

OBELISK

A Novel

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

Humming. A dull, uneven roar. It was an intrusive tone that filled his ears. It pulsed around his brain tissue and down through the ligaments and muscles attached to his spine. Pressure built with every second. It rumbled in his body like the engines of a freight transport. It infected all of his senses until claustrophobia began to pinch the base of his skull. That feeling is all Reed had ever remembered feeling on this freight elevator. His helmet acted like a resonating chamber. An endless droning sound of metal on metal rattled against the nervous feeling at the base of his skull. He wanted to remove the helmet but knew he couldn't. The awful rhythm was only interrupted by the occasional stutter of the mag clamps losing contact with the shaft railing. But that only exacerbated the metallic shrieking of the thirty-year-old tech. An elevator that likely hadn't been checked or repaired since the last time Reed was here. Its piercing frequencies could be heard on any floor above or below the car as it ascended the building's interior. These were just the loathsome, ambient sounds of the industrial sectors of Esqrol. Miles of breathing steel soaked in a thousand luminous shades of neon light – blinding pinks, greens, and purples swarming the surface of metal and concrete. Structures clothed in dead blues, grays, and other hues that didn't deserve proper names. Nothing could escape the perverting glow of commercial

neon. Advertisements and signage. Even tattoos and body augmentations. Its sickly haze decorated almost every surface across the 850,000 square kilometers of multi-level corporate buildings, commercial megaplexes, spaceports, innumerable residential zones... the neverending, unsleeping organism that pulsed at the heart of the known galaxy. Though Reed was far from the shiny, modern visage of the city center, the arcane luminosities stained the glare across his helmet. He rocketed toward the upper floors of just one of the thousands of buildings nestled in a seething maze of shipping lanes and storage facilities – Sector Six: the rotten lungs of this vast and sprawling city. It was where all the secrets were kept. Where the city sheathed all its criminals and shady business deals. The disease. The malice. The darkness of its heart.

Any mercenary or courier that needed work came to see a broker in what was known officially as the “Iron Circle,” but anyone who lived in or near it just called it the “Hellmouth.” Esqrol law enforcement gave this part of the city a wide berth due to a healthy fear of the cartels. An underground criminal network that operated freely within the borders of Sector Six. Its leaders were broken into semi-syndicated houses plagued by infighting and disorganization. They cannibalized one another’s business and frequently broke the established boundaries of the circle. Spilling into the rest of the city as they pleased. At the time Reed last rode this elevator, there were six houses. But time is cruel and business is cheap. There was no telling what had changed hands in the time that he had been away. The cartels were greedy, vile, and notoriously untrustworthy, but one of them held Reed’s future in the palm of its hand. Specifically, one man.

He was a man that solved problems for those incapable or unwilling to get their hands dirty. A man Reed had known and worked for from the time he could properly hold a gun in his hand. Reed had traveled across eight systems to see him. His last job on Esqrol had been almost eleven years ago, and even though almost everything had changed since then, the city was mostly the same. But every city in the Core was the same. Buildings taller than ancient humans could have ever imagined possible, crowds choking the streets, a thick blanket of airborne vehicles moving in uniform lines – asphyxiating the atmosphere. Marvels of human evolution and engineering repeated all the old sins. All the old cycles. No matter how far someone ran, they could never fully escape them. 10 years away had given a dull and irritating nuance to Esqrol’s fragrances. Reed had all but forgotten the hours of public transport and swimming

through frenetic crowds just to haggle over rates and leave with less than you expected. But industrial mag lifts were always the worst of it. No matter what system he was in. That was until now. Walking through his oldest haunt, he could feel the past attempting to burrow into his mind. It stank of sweat and rubbish. It drew out the metallic flavor of blood and burned against his tongue.

Fluorescent panels mounted in the car's ceiling spat out a white, sanitary light. His dark and tattered muslin cloak hid the armor that clung to his body – a layered system of carbon textiles and hardened alloy panels covered his limbs and torso. It had been tailor-made for his dimensions. A gift from his old boss. The mag car rattled violently as it passed each floor of the building, readjusting the loose garbage that huddled together in the corners of the cramped space. Lights continued to flicker as Reed tried to think of what he might say after so long away... what the old man might do when he saw him.

He began to imagine how this conversation might end as the cab jerked to a halt on the fiftieth floor with a *CLUNK*. The entire box shook and settled and the stabilizers engaged. Its large alloy doors opened, hissing as they retreated into the walls. A massive, grimy man dressed in tattered black clothes waited just beyond the opening, past the level's collapsible gate. He lumbered towards the cab and, with little effort, pushed the heavy gate open from the center. Half opened toward the ceiling, half toward the floor. Calloused digits wiggled on the end of his hand, motioning for Reed to vacate the trash-ridden car. Without a word or hint of hesitation, Reed stepped forward and passed the bouncer. The man had a large, bald head that rested on a proportionately large body. He was covered in sweat and was visibly irritated. He had, obviously, not chosen this post for himself. The corridor he guarded was hot. Reed saw the temperature rise five degrees in his HUD. Salty solutions flowed along the deep lines in the bouncer's face. He followed Reed with narrowed eyes until he floated from his peripheral. The man's meaty head turned back and barked further down the hallway. Gravel bellowed in his voice, "Oi! You two... you comin' or not?" He hocked the mucus in his throat and spat on the floor – further displaying his general disgust. Reed drew closer to the pair of ominous figures that filled the dark, cramped corridor. After a moment he realized what they were... his fist tightened. *Bounty hunters*, but not the kind that frequented densely populated systems, much less in the Core. Most called them "Dwellers," though that wasn't their true name. Not much was known about them, but all who knew of them considered them dangerous. If they were on Esqrol, they were hunting.

Like earth-borne civilizations, they had lived isolated from other forms of intelligent life for an eon. They had only coexisted with humans for the last 200 years. The collision of two races that were otherwise never destined to meet. Separated by thousands... millions of years. Formally, they were called the “Wruteh,” but *dweller* was a rough translation in Colonial English. Their existence was common knowledge, but religious extremism and other political complications had all but fully prohibited their travel to other systems. Wruteh were rarely seen, but law enforcement in most settled systems considered them capture or kill on sight due to decades of merciless pirating and unsanctioned bounty hunting. Besides being the only non-human species known to exist, they had earned a reputation for being exceptionally dangerous. Their hunting parties plagued the outskirts of UGF and Herstein space – skimming the systems that had copious resources but lacked organized militaries. Little was known about Wruteh origins. Their existence raised more questions than it answered and what facts no one had been allowed to stay on the planet long enough to adequately study their culture or their geological record. After the initial expeditions, only a handful of diplomatic envoys had ever been welcomed by their leaders. All Reed could remember from holodecks he read as a boy was that they were older and yet somehow more primitive than humans. Similar, but had evolved to survive on their desert world of K’amut. A wasteland nestled on what was once the very edge of the outer rim. Now, the greatest scientific event of earth-borne history – the discovery of intelligent extraterrestrial life – was restricted to a no-fly zone in the middle of Federation space.

Reed’s eyes searched their figures. They were tall and nimble. They carried themselves in a strange manner that felt practiced and unnatural. It was an unmistakable presence. In all his time in the Outer Rim, he had never seen them in person. Across their bodies was a patchwork of armor. It dotted their limbs and torsos, peeking out from under their more robust cloaks. The garb draped over their frames appeared flat and featureless, as if sand had somehow been sewn into the fibers. Cloth ran the length of their bodies and hovered only centimeters from the floor. Scabbards hung from their hips, impregnated with sacred K’amuti steel. Neither of them made an attempt to hide their weapons. Both stared through the bugged-eyed visors that protruded from their identical helmets. A rare sight. Their garb seemed to confirm more than a few urban legends... they keep what they kill. Reed noticed their armor looked suspiciously similar to that

worn by Federation Military, and no one came by that kind of gear honestly. They never went anywhere by mistake. He just hoped they weren't here for *him*.

Hyper-fluorescent holo signs flickered from readouts on the walls. Adverts and various smut-like art fizzed and popped along the length of the concrete tube. Mounted on the wall ahead of his was the word "Chimera." That's different, he thought. For almost thirty years this club was known as the "Holocene," and its owner wasn't known for being flexible. Reed tried to deny what this meant, but he could feel the worry descend into his gut. He continued walking as if he hadn't noticed it. His pace and gait remained unbroken, but this sign was much brighter and larger than the rest. Impossible to ignore. The projected word cycled through different glyphs and languages, distorting its figure until it reappeared in Colonial English. He winced at the word a second time.

Reed took a deep breath and swallowed his denial. Back in this fuckin' dump, he thought. Years had come and gone since he'd laid eyes on this doorway. Aside from the new name, from what he could remember, the rest appeared to be the same. An industrial gutter that operation used to employ con artists, mercenaries, and black market smugglers. The only place someone could find discreet work with high payouts. The only trouble was the company. Most of the Holo's patrons were historically low-level criminals with no real skills. They would use the club as a hub for trafficking drugs and people. Melig never cared, as long as he got his cut. He paced towards the slimmer, sweatier bouncer waiting in front of a double door at the end of the hallway. The pulsating rhythm of the club pushed its way passed the entrance. Reed could feel it in his chest. It leeches into his boots every time his feet made contact with the floor. The doorman had a sinister, ghoulish appearance that was accentuated by the subtle flicker of the holo projector mounted above him. Shadows carved odd shapes into the lineations of his face. He gave a creeping nod as Reed approached. He opened the door accompanied by the words, "have fun." It slithered from his mouth on an insinuating smile.

A deafening wall of sound leaped from the portal as the doors swung up. It rode on waves of bright, neon lights. Optical sensors in Reed's helmet compensated for the shift in scenery, raising the aperture to sustain visibility, but even with the optical's assistance, he was forced to squint. A restless crowd danced across his helmet's interface. The room was unrecognizable. It

was brighter and more lively, but that had nothing to do with the crowd. Something had fundamentally changed about its nature. Its energy felt wild... unpredictable. The Holo was never short of patrons, but this surpassed anything Reed could remember. For as long as he had known of this place, it was a front for the house's criminal operations. It double as a way to keep the lights on and the transports fueled, and as a watering hole for petty criminals and machine operators that slugged night shifts. Knowing of this particular establishment's existence meant someone was actively looking for trouble of one kind or another. The uproarious scene that spilled across his vision was far from that.

He descended into the large room. Electronic music choked the air. His armored boots collided with the metallic stairs, but the sound could not compete with the room's undulating rhythms. As he snaked through the pulsing lagoon of sweat-soaked bodies, he scanned the bar for a familiar face. He needed a bartender that knew him but didn't ask too many questions. All the good ones he used to know were dead. Only a handful of people occupied the chairs that dotted the long bar. It was situated on a risen platform at the center of the room – mostly so the bartender could keep an eye on patrons and report anything of suspicion up to the office. Reed could only see one person behind the bar. He didn't like the look of him.

Hrm. This one's new... hopefully he isn't chatty.

Reed approached the counter and firmly placed his hands on the bar. Taking a moment to rest from the long walk. All the rezoning put no-fly ordinances all across the sector, making Reed's trip exponentially more time-consuming. The young bartender stared at him with a loose, half smile. He was slender, lean. All of his clothes had been neatly tailored. One arm was fully organic, the other had been replaced with a vanity mod covered in polished, gold plates. The shiny sort that never saw the inside of a shirt sleeve. Both arms met at the hands, their fingertips pawed a cocktail glass. Confidence hung about his person. An oozing self-assurance that Reed found particularly intolerable. Confidence that made someone an obstacle instead of a tool. A question flew from his mouth as he smacked a piece of gum. "What can I get ya?" The angular, expressionless surface of Reed's helmet shifted like restless water in the aggressive combination of neon lights.

Reed's voice buzzed from his communicator, "What happened to Felix?"

The bartender slung the dirty bar rag over his shoulder and placed the glass on the counter. His face swirled in confusion as he rolled up his sleeves, exposing more of the golden arm.

He leaned closer. “Who?”

Reed forcefully repeated himself, “Felix.”

The young man’s face scrunched another time as he attempted to place the name. He took an animated stance as he thought, making sure his indifference was well known.

Reed sighed, “Nevermind... I’m looking for Melig. He around?”

“You must be outta the loop, babe. Melig’s old news. Radda runs the Chimera. Has for a while.” *Shit. So... worst case, then.*

The music reverberated through his gloves and up his arms. Soundwaves infected the air, bleeding into all the solid objects around the room. The bar absorbed every infinitesimal sound that leaked from a speaker and orifice and sent it straight into the palms of Reed’s hands. It made it difficult to think, much less sort the implications of Melig’s absence. Mel being out of the picture made his situation much more complex. But he couldn’t leave without trying – regardless of who was sitting in the office upstairs.

“Gonna need to see him, then.”

The bartender guffawed, “Ha! You and everyone else, helmet. Get in line. She’s booked tonight.” Reed noted the correction. “Hell, she’s booked *every* night. You don’t become the best fixer in Esqrol without keeping a busy schedule.”

Reed gave another, less-than-amiable grunt from the confines of his face plate.

“Me and Melig went way back. I’m sure this, *Radda*, could make an exception for an old patron of the Holo.” The man was slender, too skinny to scare any of the regulars Reed used to see around. But no one worked this bar without something more than a metal arm up their sleeve. This scrawny man held the keys to Reed’s immediate future. If all else failed, he’d have to charm him. Reed couldn’t think of a painful or inscrutable option. The bartender narrowed his eyes and chuckled as he dropped the bar rag behind the counter.

He leaned in again to emphasize his point, “Like I said, *she’s booked*. I can get you a drink, but if you think you’re waiting around to get upstairs, you should clear your schedule and come back in a week or two. No one gets in without an appointment. Especially if they were friends with Mel.”

Reed continued to stare at him. His expression matched the complicated facade of his armored helmet. Neither of them flinched. For several, awkward moments, they stared at one another amidst the violent mixture of light and sound. Reed was practiced in silence and knew eventually it would get to him.

The bartender threw up his hands in surrender, “*Fine...* I’ll ask. Just don’t get your hopes up, helmet. She’s never in a good mood.” He shook his head in disapproval as he put some of his instruments away behind the bar. ”So, who should I say is calling?”

Reed turned to look down the bar and over the crowd at a small door towards the back of the club. The back office entrance. It was sectioned off from the rest of the floor. Armed guards, DNA locks, the whole setup. *More security than before.*

His comm clicked on as he looked back, “Reed.”

The bartender narrowed his eyes, “Got a last name, *Reed*? It’s a big city. A lot of people to remember.”

He continued to assess the office entrance across the building, “If they’re worth my time, they’ll know.”

“If you say so.” He slid sideways, lifted part of the counter, and out from behind the bar – quickly disappearing into the crowd.

Reed’s mind collapsed into itself in frustration.

Melig ran this spot for probably twenty-five years. Twenty-five years, no one tries to take his seat. Then, all of a sudden some no-name muscles him out? Unlikely... Too many people owed Mel favors to just let that kind of thing slide. Unless–

Suddenly a body carelessly crashed onto the stool next to him. A drink slobbered from its container, spilling onto Reed’s cloak. “Oh! Excuse me, man. So sorry about that. Came in a little too hot.” Reed slowly turned his head. A twenty-something gutter rat. Likely a pickpocket trying his luck.

“Look, let me buy you a round to make up for this. I’m such a shit head.”

He slowly looked down at the fabric soaked in a mixture of rainwater and alcohol. The man appeared athletic. Probably okay in a fight, Reed thought. A crooked nose sat in the middle of his face, subtle confirmation of Reed’s suspicion about his brawling abilities. His hair was short, cut in a popular fashion Reed had seen several times in the few hours he had been back in Esqrol. The sight of it annoyed him. Sloppy streetwear covered his body. A shirt, jacket, and

pants – all with their fastenings loosened. They hung off his body in a manner that would get you killed in a real, proper scrap. Too many handles. Too many options for leverage.

“Move,” Reed barked.

“C’mon, man. Take it easy. Look, it’s my fault. Just let me be a good citizen and buy you a drink.” Reed didn’t respond. He glared forward, across like the bar like an armored stature. The young man took this as an opportunity to examine Reed’s loadout – suddenly noticing the suit that matched his helmet.

“Whoa... y’know that’s a *nice* suit you got under there. Do you mind if I take a loo–” Reed’s hand jerked to his side, gripping the handle of his pistol. His head whipped to the side, inches from the man’s face. The carbon steel almost whistled from the tension between their bodies. Reed’s com clicked on again, “*Move.*”

The kid’s eyes tracked the weapon, “Woah! Okay, guy. Ha... Take it easy, alright? No need to get rowdy.”

He slowly extended his arm, cautiously holding the weight of his half-empty drink. As he placed it on the bar, Reed noticed the movement of his other arm and a slight tug on one of his belt pouches. He yanked the pistol from its holster before the pickpocket could pull away. A subtle *whir* sounded from the back of the weapon as it charged a round in the chamber. Its barrel was firmly pressed against the flesh under the man’s chin. Reed slowly applied more pressure lifting the man onto his toes. The red-orange glow of his visor burned the thief’s eyes.

“Try that again and I’ll paint the ceiling with your brain.”

No one noticed the commotion. Electronic music continued pulsing through the room.

“Okay, let’s just... Stay calm.”

Reed’s glare was unshaken. He stared for the duration of the long, awkward pause that had arisen. The angry glow of the visor seemed to grow more intense by the second.

The thief laughed nervously, “Heh... fair enough. Look, just let me go, and you’ll never see me again. Deal?”

Reed contemplated pulling the trigger – just to extinguish his irritation. But he couldn’t afford the commotion. In and out, just like he told Quinn.

“Disappear.”

He returned the pistol to its holster and resumed his forward-facing position.

The pickpocket let out another bout of nervous laughter. “Heh... okay, man. Thank you. Sorry about all that. Like I said, you’ll never see me again.” He quickly slithered back into the crowd, his fist wrapped around a small rectangular key. Reed looked down at his belt. One of his pouches was unclasped. *Damn*. He had lifted something from his belt. His ship’s key fob. He turned to face the crowd behind him. No sign of the man. He didn’t have time to look for him now. The tracker was intact and active, and he’d have more time to track it down afterward. Maybe he could even get some help upstairs.

Reed refocused his attention across the building. He scanned the VIP section searching for the bartender. His visor cut through the vapor and smoke. A mezzanine. Six new tables had been added since his last visit. Looks like better service, too. Each booth was filled with a different breed of criminal. Dealers, gangs, a politician or two.

On the far side of the room, he spotted him. *There you are*. He crossed the VIP floor above the mezzanine, shuffling past service girls and gangsters until he arrived at the door guarded by a cartoonishly large bouncer. So far he was the only armed guard Reed had spotted. He leaned in to hear the bartender as his golden arm pointed back to where Reed sat at the bar. The man stood at least two feet over the slender bartender. They exchanged a few words, then he nodded and stepped to the side. The doors snapped into the wall and disappeared through a door. Reed looked to his left and right. *Always waiting on something...* He fidgeted back and forth, looking around one more time to make sure no one else was getting too close. A decade ago the Holo never broke a hundred bodies, but this place was something different entirely. It had somehow become a proper club – way out in Sector 6. *Who would’ve guessed?* He decided whoever this *Radda* was, they were industrious. And that meant they were dangerous.

After a few minutes, the bartender reappeared through the guarded door and quickly sank back into the crowd. He emerged just shy of the steps leading up to the bar area. Reed noticed that he looked much less smug than before. He climbed the stairs and took a seat on the stool next to Reed. He sat facing the dance floor, leaning back with both elbows resting on the bar.

“Well...” he began, still facing the dance floor, “Looks like this is your lucky night, helmet. Her schedule seems to have... opened up.”

He turned around and reached behind the bar. For a moment he struggled to find what he searching for, but eventually, he returned to a seated position with a bottle of alcohol and two

shot glasses. He turned the bottle over and filled both glasses, then gestured towards Reed with one of the shot glasses – an inquisitive look on his face. Reed stared, reticent as ever.

“Egh... fine. More for me then.” The bartender turned up the first shot and swallowed it. He dropped the shot glass on the table. He repeated the motion with the second.

“C’mon. I’ve gotta walk you up. Don’t want to keep her waiting.”

He gestured for Reed to follow and turned back into the undulating mass of bodies. Reed stepped backward and hopped down the short flight of stairs, following the bartender into the crowd. Asynchronous lights mounted on the ceiling flashed across his helm and body, cutting through the fog that hung in the air. His boots met with the floor with an odd feeling, like the concrete was unfit for traffic, too hard to be walked on. The scent of illicit vapors crawled through his carbon filters. Neither of the helmet’s intake filters could scrub the air quickly enough. Effervescence filled his nose. The floral aroma had a rotten quality. He had never seen this much H12 in the air, but then again, it had been quite some time since he had been in the Core.

Probably vaporizing it and pushing it into the air on the fog machines. Not a bad way to keep people in here drinking... spending.

The dance floor was littered with mostly young, Esqroli citizens – locals who worked the docks, depots, shops, and warehouses in the sector. “the pit,” as he always knew it, had never been this full.

The pair climbed another short flight of stairs up to the VIP mezzanine. They passed several booths filled with people. The tables were littered with glasses and empty bottles. The large man guarding the door was bigger and uglier than he looked from the bar. His face was scarred and crooked. The kind of face attached to dangerous body parts. Reed had seen brawlers in the middle systems that were bred to fight, but none of them came close to matching this man in size. He didn’t want to think about who was waiting beyond the door.

The giant caught the two of them approaching in his peripheral. As they drew closer, he clocked Reed’s sidearm. Once they were a couple of meters away, he held up his massive hand, signaling for them to stop.

“Can’t let you in with that iron.” He nodded towards the pistol in his leg holster. “I’ll hold onto it until you’re out.”

He turned and entered a combination into a holopad on the counter next to him. *Tsst!* A panel slid open revealing a shallow compartment. He extended an open hand, his palm facing up toward the ceiling. It was almost half a meter across.

Reed slid the pistol from its holster and placed it onto the plate of flesh. His fingers were larger than the barrel of the gun. They curled back, forming a cage around the weapon. He turned and place it into the compartment.

“Better be here when I get back.” The guard tapped an icon on the holopad. *Tsst!* The panel closed and locked into place with an affirming chirp.

