

379
N81
No. 7439

MAELSTROM: THE LAST
COYOTE TALE

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

J. Taylor Claiborne, B.A.

Denton, Texas

December, 1997

Claiborne, J. Taylor, Maelstrom: The Last Coyote Tale. Master of Arts (English), December, 1997, 261 pp.

It is a dark future, where corporations have taken the place of governmental bodies, and Earth is a myth, forgotten in the reconstruction after the Second Dark Age. One man—a clone—investigates a murder leads him deep into a spirit quest of his own that will answer the questions of Man's heritage as well as his own identity.

This story is a science fiction, but it is similar in structure to a Coyote tale and involves quite a bit of Navajo mythology. The use of Native American imagery is not an attempt to capitalize on another culture, but rather to study the culture and use allegorical elements that transcend many cultures. It must also be noted that non-Native American writers wrote all texts available on the subject. This fact should be taken into consideration by the reader.

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Chapter One

The Price of Information

Armageddon draws nigh! Beware the final days, when the angels will come for all humans and leave the other races burning in lakes of fire! Our souls are at stake! We fell from Eden. We fell from Earth. This is the last chance we have to prove our worth in the eyes of God! Don't fuck it up!

--Angus McDermott
Intergalactic Baptist
Coalition

Klermine City, Aldion III

"Could you be getting paranoid on me?"

My instincts kicked in. Perhaps it was years of field duty in strange jungles, swamps and deserts as a scout in the Confederate Marines. Or perhaps it was my experience at tempting fate with phrases like the one that Griffin had used so casually. In either case, the hair on the back of my neck rippled and I threw all of my weight into her, knocking the red-haired woman to the floor. I could feel the wind rush from her lungs as we hit the ground, and I covered our heads with my arms, for even as we dropped I could feel the familiar staccato thunder in the air.

The office wall nearest to us exploded, becoming a long line of destruction shredding everything at waist-height. White bits of the wall and crystalline shards of the windows rained down on us in a powdery cloud, punctuated by the sound of bullets humming through the air and ricocheting about the office. I could hear the desk and the computer terminal in it burst under the shrapnel, the ruined circuits tossing sparks onto the forest green carpet. The far window, which had a wonderful view of the city, held under the impacts but was scarred with white webs of powdered glass from striking bullets. I gritted my teeth as the desk behind us collapsed and the leather chair was disemboweled into wood and foam.

And then the gunfire subsided.

I raised myself up to peer through the new holes in the wall. The hallway beyond was empty. "Nah, I'm not paranoid," I said, crawling for the door. The gunman--or men--were not using conventional slug-throwers. Full automatics to be sure, most likely several men with automatic rifles or a single man with an autocannon. I just couldn't see them. "Everyone really *is* out to get me."

Griffin, still wheezing from the tackle, crawled over to where I was kneeling. "Y-you believe me now?"

"I didn't doubt you earlier, but this does put a few holes in their story." I glanced around the room. "Not to mention the walls." My eyes fell on a small picture that had been knocked to the floor, the face pockmarked by bullets. It had been a picture of a planet, largely water and striped with white clouds. In its crumbled condition, I could see something reflective in the frame behind the artwork.

I pulled the picture out of the shards of the cover and found a tiny laser disc resting underneath. It looked scratched but unbroken.

"What's that?"

"Disc. Here, hold on to it," I handed it to her. Griffin was a corporate network specialist, a legal hacker. If anyone could examine the disc, it would be her. Besides, it belonged to her brother. It was only right that she examine it first. I only hoped that it was worth becoming a human target. Time would tell.

Later.

"We gotta get out of here," I said. Griffin didn't argue. I crawled over to the door, pausing only to pull out my gun. It was a Colt Viper, an automatic with fifteen rounds. Not much against the firepower that can shred a corner office, but it gave me somewhat better odds.

Griffin joined me by the door. "What's the plan?"

"I open the door, we run for the elevators." I thumbed the safety on my pistol.

"That's it? Someone's trying to kill us!"

"If I see them, I'll shoot back."

"What if you don't see them?" Griffin slipped the disc into her jacket's inner pocket.

Her red curls were coated in dust and glass.

"I'll shoot back anyway." I shrugged. My mentor at the academy had one motto: you never plan out *every* detail. No matter how smart you are, you'll always miss something and that one detail will trash everything to hell. If you stayed flexible and just a bit paranoid, you could handle most situations. That was the theory, anyway. "Ready? On two. You go first, I'll cover."

Griffin nodded, drawing her legs underneath her. She was handling this better than expected. I grasped the door handle with my free hand. A trickle of sweat ran down my temple.

"One . . ."

I strained to hear anything in the hallway. The only sounds I could make out were the popping wires in the ruined computer and our ragged breathing. The gunmen were either very professional or very patient. And with corporations these days, one didn't exclude the other.

"Two!" I pulled the door open, using it to pull myself up as well. Griffin launched into the hall, sprinting to the right towards the elevators. I followed, firing a couple of rounds blindly behind us as we ran.

The door and surrounding frame disintegrated under a stream of gunfire.

In typical example of human architectural genius, the office building was square, with offices on the outside separated from the inner rooms by a hall that ran the perimeter of the place. Breck's office was at the corner of the building, and while the hall leading from the office door held our attackers, the hall also ran perpendicular to the right and continued towards the elevator lobby. We tore past door after door, all offices silent. Thankfully it was late enough that most people had gone home. The steady barrage of carnage trailed after us from the doorway, but could not follow far because of the corner.

We had scant seconds to reach the far end before the gunmen rounded the corner behind us and opened fire again. Griffin, running too fast to completely stop, screamed as she careened around the corner and slammed into the wall. I was able to fare better on the turn, coming to a stop beside her.

“You okay?”

She nodded, using her keys in the wall lock to call the elevator. She was favoring the shoulder that had absorbed the impact, but other than that she was just scared. I backpedaled to the corner, bracing myself against the wall. I took a deep breath and peeked around the corner quickly.

Nothing. The hall was empty.

There was a flash of red light, and I pulled back. The wall next to me shimmered, the paint and first few layers of plaster boiling, and suddenly the laser punched through the wall. I was thrown to the floor, pain lancing through my arm. The Viper fell to the carpet. *That was stupid, Warlock. Real stupid.*

“Warlock, you’re arm!”

Using my left hand to peel back the jacket sleeve, I examined the wound. The upper arm was burned pretty bad where the laser had hit me, the points of direct contact blackened flesh, while the rest of the shoulder was an angry red, as if severely sunburned. “It looks worse than it really is,” I said. She gave me a dubious look.

The elevator chimed with a merry ring, the doors sliding open.

“Get on.” I bent down and scooped up the gun with my left hand, ignoring the glistening of my blood on the grip and muzzle. I turned the keys the other way, and as the doors closed I tossed them to her. “Get the disc to Nightmare and Katt.”

“Warlock, what are you doing? Warlock!” Her cries faded as the doors shut and the express elevator began the trek down. I dashed for the next set of offices, not twenty feet

further down this hall. So far I had traveled a third of the floor, and I had yet to see who was shooting at me.

There was one simple problem. The elevator took at least half a minute to reach the lobby. The people shooting at us had enough firepower to shred an office, so the elevator shaft would be little trouble. They would destroy the cables, or open the doors and fire down through the roof. The elevator was a deathtrap, unless they had something else to shoot at, a more visible target.

Something likes me.

Where's my back up when I need it? I wondered as I sprinted away, every muscle straining. Blood pounded horribly in my ears, every pulse pealing like thunder through my head. I aimed for the first office. Leading with my left shoulder, I burst through the locked door and fell to the floor hard enough to shake me up, but I had enough sense to roll to my left, out of direct view from the hall.

My vision was blurred by red light as the laser flickered across the office, churning the walls it touched and melting plastic. A painting of a desert landscape at dusk burst into flame as the laser transformed the setting sun into a supernova.

I rolled further along the office, keeping under the fire line. When I reached the far end, next to a second door leading back into the hallway, I raised myself up. The stairs were just across the hall. I had to open the door quietly since the air was thickening with smoke from the painting. *Sonovabitch! A real painting!* There was very few works on true canvas and frames. Most people used LED screens and art programs. *High-class building. I almost hate to see it destroyed.*

The alarm sounded, and my first real break kicked in. There was a brief shock of cold as a fine spray hit my face. The fire alarms buzzed deep within the bowls of the building as nozzles sprouted out of the ceiling and hosed everything in sight.

I wiped my face with the sleeve of my jacket. Outside of the office, obscured in the downpour, something came around the corner. I sidestepped out the second doorway into the hall, saw what had been tracking me all this time, and fired once before diving back into the room to avoid a random barrage of bullets.

So that was it. I wasn't running from a man or even from a group of men. I was running from a Zombie. I needed distance, and I needed it now. A corporation such as this one was likely to have a few in locked warehouses, disabled relics gathering dust, but to have one still in use?

You gotta be shittin' me.

Zombies were members of assault-class droids, most of which were medium in size and heavy in firepower. I had seen them before, since several of the corporate wars had used these droids, but I had never had any real involvement with them. After all, it wasn't long before the corporations switched back to live grunts rather than robotic ones. Droids, while able to possess some rudimentary level of artificial intelligence, still needed far too much direction. Combat situations tended to explode into complete chaos on the field and the droids were never quite able to deal with the havoc. They lacked initiative.

Guard duty was another matter entirely.

This particular unit resembled a spider, with eight spindly legs holding a round body in the air. On the top of the sphere sat a long black tube with a prismatic tip. *The laser.* On the underbelly hung the bulk of the small autocannon, the cluster-barrel rotating with an audible hum.

The strangest thing about this droid was the strange shimmering effect that flickered across it. It was like the shimmering of heat, but when it was in effect, the droid was hidden from view. The sprinklers were interfering with the droid in some way. It was almost like the shrouding devices used by the Special Forces transports he had seen in the army, but the droid

was far too small to have something like that. The power source necessary for a Shroud would have been larger than the droid itself.

There was a loud electrical pop as the droid shifted under the falling spray. The shroud effect faded, apparently deactivating under the circumstances. I used the brief moments of disorientation on the droid's part to charge across the hall and through the door marked STAIRS.

I was almost two full flights down when I could hear a door open and the Zombie stepped into the stairwell, the arachnid-like legs thumping with a hollow sound on the metal floor of the landing. There was a moment of silence, and suddenly the open center of the spiral staircase was ablaze with sparks as bullets rained down from the autocannon. I pressed up against the wall as I continued down, trying to avoid stray shots. The sound of the rebounding slugs was smothered by the fire alarms blaring in the stairwell.

This is gonna get someone's attention. If I wanted to stay alive, I needed to either escape or give up. A thin laser sliced down from above, cutting a slag line through the rail and underlying floor. *Preferably escape.* I gave the door at the next landing a tug. Locked.

As I stepped down on the next level, the door looked different. It had a lock designed with a retina scanner. The frame and door itself were titanium alloy probably reinforced by some sort of hydraulic system and undoubtedly hooked up with an alarm. It would take me about five minutes to crack, but I lacked the time.

Still, my curiosity was aroused. *Another time.*

The entire portal screamed go away, which suggested that this was some sort of special projects level. I was about to leave when the door hissed open, and four men stepped out, their rifles snapping up quickly to point at me. I flipped my gun around so I was grasping the muzzle and the grip was facing them. "Evening, guys. Nice hardware." One of the guards took the Viper, and I raised my left hand in the air, my right arm still numb from the shoulder down.

"Who the hell are you?" the nearest guard snarled.

"Hydrolift repair. Nasty coolant problem up on thirty-five. Can I use your vidphone?"

I deftly caught his fist with my abdomen and crumpled to my knees. After a brief moment of shock, I forced myself to relax, willing my lungs to work again. I had been expecting it just enough to brace for it, which absorbed some of the shock. It still hurt like hell. Rough hands yanked me up, checking my jacket and pockets for any weapons. One of them—they all looked alike in their uniforms and polished boots—took my wallet.

Behind me the downpour of ammunition slowed and finally subsided. The guard who hit me shouldered his rifle and pulled out a comlink. "We have the situation under control. Get a crew on the thirty-fifth and give a damage estimate in ten." I could hear a faint acknowledgment over the mike.

"Not my fault. That Zombie has no sense of targeting."

"Who sent you?" Sucker-punch asked. I shrugged. *No sense making things easy.* Two guards, one on each of my arms, forced me into the hall, through the security door. "Well, we'll just have to make you a little more agreeable."

More agreeable? That sounded familiar. *Torture in a multi-million-credit corporation. Who would have thought it?* I struggled to maintain my cocky expression. I don't care what kind of training a person has, pain was not something I enjoyed. "Excuse me, I'm a Terran citizen. You know, human? I have rights."

"Shut up."

"So why don't you arrest me? I need a long rest in a jail cell to cool me off. I think you should arrest me." The guard on my right twisted my arm, and I clenched my teeth as the pain wrenched a grunt out of me.

Sucker-punch gave me a smirk. "I told you to shut up."

"Right." *That's one more for the shit list.* I had a long shit list.

The corridor opened up into a cluster of doors, each as formidable as the one back in the stairwell. Sucker-punch ran his keycard through the slot, and once again I heard the hiss of hydraulic pumps as the door opened. A corporate executive met us inside, his black hair slicked back, his gold suit impeccable. "This is the intruder?" he pointed at me. He gave a smile as he noticed my arm. "I see you've met our guard dogs. So this'll be real simple, real easy. Who sent you?"

"Hydrolift repair. I keep telling these guys I have to fix a nasty coolant leak, but they just keep ignoring me."

The suit studied his manicure carefully. "We now you came in with one of our people. We have the visitors log. Tell me, where is Ms. McEdlin at this moment? She might be able to clear this up." *She got away, huh?*

"Once I got inside I told her to go home. I did this all by myself. I can do more damage before breakfast than most people do in a month."

"I don't find this humorous."

"I dunno. It's kind of funny."

The suit pulled off his gold-rimmed glasses and proceeded to wipe one of the lenses with a white silk handkerchief. "I was hoping you would cooperate. I hate using more extreme methods." Another sigh. "Let's see what the doctors can find in that thick skull of yours."

Sucker-punch muttered something else into his comlink. "Doc's ready when you are," he said to the suit.

I was dragged into another room, this one having more of a clinical tone. There was a medical chair complete with safety straps and a computer console attached for monitoring purposes. I had seen them before, and it looked pretty standard. While it was safer for the individual to have cybernetic equipment installed at a professional establishment, many corporations, especially ones that developed organic-machine technology like Nebula, had their own labs to deck out their agents. There was nothing new or different that I could see about this

lab; all the standard gear. The guards shoved me into the chair and tightened the straps down on my wrists and ankles.

A young man in a white smock strode into my view, loading a hypospray with a canister of a clear liquid. He reminded me of a rat, with a pinched face, long nose, and a wispy goatee. "We'll start with a moderate dose. On most subjects it's enough to get them talking," he said. "Too much and his nervous system will collapse."

"What the hell is that stuff?" I asked.

"Does it matter?" The suit said.

Rat-face stepped towards me as a guard grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled, forcing my chin up.

Thunk!

