

Chidra – chidras are a reptilian race – they’re humanoid but scaly and hairless (unless you count their “head tails”, imagine tail-like dread locks) most avoid the moon for cultural reasons.

Donum – a word used to somberly acknowledge something terrible, the word comes from the name of an infamous Batloen Queen who unleashed a plague on her people to win a civil war.

Korrukk – the nearest moon (of three). Owned by Batloe, access is controlled by the Batloen Moonrush Mining Corporation which offers laborers multi-year contracts for passage.

Molemen – moles are the only race willing to work on Korrukk. They’re shorter than the average human by a half-foot, have short fur, and little snouts with pig-like noses.

Pyramid – a gladiator-style battle royal offered to prisoners of Batloe where the last team standing is pardoned. Particularly infamous convicts can be volunteered without consent.

---

The planet rose from the abyss of space as if it were manifesting for the first time. Milky tendrils of storms swirled over the sapphiric surface, shifting as the planet tilted out of the shadow of the moon. Emerging from the darkness, the sphere seemed larger than before. The planet looked down at those on the moon like the cloudy blue eye of a witch, glowering with vitriolic wisdom. Tiny shimmering specks burst from the cataracts and began to descend towards Korrukk.

Turning from the window, Sallis looked back towards Korrukk. He marched through the droves of meandering company men. Sallis didn’t yield to those in his path, he bumped shoulders and shoved past. Moles turned to snarl and curse but shut their snouts when they caught a glimpse of his. His snout was twisted into a grimace that contorted his whole face, furling his brow and squinting his eyes. The crowd left a gap in his wake, one in which an associate plunged into to pursue him.

“Comrade!”

Sallis flinched at Seliger’s voice but his stride didn’t skip a beat. Seliger caught up and walked alongside Sallis in silence until they arrived at the window. Grasping the metal banister, the two moles stared out. Korrukk was sheltered in the shade of the exterior moons. Artificial light sprayed out from chrome towers like water from hydrants, beating back that shade to reveal the desolation of the mines. Tunnels crisscrossed where roots once spread, light towers stood in place of tree trunks, and a putrid smog hung low over the moon like a canopy. Sallis hadn’t seen Korrukk like this since he first arrived and back then the dig site had been milling with moles. Now it appeared to be the barren skeleton of an ant pile, but there was still life within those subterranean corridors.

Nudging Sallis, Seliger said, “You need to eat.”

---

*“We need to eat!”*

*The mole jumped up onto the table. He spread his legs wide, puffed out his chest, and snapped his head back to stick his snout in the air. His cap slid right off the top of his head and plopped down on the table behind him. This led to an assortment of chuckles from those at his table – his stage – and the other tables in the chamber. A mole by his feet picked up the cap, dusted it off, and tossed it back up to the blowhard.*

*“Thank you, Comrade Fisgle.”*

*“Aye, Augert.” The comrade nodded.*

*Augert flopped the sock-like hat back on his head and looked out over the dining hall. He had his fellow mole’s attention. It didn’t take much. Their lunch left little to distract them: sacks of gray sludge so bland one started to wonder if they’d rather the goo taste bad so then at least there’d be some sensation. Instead, they sipped and sipped the insipid slime until suddenly they realized themselves full. The drained, rubber bladders were then tossed in a barrel to be refilled with tomorrow’s. On and on it went, yet that was not how it always had been. There once was a yesterday with real food.*

*“Don’t we need roses too?” Augert asked.*

*The chuckles he’d gotten before upgraded to laughter. Augert stomped his foot.*

*“Not roses, comrades, but roses.” Augert insisted, “The finer things in life. If you were told in your mother’s womb that all life would be was work hard and eat shit then you’d have asked to go back to wherever you were before!”*

*Fisgle slammed his fist on the tabletop by Augert’s feet, bellowing, “Aye, Augert!”*

*“When we signed our contracts, they promised food not slime!” Augert continued, “When we got off the shuttles, they gave us food not slime!” He shoved a furry finger in the air, pointing towards the planet beyond the cavernous ceiling above, “But when those shuttles left us here, everything started to change!”*

*Fisgle wasn’t alone this time. Other moles brought their fists down on their tables. The laughter had now evolved into a completely different species of sentiment. Folks echoed Fisgle, praising Comrade Augert and spouting off with their own grievances.*

*Under the cover of concurrence, Sallis slid out from the threshold of the tunnel with his head down. He did his best to slip into his seat beside Fisgle but could not escape the notice of the preaching comrade. So astute was Augert’s awareness, the mole even noticed the lump in Sallis’ pocket. Feeling his friend’s eyes, Sallis met his gaze. If he hadn’t been furred, then he’d be blushing. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small, metallic cube.*