“Alright, go on in. She’s waiting for you upstairs, Neph.” His voice rumbled so deeply Reed could feel the vibrations of his vocal folds.

The broad, ugly giant took a step to the side. His head cleared the top of the doorway by several centimeters. The hatch looked look cartoonishly small next to someone of his stature.

Neph crossed through the opening into a dark hallway. Reed followed, hesitantly, unsure of what waited for him in the old maze of back office corridors. He stepped beyond the threshold and both halves of the metal door collided behind him. A heavy thud came from the wall as the clunky mechanism locked shut. Through was the only way out from here.

Neph led Reed through the darkness of the narrow hallway. Reed felt, for the first time, like he had rewound ten years of his life. This was the only part of the club that hadn’t been unrecognizably altered. All the memories pulled sweat from his pores. He could almost smell the incense that the club manager used to burn in his office. It would be pulled into the vents and circulate through the entire back section of this level of the building. They walked out of the entryway and into a large dimly lit space. A recessed lounge area sat comfortably at the center, sure of its place in the room. It was surrounded by a handful of empty planters and second rows of seating. Reed could tell, even from where he stood across the room, it had been some time since anyone had found rest there. A subtle haze hung thickly about the air, coloring the geometry of the room in a dull, bluish-grey. The scenery was in stark contrast to the lively menagerie of color that once decorated every surface of the room. Three additional hallways were positioned at the center of the other walls. All three were lined with more dark spaces

– unused rooms and booths. Melig had always used them to pay the bills will private parties and escort services. that were once filled with dancers and members of gangs. The sound of the music and crowd reverberated through the old, metal walls – droning on like a hive of inebriated insects. This corridor stank of the same vapor. But it was older. Staler. It left Reed missing the smell of the old manager’s incense. Tungsten light fizzed from the rows of rectangular panels in the ceiling and along the walls. Reed stopped in front of a room at the end of the hallways. Its door was closed and appeared to be locked. Like most of the room, the entry pad was dark. It had been asleep for some time.

Hmm... this used to be surveillance. The keypad is covered in dust – just like all the others. Looks to be disconnected, too. Most of these old booths are being used for nothing more than storage. Curious.

The ways the club had changed made Reed uneasy. He lingered by the old security office door, sorting out the last time it had been used.

“What are you doing? You want a tour or something? Let’s go, helmet. I need to get back.”

“Seems a little odd to shut down security. And the rest of the old VIP section.”

“She shut the back office down almost immediately after Melig left. Everything is run from upstairs.”

Left? Bullshit. Melig was a cutthroat.

He was good at what he did and Reed knew he would never forfeit his position like that. Willingly, anyway. Even if none other Caragol leaders respected him, all of them feared him. He was notoriously unstable, and Reed had personally seen the man skin people alive for nothing more than speaking out of turn. If he left, he was removed by force.

Reed joined Neph by the next set of doors. The bartender stopped and turned around.

“Listen, before we go up,” he paused, looking to the doors – a knowing look shrouding his face. He was clearly nervous about what he meant to say.

“I don’t know who you are or why she agreed to see you, but we don’t need you sticking your nose in this.”

“In what?”

“You’ll see. Just keep your mouth shut and try not to fuck anything up.”

Reed gave a subtle nod in agreement. They continued through another large holding room. This was the only room in this part of the building Reed had noticed a considerable change in decor.

Another staircase waited through the next set of doors. 40 stairs up to the office, where there were likely several additional guards. His hand slipped to the small of his back, unclipping the ceramic knife sheathed on his belt. Better than nothing, he thought. No way out but forward. He lingered by the locked door for a moment longer, recalling a night he had long since forgotten. Every step brought with it a different scenario. One possibility after another. Then heard something he did not expect — laughter.

Melig's old office sat at the top of the stairs, it had been known for many things, but Reed never considered it a jovial place. Melig had quiet, tense mannerisms that unsettled anyone without the constitution to habituate his unpredictable personality. A serious and stubborn man without empathy. He lacked taste in almost every capacity but still insisted on collecting priceless art in an attempt to present himself as an intellectual. Reed had seen the man order a dismemberment on the office floor for speaking out of turn.

It was large, and from his memory, poorly decorated. The walls stretched upwards into vaulted ceilings. They grew darker until they became a starless void. Plate-glass windows formed a pyramid on the far wall. Scattered throughout the room were examples of what Reed could only assume were "fine art." The kind of "pretentious shit," as Reed always called it, that Melig would smuggle through trade terminals for high-ranking corporate officials and crooked politicians. He winced at the thought of them. But as he caught the first glimpse of the room, it was not as he remembered. The space had been turned inside out, but all Reed could think was: *Hmm... cleaner than I remember.* A dozen or so guards were positioned around a large, crescent-shaped booth cut into the center of the room. Reed stopped just past the doorway. Both units clocked him immediately, turning and glaring at him through their helmets. He was unexpected. These types didn't like the unexpected, usually greeting it with a blind salvo. The age-old tenet of *shoot first.*

There were distinct from one another, and that meant this was some type of tenuous negotiation. The first group was ordinary corporate private security. All five of them were

dressed in identical black undersuits covered in matte-gray body armor. It was clean, uniform, and unremarkable. They carried the sort of short-barrelled energy weapons that were typical of private security detail. A faint shimmer encapsulated their bodies. Static shields, Reed thought. Personal protective barriers designed to stop energy-based small arms fire surrounding all five of their bodies. Everything about their appearance looked expensive. It was military tech Reed had never seen before, which was another clue to their benefactor's identity. No one would have traveled multiple systems or even around the planet to meet with a crimelord. That meant it was a corp headquartered in Esqrol. Which only left Sempra and Calto on Reed's list of suspects. But what business could they possibly have here? Neph's apprehension revealed more than he realized.

Reed turned his attention to the second group. Aesthetically similar – what would've been almost identical to a civilian – but with subtle and important differences. An assortment of gas-operated rifles hung from straps on their shoulders, matching the beetle-black body armor that covered their bodies. That explained the tension he felt in the room. Gas-operated weapons were highly illegal and had been outlawed for a variety of reasons. Energy-based weapons were superior in range, accuracy, and damage subjected to their target. The primary tension in this scenario, however, was a static shield's vulnerability to kinetic projectiles. It gave one group an incredible tactical advantage over the other. A soldier didn't need to overload the shield to maim or kill their opponent. They also didn't contain any of the digital components that allowed them to be hacked and locked. EMP devices were useless against them as well. Many paramilitary groups kept these types of weapons in their armories to quickly neutralize conventionally well-armored units. Only a handful of manufacturing facilities existed and half of them belonged to the Lockammer Confederacy – several of the Founding Corporations who split from the Federation during the first 100 hundred years due to political misalignment. Their secession generated a much different government than the one that founded the United Galactic Federation. The Confederate Houses had reverted to a feudal system ruled by profit and often plagued by infighting due to a lack of univocal legislation or oversight. No laws nor moral code existed except for that kept by the head of each of the houses. This paramilitary unit and their weapons were a prime example of what that system was capable of producing.

The rest of their loadout wasn't uniform, but it appeared to be a military-grade carbon weave – a material that was similar or even the same as Reed's undersuit. The finishes on the

armor plates were marked and scuffed. The type of wear and tear that only came from several tours suppressing separatist militaries and snuffing out unruly militias in the Outer Rim. Each man, despite their difference in armor, had an embossed symbol on their left pauldron. Reed had seen it before: two dragon heads facing one another inside of an octagon. *Dorogon*, he thought. *I heard they were all dead. Probably started that rumor themselves. This could get nasty.*

He had heard of this particular unit. They had a reputation even among the Confederate Houses for being especially ruthless. All of them were ex-Federation special operators. As the stories go, they had spent 10 years running silent scorch operations against Thestan separatists. Ops that would have sent the Minister of Defense to prison. That is if anyone in the Senate had a spine. Their attendance meant the club had deeper pockets than it ever had when Reed worked for Melig. It raised another very important question: how did Radda acquire the reputation and the capital to hire ex-special forces for private security?

He attempted to scan their loadouts, but something in the room was interfering with his systems. Most of his readouts had gone flat since he entered the room.

Hm. A disruptor. She's smarter than Mel... or maybe just more paranoid. Time will tell.

In the booth, a handful of people buzzed with conversation. The tone was tenuous. White light shone from the table, clearly illuminating all of their faces. Those in attendance were a strange mix of corporate suits along with two Phest affiliates. This situation read like a business negotiation over client hospitality. Not the type of meeting you would expect to see in a known gutter hideout run by one of the syndicates. But none of them fit as the Holo's new overseer. One of the suits spoke, "And how do you plan on dealing with these roaming city patrols? We can only pay off so many people in law enforcement, and if you don't get your shit together, eventually someone from the Senate or the Trade Ministry is going to be knocking on our door. I don't want to end up regretting this little arrangement of ours."

A woman across the table from him answered, "I can assure you these issues are being swiftly taken care of even as we speak. There is nothing to worry about. All of the assets your investments have bought with our organization are secure."

"They better be. We aren't sending any more funds until this shit gets cleared up. Based on your reputation, I would expect you people to be better at this." Disgust and frustration augmented his voice. This was clearly not their first conversation on the topic, and it seemed, whatever the nature of their relationship, the organization might be out of its depth.

The Phest representative responded, “Things like this tend to happen when certain parties ignore protocols we’ve set in place for a reason. If I’m being entirely transparent, some of your people seem to have either gotten sloppy or just greedy. Your shipments have been secure until now, and we had none of these issues with your predecessor.”

The man shot up from his seat, anger ruined his face. “What exactly are you implying,” he yelled, “that I’m sabotaging my own operation?”

The woman smiled, “No implication, just a simple observation of our relationship thus far.”

Reed found this interchange incredibly interesting. Despite Neph’s warning, this was the last thing he expected to walk in and observe: a secret meeting between the Phest Cartel and one of the largest Interstellar corporations.

Unlike their security details, none of them noticed Reed enter the room. He stepped down a short staircase and onto the main floor. He didn’t want to risk interrupting whatever was happening, and this was a good chance to observe who and what he might be up against. He quietly sat on a bench only a few meters from the stairs. Of all the rooms in the club he had seen tonight, Reed knew this one had changed the most. Melig’s tired, drab decor and illustrious artwork had been replaced with abstract sculptures and a variety of diverse plant life. The walls and contours of the room were soaked in rich shades of purples and blues that created an illusion of dynamic movement. It appeared as though the walls were warbling like sunlight at the bottom of a shallow pool. Above the booth were several ornate terrariums. Each one held an odd species of flora. They looked expensive and properly alien. Reed had never seen anything like them, and suspected they were from one of the exotic, newly discovered planets in the Outer Rim. All of this was evidence in favor of Melig’s death. Reed was sure he had been killed – and buried in several pieces – in conjunction with being supplanted by Radda.

A voice cut through the air. It was regal and sinister. It spilled into the room like a satin vapor. “As much as I do *hate* to spoil such a wonderful conversation, I have some business that requires my attention. And unfortunately, I need the room. As Aida has mentioned, our little problem will be corrected and there will be no further issues. You have my word on that. My men will escort you back to your transports.”

Hm... Radda. Reed's pulse quickened. He searched for the source but could not find it. All six of the guards shifted in unison like they were being called to attention, moving into formation.

Everyone in the booth had fallen silent at the sound of her voice.

"However, I must remind you to refrain from any mention of your time here tonight. My men are perfectly well-behaved here, but I cannot promise the same will be true should they visit you at home."

One of the beetle-black guards barked through his helmet. A modulated voice boomed at the group, "Up. Let's go."

Awkwardly, they attempted to stand and shuffle out of their seating arrangement, their security detail providing a buffer between them and the Dorogon. Their spokesperson left the booth last. As the rest of the group moved towards the doors, he paused.

He looked up towards the balcony and scoffed, "Scare tactics are not something I would advise trying again. Regardless of our... understanding, you would be wise to remember who we are. Do not make me question why we fly all the way to this slum in the first place."

The disembodied voice sounded again from the shadows, flowing from everywhere and nowhere at once, "Yes... I will certainly do my best to remember my place, Senator Galdo. But, as I said before, I have business to attend to. So, if you wouldn't mind making your way to the platform outside... I believe your transport is waiting for you. I'll have Aida contact you once things are tied up in Sector 3."

The senator stared up at the balcony for another moment, then sharply turned and left the room.

The vertical egress door slid down behind him. The space hung in an odd silence that seemed to groan after the kinetic energy of a new and more interesting conversation.

"A senator?" Reed quietly whispered the words to himself. He attempted to decipher the implications of a high-ranking politician being in what seemed to be the Holo's *true* VIP suite, participating in a meeting that concerned illegal shipments for a corporation. Melig welcomed a fair number of local officials but never held the cachet for a member of the Senate to be in his club. It would explain a lot of changes.

Reed continued to watch the body language of the armed guards. He could hear the crackle of their private channel in his earpiece as most of them followed the party outside. The sound of their transport vehicles whined through the door learning outside.

The disembodied voice spoke again, “I’ll admit, I never thought I’d see you in here again.”

That voice... Reed knew it, but couldn’t place it. He scanned the room for his new host, but remained still, silent. Several moments passed and a figure appeared on the balcony. Its feline shape slumped over the railing, leaning sideways. It loomed over the space with a sensuality that felt intelligent and devious. He stared up at the shadowed form.

“Hmm... Loquacious as ever, I see. So, what brings Elias Reed, the *Ghost of Esqrol* into my club – asking for a favor?”

Reed’s stomach crawled into his throat. Only a handful of people had that information, and one of them was Melig. His discovery of that name was the reason for Reed’s departure from Oberon. *This just got more interesting.* His mind raced with possibilities.

He felt naked without a pistol. If anything went sideways, these mercs would cut him down before he could reach cover and his knife was useless out in the open. For now, he would have to stay calm.

“Don’t believe we’ve met. Think you might have me confused with someone else.”

A cooing laugh seeth from the monitors. The voice spoke again, “Perhaps... but I think there are several things we should discuss in private. Please, join me.”

The silhouette retreated into the shadows. *Shit.* Reed gave a heavy sigh and made his way across the room. The bulbed, glossy-black helmets tracked him as he moved. The crackled distortion of their private channel still rattled through his earpiece. They felt dangerous in every way.

He ascended the curved staircase but could feel them staring holes into his back. Blue light guided his footfall as he climbed. The knife on his belt was still unlatched, and he intended to keep it that way until he was back on his ship. As he rounded the top of the dark channel, he stepped into an open office space. Against the wall was a large shelving unit. On one side was a security readout – it flickered as it cycled through a live feed of the club downstairs, the landing pad outside, and several other rooms throughout the building. The other side held an assorted collection of small sculptures and books. Its design looked out of place with the rest of the room. The rustic and natural resources clashed with the It At the center was an empty desk. A dim light

spilled across it from a ringed light just overhead. Reed studied the contents, curious of who could've taken Melig's place without a fuss.

A tall woman stood at the window, poised in a way that felt rehearsed and intentional. She stared over the neon vista covered in smog and industrial traffic. She addressed him, still staring out the window, "Hello, Elias."

He looked the room up and down, noticing more changes to the space. "Just 'Reed.' thanks. Guessing you're Radda?"

She did not move from her position at the window. Ambient light curved around her from the cityscape beyond the glass. Her clothing was professional. Even in the dark Reed could tell it was fashionable. Expensive.

A single word bounce across the room, devoid of inflection, "Correct."

Another tense moment of silence passed between them. Reed was comfortable with silence, but this felt like a test. One he was more than happy to wait out.

"I'll ask again, what brings a pirate like you into my club?"

"Last I checked, this was Melig's joint."

"*Was* Melig's... you'll be careful to mind that distinction. As you can see, the Holo, or should I say, the *Chimera*, is under new management."

Reed narrowed his eyes behind his visor. "Uh huh... and was that *before* or *after* you dropped him in a trash compactor?"

"That's a fairly insidious accusation for someone who's come to ask a favor."

So far, Reed found her preconsciousness impressive, undoubtedly sourced in good intel. But he was entirely oblivious as to how she could know the reason for him being here.

"Well, a guy like Mel doesn't just *go away*. So...?"

Another soft purr of dubious laughter flowed across her lips. "Hmm... Ha, let's just say, Mel got greedy." Her tone flattened and became more serious, "Eventually it caught up with him."

She turned away from the window and walked towards the desk. Reed's sensors were still obstructed by the disruptor hidden somewhere in the room. His eyes could not break through the darkness. Only a faint silhouette was visible. He interpreted her movement as permission to take

several cautious steps forward, closing the distance between them. He caught a glimpse of her face as she sat in the large desk chair and spun around.

No. It-it couldn't be, could it?

He filtered the last half hour through a sudden realization. The thought of it alone made him stop short of the desk, almost too afraid for her to turn around. The desktop was a large digital readout with a small holoprojector bulb situated at the center. Their movement had activated its motion sensors and the entire surface lit up, illuminating part of the inky darkness. Reed's body tightened as he waited for her to reveal herself.

The chair slowly and silently swiveled, torturously unveiling the features of her face one centimeter at a time. Reed had forgotten what she looked like, but as he saw more and more of her face, a past life flashed before his eyes. The contours of her features were sharp and chiseled – a statue-like bone structure that would demand attention. She was not traditionally beautiful, but remained so, despite convention. Gazing upon the qualities of her appearance was uniquely inexplicable. Reed would have likened it to staring at a nebula for the first time: indescribably terrifying. Something that unhinged the understanding of what could be possible, but called to you with the dulcet tones of the universe.

Reed never thought it matched the sound of her voice, but their incongruous nature was part of what he had always found so intriguing. He felt ashamed that he hadn't come to this conclusion earlier. Everything pointed to her. It was clearly the only logical explanation. But time and experience had clouded his judgment. There was only one person he had ever met who held such power in the wake of silence.

His voice took an involuntarily loose and familiar tone, "Fuckin' a..."

Yendra had barely aged a day. Maybe that was just the distortion of time, but he couldn't picture her any other way. The longer he had spent in the Outer Reach the less fluent became in the unspoken languages of the people that, at one time, cared for him most. Their voices, their faces... he remembered this room in greater detail than he did the tones of her voice. The smell of the back office was a stronger memory than the words of their last conversation. He tried to recall exactly how long it had been, but he didn't know. He had forced himself to forget the particulars. All he had managed to carry with him were the larger pieces of guilt and shame. Looking at her now, he was confronted with it all.

“Surprised? I thought you might be.” A playful timbre floated on her voice. Reed shifted his weight, thankful his face was covered by the helmet.

“Could’ve told me it was you and saved me from all the stress.”

“Ha! Now, where’s the fun in that? You always appreciated a good joke. Has nine years away robbed you of your sense of humor?”

Nine years?

Reed sighed. He was at a loss for words. Their history swirled through the air – unsure of itself. Nine years was long enough for them each to have their own distorted versions of the truth. Stories filled with holes, or in Reed’s case, covered in dust.

“I knew I’d probably see you, but gotta admit, didn’t think it would be in *that* chair.”

“And now that you do?”

“Suits you...”

She gave him a knowing smile, “I must agree.”

Reed gave another curious look around the room as if he expected to find Melig stuffed in a dark corner. “So...what’d you do with Mel?”

Yendra opened a drawer behind the desk and removed a box of cigarettes and a small burner. She delicately placed a cigarette between her lips and ignited the burner. She looked up at Reed through the bright orange light as she pulled the flame through the small cylinder. A plume of thick smoke poured from her nose and mouth as she exhaled the synthetic tobacco. The burner slid out of her hand and clattered against the desk. She gracefully fell into her chair and leaned into the backrest.

“I already told you.” She took another long drag from the cigarette, spitting more smoke into the air. “He got greedy.” Her cigarette hand gestured towards the chair across the desk. “Have a seat.”

Reed eyed the sitting area – two couches and a circular holotable. “Right... and what’s the *official* story?”

“*Official?*” Yendra let out a guffaw that made her choke and cough. She put on an almost sympathetic expression as she crossed from her desk to the white leather couch.

“Reed, dear, there’s no such thing as an *official* story. Not around here. You spent long enough working in the business to know that. Truth simply doesn’t exist outside of your own perception. The official story is whatever the people decide it is. The power lies in the court of

public opinion. It always has, and it always will. So, why would I hide behind some bullshit story? You might be able to see the center from here, but this isn't a corporate high-rise. There's no press release, just rumors. If anyone in this city has any reason to believe I'm not just as much of a cutthroat as Mel or even one of the Dorogon out there, it's really only a matter of time until they come for my crown." She took another drag of synthetic tobacco. "And I have no intention of letting that happen."

Why would she? She finally got what she wanted.

"So are you in control of the organization, or was this not a package deal?"

Reed's sarcasm was not lost on her. "Yes, the cartel is mine. Most members of the Caragol have been happy with the change of hands. I have made them a lot of money, after all." Reed reached back to clasp the knife on his belt but paused. *This isn't over yet.* He left the clasp open and ready. His hand fell to his side as he took a seat on the stool in front of her desk. Rather than addressing the tension she was working to create, he defaulted to small talk.

"Club looks different. Business seems... good." His expression was flat.

Yendra smirked, "That's what happens when you have proper leadership."

"I guess you're referring to yourself."

Her face grimaced, "As I said... in four years we've made more money than the previous ten combined. Melig was too focused on personal profit. Brokering these runners and mercenaries is too expensive and dangerous. His little vanity project nearly cost us control of the cartel. If you'll recall, it nearly cost you your life on more than one occasion."

Reed ignored her jab, "And you think socializing with Sempra execs isn't just as dangerous? What's your angle?"

"I'd hardly call it socializing... just a little business. It's better for *everyone* if this place is more than a sad watering hole for desperate crooks and gangsters. Melig sat in this chair for what? 25 years? He never had the gumption to do anything more than produce the bare minimum for our partners and run local jobs for gutter rats like you."

"Not wrong, but more credits bring more attention, especially within the triangle. So do ex-military." Reed motioned towards the balcony. "That a normal thing nowadays?"

"As normal as it needs to be. The work I'm doing is too important to leave in the hands of cartel soldiers."

“Right... well, judging by your houseguests, you’ve got your fingers in more than just H12. What happens when things turn sour with the suits? You think they won’t pay a premium for your own guard dogs to cut you down?”