There was a sharp pain and a rush of air as he tapped my neck with the hypo, and I could feel a sudden cool rush as the serum mingled with my bloodstream. Spikes danced up my spine, and I felt like my mind and my body were separating into two entities, and my mind was floating in cool water. As my vision clouded and my tongue seemed to swell in my throat, I could see the executive hover over me.

"Now we will see what we will see," he said.

* * *

I stepped into the bar, pausing a moment at the door both to let my eyes adjust and to flap my jacket to get the rain off. I was normally fond of rainy days, and the skies above Klermine were slate gray, and the rain that fell down on the city was steady and cold. Inside, the bar itself was like most of its cousins on just about any planet I had ever visited. The lighting was enough to move about and to see who was sitting across the table from you, but little else. The booths and tables each had a small lamp giving barely the illumination of a

couple of candles. The bar itself had a wall of bottles and the lights behind them flooded the area with a rainbow of colors due to the hues of the drinks.

I ran my hands through my hair to get some of the water out and walked over to the bar. The four-armed Ventorian behind the bar nodded as I approached. "Afternoon," he said in a raspy voice. Like all his race he had bluish-gray skin and no hair, with tusks peeking out from under his flapping jowls.

"And a wet one at that," I said, flinging water off my fingers. "You have any Numakian ale?"

"What self-respecting bar doesn't?" He grabbed a glass and poured me a serving of the orange liquid. "Can't stand the stuff myself, but I always have some on hand." I handed him a few credits and took the glass, glancing about the room. There was a nice mix of races present, but nothing too exotic. I saw her in the back booth, and caught her eye.

"Thanks. I've been needing a good drink for weeks now." I took a sip. The alcohol burned the back of my throat and blazed a sharp trail until it reached my stomach, where it seemed to radiate warmth to the rest of my body. It helped ease the chill of the weather. Enough of the stuff and I'd ignore the water in my clothes.

"Glad to be of service," he said. I took my ale and moved towards the booth where she sat, glancing at the other faces in the bar. No one seemed particularly interested in me, which was a good thing.

She was just as beautiful as I remembered. In fact, the last five years had added maturity and wisdom to her youthful beauty. What was she now? Twenty-four? Twenty-five? A mane of red-curls framed her heart-shaped face, and she still had the figure that could make a holo-evangelist stutter. She was wearing a light blouse, brown pants, and a brown jacket. A cup of coffee, still warm enough to give off tendrils of steam, sat before her.

"Hi," she said.

"Hey, Brenna. I got your message," I said, watching her green eyes.

"Thanks for coming. Please, sit." She motioned to the booth with her hand. I slid into the booth and took another sip of ale before setting my glass down on the table.

"How're you holding up?"

"Not very well." She folded her arms on the table, and I could see her try to stop her hands from trembling slightly.

I placed my hand gently on her arm. "I'm sorry it took me so long to get here."

"It's okay. The funeral was this morning."

"How was it?"

She shrugged. "The corporation paid for everything, even left Mom with some credits from his savings fund. I'm sure it was a fine ceremony. The company loves making a big deal about how family-oriented it is."

"You didn't go?" I asked, pulling my hand back as she picked up her coffee.

"Mom and I aren't on the best of terms right now. She made it clear that I wasn't invited to the service." She lowered her head so her hair became a mask of curls over her face.

"Unbelievable. Just unbelievable." I took a deep breath and let it go. Brenna's mother had always been stubborn, but this--

"Warlock, let it go," she said, watching my expression.

"He was your brother, Brenna. Your *brother*. You had every right to be at the funeral."

"Mom never forgave me after I joined the Nebula Corporation two years ago. Like everything else, it was great for Breck to do it, she even gave her blessing, but no daughter of hers was going to join the company. Heaven forbid a woman succeed in the corporate world"

"She always was old-fashioned."

"Yeah. I think what really hurt her was this," she said, turning her head and pulling her hair back. Behind her left ear, hidden by her hair normally, was a small metal object with a hole designed for a connector. A gridjack.

"You're a grid-runner?"

She gave a weak chuckle. "The day I got the cyberwear Breck treated me to dinner. He was so proud of his little sister. He kept telling me how we had made it, and how we could really do something, 'cause we were in the big halls of the corporation. Real changes, changes that meant something." She fell into silence.

Breck McEdlin had always been a dreamer, and had always sought to rise above the streets through business, while I had been more inclined to the military, what with my attitude and all. While his family had cared for me with good intentions and a fair amount of patience, they had not been able to keep me under control. I had been a petty thief on my way to a brilliant career in a penal colony except for Breck. He had always been the one to back me up, and he never had spoken a condescending word to me or about me. He had been a good man, with a lot of faith and ideals. He had been my friend. I was truly sorry he was dead.

But, in the back of my mind, something bothered me about all this.

Brenna took a strong drink of coffee to steady herself. "Anyway, I wanted you to hear about it from me. That, and I need a favor from you."

"Brenna—"

"And my handle is Griffin. I prefer it to Brenna."

"Griffin?" I raised an eyebrow.

"You know, the mythological creature, part lion and part eagle? My Grid persona looks like one," she said. "Considering you're a pureblooded Navajo, I'd think you would know a lot about myths, spirits, that sort of thing." I gave her a dirty look. She loved to tease me about my heritage.

"Griffin it is, then. And just so you know, I leave the spirits to my father."

"Point taken," she said.

"Well . . . are we going to chit-chat all evening, or do you have more of a point for asking me to come here? I enjoy small-talk, but you were upset in your message. What's this favor you need?"

Brenna—er, Griffin—pushed her cup away from her and folded her hands carefully on the table. “The official story in all the Newsnets and corporate memorandums is that Breck—for his own personal reasons, either due to depression or financial motivations—threw himself out of his office window into afternoon traffic thirty floors below.” She managed to keep her voice steady.

“Sonovabitch,” I whispered. “Suicide? That doesn’t sound like Breck.”

“And they’re saying he threw himself through a window that was three inches thick and built to withstand a tornado. Hell, chances are, it’d stop a bullet point-blank. Yet he jumped through it to kill himself.”

“I have a bad feeling where you’re going with this,” I said.

“Warlock, he didn’t jump. He was killed.”

“Griffin, I--”

She sat back. “You don’t believe me. Out of everybody I know, I expect you to believe me. I’m not crazy, and I’m not hysterical. What they’re trying to say about his death is impossible.”

“I didn’t say that I don’t believe you, but what proof do you have?”

She chewed on her bottom lip. “None. Yet. That’s the favor I need from you. I need help putting the pieces together.” There was worry in her eyes now, concern for my answer, concern for my faith in her, perhaps even concern that she might be losing her grip on reality.

“What do you have so far?”

“Thanks, Warlock. I--”

“—I haven’t said yes or no, yet.” I let that sink in. She nodded, the sudden excitement draining from her face. “What do you have?” I repeated.

Griffin pulled out a handful of clear hard copies and slid them across the table to me. I picked them up and studied the data she had pulled. She gave me a few minutes to read the files. Everything looked in order. There were several weeks worth of records of when Breck got

to work and left the office for home, as well as a medical report from a physical he had taken two months ago. Lastly, there were his credit statements over the last few months.

“Well?” she asked in a slightly smug tone.

“I don’t see anything,” I said, dropping the files.

“Exactly.” She brought her hand down on the hard copies. “Breck was in good health, according to the doctor, both physically and mentally. He came and left the corporate offices at exactly the same times every day of the week. There are no unusual deposits or withdrawals from his credit account. There’s not a damn thing out of the ordinary, and I cross-checked his entire history. I don’t have a single clue as to why he died. But I know it wasn’t depression or financial problems, legal or otherwise.”

“Maybe he hid it well.”

“Not from me. Not from his little sister.”

I rubbed my eyes and took a long swallow of the orange brew. *She seems to have covered every base except one.* “Griffin, tell me this: why would the Nebula Corporation lie about the cause of death?”

“I don’t know. Maybe to keep them shining in the public’s eye. Maybe someone lied to them. Maybe someone paid them off.” She shrugged to the heavens, losing her patience. “This is why I need you. I don’t know these answers. If I knew everything I wouldn’t be this upset!

“I haven’t slept. I can’t eat. All I want is the goddamn truth.”

“Okay, sorry. I’m just making sure. If I do help you, you still might not like what we find.”

She gave a chuckle. “I can handle anything except what they’re trying to tell me.”

I nodded. “Have you told your Mom?”

“No.”

“She might help,” I said.

“No.” That was final.

I reached out my hand, taking hers. I still had my doubts, but Griffin had always been a steady person. Her concerns were genuine. "Okay," I pursed my lips. "Where do we start?" I would see this through, and prove her right or convince her she was wrong. In the end, maybe she'd have some answers.

* * *

The man in the gold suit nodded with understanding as I snapped out of the trance. My throat was dry, and my head throbbed behind my eyes. I tugged at the restraints on my hands and feet. Sucker-punch held up the com-mike. "Pick up Ms. Brenna McEdlin. She is involved in this mess."

"What the fuck did you give me?" I snarled.

"Alpha-trance inducers," Rat-face said from somewhere to my right. He was blurry in my eyes, and I felt almost tipsy. "It lets you relive the past in brief episodes that we can guide, sort of a chemical hypnosis."

The executive made a note on a datapad. "So, this is about that G-3 affair. I told Mr. Xavier that this wouldn't just go away, but of course, how many CEO's listen to their peons, right?" He stormed over, and loomed into my blurred vision. "There's got to be more to this than a sister's hysteria. Who do you work for?"

I could feel my silly grin spread. "Hydrolift repair."

He strangled a curse. "Conner!"

"Sir?" Sucker-punch raised his eyebrows.

"Who is this man? Have any of your checks panned out?" He pulled away from me and moved over to the head of security.

"Yes, sir. I have his files right here. We have his records in the military with the space marines—including several major battles—but there's no data for the last year or so. We're cross-

referencing some data, but he might be Agency, or worse, which means his records will be completely washed.”

“Fuck.” He ran his hand through his hair. “Well, what *do* we have?”

“Our friend is Greyson Lightfoot, a.k.a. Warlock.” Connor paused and looked at me. “Warlock? Shouldn’t it be Shaman, or Mohawk or something?” The doctor joined him in a chuckle.

“Piss off.”

Connor sneered, but read on down the file. “Anyway, he retired from the marines with three medals of Valor, and a Purple Heart. He left the military after a disagreement with one of his superiors. It doesn’t say what or why, except that there’s no dishonorable discharge, so he must’ve pulled some strings.”

“Smells like a mercenary to me,” the suit sighed.

Connor nodded. “His records after the marines are way too clean. He’s gotta have someone paying his bills.”

“His next phase sequence is coming up in about ten seconds,” the doctor said to no one in particular.

“Find out. Find out right now.” The executive grabbed Connor’s uniform. “I want to know where he lives, what he does, who his friends are, who does his laundry and what he had for breakfast.”

“Bacon and Andromian eggs,” I said. “Delicious if you use the right spices.”

“Five seconds,” the medic said.

The suit ignored me. “Get me everything. We have hackers for this, get them to earn their keep.” He stood over me once more, studying my face with his slate gray eyes. From this view, I realized his glasses had a liquid LED so he could keep linked to a database. Probably stocks. “So, Warlock, just who are you? Gimme a little hint.”

There was a sudden tingling across my scalp, and my blood turned cold. I felt nauseous and dizzy. The drug kicked in.

Hard.

* * *

I gunned the engine of my Scorpion motorcycle and turned it down the rain-slick ferrocrete streets of Klermine City. Night had fallen and the largest of the Aldion moons was starting to come over the horizon, giving the dark heavens a slightly bluish tint. The cool breeze brought the smell of the city to me; I breathed in the aroma of oil, the wild orchid-like flower native to the region, and perhaps even a hint of rain from sculpted clouds in the west. It was a good night for a bike ride.

Griffin's arms tightened around my sides, her hands locked near my chest as she held on. She had never ridden on a cycle before, and it forced her to trust me. I gave her hands a squeeze. "We're almost there. You sure they'll let us in?"

"My supervisor knows I'm 'working' tonight. It shouldn't be a problem."

"Let's hope so."

We had already searched Breck's home, a small place over on the south side of the city. It was nice, but probably a little on the expensive side. His things hadn't been packed yet, but after a complete search of every room and closet, as well as his personal computer, we still had no idea what might've led to his death.

That left his office.

I pulled the bike up into a parking slot and popped the kickstands. The office building of the Nebula Corporation was a green-glass building about fifty floors high and shaped like a spike at the top. Griffin hopped off the bike and unzipped her jacket. I turned the cycle off and slowly pulled off my gloves. "Griffin, promise me something."

"Sure. What?"

"If this doesn't pan out, if we don't find anything in his office, I want you to admit that Breck may have killed himself."

"He didn't."

"I said *may*, and I want to prepare you for all the possibilities. I know it won't be easy, and I know it hurts. Breck may have killed himself. If we run out of leads, I want you to let it go. Promise me."

Griffin took a deep breath. "We'll find something. We will."

"Griffin--"

"We'll find something in there." She spun on her heel and stormed towards the office building.

I dismounted and threw my gloves down on the cycle. I hoped we found what Griffin was looking for, but I also knew that it could all end here with nothing to go on. There was a time to just let go. "Hold up, Griffin." I double-checked my handgun--one had to be careful even in the nice neighborhoods these days--and hurried to catch up with her.

"You don't have to bring the gun," she said, and I thought I saw a strange look in her eyes.

"Yes I do." I didn't meet her gaze.

"Are you planning on shooting someone?" She folded her arms across her chest.

"Night's young, let's see what happens."

She didn't follow me as I walked by. I turned to look back at her. "Have you ever killed anyone before?"

I sighed, scanning the area. We were alone. "Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"You and Breck got into big business, okay? I joined the Marines. While you were dissecting viruses and hacking through huge systems, I was in swamps and deserts and jungles

fighting everything from humans to Kybrin xenomorphs. Yes, I killed people and yes, I'll do it again if I have to. That's what I was trained for, and it's what I do. You've seen those holo-ads for the military? Bullshit."

"Warlock, I--"

"You started this, so shut up and listen. Have you ever seen a man hit by a rocket launcher? There a pause after it sinks into his body where he's wide awake and knows exactly what's going on before it blows. He looks at you straight in the eye and you can see his fear. You can see that he doesn't want to die. But then the rocket goes off., and that human being goes from being solid flesh and bone to vapor.

"And the only way you can sleep at night is by telling yourself that that guy would have done the same to you, and he would have, too. And after a couple of years, you don't lose sleep over it. I've killed plenty of people in my two tours, and I'll kill people again. It's what I do.

"They always tell you when you're a kid that you have to find what you do best and use it in your job, right? What happens if your one skill seems to be killing other people?"

I cursed myself silently for losing control. Griffin didn't mean anything by it; it wasn't her fault. "All I ever remember is what my father said. Claimed it was the 'Way of our Ancestors' or something. He told me that no matter what battles a warrior faces, he never allows violence near his family or friends." I looked her right in the eyes. "You and Breck are family. I'm in this all the way."

"Thanks," she said. There was an uncomfortable moment of silence before we headed for the building.

We walked up the steps. She swiped her security badge through the card lock, the door buzzed that it was unlocked and I opened it for her. "After you, madam."