*The dining hall gasped. Everyone was suddenly on their feet.*

*“Comrade Sallis!” Augert exclaimed, “Is that what I think it is?”*

*Sallis turned the cube over to reveal a small round button. Pressing it released another wave off awe through the congregation of miners. In the aftermath of their exclamation, a buzzing hum filled the room. The chrome cube came to life. Text scrolled down the sides as a light shot up from the button. The light stopped at Sallis’ eye level and there it took on a shape – the shape of a loaf of bread. Craning his neck to meet Augert’s gaze once more, he gestured with a simple shrug.*

*“Comrade Sallis!” Augert stooped to snatch the holographic roll. It materialized in his hands. No longer was it just light, it was matter. He bit in, tore off a bite, then threw the rest into*

*the crowd. The other tables had been abandoned. The miners were all squeezed in around them. Augert continued, "Comrade Sallis, the honorable laborer. Is there a more honest worker than Sallis amongst us?"*

*While Augert proceeded with the sermon, Sallis worked on the cube. Tapping a few lines of scrolling text and suddenly a girthy chicken leg was projected into the air. An eager hand reached across the table for it but Fisgle batted it back. Turning back to Sallis, Fisgle bowed and let him do the honors. Sallis pulled the morsel from the light and handed it slowly to the miner that had lunged for it. The others took this as a cue. Though they couldn't help but fidget, they waited their turn.*

*"Loyal to his fellow comrades but also fair to the company men," Augert said, "no one on this moon or on that planet can find fault with Sallis and yet here he is – he has been driven to thievery!"*

*"Augert!" Sallis yelled before hastily spitting out, "Comrade Augert! Comrade, I didn't steal anything." He clutched the device to his chest and the crowd sighed. Sallis clarified, "This food was promised to us, it is ours. It isn't stealing."*

*"What're you doing with the warp cube after?" The mole with the chicken wing interjected. He was gnawing on the bone, the meat already gone. His beady eyes watched the machine in Sallis' hand. Prying the bone out of his snout, he licked his lips, "Those are worth a fortune back on-"*

*"I'm putting it back where I found it, Seliger." Sallis snapped, "I'm not a thief." He looked back up at Augert on the table and repeated himself, "I'm not a thief, Comrade Augert."*

*Augert nodded, "I know. I'm sorry, Comrade Sallis." He addressed the rest of the miners, "Sallis is no thief. We all know that."*

*The congregation nodded and grunted in affirmation and as Sallis held the cube out and began to pick through the options once more, the sounds of affirmation grew. Stifling a chuckle, Augert continued.*

*"Even if he were, that doesn't matter. Crime doesn't come from a lazy person succumbing to evil. Crime comes from a desperate person railing against injustice. We were promised food, then they gave us sludge. We were promised gold, what is to stop them from taking that as well? That's what we've all been thinking, right? We've all wondered it. We've all talked about it. But what about after that?" Augert asked, "Once they take our gold, what's next?"*

*The crowd hushed. The antsy shifting ceased. Even those that had already gotten their food stopped chewing. Their snouts turned up to Augert.*

*"What's to stop them from taking our lives?"*

- - -

*"You need to eat!"*

*Sallis shoved the dish back at Seliger as he left the overlook and began to march back across the concourse. The other moles, the company men, were shifting that way. Like a school of fish caught in the current, the entire airport moved towards the planet-facing windows.*

“Comrade,” Seliger protested, skipping to get just ahead of Sallis so his gestures could break the mole’s line of sight. He beckoned to the action outside, “they may not have food on the shuttles!” Seliger clasped Sallis on the shoulder, “You haven’t-”

Sallis shrugged his associate off and shot him a glance that curbed the man’s campaign for a moment. Grasping the banisters, Sallis gazed out towards the planet and the approaching armada. The vessels were rotund, swollen balloons constrained into segments by thong-like harnesses. There was no deck to these ships, they were hull all the way around. Sails had been turned ninety degrees and flipped to stick parallel against the side of the barge like the fins of a giant fish. From afar, the fleet looked like a pod of whales slowly floating through the dark depths of the sea. In reality, the crafts were soaring through space like shooting stars and, in reality, the fleet had more in common with a shiver of sharks than a pod. Tumor-like ball joints speckled their bellies, antennae-like rods extended from these capsules. Tiny gems glimmered between the bulbous bearings and the shafts. Sallis had never seen the bizarre appendages, but he had seen the glowing stones. In fact, he had mined them. Just as he was beginning to understand what he was seeing, the rods turned to point towards Korrukk and their jewels began to radiate brighter and brighter until a new light began to emanate from their tips. Then with a silent flash – such an sudden visual, it seemed to render deafen all sound for a split second – the light jumped from the tips of the rods and zoomed towards them.