“With no due respect, the last thing I would ever want from you is an unsolicited consultation for how I should do anything, much less run this organization. I’ve been building what Mel was always too afraid of trying – solidifying assets that will do much more than keep us afloat.”

Reed sank into a squatted position, resting his haunches on the low, stiff cushion of the couch. He assumed a patient and contemplative posture, his arms rested on his knees, his fingers interlaced. He waited for her to speak again. Yendra sat up, and her body language became more aggressive, betraying the cool demeanor she had been maintaining all night.

She grew visibly irritated. “Look, if you’re going to stay, take off that ridiculous helmet.” Reed’s mic clicked on, “I’d rather not.”

Another long pause passed between them. Yendra took a deep breath and steadied herself. She returned to her reclined position and motioned toward the stairs behind him.

“I think my friends here could convince you otherwise. I don’t want you hiding behind that visor – scheming.” Reed glanced back across his shoulder, two guards facing him at the top of the stairs.

Another grunt bellowed from his throat, “Fine.”

He raised his hands to the dials on either side of his helmet, depressing identical buttons, sliding and locking them into an ejection position. The faceplate hissed, expelling the oxygen cocktail generated from the scrubbers – it separated into three parts and decompressed to match the neutral atmosphere in the room. The visor slid out and back along the helmet’s rounded crest. Simultaneously, the faceguard moved down and slightly out. Inside, the interface dimmed and faded as readouts entered standby mode. He gripped both sides of the lowered faceplate, lifting upwards to free his head from the safety of his armor. It met the desktop with a slight metallic *clink*. Cool air from the room greeted his skin, rushing along the back of his neck and the irregular contour behind his ears. The smell of Yen’s cigarette filled his nose. It had a thick and sickly sweet smell that reminded him of bazaars they walked through as children. The thought of it pinched his jaw and turned his stomach.

“There you are. You’re greyer than I remember.” She gave the smallest hint of a smile unfurled on her words.

“Been a while.”

The comment blew the whisper of nostalgia across the room. Yendra’s face fell into a more serious expression, “More than a while.” She took another drag of her cigarette. “So, I’ll ask a third time: what brings you into my club, unannounced, asking for an audience? What did you think Mel was going to be able to do for you?”

She isn’t making this easy. Reed knew he could cater to Melig’s eccentricities, his narcissism, and his hunger for control. He had done it successfully for years. But Yendra was different. She was smart, calculated, and always three steps ahead. If he was going to get something out of her, he would have to find the right nerve. He wanted to lie, but he knew she would see through him.

“Ran into some trouble in the Outer Rim – far side of Confederate space. Figured Mel could help me land a decent score to get me out of the red.”

Yen stared at him blankly. She twisted her cigarette into the desk and flicked it in a receptacle at her feet. “Hard to believe a smuggler doesn’t have work in the middle of a war.”

“‘War’ is a little strong for diplomatic disputes over trade agreements. Thesta isn’t stupid enough to try anything after the incident on Qortal. It would be bad optics. Too many systems would side with the Fed.”

“I don’t suppose you’d be willing to tell what kind of trouble you’re in... would you?”

“There’s no benefit in you knowing the details. I made some decisions and now people are trying to collect on those decisions.”

Yendra’s face went quiet, contemplative. The kind of expression Reed had never been able to figure out. Yendra stood up, forcing her chair backward. It softly rolled away from her. She leaned across the desk, both of her hands planted firmly against the glass.

She cut her eyes up at him, “So, just trying to keep your head attached to your shoulders, is that it?”

Reed nodded, “That’s the general idea.”

Yendra crossed the room back to her desk. She tapped through several options on her desk’s interface. Her last selection was accompanied by a high-pitched chirp. It was similar to the one Reed heard downstairs. Some kind of device had been activated. A low warbling sound pulsed through the room. She continued tapping through commands on the desk, and the plate glass

overlooking the lower floor went into a privacy mode, frosting over so nothing on the second floor was visible from below. Yendra didn't look up. She continued searching through her files, looking for something particular. After a moment, a blue-tinted holographic image appeared above the desk, floating several centimeters from its surface. It was a gallery of dossiers. Reed recognized it. He had seen this database a few dozen times. It was a catalog of illegal contracts – unsanctioned bounties from the Undalla Clans and other underground organizations.

She stopped in the middle of the thread, “I think you're a little too late for that.” A dossier appeared above the table. The entry read: *WANTED, ALIVE. Reward: 12,000,000 UGFC.*

Reed's name was listed at the top of the image. He looked away, attempting to hide his surprise and irritation. *That Kaarj prick sold me out.*

He stared out the window, a witness to the busy hive of intersecting traffic that sprawled across the distance. The bright aura of Sector 6 leaped through the window. Its glimmering patterns of unending neon burned his eyes without the protection of his visor. Bright colors of every shape and kind crawled into the atmosphere. *No matter how far you run, it always catches up with you.*

“Doesn't matter. As long as I can skirt detection long enough to bank the credits, I'll be alright.” He tried to stay calm and maintain eye contact – she was studying his face, looking for something she could use. Just when he thought she was going to press him, she turned away. Her hands came together and her voice became firm.

“You've got a lot of balls coming back in here.” She looked back at him, her expression remained inscrutable. “During those first few months, I had hope that you would come back. That we would work through everything – together. I figured, ‘he just needs to blow off some steam. Get his head right.’ But then six months went by. A year. Two years. After that, I finally accepted that you were gone. Honestly, it was just easier to think that you were dead. So that's what I did. It took a while, but I managed to forget about you altogether. Stayed that way for almost four years. In that time I did everything we ever talked about doing, and not once did I ever wish you were here to see it.” She pulled another cigarette from her small container and lit it with the burner from her desk. She made a forceful pull, and breathed in deep, as deep as she could, then exhaled even deeper. She took a moment to settle. Reed could see all of her little ticks – the way she fidgeted and moved her tongue around in her mouth. *Now she was angry.*

“Then, to my surprise, Mills comes up to my office and tells me a *Reed* is here to see me. Asks if I know who you are. I had to stop and think, and once it hit me... I realized it had been

so long since I had thought about you. All at once, I was aware of the freedom I had managed to find in killing your memory. But here you are... You know, I almost had them to shoot you at the bar. I thought maybe that might finally bury my hatred. But as it so happens, however unfortunate it might be, you're actually of use to me. So that will have to wait."

The memory of that last night on Esqrol haunted him. Not a day passed during those 10 years when he hadn't recounted every second of it. It took only a few hours for his life to be torn down and rearranged in the worst of ways. Being here again was like tearing open a wound. Reed felt none of her words. He had already said far worse to himself and paid for more sins than she even knew. But it came as no surprise that her ambition outweighed her contempt for him. Yendra left the desk and walked towards a panel located between the shelves on the wall. She slid the metal plate towards the floor, revealing a small safe with an analog keypad. A four-digit code opened the door. She closed the safe and returned to the desk. She tossed the fob onto the desk. It was small and nondescript, yet odd. It had an inexplicably ominous presence about it. Reed did not know why but he felt it in his chest. Something felt wrong.

"This showed up on my desk two nights ago."

Reed continued to stare at it on the desktop, "What is it?"

"An invitation of some sort."

"Invitation? For what?"

Yendra paused. An odd expression slowly oozed down her face. She seemed worried, unsure. Reed hadn't seen her for the better part of a decade, but he couldn't remember her ever looking so... scared. She took a long drag from her cigarette.

"Two months ago I made contact with... I'll call her an *agent*. I'm not entirely sure what her role is, but she's a corpo suit of some kind. She came to see me one night. Here, in my office. Totally bypassed security. I checked later and she wasn't even on the cameras. No footprint whatsoever. It was textbook tradecraft – some real corpo spook shit."

"What'd she want?"

"It was a fairly short conversation, to be honest, but she was rather direct. She sat right there where you are now and gave me an ultimatum: Work with her or refuse. She assured me that she would make the latter worth regretting – very quickly. She gave me little-to-no information outside of that."

“Hmm. Not exactly what I would call *peculiar* behavior for a corp, but... it is odd that she came to you.”

“Maybe you haven’t been paying attention, but I’ve been busy making my way.”

Reed ignored her taunt. “I’m guessing you said ‘yes?’”

“What else *could* I say? The agreement was simple. All I had to do was send the right talent when the time came. In exchange, she would connect with me classified government contracts on Oberon and other key systems in The Interior.”

“Essentially guaranteeing your security for the foreseeable future...”

Yendra glared at him for a moment before she continued.

“That’s not the important part.”

“Go on...”

“She said... she said that she represented Deidos.”

Reed tightly shut his eyes. *Fuck.*

“Well, that does... *complicate* things.”

“No shit.” Yendra stood and began to slowly walk laps around the desk. “Look, whatever it is, it’s worth your time, trust me.”

Reed let out a sarcastic laugh, “Worth *your time*, you mean. But have you thought about what happens to you when the Federation eventually quells this little trade disagreement or puts Thesta back in its place? They’ll start auditing suspicious traffic and transmissions. Eventually, they’ll find their way here and bury anyone involved in Thestan operations. By then you’ll have to start taking bets on just how many holes they blow in this place.”

She cut him off before he could attempt to further dissuade her. “Sixty million.”

“...What?”

“Sixty million Federation credits. That’s the payout.”

She had been holding that information until the right moment. The confidence that lived beneath words crawled up Reed’s spine. She had him cornered. Age had only made her more adept at manipulation. Reed growled under his breath. There was no way he could pass up this kind of money. She had masterfully leveraged his desperation. The bounty has been pressing him more and more by the day, but if there *was* an unsanctioned contract out, he wouldn’t last much longer in the central systems. He might not even make it off planet. He had already been here longer than he wanted, and this was his best shot at survival. Yendra clearly needed him, and he

needed her. All he knew to do was say “yes.”. He found another gear and his attitude instantly became less suspicious and more energized.

“Fuck, alright fine...” He reach across the desk and grabbed the holodisk. He sat back on the stool and turned the shape over in his hand. He examined it closely. It didn’t look like any holodisk or comm key he had ever seen before. No seams, no ports. The only thing that marked its surface was an odd symbol.

“You ever seen something like this?” Yendra shook her head.

Reed continued, “Hm... it has to be some kind of deep state op. Something too radioactive for anyone on Thestan payroll.”

“I agree. The timing is too perfect for it to be coincidental. The situation with Thesta is flaring up again. There are rumblings that separatists are gaining traction in the Senate, and it’s only a matter of time until they find the right way to officially end the treaty and restart the war.”

She sank back into her chair. “People whisper. Especially around here. A little juice and H12 in their system and they’re ready to trade government secrets. The Thestan military is looking for any opportunity to undermine the Federation. They’re getting desperate if they’re coming to me for talent. Needing a merc without a government name tag? That’s bad news for everyone.”

“Well... we could sit here and theorize all night, but judging by that dossier, I’m hanging from a pretty short rope.” Reed stood up and collected his helmet from the desktop. He slid it back onto his head and engaged its systems. The visor and face plate slid back into position, igniting the complicated network of lights and sensors. Once it was reinitialized, his communicator clicked back online.

His voice returned to a garbled, fuzzy tone. “Need one more favor before I leave. Can you get eyes on someone in the club for me? Some kid lifted my receiver. Need to contact my ship.” Yendra tapped on the desktop and a tone began to ring through a speaker. After a moment the rough voice of the bouncer of the elevator shot into the room.

“Ma’am?”

“Gel, have you seen that scrawny kid that was talking to those dweller assholes?”

“Aye, ma’am. He’s walking to the lift right now.”

“Keep him there. My friend is coming down to retrieve something he took from him.”

Reed sighed again. *Fuckin’ Dwellers*. “Was hoping I could avoid a fight.”

Yendra cut the com link.

“Not with 12 mil hanging over your head. Neph told me about them when he came to ask about you. Said they came in an hour or so ago. Didn’t buy anything. Didn’t sit down. Just skulked around for a while until they found that kid. They were asking around for someone who looked like you.”

Time was running out. He needed to get back to the shipyard – *quickly*.

“Well... I’d say it was nice to see you, but... I’d rather you didn’t shoot me just yet.” Surprise washed across her face when she laughed. It caught Reed off guard as well.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“You know me,” he said as he turned to leave. But a few paces short of the stairwell he stopped and looked back over his shoulder.

“Why take your mother’s name?”

Yendra paused, unsure if she wanted to tell the truth.

“Just thought I might be able to give her the chance to do everything she never could.” Reed let out an empathetic grunt. “Your dad was a real bastard, Yen. For what it’s worth – I’m sorry.”

Her face fell from the lighter expression that still lingered from her outburst of laughter. She looked at him, more seriously than she had in more than a decade, and said, “I’m not.” He wanted to say more but that was all he managed to knock loose. He turned and started his descent onto the main floor.

All six mercs were waiting for him as he passed through the translucent warble of the privacy field. They were staring, just like before. Reed could feel the trembling aggression emanating from their bodies. It had undoubtedly been some time since Yen had let them cut someone down.

The human-shaped tanks watched him until he reached the other end of the room. Yendra glared from the shadows, still perched on the balcony of her office.

Once he was out of sight, Reed’s pace quickened as he descended the stairwell. He briskly walked through the abandoned back office space. He stopped in the empty space of the old common area. His hands caught his weight on one of the decorative retaining walls. He clenched his fist and forced his teeth together until it hurt.

A decade leaves so much time for one's nature to evolve, to erode. It can find new languages that form schisms in the heart and the mind. Ruining the beliefs and doctrines once held dearly. Proof that even the greatest of resolve will eventually fall victim to the onslaught of existence.

For some, it is a decade, but for many, it takes much less to be truly undone. To be truly alone. Reed inhaled the stale air of the empty back rooms of the club he once knew. It smelled unfamiliar. The cells and molecules in his body had replaced themselves since he had last stood in these halls. Dust from the cosmos reorganized to silently mold the same organism with the certain omission of memories or preferences or desires. Vestigial leftovers that no longer served the whole. Cast aside to avoid all the old sins. He might as well have been a different person entirely. He barely recognized the old life form that once held his name. But those sins always found their way back home.

The past was here and now, but he buried everything he was feeling. There wasn't time for all that now. He finished crossing the room and trotted down the dark hallway until he arrived at the locked door leading back into the club.

CHAPTER 2

Reed banged his fist against the door of the VIP entrance. The mechanism was still locked in place. His heart started to race as he rested against the steel wall, unsure of what had just transpired. *What the fuck has she gotten herself into?*

Suddenly the doors separated and retreated into the walls. The boulder of man still stood guard, looming over the entrance to the stairwell. The ogre open the compartment where Reed's weapon had been stowed. He calmly collected the pistol, trying not to appear panicked. Without speaking to the guard, he crossed the mezzanine with intention, measuring his pace. Every step carried the weight of his survival. He descended the staircase at the end of the half floor and pushed his way through the crowded dance floor, craning and swiveling his neck, trying to spot anyone that looked overly suspicious. If those bounty hunters found him so quickly, there was no telling who had marked him since he'd been in Esqrol. The quicker he got back to his ship and off planet, the better. He found his way to the other side of the room and run up the flight of stairs. His momentum carried him through the front entrance. *Domph*. The double doors slammed against the wall, testing the integrity of their hinges as Reed pushed his way back into

the dimly lit hallway. The soles of his boots crashed against the floor as he stomped past the ghoulis man and down the corridor. He turned the corner of the hallway he saw the lanky figure waiting in the lift just like the bouncer had said. The pickpocket was looking down at a data pad in his hand, unaware of what was quickly approaching.

When he did finally look up, his face fell. Reed's figure emerged from the darkness and he could do was watch. Sweat poured down his face. Paralysis gripped every muscle of his body as his eyes looked on in terror. The bouncer closed the shaft doors behind Reed. His massive knotted hands secured the gate with a loud *bang*. He grunted and asked, "Mm... going down?"

Reed looked back at him over his shoulder and nodded. The bouncer pulled a lever and the main doors slowly inched together, sealing the two men inside. Reed turned his head again, this time toward the pickpocket. His com clicked on, "I believe you have something of mine."

Reed grabbed one of the many loose straps hanging from the man's jacket. They struggled around the space. Reed cocked his arm back and struck him in the face three times, giving him the leverage he needed to force the pickpocket to the ground. Reed pinned him to the floor of the elevator with his knee placed most painful in the small of his back. His left hand firmly tucking the thief's free arm behind his back, the other palmed the back of his skull – pressing his face into the cold steel.

"What's your name?"

"FUCK. YOU."

Reed removed his knee from the man's back, lifted him into the air by the straps of his jacket, then slammed him back into the floor of the elevator. His comm fizzed with the same, almost emotionless question

"What's. Your. Name?"

"Micky! *Korpu'nomai...*"

Reed pushed his head into the floor harder than before. He didn't understand the phrase, but he knew a curse when he heard one. He yanked the man up off the floor and onto his knees, then struck him in the temple with the hilt of his knife. He leaned closer so that the mic of his communicator was only centimeters from the young man's ear. Close enough to be uncomfortable.

"Keep talkin' shit and I'll bleed you for the hell of it."

"Look, man. I was just doing what they told me to... it's in my pocket. Just take it back."

“Too late for that.” He struck him again. “Who hired you?”

“Those two alien freaks!” He began to sob, snot and tears ran from his face as he struggled to further form the sentences needed to release himself from the terrible situation he had found himself in.

“T-the, the uh.. the dwellers. They, they... uh, they saw me lift something off a mark. Told me they’d give me ten grand to keep an eye out for you. Asked me to get your key fob and bring it to them. They gave me half up front.”

Reed almost felt sorry for his stupidity. They clearly baited him. He knew this to be a Dweller trick. Promise you payment for fulfilling a job, kill you and reclaim their investment once it was finished. But he didn’t have time to chide.

“What then?”

“I don’t know, man. I didn’t feel like asking questions was a good idea.”

“Do you know where they went?”

“I don’t know...” he continued to sob. Not for fear of death, but for the shame of getting caught. Reed pressed the tip of the blade into his flesh, spilling blood onto his neck.

“Fuck! Alright, man... alright! They gave me a fob and said they would wait for me out in the market. That’s it. I needed money and it seemed like an easy job. I didn’t know who you were.”

“Best that you don’t remember.”

Reed forced the rest of the blade into the man’s throat. He tried to scream, but a muffled gargle was the best he could manage. The only sound that escaped his mouth was the squelching sound of blood filling his airways. He had latched himself onto the hope that could fight his aggressor, but even without a knife lodged in his neck, he was in no state to save himself. The entire blade was lodged firmly in the tissue just below his hyoid bone. All Reed had to do was remove it from his body and wait. As he let go of the jacket collar, the knife slid from the wound under the weight of the body. It crashed against the floor. Blood pulsed from the opening in his neck, rushing onto the floor. Reed watched him squirm as he cleaned the weapon and returned it to the small of his back – firmly clasp it into place on his belt.

He patted around the chest and pants pockets looking for the ship's receiver, but instead, he found a holodisk. A three-dimensional image shot up from the projector, spinning in place. It was the dossier he had seen in Yendra's office. His bounty.

Fuck. If this kid marked me that easily, these dwellers had good intel on my description. Need to stay out of sight. The market should give me enough coverage.

He felt around in the corpse's jacket until he managed to find the fob in a breast pocket along with something else: a data chip. An activation switch caused the small rectangle to light up, birthing projection, and a recent photo of Reed hovered a few centimeters above his palm. It appeared to be undamaged. The shaft doors let out a horrible, metallic grinding as they screeched open. Reed stood up, hovering over the body that lay motionless in the harsh fluorescent light. The elevator door framed the scene like one of the old paintings that had been removed from Melig's office. One piece in particular always stuck out in Reed's mind. It was priceless according to the old man. A massive, almost life-sized depiction of an English drag hunt. A pack of well-bred hounds gave chase to a fantastically colored fox that reminded Reed of the Oberon sunset – but only above the clouds. They were followed by a group of men on horseback, dressed formally. A combination of garments that Reed had always thought ridiculous. It helped form his low opinion of ancient humans and all the ways they worshipped decorum. Not that the present was all that different. Almost every time Reed would visit Melig's office he would launch into a long winded explanation of the painting and its purported meaning. One Reed certainly knew to be someone else's elaborate pretentious interpretation Melif had taken as his own. He could never remember the specifics, and neither could Melig, but he chose to remember it as an asinine metaphor on the poetic and primal beauty of the hunt. But despite the history and cultural meaning many had given this work of art, all he could ever see was a group of rich shits killing for sport. Watching comfortably from their saddles as their dogs did all the dirty work. That felt better to him. Cleaner. More honest. It cut through all the bullshit. Came right out and said exactly what it was. It wasn't art, it just was life and death in a few thousand brushstrokes.

Reed stepped over the body and into the large pool of blood that had enveloped the floor. Crimson footprints marked his path as he walked across the dark lobby of the building. A multi-colored portal of swirling lights rippled across the entrance to the building. It was the start of another long haul. There was no telling what this job was or how long it would take. But it had

the highest payout he had ever heard of, and that was reason enough to at least meet the contact. He stepped into the swarming Esqroli night, greeted with a shower of rain and street-level exhaust – familiar to the lower levels of Sector 6. Reed activated his key fob and paired it with the helmet’s communicator – reestablishing his channel with his ship.

Reed hailed channel one: the bridge, “Quinn, I’m on my way back. Settle our fees with the hangar and warm up the engines. We need to break atmosphere within the hour. I’ve got a tail. Could be trouble. Need you to come get me.” Silence infected the channel. Not even the drizzle of static came through Reed’s earpiece.

“QUINN. Are you there?” Panic began to set in. The pickpocket had the fob long enough to relay a position to anyone in range. If they had found him surely they could have found the ship.

“Copy, Reed. What’s the problem? Did you talk to the old man? This tech inspecting the fuel lines is being a pain in the ass.”

“Sort of... I’ll explain when I get there. Look, I just need you to fire up the engines and find me. We need to be off planet as soon as possible. And stay near the com, like I said.”

“We’re in the middle of refueling. It’ll take at least ten minutes to disconnect and prep for takeoff. Where are you? Your locator’s been dead for half an hour.”

“I don’t have time to explain. Just ping the fob and follow those coordinates.”

