

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

A Dread Naught Trilogy Short Story

By Dylan Sanchez

© 2021 Dylan Sanchez

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.

For information, contact the author at:

<https://www.facebook.com/dylanwaynesanchezauthor/>

Cover art by JeCorey Holder © 2021

Twelve years prior to Dreaded First Contact ...

Bryluen had to attend a wedding in little more than a week. Her wedding, in fact—an idea that had still not entirely settled into her consciousness. It was to be a small affair attended by very large people. An ornate red gown currently hung in her office, hand-embroidered by a traditional tailor lent by the House of Ho’Xal. Every time she saw it the dress seemed stranger and more surreal.

She had never imagined herself getting married previously and, if so, certainly not at the age of fifty-one. This was not due to a particular lack of romantic inclination, but rather a fair assumption based on her job. Bryluen was an Operative for the Colonial Special Operations Executive—one of fewer than three hundred people qualified for the position, and the most decorated among them. She was a diplomat, a soldier, and an intelligence agent in equal measure, given a broad purview and immense resources to undertake discrete tasks that the highest Human authorities could not entrust to anyone less qualified or dedicated.

Some details about how Bryluen and her fiancée, Bel’Wa, met were still classified. To summarize, Bryluen had been investigating the possible reappearance of a vast serpent that had once been worshiped on a world out on the rim while Bel’Wa had been responding to a distress beacon from a crashed transport on the same planet. Several encounters with one of the largest instances of terrestrial fauna ever seen and one heroic rescue effort later, the two had immediately hit it off.

Currently, Bryluen was involved in an event almost as strange as her approaching wedding: her bachelorette party. She had spent the day out with her best friend as well as a close co-worker. The last several hours in particular had featured a joy in which she had not partaken in a number of years: a bar crawl.

They were in Beatrice, the capital city of the world Dantures, which was the capital world of the Alighieri system. The city about them was as fine as the works of the world’s namesake; Beatrice was a vista

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

of gleaming spires built in cascading layers upon the slope of a mountain whose footprint dwarfed some of Earth's best offerings. Winding among the numerous structures was a gossamer web of rail lines that sparkled in the pink tones of dusk.

At first glance the city did not appear entirely possible—the severity of the mountainside and the height of the buildings could have been the makings of a disaster. Yet Beatrice was not a vast gathering of separate buildings, but a singular superstructure rooted deep in the mountain. The city's walkways and dense buildings were expertly arranged so that at ground level it was difficult for the average pedestrian to tell they were suspended along a perilous incline.

The city had been chosen as the site for Bryluen's bachelorette party for two reasons: first, for Beatrice's exhaustive main avenue of clubs and taverns; and second, because Bryluen's best friend lived there in a nearby high-rise apartment.

Bryluen had met Asmat Nishi Arai when they were eighteen. They had been assigned as roommates at the CSOE academy, and from there rapidly formed a friendship initially based on a mutual affection for attentive study and various intellectual pursuits. Asmat had since gone on to become a leading Xeno-Lingual Historian following her breakthrough archaeology dissertation.

Accompanying them was Lucinda Braynard, a highly decorated Astral Marine about three years younger than Bryluen and Asmat. Both had known Lucinda in various capacities for well on twenty-five years. As it happened, both Asmat and Lucinda were members of CSOE High Command. It followed that Bryluen, who had lived in a government facility most of her life, would have friends with security clearances.

The three women were walking together up the road leading to Asmat's apartment building. Unobtrusive street lamps lightened the shadows as the sun descended for another of Dantures' long nights. Vibrant art fixtures, cafes, gardens, waterways, and playgrounds decorated the broad avenue while slender trolley cars quietly hissed along their course, and glass elevators sailed up and down rounded spires. Clusters of people milled across winsome wooden bridges, bouncing idle conversation off garden walls and statues.

Asmat was the tallest of the group, olive-skinned with midnight hair bound in a bronze hijab. She had high cheekbones, a pointed nose,

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

and dark almond eyes dramatized by kajal as well as an airy copper tunic that fluttered about her in the breeze. Lucinda was shorter than Bryluen, though of comparatively broader build; lightly tanned and even more lightly freckled, with a round and habitually dour face anchored by a pair of pale blue eyes. Her wavy blonde hair billowed behind her like a wake pursuing a speed boat, and she wore a tan jacket over a white buttoned shirt and khaki slacks.

Bryluen strolled between them in a shimmering crimson sarong and breezy gray blouse, keeping one hand gently on Asmat's back. The sarong had been a gift from her fiancée. She had been long unable to accept that Bryluen didn't own such a garment, as she herself owned almost nothing else. Bryluen typically wore pants given that she usually needed to be able to leap into armor at any moment, but today was one of very few exceptions.