That earned me a shot in the ribs. "Watch it, smart-ass."

"Fine. I try to be a gentleman--" I started until she cut me off with a gesture.

"Ah, but I know the real you. You couldn't have changed that much." She gave me a conspiratorial wink, taking any edge out of her words.

"You wound me," I clutched at my heart.

"Not yet. Night's still young, though."

The lobby was what one would expect. The floor was made of tile that resembled crushed gray marble, and the couches and chairs were plush silk in simple blues. There was a crystal sculptured light hanging from the ceiling in the center of the room. We headed towards the guard desk that sat directly in front of the elevators. From my perspective, I could see the two guards peeking over the desktop, watching us.

Griffin ran her card through a sensor on the desk, and one of the men, an older guard with laugh lines around his eyes and a belly that had had too much pasta over the years, smiled at her. "Evening, Miss McEdlin."

"Hey Cal. How's the wife?"

"Fine, fine. I'm sorry about your brother. We all are. If you need anything, anything at all."

"Thanks, Cal. That's sweet of you. I just need to lose myself in work and get my mind off of it all. I'll be fine in a few days." She pointed at me. "This is my friend, Greyson Lightfoot. Can he go up with me?" *Thanks for keeping my identity low-key, Griffin.*

"No problem," Cal grinned. "Go on up."

* * *

"Anything else on a Greyson Lightfoot?" I could hear the suit ask as I came out of the trance a second time. This was getting real old, real fast. "What do you mean, no? Check the credit accounts, check whatever you have to, but get me some answers. And fire that old man. Move!" I forced my eyes open and glanced around, unable to rub my face with my hands

bound down. The executive glanced at me. "It seems that our mutual friend has vanished for now."

"Ain't that just like a woman?" I said.

"You are steadily becoming nothing more than a nuisance to me." He grabbed Conner by the shoulder and he began whispering orders.

"You going to kill me like you killed Breck?"

The suit paused in his private conversation. "What, that jumper from bookkeeping? I had nothing to do with his death. I will, however, have something to do with your demise if you're not careful. Now shut up."

I shrugged. "Okay."

The suit groaned as his com-mike buzzed. He pulled it up to his mouth. "This better be important. I'm trying to deal with--what? What do you mean? Just turn the thing off. I don't know, that's a problem for George. Call him." He began to rub his eyes. "I don't care if he is asleep, this is--fine, fine. I'm coming down, but you better call George anyway."

"Problem?" the medic asked.

"There's been a malfunction. Just get him ready for his next dose and I'll be back in a few minutes." He looked at Conner. "I swear if it's not one thing its another. Where the hell did they pick those droids up, anyway?" Connor and the executive stepped out of the room. Three of the guards went with them, leaving me with one near the main door and the good doctor.

Time to bait the trap. I tested my right arm, wiggling the fingers slightly. It was sore, but it was usable. The laser had grazed my shoulder, and the burns were already healing. The doctor was preparing another hypospray. I grunted and shifted my hurt arm. "Easy," Rat-face said, moving over and clipping the injector to his belt. "The sedatives are wearing off. You need to relax."

"Make me."

"You'll only cause yourself more harm than good. Do you feel any pain?"

I swallowed the obvious answer. "My arm hurts like hell," I grimaced. "Could you loosen the strap a little?" Rat-face paused, looking over at the guard for conformation. "Come on. I can't go anywhere."

Mental Note: never trust a prisoner who tells you how helpless he or she is.

Rat-face obviously didn't know the rule. *Just get close enough to me.* He gave me a dubious look, but waved a guard over. "We need to try and keep the pressure off the injured arm. Any pain in his system can neutralize the alpha-trance inducers." The guard propped his rifle against the chair and grabbed my arm just above the elbow, while the doctor loosened the strap and examined the arm.

Just a little closer.

"There is some minor burns on the shoulder, possibly some ligament separation. He needs more specific attention than sedatives. I--"

We all jumped as the intercom beeped, and there was a split second as the doctor and the guard looked up. I stretched my fingers, only moving my hand at the wrist so the guard wouldn't notice, and lifted the hypospray off of his belt with two fingers, flipping it into the chair next to my hip. Neither man seemed to notice the theft or my shifting to hide the device with my leg.

"Yes," the doctor said. He turned towards the communications panel. "What is it?"

"We have some injuries up here, Doc." I didn't recognize the voice. "As soon as we're clear I'm going to bring them down. You going to be ready?"

"Not a problem. What's going on up there?"

The guard was preoccupied with the doctor and the conversation. I eased the injector out, set it to maximum dosage, and plunged it into the soft flesh under the guard's chin. His eyes went wide, so wide they looked like they were going to pop out of his skull. There was a loud rush of air and the guard collapsed, blood and serum drooling through his clenched teeth.

His body jerked about as wracking spasms shot through his limbs, and I felt sorry for him.

"Doc! What's happening to him?" I shouted.

The medic rushed over to the guard, and right into my reach. Men have two real weak spots you won't find on a woman, the first of which being the balls. Contrary to popular myth, the knee-jerk reactions of most men makes the testicles hard as hell to hit. The second, and not nearly as well known, is the Adam's apple.

I grabbed the doctor by his throat, clenching my fingers around the knot of tissue. His eyes went wide.

"Urk!"

"You want to live?" I asked. "Undo my other hand. Do it now. Now!"

"Urk." He pulled the straps off my left hand. I shook the hand to loosen it up and, still holding the doctor by the throat, I undid the strap across my legs. If Griffin had gotten away and done as I had asked, Nightmare and Katt would be here soon, and everything would get really complicated—or really simple if you asked Nightmare. Life was always simple for Nightmare: if it was in his way he blew it up or shot it. He was rarely subtle.

Then again, this investigation has yet to be subtle.

Rat-face tried to speak again, but I cut him off with a wave of my index finger. "Keep quiet. I'm a man of my word. I'm not going to kill you."

"Urk?"

"I promise." I stood up and maneuvered Doc around, pushing him into the chair. I strapped him down with my good hand, releasing his throat when he was locked down. He breathed deeply. I scooped up the rifle and cradled it in my arm. "I'm going to leave you here, just stay quiet."

"You trust me?"

"Would you rather I shoot you?"

"N-no."

I shrugged. "I figured as much." I started for the door.

"But you won't get very far," he said.

"Why is that?" I stopped.

"Security is on full alert. That Zombie that nearly killed you won't shut down. It's been tearing up every floor searching for the 'intruder.' The guidance program somehow fried itself and the guards are trying everything to stop it. You're safer here than any other place in the building."

I walked back to him. "So I can either stay here and do nothing but get interrogated some more, or I can go out there and face the entire security force of the building as well as a droid that won't stop until I'm dead. Hmm. Tough choices, but I think I'll take my chances."

I yanked the hypospray out of the guard's head, and started scrounging through the canisters on the nearby tray. "What are you doing?" the doctor asked.

"I promised I wouldn't kill you, but I can't leave you here to ruin my escape," I said. I wiped the gore off the device and loaded it with a blue liquid. Resetting the dosage, I gave Rat-face a quick burst of sedative. He lost consciousness after a few moments, his eyes sagging as his body slumped in the chair. "I've got that black magic feeling," I muttered.

Pausing only to take the dead guard's keycard and com- mike, I moved to the door, hefted the rifle onto my shoulder and inserted the card into the lock. The door whisked open, and while it made more noise than I liked, everything was quiet in the corridor beyond the doorway. I edged out, glancing either direction. No one was in sight. Hopefully the Zombie would keep the guards busy until I escaped.

Right-hand Rule, I thought as I moved down the right side. *When in doubt, Right-hand Rule.*

I passed a door to one of the stairwells, but I could hear the thumps of booted feet on the tiled landing, so I kept going down the hall. Somewhere above me I heard the faint chorus of gunfire.

The guard's com buzzed. "Conner to all units. We have the droid pinned down in the east wing of floor twenty-nine. We'll maintain our position. Send reinforcements with heavy lasers." I vaguely remembered being on the twenty-eighth floor, which made them too close for comfort.

I was almost willing to risk the elevators. I rounded the corner and saw the doors ahead, and no one was around. Maybe--

"What the--" the mike cut in. "It's escaping! Get--"

At the far end of the corridor, the ceiling lights exploded into a cascade of sparks and dust. In the sudden cloud that billowed towards me, I could see something drop from the ceiling to the hallway. *You've gotta be shitting me.* I could hear the familiar whirring sound as the Zombie scuttled forward on its legs. Its sensors gave off a piercing shriek as it recognized me. I backpedaled around the corner just in time to avoid the kiss of a laser that flicked down the hall.

The sounds of its metal legs echoed behind me as I sprinted for the next sealed door. I expected to feel the laser or autocannon rip me apart as I used the keycard to unlock the door. I risked a glance back as the portal opened, and ducked inside as the droid rounded the corner and opened fire.

The door closed. I grabbed the com-mike and tried to slow my breathing. "All units, all units, the droid is on twenty-eight, I repeat, twenty-eight. Request back-up."

"Roger that," Connor said, oblivious.

Well, let's see if we can hold out until the help gets here. I glanced around the room. This seemed to be mainly a storage room, with metal crates lining the walls. And although the lighting was dim, I could see that there was also a webbing of pipes and vents that serviced this entire floor. It wasn't much in terms of defense, but least I was out of the way of normal traffic. I headed for the rear of the room, slipping between crates and ducking under pipes. Maybe I could hide in some nook in the back and wait for everything to blow over.

That was Plan A, in any case.

I jumped as a sudden rattling came from the door, and tiny dents began collecting on the metal surface, spreading outwards from the center. It was enhanced by a glowing red dot on the door, the brightness of which began to intensify. The droid was using both the autocannon and laser to break through the door. *It seems to be taking this personally.* I tried to ignore the rapid tattoo being beaten against the door by the bullets. I looked for any escape, anything I could use to fight the Zombie--

I froze.

My throat clenched, and for a moment I knew I was dead. I expected to be sliced in half by gunfire, but the death volley never came. The Zombie stood hunched on its insect-like legs, the laser and autocannon poised in my direction. It was cloaked by shadows, barely visible in the dim light.

No, it's not the Zombie. It's a Zombie.

I steadied my breathing, studying the inert droid. I was damn good at hot-wiring any vehicle made by humans, and quite a few from other races. *Okay, let's try Plan B.* I looked at the door. The laser was causing the door to start to glow, which left me few options, and almost no time to look. A normal laser would take several minutes to burn through steel enough

I pulled the droid out of the corner and felt around on its back for the control panel. Finding the hairline seams, I pried the metal lid off, revealing the small keyboard and screen, as well as the chip-laden board.

The first thing to do was to replace the secondary command chip with one of the spare chips on the board. The primary command chip dealt with weapons, movement, and other basic functions, sort of like the unconscious reflexes in living things that kept breathing going and the heart rate pumping. The secondary had all the other details, such as "Guard this room" or "kill Warlock."

At least, that was if the Zombie was like most droids.

If not, I'm screwed, I told myself.

I tugged on the board to expose the chips. It didn't budge. I studied it more closely, and noticed for the first time the strange device that overlapped the board. The casing mostly hid it, but there were several wires leading to it. The droid shell didn't seem designed to hold the device. *Power source? Sensor cluster?* I had never seen anything like it. I shrugged and ripped it out.

It was a silver and black canister, about the size of my fist. In the center, behind a transparent panel, sat a strange crystal, its misty rose facets glowing from the lights of the device. It certainly wasn't a bomb. The one attempt at crystalline explosive I knew of had been disastrous.

The gunfire was steadily growing louder as the layers of metal dissolved under the beating. I slipped the thing in my jacket pocket and turned to the droid. Now the chip board came out easily, and I yanked the secondary control chip out and flicked it over my shoulder vaguely listening to it clatter across the floor. I popped one of the chips off a minor spot on the board and pressed it into the appropriate slot, then returned the control board.

You take this wire and those wires . . . I now had a blank slate for the droid's objectives. A little programming and I might live through this yet. Programming droids was simpler than one might think, but I had to be careful. The commands could not overlap or contradict, or the droid's circuits would lock.

The marines, in preparing soldiers for the world, tried to maintain a well-rounded course selection, and basic programming was involved. I was no expert, but I could handle basics. I started typing.

>ACTIVATE WEAPONRY

>MAINTAIN POSITION

>NO UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY ALLOWED

>TERMINATE ANY THREAT TO UNIT

I hit a few more keys, then closed the lid, locking it down, leaving one switch visible on the tarnished metal surface. I took a deep breath, gathered my resolve, and picked up my rifle again.

A simple touch of switch and the droid came to life, raising up on its many legs. It didn't move, but I could hear the internal sensors thrumming with power. The medium laser and autocannon powered up. It shifted slightly, almost like a puppy, to study the door. I rose, waiting to be attacked, but my program seemed good.

I crept back to the very back of the store room, slipping into an alcove formed by a row of cold pipes and the back corner. There was enough of a space between pipes to see the door and the Zombie silhouetted against the near-molten door.

Here we go.

An opening melted away in the door, small at first, but quickly widening into a large hole, as rivulets of metal slag pooled on the ground, hissing like coiled snakes. The Zombie--my nemesis, as it were--peered though the ruined portal, weapons swiveling as it searched for a target.

My Zombie lowered its main body and widened its stance, bracing itself. The muzzles of its weapons focused on the doorway, like a predator stalking its prey, waiting in the darkness to pounce.

The other droid stepped in from the hallway, and there was an agonizing pause as the two guard units studied each other. Their weapons shifted in unison, and their stances matched as they swept their sensors across each other. It was a mirrored dance, a waltz of paralleled machines.

And in unison, in a chorus of blazing fury and unbridled power, they opened up on each other with everything they could spit out. The storeroom was suddenly bright with the radiance from the lasers and the autocannon fire, and I could hear both droids absorb the bullets

from the sound on their shells. And in a wink both droids burst like bubbles, mirror images even in destruction; this was their final act together.

The explosion sent fire roaring everywhere, unfolding almost like a beautiful red flower. I could feel my eyes dilate from the brightness of flames, feel my pores stretch under the heralding wave of heat. The droids had been installed with auto-destroy fail-safe.

Figures. I sighed.

The explosion engulfed me and for an instant I was overwhelmed by heat, flame coating my skin, filling my eyes, my ears, my nose. I could feel my skin ignite like a spark off a piece of flint, and just before unconsciousness swallowed me, a wave of cold harsher than anything I had ever felt before crashed over my body.

I was gone.

Chapter Two

*And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

—Dylan Thomas,
(A poet rumored to have
been from Earth, but this
is only to add to the
mystique of his work)

Metaltech Corporate Headquarters, Aldion III

I was floating in the dark depths of the ocean, in the cold embrace of deep space. I couldn't breathe, didn't need to breathe in this emptiness. I had no lungs to use. I was adrift in a void, with no form, no proof of existing in any state except that I was *aware*. I knew who I was and what had happened. Fire . . . the explosion . . . pain. That was it. The droids had consumed themselves and everything else in the room—including me—by activating some sort of self-destruct circuit. I was dead, and this was the afterlife. I wondered if the priests were right about heaven and hell. If they were, which was this? All in all, I had expected something more grand, more dramatic, less empty. Shouldn't the Powers-that-be have a little more artistic license? Maybe this was hell after all. Or maybe this was simply *it*.

