**Small Victories**

“Tell me when you get to the ship,” Dmitry had said, and he didn't doubt that they would… if they managed to get there at all.

A sleek mass of shadowy tendrils and glinting teeth skittered around the corner. It leapt onto the wall without slowing. It loped forward as though the station’s artificial gravity held no sway over it. Its sinuous legs swirled as it ate the distance between it and Dmitry.

Dmitry squeezed the trigger. He was rewarded with a staccato crack. ‘Five,’ he thought. The bullet grazed the creature's side. The wound began bubbling and leaking black smoke, but the thing didn't stop. ‘six , seven,’ the rifle kicked twice in his hands. The oily black creature fell from the wall, skidding across the floor coming to a stop among the bodies of half a dozen other dead star striders. The body boiled and smoked, bubbling as its substance began to fade. It would be completely gone within the hour, with no trace left to prove it had ever existed.

Dmitry checked the impulse to look at his ammunition counter. He knew what he would see there, bent metal and a shattered display. He was lucky the gun was working at all. He kept his aim steady, despite the pounding of blood in his head.

He heard the pattering gait of more star striders moving down the corridor. He let out a long breath and lined up his aim, covering the a bend in the hallway. A flicker of movement drew Dmitry's eye to the ceiling. ‘Eight,’ he thought as he snapped his aim up to the ceiling where the fist star strider clung. The bullet tore through the creature, center mass. It dropped to the deck. The second one kept to the floor, bounding with all it was worth. ‘Nine, ten, eleven,” thick smoke boiled from the oily shadows of the creatures body as it collapsed, skidding across the floor, before coming to a stop.

Dmitry was almost out of ammunition. There were forty five rounds in a standard B814 magazine. He had no idea how many he had used before he had started counting, but it couldn't be long now. He didn't know why he was even bothering with the count, it wouldn't change anything. Dmitry knew he was going to die.

A lot of people were dying these days. There was a war on, and humanity, or at least his piece of it, was loosing. The star striders and the unknowably ancient entities that pulled their strings had found no shortage of potential pawns in the cults of scattered humanity. Nobody knew why they wanted to wipe out the human race, or warp it into something completely unrecognizable, at any rate….

Dmitry paused in his line of thought. As he listened, he heard a slick skittering accompanied by a husky wine in his mind. More star striders were coming. Quite a few more. Dmitry chewed his lip. The grenade launcher slung under the barrel of his rifle was loaded, but he only had the one grenade. The skittering was getting closer. Dmitry couldn't count how many their were, but it was a lot. He silently hoped that they were clumped together. It wasn't that they weren't smart, experimentation on captured star striders showed that their mental capacity was double or triple that of a human. They just didn't seem to care if they lived or died. Their apathy showed not only a complete disregard for their own lives, but for the effectiveness of human resistance, that is, if it showed anything at all.

The first of the approaching group sworreled around the corner, flowing onto the far wall. Four more loped right behind it with a fifth and sixth bring up the rear. With a clattering woosh, Dmitry’s rifle stalk pushed into his shoulder. The hall felt oddly quiet for a moment before the grenade detonated. Dmitry fealt the explosion in his chest, as shrapnel flew in all directions. The star striders were torn apart, seeming to pop as though they were nothing more than balloons wrapped in cotton.

Dmitry knew he wouldn't last much longer. How far were the others from the docking bay? Maybe they were already gone and they had just forgotten to tell him. The wouldn't have forgotten though. They were still here, still in danger.

Private Teun and corporal Fredi, Olivier and Maria, were Dmitry’s best friends. The closest thing he had left to family. He was glad that he had been able to give them a chance to survive. In the grand scheme of things, though, they didn't matter, but if dr. Shukri got off the station alive, then Dmitry would have won a victory for humanity. It wouldn't be a big victory, but in this war, small victories were just about all you could hope for. Even then, if humanity was going to win, or even survive, Dmitry figured they would do it by taking all the small victories they could get.

That was the one thing that those vast and ancient somethings out in the deep places between the stars didn't understand. No matter how small something is, it still matters.

Dmitry gritted his teeth and steadied his breathing. He felt the telltale wine in his head. More star striders were close. Two of the things came around the corner. “Nine, ten,” Dmitry found himself counting out loud this time, “eleven, twelve, thirteen.” The two oily masses toppled to slide along the ground and begin to bubble into nothing.

Three more star striders hurtled around the corner, shadowed tendrils trained in his direction. “Fourteen, fifteen,” Dmitry flicked his aim to the next oily mass, “sixteen, seventeen.” It dropped from the ceiling to begin to boil and smoke. Dmitry moved his aim down to the third and final creature, then he pulled the trigger. He was met with a dull click. Everything seemed to go still. The star strider stopped dead in its tracks, its tendrils whipping out in front of it with the sudden halt.

Dmitry lowered his weapon. He looked into two of the bright points that regarded him from the center of the shadowed mass. The star strider began to prowl forward. Dmitry shuddered as he felt a new and altogether foreign sensation in his mind. It wasn't like any human emotion, but if Dmitry had been forced to put a word to it, he would have called it mirth.

His rifle fell from the suddenly numb fingers of his right hand. The star strider tendrils shivered around it tensing like a coiled spring. Dmitry wondered if he had bought enough time. The shadowed mass in front of him blurred in a sudden release of motion. Dmitry wondered how Maria would fair after he was dead, but she was strong, far stronger than he had ever been. She would be fine. If she got out at all.

As the serrated talons that felt strangely like cotton tore into Dmitry, his radio crackled. The shadow tendrils burned as barbed counter rotating coils shredded through him. A voice crackle over the radio, but the blackness of the void overtook Dmitry before he could hear what they said.