Throughout the evening, a few people had recognized members of the trio and at least considered approaching. Without Asmat or Lucinda being aware, Bryluen had warded off those intent on interrupting them with a look or gesture. Bryluen was a lauded hero who had done more than her share of photo-ops, but she was still not the kind of person whose drinking one should disturb. Additionally, whether or not it was her bachelorette party, Bryluen had the responsibility of keeping her remarkably important friends safe. Days off were mostly a misnomer when you were an armed person palling around with elected officials.

As an Operative, Bryluen was one of a small selection of people in Human space authorized to carry a weapon on their person at all times, and one of the few among that group able to produce their weapon more or less freely. In recognition of the fact that blind trust is anathema to a just society, this was one of the main reasons that Bryluen lived under perpetual surveillance. She lived in government housing on a remote world where every communication was monitored. Even now, she would be required to file a report about her evening despite sharing that evening with no fewer than two members of CSOE High Command. Despite this, she felt the difficulties of her career were, if anything, far outstripped by the weight of the duties conferred upon her.

Asmat traded a polite bow with a kannushi stationed at the torii of the local shrine before turning to Bryluen. "Bel'Wa is sending over a

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

gift for you, by the way! I wonder what it is.”

“You said she had never heard of a bachelorette party before, right?” Lucinda ran a hand through her hair.

Bryluen nodded. “Not a thing for her people. I explained the basic concept and its long history of being strangely inappropriate as a way to herald imminent nuptials.”

“Oh, so it's definitely a dancer in a cake, then.”

“Nah,” Asmat said, “I'm certain it will be uncomfortably intimate in some way, mind you, but likely more specific. Bel'Wa's a solid gift-giver.”

Lucinda rubbed her chin. “Well now I'm curious.”

Bryluen smiled. “I'll be sure to open it in front of everyone.”

Asmat lived near the top of a forty-story apartment complex; a staggering needle shaped building formed of marble, steel, and glass. A broad mahogany door flanked by fluted pillars granted the small party passage inside.

Lucinda looked up at the doorway as they entered. “Nice digs.”

Asmat smiled. “I got lucky. This is a very nice place.”

They walked through a well-appointed lobby and stepped into a charming elevator tiled in minutely detailed mosaic patterns.

Bryluen leaned against the wall as they soared upward. “When was the last time I was here? It's been years!”

Asmat tapped a finger on her chin. “At least three or four! The décor is the same, mind you. Have you seen Lucy's new place?”

“Can't say I have.”

Lucinda grinned. “It's gorgeous. Rainforest overlook on Tūmatauenga, over a gorge. Big herds of gyorathorns pass below once or twice a month. You can hear the clatter of their roots from the porch—it's outstanding. Three bathrooms, too, which is nice.”

“One more than before! Got tired of everyone having to wait on L-itkala, huh?”

Lucinda laughed. “I keep telling haoum: ‘If you aren't pregnant, hurry it up!’”

Asmat leaned against Bryluen before speaking again.

“Any luck on that front, so far?”

“Either Friedrich gets me pregnant in the next few months, or we get a donor for L-itkala, and Kay'Ohn delivers.”

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

Bryluen made a thoughtful expression. "I sometimes think of how often flowcharts are involved in your life, Lucy."

"Ha, once you get things divvied up it's pretty smooth. Couldn't live without any of 'em."

The elevator stopped with a gentle chime. The door slid open, revealing a hall thoroughly bedecked in dark wood paneling. Asmat took the lead, pointing two doors up the hall. "I'm right there, ladies."

As they approached the door, Asmat tapped a quick pattern on an earpiece unseen beneath her hijab. The door unlocked and silently swung open. Asmat's apartment, like in most Human systems, was spacious and spotlessly cleaned by household drones. Jeweled greens and pleasant golden tones characterized a space replete in elegant furniture, dense bookshelves, and vibrant paintings. The main room featured a round sunken area with ample seating around a white stone fireplace, which itself sat just beneath a large wall-mounted screen. An amorphous metal coffee table held a hefty CSOE-issue encrypted projector unit. The outer wall of the apartment was thick glass, affording a stunning view of Beatrice as it rolled down the mountain below them. Several bold statues inhabited nooks and corners in the apartment, and a digital accent wall transitioned between various scenes of worlds where Asmat had held office.

She had an automated dispensary rather than a kitchen proper, a small bedroom out of sight around a corner, and a comfortable bathroom. The entire apartment glowed gently with pleasant light that provided the perfect conditions for reading. It was a peaceful place, characterized more by its cultural displays than its amenities.

Lucinda whistled. "Very lovely. Does seem like your kind of place."

"Thank you! I—"

Asmat froze. Bryluen placed a hand on her back. "What is it, Azzy?"

"I ... believe some of the food at our last stop did not agree with me."

"Oh, you didn't have to do that for me, Asmat."

"What?"