“Okay, well–”

“Hurry.”

The channel closed as Reed bounced down several flights of stairs. Other sectors of the city were visible in the distance – an interconnected web of metal, light, and sound echoing across hundreds of miles of urban landscape. The skyline rose and fell at the will of progress. But, here, on this winding path that led down from the elevator platform, looked over a benign, rust-colored marketplace that hadn’t seen progress in years. An unknown assortment of fumes and industrial vapors clouded his view of the other sectors in the distance. This was the true floor of Sector 6 – the depths of its commercial district. Several levels were stacked above this one, forming a crisscrossed network of footbridges and courtyards affixed to the pillared buildings. Rainwater fell through it all, filling the downspouts and gutters as it reached the bottom, flowing through the streets like tiny rivers. As Reed’s boots met the cold, damp street, the neon signs along the building marquees spat the sickly sweet colors onto his cloak and armor. He pulled the

thick hood of his over his helmet, trying to avoid being spotted in the massive crowd. His paramilitary aesthetic was sure to attract attention in the river of bodies that snaked through the confined spaces between buildings. The old industrial sectors like this one had been rezoned to collect the taxes of a new and grungy commercial district. From the air, construction could be seen for miles across the metal plains. New, taller buildings replacing old manufacturing and distribution centers.

An odd mix of cargo crates and vendors filled the street, a bazaar of assorted stolen and illegally imported goods. Anxious energy ran through the crowd. Merchants and consumers went back and forth, screaming at one another over the price of exotic animals and counterfeit items. The local government would usually turn a blind eye to unauthorized trade in exchange for a few credits. Unless it involved a shipment of Federation goods. Stealing from city patrols or dealing military equipment of the black market was strictly forbidden. But most of the gangs in the Hellmouth were unorganized opportunists, and a crate full of expensive equipment was too tempting. The thought of cashing in 20,000 UGFC on military hardware was enough to persuade even those within the Esqroli police force itself. Reed had run a handful of courier jobs for crooked officials during his tenure at the Holo – all under Melig’s nose. Every now and again he would need to earn a few extra credits, and they needed to keep their stolen, high-value cargo out of the cartel’s reach. An advantageous partnership that gave Reed valuable intel almost no one else had. It made him an incredibly effective smuggler.

Rainwater fell from the edges of makeshift roofs constructed from tattered cloth and parts from shipping containers. The scene looked and felt like a proper slum. Reed moved swiftly through the crowd, in and out of the neon glow from above. His boots emptied the contents of small puddles that littered the floor of the market as they crashed against the ground. The slum moved like a sentient organism, ebbing and flowing. But something was different about it. It felt wrong, different than it did when he had arrived. Something whispered beneath its skin. Something foreign. Even the air could sense the virus in its company. Reed felt it, too – several pairs of eyes burning into the back of his head. He depressed a button on the control panel of his helmet, setting the visor to an electromagnetic filter. If these bounty hunters were stupid enough to try anything in the open, he would be able to spot them or kill their scans. His best shot was to break their line of sight and sprint for the station. Despite the immediate precariousness of the situation, Reed attempted to rack his brain for the source of this bounty. Naturally, his first

suspicion was the man who had forced him back into the core. But all of it felt too inconsistent. Too easy. He was unsure of *how* Yendra acquired a copy of his bounty, but it meant she was dangerous and exceptionally untrustworthy. All things he would have to figure out, but later. For now, he needed to keep his head down, move quickly, and get off-world without incident.

Sub-atmosphere transports flew overhead. Most likely rooftop deliveries, but Reed knew if they were going to hit him, they would do it from above. Sensors in his helmet kept tabs on everything airborne. All visual tracking modules were monitoring for any vessels whose airspeed dipped below cruising. Rooftops would be the most effective position for engagement. They would likely try to lure him into a kill box. Avoid all the crossfire. Minimize civilian casualties. Assuming they were paramilitary. Regardless, he'd have to maintain a heightened level of awareness. Mainline spaceports were crawling with Esqroli law enforcement. Usually, they would let a bounty kill slide in the slums, but not a heavily trafficked part of the sector. If they make a move, they'll do it before the rail station.

Vents and other exhaust ports protruded from buildings along the street. They vomited more fumes into the air, painting the street with a hazy glow. Smoke billowed and danced in the alleyways, venturing far enough into the world to be drowned in the rain. It fused with the crowd, the polluted lungs of the market. Reed walked through the breath, his fists clenched. Only three blocks stood between him and the bridge for the rail station. Both of his heels continued to empty puddles as he walked along more street vendors. He had left the thoroughly black market sections. Most of the people swirling around him now were regular merchants willing to brave the illegal night markets. Assortments of plucked pheasants, species of pigs, and other small mammals were being cooked over the open flames of makeshift ovens. Coal fires cracked and spit from the tops of large, metal drums. One of these blocks could have been easily mistaken for one of the sub-sector refugee camps on the outskirts of the city. Temporary placements turned into permanent slums.

There, in the bustle, was a figure. Someone watched him from one of the alleys between the stalls. It was the only body in the slurry of people that looked out of place. All Reed could make out was the outline of the helmet. It followed him as he walked.

EEP. A notification appeared in his visor. It flashed in the corner of his vision —
UNAUTHORIZED SYSTEM SCAN DETECTED.

Finally, he thought. Let's get this over with.

As he passed the shadowed figure, a woman the size of a building screamed into the sky. A holo projection, advertising some kind of Nurocan product, painted the street in vivid shades of pink, blue, and purple. It robbed the hiding places of their safety and, for a moment, the night market howled with light. The alley's occupant was exposed. Hanging there in the open, unfazed by his compromised position. He stared directly at Reed. Bug-eyed goggles lurched from the contoured faceplate. *There you are.*

It was likely a scout relaying Reed's position to the rest of the hunting party. The ad clicked off and the alley was once again swallowed up by the darkness and rain. Reed's sensors couldn't compensate quickly enough. Everything returned to a murky and indiscernible state. Another mountain-sized advertisement cycled on. This time there was no alien face to greet him. The hunter was gone. Reed stopped so quickly that he nearly fell forward. He wheeled around trying to locate his pursuer. Losing sight of a tail was bad news, especially one like this. Reed knew very little about them. Only that they were highly skilled and notoriously ruthless. They hunted in packs, and a scout meant there was *at least* a five-man team. Likely more. Undoubtedly the others were close and quickly closing in.

Reed looked towards the rooftops and activated his thermal sensors. Three human-shaped heat signatures bobbed up and down along the warehouse parapets. Moving quickly. Agile. Calculated. They were moving to sever his route to the rail station. He needed to move before they were on top of him. He waited for the next advertisement to cycle through and light up the alley, hoping it would blind and distract any of his pursuers long enough for him to escape into one of the backstreets. Finally, after waiting for what felt like minutes, he broke free of the market stalls in unison with the blinding lights of the neon pillars. He began to run, still looking over his shoulder, watching for the predators that stalked the concrete canopy. His boots began to make bigger and bigger splashes as his gait crescendoed. Now he faced full forward, making large strides at speed. The crowd instinctually opened, creating an airway for Reed to move through. The front of his poncho clung to his body, the rest of its loose cloth whipped behind him. Merchants and patrons scoffed and yelped in surprise and confusion as he tore through the market. No one had seen the others, just him. But it wouldn't be long until there was gunfire. It would be tough to evade them, but if he moved quickly, there might be a chance to confuse them long enough to break their line of sight. Ahead was another alleyway that was connected the spiderweb of passageways that ran through the lower street level. This one, and others like it,

had always been used to grant easier access for foot traffic between warehouses. Reed had used them countless times to avoid detection. They were narrow and crowded and crowded with trash. For all knew it could be a planned choke point, but it was his only choice if he wanted to avoid being gunned down in the open. His torso led his body, careening toward the narrow alleyway. His muscles burned from the sudden movement. He was making good ground until a violent, abrupt force hit him from the side, sending him to tumbling to the ground. He felt his bones crunch against the concrete as he collided with a solid retaining wall that blocked one of the piped exhausted ports being fed up the side of the building.

Blurry shapes consumed his vision. He quickly gathered himself and rose to his feet, stumbling forward. A boot heel met him in the chest, forcing him back toward the retaining wall. As his vision readjusted he barely had time to notice the blade falling down at his body. He wheeled sideways to avoid the blow, striking his attacker with the back of his fist. It gave him enough time to create the distance needed to prepare a proper defense. The sword flew at him a second time, this time from below. He raised his arm and deflected it using one of his vambraces. A glancing blow that left Reed's attacker vulnerable. He seized the opportunity and kicked him in the ribs, hard, using the heel of his foot. The hunter was launched a meter away and fell through one of the market stalls. The contents of the table spilling on top of him. Reed turned and made seven or eight full strides until another dark figure stepped out from behind another stall. He planted his feet on the sloppy, wet concrete, sliding to a stop a meter or two short of the hunter. Another gaunt figure haunted the spaces between the high walls of the market street. Their reflection was visible in the speckled pools along the ground. Pin holes in the terrible night. Two more shadowed silhouettes descended from the rooftops on either side. Footsteps sounded at his back. Four hunters in total settled into a circle around him. They all traded clicks, communicating with one another. Reed looked left, then right. Checking his periphery. They all held weapons, but only the one in front of him carried a rifle. Suspicious, he thought. But good news nonetheless. If he could put even a few meters of distance between them he would have a decent chance of getting away. As long as there weren't more waiting for him down the street. A garbled voice rattled from the bug-eyed helmet. A truly alien language. Reed had only heard it a handful of times, but never in person. It sounded nothing like an earth-borne dialect. Even the translator in Reed's helmet could only piece together every other word. The best it could tell, the voice said something along the lines of, "Move... kill."

Reed shuffled his weight from one foot to another. His hand danced above the handle of his pistol still clasped in its holster.

The leader's shrill, alien voice fluttered through the air, "Deshta da qettu."

His companions responded in unison, "Ne tapi mnetar."

One rifle and three short blades. If I play this right, I'll live.

On paper, Reed's odds were good. He had enough distance to get a shot off and reposition himself. Despite the instruction to *be still or die*, they would likely kill him regardless of what he did next. Reed's hand floated down and gripped the handle of his pistol. The hunters all readied their weapons. Three blades shone in the dark, whet for their bounty. Their pack's lead took aim at Reed's chest. He barked at him down the dark barrel of his long gun. Rain struck and slid from the odd cylinder of his weapon. His voice rasped and crackled – undulating in the odd dialect. Ending on three abrupt sounds that overloaded his communicator. The robotic tone of Reed's translator trilled in his helmet but failed to interpret the words. Reed looked back once more at the man behind him, marking his position. Three paces. Maybe four.

A heavy, visible breath shot from Reed's ventilators as his lungs deflated. Preparing for what came next. His hand still floated above the handle of his gun. Before the vapor of his breath could be swallowed by the cold, rainy air, Reed's pistol was free from its holster. The alleyway lit up with a blinding yellow flash as its first shot screamed through the air. The energy bolt collided with the chest of the man in front of him. The round ate through his torso, and the force of the impact threw him several paces down the street. A shot from the rifle howled upwards against the rainfall. Before the body hit the ground, Reed had shifted to his right and fired another time. The force of the recoil slithered up his arm. The second man's helmet buckled inwards as the bolt chewed through a mixture of metal and bone. The dead man's sword made a loud clattering sound as it struck the wet ground. Two more blades cut through the air. Reed dropped and rolled out of their path. One of them still managed to hit its mark but failed to cut through the carbon-weave fabric between his armored plates. The pressure of the blade put him off balance and pushed him into a stumble. His feet slid out from under his body and he splashed onto the street. Another shot loosed from the barrel of his pistol as he slid to a halt. Before he could blink, it severed one of the swordsmen's legs at the knee. The alien man crashed to the ground, wailing in pain. His companion had already leaped toward Reed, bringing his blade down another time. Instinct took over, as Reed's heel collided with the Wruteh's chest plate,

concussing the tissue that lay beneath. The impact forced the man backward, pushing him off balance. The handle of his sword slipped through his fingers. He crashed into the ground. Reed paused, there in a prone position, trying to catch his breath. The dreadful song of claustrophobia began to swell as hot air and sweat overtook the innards of his helmet. The thump of his pulse pounded in his ears like a drum. The hunters were quicker than even stories suggested, and Reed was more than unprepared to handle them. If they had all been carrying proper weapons, there was no question – he would be dead. That was all the more reason to be grateful later. Reed drew himself up enough to meet the gaze of his opponent who was in a similar stance. Both men stared at one another, winded from their sparring. Even with all the cloth and metal that coated the hunter's body, the rise and fall of his chest were still visible. Reed took a single long, deep breath before he attempted to stand, trying to calm the rhythms of his diaphragm. The rain had greased the concrete, making it difficult to stand let alone fight off four of the deadliest bounty hunters in the known galaxy. Reed started to speak and fumble through negotiations when the hunter settled into a fighting stance, his sword pointed at Reed. He clearly had no appetite for conversation. The hilt was pulled close to his head, coiled like a snake. Ready to slash and maul. The mutilated companion still writhed in pain, the severed limb only a meter or so from the body. Blood poured from the stump, mixing with the trash and muck in the street. A crowd had formed around them. They watched the rain pour onto this dance of death. No one spoke. None could be sure of what to say. None interfered. They knew what would happen if they tried.

Rain thrashed against every surface, a torrential and ominous shower. It was the breed of rain that impeded even the ability to breathe or speak.

The Wruteh hunter called out in their odd language. He hissed something the translator could not interpret. "R'jote don queda. N'ast betou. R'jote don queda."

A bellowing roar sounded from within the dark, bug-eyed helmet as the hunter lunged forward. His sword had already begun its journey bound for Reed's head. A sharpened stone pendulum that ached for death. But after only a step or two, a bolt of energy lurched across the circle. Reed had taken advantage of their poor choice in weaponry. The bolt had passed through the hunter's chest as if he hadn't been there at all. By the time the body hit the ground, its pulse was all but gone. It produced an underwhelming splash as it met the hard street. Every sound left the world. All except the patter of rain against Reed's helmet. He stared at the corpse, newly

dead and face down on the concrete. It was odd, he thought, the way they approached him. Why corral your mark only to forfeit your position? I should be dead. Not him.

Another wail rang out through the white noise of rainfall. It stole Reed's attention from his thoughts. The hunter was still writhing on the ground, pawing at the weapon just out of reach. Reed crossed the pool growing in the street. Crimson waves were born out of his footsteps. Boots sloshing through a shallow mixture of blood and water. Reed stood over the man, watching him flail erratically. His grip on his pistol tightened as it whirred, charging up for another salvo. The blade made an awkward clatter as it was kicked away. A scraping clang. The hunter could not follow after it. His wound had forfeited too much blood onto the pavement. He would be dead within the minute. He spoke again, choking on the blood gathering in his throat, "R'jote... ACK... don... queda..."

The same phrase as before.

The hunter began to seize. His body contorted and shook, slapping the pavement like a fish, expanding the borders of his pooling blood. Reed watched, simply waiting for him to die. The data pad on his arm chirped. He pulled it close to his face, checking the notification. *Almost time.* The crowd was still gathered around them, still watching, still unsure of how they should act. A wall of faces was transfixed on him, waiting for his next move.

Reed stared down at him without pity or empathy. "Don't have time to wait."

Another bolt leaped from the barrel of his pistol. The convulsing man ceased to move. An even greater silence fell onto the street. The light from neon adverts still pulsed overhead. They washed over the armored corpse revealing a symbol etched into the chest plate. Odd, Reed thought. He lowered himself onto his haunches to examine it.

It was crude etching. What appeared to be a serpent in a triangle. A sequence of outward-facing lines formed a circle around it. Reed quickly capture a photo of it from his visor. Odds were this was only a detachment of a larger party. He needed to get to the rail station. Reed holstered his weapon and moved toward the crowd. A wound opened in the line of onlookers. A boy, maybe seven years old, was the only one who stood in his way. His eyes were glazed over, fixated on the bodies strewn about the street. He was around the age Reed was when he first came to Esqrol. No business in a place like this.

Reed opened his mouth to order the boy out of his path when a beam of light raced across his periphery. Before he could speak the boy's body folded into itself. The concussion of a solid bullet yanked his body toward the ground. It slid several paces leaving a bold trail of blood. The boy was dead on impact.

As the sound of the shot caught up with its target, the crowd began to scream and scatter. Reed moved low and quickly, using the crowd's confusion to cover his escape. He weaved through the crowd as quickly as he could before the stride of the swarming bodies began to outpace him. It was only a few steps before he was sprinting away with the rest of the herd, dodging or trampling those who had fallen in the commotion. One of the livestock, running aimlessly from a hungry pack of wolves. Merchants and patrons alike now haggled for their lives against this untamed current of flesh and bone. Proximity to the others prevented Reed from fully extending his legs, which put him in danger. If the scope found him before they all turned the corner, there's little he could do to avoid a clear shot. Beams of light assaulted the mass of bodies, dropping someone here and there. They still hadn't spotted in the dark. As the swarm rounded the street corner, a fluorescent shine engulfed their vision. The cross-sector transport was nestled in the station. Doors open. Reed could barely hear the intercom over the roar of screams and thunder of hooves.

"Last boarding call for sector three. Please board in an orderly fashion and keep all hands and feet clear of car doors."

We have sixty seconds... maybe less, he thought. If I'm not on that transport, I'm dead. He ripped his pistol from the holster and blindly fired two shots behind him. The bolt claimed several people, but he couldn't afford to turn and confirm just how many. Louder screams of pain rang through the air as the people further back in the crowd began to trip over the maimed. More blood gathered in the street.

The gap between Reed and the human blockade had grown by more than twelve meters as his group stepped onto the platform and hurriedly filed into the car. The deafening roar of screams and rain had almost fallen away, the open door was the only thing that stood in the way of painful silence. Reed stood in the white, sanitary light of the transport car, shoulder to shoulder with the vestigial limbs of the crowd. They all rose and sank in unison, trying to catch their breath, bobbing like the pistons of a combustion engine. Their eyes searched one another while their tongues searched for the proper words to address the sudden chaos.

Loud bangs interrupted the silence of the car. Bullets crashed against the windows of the car. The force shattered their outer layer but failed to break through. Esqrol transports had been engineered to withstand most small arms fire, but there was no telling what other munitions they had on hand. There was nothing any of them could do but wait. Painful, anxious seconds passed like years. The slow aching of the passing of time wore on all of them. The thumping in Reed's ears returned, pounding in an unbroken rhythm like a fleshy metronome. Even he was unsure of what would happen. If this pack was holding kinetic rockets, this would be a short ride. More rounds collided with the car. One, then two, then a third. More than one shooter. The bullets crystallized the glass and further obscured Reed's view of the bloodied crowd outside. The doors had stayed open much longer than he had anticipated. The pounding in his ears grew, and pain began to sprout in his skull. Any longer and they might be able to reach the platform. He knew that would mean more bloodshed. After a few more excruciating moments, the doors finally hissed and began to close. When the tram began to move two more of the gaunt figures shot out from the darkness and crashed against the side of the transport car. Their blades crashed against the windows to no avail. They kept pace with where Reed was seated, staring at him through the shattered window until the station ran out of platform.

Once the tram had cleared the station, Reed slumped back into the chair and emptied his lungs all at once. It was a euphoric sigh of relief. The last few minutes had held him over the edge of death, giving him choices that might contain the chaos of his situation, and he had chosen. evaded the hunters – for now. The car was crossing through one of the last industrial shipyards in the sector. All Reed had to do was make it to the next stop and hail Quinn for extraction. Assuming they hadn't sent another team after the ship.

Reed was not alone. The others that had rushed from the market had huddled in the middle of the car. Most stood, but some had collapsed onto the floor. Maybe fifteen or sixteen bodies. Many of them were quietly discussing what had happened, unsure of what caused the commotion. Only a handful of them had seen Reed be attacked. Their voices were occasionally interrupted by soft whimpers and muffled whaling. A man in his mid-forties stood among them. He had run into the car behind Reed. He hung onto the metal pole grip bolted to the floor and ceiling. He wore a long, dark coat that covered a traveler's attire. All of his clothes appeared to

be soaked through to the skin. The heavy dripping had formed a puddle around his shoes. His hair had gathered together and clung to the face of his skin. A lost and bewildered look stood on his face, scarcely hidden beneath his toffee-colored bangs. His mouth hung open, hastened breathing moved his chest cavity in and out in a hurried and irregular manner. His gaze was unfocused and wandered the spaces of the car until it settled on Reed... and the pistol in his hand, resting across his lap. The sight of it focused all the sensations boiling within his body into a senseless rage. It spilled over onto his face. He yelled frightening those around him, "TY... Sukin syn!"

The yawp seemed to rattle the floor and windows of the car. It arrested the attention of everyone in the car, except Reed. He had turned to face him in an aggressive stance that mimicked his accusation. He started to lunge and ran across the car when Reed raised his pistol and pointed it at the man's chest. It stopped from attacking, but only just. His breath stuttered as he shuffled and nearly fell. Tears filled his eyes and fell down his face as he continued to mumble in another language. Reed didn't bother turning on his translator. He didn't need to. The pistol's barrel was still warm from the shots that cut through the crowd. His com clicked and he spoke without facing him, "It's done. Sit down."

Someone from the group called out, "W-what's going on? Why does he have a *gun*?" Still boiling with rage, the man began to shout again in a foreign language. Reed still did not turn on his translator. One of the other group members attempted to translate for the rest, "Um, something about an attack. He-he says that *he* started all of it and... that he sh-shot the people behind?"

"*Him*? The man just there?"

The translator confirmed, "Yes, that's what he said." Some of them continued to shudder and cry, afraid of what that could mean. Three of them stood and joined the distraught man. The four of them gathered in front of Reed, angrily staring at him. The youngest of the three spoke, "Is that right? You shoot someone with that?" The older man forced two words passed his tears "Moy zaika," he jeered.

"Uh, his...his.." the young translator struggled to remember the word's meaning. "...his *child*, I think."

Reed firmly gripped the handle. He turned his head to face the men hovering over him. The motion of his cold, robotic features was a menacing gesture. Two of them shuffled, unsettled and

their bravery was shaken. He did not want to shoot any of these men but was prepared to make an example of them.