When my father died and left me to rot in the orphanage, his last words were of something coming to him to take his spirit away to be at peace with his "ancestors." I felt no peace here. Maybe I had disappointed my father somehow, and he banished me here to be alone with my thoughts to torture me. It was something he would have done.

Maybe I hadn't been Indian enough.

My father, like his father before him, was one of the radical group of Native Americans that still believed that the Earth was real and not a legend, and that it was their destiny to return to it one day and claim it as their own. "Why else are we called 'Native Americans', he'd say,

and I'd always reply with what the teachers said: "We come from the Amer V Cluster, that's why," at which point I'd get a stern look from the old man.

I never liked the spirits and strange rituals that Father adhered to, could never understand them or him. It was too strange. It never made any sense. If I wanted weird, there were plenty of races to accommodate one. I was always looking at the stars, not the spirits around me. When my father died, I had no one left to teach me.

This was one of those times I wished I had understood and believed everything the way he did. I needed his faith. *Any* faith, at this point. The darkness was complete and unending.

At that moment, something happened. Something changed.

It was a speck of white faintly visible in the distance. I was surprised to even have noticed it, since it was hard to make out at first, indistinct even against the broad expanse of darkness. Maybe this was that tunnel I was supposed to be looking for, that I would go through to reach the "other side." I focused on the pinpoint of white.

It drew closer, swelling in my vision. I could hear--although I had no ears--a faint rapping as I drew closer to the light. Slowly, the glow began to take shape, the rapping growing stronger in my ears. I knew what was approaching me; my father had mentioned it on his deathbed, but I had assumed it was delirium. He had been right all along. This was not the end of a tunnel that I was approaching. This was something coming at me. The rapping turned into thunder all around me as the being came into full view.

A pale horse was coming for me.

It was galloping at full speed, white mane and tail flying back as it leaned into the run. Its hooves glowed with white fire, and its flanks shone with a strange fire. The beauty of the creature astounded me, the raw power. The legends were true. My father had been right.

Suddenly the blackness was lit up with white words that scrolled past, spewing out of the shadows below me and rising up to be swallowed back into the darkness:

config cybersys.bat

organic interlinks active

integration confirm

config cybereye

The pale horse was close; tucking its chin in to crash through the words that smoldered in the space between us. White fire came from its nostrils in brief goutts, and its ebony eyes glared at me.

A blue dot popped up between us, growing vertically in both directions into a thin line of blue radiance, which rotated and the line was actually the side view of a screen that swiveled and blocked the stallion from my view. I looked at the screen, and found it was a window. More letters scrolled by, this time on the window, not empty air. The thunder of the pale horse fell silent.

cybereye active

synapse translators on

I stared through the window. A beautiful blonde woman in a white smock was standing over a computer terminal, studying what the monitor revealed. She was perhaps one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen, like a holo-model or actress, but she lacked the self-awareness of that beauty in her movements, the self-centered air that radiated from many beautiful women. She was professional, down-to-business. She walked over to the window, leaned down, filling the entire window with her tan face, framing my vision with long, blonde hair. Her ice-blue eyes studied something out of my view.

I knew her. What was her name?

She moved back to her terminal, making a note on a data pad she carried. She reminded me of a feline in the way she moved and walked, much like a panther or tiger hunting an elusive prey. The fact that she was in a lab, meant that she was a tekkie or a scientist, and her prey was information.

Katt. That was her name. Katt. What did that mean? Did this have anything to do with the pale horse? Katt punched a button on the terminal.

system ops good

translator response good

config secondary systems

activate target sys

In the window, a crosshair appeared dead center, targeting the computer past the small of Katt's back and to her right. The gold cross then proceeded to float all about the window, from top to bottom and touching both sides. Then the crosshair vanished.

I had to get her attention. Maybe I could make contact, make her understand, get help to find a way back. I didn't want to go with the pale horse. I vaguely remembered that Katt was the best in her field. She would be able to help. *But how do I get her attention?*

target sys good

activate lumin sys

It was hopeless. I had no hands to pound on the window with, no mouth to use to scream at her. Maybe I was out of time.

error

Incompatibility flux

sector 23xyd5 bad

reboot?

Katt gave a curse I couldn't hear, and angrily thumbed a key on the computer. The window flashed brightly, the light blinding me as the screen winked out. Spots danced before me in the dark, the residue of the light dissolving away. I was once again wrapped in the darkness. The pale horse was gone.

And then, I was somewhere else.

My senses were overwhelmed, shifting from the intangible to the tangible with a sudden rush. Sights, sounds, and smells cascaded over me. It was refreshing and painful all at once. I was in a small glade, surrounded by trees, and the sun was hot on my skin. Somewhere nearby, out of sight but still loud in my ears, was a fast-moving stream. I could smell some sweet-smelling flower in the air, the aroma coming from a cluster of white tiny flowers with drooping petals. It smelled like honey, but more pure, richer in comparison.

"Honeysuckle," a gruff voice piped up.

I spun, but saw nothing. "What?" My vision seemed off, like I had one eye closed. I felt my face, but when I tried to reach with my left hand, nothing happened. My right hand moved, but from my left, nothing. I looked down, and I had no left arm. I pulled the shirt away and where my arm had been ended in smooth skin. No scar, no lumps of cartilage or bone left over, just smooth flesh. I had no left arm. I felt my face with my right hand. Again, I found smooth flesh. My face was normal, but I seemed to be missing my right eye. It was as if I had been born with out either the eye or the arm. Almost as if it were perfectly natural.

Perfectly natural my ass. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Sit down and relax. That's the problem with you humans, always rushing this way and that, running around and never getting anywhere. Me, I like a nice nap in the sun, fresh meat, and a sexy little mate by my side. Say, have you seen the Earth Mother? She's lost, and I've been trying to find her for a long time."

The shaggy lump behind a fallen log moved, and I realized it was an animal. It's fur was charcoal gray, and there was a black spot over its left golden eye. It reminded me of a wolf, with gleaming white teeth and a canine's lean, strong body, but rather than bearing a full coat and a squared muzzle, this animal's fur was scraggly, it's face longer while the over body was smaller than a wolf. This was a coyote. *I'll be damned. The coyote's talking!*

"Well don't look so surprised, Lefty."

"You spoke?"

"You're observant for a man with only one eye. Sit down."

I circled the log and the coyote warily. I had yet to meet an intelligent animal like this one. I had only seen coyotes in holo-exhibits, but I was pretty sure speech was not within their abilities. Which meant I was insane.

No reason why I shouldn't indulge my insanity. "Who are you? What are you?"

The animal gave a soft sigh and shook its head. "It doesn't matter who I am. The question is: who are you?"

"My name is Warlock."

The coyote cackled. "That's funny. No, no, that's really funny. I know who you *are*. I want to know *who* you are."

"I don't understand."

"Of course not. If you understood, than you wouldn't be here, and I wouldn't have to deal with you. Stupid boy. Do you really think I have nothing better to do than sit around here and chitchat? Hmmn?" He started to preen himself. "And to think, they pull me away from Mink to deal with you. Now there's a spirit for you. Beautiful, long fur, voice like silk, tail that just makes you--"

"Spirit?" I started to laugh. "You're one of the Great Spirits?" I almost laughed.

"What's so funny?" Coyote's coat ruffled in anger. "You think you could do this job, punk? Right."

"I must be the only man whose spirit totem has an attitude problem. And I meet you after I die? Nice timing. I could have used you earlier."

"Really? You seemed to be doing real well for yourself. It takes a real professional to blow up five floors of a corporate building and his own fool self in the process. Oh yeah, you've done real well. Real piece o' work, you are."

"Look calm down, I--"

"And you think you got it bad? Try being the spirit guide for a man who dashes over here and runs over there until he blows his own ass off. You're no easy job, you know. You want calm, go find Buddha." Coyote sneered and looked me over. "What's the sound of a Navajo missing one arm clapping?"

"Coyote--" I said.

"Sit down."

"I--"

"Sit. Down. Shut. Up."

Weary of the arguments, I used my good arm and lowered myself down, leaning back against the log. The bark crunched pleasantly under my weight. "This is too weird." I took a deep breath, drinking in the sweet smells. "You know how often I dreamed of seeing a spirit as a kid?"

"Yes," Coyote grinned. "Two hundred and six."

"So where were you? I waited and I waited for a sign that Father was right and you never came. I needed you there. Why come to me after everything's over and I'm dead?"

Coyote shuffled out from under the log and shook himself out, stretching his joints with languid movements. "If you really needed me back then, I would have been there. You weren't ready yet. Maybe now you're ready. Ready to hear, to listen."

"Listen? Listen to what?"

"The cycles. Everything comes and goes in cycles. Everything in nature and everything not of nature must obey the cycles. Listen to them." And with that, Coyote lunged forward and bit my arm, sinking his teeth into muscle and sinew. The pain was sudden, sharp and raw.

* * *

White light. Loud hiss.

The pain was sharp, a cold penetration sinking deep into my arm, my veins swelling as something was forced into my system. I jumped up out of instinct, not sure where I was, or even who I was. I fell out of a medical bed, pulling white sheets and cables down onto the polished floor, landing poorly. I felt almost drunk, my mind was so clouded, my limbs moving of their own violation. I couldn't even pick myself up off the floor.

"Wonderful, just wonderful work, people. Anders, where'd you learn bedside manner, anyway?"

"Stitcher, I--"

"Shut up. Grab his legs. One, two, up!" Hands pulled me off the floor and back on to the bed.

There was a black man standing over me, wearing his doctor's coat over more comfortable clothes. His hair was quite short, and it looked like he had a pair of cybershades -- the latest fashion on the street; a pair of dark or mirrored glasses embedded directly into the face -- so all I saw looking up at him were faint, distorted reflections of myself. He fiddled with the buttons on the hypo at lightning speed, and with incredible precision. The good doctor had cyberhands as well. I tried to speak, but my tongue and throat seemed to get in the way, and the words came out garbled, as if they were my first. He nodded at me. "You're in shock. Just relax." He smiled as he finished giving me the shot. "You're going to be fine."

I wasn't sure, but I slipped again into the warm folds of unconsciousness, and I found no white horses, no talking animals to disturb my sleep. One thought, one tiny little voice continued to pester me as I slept:

Wasn't I dead?

* * *

When I awoke, I almost prayed for death. My entire body ached; every move sent shivers of pain up my legs, my arms, and my back. Everything hurt. Everything, that is, except for my left arm and my right eye. Strangely, they seemed to be the only two areas that had no pain.

I tilted my head, stifling a moan, and looked at the arm. The limb was cybernetic. Every digit, every muscle, every tendon was replicated but with chrome, plastic and hose. The veins and arteries inside were undoubtedly circuitry and wires. I wiggled the fingers, and they responded as if the arm was my own, which in a sense it was. I pulled my medical shirt up, and the cyberlimb was grafted directly onto the flesh and bone of my shoulder.

"Great," I said. I pulled a mirror off the table nearby and examined my eye. Sure enough, it was cybernetic as well. The orb looked real enough, but the iris was transparent, the pupil within it glowing with a soft yellow light. "Just great." The idea of cybernetics was unsettling. I had never needed them before. I hated relying on them now. I looked for a clock. *How long have I been out?*

"We can match the color of your other eye later. There are still some minor adjustments." The voice was a sexy contralto, definitely female, and definitely familiar. Katt strode over and leaned in close to examine the orb. Her perfume washed over me like a warm caress. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm not dead yet," I said.

Katt looked over her shoulder at someone. I followed her glance and saw two men, the black doctor and someone else. She turned back to me and her voice was hushed. "Warlock, we need to ask you some questions, make sure you're all in there," Katt rapped lightly on my forehead with one knuckle.

I nodded. It made sense. After the explosion, they must have put me back together and now they needed to make certain that all the parts worked. "Griffin? Is she okay?"

Katt nodded. "She's fine. She made it downstairs safely." She paused, studying my eyes. "Are you up to these questions?"

"Absolutely."

The black man sauntered over. "Vitals are looking good, my friend. Do you feel okay?"

I shrugged. "Been better."

"The name's Stitcher," he said, offering his hand. I grasped it. "I'm the new clean-up man Cavalier hired around here."

"Guess I made you earn your pay."

"You've got that right." I noticed as he moved that his coat opened just enough to reveal a sidearm. A holster was belted to the side of his leg, a worn leather holster bearing a long barreled revolver. Reminded me of a holographic western, like *To Tame Sierra Prime*, or the *Outlaws of the Venoki Belt*. Stitcher realized I had noticed and he drew the pistol, gave it a twirl, and holstered it in one smooth move. "Fastest draw this side of the Emergency Ward."

"Tough crowds?"

"You wouldn't believe."

Katt sat down in a chair by the window. She had always been cold around most men. Nightmare was the only man who could touch her without arousing her defenses, and while she could touch my arm and even flirt with me, it was always on her terms. I could only guess what had happened to her in her past. I could see the frosty treatment she was giving the suit, almost like tangible waves through the air. She pointedly sat away from him and ignored him completely.

The nameless man gave a small smile and nodded in my direction. I rubbed my eyes with my hands, startled at how cold the touch was of my cybernetic fingers.

"Who's the suit?"

Stitcher chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. "Not my idea, man. Cavalier wants him here for the questions. He's some data pusher, wants to verify all this for the muckity-mucks above."

"My name is Peter Malcolm, Mister Warlock," the suit smiled. I muttered under my breath and rubbed my face again. Everything seemed to be normal, but it still seemed hard to separate the dreams from reality. Everything blurred together as if I had been an observer rather than a participant. "I beg your pardon?" Peter's brow creased.

"I said, drop the 'mister'. It's just Warlock."

"Of course."

I motioned for Stitcher to lean in close. "Does he really have to be here?"

"I just work here. I don't make the rules."

"I think he should leave," Katt said.

I gave him a dirty look. He responded with his most charming smile, which had no effect on me except to annoy me further, and proceeded to take the chair on the other side of the suit. Looking at the three of them, I had the vague impression of a board of inquisition. "So what do you want to know? Height? Weight? Blood type?"

"Six-foot even, one-fifty," Katt said.

"B-positive," Stitcher said.

"Thank you both, but I need to hear it from him. What," Malcolm leaned forward, "is your real name?"

"Greyson. Greyson Lightfoot."

He made a note on the data-pad. "To your best recollection, what was your earliest memory?"

"My earliest what?"

"Memory, Mr. Lightfoot. Your first memory."

"Could I get something to drink?" I asked, my throat suddenly dry. Katt got up.

"Thanks, Katt. Make it water, cold. Thanks. Now let me get this straight, you want me to tell you my earliest memory? And you're serious about this, right?"

"Very serious, Mr. Lightfoot."

"Call me Warlock. No *mister*, no *Lightfoot*." I took a sip of the water, flinching as the cold liquid poured down my dry throat. I sighed. Talking about my past was one of the hardest things for me. "I remember living with my father at his place on Amer IV. Lots of woods, lots of wildlife. He liked to take me hunting. By the time I was five, I could track and hunt and move without making a sound."

"What happened when you were five?"