"I'm honored you took on the role of the friend who parties so hard they get sick, but you don't even drink!"

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

Asmat tried not to laugh. "You're terrible. I'm going to go vomit and then medicate myself. Love you!"

"Love you, too."

Asmat slipped away into her bathroom and sealed the door firmly behind her. Lucinda grimaced. "Alright, never going there again."

"At least it's not poison. She's sensitive, the Qixing-style appetizers were probably just a bit rich for her. Hopefully she's not down too long."

"Wait, how do you know it's not poison? I hadn't even considered poisoning. Should I be considering that?"

Bryluen shrugged. "Nah, you just live your life. Checking that has been my problem this evening. You're safe."

Lucinda nodded. "That's why you're my girl. Any more big plans tonight?"

"Not so much. Wait for Bel'Wa's gift, and some other surprise she said she had in store."

"Well, that's promising! I don't need to go anywhere until ..."
Lucinda briefly did some mental math. "Eleven-thirty universal—about four and a half hours."

"Good! We'll rustle up some food in a couple of hours. Hopefully Asmat will be up for it, then. She won't want anything purple, I'm guessing."

Several minutes later, Asmat was wrapped in a thick blanket and leaning against Bryluen on her couch. Lucy was sitting next to Bryluen, one arm thrown over the seat back.

"Bryl ..." Asmat's voice was small and piteous to a degree disproportionate to her mild nausea.

"Yes, councilwoman?"

"... I don't feel good."

Bryluen nodded and gently patted Asmat on the head. "I know, dear. I'm sorry."

Bryluen heard a chime. Without looking, she fished a hand down her blouse and immediately produced a small tablet. She had received a message from Bel'Wa. Her soon-to-be wife was on watch at Gate Puyal-Hattan, meaning the message had been scheduled ahead of time. Bryluen smiled as she opened it.

The message was accompanied by a picture and simply read: "A

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

surprise, every thirty minutes until midnight local! Stick around for the finale!”

The picture was an image of Bel'Wa. She was roughly a head shorter than Bryluen, though broader and with skin a rich green shade. Age had caused the color of her scales to fade past her knees and elbows, and for her vivid orange hair to bear numerous yellow streaks. Bel'Wa was a Qixing, a semi-amphibious alien species whose outward similarities to Humans belied an internal anatomy that departed so much as to be almost unrecognizable. Bel'Wa may have two eyes, a nose, and a pair of ears, but she also had three heart-like organs, something akin to a swim bladder, and the ability to expel water from tiny orifices under the scales along her ribs.

In the picture, she was sitting in a cyan robe and giving a somewhat suggestive look over one bared shoulder. Bel'Wa's hip was settled beneath her at an extreme angle, a sign of the expansion joints that allowed her a broad range of movement when swimming.

Lucinda nodded at the picture slowly, eyebrows raised. “Well, now I'm jealous.”

“Yeah, you folks aren't looking over my shoulder at the rest of these. So: three spouses and no sexy pictures, huh, Lucy?”

Lucinda shrugged sadly. Bryluen briefly reflected on the fact that Bel'Wa had found time at some point roughly three weeks ago to take ten naughty photos and send them off. She had immediately realized the message lacked the typical letterhead indicating the contents had been automatically pre-verified before reaching her. This meant the message had been manually inspected by CSOE personnel to root out encrypted data or tracking software. Someone would be getting an eyeful this evening.

Bel'Wa knew the CSOE procedures, of course; She was just as Qixing as it got and therefore thought nothing of beaming racy pictures across the stars. The Qixing wore beautiful, ornate, interesting clothing, but also mostly considered it optional. They were insulated for the cool waters of their homeworld, and they did not sweat or burn in the sun as Humans do. They had simply never had reason to develop a strong attachment to being covered. As point of fact, one of the first questions asked when someone requested a diplomatic position in Qixing space was, “How do you feel about possibly seeing your co-workers nude?”

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

None of these facts, of course, were going to keep some unsuspecting CSOE analyst from blushing throughout the night.

Asmat slowly wrapped herself around Bryluen's arm, one eye open and looking at her tablet. "... pretty."

Bryluen nodded. "It's true. Azzy, I might need that arm at some point."

Asmat shook her head, and almost immediately fell asleep.

"Good argument. Three degrees, seven languages, thirty-four high-profile academic publications, yet always pitiful when sick. You contain multitudes."

Bryluen and Lucinda chatted and laughed while Asmat quietly snored. After thirty minutes, another picture came through. This time, a Human pinup classic. Bel'Wa's hair was tied up into a polka-dot scarf and she was wrapped in a towel; she appeared to be painting her nails with an antique brush. Bel'Wa had never worn a headscarf nor painted her nails in such a fashion—Qixing, being covered in scales, had a greater variety of options when it came to body paint. The humorous anachronism was not lost on Bryluen.