Sallis jerked away from the window. His flinched would’ve been far too late. He saw the projectiles disappear over the lip of the window frame, passing over the airport. Having turned away, he found himself looking back towards Korrukk, back towards the excavation site. The other moles in the harbor had ducked too, allowing Sallis to gaze, wide-eyed, over their heads through the opposite window. The beams of light pelted the mine like the first fat wads of a rainstorm stabbing a sandcastle. The tunnels and towers shifted, then they disappeared behind the second volley of light.

“DEPARTURES HAVE BEEN DELAYED,” the intercom announced, “ON ACCOUNT OF TEMPORARY DISTURBANCES. THE ISSUE WILL BE RESOLVED SHORTLY.”

Falling to his knees, Sallis eyes continued to stare across the concourse. The light that blotted out the mines was profuse. It stung his eyes. The glass had been replaced by a white façade, like snow pressed up against a window after being buried by a blizzard.

A splat wrenched Sallis attention away. Clumps of meat, peppers, and sauce covered in rice slowly puddled by his knees. Seliger stooped down to pick up the bowls, doing his best to sweep the food back into the containers with his hands but his eyes were dragged away from the process to meet Sallis’. Seliger froze under Sallis’ glare until tears began to bud in the corners of the mole’s eyes. Joining Sallis on his knees, Seliger hung his head.

- - -

*“We gah...” Spilph stooped low and scooped his fingers under a moon rock that was twice the size of the old mole’s torso, “...aht a minuh...” he squatted low with a straight back and heaved, “uhte.”*

*The stone didn’t shift.*

*“Aye,” Fisgle squatted beside Spilph, met his elder’s gaze as he grasped the bolder, then heaved it from the floor of the tunnel, “Spilph.”*

*Slamming the rock into place in the wall, Fisgle moved to the next stone but Sallis was already lifting it. Sallis passed it off to Fisgle and turned for the next but the next was firmly pinned to the ground by the boot of Seliger. Sallis rolled his eyes until they connected with their fourth comrade.*

*“The company men have clocked out for the night.” Seliger scoffed, “All the other barricades are settling in for the night watch.” Keeping his Captain Morgan pose firm, Seliger pivoted to gesture to the rest of the rocks. At least a dozen and none smaller than the one that tripled Spilph’s weight – back when food was on the menu – meaning there would be quite more than a minute more hammering and nailing before even Fisgle would be able to wall them, “Even if the old man Spilph’s right, we’re faraked.”*

*“And if you’re right,” Sallis crouched and cradled the stone beneath his associate’s shoe, “we’re faraked.”*

*“I wah...” Spilph said, still rising from his prior stoop, “...ahs wrong.”*

*A rod burst through the wall, nearly impaling Spilph. It was wide as Fisgle’s arms and Fisgle quickly grabbed it, but the rod appeared to have gone just as far as it wanted. Still, he kept his grip as he craned his neck to check the other three for a clue. Seliger had finally hopped off his rock, having fallen back to cower against the side of the tunnel. Spilph moseyed to the barricade with hands upraised as if he might be able to keep it from crumbling in on them. Sallis had given up on Seliger’s stone and instead peered into the center of the rod.*

*“It’s a hose.” Sallis gulped.*

*“Aye, Sallis?” Fisgle asked.*

*Sallis looked up at Fisgle, “For gas.”*

*“Foam!” Spilph barked.*

*A tiny version of the prior rod poked through a small crack in the moon rocks, nearly pricking Spilph’s upraised hands. His hands quickly throttled the tube, his fingers fumbling about the mouth just as a white goo burst out of the orifice. It sprayed through his furry phalanges to splatter the poor old miner and then swell into bulbous white balloons of foam. Spilph looked like he’d just braved a snowstorm and it had only taken him a split second to clasp his palm over the mouth of the tube and stop the spray. A split second later and five more needles burst through the barricade.*