I met Malcolm's gaze behind his ugly, shaded glasses. "When I was ten years old, my father died."

"I'm sorry, but –"

"My mom died in childbirth, so when he died my Father left me an orphan. I was moved off planet, bounced around from here to there. Two years later I sneak on board a freighter and when the captain finds me, he drops me off here, on Aldion III. I swear, I thought he was going to toss me out an airlock. Anyway, I take up lifting wallets for credits when I get caught by Gregor McEdlin, a security officer for this tiny corporation, and rather than busting me, he takes me in. He had a daughter and son about my age, and I guess it tugged at his conscience."

"Griffin," Katt said, nodding to herself in understanding.

"Yeah. They let me stay there, put me in school, kept me off the streets until I was sixteen, when I joined the marines." I allowed myself a fond memory. "I liked Gregor. He was a good man. They're a good family in general. Say, whatever happened to that disc? Anything on it?"

"We'll get to that later, Warlock." Malcolm leaned back. "What about your military career?"

"Breck was like my big brother. I want to know why he died." I sat up in the bed. "What the fuck was on that disc?"

"Easy," Katt purred, putting a hand on my shoulder. "Everything is okay. We'll tell you after he's finished with his questions. I promise it's okay." She pushed me back down on the bed. Over her shoulder, I caught Stitcher giving me a helpless look.

"Would you please stop it with the 'feminine wiles' and all that. You're Nightmare's woman. It won't work on me."

"You so cute when you're riled." She glanced over at Malcolm. "How much longer?"

"Just a little more. He's doing remarkably well."

"Damn straight," Stitcher muttered.

"Warlock?" Malcolm said.

"Right. Military career. Two tours of duty on the rim worlds, one with regular marines, one in shadow ops. Lots of experience with demolition, espionage, that sort of thing. The sort of thing I would have to kill you if I told you. And I was taught how to kill you. Four years after joining the marines I left and joined the Rangers, which is sort of the shadow op of the IPF."

"IPF?"

"Intergalactic Police Force. Each planet has their own law enforcement agencies, but the IPF links all human agencies across the worlds. Helps to catch off-world criminals."

"Where did you meet Nightmare?" Katt asked, watching my reaction.

"In the marines, on the moon of Syrda. Metaltech and the space marines worked together to evacuate and rescue a colony that was way too close to the Ithrilli pirate network. The Ithrilli had decided to take some hostages, so Nightmare and I took our squads into their base on the planet. Nightmare and I were the only ones to walk out."

"Total casualties of the colonists and your men?" Malcolm smirked. "Not very professional of you, was it?"

"The colonists were already dead. The Ithrilli were preparing them as food, and using them as bait to lure us in. Nightmare and I blasted the place, kept them from ever doing it again. Have you ever seen an Ithrilli go to work on a human being? It's not pretty, and it's not decent."

"And now?" Malcolm marked another note on his pad.

"Now, I am the official liaison between the Rangers and Metaltech. I mainly work with the company and keep the peace as it were. I had already worked with Metaltech, so it was the obvious choice."

Stitcher snickered at this. Malcolm looked incredulous. "Do you realize what you've done? Do you remember everything about that last day?"

"Yeah. I remember everything."

"You blew up four floors of a high-security corporate building and killed who knows how many guards in the blast. Is that what you call keeping the peace?"

"Between them and the droid everyone wanted me dead. It was either them or me, I preferred it be them. I'm sorry if that offends your sensibilities, or doesn't agree with the statistics or whatever, but that's the rules out in the field. Deal with it."

He shook his head. "Whatever."

"What's the verdict?" Stitcher asked Malcolm.

"Full memory recovery, from what I can tell. I think our job is done. I'll file a report with my people, and they'll send you a copy." He shook my hand. "It has been a pleasure, Warlock. Good luck. You seem to need some." With that, Peter Malcolm left the room, closing the door behind him.

And stay the fuck out," Katt muttered as the door shut.

"What was that about? Who is he anyway?"

Katt and Stitcher exchanged looks.

“What?”

“Warlock, Malcolm belongs to a specific agency that does medical research for the military. When you were a shadow operative, do you remember giving tissue and blood samples to put on official record?”

“Everyone does that in case they find a body and can’t identify it through the normal means, they can run a DNA check. Standard stuff.”

Stitcher nodded. “That’s what they told you, anyway.”

“What did they do with my samples?”

“They were within their rights, Warlock.” Katt rubbed her forehead. “They legally owned the samples, and they could do whatever they wanted to with them.”

“What did they do?” Gooseflesh rippled down my arm and back, as I looked between the two of them. Something weird was going on, and everyone seemed reluctant to talk about it. It was something important.

Stitcher stood by the window as he spoke, folding his hands behind him. “The agency works on base-acid reengineering. Detailed genetic recombination. And they used the free tissue samples the military didn’t need. You weren’t the only one who they did this to, just one of the very few successes. In fact, you’re the first person to come through the memory transfer intact. Most times, the brain can’t maintain synapse integrity and shuts down. You’re the very first success in the long history of genetics.”

“Successful what?” I practically screamed.

Katt broke in. “Gordon Lightfoot died in that building, his flesh burnt from his bones. Most of his mind was still intact, because he was hiding behind some coolant pipes, and when the place went up, they burst, dowsing him in coolant. It wasn’t enough to save the man, but it was enough to keep the brain and most internal organs intact. That’s how we did the memory updating. You are the first successful attempt of a human being.

"You're a clone."

I felt like someone had kicked me in the chest. A weight pressed down on my lungs and my head spun. I had died. I was dead. *No, not you. Warlock. Warlock is dead. You're not even him.*

I wasn't even real. Warlock had died, consumed in the explosion he had accidentally created. I was the leftover, a genetic experiment that had miraculously worked. I was a joke, a creation. Less than human. I did what any other self-respecting person would do if they found out that every memory they ever had belonged to someone else.

I threw up.

Once done, I moved to the sink from the toilet, conscious of Katt standing at the doorway. I was dressed only in the white shorts I had been wearing in bed, the tile floor cold on my knees. I let cold water pool in the metal basin, splashed it on my face, ran it through my mustache and beard. "Warlock, I'm sorry," she said.

"But I'm not Warlock. That's just it."

"But you are. You have his skills, his memories, his instincts. Everything that made Warlock who he was is in you. His genetic makeup is yours, his fingerprints are yours, his body odor is yours. The only difference is that you can remember dying. That and the cyberarm and cybereye." She sighed. "You are Warlock."

I stared at the face in the mirror. "Do I have his soul?"

"You tell me."

Cool water dribbled down my face and jaw, dripping down on my chest. I flexed my left arm, listening to the hum of the servos. "So why all the cybernetics? I had assumed they were from the explosion. What happened?"

"As soon as you were reported dead, these guys from this agency contacted Cavalier and set up the labs for memory integration. Unfortunately there was an accident in the suspension chamber, and you thawed out early. The arm and the eye were unsalvageable, torn

up from blown seals. Stitcher and I gave you the cybernetics, and he actually helped with the transfer. Personally, I think he was the reason your case was successful.”

“So I’m a piece of meat belonging to some agency?”

“Nah. Cavalier took care of the red tape, and while they were really pissed, the Agency boys left right after you woke up,” she said.

“So how long have I been out?”

Katt’s gaze went distant as she did the mental math. “The explosion at the Nebula Corporation was about two months ago.”

“Two months? It feels like two days.”

“Trust me. I know it’s a little disconcerting, but —”

“Don’t give me that line. Just don’t.” I ran a rough towel over my face. “You have no idea what this is like, what I’ve gone through. When you die and wake up in the body of your own clone, then you can tell me how I feel.” I looked at her. “Back to business. What about that disc? What’s on it?”

“We’ll save that for later. There’s a little more that I need to explain. And I need to show you for yourself. It’s a little complicated.”

I cocked an eyebrow at her. “More complicated than this cloning mess? You’re joking, right?” I glanced from Katt to Stitcher and back again. I tossed the towel down on the sink and spread my hands. “Fine, fine. Let’s go. I’m sore as hell, but I’d rather be up and moving than sedated on that stuff again.”

“Hey, now. That was good stuff. Was it not working?” Stitcher asked.

“No, it’s not that. I just had this really strange dream while I was out.” An image of Coyote rose before my eyes, and I blinked the illusion away. “It was very real and very . . . different.”

“I’m not surprised,” Stitcher said. “That memory implant took some time to lock in. Those images can get a bit jumbled around.” Like you’d know, I thought but didn’t say. “I

hope they weren't too bad." He pulled out a data-pad and keyed in some information. "We'll change the dosage and change the mix around. That should help."

"What was the dream about?" Katt asked.

"Oh, I was nearly trampled by a white horse, and then I had a strange discussion with a coyote." I shrugged. "The usual dreams you have when you die and wake up as a clone of yourself." I pulled on my shirt and a pair of pants, wiggling my toes on the cold floor and enjoying the sensation. "So what is it you want to show me?"

Katt and Stitcher exchanged glances again.

I was learning to hate it when they did that.

"He's still weak and in emotional--if not physical--shock," Stitcher said, studying some read-outs from my medical chart. "His pressure's up and I don't like his synapse rate. Maybe this should wait for later, when he's more stable."

"Synapse rate? You're joking, right?" Katt chuckled as she watched me slip my boots on. "He needs to know everything," she said. "Besides, it's not as bad as all that."

"Let's get some food in him, get him some real sleep, and we can show him tomorrow."

I stood up. "I say we talk to him, not around him." I looked at them each in turn. "I think he'd appreciate that little bit of courtesy."

Stitcher raised his hands. "Sorry, man."

Katt shrugged. "What do you want to do?"

"Food and sleep sounds really good right now. Besides, I'm still trying to adjust to me not being me." I ducked into the bathroom and glanced in the mirror. The face that looked back at me was Warlock's but different. It wasn't just the black beard, and it wasn't just the long hair—I had always worn it shoulder length. The face was different. New, less used. Little details were gone, like my old acne scars on my cheeks, and the one scar that used to run along my hairline. This skin was fresh. Not everything on my face was new, though. My eyes were old.

"Warlock? You sure you're even up to eating?" Stitcher leaned in the doorway.

"Yeah," I said. "Let's go."

* * *

The mess hall was almost empty, not surprising considering it was the middle of the afternoon, between the lunch and dinner rushes. All the people who were there were involved in their own affairs, and paid me no notice. The sounds of their voices, the smell of the food and rich coffee, all of them seemed more vibrant and alive than ever before. Then again, this was my first time to experience everything that I knew intimately and yet was just learning about. It caught me off guard, but not by much. Katt and Stitcher stopped to talk to some of the lab folks in the corner as I grabbed a tray. The serving droid gave me a helping of fish pasta and some tea. I left the line and was walking towards the back of the hall when I stopped in my tracks.

Griffin sat by herself, studying a datapad as she ate. She was dressed in a forest green jumpsuit and the badge dangling from her pocket marked her as a Metaltech grid-runner. She looked confident and in her element. She didn't have Katt's striking beauty, but rather her beauty radiated from her like warmth, and just seeing her made me feel better. She looked up and our eyes met. Her fork fell from her fingers, clattering on her plate. "Warlock?"

"Hi. May I sit down?"

"Ye-yes, sure. Please." She moved her tray a bit to make room. "How are you feeling?"

"You want the truth or you want me to make you feel good?"

"Umm truth." She sat the datapad aside, and folded her hands before her. "You were always bad at lying."

"Only with you," I said. The tea was a citrus and honey blend. It tasted sweet on the way down to my empty stomach. "I feel like I've always been me and yet it's not me. Like I've

lived this life, for good or ill, and suddenly someone's telling me that it was just a joke, someone else was in control, and I was just along for the ride."

"They only woke you up forty-eight hours ago. You still need time to adjust."

I downed a bite of the pasta. It had a bite to it, too much salt. The actual presence of food in my stomach seemed to quiet the pangs, though. "I don't know if I can."

"Can you tell me one thing, Warlock?"

"I can try."

"Why is all this happening? First I lose Breck, and then I almost lost you. Why? All I want is some reason for all this death." Here was a young woman with a good childhood who had never been exposed to violence and death like this. And when she was the most unprepared for it, she was thrust into the middle of the storm.

"What did that disc have on it? Maybe that will help."

"Nothing useful. There's a lot of raw data, numbers but no substance."

"We can't read it?"

"Not without the reference points. It's like having all the internal pieces, the muscles and organs, but no skeleton. All the data is useless without the program that it belongs to, and there's not a single clue as to that mother program." She shook her head. "We're never going to know."

"Don't give up yet," I said, mulling over my memories. I took a sip of tea. "There's something that bothers me about the droids. The guards at Nebula seemed to have no control over them. Like they were running some sort of separate program."

"I'm not following."

"The droid was after us, me—Warlock—and it wanted me bad. Almost as if it was taking the entire matter very personally. And it was killing the same security men it was supposedly working for." I looked into her curious green eyes. "They must have had hidden

agendas, hidden code in their programming. What have you been doing while you've been here?"

"Cavalier gave me an introduction and orientation, and he's been having me work on decrypting Breck's disc. Why?"

"If you get a chance, could you break into Nebula records and see where they got those droids. How long ago and from whom. If it was recently, chances are the person we're looking for is the seller. If it was a while back, it's probably someone in Nebula. We need to narrow this down."

Griffin looked undecided. She was a hacker, but this was asking her to compromise principles. Most grid-runners hacked through computer systems but never crossed certain lines. Those that did risked their lives against security programs.

"Okay," she said. "I still know a couple of back doors that they haven't closed. Do you really think this will help?"

"I don't know, but it's worth a try. It's the only thing I can think of right now." I grabbed her arm gently. "We'll get to the bottom of this, no matter what it takes. You have my word on that."

"Thanks," she said, her voice soft. "I have to get back to work now. I'll stop by later on tonight, okay?"

"I'll see you then."

She almost said something else, but thought better of it and left the table. I watched her as she walked out. She had grown up while I was in the Marines, and she wore it very well. It was a certain level of confidence, even when she wasn't sure about the world around her, she seemed sure of herself.

Damn, woman. I thought, wanting to tell her. You take my breath away.

"She's spent most of her off time in your room, waiting to see if you woke up or not," Stitcher said quietly, sitting down beside me. "You got a good one there."

"I know."

Katt took Griffin's chair. "But does she know that you know?"

I gave her a dark look.

"Do you kiss your mother with that mouth? Be careful. I can take the arm back. Oh, and just so you know, when you're done we have to go upstairs. The Big Guy wants to see you."

Great. Cavalier had requested the honor of my presence. Everyone and their grandmother wanted to ask me questions. I looked at Katt, and briefly wondered where Nightmare was, and what he was doing.

* * *

I stepped off the elevator onto wine-colored carpet and looked around. Everyone here was dressed in corporate outfits, business clothes to maintain the executive level that they felt they had earned. I was dressed in my simple pants shirt, nothing fancy. Most people would have been surprised, but I stepped through a set of double doors into the Special Operations offices.

"Good afternoon," one of the secretaries said as I walked in. "You are expected. Please go on in."

"Thanks," I said, opening another set of doors, but these led into the main office of Cavalier, my boss as liaison for the Rangers and the chief executive in charge of the Heavy Metal unit. He sat behind the desk, three computer terminals running at once.