Minutes after the third picture arrived, the quiet evening was shattered as the apartment's security features rushed to life. Thick metal shutters slammed down over the exterior windows and front door with a percussive bang. An instant later, a hard impact was heard against the outer shutter, producing an ugly dent. The assailant delivered another blow seconds later, leaving a second dent. After a third impact, there was no lingering doubt the heavy impacts were intentional.

Asmat had startled awake and nearly fell over as Bryluen shot to her feet. With a twirl, her pistol was in her hand and primed. "Lucy, catch."

Bryluen tossed a secondary firearm to Lucinda and marched over to the home control console by the fireplace. Lucinda rapidly checked that the weapon was loaded and turned off its safety as Bryluen brought up the exterior camera feed. A delivery drone hovered outside the apartment, its front mostly crushed. It wavered back and forth as if looking for a way inside. Delivery drones invariably had a special entrance into an apartment building which allowed them access to the corridors, where they would signal their presence at the front door. They typically did not attempt to barge through windows.

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

"The sensors are lagging behind the direction the drone is turning. It's being manually overridden."

"Bryl, what's going on?"

"Hey, Azzy. Sorry, I think someone just tried to ram your house with a drone."

"Oh, wow. Not to lay blame, but I'm guessing the Tz-zaz Ik'Thill Cartel wasn't too amused by my Anti-Smuggling Initiative statement last week. Well, tell them I said 'tozz feek'."

Bryluen smirked. "I'll be sure to let them know. Should be easy to pull a trace on the command signal with the house sensors. The pilot is likely close by."

"How do you figure?" mumbled Asmat as she rubbed her eyes.

"Drone systems are insulated. Making an attempt like this without the system reporting a disruption and triggering a restart would require a great degree of signal spoofing, and by far the best way to do that would be to physically install bypass hardware on an inactive drone. Furthermore, the farther the distance your intercept signal is traveling, the better chance someone will catch it by other means before you can do what you need to do—like I'm doing now. You can use proxies and relays, but these drone networks are insistent—the slightest delay or error in your signal could cause maintenance drones to show up or otherwise attract scrutiny."

Bryluen began to trace the drone's signal at the home console. She produced a small eyepiece from her blouse and attached it to her ear. A small holoscreen glowed to life before her eye.

Lucinda shook her head. "Alright, so your pistol was in an inner thigh holster, while the eyepiece and tablet were in your bra. I get that part. I don't understand the magic trick that produced this second pistol."

Bryluen glanced down. "Thanks, I think? But were I capable of hiding objects in a bra, I might wear one every once in a while. There's a low-profile harness at my sternum. The pistol is a folding model, strapped to the back of one thigh. I have an extra magazine for my main pistol on the back of the other. Got my whip and badge on me, too."

"I feel like I don't know what you're shaped like as well as I thought."

"Took a while to find my body's ideal object-hiding weight, but

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

it was worth it; I'm strapped like a luggage rack under here. Bel'Wa was right, this sarong is quite freeing." She nodded. "Alright, got a trace from the house sensors. Source is a building two levels down from us. Looks like there might be a few other drones having their strings pulled, as well. Backups, I'm guessing."

"Bryl," Asmat whined. Her voice was muffled by the pillow her face had sunk into. "We're in lockdown, the police will be here soon. We'll call a CSOE sweeper team."

"Asmat, since when have you known me to wait politely for someone else to handle things?"

"And when have you known me to not want my best friend to be careful?"

Bryluen walked back to the couch and kissed Asmat on the forehead. "I must really stress you the hell out. You get some rest, councilwoman. Don't make me come back here to make you nap."

"I'm not a baby, Bryl," Asmat muttered. She pulled a blanket tight about her.

"Yes, you are."

Asmat smiled and closed her eyes. Bryluen stood, whirled about, and touched an innocuous stretch of wall. It slid open, revealing a crawl space leading out the far side of the building.

Lucinda was interacting with the holo projector. "A sweeper team will be here within thirty minutes to secure the area. Operative Branok: your primary objective is to ascertain the identity of the attacker and who, if anyone, employed them. Capture if possible. Dispatch intel and casualty coordinates to prime channel Lambda Upsilon Chi. Dismissed."

"Yes, ma'am."

Bryluen knelt and entered the passageway. She moved along at a jog with her pistol gripped in both hands. Her eyepiece was a fine piece of equipment, able to efficiently relay tactical information, communicate in various formats, and provide basic forms of scanning and analysis. It wasn't anywhere near as powerful as her helmet, but it would suffice.