*Sallis and Fisgle sprung into action. Sallis scurried to stopper one of the new foam blasters, focusing on getting his right palm over the hole before even bothering to fumble with his left palm to plug the next closest. Fisgle, on the other hand, was flustered. The fingers on his right hand danced around a hose like a startled spider before he turned back to his left hand to ruffle another spout like it was the scalp of his boy and before he could focus back on his right hand the foam had already begun to hard. Not to mention the fifth spout – which had been totally neglected. Spilph was stretching for it but his limbs didn’t quite extend like they used to. Seliger’s limbs did but he had remained behind the trio, cradling the lamp orb as if protecting it from the being marred by the foam. Despite the fact that light wouldn’t matter much once the gas hose turned on, it did give Seliger the vantage to see that they had only one option left.*

*“Tear down the barricade!” Seliger shrieked.*

*Throwing the light orb, Seliger dove on the gas hose, stoppering the mouth with his sternum. The rolling orb behind the four shot light in all directions as it bounced about the moon rocks, making it all the more difficult for Sallis, Fisgle, and Spilph to see what they were doing as they scraped and clawed at the wall they had struggled so hard to put up. Then, as the light settled, dust joined the still splattering foam, blinding them as the barricade fell.*

*The cloud of refuse hung in the air around Seliger while his comrades lay half buried in the debris. He didn't move from the main hose, even as the dust began to settle and reveal the company men waiting on the other side. Seliger didn't budge until the rod he strangled shifted beneath him, wrenched free as it's masters retreated and tugged the cannon-like apparatus that hoisted it back down the tunnel away from the smithereens of the barricade. The foam spittles cut off and the company men began to roll them away too. Two company men remained behind them, holding rods that were not hollow.*

*One of them took a step back towards the departing chemical cannons, snickering as he marched away, "Wish I could say you got lucky."*

*A stone shifted and Fisgle sat up from the destruction, he growled, "Aye, crows."*

*The other sheathed his baton and then reached for a flask on his hip, "This is for the two of ours."*

*"Two of ours?" Sallis asked as he squirmed out of the wreckage.*

*The company man tossed the flask to Seliger then let his hand fall back to the handle of the sheathed baton, "Y'all took two today." He took a step back towards his comrades and twisted halfway from the miners then hesitated and said before turning his back and rushing off, "So they took the water."*

*"Doh..." Spilph yelped.*

*Sallis and Fisgle jumped to their feet and rushed to their elder's aid. He didn't have to finish his expletive. Seliger did it for him.*

*"Num."*

*Draping the old mole's arms over their shoulders, Sallis and Fisgle lifted him from the rubble. Seliger tied the flask to his belt, recovered the lamp orb, and led the other three down the tunnel. A low rumbling wafted over them like a breeze, growing louder they closer they got to the dining hall. The high-pitched voices and thundering roars of the workers reminded the four of the cacophony of comrades during a cave in.*

*"This is a cave in." Sallis stated.*

*"Aye, Sallis." Fisgle nodded.*

*"This was a cave in from the start." Seliger muttered.*

*"From the duh..." Spilph stammered, "...day we signed."*

*Rounding the corner, they joined the choir. The moles were up in arms. A dozen stood on tabletops, preaching plots of action or bemoaning their inevitable doom while clusters of their comrades clamored around them. In the chaos, only Adorge, the one non-mole, was calm enough to notice the four's arrival.*

*Adorge was a chidra. A reptilian race that had scales where moles had fur. Long ago they deemed moon mining cursed, thus few were tempted to give any contract their signature. Adorge, however, had missed the memo. Now he sat alone in the crowd, sulking with his chin in his hands*

*and his eyes listlessly looking onwards until they fell across the four. Standing, he approached while beckoning them his way.*

*"You heard?" Adorge asked.*

*"Aye, Adorge." Fisgle grunted.*

*"Augert has them." Adorge hesitated before continuing, "Donum, y'all got foamed?"*

*"No." Seliger rolled his eyes, "What gave you that idea?"*

*"They cut the water." Adorge jabbed Seliger in the chest with a gentle fist, "Ya, crow."*

*The four followed Adorge to Augert but their eyes followed the flask on Seliger's hip.*

*The two company men sat on the floor, their backs up against the wall of the bar. In the kitchen over the counter, Augert paced back and forth. A few moles surrounded the two hostages, but their focus was on Augert. They looked as if they were in line waiting for the kitchen to open, not like they were guarding prisoners. Nor did the prisoners appear they needed to be guarded. They sat unbound and ungagged, dwelling on their situation in almost the same manner as Adorge had been when the four first happened upon him.*

*Augert saw them coming and stopped pacing. Slapping his palms down flat on the bar, he gestured to the company men sitting on the other side and said simply, "Gifts of death from the southwest tunnel."*