An announcement called out over the speakers, “Approaching Sector 2 – Waiden Station. Stand clear of all doors. Wait for the car to fully stop and engage the platform before exiting.”

Time to go.

Reed slowly stood up, his barrel trained on the group of men. He looked past them at the rest of the group. His two scans of the car hadn’t detected any weapons, but anything without a digital fingerprint wouldn’t register. If any more of them found a spine, he’d have trouble handling them in such a small space.

Reed spoke for the second time, “Back. Up.”

One of the three hissed, “And let you just get away?”

He took an overly aggressive step towards Reed and found the warm muzzle of the pistol jammed into the soft flesh of his cheek. He could feel the aggravated vibration of the mass engine spinning in the barrel – it did all the talking. The man’s resolve instantly fell away. Both of his hands shot towards the roof of the car and his eyes dilated with fear.

Reed’s free hand toggled the receiver switch on the side of his helmet. “Quinn... are you airborne?”

A voice rumbled through his earpiece, “Affirmative. On you in 30.”

He released the toggle as the train’s footbridge began to engage the platform. All four sets of doors on the car gave a whooshing sound as they separated and slowly shifted open. Once the door in front of him had fully opened, he knew it was safe to back out across the gap and onto the platform. The ball of his boot began to slide across the floor, inching backward. Reed didn’t want to further excite anyone in his company. His stolid retreat released the muzzle’s grip on the sweaty flesh of the man’s face. He continued to retract his presence until he had fully removed himself from the car. They all stared at him, either through the opening or the fractured glass of the train’s windows. An announcement – identical to the one from the train – sounded over the station’s loudspeakers, “Train from Waiden Station, departing momentarily. All passengers please finish boarding and ensure all hands and feet are clear of the train doors.”

Though he was outside, the tension had only grown. Reed didn’t have space to think about *why*, but he knew that’s when people made stupid decisions. He looked around the platform. Only three others stood under the pale, fluorescent light. They had yet to notice him.

His pistol was still pointed at the men now gathered in the car's doorway. Hydraulic doors hissed down the length of the train as it began to disengage the platform. The swollen fist that had formed in Reed's throat began to loosen and disappear. All he had to do now was make it to a suitable rooftop. He lowered his gun and turned toward the staircase leading out of the station. A foul, awful scream rang in his ears. Its source lay behind him. By the time he turned back to investigate, the older man had jumped through the closing train doors. He was only two meters from Reed, furious tears mixed with rainwater on his face. Reed stared at him, his gun still hanging by his side. He barked at the man through his comm, "Let it go. I don't want to shoot you." Decisions flashed in the man's eyes. Reed saw the path he had chosen and turned the pistol over in his hand, holding it by the barrel instead of the grip.

All of the old man's emotions swelled and crashed into a single expression. The grievous rage and sadness of a mourning father fueled every bellicose stride that followed. He charged towards Reed, raised his fist, and futilely attempted to strike the armored man who had shot his daughter. Reed sidestepped the advance and swung the heel of the pistol into the man's face. He yelled, "Awgh!" and immediately collapsed onto the ground. The force opened a generous gash above his eye, adding to the amount of blood Reed had spilled into the streets of Esqrol. He looked down over a bloodied man for the second time tonight. This one, however, he wished no more pain upon him. Reed found himself wading through an unfamiliar feeling. He mumbled inside his helmet, "I... I-I..." As much as he tried to force out another word, he couldn't finish the sentence. He holstered his pistol and wheeled around, moving quickly toward a staircase that led off the platform and out of the station. He fought the urge to turn around and glance at the man on the ground. The thought haunted him. He hailed his ship instead.

"Quinn, I'm out of the station. What's your ETA?"

"Coming up on your signal now. Where do you want her?"

A large ship appeared from behind one of the buildings. The Hyena. Its form blocked the pervasive glow of the city that seethed in the distance. Two gimballing engines whined and roared on either side of the aircraft. A pair of smaller engines mounted to the back of the craft idled. Even through the rain, Reed could see the heat distorting the air around the fuselage. The main engines were pitched up, stabilizing the vessel's weight as it hovered in the negative space between buildings. Several smaller stabilizers lined the belly of the ship. It was a symphony of fiery, undulating exhaust that was colored dangerous shades of blue and purple. Reed spotted

Quinn in the cockpit. He spoke to her through the comm, making hand signals toward the adjacent buildings.

“How about the next platform up? You have enough room to turn her around up there?” Quinn’s figure moved back and forth in the jade lights of the cockpit – double-checking her clearance on either side of the ship.

“Ahhhh... yeah. Should be able to get the doors open. You’re gonna have to jump, but I’ll get as close as I can.”

“I’ll be fine. Just get in position.” Reed lowered his hand and began to look for a way up to the rooftop.

Quinn confirmed his instruction, “Copy that.”

The streets were wider in this sector, but still just as crowded. Shops lined the street level of the mid-rise buildings. People near the station began to look up at the ship, confused by its presence. This area was outside of traffic lanes. If they didn’t want to draw the attention of city patrols, they’d need to clear the area as quickly as they could. Reed scanned the shops along the street. This building looked different than the rest, most likely a hotel. The platform above was probably connected and only accessible through some sort of restaurant or bar. It would have to do.

Reed locked his eyes on the entrance and barged through the lobby. Small groups of wealthy business people turned to investigate the disturbance: a heavily armored man boorishly approached the service desk. He approached the woman at reception. “Lift to the balcony. Where is it?” He growled over his comm.

Bewildered, she sheepishly pointed to the far left side of the room. “Through the restaurant.” He nodded, thanking her for her cooperation, and quickly moved toward the large pane of glass that divided the two large rooms. As he approached a thin, smartly dressed man quickly moved into Reed’s path and began to say something about denying him access due to dress code, but Reed yanked his pistol from its holster. He kept it trained on the man until he cowered and moved out of Reed’s path.

Quinn came back on the comm, “Hey, Reed...we’re starting to draw a lot of attention.” He ignored her comment and continued through the restaurant. His boots clattering against the floor interrupted the soft melody of the piano playing in the corner of the room. All eyes stared at

him, nervously, over their forks and glasses. He entered the elevator without so much as addressing their presence and forcefully banged on the button for the balcony. The doors quietly closed and he ascended to the next level. He stared out over the dining room through the translucent walls of the elevator, every person in the room watched him climb to the second floor.

What a fuckin' night...

He turned as the doors opened behind him. The Hyena hung in the air just beyond the guard rail of the balcony. Reed holstered his pistol and began to run towards the open cargo bay doors. "Boarding now. Be ready to burn."

Long strides pushed him across the marbled floors of the bar and out onto the covered balcony. Rain poured in a solid sheet beyond the awning. He jumped onto a long, risen stone planter then ran all the way to the end of the platform. His arms pumped in rhythm with his legs as he built up the momentum necessary to clear the gap. The cargo bay door lay open like a large, magnanimous metal hand – ready to catch him. He pushed off the handrail with his foot, throwing his other leg forward to greet the cargo door. His body leaped into the brief hurricane that raged between the building and his ship. 300 meters of nothing below him. A gaping abyss that called out to his subconscious.

He met the wide metal door and rolled into the empty space of the cargo bay, losing his balance and landing on his side. He scrambled onto his feet and slammed a fist against the callbox on the wall. He grunted past his heavy breathing, "I'm in! Go like hell." Quinn's voice sounded over the speakers, "Got it. Hold onto something."

Reed initiated the door lock and braced himself just as the engines began to hurl more force out into the air. He looked back through the opening as it shrank and the bright lights were swallowed by the rain storm. The entire ship jolted as Quinn throttled up the propulsion systems and reentered a traffic lane.

Reed removed his helmet and slid against the wall into a seated position. It was quiet in the empty cargo bay. The only sound was the muted fulmination of the engines. He had been to dozens of systems and seen marvelous and unspeakable things most would only dream about. All manner of beauty and majesty throughout the galaxy. But he welcomed nothing more than the

sonorous rhythms of sub-light engines. For the last ten years, he had felt like there was no such thing as *home*. But the winged geometry of this ship was the closest he ever got.

For the first time in hours, he felt like he could breathe. He pulled the freshly scrubbed O2 into his lungs and held it there. Like a hug that swam through his bloodstream. It slowly released across his lips back into the cargo bay. He closed his eyes, but all he could see was that old man at his feet. Bleeding into the street. He felt something he hadn't in a very long time – except for Quinn. Empathy had found its way into his old haunt called regret. Before he explored that feeling any further, Quinn barged into the cargo bay from the door up on the flight deck. She looked down and saw Reed seated on the floor.

“Shit, are you alright?” she called out.

Reed was still distracted by his thoughts, his eyes still closed. “Uh... Yeah...” his voice lacked the conviction Quinn was used to hearing. He caught his mistake and corrected himself to prevent her from probing. He repeated himself more firmly, “*Yes*. Yes, I'm fine.” He slowly rose onto his feet. “I've just had... an *interesting* couple of hours.”

Quinn slumped across the guardrail mount on the flight deck and looked down over where Reed stood. She jested, “Yeah, no shit... you look terrible.” A curious smile settled on her face but quickly disappeared when Reed didn't reciprocate her banter. She inquired about his condition, “Are you hurt?”

Reed looked down at the floor, his eyes closed. Somehow, and much to his surprise, he had almost forgotten about the group of hunters that attacked only minutes ago. He tried to remain calm and not let the knowledge of his pursuers leech into his voice. He brushed the top of his head with the palm of his wet glove. It cooled his scalp and helped ground his unfocused attention. “No... no, just a shaken up. That's all.” He looked up at her and gave an instruction, “Get us out of Esqrol and I'll fill you in. The sooner we break atmosphere the better. I'll join you in a few minutes. I've gotta make a call.”

Quinn straightened into a standing posture. A more serious expression narrowed her eyes. Something felt wrong. She wanted to push him, but his odd behavior gave her reason to pause. She complied with an apprehensive tone, “Yeah, sure... just hurry up. I'll be in the cockpit.” The doors closed behind her as she returned to the front of the ship. Reed took another deep breath. *Time to check in with the devil.*

He collected his helmet from the ground, then stepped onto the personnel lift and pushed up on the control lever. He unfastened his cloak and stuffed it inside the helmet as he rose to the flight deck. The lift gave a subtle shake as it stopped. Reed stepped through the same bulkhead doors Quinn had used. They hissed open revealing the first compartment of the central hallway. The gear locker held all of their armor and various other types of regularly-used equipment. The Hyena could comfortably accommodate four people, but its passageways were much narrower than those found on multi-crew vessels. This gear locker served the dual purpose of storage and staging. All other equipment, including weapons, was stored in the hidden lockup on the cargo deck. Reed tapped a button on the wall that opened his personal locker. He stowed his helmet in a small compartment at the top of the segmented alcove, then removed his belt and cargo vest and hung them on the hooks of the recessed compartment. He removed his pistol from the sidearm holster and slid it into a similar storage holster mounted on the wall. A sound pulsed through the ship's hull, rattling anything not bolted to the floor or one of the bulkheads. They were pushing out of the atmosphere, which eased Reed's mind. The likelihood of taking fire was much lower near one of the orbital stations.

He held onto one of the handles that ran up and down the locker wall, stabilizing himself as the ship pitched upward. After a moment, the vibration stopped and the force released Reed's body. Only the sound of the ship's gravity engine fought against the black noise of space. Reed's feet firmly planted against the floor and he moved down the passageway past the next bulkhead into a larger section of the ship. He took long strides past the crew quarters, past the next bulkhead, and into the bridge leading into the cockpit. The pyramid-shaped control room contained four seats arranged in two, tiered rows. Two pilot chairs and two passenger stations that were capable of operating several of the ship's systems. A three-rung ladder separated the split deck between them. A carnival of brightly colored screens and switchboards lit up the space. The two pilot chairs were fitted with control racks that could be activated at will based on the operator's preference. A large, glass canopy ran the length of the cockpit. Three cutouts in the floor – two on either side and one in the middle – were present to give both pilots visibility of what was above or below them for more informed maneuverability. Reed made this modification along with many others to convert the Hyena into a capable gunship. The two passenger control centers also operated several gimballed, four-barrel turrets that were mounted in the fuselage.

Quinn heard him approach. She turned from where she was seated and asked, “*There* you are. Where the hell are we going? I thought you had a tail. We’re moving pretty slow for having someone after us.”

Reed jumped down onto the pilot deck and took his seat next to her. He strapped himself in and began to toggle several of the ship’s systems, activating his control center. He reached across to her panel and turned off her chair’s control priority, then grabbed his yoke.

He continued to calibrate the systems to match his subsequent flight pattern, answering her question in a frustrated tone, “I did. Probably still do. We need to get to…” he pulled out the fob Yendra had given him in her office. Marked on the side was a number: *03 – 256*.

“...orbital station three. We have a rendezvous with a client.”

Quinn scoffed, “Ha... in person? You must be joking.”

He turned the ship, orienting them in a sensical orbital pattern. “No joke. Just... hold on a second.”

Between the two chairs was a small holoprojector. Reed dialed a number on the communications panel and hailed someone from his contacts. A camera opened and faced him, accompanied by a continuous chirping tone. After a moment, a man’s face appeared on the holoprojector. He was middle-aged and dressed in casual attire. His expression was surprised yet excited. Quinn’s eyes doubled in size at the sight of him.

He exclaimed, “Reed, my boy! Quinn. Hmm... how good to see you both. I was beginning to worry I wouldn’t hear from you again.”

Reed turned, focusing on the holo projection. He calmly, but firmly, raised his voice, “Cut the shit, Alistair. We had a deal. What the hell are you doing putting a blacklist bounty on me?”

Alistair cooed in a playful manner, “I must say, I honestly have no clue what you’re prattling on about, Reed. I may be an impatient man, but I am also a man of my word. Wouldn’t have gotten very far with the Confederates otherwise. But it’s nice to see the pressure getting to you near the end of our agreement. I’m nothing *you* can’t handle.”

Reed gave a dismissive grunt. “You call a Wruteh fireteam *pressure*?”

“WHAT?” the word shot from Quinn’s mouth before she could even think to stop it. She covered her face with her hands. Reed cut his eyes at her, quietly signaling for her not to speak again. He continued his chide, “If you want your money, you’ll stay off my back for a few more

days. Call off the dweller hunting party and I'll have the other three million to you by the end of the week."

"Again, I know nothing of this 'fireteam' you speak of, but if I wanted you dead, I'd send one of my hunting parties after you. Always best to keep everything in-house, you know..."

"But in regard to your extension, I'll allow it." He leaned forward, closer to the camera, "But *not a day more*. Only out of respect for all the years we've spent doing business together.

"How kind of you," Reed spat.

Alistair snarled, "I've already given you more time than you deserve. More than you have my brother... If those credits aren't in my account by the very first minute of Monday morning, you're both going to end up mounted on my wall. Is that understood?"

"Yeah alright," Reed said forcefully as he cut the transmission.

Silence overwhelmed the cockpit. Quinn stared at him intensely. The control panels were the only source of light in the ship's bridge. The Hyena was still on the dark side of the planet, traveling along a flight path plotted by the ship's computer. Reed laid back in his chair, his head back against the rest. He stared blankly through the canopy, ignoring the cresting light from Oberon's star, Otura. It shone with an enduring glimmer, casting a fulgent amber line that followed the curvature of the planet. It tapered and faded toward the ends, mixing with the city lights that burned on the surface. A blinding brilliance that was lost on Reed. All he could see were the dotted stars of other systems lightyears away. Pinholes against the zero-sum of space. Memories flashed in front of him. All the things that happened when he was out there – beyond the Esqroli skyline. A ringing slithered into his ears that grew louder in the silence. The more he remembered the louder it grew. Its wavelength stretched longer and longer until it became a single, unbearable tone that could be only broken by—"Well... what the fuck was *that?*" she asked, interrupting his thoughts.

Reed continued staring forward. The ringing had disappeared. Anger and confusion filled the void, pulling his brow low across his eyes. "Nothing," he responded coarsely, shaken from his stupor. Quinn's face contorted as she questioned him again, "*Nothing?* You go dark for two hours, then out of nowhere, you hail the ship asking for extraction in a no-fly zone because you have a mysterious tail. *Then*, you call fucking *Alistair* and start talking about a Dweller hunting party trying to claim a bounty on you. Did I miss anything?"

"Yeah, actually. You missed quite a lot." Reed tossed her the fob from Yendra's office.

“Starting with that.” Quinn stared down, turning it over in her hand. “What is this?”

“*That* is our ticket to a sixty-million credit job.”

“Sixty *million*?” her voice shot up in a kind of disgusted excitement, “Are you going to tell me what the hell is going on? Did the old man give you this? Your old boss?”

“No. Melig’s dead. My... an *old friend*, is running the Holocene. Or Chimera. Whatever the hell they’re calling it now. *She* gave it to me. But she wasn’t exactly happy to see me. Can’t say I blame her, honestly. I wasn’t too excited to see her either. She’s gotten into some deep shit with a Thestan corp, and *somehow*, got her hands on a bounty someone put out on me. She had my dossier swirling around the room like a fucking sideshow.”

Quinn caught a hole in his cover story, “Old friend? I thought this was just where you did a couple jobs back in the day.”

Reed realized she had caught his lie. “It—don’t worry about that. It’s not important. What’s important is the fact there’s a bounty on us and she had the file.”

“How did she get it?”

“I don’t know, but she was entertaining an entire group of corpo goons when I got there. An ex-military unit was running her security... all of it was weird. Said she’s being pressed by some Deidos agent.”

“You mean the one we’re flying to meet... right now,” she retorted.

Reed angrily threw the HUD switch on his console, causing his readout to go dark.

“She threw this contract in my face and used our situation as leverage. She adeptly outmaneuvered me.”

He stared through the front of the cockpit, shaking his head in disbelief for the last few hours. “But... sixty million credits will go a long way.”

Quinn shook her head and laughed, “Ha! Yeah, unless we’re too dead to collect it. Do you even know what the job is?”

Reed chewed on the tip of his thumb, contemplating. “No...” He made a fist and sat forward in his chair, leaning against the armrest. It was worn from years of pressure and friction. “...no, not yet. We’re meeting this agent at one of the orbital stations for a briefing. Some real military shit.”

Quinn stared at him, still in disbelief. “And you don’t find that... at all peculiar?”

“Of course, I find it *peculiar*, but I think that’s probably the least peculiar thing about doing a job for a shady tech corporation known to play a part in running the Thestan government.”

“You realized how stupid this is, right?”

“Those hunters nearly killed me, and there were only four of them. If there had been more of them or if they had been carrying anything other than swords and antique rifles, you’d still be in a hangar trying to hail my corpse.”

Quinn ignored the oddities of his response.

“Okay, well do you have a plan that doesn’t involve getting shitcanned at the end of this?”

“I’m going to find this room on sublevel two, see what this Deidos agent has to say, and then go from there.”

“Okay, so... *no plan* it is.”

Quinn crashed back into her chair. She closed her eyes and resigned with a long, weighty sigh. Reed felt like she was waiting for an interjection or retraction of his aforementioned plan, but he said nothing. After a few moments, she quickly jumped out of her chair and climbed up to the main flight deck.

She called out from the rear of the bridge, “Just let me know when we’re there.”

The metallic clanging of her footsteps disappeared after a moment, and Reed was left in silence for the second time. Several things crossed his mind – possibilities. Solid, unsculpted blocks waiting to find their form. He looked up again through the canopy at the endless chasm of space. He winced at the face of its expanse. The concept of innumerable stars. The unknowable borders of the universe. An all-but-silent and sedated whisper came from deep in his chest, “Right back where I started...” He chuckled at the thought. The irony of all that had happened in the last ten years. He kept everything else hidden away.

The HUD reappeared as he deactivated the autopilot and took control of the ship. He throttled up the engines and increased the flight speed by half of the previous velocity. The flight path updated, reading: *15 minutes to target*.

Molten carbon trailed from the engines, leaving a path of blue and gold lines set against the murky depths of Oberon’s clouded atmosphere. Lightning pulsed from a massive storm below, flickering like the neon signs Reed had left behind in the basement Sector 6. Everything

that surrounded him was undeniably beautiful. It all shimmered with a dark and inexplicable pulchritude he had only witnessed a handful of times. The only thing that came to mind was being caught in deep space – watching the Eagle Nebula and its cosmic pillars of creation. Few moments in his life had been worth revisiting in memory. But he could relish in this particular beauty above the sullen skies of Oberon. Death hung heavily on his mind. No beauty or fondness of memory could help him escape it.

CHAPTER THREE

Oberon Station 2 hung like a dark crystal in the distance – backlit by the white light of Otura. Its vertical structure was approximately two kilometers in length and was capped with a massive disc containing dozens of inhabited levels. A small city’s worth of infrastructure buoyed to the planet’s upper atmosphere in a constant state of freefall. Someone could stay there for years without wanting the opulence of Oberon’s surface. Residential sectors, commercial trade services, hydroponic facilities, everything needed to support or entertain life was an elevator ride away. Orbital stations were an integral part of the Esqroli, Isolan, and Cathan economic systems – the three gargantuan city-shaped scars carved into the planet. Originally, they were constructed as terminals for the system’s hyper-light gates to track and register vessels traveling throughout the Federation’s wormhole matrix. With time, Oberon became the operational center of the interior, making it the most affluent system in the entire United Galactic Federation. A second orbital station, identical to the first, was built to accommodate the additional traffic. They both

featured four large hangar bays that protruded from the main column situated beneath the main civilian decks. Each bay was capable of holding vessels up to class-four commercial transport with the occasional military vessel in need of refueling. Anything larger than class four was required to dock in the cruiser yards located on the planet's surface. The Hyena was a modified class-two vessel. Its twenty-meter wingspan would be dwarfed in comparison to other multi-crew ships. Reed could see dozens of vessels hung in unorganized holding patterns, waiting for the station's flight control to grant them docking permissions.