After a brief ride in a maintenance lift, she slipped out the back of the apartment building and into the night. Bryluen crossed the road and leaned on a safety rail. She was two levels of the city above her destination in an almost straight line, but likely didn't have much time—

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

certainly not enough to wind downward through the streets. There were no nearby vehicles to commandeer, either. There was, however, a long series of gradually descending rooftops, arches, and elevated walkways. Bryluen glanced down at her feet. She shrugged and holstered her pistol; her open-toed sandals weren't exactly climbing gear, but needs must.

She vaulted up and over the rail in front of her, landing half a meter below on the roof of a small restaurant. She rolled to her feet and broke into a run, sprinting the length of the restaurant and leaping onto the top of a neighboring walkway. After another brief run she slid off the end of the walkway, then lifted herself onto a half wall that bordered a small public garden. Edging along the half wall, Bryluen grabbed the roof of the adjoining home and pulled herself up with a grunt. She rolled over, shoved herself to her feet, and made a running jump to the next house over.

Another picture of Bel'Wa arrived as Bryluen came within sight of the building from which the command signal originated. She unholstered her pistol once more and closed in on the warehouse structure ahead. The building was disguised as a pleasant stucco structure sunk down so that only a single story protruded above the street. The drone landing pad on its roof was surrounded on all sides by a lush garden area decorated with benches and water features. Bryluen pinged her location before digitally bypassing the security on a maintenance entrance.

*

*

*

A lanky woman was tucked away in the warehouse's spacious office, monitoring a sleek computer as she absentmindedly twirled a lock of her light brown hair. She was carefully watching readouts on several drones; the first had succeeded in its mission, so she had hidden her tracks and signaled for the bypass hardware on all the modified drones to deactivate. Now all she had to do was wait for extraction.

This thought process was interrupted in a most startling fashion as a cold object touched the back of her neck. Her eyes widened, and she gasped. She raised her hands in front of her and swallowed loudly.

"OhGodIFuckingSwearICanExplain—"

"Shh, have some dignity." Bryluen paced into view, her pistol

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

unerringly aimed for the base of the woman's neck as she strolled along. She had just silently lowered herself through a ventilation shaft. "CSOE. You're under arrest."

The woman's eyes darted to the side. "F-for what?"

"Really."

"Don't, d-don't you have to say ..."

Bryluen shook her head. "I really don't. Technically speaking I could wordlessly blow out both of your knees and drag you off by your hair if I could prove it was necessary in a deposition."

The woman grimaced. Sweat began to bead on her forehead as she fought a rising surge of primal terror.

"So, not exactly a career criminal?"

"N-n-no ma'am."

Her throat became dry as Bryluen moved to where the woman could see her. Her eyes traced the glimmer of her monitor light along the broad pistol barrel, past the compact accelerator above the grip, and up to Bryluen's face. Her stomach turned over as she realized she recognized the Operative.

Bryluen snorted, and spoke in an easy tone, "Ma'am? You must be terribly out of your depth. Let me see: easy job, good money. You didn't know who your target was."

The woman swallowed. She opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't find the words. She closed her mouth again and nodded.

Bryluen's posture was easy, her stride loose. By all indicators, she was clearly relaxed—except for the steely rigidity of her gun arm. Regular citizens never even saw the gun of a CSOE Operative, and certainly never had it trained on them. Not even typical criminals were likely to ever enter an Operative's sights. Bryluen had once been present for a robbery, and resolved the situation with little more than a calm tone of voice. To find yourself within the gun sights of an Operative was a scenario rarer than most natural disasters. An Operative's gun was unveiled only on the back of thousands of years of jurisprudence and the utter extent of necessity. The situation the woman found herself in was less like being in trouble with the law, and more like finding oneself toe-to-toe with a storm goddess.

"Let me guess: no one else knows about this job. You're likely from the Liminal Stars and are doing this for money out of desperation,

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

or you simply wanted to start a reputation among the underground.”

The woman haltingly nodded again.

“How are you getting paid: transfer or cash?”

“Cash,” she squeaked.

Physical money was distinctly atypical in Human space, mostly appearing as a fallback when traveling into other territories. In situations like this, it was employed as a less easily traced method of shifting funds about. Even then, when within Qixing or Human space, it was difficult to use such cash as any interaction with a digital system would record the serial number of the banknotes used, often allowing authorities to home in on when and where money gained through illicit means had been sourced. The more likely case was that the money was going to be used in the Liminal Stars, where the exploitation of rampant corruption allowed any reasonably competent—or simply privileged—operator to go undetected.

Bryluen wagged a finger at the woman. “Did your escape plan involve your current employer?”

The woman stared silently. Bryluen nodded and sighed before lowering her pistol. “If you survive today, it will only be because I caught you.”

The woman's eyes widened. “Wait, what?”

“Difficult to trace funds, no one knows where you are, and you're effectively a nobody. It's cheaper and leaves less of a trail to just kill you and dump your body. This isn't typically what is meant when someone says that crime doesn't pay, but you really are probably not being paid. Are you claustrophobic?”