"Warlock, come in. I think we both need a debriefing. Bad." To his credit, he did not look like a suit. He was in his late thirties, and he was still in prime condition. He was a military man, and his attitude, while relaxed in his office, was still official. He had brown hair and a

beard that had some gray just above the ears, and his eyes, the color of gunmetal, were alert as he watched the flow of data.

“How can I help?”

“What do you see out that window?” He said as he pointed.

I moved to it, and I knew what he was starting to get at. Across the way, in the distance, was the Nebula building. The middle floors, roughly Twenty-five through Thirty-three, were under construction. Most of the glass in those floors was still missing, and even from this distance I could see carbonized stains on the structure. Scaffolding wrapped the building like a cast. “I see Nebula.”

“And what do you have to say for yourself?”

I thought about it for a moment. “How about ‘ouch’?”

Cavalier spun his chair to face me. “Anything else to add?”

“If the explosion happened over two months ago, then those construction people have a fantastic union working for them. They are really slow on the ball.”

Cavalier nodded. “Fine, fine. You’ve had your say, now it’s my turn.” He stood up and walked over to stand next to me. “What the *fuck* did you think you were doing? You and I know you’re part of the Rangers, but while you are with my unit, you’d damn well better do what I say.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let me get this straight, just for my own personal amusement. You began an unofficial infiltration of this corporation without my consent or knowledge and based on the presuppositions of a depressed and distraught young woman—”

“--Who you hired--”

“— Shut up. When it’s your turn I’ll send a memo— and you and this girl went in there with no back up. None. Not even a message. On top of *that* you ran around this company, who just so happens to trade with Metaltech on a regular basis, played tag with the guards, got

doped up by their people, and then blew most of the middle structure straight to hell. Is that what happened? Does that sound about right?" He folded his arms behind his back, gazing at the building.

"About."

"I thought so. They had every right to capture you, you know. We had no real reason to be there. Did you know that they could take us to the justice Department and sue us? They could put our finances back decades even with a settlement? Did you know that?"

"No," I frowned. "I didn't hear anything about a legal suit."

"That's because there isn't one. Just like the death of that Beck—"

"Breck."

"—Breck," he amended, "just like his death, they swept it all out of sight. They want the last two months to just go away. And that's what really pisses me off!" He hurled a folder at the window, sending hard copy fluttering everywhere.

"You're mad they aren't suing us."

"You damn well better believe it!" Cavalier sputtered. "What moron wouldn't want to rob us of every credit they could possibly get?"

"Why does that upset you?"

Cavalier slammed his hand on the desk, his voice suddenly level and hushed. "It means, Warlock, that the Nebula Corporation really is up to something. Anyone who settles for peace rather than hard currency is hiding something."

"What do we do?"

Cavalier sat down, ignoring the files on the floor underneath the window. "You? You go rest and get better. When you're back up to specs we'll figure something out. Me? I'm going to get something hard and wet to drink, and try and forget all about this." He looked at one of the terminals again. "That's all. It's good to see you back from the dead, Warlock."

"One more question, Cavalier."

"Sir?"

"How much did you pay to let the agency that cloned me release me?"

"Enough that you won't be getting a paycheck for the next couple of decades. They kept saying that you were the first success they had ever had, and how it was imperative that they study you for the good of science."

"What did you tell them?"

"Fuck off."

"Ah." I liked Cavalier, respected him for his job and his common sense and loyalty to those underneath him. He was a good man, and any anger he felt was not directed at me but rather at the situation. Rather than show concern or worry about people, he got angry. He was the kind of leader who cared about his people, and who put his own neck on the line for them. He earned the respect of his men. Including my best friend. *Speaking of that—*"Say, have you seen Nightmare?"

"Hmn? Oh, yeah, weirdest thing. He's been in one of the labs Katt uses on some sort of project." He shrugged. "I just stay out of it."

"That's good, I was afraid he might've gone nuclear when I was caught in the explosion."

Cavalier stopped and turned. "Twenty soldiers died when the droids went off, and three floors were all but destroyed. The rest of the total counts, sixty-three dead, eight floors demolished are due to Nightmare after he realized you had been in the building."

"That's my pal for you."

"That's not friendship, that's frightening."

I smiled. "That's not scary, that's just Nightmare."

"True," Cavalier said. "Far too true. You're dismissed, Warlock."

I turned and left the office.

* * *

"Hold still."

I complied, settling back in the chair and folding my hands across my chest. Long, gentle fingers stroked my hair, slipping through the wet strands with the ease of a fish through water. The faint smell of the shampoo she had used filled my nostrils; it was sweet and reminded me of flowers. *Not my usual scent.* But, as Griffin said, anything's better than the smell of sweat. Besides, I needed the trim. Being grown in some biological-engineer's vat of primordial sludge, I had apparently had few haircuts, and it was almost to the small of my back.

"This feels nice," I said.

"Well, don't get used to it," Griffin chuckled. "You just caught me in one of my kinder moments, that's all."

I sighed. "Lucky me."

Cold metal touched the nape of my neck as she pulled on a handful of hair and moved the scissors into position. I almost flinched, but my patience and faith won out. The touch of metal taunted at me as she eyed the height at which she wanted to cut.

Snip!

I could feel the whisper touch of the cut hair falling on the back of my neck and then away, down to the floor. I clenched my jaw, maintaining my calm as she continued to cut at the black man I had grown in this body. It was amazing how at times I felt quite at home in this clone of myself, and how at other times it was so alien to me.

Snip, snip!

Cutting the hair around my face was the hardest part. I had been in too many knife fights for my own good, and sharp metal near my eyes was unpleasant. To my own credit, I held my tongue.

Snip. "There." She stepped back, an artist admiring her handiwork. "I think we're done. Check yourself in the mirror." I stood, running my own fingers through the hair. It was still quite damp, but it felt good, like I remembered.

I glanced at the mirror she held up. While not a professional, it looked quite good. "I like it."

"Good." She brushed the hair back from my face with her free hand, and gave me a quick kiss on the forehead. "I'm glad."

I stood up and stretched, feeling more like myself. "What do I owe you?"

"Dinner. At a nice place."

"Great."

"It's a start, anyway."

There was a knock at the door, and Stitcher stuck his head in. "Everybody decent?" I nodded to him, and his shoulders slumped. "Damn. I gotta get up earlier."

Griffin chuckled. "Much earlier."

He entered the room, followed by Katt. "How's the patient?"

"Doing okay."

"You up to doing some walking?" Katt asked, checking some charts. Griffin glanced over and raised an eyebrow. "There's something you need to see."

I swung my legs over the side of the bed. "I suppose."

Griffin headed for the door. "I have to get back to work. You can go out and play with your friends, Warlock."

I gave her a warning look, but she was already walking away, throwing us a wave.

"Where we going?"

"Wait and see." They gave me a few minutes to get dressed, and then they formed an escort on either side and we headed down the hall.

We took an elevator down to sub-basement, and we were only allowed off after Katt gave a retinal scan to confirm her identity. She led the way out into a hallway. As one of Metaltech's highest ranking field techs, she was given access just about everywhere. The few places where she could not go were uninteresting to her anyway, so she said.

The three of us went down the smaller hallway and entered a secured room – after Katt so graciously unlocked it with her passcard – that seemed to be some sort of workroom. There was a table in the center, with a set of intense lights above it and a scattering of tools and wires. I was intrigued by what she was going to show me. Katt was an expert in electronics engineering, cybernetics and a smattering of weapons tech, and so the possibilities were endless. Once she got an idea, she tinkered with it until it worked.

Let's see what the good doctor has for us today.

Katt opened up a safe box – designed for protection both from theft and on the off chance that the item is explosive--and pulled out a familiar shape. I knew it quite well. It was a small black canister, lined with chrome, with a strange red crystal in the dead center. It was the device from the droid.

"How did you get that?"

"Your – er, Warlock's body and the coolant that he was drenched in kept it from any serious damage. The outer shell had some structural problems, but nothing serious."

"And I suppose you know what it does?"

"This is the droid's shroud generator," Katt said. "Amazing piece of technology. Whereas only large vehicles could be shrouded because of the massive amount of power involved, this little guy uses a rare crystal to bounce the power stream and magnify it so the shroud can cover a small body, such as the droid. Bounce the field over several nodes implanted or on a suit, and you can shroud a man."

"All you need is a guinea pig and—" I stopped, as a flash of insight washed over me. Heat rushed up my neck, spread through my scalp. "You didn't. Tell me you didn't."

Katt shrugged. "You were just lying there, and it seemed like a good idea at the time. There are microscopic nodes in your shoulders, hips, knees, and the base of your skull. I put an exact duplicate of this cylinder in your cyberarm." She squeezed the wrist of my cyberarm and a tiny panel popped open, revealing a flat red switch. "Pressing this will activate the Shroud. Unfortunately, you will only be able to keep it on for a few minutes before you run out of juice. We can recharge it, but you can't wear it all the time."

"I don't believe this," I shook my head.

"Warlock," Stitcher stepped forward.

"I'm one giant experiment to everyone, a little rodent in a glass maze. Let's see if he can find his way out. Goddamn it!" I threw the cylinder across the room. It rebounded off the wall with a metallic *clung!* "Did you ever think that I might not want it? That I might want to try to live as normal a life as I could?"

Katt looked at me evenly. "Define normal."

"That's not the point! I have rights, don't I? I'm more than just a piece of meat for you guys to play with, right?"

"It seemed like a good thing to do at the time."

"What about side effects? Will this field hurt me at all?"

"It shouldn't—"

"Shouldn't? But you don't know for certain, do you? You just went on ahead and put it in my body because it was your first thought. 'Say, wouldn't be fun if Warlock could make himself vanish?' No attempt to find out if I wanted it or not." They stood there in stunned silence, looking at me. Katt was upset, a nerve in her jaw twitching violently. "Jesus, you don't even get it, do you? Take me back to my room."

The elevator ride back upstairs was quiet, with me fuming in one corner, Katt insulted in another, and Stitcher uncomfortable in the third. I stormed into my room and slammed the door behind me. I was weary and sore, but now I had a lot of restless energy, a lot of anger to

work off. I paced about the room for a few moments, then grabbed my worn leather jacket and pulled it on. I had to get some time away from all this.

There was a knock at the door. "Warlock? You up? Time for some of the good drugs." Stitcher said.

Time for a test run. I thumbed the secret panel on my cyberarm, and after a second's hesitation, I tapped the button. Cold chills swirled across my body as every inch of skin prickled at the same time as a soft hum revved up in my ears. I glanced down at myself, and saw the floor instead, my body now a shimmering translucence. The Shroud worked. Hell, everything Katt made or fixed always worked in perfect order. *Even me.*

Stitcher came in with some medication in one hand, and a metal cup of water in the other. My movements slow and careful to avoid unnecessary attention, I walked by him and out into the hall. Without a single glance back, I walked away.

No one noticed me as I moved. I was a wraith, a ghost slipping past nurses and executives with equal ease. I had to admit I liked the Shroud.

I thumbed the Shroud off when I got downstairs, and I stepped into the afternoon air. I needed a ride and some time alone to find myself--whoever I was. My cycle was in its usual spot where I parked when I was at the corporation. I slid onto the seat, and kicked the engine to life. The bittersweet smell of the alcohol fuel burning drifted up into my face.

With a roar of the engine and a chorus of squeals from the tires, I sped off into Klermine.

Chapter Three

*Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it:
Thinkst thou that I who saw the face of God
And tasted the eternal joys of heaven
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells
In being deprived of everlasting bliss?*

—Mephistophilis

Klermine City, Aldion III

The *Inferno* was always one of the hottest spots in the city—pun intended, since it's the truth in just about every sense of the word—and it was an excellent place to lose oneself in a crowd. It was a haven of vice, of activities legal and illegal, and was a realm where normal laws held little sway. Over the years the club had been assaulted by lawsuits, raids, and legal bans of various sorts, only to emerge more popular and profitable than ever. I was an acquaintance with the owner, Dante. Even though I was a Ranger and considered an agent of the law, I always considered the establishment as a valuable place to gather information and make contacts. A necessary evil, one might say. Today I was there for different reasons. All I wanted was a drink.

A strong one.

I parked the bike and glanced at the establishment. At one time, many years ago, it had been a large warehouse. Now the windows were alive with yellow, orange, and red lights, and even standing in the parking lot I could feel the music inside pulse through my back teeth. There was a fair crowd outside, people without enough credits to get through the door, people who had not gotten past the doorman.

I walked up to the entrance to hell. The doorman was a Ventorian, all four arms folded across his chest. He was a mean-looking mountain of muscle, his blue skin nicked and crisscrossed with black scars, the effect eerie in the light of the setting sun. One of his tusks had a gleaming metal cap. He fixed his black eyes on me as I drew close.

"Evening, Brutus," I said.

He grabbed the door for me. "Good to see you," he grunted. "Try not to cause any trouble."

I nodded and stepped into hell.

The first time you enter *the Inferno*, he or she is usually surprised, and even a bit disappointed. For all the rumors and reputation of the establishment, the first level is nothing like one would expect. Just past Brutus through the doorway is what to all appearances is a normal bar. There was a long row of stools against the bar, and a few tables and booths, all cast in the glow of blue lighting. People here are quiet, usually in hushed conversation. Illegal conversation much of the time.

I walked down the bar, enjoying the comfort of people nearby but not troubled by the social chains of knowing any of them. The music was louder here, pumping through all the cracks and vents of the walls in the room, but still muted. I strode through the bar, glancing at all the faces, as I went. Old habits die hard.

At the back of the bar was an archway with black curtains that led to the rest of Inferno, the bar—nicknamed "Limbo"—only taking up a third of the warehouse. Across the archway was a neon sign that read:

ABANDON ALL HOPE, YE WHO ENTER HERE

Cute. Obvious, but cute. The sign always got a smile out of me.

A tall man with long hair, shades, and twin cybernetic arms made of red and black chrome stood by the curtain, a scanner in his hand to tell him whether a customer was bearing cybernetics or weapons or both. I stopped so he could complete his scan, lifting my arms slightly. "You wouldn't happen to be Virgil, would you?" I chuckled.

"Name's Clyde. Who the hell is Virgil?"

“Never mind.”

He swept the scanner over me several times. “Cyberarm, and a cybereye. You’re clean. Go ahead.”

I stepped through the velvet curtain and into the heart of *Inferno*. The music surrounded me, jabbed at me with sharp chords and piercing tones. It prodded me. The crowd was large, people dancing and writhing to the sounds in a bestial ritual of adrenaline and passion. In some parts of the room, the frenzy of the participants became almost violent. The lighting was rigged to flash in rhythm with the beat of the songs. This was the club portion of the establishment—Club Discord. I scanned the room casually, not caring who was around. This wasn’t my typical crowd, but the mindlessness was appealing.

“Warlock. So it is you. Is this a business call or a pleasure call?”