Against the brilliant daytime colors of Oberon's striated atmosphere, the metal shapes seemed more like digital aberrations in the periphery of a malfunctioning holoprojector than floating cities swirling above the atmosphere. Their mass was laughably incomparable to such a celestial body. As large as the orbital stations were, and as difficult as they had been to construct, Oberon was a giant. It was one of the largest planets in the Core by far, with The Hyena approaching the lineup of much larger vessels. All of the ship's forward-facing stabilizers and thrusters fired to slow their approach. The silent dance of ignited fuel licked into the vacuum of space. Reed flipped several switches on his control board. The holographic HUD in front of him detailed all of the Hyena's active and passive systems. Levels and numbers across all of the digital gauges rose and fell in conjunction with Reed's movements on the joystick and throttle. Once the ship had become mostly static, Reed selected the station's communication channel and hailed the control tower, asking for a docking assignment.

"Tower, this is vessel QX992 – callsign: Hyena – requesting docking assignment. Anything open for class two? Copy."

The gargle of the traffic controller came through the cockpit's communicator, "Hyena, this is Station Two Control. We read you. Hold for status." The voice paused, looking through their log for open docking station.

"You're in luck, Hyena. All other vessels in holding are class three and above. I have an open station in hangar three. Sending through your permission now. You're clear to dock at your leisure."

"Copy that, control. Docking now."

Reed completed his sequence of flipping switches and reactivating systems until the ship was ready to assume low velocity towards hangar three. The ship floated between the massive and commercial transports. Their hulls were marked with brand names and the insignias of

subsidiaries owned by the galaxy's largest corporations. Reed chuckled to himself at the thought that he had witnessed one of their back-alley deals not two hours ago.

He shook his head and activated the loudspeakers mounted in all the ship's compartments. "We're docking. Get back up here," he demanded.

Moments later the hatch to the cockpit opened. Quinn's gait and expression carried a morose quality as she slunk back to her seat. She hovered there, just to the right of Reed. Large ships continued to slowly pass in and out of view from the canopy's irregular shape. She slouched, making her disapproval known to those in the cockpit and even those who were not. Reed did not have to look at her to sense her revulsion.

"Done pouting?"

He asked her in a mostly rhetorical fashion, trying to push past her emotions and get to the issue at hand.

Her response was terse and gruff. "No."

"After what happened in Esqrol I think it's best if you stayed back with the ship."

"Again?"

"Yes, again. We don't know who we're dealing with. It's best if you stay out of sight."

"You could use me in there."

"It's just a client meeting, Quinn. If anything you'll make it worse."

She crossed her arms and let out a languishing moan, resentful of his argument. Unaware of his desire to protect her.

She vullied, "Ugghh... the thing on Cistero wasn't my fault and you know it."

"Yes it was," he said, on the heels of her last word. "You cost me two days and you spent the night in a backwater jail... You aren't coming to a briefing with a corpo spook. Not with 60 mil on the line."

Quinn shot up from her slump and leaned over the armrest, pointing at Reed insistently.

"That guy was a slug, and *you* were half the reason I ended up in that cell."

Reed shook his head dismissively. "Just... stay with the ship. While I'm gone, see what you can dig up on the Phest Cartel. Something feels off. She's pushing something for one of the corporations, and I'd like to know what it is before we stick our necks out on this."

Quinn had a thought, a fleeting inclination. She remembered the question she had asked earlier.

“What is she to you? You dodged the question earlier and you never get this hung up on something.”

The pangs of his past rose in his throat at the sound of those words. More and more he was coming to terms with the truth. He would have to face it sooner rather than later. It took force, but against his body’s best wishes, he got the words across his tongue.

“I–agh... I grew up here.”

Forfeiting information felt unfamiliar with the girl. They had not traded things of this nature outside of their shared history. Quinn had been endlessly curious about Reed’s past, but knew his silence on the matter was a foregone conclusion. Surprise gripped her body. She listened intently for what little she might gather from the moment of vulnerability.

“Yendra and I, we were... like siblings, in a way. We grew up together. Kind of, anyway.”

Realization warped Quinn’s expression, she looked forward and announced her conclusion to the vista of trade vessels and space stations. “THAT’S why you didn’t want to come here? Holy shit. Uncle Porter always said you were from the Core, but I didn’t put the two together.” The moment hung on her aghast expression. “So, wait... you used to work for one of the Esqroli Cartels? What the hell! What else are you hiding around here?”

Reed immediately regretted forfeiting the information, but if he didn’t satiate her curiosity now she would be asking him questions until Otura became a black hole.

“Yes, I used to work for a cartel. No, that’s not the reason I didn’t want to come back.”

“Then what is?” She asked in a tone that requested a simple answer. One that was meant to be obvious and without complication. The comprehension of a life before he knew her was unfathomable.

Reed barked at her, spurning her question. “It’s complicated.” He had gone further into the rabbit hole than he wanted. It was time to focus on the task at hand.

He pushed forward on the throttle and increased their velocity through the several dozen ships plotted around the station. The floating city spun slowly and quietly in the lively scenery that graced the morning. The Hyena drifted up towards the hangar deck, engaging its port-side stabilizing thrusters to match the station’s subtle rotation. Reed and Quinn stared through the canopy and beheld the size of hangar three. Its maw hung open, ready to swallow all that requested shelter from the chill of space. A bright blue atmospheric barrier obscured their line of

sight into the gargantuan shipyard. Its surface warbled and moved like living glass, holding back the ever-present death that loomed just beyond its border. Reed became lost in its iridescent movements. He thought of Yendra and Melig. He considered all that had led him here with Quinn. Fear coiled around his neck. He could feel the pressure on his skin as the shrill ringing in his ears started to crescendo. Pins and needles crawled across the surface of his skin as his past and future colluded with one another, trading secrets without his permission. The liquid energy before his eyes warped and moved like a sentient organism, desperate to communicate with him – warn him about what lie ahead. He watched a menagerie of blue faces and worlds collect and fall apart. The high-pitched sound that lived in his head rose alongside the intensity of his visions. Quinn sat next to him, wholly unaware of the sullen universe that occupied everything behind his eyes. A confrontation raged in the shadows of his mind – memory and prediction coagulating into a cancerous and oppressive dread. The blue entity inside the barrier stared at him without reprieve. He spiraled on and on into the depths of his unconscious until heard a call that was foreign to the rest of the experience – a gentle beeping interrupted his thoughts.

It continued in a steady rhythm, *beep... beep... beep...*

“Hey! ... We just gonna sit here or...?” Quinn snapped, confused by Reed’s stupor.

The targeting computer was still beeping, notifying him that they had matched rotation. Reed cleared his throat, embarrassed and confused by the last few moments.

She stared at him as concern commandeered her voice, “...You alright?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.” His brusque response only reinforced her suspicion that something was, in fact, wrong. She decided to leave it for later.

Reed gently pushed forward on the throttled and moved towards the hangar entrance. A static seal formed around the hull of the ship as it passed through the hazy atmospheric barrier. Reed winced as is wrapped around the cockpit, still reeling from his experience. Beyond the blue pane was a relentless steel chasm. 20 levels of docking stations filled to the bulkheads with a hundred or more ships. Mostly class-two and class-three vessels, with a handful of single-crew ships.

Now that they were inside the rattle of the engines ceased. Only stabilizers were permitted for movement within the hangar bays. The Hyena floated past dozens of docking stations until it arrived at their docking assignment. Open space with sizeable platforms on either side. Mounted beneath either platform were two large pneumatic arms that were fitted with

docking clamps. They attached to one of several small concave spaces along the ship's hull that featured reinforced bars designed to connect with the docking arms and stabilize the ship. This mechanism was developed during the Colonial Expansion and had remained an industry standard ever since.

Reed turned the ship around – so that the cargo door was facing the wall of the hangar – and pushed the ship backward, carefully maneuvering into position so the docking arms could make contact. After a moment a dull *clunk* sounded through the bones of the ship, signaling that the arms were secure. Reed entered another sequence of switches and buttons, powering down all of the ship's primary systems. The HUD that floated above the flight control panel fell silent – all of its levels and readouts went dark. Both of the pilot seats simultaneously retreated from their control panels and lowered toward the floor.

“Alright, let's make this a quick visit,” Reed said, jumping out of his seat. “Complete the rest of the docking sequence and I'll meet you on the platform.”

Quinn grumbled under her breath slumping out of the copilot position, “Yeeaaah, alright.”

Reed trotted out of the cockpit, through the living quarters, and into the crew lockup. The overhead fluorescents did little to illuminate the space on auxiliary power. He opened the sliding door to the compartment that stored his helmet. He took a moment to look at it silently slumbering there in the dark. Its curves and depressions looked menacing. Don't really need the armor, he thought. But I still need the mask.

After what had occurred, he was thankful to be hiding behind such a face. His luck had run out. And he was starting to feel it. He reached into the locker and removed his head-shaped body armor. He spun it round in his hands until it was properly oriented with his body, then loosened the face plates. It slid onto his skull as easy as it ever had. He initialized the visor and secured the face plates, but did not bother activating the pneumatic seals or the scrubbers for the air supply. He wouldn't need them here. He reached back into the locker and relocated the sidearm to his holster, clasping it down. The sound of the airlock cycling hissed through the ship.

Time to go.

Quinn was waiting on the platform just as he had asked. She was looking up and around, marveled by this feat of engineering. There were only a handful of stations larger than this one, and she had hardly ever seen something so large in the flesh.

She laughed, a childlike smile on her face, “HA... this place is *huge*.”

Reed stomped past her, unimpressed by this station. The shine had worn off a lifetime ago. Without his atmospheric scrubbers, the subtle bite of synthetic ozone stung his sinus cavities. Recycled air had always been too stale for him. Life support’s gone to shit, he thought. When he reached the end of the platform he looked back and forth down the terminal hallway. Dozens of people walked in front of him. Locals and off-worlders vomit and going . He turned to say something to Quinn but she wasn’t there. He looked back and she was still examining the intricacies of Oberon’s floating city.

Reed called out, “Quinn!”

She began to slowly back in Reed’s direction until a bright blue Harukawa Phantom floated through the open space just beyond their station. Her eyes widened at the sight of it.

“Ho.ly. SHIT.” She could not contain her excitement. “Have you ever seen one of these in person?” Her juvenile wonder persisted.

In that moment Reed couldn’t help but be amused by her duality. She was only twenty-years old, but had seen little of the civilized worlds with her own eyes. It had mostly escaped him these last few months that she was seeing many things for the first time. If someone had met her in this moment they would never know how capable she was in combat. Reed had always considered her, despite her inclination to say almost everything she shouldn’t, a remarkable operator. Her uncle Porter had trained her from the time she was a pup to ensure was more than deadly by the age of 16. The particular style of fighting they had specialized in was a hallmark of hired guns from Sula. It combined techniques from martial arts with forms of CQC that were popular among Old-Earth militaries. Heavy, forceful movements integrated with firearms. She was still sloppy and reckless, but in a few years, Reed knew she would be one of the most dangerous people in the known galaxy. If they lived that long, he thought. He watched her dispatch an entire unit of ex-military guards on an op a few weeks before they traveled to The Core. It was the first time he had seen her shut her mouth and truly put her skills to use. If he had met her around the same age she would have terrified him. In a way, she reminded him of Yendra.

Quinn continued to stare, mystified by the iridescent colors that washed across the sheened hull of the fastest ship ever cleared for civilian use. Reed, too, was impressed by its form. The wings were tucked forward in a docking position. When extended, its wings gave it an incredible amount of maneuverability in most kinds of atmospheric conditions. It was made of a recently-declassified compound that was stronger and lighter than carbon fiber paneling. This also made it incredibly agile in space. Harukawa had been acquired some years ago and was now a subsidiary of Kelto Enterprises – a corporation with a long history of producing vessels for military contracts. This particular ship, in its original form, was mounted with two class-four, forward-facing energy canons. A deadly machine even while carrying all that hardware. It could chase down almost anything for search and destroy. Before civilian clearance, the Federation had reserved them for high-value flights and often kept them on standby at classified black sites. Without its military trim, it was a lightweight luxury capable of even more blistering agility and speed. Reed had seen recordings of the ship hitting top speeds in atmosphere – consistently around 3,500 kph. Certainly impressive for a hybrid civilian vessel. Most industrial ships were made primarily for traveling in either space or in atmosphere. Having the functionality to maneuver in both environments was costly to acquire and maintain. That’s why there were very few pilots that operated ships outside of industrial or private employment. It’s also what gave Reed so much value as a courier. The government and private corporations had placed so many fees and tariffs on privately transported goods, most couldn’t afford the operational costs of flying goods or personnel. Smugglers found less than legal ways around these kinds of particular complications – often replicating codes and pre-paid licenses to make it appear their vessels were in good standing with the Ministry of Trade and Transportation.

Reed shook himself from further considering the ship’s prowess and called out to Quinn a second time, “Quinn! Let’s go...”

The predator slither from view as it continued on its trajectory toward the hangar’s exit. Quinn hopped backward, then turned and jogged across the platform until she had joined Reed near the terminal hallway.

“Can you believe that? Never thought I would see some shit like that with my own eyes.”

“Should see ‘em when they’re carrying three-barrelled scorpions. Not so cool then.”

“Pshh... says you.”

The pair joined the foot traffic on their way to find a DockMaster kiosk. Reed scanned either side of the path ahead of them for its trademark four-wings logo – another of Kelto’s consumer-facing products. He saw it just a little further in the distance. The bright gold and red stuck out against the drab grays and blue of the hangar bay. Several kiosks lined the far wall. Reed and Quinn stepped in front of the only machine that had been left unoccupied. Reed woke the interface and punched in their docking assignment: Level 10 – Platform 12. He submitted the information and a text container appeared on the screen reading: *500 UGFC*.

“500 credits? Where’s my dinner and a movie...” Reed scoffed, aghast at the price of their hangar fees. Quinn leaned forward, almost pushing him out of the way.

“What’s the—oh...” she fell silent at the sight of the number.

A man at the next kiosk heard the commotion and laughed quietly to himself. He was dressed in a monochromatic uniform – several shades of green. The garment was a single piece that closed asymmetrically across the chest. Likely local transport pilot, Reed thought. His appearance was unkempt. His hair laid in an irregular fashion and his face looked sunken – like he stood on the edge of malnourishment.

The man casually looked over at Reed and Quinn and playfully jested at their shock. “Welcome to The Core, mate,” he said, turning back to look at his screen. He gave a half smile and shook his head, “Hangars are privately controlled by Kelto nowadays. They took over a few years back. Costs an arm and a leg just to stop ‘n take a piss.” His Esqroli accent rang through.

Reed looked over, surprisingly receptive to the input. “They’re running the stations, now? Hard to believe the MTT would give up such important real estate.”

The man scoffed, “Ha! A few billion credits will get you just about anything. No, they just lease out the hangars. MTT has been in over their heads in other systems. Last thing they give a shit about is running this place. Hell, they even replaced the guy upstairs with some suit from Sempra.”

Negative space quickly formed in their brief conversation. Reed waited, painfully for the man to follow his need for casual conversation.

“Say, that’s a nice suit ya got there. Saw sumfin like ‘at back during the war. It’s what, military issue? You fight?” A bright mien shone through his tired and dirty exterior. Quinn found it charming. It had been quite a while since either of them had a pleasant conversation. Their

predicament had been relentlessly hanging over them ever since they flew out of Confederate Space. Reed, on the other hand, was suspicious – as he was of everyone.

Reed was hesitant, but answered truthfully, desperate for the end of this exchange, “Uh... no. A little before my time,” he said as he completed the payment and stepped away from the machine. Suddenly, a thought of the man he had left on the platform back on Esqrol popped into his head. He couldn’t explain why, but decided to turn back to the man and say, “Thanks for the intel.”

The man let out a sarcastic chuckle, “Heh, no problem, friend. Enjoy your stay in the Eye of Otura.”

Reed and Quinn began walking back to the ship. They had made exactly 15 paces when heard a loud crash behind them. The pair turned, ready for a fight. Reed’s hand was already gripping his pistol. But instead of assailant they, they saw the man they had been speaking to pushed up against his kiosk by two large, equally gruff looking men. Reed thought they looked like low-level muscle. Probably working for one of the gangs on that operated on the orbital stations.

“Ello, Jase. Been awhile,” one of them said. A thicker accent than the last. They both the men held the man called Jase by the collar and pinned his arms against the machine.

The other gangster taunted him, “We heard you was runnin’ the tables again up on level four. How about that... what do you think the boss’ll think ah that, Aryn?”

“I don’t think he’ll take to kindly, if I’m honest,” he confirmed.

Jase attempted to deescalate, “Lads, look... I’ll have your money by the end of the we—”

“Nahhh, that ain’t no good,” one of the interrupted, “boss said to get the 5,000 or be’it out of ya. Considerin’ you ain’t got no money...” He forced a fist into the man’s stomach, knocking the breath out of him. “C’mon, son. Let’s see how much ya’ve got in ya.”

They picked the man up and began to drag him down the hall. Reed and Quinn had watched the exchange. He knew gambling debts to be a common trapping of the station. Many would come up from one of the cities to try their chances at one of the tables of level four. They were rigged, of course. Reed knew many of the gang leaders, and had never considered them to be very bright. They were a lot like Melig, he thought, in the way they never took “no” for an answer. This man owed one of them money, and it likely wasn’t his first run in with a gang like this. Judging by the looks of these two gruffs, Reed suspected there wouldn’t be a next time.

He turned back towards the ship. “C’mon, let’s g—” he said to Quinn, noticing she had disappeared. Reed wheeled around. She had already began her dash towards the three men.

Fucking hell. Not now!

Quinn called out, “Hey, shit heads! Why don’t you fuck off back to whatever incestuous garbage can you crawled out of.”

The pair turned to investigate the taunt. They shared a look. Aryn, the larger of the two, approached Quinn with a slow, menacing gait.

“Ha... look at you, li’l mouse. I’d love to take *you* for a spin, but as you can see, we’re a wee bit busy. So, why don’t you FUCK OFF,” he said percussively.

Reed approached, grabbing Quinn by the shoulder. “Quinn, what the fuck are you doing?” He cursed at her in a hushed tone. It buzzed and crackled softly through his communicator.

“Best listen to daddy,” he said looking at Reed, “don’t want you gettin’urt.” His eyes darted back towards Quinn, his index and middle fingers pointed at her chest.

Quinn looked down at the man’s fingers. They were all but touching her. In a split second, she had made the decision to break them. She gripped him by the fingers and the wrist and violently hyperextended the fingers – snapping them both near their base. The large man wailed in pain, grabbing his hand and doubling over. His counterpart left his position at the kiosk and moved to confront Reed and Quinn. Reed pushed past her and threw her backwards, blocking her aggressor. His pistol was drawn and ready – it pointed forward, resting at his hip. The man noticed the gun and stopped short. His face was only centimeters from Reed’s helmet. Fury swelled in his eyes. Like most of the thugs on the station, he looked like a proper brawler. They were expendable, and they were paid to do rough, bloody work.

“Wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Reed warned. His pistol calmly whirred between them.

He bit his lip, trying to quell his adrenaline for conversation. He looked over Reed’s shoulder at Quinn, then down at the weapon pointed at his abdomen.

The gangster snickered angrily, “Ha, that right? Lucky ya’ve got that, mate.”

“I’m sure,” Reed quipped, his words dripping with sarcasm. “We don’t want any trouble. Not from you *or* your boss.”

Reed carefully reached toward the back of his utility belt and into one of the larger pockets. It returned with four pieces of Kaarj silver resting in his palm. Reed flung the silver

pieces toward the other man who was still nursing his broken fingers. The silver clattered to the ground near his feet.

“That’s pure Kaarj silver. It’ll get you more than a few rounds at the nearest watering hole. Go about your business and we’ll go about ours.”

The man hawked the snot and phlegm in his throat and spat onto the ground. He gave Reed a dismissive grunt and turned back toward his companion. Reed took several paces backward until he saw both men turn back toward their mark. He holstered his weapon as one of them channeled his anger into a single right hook that broke the smaller man’s jaw.

Reed pushed Quinn back in the direction of the ship. “Walk,” he said forcefully, following closely behind her. Once they had made their way back to where the Hyena was docked, Reed pushed Quinn onto the boarding platform.

He yelled through his communicator, “What the FUCK is wrong with you? What do I *always* tell you?”

Quinn rolled her eyes and let out a heavy sigh, visibly exacerbated like a child being scolded by their parents. He repeated his question.

“*What* do I always tell you?”

“Never get involved,” Quinn said.

“Right, never fucking get involved. We have enough to worry about right now without you picking another fight.” Reed angrily paced back and forth across the platform.

“Porter would’ve been right there with me,” she chided.

He stopped and whipped to face her. “And he’s fucking dead, isn’t he?”

“Fuck you, Reed.” Quinn’s face buckled as his eyes demanded tears.

“Yeah, fuck me,” he said under his breath. He shook his head, looking at his feet.

“Get back on the ship,” he ordered. “I’ll hail the ship’s com when I’m finished.”

Quinn gave him a disgusted look before she turned and stormed back toward the Hyena’s airlock. She surrendered to the tears that welled in her eyes as they parted ways. Reed was unshaken by her emotions. Instead, he was focused on the importance of his next conversation, and all that it might hold. All the danger and mystery.

CHAPTER 4

Reed found himself on another service elevator, falling towards the station's handful of sublevels. These dark, lesser-seen areas held the station's vital systems – an endless catalog of complicated machinery. Advanced tech and engineering that kept this gargantuan marvel floating above Oberon's surface. It was devoid of the foot traffic that plagued the main atrium. It was quiet. Its peace was only disturbed by skeleton crews of operational staff that managed and patrolled these corridors. It was the perfect place to headquarter the kind of surveillance op Yendra had alluded to. He took inventory of their conversation.

Yendra said they came unannounced. Bypassed all of her security. Which is odd, considering her security detail and the tech in her office. If she's trading with senators and Sempra suits, surely she was expecting something to happen eventually. She's too smart to be so caught off guard. Either this is a seasoned operator or Yendra's full of shit. Both could be true. Best to err on the side of caution, though. Everyone is a threat right now, and if Yendra is using me, I need to stay on my toes. A lot of things still just don't add up.