The woman shook her head.

*

*

*

Lucinda and Asmat were attentively watching the live feed from Bryluen's eye piece. Asmat had put on her favored brand of concentration music—howling, lo-fi synth-core dance music that threatened to loosen the walls of her apartment.

Lucinda, bracing a cup of tea in her hands, glanced over at her blanket-clad co-worker. “I admit this is not the Situation Room music I had you down for.”

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

Asmat shrugged and took a sip of her own tea. "Well, being tightly wound must have its remedies. What's your routine?"

Lucinda sat forward, spreading her hands in a room-encompassing gesture. "A silenced screen playing Latin Noir-revival, and my micro-smithing kit."

"Your what?"

"I make very small swords."

"For slaying tiny dragons? Or settling very minor matters of honor, perhaps?"

"Pins and brooches, mostly."

*

*

*

Bryluen had restrained the drone pilot inside the ventilation shaft she had entered through, sealing the vent closed and instructing her to remain utterly silent until Bryluen returned. The Operative stalked the corridors of the warehouse for the time it took another picture of Bel'Wa to arrive. In the latest picture, Bel'Wa was holding a strategically draped sheet over herself and taking a bite of some sort of reef-fruit—while making outright aggressive eye contact. An escalation from coyly suggestive to saucy this early on implied an almost certainly pornographic final product.

Shortly after appraising the picture with raised eyebrows, Bryluen detected the first signs of the people intended to "extract" the drone pilot. Observing from the shadows, Bryluen counted out sixteen individuals armed with melee weapons—smuggling a firearm onto a Human world was risky for what were almost certainly mercenaries, but the possibility of one or two guns could not be entirely discounted.

As Bryluen carefully observed the pattern of their sweep by overriding the warehouse cameras—it was entirely evident that they intended to corner the drone pilot to ensure she could not escape—she lowered the facility lights and waited by the office door. The mercenaries poured in past her, waving flashlights and cursing as they realized their target was gone.

Bryluen moved to block the doorway and turned the lights back on. The group of mercenaries rapidly turned to face her, drawing their various weapons. One person's right hand hesitated ever-so-slightly

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

before they used their left to draw a knife. Bryluen noted them as the most likely candidate for carrying a firearm.

"You know," Bryluen noted, "I waited here hoping for an assassin, or maybe a chemzerker—a fair fight."

The mercenaries remained quiet for a moment, when one of them—likely the leader, based on their bearing—spoke up, "Not a crowd of mercs, huh? Too bad."

"Right, it's a pity, isn't it? A professional would know better than to think an Operative is going to fight fair. In the interest of mercy, I'm going to tell you this: it was my bachelorette party until this started. You tried to attack my best friend in her own home. I had to run across rooftops in sandals, I've needed to pee for an hour, and there's no way this outfit is going to be salvageable if I have to maim someone all over it. I am Dame Bryluen Branok, CSOE Operative, and I am not in a great mood. Surrender now, because I promise to cut the legs off the first one of you dipshits that makes a mistake."

Back in her apartment, Asmat reached up and dimmed the camera feed. She knew what likely came next.

Bryluen calmly watched as a particularly dense mercenary shifted their feet, nervously. They suddenly dashed forward with a combat blade in hand, but just as quickly broke their nose against the edge of a desk. It took the others a moment to realize the mercenary had left their shins a meter and a half behind them. Bryluen lazily swung her whip's filament in a spiraling motion as it withdrew.

The scream that emitted from the mercenary was horrible and the entire group recoiled in disgust. If there was one thing Bryluen had learned in her career, it was that even hardened killers could often be caught unawares by a demonstration of the messy grotesqueries of close combat. It was at times worth remembering that holing someone with a plasma bolt was often less disgusting than dismembering them.

Several mercenaries rushed to their fallen compatriot's side, struggling to tear off sweaters and jackets in order to tie tourniquets around the mercenary's recently unencumbered knee joints.

Bryluen sighed at the their unfortunate sense of judgment. The leader of the group paused before moving a hand to scratch her nose. The head of the mercenary next to her promptly deposited its contents backwards, and a small pistol clattered from their nerveless hand.

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

Bryluen lowered her pistol. "Your ace-in-the-hole was twitchy, and that signal was embarrassing. You have got to stop."

The collective group seemed to shiver as nerves overcame them. Bryluen flagged her location as requiring urgent medical care, immediately dispatching an ambulance to the warehouse. A loud yell began as the group rushed forward in a panic. Bryluen dropped her pistol and dialed her whip's length to maximum. With one hand she swung the whip low, and with the other retrieved something from beneath her sarong.

The first six mercenaries collapsed to the ground, bereft of important parts of their anatomy. She tossed her whip aside at the outside of her swing, and surged upward with a harsh strike against the chin of the first mercenary to actually reach her.