*"Tell them the move." Adorge prompted.*

*"We're sending two lucky comrades to escort these two crows home." Augert explained, "Any volunteers."*

*Fisgle didn't hesitate, his hand shot up like he was catching a pop up. Sallis looked at Spilph, still hoisted between them. The old mole simply shook his head. Sallis turned to Adorge. Adorge scoffed, good heartedly, "I'd rather take my chances in Pyramid."*

*"Pyramid?" Sallis murmured, shriveling up his snout in confusion, "You think they'll shoot us dead for giving them two crows back?"*

*"They cut off the water, Sallis." Seliger said before glowering at Adorge, "We'll be lucky to even get to prison."*

*Sallis protested, "But they wouldn't-"*

*"They will." Augert interjected, "They'll kill us all. What do you think they've been trying to do?"*

*"Well it can't make it worse." Sallis stated. Then he raised his free hand to mirror Fisgle whose arm still hung in the air almost as if he had been born that way. Sallis shrugged, "This was always the risk."*

*"Donum." Adorge lamented.*

*"Fisgle." Augert commanded, "Put your hand down."*

*"Aye, Augert." Fisgle complied.*

*"Seliger." Augert declared.*

*Seliger bowed his head with a sigh.*

*"What?" Sallis lowered his hand, "Augert-"*

*"Fisgle would ensure he got shot." Augert smiled sadly, "You and Seliger, keep your cool. You'll be alright."*

*Sallis and Fisgle exchanged glances over Spilph whom still hung between them.*

*“Adorge, help Fisgle set Spilph down.” Augert ordered, “Sallis, Seliger, you need to go now. Every hour without water...” Augert slumped over the counter for a moment before straightening back up, “Get the crows. We’ll get y’all ready in the kitchen.”*

*Sallis and Adorge gently switched places.*

*“Be guh...” Spilph stuttered, “...ood, Sallis.”*

*“Spilph.” Sallis put his hand over his heart and bowed. When he recovered from his bow, he nodded to Adorge and Augert. They nodded back. Then he turned to Seliger.*

*The hostages were already standing up. Shifting their weight from one foot to the other was all they could do to mask their anticipation. The miners led the two company men behind the bar and met Augert in the kitchen.*

*Between the empty cabinets and kitchen racks, the four began to exchange uniforms. Pressed slacks for torn jeans and starched shirts for scratchy flannels, their little costume swap might just save their lives if Seliger was right. The captive corporatists weren’t the biggest fans of the ploy but were willing to consent to just about anything to avoid whatever fate would soon befall the striking miners in the empty mess hall.*

*Augert was pacing again. Sallis watched as he tucked in his shirt and fastened his belt.*

*“For the roses.” Sallis commented.*

*Stopping mid stride, Augert turned and cocked his head.*

*“We need to eat...but we need roses too.” Straightening his collar, Sallis elaborated, “The finer things in life.”*

*Augert smiled, “See, Comrade Sallis, that’s why we’re sending you.”*

*“And me!” Seliger interjected.*

*Chuckling, Augert walked up to Seliger and clasped his hand. After a moment, he moved on to Sallis, “When you’re back in Batloe-”*

*“When we are back.” Sallis corrected.*

*“-remember that.” Augert said.*

*“We’ll be back in a few hours.” Sallis promised.*

*Augert smirked, “Then bring dinner.”*

- - -

The moon sank into the darkness like an anchor plummeting to the bottom of the ocean. Korrukk appeared to be slowly turning its face away from them but in reality it was their shuttle, curving around the moon on its way towards the planet. Their mine – what was left of it – was obscured from view as the next hemisphere took its place. With each passing second, the moon shrank further and further but even still Sallis could make out a few of the other mines that pimpled Korrukk’s surface. The silver light towers shimmered as they beamed light past one another to illuminate the tangled knots of tunnels and quarries. Darkness still blanketed most of the other mines, but then another lit up. One by one the light towers blinked to life.

Sallis gasped. He peeled himself off the window to look over at Seliger. The mole was already ogling him, mirroring his expression: furled brow, snout agape. There was no nightshift in the mines. The only time the two had seen the spotlights on after dark was during the strike.



the company men in the pews around them had noticed. A chorus of murmurs began to rise in the cabin. The two miners smiled and turned back to watch Korrukk, shining like a full moon.

