetic rail gun. It fired tectonic rounds – hardened alloy. They had tiny ferules that spiralled around the length of the slug. The speed at which they were fired caused them to make a feint sound, hence the rifle's ironic name. The gun held a compact magazine of one hundred and twenty rounds. Slung under the main barrel was a shorter wider tube. As well as housing a retractable tripod and having the forward grip, this barrel could launch a variety of explosive rounds.

Srisk lent out from cover aimed the rifle and fired. The gun action made a 'thwip, thwip' sound as the projectiles left the barrel. The enemy soldiers took cover behind the pillar uprights. It was a futile gesture. The rounds accelerated at such a velocity that they punched through the stone, through the bodies of the crouching soldiers and out through the

wall of the building.

Srisk ran to the opposite site repeating the action. With his finger held on the trigger he strafed the wall. The rounds destroyed some of the supports completely, and roof plaster crashed to the floor. He caught a glimpse of a surviving soldier stumbling through a door towards the end of the elevated walkway.

'Scan'

The thought triggered the weapon's sight which flicked up. Srisk held the rifle up and looked down the sight through the glass reticule. The x-ray mode allowed him to see the outline of the escaping soldier. The sight zoomed in and the Ordanian's organs highlighted on the mini screen. Srisk squeezed the trigger and a single round punched through the end wall and shattered the knee of the fleeing warrior. Srisk returned the rifle to his back and crouched. The servos in his armour whined and then he leapt from the floor. He smashed through the stonework and onto the thin walkway. His armoured bulk was too large to fit through the door, but that did not slow the advancing Ecclesiarch. Stone, timber and plaster showered over the injured soldier as Srisk crashed through the wall. He reached down and clamped his gauntlet around the soldier's neck. He hoisted him aloft.

"Tell me who set this up? Where did you acquire these weapons?"

The Ordanian soldier struggled, his hands trying impossibly to prize the unmoveable fingers away. Srisk then shivered as he felt another presence in his mind.

[Leave him brother. It is I you seek]

"Where?" replied Srisk out loud.

[You know where. I await your company]

The voice vanished. Srisk growled. The fingers on his gauntlet closed and crushed the soldier's windpipe.

The Ecclesiarch ran through the city, this time he did not bother to mask

his presence. The local population ran screaming from the metal giant as he thudded his way back to the main gate. The frightened guards made no attempt to stop him.

The Apocris had dropped its shield and now stood like some frozen metal monster towering above the trees. Under the chin gun stood a tall figure. Recognition flashed across Srisk's yellow eyes, and he skidded to a halt, stunned. Until this point all he had seen was an enemy holding a pistol against the squirming red creature. The tall stranger held Liktus around the neck.

"Well met brother" said the stranger.

"Let him go" demanded Srisk.

"As you wish brother" The stranger pulled the trigger of the pistol and a pulse of white light thumped into Liktus. The stranger dropped the limp creature onto the floor. Srisk raised his rifle.

"Do you not want to know who I am?" asked the stranger.

"I know what you are" replied Srisk.

"Of course you do. We were born under the same star you and I. Brothers of Ventor. Crusaders both. I had thought I was the last. It saddens me that we must meet in such a manner. My name is Ulan. I was Serengal, as I assume you were also."

"That was a long time ago. What is it you want, brother?" Srisk almost spat the last word.

"I was sent to finish a mission that you could not or would not complete" Ulan gestured to the lifeless body lying on the ground.

"So all of this was a rouse by the Lords of the Balance? Why did they simply not kill me back at the Sanctum? That would have been easier"

"Perhaps" said Ulan. "They want to know how far you have strayed from the path. Whether you can be saved."

"And you will decide that?" laughed Srisk.

"I think that from all those in the universe, that yes, I am the best qualified. Seeing as though we are brothers."

"We couldn't be more different." Srisk masked his thoughts. "I'll make this easy for you. Do I question my orders from the Noxvata? Yes I do. Am I unsure of their motives? Yes I am. Would I kill an innocent creature as you have just done? No I would not."

Srisk squeezed the trigger as he ran to his right. The rounds thudded into a plasma shield surrounding Ulan and then gently fell to the floor slowed by the shield's viscosity. Srisk's rifle repeatedly clicked indicating it was out of ammunition. Before he could launch one of the under-slung explosive rounds Ulan had fired his pistol. The white bolt of light smashed into his rifle and the localised electro-magnetic pulse fried the gun's mechanisms. Srisk reached around and grabbed for his sword. He brought the blade up in front of his face.

"Such a primitive weapon brother. Surely you still do not hold to the old ways?"

Srisk made to lift his foot but a second bolt of light thumped into him. He felt the white hot heat as the molten round melted its way through the outer causite shell of his armour. Several more well aimed shots punched into him. Ulan had known exactly what ammunition to equip. Ordinarily Srisk's armour would have weathered standard rounds or even plasma shots, but these layered Thermite slugs could melt their way through even the hardest metal.

Srisk's armour was displaying numerous warning runes as the power fluctuated and the rounds finally started to eat their way through the Graphene and spall inside his flesh. The thickness of metal around his shoulders and chest had stopped the shots that would have killed him outright but enough had found their living target inside his metal carapace. The Ecclesiarch grimaced and dropped to one knee. Ulan stalked towards him holding his pistol at Srisk's cowed head.

"This brings me no pleasure brother" said Ulan.

Fighting against the pain Srisk twisted the metal collar on the hilt of his

sword. Blue tendrils of electricity leapt down the blade and he swung it upwards. The blow would have cut Ulan's head in two if he had not been shielded. Instead the meeting of the two electrical fields sparked an explosion of light and both warriors were thrown backwards. Another round slammed into Srisk's torso as he struggled to stand. Alarms echoed through his mind. He watched as his adversary discarded the pistol. Ulan tapped the back of each of his gauntlets and long metal claws slid out.

"This is far more civilised" said Ulan as he stalked in for the kill.

Srisk turned the metal collar on the hilt once more and the electrical field died. The blade shimmered. It was vibrating at such a speed that the motion could not be seen. Mustering his fleeing strength Srisk swung the power sword. Ulan lifted one of his claws in an uncaring manner, safe in the knowledge his shield would protect him. He convulsed in pain as Srisk's sword sliced through his shield severing his arm and thudding into his chest. Srisk leant towards his foe and the molecular sword edge bit deeper.

"Crude but effective" snarled Srisk.

"Please brother" pleaded Ulan.

"I am not your brother. I am and always will be, the last Crusader."

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Srisk knelt beside the tiny body of Liktus. The creature twitched and opened its large eyes. Ulan had used a stun shot instead of a lethal one. Srisk looked back to the dead body of his kin. He would never know why. The Ecclesiarch's suit was desperately injecting coagulants and stimulants into his system but he would need the medical capability on board the Apocris if was going to see the end of the day. He struggled up the ramp into the cockpit and slumped back in the co-pilot's seat. He plugged his suit into the ship. Liktus hopped over him.

"Open a channel to the Ninth Cloud."

The Recit crackled with static.

"Report" came the automated voice.

"This is Ecclesiarch Srisk.... Mission accomplished."

There was a moment's silence.

"Acknowledged."

Liktus tapped the console and the turbines hummed with power. Within seconds the ground below them was just a mix of colours.

"Master?"

"What is it?"

"That creature back there. The one you killed. It called you brother. Is that what you look like beneath your hood?"

Srisk smiled.

"No my friend, I am much uglier."