The mercenary's jaw not only shattered, but blood gushed from their mouth in a torrent. Bryluen's fist was now clad in a sleek knuckle duster featuring two prominent spikes. She slid back and braced for the next mercenary, arming her other fist with an identical knuckle duster concealed within her garments.

A sweep of the next person's outstretched arm left them open to a stab in the chest. Bryluen spun them into the path of the next mercenary, stepping aside as they crashed down together. She stomped the third mercenary's head hard enough to render them unconscious, then fended off three blade sweeps from a fourth with well-practiced forearm motions.

She allowed the knife-wielder to overstep to her side, then easily arm-locked them and kicked the side of their knee. They cried out and fell before a meaty jab to their upper back silenced them.

The leader—and now the last mercenary standing—dashed in, swinging a sword in a tight diagonal slash toward Bryluen's center of mass. They were at least a head taller than her and proportionately broader.

Bryluen stepped inside the arc of their swing and head-butted the leader's nose, causing them to stagger back while keeping hold of their blade; as the leader blinked at the unexpectedly bold maneuver and renewed their grip for another attack, Bryluen stabbed their upper arm with a stiff motion. The duster's blades punched twin holes in the leader's bicep, causing their hand to spasm. The mercenary swung their

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

other arm at her in reflex but Bryluen easily deflected the attack.

Bryluen braced the duster that was still buried in the leader's arm; the mercenary's eyes widened an instant before she sliced down, making a lateral motion toward the wrist. The leader shrieked and dropped their sword as their arm was cut open. Bryluen kned their thigh, then caught their chin in her grip as they tumbled forward. With a growl, she threw them down onto their back. There was a muffled thump as her heel connected with their forehead.

She leaned over and fished a small device out of the leader's shirt pocket. "Targets down, possible data secured. One uninjured captive, several more injured. Multiple casualties."

Asmat opened the comm line, "We already have teams closing in. Good job, Operative Branok."

Bryluen unconsciously sniffed the coppery air of the office, checking cuts, scratches, and bruises. Adrenaline had a tendency to blur out near-misses and hits that didn't leave any meaningful damage—the definition of which was greatly effected by Bryluen's decades of mortal peril. As she flicked a thin stream of blood from her arm onto the office carpet, another picture from Bel'Wa came through. From the preview thumbnail, Bryluen could see that not only was the vast majority of the picture green—but there was also some amount of turquoise. This indicated the images had now certainly gone from saucy to explicit. She smirked.

Within ten minutes, a dark CSOE lifter and a hover-ambulance descended on the warehouse. As was standard practice for a cleanup operation, the CSOE team member with the best smile was left outside to look friendly and stand next to an informative holographic projection. Bryluen directed the CSOE response team to the woman tied up in the vent. The matter was out of her hands now. One of the rapid-response medics, clad in a sleek white exo-frame, approached her to check her wounds. A suite of tools unfurled from a casing mounted to their forearm, and a small shoulder-mounted light attentively followed their gaze. She politely waved them off in favor of tending to the still living mercenaries.

The team leader approached her, stopped at a polite distance, and folded their hands behind their back. She was a tall woman with an abundance of curly burgundy hair pinned into a loose bun. Her blue

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

uniform was as stiff and crisp as armor plate. "Would you like a ride back to your party, ma'am?"

Bryluen handed her the data drive, which the team leader curtly sealed inside a protective case in their front pocket. Bryluen briefly considered walking back to Asmat's apartment, then glanced down. She supposed it would be somewhat concerning for her to take a stroll, given the amount of mercenary blood splattered on her clothes. "I think I'll take you up on that."

No less than forty-five minutes later, Bryluen had been dropped off at the apartment building, made her way up to Asmat's home, and been debriefed. Even at this early stage, it was evident that Asmat's initial assumption had been correct: the drone was never intended to harm, only to frighten. This was likely as retaliation for recent measures Asmat had supported regarding Human policy in crushing Ly Aulth trafficking operations that passed through the Liminal Stars.

Asmat was not particularly phased; she had faced far more serious threats before, and this was hardly the first time an attempt had been made to frighten her. While she had already dispatched more or less stern messages to the organizations and authorities which were supposed to catch things before they impacted her apartment defenses, she was quite ready to resume Bryluen's bachelorette party.

Bryluen herself was back on the couch, sitting on a towel as the medical spray on her various cuts dried. She had already mournfully disposed of her ruined outfit, and now wore one of her typical sets of white and gray athletic wear.

"Think I should send Bel'Wa a response picture, tell her how *my* night went?"

Asmat sighed, "All sweaty and bloody? Okay, go ahead, you can use my bedroom."

"... I mean, I intended to keep my clothes on. But, now that you mention it, I've got a bruise on my ribs that might be sexy enough to make her faint."