- - -

*The moon breeze tugged at the trees around them. Sallis couldn't help but smirk at their trunks. The bark was covered in thin fur, nigh identical to the moles that walked between them. Unlike the fur trees, the moles marching down the wooded moon trail weren't worth their weight in gold back in Solaris. An arborist would make as much money as a mining company if they sold fur saplings back in Batloe, though raising and transporting trees was too delicate to be lucrative. That delicacy, however, made it all the more tantalizing to Sallis. The workers would have to be well fed and rested, a corporation couldn't just throw them down a tunnel with a pickax and waltz off.*

*Sallis sighed, "How different working on Korrukk could be."*

*"What's that?" Seliger asked.*

*The sparsely wooded path between the mines and the airport wasn't lit at night, so the four could hardly make each other out apart from their silhouettes. Fortunately, the trail was easy enough to follow. Ramping upwards from the mine, the road arched away from the excavation before cutting back to connect with the airport. The spotlights from the chrome obelisks were all fixated on the barricaded tunnels, leaving the two miners in the dark with their two hostages.*

*The company men weren't bound or gagged. There wasn't much reason to expect they were dangerous. Dressed as miners, the last thing they wanted to do was cause a fuss. Everyone involved hoped for an uneventful transfer. No harm, no foul – that was all. Well...maybe not all.*

*Moving on from Sallis' silence, Seliger halted the procession, "Suppose now is as good a time as any."*

*The company men pivoted so that they faced one another but were still able to glance back at their captors. Seliger was digging in his pockets. Sallis stepped in front of Seliger, raising his hand with concern about to ask before Seliger cut him off with a surprise. Out of his back pocket, the moleman withdrew a warp cube.*

*"We'd like to make a deal." Seliger stated.*

*Sallis lunged at Seliger, grabbing him by the collar of his stolen uniform but again Seliger answered before he could begin to question.*

*"Augert gave it to me." Seliger said.*

*Sallis didn't let go, but his shoulders dropped and his arms went limp, "Huh?"*

*Looking past Sallis, Seliger made eye contact with the former hostages. They were no longer facing one another. The sight of the tiny square device had peaked their interest. Neither a fur sapling nor a moon-mined enertomb could compare to the cost of a warp cube back on the planet. They licked their snouts and waited for the terms.*

*"This cube is yours," Seliger explained, "if you get us off Korrukk."*

*"You faraking crow!" Sallis bellowed. His shoulders heaved once more and his arms lifted Seliger up off the dusty path, "Augert didn't-"*

*Somehow Seliger stayed cool, simply saying, "Augert did."*

*This time, Sallis didn't relent immediately.*

*Seliger continued, "That's why he sent me instead of Fisgle."*

*Sallis' snout remained twisted in a frown, but his brow began to soften as Seliger's sense began to chip away at his defensiveness.*

*Seliger finished, "That's why he sent you instead of Fisgle."*

*Behind the two, the company men were becoming impatient. There was no thought of running for the airport, not at the sight of the fortune in their captor's claws. Instead, their concern was that this dispute between miners might lead to them losing the deal.*

*"We'll take the deal." One squeaked, "We'll get y'all off Korrukk."*

*"We'll make sure you dodge charges!" The other piped up, "We'll say you saved us!"*

*"Shut up you farakin crows!" Sallis barked over his shoulder. Then his shoulders fell for the second time and he set Seliger down but his hands still gripped his former-comrades disguise so tightly, he couldn't let go just yet. Bowing his head, he sighed, "Donum..."*

*With his free hand, Seliger began to pry Sallis' hands off his shirt. He looked hard at Sallis but Sallis would not look back at him. Seliger explained, "Augert thinks you can lead the workers."*

*"From the planet?" Sallis scoffed.*

*"There are workers there too." Seliger retorted, yanking Sallis' last hand off him, "Trust me, I didn't agree either."*

*"Then why'd you agree?" Sallis snapped.*

*"I didn't want to die." Seliger shrugged, "And neither did Augert. That's why he wanted to send you. You were willing to die."*

*"So was Fisgle!" Sallis exclaimed, finally looking Seliger face to face.*

*"Aye, Fisgle." Seliger rolled his eyes.*

*Sallis turned away. He walked over to the edge of the path. Squatting, he placed his fingers in the soil as if he feared he might keel over.*

*"Again, I agree." Seliger said, "I don't think you're a leader. You're not an Augert."*

*"Thanks." Sallis grumbled.*

*"But you and I both believe in Augert." Seliger slowly walked over towards the crouching Sallis. He beckoned for the company men in their mining-disguises to keep from interfering. From a foot behind Sallis, he said, "And Augert told me the workers need you. If any of us were to escape Korrukk, he wanted it to be you."*