I spun around and was face to face with an amazon. She was my height—six-foot three—and her long frame was layered with more muscle than I like on women. Her head was bald but perfectly shaped, and she watched me with eyes of bright red, which meant either they were cybernetic or she wore colored lenses. A dress clung to her figure, cut to the point of being obscene. Her skin was shockingly white, but what truly shocked the eyes were the holo-tattoos that spread over her body, covering her bald pate, long arms, and strong legs. The images crawled over her skin almost as if they were living things. Birds flew, people moved; a dragon curled in and out of her left breast, protective of its territory.

Dante smiled at me and took a sip of wine. “Business or pleasure?”

“Pleasure.”

She stepped back, her mouth hanging open in shock. “It was bound to happen. I never thought I’d see it but it did. Warlock comes to me not for information but to enjoy the evening. Will it be Discord? Or perhaps I should tell my girls downstairs to pretty themselves up? I have this one little darling who’ll really—“

"Drop the pitch, Dante. Thanks, but not tonight." I had never been to Dante's basement level, the Carnal Pit, which included rooms for those who found someone or brought someone special to *Inferno*, and provided entertainers for those who didn't. If Limbo is the head of *Inferno*, and Discord is the heart, than the Pit is the loins. I was sure I wasn't ready just now. *If ever.*

"If you insist. Although you don't know what you're missing."

"I'll risk it."

She watched the people, amused by the collection of various individuals in one place. "Tell you what, you want to find some interesting company? There's a Red Prophet over in the corner. The locals call him Abraham. Maybe, just maybe mind you, if you're worthy enough he'll tell you how to find God." She laughed a harsh sound that reminded me of a cat being stomped.

"I wouldn't laugh, Dante. You don't know what's on the other side."

"I suppose you do?"

"You'd be surprised."

She snorted and wandered away. Dante wasn't a bad sort, and she was always hearing things. She was a living tap on the information running through the city. It was always valuable to be up on the current information.

Hearing things

I hurried to catch up with Dante, touched her shoulder to get her attention. "Did you hear about that jumper downtown a couple of months back?"

She took another sip of wine. "Yes. I remember the traffic tie-up, anyway. Blocks and blocks of people watching the medical team clean up what was left of some corporate suit. The only thing bigger in this town since then was when you blew the building up. Why?" She smirked as she peered at me over the rim of her crystal glass. "You said pleasure, not business, remember?"

"I know, just humor me for a second. Do you recall anything out of the ordinary about that whole thing?"

"Aside from your response?" She chewed on her lower lip. "It was covered up in the media. Usual corporate procedure. Can't have their problems exposed to the world, now can they? What's the big deal? Just another suit."

I shook my head. "Thanks. Listen, usual fees if you hear anything."

She watched the dancers all around and swayed with the music. "I'll have my sources get on it."

It was the best I could hope for, at any rate. "I appreciate it."

"No problem —" she stopped speaking, and her eyes grew cold and hard, sharp as any knife I had ever seen. "Great, just great. I don't want any trouble, Warlock. I'm holding you personally responsible. If anything blows up or anyone dies within these walls, it's your ass on the line."

"What?" I turned to she what was looking at.

The man she was watching was several inches taller than me, almost six-foot-ten, but he wasn't lanky. His frame was muscular and proportionate, filling his black duster and camouflage fatigues in a menacing way that gave most people reason to pause, as if he were a fraction of a second away from attacking the closest person — which he might have been, one can never be too sure. His eyes were hidden under a pair of mirrored shades that cut across a broad face framed by dirty blonde hair. He strode through the crowd, most people moving from his path. The few who didn't notice him until too late were brushed aside roughly by his shoulders. A person could sense it from him, radiating off his body like stink on a corpse. You could see it in his eyes. Here was a man who had dealt death so often it was a close ally, had been so close to death he knew what its breath smelled like. This was carnage personified, violence made flesh, death incarnate.

It was Nightmare.

My best friend.

Dante raised her glass in his direction, acknowledging his presence, and gave me a sidelong look. "Your ass, Chief." She walked away, enveloped by the pulsating mob.

Nightmare walked up to me and seemed to be studying my eyes for a moment—I couldn't tell, since he was wearing shades—and he held out his right arm. I clasped it in a soldier's hold, grabbing the arm just below the elbow. I could feel the cybernetics underneath the synthetic skin, the circuits humming, the relays firing.

Nightmare had a bad reputation with everyone except for employees of Metaltech because a fair amount of his humanity had been removed and replaced with cybernetic parts. The entire right side of his body—face, arm, leg, and a good deal of the torso--was chrome and electronics, all installed and tweaked up by his lover, Katt. Cybernetics as a science has always had a nasty side effect: For every piece of cyberware a person has installed, the individual loses a little of what makes him or her human, they draw closer to that side which is a pure machine. Most who cross that line hate other humans for their ability to still feel emotion, and they begin violent, bloody rampages. Nightmare was so close to the edge he could see the heart of the Abyss. It was part of his charm.

There was a slight bulge under the duster on the right side. *I wonder what he's packing and how he got it past Clyde. On second thought, who'd stop him?*

"Good to see you," I said.

Nightmare grunted.

"Katt send you?"

He shook his head, listening to me even as he was studying the crowd, watching for potential threats. He was usually paranoid, waiting for attacks that often never came. I had been there on those rare occasions when the attacks did come, so I let him do his thing. *Better safe than sorry.* "She's pissed," he said.

"I know. I just—I'm not really myself right now."

"You look like you."

I gave him an even look. "That's not funny. Every time I decide that I'm actually Warlock, I remember something or get told something and suddenly I'm not a human being anymore, I'm an experiment just let out of the lab." I looked down at my own cybernetic arm, bare, uncovered, glinting in the lights of the club. "Tell you what, let's go back to the club. I need something to drink."

Nightmare led the way back through the crowd, shouldering aside the few unfortunates who did not move aside on his return trip. *You'd think people would learn.* He strode through the curtains and past Clyde. I followed, leaving the chaos of Discord for the muted calm of Limbo. I noticed with a grin that the scanner Clyde held in his hand screamed, registering off the scale as my friend strode by, but the bouncer said nothing.

Good. It was time for that drink.

* * *

We sat in the corner booth, Nightmare with his back to the wall and me stretched out in my seat, one arm thrown over the cushioned back, giving us both a wide view of the room. It was force of habit, from years of experience in the field. Always keep a wall at your back. We each had a mug of the local brew, which wasn't bad as beers went. *It'll do for a start, anyway.*

Nightmare pulled something out of the pocket of his duster and set it carefully on the table between us, a bundle of metal and leather. I picked it up and unwound the smooth black leather, and realized it was a belt wrapped around a holster and gun. The holster itself had a velvet feel to it, but was made of metal. The inside shaded black. The front of the holster was open, relying on the magnetic layer inside to lock the gun in place.

The buckle of the belt, I noted with a grin, was designed to hold my Ranger's badge, a Silver Star inside a circle with the words Honor, Duty, and Justice. It was the code of the

Rangers. We weren't cops, and we weren't military. I always thought of the Rangers as some sort of band of knights errant, protecting those they came across and serving a code as much as the law.

Maybe I'm just a sucker for the underdog. I studied the weapon in my hand. This was the kind of handgun that would enforce the code.

The gun itself was impressive. I pulled it from the magnetic holster and ran my fingers over the smooth metal surface. It was fifteen inches from barrel to back, and the shape of the gun was wicked and black, giving it an almost sleek look. The ammo clip sat above and parallel to the barrel, which typically meant caseless rounds. It was an expensive weapon, a quality sidearm. I slid it back into the holster and set it down on the table. "Thank you."

Nightmare nodded. "I figured you needed something to keep your butt out of a sling." Most people bought little presents for friends who were sick. Most people sent flowers or e-mail, or little trinkets with more emotional value than monetary worth. Nightmare sent a gun.

That was typical. "Does it have a name?"

He shook his head. "It's a prototype Katt had the Hiro brothers whip up. They built it to her specs. You get to name it."

"Later." I noticed some of the muscle talking to the bartender and for a brief second I thought they were concerned about my new firearm, but some of the patrons by the door were gathering to glance outside. Dante strolled from out of the maw of her own little hell, her tattoos twisting and dancing across her flesh. I caught her eye. "What's going on?"

Dante paused, noting the gun on the table. "Easy, gentlemen. It seems a gang of booster-punks has decided to park across the street. I wouldn't worry about it. It's not a problem. My men can handle it."

I nodded. "Holler if you want help."

"I've seen how you boys play. No thanks." She walked to the bouncers and whispered quiet instructions. I turned my interest back to my beer.

Booster-punks were bullies and addicts who spent all their time boosting all sorts of synthetic chemical cocktails into their systems, throwing themselves into berserk rages and then terrorizing whatever section of slum they called their own. They usually had just enough weaponry and bloodlust to get themselves in trouble, but the local cops could take care of them. Still, it was rare for them to be in this part of town. I took a drink. *Isn't my problem.*

"Katt said you've been having nightmares," Nightmare smirked at the word play.

"My dreams?" I took a long pull on my beer, sighed as I set the mug down. The cold liquid trickled down my throat, hit my empty stomach, and my nerves tingled with life. "I only remember little bits and pieces between my 'death' and my 'resurrection', but I remember talking to this animal." I laughed. "It was this coyote. And he was in this glade – which is kind of strange, because I thought that they were supposed to be a plains animal – and he started talking to me."

Nightmare belched.

"I remember my dad telling me stories, back before I lived with Breck and Griffin, to help me go to sleep. He had stories about creation, about the spirits who helped man and tricked man, and even about *chinde*, the ghosts who returned to cause illness, strife, and even accidents." I snickered and took another sip of the beer. "Stupid stuff. The kind of thing you tell kids. You know, I always liked the Holy Ones, myself."

Nightmare cocked an eyebrow as he drained his mug, slamming it firmly on the table. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and sat back. He was almost relaxed. Almost, because he never relaxed completely. Not that I had ever seen. "Who?" he asked.

I searched for a good comparison. "Like the old myths. You know, Zeus, Apollo, all those guys? The Holy People are like that."

"Myths?"

I nodded. "I always thought they were just stories to explain creation and why we're here. Until I met one."

Nightmare gave me a sidelong glance.

“Don’t even give me that look. Coyote was—is—one of the Holy Ones.” I chuckled. “I liked the stories about him the best. He was always quick on his feet, always clever. There were always enemies who were stronger and more powerful than he was, but Coyote could out-think all of them every time. And he was always—well, almost always—helping those weaker than himself and playing pranks on those bigger than him to keep them honest.” I chuckled. “You’d like Coyote. He has these moments where he’s a real bad-ass.”

I took another pull of my beer, lost in the memories. I had thought that I had forgotten the tales of the Old Ways that Dad was always bragging about. I could remember them now, clear as if I heard them yesterday. Maybe the memory implant cleaned up the old thoughts somehow. Maybe now they were just more important. I set the beer down carefully on the table. It made a hollow sound. “I made Dad tell me the story of how Coyote stole the fire from other spirits over and over again. I loved that story.”

I pushed the empty mug away. “You want something else?”

He nodded. “Stronger.”

“Stronger, right. Whiskey?”

“Whiskey.”

I slid out of the booth and strolled over to the bar. The bartender looked up. He was an older man with a bald spot on top and what hair he had left was grown long and tied into a ponytail. “Whiskey,” I said. “And two glasses. Leave the bottle.” He nodded and ducked behind the counter, rising with the goods. I had never in my entire life gotten completely smashed, never having a good enough reason. I had a reason now.

I slapped a few credits on the bar and turned to go back to the booth when I heard a familiar voice from down the bar. “. . . so this droid goes fucking nuts, and it’s taking out everything we had. Jesus, we hit it with fucking military-class lasers. Lasers for God’s sake!”

I stepped closer. The voice was familiar, even as the booze that he had been drinking slurred it. I almost knew it through the haze of my transferred memories. *Who is that?*

“So we almost get the damned thing pinned down, my men scrambling to the scene, and just when I figure we can put the thing down for good, I feel it. The entire building shook and it was like thunder, real wrath of God. Entire floors were gone, burned, only the skeletal frame left. All my men? Gone. At least I know that that bastard is dead.”

I knew that voice.

I set the bottle down on the bar, as well as the glasses, and I crept forward. The speaker was sitting on a stool at the bar, two of his friends listening as he droned on. He took a shot of bourbon. “What was that guy’s name? It was something odd.”

I threw my arms around the shoulders of the man’s two friends. “It wasn’t Shaman or Mohawk,” I said quietly.

He turned and looked at me, panic in his eyes. “You? You’re dead!”

“Hello, Conner.”

There was a loud hum from somewhere to my left, and Nightmare stepped forward and pressed the weapon he had been carrying under his duster, leveling it inches from Conner’s temple, the hum stretching into a high-pitched whine. Conner was pale and beginning to sweat profusely, but whether it was from the large weapon or my presence, I wasn’t quite sure. Under my arms, Conner’s pals stiffened.

“Nightmare,” I said through clenched teeth, never taking my eyes off Conner, “a missile launcher is not a melee weapon.” Granted it was a mini-missile launcher, but the launcher carried two rounds, each missile about two and a half feet long. Two red cones pressed into Conner’s temple.

Nightmare thumbed the safety off.

I clapped the two friends on the back several times, then stepped forward to where Nightmare was threatening Conner. “Let’s ask Conner some questions. Maybe he’ll help us out

and we can let him go. Besides, I've had a bad time with explosives recently." I turned to face Conner. "I mean, you want to help us out, right? Give us a little information. You are a reasonable man, yes?"

Conner nodded.

"See? He's going to help us." I could feel the two friends of his shift uneasily. Without looking back, I shook my head. "Don't go for those guns boys. In fact, you need to leave right now." I leaned forward to Conner. "They won't be any help."

"Oh? Why not?" one of the men snarled.

I smiled, holding up my hands. "I stole their guns." They were basic handguns, nothing special. With a shrug I tossed the weapons behind the bar and glanced back at the men. Conner's friends checked their empty holsters and glanced at each other, making a silent agreement. Without a further word, they walked out of the bar, neither of them looking at either Conner or Nightmare and myself. "See you around, boys."

During the entire exchange, Nightmare stared hard at Conner, barely holding back. "What do you want from me?" Conner said.

"Information." Dante gave us a dirty look from where she stood at the doorway but I waved her off. "It's my turn to ask some questions, and your turn to sweat a little. First of all, what happened to Breck? How did he die?" *It couldn't be this easy, could it? Walk right up and get my answers.*

"Breck? Breck who?"

Nightmare rapped him on the top of his skull with the missile launcher. He hit him hard enough to make me wince in sympathy. I clucked my tongue. "Breck McEdlin. You know who I mean."

Conner groaned. "Look. It wasn't my fault."

"Don't lay that crap on me. You're high up in security over there at Nebula. I remember you leading the men over the radio to contain the droid. If anyone would know

anything about Breck, it would have to be you." I poured him a shot of whiskey, then one for myself. Nightmare took the bottle. I downed the shot, grimacing as the alcohol burned straight into my gut. "What was it that suit called it? The 'G-3 affair' or something, right? Talk to me, Conner, or I'll let my friend here have you." Nightmare snorted, a wild gleam in his eyes. His finger danced on the trigger, caressing it gently.

"Fine, fine." He shifted. "We had to cover it up, okay? There was no other choice. If people knew what happened, they'd kill us."