"God, you two deserve each other."

The evening resumed much as it had before the exciting interlude, except for the addition of a late meal brought to the door by the local Community Officer rather than a drone. She was a small woman, smiling nervously as the Operative answered the door. Bryluen

Bryluen's Bachelorette Brawl

had a brief conversation with her, asking how things had been in the neighborhood. The area had been quiet until today, her usual daily task of retrieving soccer balls from topiaries uninterrupted but for a trilingual conversation with a particularly cosmopolitan tourist family from Qixing space. Shortly before midnight, Lucinda took her leave in order to greet her spouses before they left for work. Asmat had fallen asleep on her couch once more; she had felt just fine for a couple of hours, but tended to rapidly acclimatize to being coddled.

The gift from Bel'Wa arrived at the door, similarly delivered by hand as midnight arrived. It was contained in a small, unassuming box with a biometric seal. Within were finely crafted plates for the grip of Bryluen's pistol - white and pearlescent, meticulously engraved in poetic verse which gleamed in crimson as the light passed over it.

Beneath the plates lay the final picture, a physical print enshrined in a small frame. "See you at the wedding!", said a message etched along the bottom. The portrait itself was an elaborate scene of such awe-inspiring hedonism that Bryluen actually blushed.

"God I love that fucking woman."

A Preview of The Dread Naught Trilogy Book Two: The Stirring Among the Stars

Bryluen nodded at the message from the Admiral. “Kirby, we’ve just received word from the fleet. They have engaged the Dreaded.”

Kirby immediately told the *Atet* to run silent; all the *Atet*’s non-essential systems would be deactivated in an attempt to mask its presence from other vessels.

The *Atet*’s unique prototype Compressed-Space drive allowed it to translate through a Gate thousands of kilometers further out than normal. This meant it could arrive in-system at a distance where most Gate defenses would not likely see it when running silent. While even such a small Compression Phenomenon could potentially populate on scanners, the absence of a detectable ship would render the discovery mostly useless.

Kirby engaged the drive one last time in order to pass through Gate Siegfried. The battle had been going on for a mere four minutes, and already it was a living hell. The instant the Compression Phenomenon opened, local communications were flooded with status reports and panicked maydays.

“This is *Astarte*, engines two and four are losing power. We have no choice but to withdraw for triage. We require cover—“

“—that sector, *Laveau*, the *Talon* and *Vindicator* are en r—“

“—ptain Raju, formerly of the *Mark Antony*. Recovery is a no-

go, we have lost the *Baradji*. I repeat: we have los—”

“—*ingetorix*, here. Confirmed kill. *Brekyirihunuade*, you are clear to evacuate.”

A small tactical simulation on the *Atet*'s HUD showed each craft as if it were close enough to be seen. The urgency and relative positions were real enough, it was just that the distance between each glimmering hologram appeared vastly smaller than it was.

The Battle of Gate Siegfried was spectacular and terrible in equal measure. Wretched hulks twirled in the void, rent in half by monstrous forces. The apocalyptic impact of cannon fire sent glittering shards of armor twirling in vast clouds. Blinding laser beams able to melt skyscrapers warped and twisted weapons and subsystems while missiles careened about, piercing into targets before bursting in violent detonations. Small munitions burst from every vessel as dozens, if not hundreds of automated turrets took aim at incoming projectiles, wreathing each ship in a halo of mini-laser flashes and flak. Drones swarmed and coordinated fire to protect surrounding ships from the unnatural black clouds—powder sent to create Dreaded on any vessels it touched. Each craft moved at immense speeds, their attitude thrusters fired in short bursts to compensate for weapons fire and impacts, while making numerous tiny course adjustments to avoid incoming fire. Each ship moved in complicated patterns of wavy lines, loops, and spirals that would look absurd for anyone with a frame of reference for their size and weight.

This battle had already entered the record books for its scale. Failure here would not only mean the loss of the Stone, but a catastrophic loss in life and material for the Human fleet. Even as the battle raged, debates occurred within the halls of civil servants across Human space about the risk being taken to hold onto a single object. Regardless of the uncertainties involved, the Astral Marines and CSOE had maintained a hard-line stance on the Stones' importance. Today would be a firm test of that commitment.

About the Author

Dylan Wayne Sanchez is a lifetime nerd with a long list of conquered books. Holding a degree in Classic Studies, and thus familiarity with Greco-Roman narrative structures, he has written on topics from Superman to Warhammer 40k.

Dylan has been a sci-fi junkie ever since his mother read him the John Carter of Mars series at age four, and hasn't slowed down yet. He lives in St. Louis, Missouri with his wife. She is his muse, and spends far too much of her time trying to keep him alive. Follow Dylan on Facebook as Author Dylan Sanchez, and on Twitter as @CaptainVentriss.