*Sallis shook his head and dug his hands deeper into the dirt. He asked, "What am I supposed to do?"*

*"Don't ask me." Seliger said, though his voice was soft. It was almost as if the mole was pleading for Sallis to understand. They were both about to turn themselves in to the enemy with nothing but the word of two hostages to protect them. From what Sallis knew of Seliger, this was the boldest thing he'd ever seen the self-serving sapper do. Seliger proceeded, "Just live. We believe in Augert so he must be right. So just stay alive and it'll work itself out. Just keep going. Work, sleep, eat. Just eat."*

*Looking up, Sallis stared through the fuzzy trunks of the fur forest. He squinted as if he might be able to peer through the barricades and deep into the tunnels where their comrades resided. Neither he nor Seliger knew what fate would ultimately befall their fellows, but both*

were certain it would not be good. Fisgle. Spilph. Adorge. Sallis could imagine their faces in the shadows. The worst part was that he could see their faces twist into smiles and nods. Then he saw Augert and he heard him say again:

“See, Comrade Sallis, that’s why we’re sending you.”

- - -

*Next scene, everyone at the tenement treats him like a hero, reads the news on Solaris, gets arrested for stealing food.*

- - -

Auriferous warmth slowly melted Sallis’ dreams, rending his eyelids useless. Solaris didn’t shine like that on his side of Korrukk. Clutching his blanket, he rolled away from the sun. His eyelids flickered as his eyes adjusted to the shade, but in the blinking he spotted other eyes. Moles and chidras alike were staring at him. Clenching his eyes shut didn’t help, he could feel their attention on him just as well as he could feel the heat of Solaris. Squirring out from under his comforter, Sallis sat up.

He sat in a pavilion of sorts. The tarp that had been fashioned as an awning had long since depreciated in value since the state initially installed it. Beams of morning sunlight split the canvas ceiling like pickaxes splitting moon stone – only they lingered...like the stares of Sallis’ roommates. A little mole scurried past then skidded to a halt in Sallis peripheral. She craned her neck to look in every other direction but Sallis’ then, still averting her eyes, she made a beeline for the former moon miner. In her hands, the girl clutched a scroll. She stopped and turned around when she got to Sallis and held the paper behind her, wiggling it.

“Thanks.” Sallis said as he took the bait. It was an elven paper, but the largest publication beneath Solaris and her three moons: *The Mystakle Times*. The headline read: *Striking Moon Miners Suffer Catastrophic Collapse – Igniting a General Strike across Korrukk!* Sallis shook his head and rolled the paper back into a tube. Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a few sheets of credits. The girl was looking over her shoulder, watching him out of the corner of her eye. When she saw his moon-money she giggled and skipped off.

Sallis’ stomach growled. Looking around the quarterage he saw that the scroll was the first and last gift he would be getting from those that still stared at him. All they had to offer was nods. Sallis nodded back as he made his way through the crowd towards the edge of the tent. His nods seemed to relinquish the people from their curiosity.

*What do they think happened? Who do they think I am?* Sallis wondered. His fist clenched around the newspaper. Then his stomach lurched again. *Food.*

Wind swept sand up off the street, spinning in twirling flurries that were quickly burst and scattered by busy passersby. Moles and chidras hustled here and there, weaving in and out of each other’s way, just as busy as Sallis and his comrades had been in the tunnels on the moon. Only, on the moon, your labor was worth twice that as it was on the planet. Sallis had expected the people to envy or resent him but the glances he got from folks on the street were much the same as those in the quarterage.

*Do they believe the news?* He peered up between the towering tenements to squint at the moons. He could make out half of Korrukk in the morning sky, a green and blue marble that mirrored the planet beneath his feet. *Could they have seen the attack?*

With his head in the clouds, he bumped into someone and jerked his attention back to the street. The fellow was gone before he could apologize. An old lady caught his eyes while he was looking for the person he had ran into. She quickly averted her gaze. He heard her murmur, “Donum.” before she disappeared into the throng of commuters behind him.

*Donum for me?* His eyes slowly drifted back up to the sky. *Or for-*

His attention was snatched away from Korrukk as he finally made eye contact with another Batloen – one that did not appear to share the sentiment of the rest of the street folk. The chidra wore a uniform similar to the one worn by company men in the mines, his glare was almost identical as well. Sallis turned away as resentment welled up within him and his blood warmed up beneath his fur – then his stomach cramped.