The elevator doors opened on sublevel four, per his instructions. He was looking for compartment 56 somewhere in the maze of service corridors. Grated floor panels hovered over a subfloor lined with cables and piping. These footpaths were contained with hexagon-shaped metal tubes that snaked throughout this part of the station. The walls and guardrails were dingy, some areas were littered with spare parts and storage crates that had been carelessly discarded. Reed's path was lit only by small, rectangular auxiliary lights placed every meter or so along the floor, walls, and ceiling. They all glowed with a dull orange that was outlined by a subtle haze of yellow and white light. The visor brought up Reed's visibility by 50%, aiding in his investigation. He slowly searched the narrow spaces for the appropriate combination of numbers posted just to the side of each door frame. Eventually he came a but the rooms were fter his fourth turn, at the end of a long corridor, he found room 56 on what he concluded was the outermost compartment of the station. He tapped on the faceplate of the door terminal to wake it up. The interface staggered, the image struggling to sustain itself; the door's computer could fully initialize. The room number was accompanied by other designations specific to this level and the departments assigned to look after it. A square text container at the bottom right-hand corner read "open." Reed forced his thumb into the square and took a step back. The circular lock at the center of the door gave a loud *clunk* then rotated 45 degrees to the right. It separated at the center and both sides retreated into the wall at somewhat sluggish pace.

The dark room glowed with a fuzzy black complexion. Reed's figure interrupted the beam of light that shot through the doorway. He switched the mode on his visor and scanned the room, looking for something – anything. But there were no readings of any kind. Just a dead, cluttered storage locker full of, ironically, spare parts for life support systems. Reed stepped back to the door's interface to double-check the number posted: S4-56. He looked down at the read-out on the fob: S4-56.

"Well. Guess this is the place," Reed mumbled. "Would've thought Deidos could afford a bigger storage closet."

He stepped back into the room and onto a pressure sensitive trigger concealed beneath the floor. It had activated something. He could sense some kind of mechanism initializing. In the far corner, he noticed a faint and hazy glow. It followed a pattern that was incongruous with the rest of the gemoetry in the room. The shape spoke a different language that the rest of the station. He switched visor modes again. The light coming through the seam in the wall was ultraviolet.

There you are.

These types of mark was often how information was traded on high-value jobs. Typically these clients was experienced in contracting talent off the books. Reed knew that meant this agent, whoever they were, was at least familiar with the tools of the trade.

Reed crossed the room to examine the light source. Through his visor, Reed traced the thin, amethyst-colored line that ran along the wall.

A hidden door, but how to open it? There has to be an access point around here somewhere. Hmmm... Why can't things ever just be straightforward with these assholes? Why wouldn't they—the key...

He pulled the fob Yendra had given him from his belt and turned it over in his hand. An ultraviolet mark glimmered from its surface.

That wasn't there before.

It formed the shape of the Deidos crest. A crude drawing of an eye set in a human hand. Reed whispered aloud inside his helmet, “Hm... Let's see what you can do.”

Just to the left of the ultraviolet line was a debossed shape cut into the wall – the same shape as the fob. Reed ran his fingers along its depression and notice a smoother material at its crest. *Pretty smart.* He matched the oval shape of the fob to the wall's matching depression. Another ultraviolet light activated from inside the depression. The seam following the purple light shifted further out of the wall and began to creep open. Another dark and swollen space lay beyond it.

Reed stepped through the opening into another room. His visor couldn't provide much of a reading, but it felt smaller than the storage room behind him. The floor and the walls were different. They appeared glossy in the dark. The ultraviolet subtly bounced from their surface. *This is new construction,* he thought. Reed had spent years running cargo through Oberon orbital stations just like this one, but the only level with materials like this were high-end traveler suites on the civilian decks. Sub-levels were grimy, cavernous, and not well-traveled. Which is what made them perfect storage areas for cargo caches. Yendra probably still used them. For what, exactly, Reed couldn't say.

The door slid shut behind him. “Perfect,” he mumbled to himself. Fully resigned to the ridiculous course this night had taken.

A bright white light suddenly shot from every panel in the tiny room. The walls, floor, and ceiling all thrummed with a loud sound. Reed's hand instinctively gripped the handle of his sidearm, and the other shot up to shield his face. Before he could withdraw it from the holster, the noise fell silent. He released his pistol and further examined the room. It was dingier than expected. *Definitely not new*, he noticed, *but not part of the original station plans*. The light panels were thin, rectangular shapes centered in each square that didn't feature a door. All the seams in the room were scratched and discolored – almost like they had been carelessly taken apart and relocated. The asymmetrical seam of the next door in front of him separated. It revealed a corridor that was three meters tall, three meters across, and ten or fifteen meters long. Near the wall on the other side was, what appeared to be, a small table by a control panel. Reed took a hesitant step forward. A set of stairs led down into the passageway. He slowly planted his heel on the first step. The panels of this corridor weren't as corroded, but from what he could tell, they were the same. Six doors lined the walls of the corridor, three on either side. The nature of his invitation was compounded by the strange series of events that had taken place over the last several hours. Every ounce of intuitive reasoning suggested something was wrong. He'd seen something like it before and sincerely hoped this one was different.

He took a step forward, his boot rattled against the metal stair. It made a loud and tinny sound. Several more steps revealed these doors were holding cells. Translucent, hexagonal cutouts separated the honeycomb cells from the passageway. No beds or furniture. He continued forward examining the polished condition of the space around him. Every successful placement eased his suspicion, replacing it with cautious relief. He had made it half the length to the next door.

Slow and easy, maybe this is just—his heel made contact with the next panel and the entire space switched to a blinding, scarlet red. The thrumming sound from the previous room returned, louder this time. Reed's pistol was free and primed, ready to fire. A sharp pain began to dig its way into his ears, the sensation started to slowly expand in his ear canal. The helmet's audio receivers couldn't filter it out.

Shit. Ultrasonics...

Reed tried to maintain his composure, but the sound grew more intense. It got louder and louder until he could no longer stand the pain. It was a foreign sensation that leached into his brain. Something about its wavelength reached inside him... it joined hands with another

sensation – a hollow sound that moved silently in the buried parts of his mind. The shrill frequency continued to rain down on him from sonic dishes hidden in the ceiling. Both hands jumped the sides of his helmet – squeezing – desperately trying to suppress the sound coming through the audio ports. He needed to stop that sound. It was worse than the thrumming. It grew louder with every second until Reed collapsed onto his knees. Every muscle in his body flexed and burned, instinctively attempting to draw inward to protect itself from the dark harmony bellowing between his ears. Bile crept into his throat and burned like a hellish curse in his chest. He began to moan involuntarily. Air left his lungs, but could not enter. His bones and muscles entered a state of animated rigor mortis. It lengthened and spread, growing into a guttural scream that felt like it came from anywhere but inside of his body. Terror and anguish flooded his mind in an unholy ritual of suffering. The Wruteh hunter's words rang in his ears without explanation.

R'jote don queda.

R'jote don queda.

R'jote don queda.

R'jote don queda.

Suddenly, the thrumming ceased. Reed clawed at his throat, gasping for air in its absence. He retched and coughed as the shape of his chest cavorted and warped. against the flurried movement of his diaphragm. A word attempted to croak from the dry and irritated recesses of his airway. Noises heaved and spat from the confines of his helmet. A modulated voice commandeered a loudspeaker mounted on the far wall. It sounded dark and inhuman.

It warbled in a dual octave, "Please stand." Reed kept his position on the floor, unable to comply.

It sounded again, "Please *attempt* to stand, Mr. Reed."

He coughed and gagged as he rose to his feet. He stood uneasy and off balance. Disorientation had left him completely vulnerable. An inflammatory remark coiled on his tongue, but he refrained from sending it through his comm.

"Very good." Its fuzzy distortion grated Reed's frayed nerves. "Now, please remove your helmet and gun belt and place them on the table by the door."

His hands had formed carbon-weave fists. If he didn't comply, they would activate the ultrasonics again. But without his helmet, they would surely rupture his eardrums. Against his

better judgment, he approached the table at the end of the corridor. The faceplate separated and slid open. His hands grip the shape, shaking. He dropped it onto the table and steadied himself against its side – pulling his pistol from the holster and placing it next to his helmet.

As his hand left contact with the weapon, the heavy, circular door separated into odd and symmetrical shapes, then slowly retreated into the wall. Beyond the threshold was a woman dressed in dark clothes. She stood with her back to the door, arranging objects on a table located at the center of the room. Stale energy hung in the air.

She turned and addressed him. “Elias Reed, I presume,” she said. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance. You can call me ‘K.’”

She looked exactly like the stereotypical image of a corporate spook. Just like every Deidos suit Reed could ever remember seeing. A solid gray pencil dress with no distinguishing mark or pattern was pulled tightly against her figure. Her hair was coiled into a neat bun at the back of her head. She was attractive in a way that Reed found almost synthetic. A perfectly curated appearance. Reed was still too shaken to be overly contemptuous of her attire. He attempted to pull focus as he stumbled through the door. A deep breath pulled him into a normal, upright position. As he slowly regained his composure, the woman crossed the room to where Reed was standing. She held out her hand to greet him. Her corporate appearance and pleasant demeanor was meant to make him feel at ease. It did not.

Reed’s brow slowly furrowed into a trench of flesh. Considering the nature of his welcome, he did not shake her hand. So, it hung there, trapped in an awkward moment. They tested one another with this stalemate of pleasantries. She quickly retracted her hand, clasping it around the other at her stomach. A curt and fleeting smile subtly curled across her face. It unknowingly portrayed her frustration. Reed, however, failed to properly notice her displeasure. His eyes were swimming over the surfaces in the room. He was trying to evaluate what exactly he had gotten himself into, and what kind of contract necessitated meeting in person. Deep within the bowels of an orbital station. Unlike Yendra’s ornate and fanciful office, this room barely qualified as a base of operations. It presented with no decoration. It was drab and industrial. Its personality felt cold with unclear intentions. A lone console at the center of the room was accompanied by sparse, minimalist furniture. Various lockers and benches lined the walls. Several cargo crates – marked with irregular splotches of yellow paint – were piled on top of one another in the far corner of the room. *Ration caches*, Reed thought.

They've been holed up here for a while, or they're planning to be... Curious. I would've expected a larger team, but then again, spooks are cocky bastards.

He continued to look around. Remnants of a security team's locker room were visible along the wall. Most of the lockers and benches had been removed, but the scars they left in the bulkhead remained. A small porthole looked out over Esqrol's marbled shades of blue and gray.

Looks a lot like an old sub-level security terminal. But it doesn't match the other two rooms or explain all that shit outside. They probably kept VIP detainees here during transit.

Reed's eyes settled on the woman. "Heard you need a courier."

"Just so. We'll get to your briefing momentarily."

Reed continued to probe his new employer, "You didn't exactly make it easy to find this place." He did not mention what had occurred just moments ago.

"Yes. Well... we can never be too careful. Especially these days. And as for our little security measure, let's just say we needed you to understand the gravity of this assignment." He glared at her with an indomitable expression. Reed could tell she sensed his irritation. She tried to de-escalate. "I needed to test your determination. This assignment requires a certain... resolve."

"You know what they say about patience... what's so special about this job that you need to blast me with nonlethals?" Reed traveled further into the room with the caution of someone who had just been thoroughly incapacitated by Deidos ultrasonics.

The agent ignored his question in favor of her own, "How long have you worked for Radda?"

"She's not my employer," Reed grunted from pain. Vestigial ringing still sounded in his ears. "Just... an old friend. Thought I might be interested."

She gave a knowing smile. The species of expression that crawls into the mind and whispers dreadful things. It unsettled Reed in a way he could not explain.

"Could I interest you in a drink?" she asked, gesturing toward the bar on the wall.

"Rather stick to business, if that's alright."

She called out to the curious man standing by the doorway, "Would you mind, dear?"

He left his position at the door and crossed the room. His gait was more akin to floating, something about his presence felt unnatural. It pulled Reed's teeth together and clenched his jaw. The man arrived at another control panel. A finger met the glossy interface and stole all the light

from the room. A brilliant cyan blue emanated from the panels of the room's center console. It burned hot against the newborn darkness. Reed and the agent were soaked in the monochrome glow. He stared at her agent's sharp, angular features. She looked menacing in this manner of light. Reed looked back over his shoulder. The unnerving man had disappeared. *Don't like that.*

“An interesting bunch, the Phest Cartel. How exactly did you become connected?”

Reed winced at the question. It grated him like it had tapped on an open wound.

“Used to run jobs for them...” he pressed her to move on “It'd be nice to discuss why I came all the way to get blasted with ultrasonics in the hallway.”

“Very well. I represent the Deidos corporation.” She paused to pour a dark liquid from an oddly shaped decanter. It slowly filled a short, ornate container. From where Reed sat it seemed to be made of hand-blown glass – something rarely seen in a core system. Prisms were cut into the shape along its circumference. The agent indelicately snatched it from the bar cart and pulled it to her mouth – taking a generous sip.

She swallowed and continued her introduction, “My superiors have a rather urgent and delicate matter that needs the attention of an operator like yourself.”

“So delicate you needed to brief me in person...”

“That's exactly right, Mr. Reed. I'm sure that by now, you've heard of ongoing, shall we say, *disagreements* between our government and the Federation?”

Ah... fuck.

“Hard to miss,” he said tersely. “Thesta hasn't exactly been subtle. Goading the Federation like that tends to make headlines and upset people in the senate. Not to mention other corporations who depend on those resources from the mining colonies.”

“I can see how someone like yourself might interpret it that way.” She dismissed his apprehension and took another generous sip of her drink.

“Before we begin, I cannot stress enough that the information I am about to disclose is incredibly sensitive and highly classified. Should you decide to share any of what I am about to tell you with a third party of any kind, I assure you – you will quickly regret that decision. A breach of contract will nullify our agreement, subsequently forfeiting your payment. And though our own teams are not able to complete this particular assignment, they are more than capable of hunting you down without consequence – or quarter. So, if you could just give verbal

confirmation that you understand the nature of this agreement and its terms, I can begin your briefing.”

Reed took a seat in one of the chairs that encircled the terminal. It was stiff, uncomfortable. His equipment didn't agree with its shape. It was just another reason to stay up and march back through that hellish hallway. Almost anything was better than sitting through this briefing on a deathtrap in the middle of what could become a second civil war between Thesta and the Fed. As much as he wanted to leave, the little information she had forfeited guaranteed he wouldn't get very far. He knew about a dangerous state secret, even if he didn't have any of the details. Thesta was planning something. Reed knew they would kill someone for so much as overhearing the wrong thing. This was textbook social engineering. His tongue rolled and contorted in his mouth so violently it was visible to the Deidos agent. He bit down hard to quiet his tongue, took a single deep breath to center himself, and resigned to his situation.

He gave her his verbal confirmation. “I get it. I talk or go rogue – you smoke me. Pretty standard procedure for my line of work.”

“I'll need you to give confirmation verbatim, please: ‘I understand.’ If you could say those words exactly.”

Reed's face scrunched, frustrated. “Yes.... *I understand.*”

“Wonderful.” She smiled. It was threatening, but veiled in more pleasantry. She placed her drink on the edge of the console and sat in the equally stylish and uncomfortable chair directly across from Reed.

“As you know, the very inception of the Federation began with its mission to map and colonize the cosmos, and ultimately, prevent our very extinction. Beginning with the operation known as *Project: Medea*. A united mission to create a galactic civilization for the betterment of mankind. In exploration, research, and all other manners of discovery.”

“I'm familiar with the story.”

“Surely... but what you *don't* know is that it birthed our devotion to the evolution of the human species. Madea showed us that so much more was possible. It revealed innumerable possibilities. Opportunities that would allow us to transcend the ancient and earthly shackles of the sapien. Develop what was needed to become the Homo Deus. Madea was our first step into a bigger purpose. It took decades... *centuries*, even. But, eventually, we found our path. For 832 years, each iteration of Deidos has labored to achieve enlightenment through evolution. So much

so, that we became reliant on our government funding. We sat by and watched the Federation do horrible things in the service of their glorious *order*.” She smiled, realizing she had said more than she meant to. “But, I digress.” She picked up the ornate glass and removed herself from the chair – standing in the bright blue light of the console.

“Over the years, Medea receive less and less funding. In the last two centuries, only a marginal number of planetary discoveries have been made compared to previous eras. Ever since the business with K’amut and the Wruteh extremists, the Federation has been less and less willing to fund exploration. As they do, things quickly devolved into political rhetoric. Most of their resources have been redirected into policing less cooperative sectors, and of course, monitoring Herstan and Confederate activity.” A tone of frustration had crept into her voice. She cleared her throat to expel it from her words. She took another generous sip – emptying the glass.

“Almost thirty years ago, however, certain parties within the Federation decided they wanted to revive Madea, but under very specific conditions. It was not to be made public in any way, and all discoveries were to remain classified. They began planning *covert* survey expeditions that would require automated vessels for prolonged, deep-space research. Officially, the objective of these surveys was to locate valuable fuel and other resources to alleviate crises arising from the overpopulation of the interior. All the paperwork would suggest these were, more or less, routine science expeditions. But, of course, this was a decoy classification. Certain individuals needed to conceal its true purpose – which was much more... interesting. At that point, the Deidos Corporation held a one-to-one partnership with Sempra for supplying the Federation DSRD with robotics and other necessary technologies. The aforementioned parties within the Federation opted to bankroll Madea to procure rare or undiscovered volatile materials. However, these actors within the walls of the Federation needed to ”

“Volatile materials? For what, fuel?”

“To weaponize them, of course. These parties within the senate didn’t want to risk another separatist movement. Herste’s insurrection cost the Federation trillions in resources and manufacturing, not to mention the funds spent on the military power their war. It simultaneously ruined the economies of numerous systems that were still under the sovereignty of the Federation. Surely you’ve read about it?” The condescension in her voice echoed throughout the room.

Reed gave a dismissive grunt and responded, “Sure, but Herste was inevitable. The Federation replaced established and trusted colonial governments with foreign leaders and thought that would fix their problems.”

“Yes, well we both know where that got them... 300 years seems to be enough time for them to forget a very important lesson.”

“And what lesson is that, exactly?”

“Strategic violence, Mr. Reed. The Federation is a squabbling hive of bureaucrats. A rebellion isn’t born overnight, it’s forged. Tempered through decades of abuse and tyranny. They, and they alone, are responsible for the secession of all the systems born from the original Agean Unity Accords – including the Confederacy. All of whom are now *much more* than rogue bands of separatists. It took several hundred years, but eventually, Herste saw what the future held. They rallied support from the systems in their sector and forced their emancipation. They leveraged the Federation’s assumption of their weaknesses to overextend their military’s resources. *Strategic violence.*”

It was obvious what she was insinuating, Reed just couldn’t comprehend how or why she was being this reckless with the truth. Was it to further entrap him? To scare him? Persuade him? He couldn’t be sure. Her boorishness only compounded the delicacy of the situation. She seemed to be juggling several agendas all at once.

“You forgot to mention the billions of credits in weapons and resources that the Confederacy supplied them. Without that, their little rebellion wouldn’t have been so successful. I don’t remember reading anything about Thesta being separatist sympathizers.”

“Not all truths are on official records, Mr. Reed. Seeds are sewn, then they grow. As with all matters of this nature, it takes time to influence the right people to act.”

Reed scoffed, “Right. Only 300 hundred years.”

She ignored him and continued her explanation of their involvement in Madea, “Deidos was secretly contracted to develop and manufacture all of the Federation’s exploration vessels – complete with modular research facilities and articulate robotics that were designed to be deployed and quickly assembled on any system that contained something the Federation deemed worthy of researching. Approximately 150 were completed and shipped. During production, affairs with the Federation started to become complicated...”

To say the least.

“...so, our engineers installed encrypted, backdoor protocols as a failsafe if we ever lost access. Our president could not ignore the implications of a covert military operation. The thought of violently subduing a peaceful or democratic protest... well, we could not abide. Due to the tensions and hostilities that followed, Sempra assumed our contract. They took control of all vessels that were still being housed in classified shipyards. We maintained close surveillance on all vessels within the fleet – active or not.”

“Did they not purge your hardware to secure their systems?”

She scoffed, “They *did try* to wipe our fingerprint. But we had certain... contingencies in place.” Another smug, overly confident grin sat on her face. Her demeanor made Reed uneasy. Everything about this meeting felt... off. Irregular. The agent’s tone and body language made it seem like she was gloating more than briefing. Still, he listened.

“Now that you have context, let’s get to your assignment...” She said, agitated by Reed’s bristled question. “Six years ago, vessel 113 – callsign: Khufu – located an anomalous phenomenon in an unexplored system – located here – approximately 120,000 AU from the nearest colonized star system.” K pointed to a pulsing dot on the star map floating above the console. “Hiding in plain sight, you might say.”

Two of her fingers slid across the console’s HUD. A solar map spun into view. She tapped on a star system floating along the map’s perimeter. Several spheres hung in the air between them. “It’s a classified no-fly zone. Four extrasolar planets revolving around an M-class celestial body. Not *so* different from the system we’re in now. The site in question is located on the moon of a Class J exoplanet: a gas giant in its primary phase – designation OS12-U317. The moon has since been named “Vago” by the science officers onsite. Preliminary scans of the moon’s surface revealed that temperatures and atmospheric conditions were promising: surface water, lush vegetation, a breathable threshold of CO₂. To our knowledge, this is the first and only discovery of a goldilocks moon in the Outer Reach. Subsequent scans gave some indication of what conditions were like on the surface, but it wasn’t until they landed that they truly understood what was there. Its indigenous flora and fauna are more evolved than anything previously thought possible on extrasolar bodies. Save K’amut, of course.”

Reed sat back in his chair. *Odd*. He narrowed his eyes and gestured toward the floating star map.

“Nothing especially interesting about that – *considering K’amut*,” he said snarkily. “So, what *else* did they find?”

“The survey drones we developed are launched from orbit in four groups of three. Each pod is tasked with gathering different data and samples for examination and relay – atmosphere, flora, fauna, and geology. These four together typically determine if a location falls within the Federation’s threshold of interest. One of the four pods, the geological drones, uncovered... *something*. A terrestrial anomaly of unknown origin. We believe this to be the source of other, seemingly related phenomena.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

K smiled again, “That, Mr. Reed, is none of your concern. All you need to worry about is your objective.”

“Okay. And what exactly *is* my objective?” Aggravation began to grow on his voice. They had been talking in what felt like circles. Aside from the history lesson, he still had no idea why he was here.