*Food.* Ignoring the cop behind him, he waded further into the crowd. He stopped before the first food vendor he could find. It was a simple booth. A grill mounted on a wagon with an umbrella that fought back Solaris but also kept the heat of the stove heavy on the shoulders of the chef. The chef’s snout was split in a perpetual pant. Sweat trickled off the tip of his nose, splattering onto the flattop and sizzling into steam that the cook fanned away. Beneath the counter, closer to Sallis’ eye level, was an opening displaying different breads and fruits. Sallis plucked out a red bell pepper.

“Moon miner!” The cook barked, “You got gold?”

Sallis didn’t put the pepper down. Instead, he sat the rolled-up newspaper on the counter to free up a hand which he then used to fish out a handful of credits from his pocket.

“No good.” The cook snatched Sallis’ scroll, unfurled it, then shoved it in Sallis’ face, “Thanks to you and your friends,” He tapped a line in the second paragraph, “your moon money ain’t worth shit.”

Sallis read, *“the people of Batloe have stopped accepting credits in place of gold”* before snatching the paper away from the cook and reading further: *The strike at Moonrush Mining’s Excavation Site V came to an abrupt end late last night – early this morning – when an alleged structural failure caused the mine to collapse on the workers barricaded inside. While Moonrush Mining has yet to report the condition of those inside the mine at the time, miners across Korrukk have now followed V’s example and instituted an industry-wide general strike that leaves even planet-based companies leery of such action spreading to the Rift.*

The officer Sallis had spotted earlier began to close in. The rosy fruit was still in one of Sallis’ hands, pinched between his fingers and the news. The vender and the guardsmen made eye contact.

Lost in the article, Sallis took a step away from the food stand and read on: *Princess Daffeega Shelba has been advocating on behalf of the workers since the strike began and appears to be winning over her father especially after news of this event. Public opinion has been generally in favor of the miners, however, their sympathy only goes so far. While Batloen law states the credits moon miners receive are still valid currency, the people of Batloe have started to stop accepting credits in place of gold for fear that the era of the credits and contracts*

*will end with the Princess' deal – functionally eliminating the earnings of the miners who have already left Korrukk.*

*What does this mean for the rest of the world? Expect the price of everything to rise-*

“Sir!”

Jolted, Sallis jumped back and looked up. His snout nearly smashed into the chidra's chest. Taking another step back, the officer followed suit.

“The pepper!” The cop commanded.

Sallis rolled up the paper and slid it into his pocket then pulled out a wad of credits.

“Thank you, *law* man.” Sallis kept his eyes on the cop as he stepped up back up to the vendor and placed the credits on the counter, “Now, I am going-”

“I'm not selling you that pepper!” The cook hollered.

“Sir,” the officer stepped towards him again, a hand slipping down to his baton, “that is not your pepper!”

Sallis raised the pepper to his snout and finished what he was saying, “-to eat.”

Deleted Scene:

Start of the barricades where you see Seliger slacking off – knowing that the strike is about to start – while Sallis still does his job. Originally when you see Seliger getting the warp cube from a company man. In this version, Sallis resists ratting on Seliger until the hostage situation when they're both in the kitchen with Augert. That's when Augert tells Sallis that he told Seliger to get the warp cube so that he and Seliger could escape if need be. In this version, Augert and Seliger were going to go and Sallis goes in the kitchen to warn Augert about Seliger. At that point, Augert has Sallis go in his place because Sallis is the most honorable among them and Augert feels guilty/hypocritical for secretly planning to escape the doomed strike.

Why I cut it:

I ran out of “present day” scenes to splice “past” scenes with *and* it seemed a bit too convoluted to make everything make sense. Why would they send the leader of the strike to go turn in hostages if they thought that might be a suicide mission?

Why I miss it:

I want it to be clear that Seliger is a realist, not necessarily a bad comrade and I feel like showing how Augert – the main revolutionary type guy – respects and maybe even leans more towards Seliger-esque realism than Sallis-esque honor/honesty, making it make more sense for Augert to inevitably in the end wish Sallis to lead the people, picking good old fashioned goodness over cold calculated practical-ness.

The point of the story is to have Sallis' origin story *and* to flesh out how he continues to stumble into heroism by doing nothing more than the right thing at every opportunity. After this short story, Sallis spends time in and out of prison until the Layman's Revolution in which he stumbles into a major role. Then, in the election afterwards, he is voted into the crown – essentially un-consensually. He goes on to reform Batloe and stabilize that racial and class divides, making it

one of the few stable nations capable of manifesting a legitimate defense against the Queen of Darkness when she arrives a few years later.