“Precisely what the data card you returned to me said: retrieval. The extraction of a senior science officer – a physicist, to be exact. Dr. Herman León. In addition to this VIP, you will be collecting relevant samples located onsite, as well as copies of all of Dr. León’s research. Based on intel from our informant, we expected the site to begin concluding its operations sometime in the next 18 months, but this event has accelerated our plans. We request data traffic from our operative more frequently than the Federation does with the base, but there is no doubt they have noticed the disruption in communications. They have reduced communications to avoid detection, but we must act before a larger force arrives.”

“What’s this cloak-and-dagger agenda? Some sort of arms race with the Federation?”

She forced out a heavy, irritated sigh, “I’m sure you of all people, Mr. Reed, are aware of the fallout caused by the *last* time the Federation tested the limits of their colonial sovereignty. Who, if you will remember, possesses the most advanced military in the history of mankind. Our war independence from the Federation cost us more than you can imagine. So, no, not an arms race. It is a preventative measure that will ensure the corporeal safety and economic stability of *everyone* within the galactic community.”

Reed found himself surprisingly convinced of her sincerity, even if only for a moment. But her jejune remarks were telling. She had clearly run a background check on him – she knew

about his childhood. Which meant she knew about everything else. Were it not for her insufferable quiddities, her charisma would have been, unpredictably, infectious. Reed wondered how long it would take for her to leverage the rest of her intel.

“Once the drones had run sufficient tests on the excavation sight and the surrounding valley, the Federation dispatched additional personnel to construct a facility that could adequately support ongoing research. For the last several years, our informant has been gathering intel and transmitting any available data to us on the region. However, several weeks ago, all scheduled communications with our contact in the facility went dark. We have attempted to hail him numerous times, but have failed to reestablish contact. Under normal circumstances, we would simply send a team to extract the assets. But, considering recent events, faster-than-light travel is being heavily monitored between here and the Outer Reach. We cannot risk further engagements with Federation forces. Not yet.”

Reed resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “What about supply vessels? Surely they’re restocking them. Why not just sneak him out on a cargo hauler? It’d be easy to get lost in a cargo manifest that big. Plenty of places to hide.”

“Our resources in the interior only go so far, I’m afraid. Resupply windows are also purposefully sporadic – typically four-to-six months apart. Sometimes shorter, sometimes longer. But as I’ve said, we don’t have that kind of time.”

“Fair enough,” Reed conceded.

“Besides, using a Federation cargo vessel would involve too much risk. Too many variables. We don’t know what materials are capable of transport. If it were a skeleton crew, your solution might be a viable option. However, military cargo haulers under that classification run with specter security teams. I don’t think you would want to bunk with them... Such an event would undermine the entire operation. Considering we have no information about the facility’s current state, it would be safer, and in our best interest, to procure any valuable assets and scrub the site. Which is why we need someone with your... shall we say, proclivity, to retrieve Dr. León’s research and then safely deliver him to me unnoticed by the Federation.”

Reed leaned forward into a thinking posture. He thought through the logistics of her proposition, and none of it felt right.

They wouldn’t send a one-man team if it wasn’t feasible. Too much riding on this. Gonna have to play a little chess.

His face rested against his clasped hands as he nervously chewed on his lip. “Okay... a secret and presumably heavily fortified research facility on the ass end of Federation space. How exactly do you suggest that I get there? I don’t imagine you’re gonna give me a hyperdrive with Deidos fingerprints all over it, and it’s probably safe to assume you don’t have access to a Federation vessel with codes that have that level of clearance.”

Her response slithered across the room in an eerily dulcet tone, “Precisely the problem we’re paying you to solve. As a professional, I would assume you have your way around the seedier part of the galaxy. I’m sure those places are full of people who can help figure out your logistical issues.”

“In my line of work, we call this kind of thing a ‘black star.’ A *coffin contract*. Plausible deniability involves tying up loose ends. So, before I hop in my ship and hurl towards what is undoubtedly a death trap on the other side of the galaxy, I want some assurances.”

The agent gave a curt grin.

“I can appreciate your apprehension, Mr. Reed, but in our experience, smaller teams are statistically more successful in covert operations such as this one. And as I’ve said numerous times already, our footprint on this must be nonexistent. The more individuals at play, the greater the risk. You will be given all the necessary tools required to succeed. We’ve been preparing for this operation for almost ten years, I can assure you we have no intention of failing. All necessary resources will be provided for you to retrieve our assets, collect your payment, and live the rest of your life knowing you help secure the safety of billions of lives. As long as you hold up your end of our little bargain, I have no intention of killing you.” She pressed another button on the console, accessing a different file. Several schematics flickered from the projector, floating above the table.

“Now... as I said, the moon is home to various species of plant life – similar to old Earth. Most of the land masses around the equator are covered in thick rainforests. Large rock formations litter a large valley in the sector of the moon where the federation base is located. They stand some 600 meters tall, mostly composed of a previously undiscovered element – Alvaldinium. Reports show that it contains certain electromagnetic properties that distort all ingoing and outgoing communications. From what we’ve managed to learn, we believe the entire valley to be an impact crater from several million years ago. The Alvaldinium vestigial of this impact. Scans suggest it can be found nowhere else on the planet’s surface. These deposits

successfully conceal most of the installation's thermal radiation, making it especially difficult to find." She walked around the table gesturing at several parts of the valley.

"In addition to these natural defenses, considerable security measures have been installed in and around the facility to ensure any breach of the perimeter would be short-lived. Drones, turrets, and other defenses line the jungle around the compound."

A myriad of red indicators appeared throughout the schematic. Likely hundreds of anti-personnel munitions. Reed's jaw clenched – this time with genuine distress.

"They *can* be avoided, but to ensure you aren't spotted by atmospheric sensors or anti-air defenses, you'll need to land ten kilometers from the perimeter and hike down into the valley.

"The main building only houses staff quarters, barracks, and several other necessary life support. But most of the installation is made up of satellite structures within three square kilometers. Most of the foot traffic runs through underground paths to further conceal any movement. Each building is powered by a substation that is connected to the main generator – located here." She pointed at a small rectangle in the corner of the hologram. A red dot on the opposite side signified their suggested landing zone.

"Our contact has created several holes in jungle defenses and supplied an exhaustive list of drone patrols, maps of munitions, and so on to aid in your approach. He has also conducted extensive research on the moon's megafauna and flora and has also provided us with a detailed report, should you find that helpful." Between the two points of interest were the stone pillars she had mentioned. They dwarfed the valley. Before Reed could worry about what was in the jungle, first and foremost, he needed to safely make it to the ground. Flying between these structures wouldn't be a problem – technically. But if these formations were full of some undescribed elements, the Hyena's avionics and flight telemetry would be useless.

"That's quite a hike..."

"Quite," she confirmed. "but I assure you it is necessary. If you land in the jungle, security drones will be on you in minutes. They are loaded with an anti-armor package. It would not bode well for you or for your ship. And I need you alive."

"The pillars you mentioned, what effects do they have on aircraft?"

K opened a report that included a list of standard military transport ships and personnel drop ships. "The Alvidinium will likely disable your ship's flight computer, but I'm sure an accomplished pilot such as yourself can manage a crowded, low-altitude flightpath. Once you

reach the facility, things will become much more complicated. Inside are two, highly-trained fire teams. Eighteen men in total. A handful of special forces were redirected to run security on this project. From the profiles we've managed to obtain, most have been assigned to multiple black-site operations in the past. If you would like to make it home fully intact, I do not recommend engaging them. They are supported by additional security measures throughout the facility, for which our informant has provided detailed descriptions. According to his intel, patrols are currently on rotating, 12-hour shifts. The shift change will allow you enough time to circumvent their patrols and move deeper into the facility. From there, you'll experience little-to-no armed resistance."

She tapped through a menu on her control pad. The display warbled and the drone schematics disappeared. They were replaced by a three-dimensional architectural model of the facility.

"You'll need to access the facility through a maintenance tunnel leading into one of the surrounding research zones. Once you're inside, you will have to make your way through these clearance-locked corridors and elevator shafts."

The model zoomed in on the main facility hub – the enlarged schematic danced from the projector. It highlighted three long, rectangular corridors that led away from the central structure and into the other wings of the facility.

"Your targets are split up between three different locations with a possible fourth. The lab you are looking for is located on one of the sublevels. This is where you'll find the samples and prototypes that need to be collected. Data logs from the lab are recorded on a local drive, then sent and stored in the facility's central server – located on the main level near the security terminal. Lastly, and most difficult to locate, will be Dr. León himself. He splits his research between the lab and other offsite locations. Apparently, he's quite eccentric and doesn't get along with his superiors or the other science officers. Intel suggests that the good doctor keeps an intentionally erratic schedule and is difficult to track. Your main priority is to locate and secure him until the other assets can be acquired."

Breaching security on a base of this nature was unquestionably more difficult than she was letting on. Reed questioned her on a strategy, "Descriptions and schedules are all well and good, but what kind of provisions do you have for me when your intel turns out to be bad or outdated? Is there a magic word for bio-locked blast doors that I don't know about?"

“Ah, yes. That reminds me...” Another sinister grin washed over her face as she craned her neck towards the doors to the back rooms. She called out, “Jacob, would you care to join us?”

The door in the back corner of the room slid open and the man from before stepped out of the shadows. He crossed the threshold and responded, “Of course, ma’am.”

His voice was baritone. It had a clean, clear timbre, but fell flat. Like it lacked the normal idiosyncrasies of a person’s voice. Reed thought it sounded like the color orange. The dark-haired man crossed the room with what could only be described as a ghostlike posture. Just as before, his figure seemed to glide more than walk. He joined the woman at the console, wading into the pool of pale blue light. Another ghastly figure. Representatives of a shadow government.

And then there were two.

“Jacob will be accompanying you. *He* will breach security and handle any classified materials or information. Your job is to assist him.”

There it is.

“Jacob is a prototype we have developed specifically for operations of this nature.”

“What do you mean *prototype*? This is a droid? What happened to *leave no trace*?”

Reed stared at him, the man’s lips curled into a smile. He had a handsome face. A symmetrical bone structure that rested in an uncommonly strong jaw.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Reed.”

Reed ignored him, and continued to question the agent. “You want me to smuggle classified materials *and* a highly-illegal combat droid through Federation checkpoints? Are you out of your mind? I might get through a general transport terminal, but if we’re scanned by anyone that knows what they’re looking at, we’re dead in the water. I can outmaneuver most pilots in-atmosphere, but not multiple fighters in space. Having something with that much RF onboard will put a big, red target on my ship. Not to mention scuttle any hopes of you getting what you’re after.”

“I understand your concern, Mr. Reed, but Jacob can and does pass as human. Not only has he gone undetected in dozens of Turing Tests with numerous AI engineers, but he can pass undetected through any available biological sensors or x-rays currently in existence. As far as *anyone* or *anything* is concerned, he is nothing more than flesh and blood.”

Reed scoffed and barked at the agent, “You expect me to trust your science project with my life? You might as well shoot both of us now and save the Fed some ammunition.”

“Mr. Reed, as I have said alrea—” Jacob raised his hand to interrupt, his expression asking the woman for permission to speak.

“Ma’am, if I may...” she nodded in agreement, “Mr. Reed, your success is my own. If you fail or expire before we arrive at the drop-off point, I have no way of completing my assignment. As Agent K has just shared, I will do everything in my power to aid you in navigating the facility, locating Dr. León, and safely exfiltrating the facility.”

Reed grumbled, blankly staring at the agent. There was truly no arguing the point. Reed knew he needed him, even if he didn’t like it. 60 million credits were worth riding shotgun with a robot for a couple of days. The sound of that number ringing through his ears helped him accept the idea of this new teammate. Reed’s eyes cut to Jacob. His browed furrowed and he attempted to examine whether his physical attributes would be any indication of his ability in a fight.

“Can you handle a weapon?”

“I am proficient with military-grade small arms and munitions up to Class B. Any weaponry located in the Vago facility will be very familiar to me. My simulation scores are available for you to review upon request.”

“Alright, well... I guess that’ll have to do for now.” Reed’s focus turned back to the agent, “So, let’s assume that things go smoothly, and by some miracle, we get in, locate León, and tin man here collects all your ‘assets’. What then? You haven’t told me what we’re hauling. Are we supposed to walk 10 clicks back through the jungle with cases of potentially dangerous materials?”

“Jacob will be able to remotely deactivate the anti-air and perimeter defenses from the facility’s control room. After you’ve retrieved the assets and planted charges, you can then access the vehicle bay to locate a suitable transport that can ferry you back to your ship.”

“Do they have fighters on base?”

“It’s hard to know for sure, but it would behoove you to expect the worst. I suggest you disable anything else with wings before you leave.”

Reed’s response dripped with condescension, “That’s assuming they don’t have another hangar you aren’t aware of... where’s my dropoff?”

“Once we have received word that you’ve made it off Vago with Dr. León, coordinates will be sent to you. You should be able to successfully send an encrypted transmission once you’re clear of the valley. Should you complete this task without breaching the terms of our agreement – as previously outlined – sixty million federation credits will be transferred to your account upon delivery. ”

“And what if something happens to León – or your watchdog?”

“Jacob is meant to assist you in the delivery of the asset. As long as the samples and Dr. León’s research make it safely into our possession, *his and Jacob’s* condition is... negotiable.”

“...Noted.” They had reached what felt like the end of the brief. The air had grown thin, giving power to the tension hiding in what had intentionally been left unsaid. Given the conversation so far, Reed suspected this was as much information as he would get from her. Everything else he would have to find out on his own.

“Any further questions you have about your assignment, Jacob will be more than capable of answering. Is there anything else you require of *me* before concluding this briefing?” The biggest problem, now, was getting into the Outer Reach without being flagged by the Federation. If they got past the first civilian checkpoint without a military turret chewing through the Hyena, he would still have to find a hyper-light method for reaching this moon. Which wouldn’t be cheap. He would need a preliminary investment. Reed stood up. He was growing claustrophobic in this room and was tired of this woman. He needed equipment and had this agent in a position that she couldn’t deny him.

He began his requests, “We need to discuss some start-up costs.”

She turned her head and gave a hesitant laugh, “Sixty million is more than enough compen–” Reed interrupted her, “I need to bypass Federation terminals altogether... I suspect you understand how difficult that is. If *you* aren’t supplying me with a hyperdrive, I have to acquire a vessel or an accelerator that doesn’t have a Fed fingerprint. Those don’t come cheap. If you want this done in a couple of days, I’m gonna need a few million to grease some palms.” The agent took a deep and irritated breath.

“Yes... well, as it just so happens, I have prepared for this particular eventuality. I have a contact that can solve our transportation problem.”

“What can this contact do for me in terms of acquiring a hyperdrive?”

“He’s a multi-disciplinary engineer. Quite talented, actually. For 15 or so years he helped the Federation’s subsidiaries establish an almost immovable presence in the Donqar System.”
Somehow this keeps getting worse.

“*Donqar?* You mean one of the primary mining systems that your government and the UGF have been squabbling over for the last several years? Fuckin hell...”

She gave a curt grin, “I will admit, it is an inelegant solution to an unfortunate dilemma. However, he’s your best chance of quickly and discreetly installing an accelerator on your ship which is, by the way, illegally modified outside of Federation code. And doing so in a way that won’t completely obliterate it *and* everyone inside.”

Reed dropped his head. As much as he hated it, she was right. He had been trying to think of a workaround since she mentioned the Outer Rim. There were only a few options that wouldn’t get him pinched by a checkpoint or rip his ship apart and throw it into several parts of the galaxy all at once. And none of them would work within his timeline. He resisted the urge to grunt. “Where do I find him?”

“His exact position isn’t known. He’s been implanted with a Wruteh refugee colony for the last two decades.”

“So how are you in contact with him?”

“That is none of your concern. I’m sure your skill as a smuggler will guide you in the right direction. I have, however, gone to the trouble of acquiring and washing a rather expensive and needed piece of mining equipment that will grant you unquestioned entry into Donqar space. It is being delivered to your ship as we speak.”

“Fine. But I’m still going to need funds. None of this will be cheap, least of all sensitive information. Especially if your engineer is in the breeze. Then I have to convince him to help me.”

“Very well,” she said picking up a data pad from the console. The cadence of her shoes made a pointed clicking sound as she rounded the console, tapping through the datapad as she walked. She stopped within reach of where Reed was sitting.

“Hold out your arm,” she commanded.

Reed complied. She gave him an unflinching expression of disgust as she tapped the pad against the one mounted in Reed’s bracer.

Without breaking eye contact she said, “There, that should cover everything you need. As I said before, your methods are your own, Mr. Reed.” She wheeled around and returned to the other side of the console, her shoes clicking louder and more aggressively than before. Reed turned his arm over and looked at the display. It read: 15,000,000 UGFC.

“Now, as much as I’ve enjoyed our little chat. I have some other business that requires my attention. Jacob will see your cargo is loaded properly. Is there anything *else* you require?” Reed shook his head, then turned to Jacob. “Hangar 3 – Level 10 – Platform 12. We leave in two hours. Don’t be late.”

He turned serious, earnest. An eager twang possessed his voice, “I’ll get my things.”

Reed turned and walked toward the door. Before he passed into the corridor, he stopped and glanced back at the woman. The droid at her side. The pair stood side by side, motionless. A smile crept on the agent’s face, accompanied by a suggestive look. “Good luck, Mr. Reed. Until we meet again.”

K depressed a button of the console and the blast doors crashed together in front of him. He found himself alone again – locked inside the dark corridor. Reed stood motionless in the dark. A thick blanket of silence within a blackness so dense he could hardly breathe. He listened for murmurs of conversation on the other side door, but heard nothing. Normally, in the stillness of the lower levels, the low, rumbling drone of the gravity engines would overwhelm the senses. The massive turbines would rattle through the steel skeleton of the station. But not here. The only sound was his pulse, thumping steadily inside his ears. It was deafening. Suffocating. A kind of quiet that wraps its fingers around his rib cage and pushed into his chest cavity with the force of every regret and decision he’d ever made. A quiet that questions one’s very existence. He had spent years running from this breed of silence. Now, it seemed, he had run out of places to hide.

Thowme. Crimson hues saturated his vision and the subtle fear of the ultrasonics consumed his body. His muscles coiled in anticipation of that horrible sound. Unintelligible and malevolent silence that rattled bone and put razor blades in his spinal cord. It pulped and exsanguinated his higher cognitive functions. His pulse quickened and his breathing followed no established pattern.

Get your shit together. Breathe. This is a scare tactic, remember? They're fucking with you. That's it. Don't let things fall apart now. You're on the path.

Several more moments passed in the stillness. Reed hung there, motionless, waiting for the next thing to happen. Murmuring to himself the distant truths of hope. The doors at the other end of the corridor abruptly opened. A gesture that said, “you’re free to leave, but only because we said so.”

Hm. Time to get the hell out of this place.

He collected his helmet and weapons from the table by the door and made his way back down the long hallway, almost running. The illuminated floor panels rattled under the shifting weight of his body. He jumped off the first step of the small staircase and launched into the brightly lit cell-like room and back into the pitch-black storage space. The sudden onset of darkness was disorienting without his helmet. He squinted, trying to make out the path through the rows of tiered steel racks full of cleaning supplies and outdated machinery. Reed slid the pistol back into its holster and closed his eyes, concentrating on his breath. Nothing had shaken him like that in years. The pulse of the ultrasonics felt and sounded just like a crowd control weapon that had been used on him before he left Esqrol. That hallway had shaken loose a memory he had hoped to never relive. As the helmet reinitialized, the dark room lit up with angles and definitive shapes. Ease washed over him.

Need to get back to the service elevator.

He quickly stomped through the room, navigating the narrow passageway between the shoulder-high racks to the open door. The rows of storage were filled with rubbish, forgotten and broken things that had probably been here longer than most of the people that lived in the residential sector onboard. A wonderful base of operations. But how long had this safehouse been here? They wouldn’t have set up camp specifically for this meeting... some things still weren’t adding up.

His mind raced as he traversed the maze of dark and grimy corridors. He attempted to process everything that had happened over the past few hours.. Being fixed up with a corporation wasn’t entirely unpredictable. Those jobs came along from time to time, but that usually meant a small operation in a middle system – not the oldest, largest corporation in the history of the Federation. And, usually, those jobs were simple: hauling unregistered cargo to help someone avoid the Fed’s import taxes. Nothing even remotely close to espionage.

What the fuck have I gotten myself into... Reed contemplated his position, sifting through possible options. He couldn't run, that much was clear. It seemed someone had gone well out of their way to get enough collateral on him to make sure he wouldn't disappear once he had been briefed. This was a proper black op, and that was a complicated topic *before* any mention of classified robotics. A humanoid breathing down his neck created an entirely new problem. Reed didn't trust AI on principle, but the nature of this job forced even greater suspicion. He had no way of discerning what its true agenda was or how Reed fit into it. The Fed outlawed autonomous tech for a reason, but it would have been naive to assume they weren't still used by the Founding Corporations or even the Federation itself.

The Senate had never been totally insoluble, and based on this meeting, Thesta seemed to be looking for a way to rally systems in the Senate. All this talk of the NCA and independence had Reed concerned about more than the immediate future. Based on what Yendra had said about separatist rumblings, this could be Thesta's attempt to cripple the Federation's forward installations, and dissuade them from further attempts to acquire Thestan territories. As she put it, "strategic violence." Violence that could lead to an all-out war – but not just with Thesta. Certain members of the senate would attempt to secede. That would lead to a chain reaction and Thesta would be the least of their problems. If the NCA smelled blood in the water, they wouldn't hesitate to involve themselves either. This was a drastic move. I would end the, albeit tenuous, armistice that had staved off bloodshed for nearly 26 years. Reed found himself trapped between a crime lord, a shadow government, and potentially a galactic war.

Never get involved, Reed... Never get involved.

This was beyond complicated, but it was his only way out of the trouble he was in. He'd figure everything else out later. Politics aside, he had a job to do that involved breaching a secure compound, avoiding a black-ops fireteam, and doing all of it alongside an illegal and highly classified autonomous droid. It would require equipment that was unavailable anywhere except a class-four Federation armory or a specialized black market dealer. He'd have to pay a visit to another old friend.