Now we're getting somewhere. "For the last time, tell me what happened. I want details."

Conner tossed back his shot, the drink seeming to steady him. "I got a call from one of the CEO's telling me that we had a Priority situation—classification G-3—after McEdlin died, and he wanted the works in cleaning it up. He had been alone, so there was no problem about witnesses, but we had to make up a press release, deal with the family, and whip up that suicide story to keep the lid on tight."

"Keep talking."

"I was told that one of the Zombies crossed a wire and shot him, blew him completely out the window. That's why we called it a jumper. The way it went after you, I can see how it just went berserk."

"No," I said, "that's not right. It wanted me dead. That was beyond a program error. It wasn't a fluke, it was a vendetta. Breck had to have fit into a certain number of variables, in some sort of subroutine in the droid. If you didn't know about it, it had to have come from somewhere else." I glanced at Nightmare, then back to Conner. "Who programmed the droids?"

"They came with the basic sentry programs. No one did anything from our end. We got them in a shipment and turned them on. Up until this incident, they had a perfect running record."

"This seems like kind of a big glitch, wouldn't you say?"

Conner slumped where he was. "I've told you everything you want to know. May I leave?"

"One more tiny detail. What was Breck doing that might have set off the droid?"

"Beats me. The surveillance videos were confiscated during the cover up. As far as I know, he was just in the office in his spare time trying to finish a project."

"Can you get me those videos?" I asked.

"No."

"Can you tell me what exactly he did for the company? What projects did he work on and that sort of thing?"

"He ran figures, crunched data and made reports based on the data he collected. And as to particulars, no, I don't know anything about his own projects. It could have been anything from potential sites for colonization to the figures on the last mining rosters including what ore was processed and where the profits went. Hell, Nebula is a *corporation*. They always have their noses in lots of little nooks."

"Can you get that information for me?"

"No." He pushed past Nightmare and me. "This has been fun, but I'm tired of the game. Good luck, and I hope you find what you're looking for. You cost me my job."

"Terrible shame, that," I said. Conner threw me an obscene gesture. I clapped Nightmare on the shoulder as Conner walked towards the front door. "Let him go. He's told us everything he can."

Nightmare watched the man leave, watched as he headed out to his car, a sleek black vehicle with tinted windows. My friend stepped to the doorway, paused for a moment of furious contemplation, then raised his launcher and pulled the trigger. The top missile burst from its cradle and, leaving a tail of blue-black smoke, it shot out at Conner's car. The crowd parted and dove out of the path of the explosive, and there were scattered screams. There was a

brief instant of calm panic as the missile punched through the mirrored windshield and into the belly of the beast. Then the beast roared, fire bursting through the windows, twisting the doors off the hinges and tossing the vehicle in the air to land in the same spot it had been in, but roof-side down, where the vehicle proceeded to burn merrily.

I moved over to Nightmare. "He didn't know anything. I told you to let him go. So what if he was there when I died? So what if they tortured me. He is — was — one of the little guys. We need to hit the top level people behind this." I looked at the burning wreckage as glass popped in the extreme heat and the custom interior floated away in dark angry clouds. "Was it really necessary?"

"Moral imperative." Nightmare hefted the launcher over his right shoulder and gave me an even look.

I turned as a shrill cry echoed across the parking lot. The single shout was joined by more voices as shadows rushed between cars, and suddenly figures wheeled about the burning car, dancing in the fire and the smoke, circling Conner's makeshift pyre like a band of angry savages. The shouts shifted into a chorus of howls as the booster-punks bayed into the night. *This is not good*, I thought darkly, my hand slipping down to my sidearm.

"Shit!" Dante hissed over my shoulder. "They're on the warpath now."

I gave her a sidelong look. "Don't go there."

"You boys started this, you finish it!"

"Call the cops," I said. Nightmare shrugged and stepped outside, the launcher still loaded with one round left. I followed, slipping behind the few people who were still in the parking lot. As I walked I buckled the gun belt on and cinched the lower strap around my thigh. It had a nice heft on my leg. "Ladies and Gentlemen, my name is Warlock, and I am a Ranger. Please step into the bar until our guests leave." To his credit, Brutus waved the people through. They'd be safe inside.

I stepped up to where Nightmare watched the scene, a smirk on his face. *If I were a smart man, I'd be inside where it was safe.* One of the punks noticed us, his head cocking like a puppy as he studied us. His scalp was bare, crisscrossed with knife scars, and his ears were covered with steel studs. A skull and crossbones was tattooed across his chest in horrible blacks and reds. The juice box rested on his belt, with tubes leading into his veins and arteries for direct chemical boosts. He leered and suddenly burst into a battle cry, waving his pipe over his shaved head. *No one has ever called me a smart man. At least I'm not the one with the Jolly Roger on my chest.*

"You!" the booster-punk snarled, pointing a dirty finger at Nightmare. My friend raised his eyebrows as he pointed at himself. "You killed Razorback."

"Who?" I gripped my gun but did not draw it.

He stared at Nightmare with a wide-eyed gaze. "Razorback. Our leader. This guy killed him. I was there, I saw him do it."

I nodded. "I don't doubt you, I just think you should be more specific. I mean, are we talking this week? Last week? Give me something to help us out a bit. After all, we've been a bit busy lately, and the faces just blur together after a while." I glanced at Nightmare as if to say: *What's he talking about?* He just smirked some more.

The punk glared at me. "By killing him, you made me leader, and for that, I owe you, but our rules are quite specific. I must kill you." He screamed again, and a distant rumble thundered over the crackle of the flaming car. The other punks erupted into cheers as floodlights from a large vehicle illuminated the shadows. The behemoth inched forward, like a lion from its den, towards us. It was huge, with a booster-punk standing on the roof, holding onto a pair of chains, seeming to reign the juggernaut of steel and glass.

The booster-punks had a RV.

It was scrawled with paint and obscene graffiti, and I could make out the driver even through the glare of the headlights. No doubt there was a minor drug lab and at least one cache

of weapons inside. We needed to keep the punks away from the vehicle. Nightmare primed his second missile casually. I could hear more thunder as a handful of cycles showed up, flanking the RV.

Time for a head count. Eight bikers, four on each side, at least one in the RV, and six or seven near Conner's car. Fifteen to two. Horrible odds.

"Kill them!"

Nightmare leveled the missile launcher at the vehicle. The leader with the Jolly Roger tattoo threw his pipe end over end, and it struck the side of the launcher, knocking it to one side. The blow caused the weapon to fire, and the missile sputtered off, missing the RV completely. It did, however, impact on one of the flanks of bikers. I could feel the explosion under my boots, flames and heat tossing booster-punks into the air. Disgusted, Nightmare discarded the empty weapon.

I pulled out the gun and took aim, thumbing the safety off. It was still set for single fire. I slipped my finger into the trigger ring, the metal cold on my digit. I squeezed gently. The gun kicked in my hand, and a hole popped up in the RV's windshield. Two more shots, and a fine red spray burst on the glass. Two more after that opened up the chest of the man holding the reins.

The RV swerved, suddenly out of control. It swung sharply into the ruins of Conner's car and came to a shuddering stop, throwing booster-punks to the ground. Jolly Roger rolled to his feet and jabbed the juice box with his thumb. There was a loud hiss as blue liquid was pumped into his bloodstream. He charged Nightmare, bits of foam specking his lips as he gave an inarticulate scream of pure hatred.

Pain flared in my wrist as a kick sent my gun clattering to the ground. I hopped back as a young girl—seventeen or eighteen?—followed the first kick though with a second, her spiked heel rushing past my head, inches away from my temple.

"Nice shoes," I said, twisting away.

She snapped yet another kick at me, but this I stopped with my own kick, my boot heel cracking across her knee. She shrieked and backed off, favoring that leg. My hand-to-hand training came back to me in a rush of adrenaline. I slipped into a fighting stance, weight balanced on the balls of my feet, hands raised before me in a noncommittal position, attack or defend. Rage burned in her eyes, and she ran her hand over the injured knee, snarling like a wet cat.

She wasn't a bad fighter, but it was apparent that she was more into kicks than punches, especially when she attacked again. She even used the leg I had abused in a frontal kick. I caught her foot by the ankle with my cybernetic hand, and as I squeezed the ankle I brought the palm of my other hand down on her knee. It bent with a disturbing pop and she went down on the pavement, her knee dislocated.

I picked up the gun and dove to the cover of a parked car as bullets sparked close by. I glanced over at Nightmare.

He stood, a tower in the midst of the chaos, his right hand holding Jolly Roger off the ground by his throat. The booster-punk's arms spun like pinwheels, flailing for any hold. Nightmare plucked up the man's juice box with his free hand, looking the device over. He spun the setting dial to the highest mark and, watching the punk closely, he punched the injection system several times until the box was empty.

The man's face grew reddish-purple and swelled, the veins and blood vessels straining to contain the fluid, his jaw working silently in a mute scream. His eyes bulged to the point I thought they might pop free from his skull, and his fingers turned blue-black as the capillaries burst. His system overloaded on the chemical cocktail he had carried around. Nightmare dropped him and left his twitching and drooling on the ground.

I scampered along the car, setting the gun for full automatic with one hand. I glanced about. Several of the booster-punks thrown by the crash were getting to their feet, boosting up for a fight. Two of them lay still on the ground. *Screw this.*

I opened fire, spraying the punks with bullets. None of them were wearing any armor, so the impacts of my bullets jerked them about, blood trail streaming from their wounds. One of the rounds struck a juice box, showering them in emerald green liquid, which mixed with the blood pooling in the cracks of the polycrete.

Damn. Nice gun, Nightmare.

He was studying the battlefield. A punk rushed him from the side, a wicked knife, leading. Nightmare, using his right arm, punched him in the gut, doubling the punk over, and sending the knife out of the man's hands. Nightmare flexed and while I was out of range I could almost hear the claws flick out from Nightmare's cyberarm. The punk spat up blood. My friend spun away, ripping the punk off his wrist blades and leaving him to die near Jolly Roger.

I glanced over the punks I had killed, noting one wore a military vest complete with grenades.

Grenades?

They were standard issue, black metal and shaped to fit snugly in a man's fist. "Where the hell did they get grenades?" I pulled three of them off, glad I hadn't hit any of them with the random gunfire.

The remaining punks scrambled for the damaged RV, scurrying for whatever equipment they could scrounge up. I slipped the gun into the magnetic holster and jogged up to the windshield I had partially destroyed, slipping one of the grenades into my jacket pocket. The driver's blood on the glass was already blackening in the oppressive heat. I held the other two grenades, one in each hand, and thumbing the safeties off, tossed them through a hole in the windshield.

I walked over to where Nightmare stood a fair distance away. "You know what I hate about drug processing?"

He shook his head.

I ducked behind a car, glancing over the hood back at the RV. Two of the punks rounded the end, guns in hand. They started shooting madly about, roaring in a mixture of anger, drug-induced euphoria, and battle-lust. "I hate the fact that to cut any of the synthetic drugs it takes a lot of flammable chemicals. You know, like ether."

The RV went up in a huge gout of flames, pieces of metal and rubber and flesh raining down on the entire parking lot. Nightmare stood through the explosion, watching the pillar of fire as it rose into the night sky, overshadowing the explosion Conner's car had created. Waves of heat washed over everything, shimmering across the ground and reminding me uncomfortably of the droid incident.

Nightmare nodded slowly. "That does suck."

"Sure looked painful, anyway," I agreed.

"You'd know."

I sat down on the ground as the faint wail of sirens drifted through the smoke at me. Nightmare sat down beside me, resting his hands on his knees. People were starting to peek out of *Inferno*. I waved to them then looked over at him. "Tell me something."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Did you kill their leader?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"It's a long story. Katt needed a favor." He rested his head on the car. The odor of burning flesh wafted past us and mingled nicely with the sharp tang of carbonization gathering on metal.

I wrinkled my nose and sighed. "Why is it whenever you and I get together people start shooting at us?"

"Part of our charm."

"Of course. That must be it." The sirens were close now. The police would be here in a moment, and there would be hell to pay. Dante, however, made the most of the situation and started selling drinks outside to those who wanted to watch the commotion. I nudged some debris with the toe of my boot. "I wonder what Cavalier is going to say about this."

* * *

"Are you trying to piss me off? Are you trying to give me gray hairs? Is that what you want? Jesus Christ, you must think I'm just made of credits at the rate you're going. No, no, no, just sit the hell down and don't say a single goddamned word even in my general vicinity, okay? Can you do that?" He glowered, ushering us into the conference room with a wave of his hand. "I ought to fire you two on principle alone."

"You have principles?" Nightmare grunted.

Cavalier stepped in front of Nightmare, meeting him eye to eye, their faces inches apart. "What did I say? What did I say? Don't walk that little road with me today." His eyes studied Nightmare's face. "Take your seat."

Nightmare smiled. Almost.

There was a rectangular table in the room, with six chairs. It was a typical room, with a monitor on the wall of one end, and a computer terminal embedded in the table at that end. Cavalier took that seat and punched a series of keys. The wall screen came to life. Griffin, Stitcher, and Katt were already there, so Nightmare and I took the two chairs furthest from Cavalier.

"First things first," Cavalier began, punching up some numbers. "This data was retrieved yesterday from the Nebula computers. It doesn't seem like much, but in these files are the sales records of those Zombies. A person known only as Cerberus sold them. Cerberus is

an arms dealer of some sort, and we're working on that end, but that isn't the issue at hand."

He slammed his fist on the table, the monitor clearing suddenly."

Nightmare yawned, propping his feet on the table.

"The issue at hand is the blatant disregard for policy. The issue is a blatant disrespect for my orders. The issue is the illegal hacking into a system that I personally restricted in order to smooth things out between Nebula and Metaltech." He looked evenly at Griffin. "I gave you an assignment, and you just went out and did whatever you felt like doing. Nothing has been accomplished on the disc, and yet you have the spare time to go looking through classified materials in another company. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I—" Griffin started.

"Wait till I'm finished. I give you a job out of the kindness of my overflowing heart, and you do this to me. I trusted you to be a solid data-processor, and instead you spend your time hacking into restricted systems. You've betrayed my trust in you." He smoothed his beard and mustache. "What am I supposed to do with you?"

Griffin shrugged, her red locks falling over her eyes.

"I'm going to have to do to you what I do with everyone who has absolutely no regard whatsoever for my rules and regulations. I'm going to do what happens to everyone who has an attitude problem and no sense of the financial or political obligations that comes from working at this corporation. Who callously disobeys direct orders and changes management-level decisions for their own personal benefit. Do you know what I'm going to do with you?"

"Fire me?"

"No." He glared at Nightmare, Katt, and I, pointing at each of us in turn. "I'm going to put you with *these* people. That way, when someone is costing this company time after time ridiculous amounts of credits, I know who is doing it! It's the only way to minimize my losses and keep the paperwork clean."

"Wait a second," Stitcher said. "You put me in this group—"

Cavalier held a hand up. "Don't even go there right now. Just shut up." Stitcher smoothed his closely cut hair and leaned back, his shades reflecting the fluorescent light, his fingers pressing into his temple.

The wrath of Cavalier turned towards Nightmare and me.

I smiled.

"Wipe that smile off your face," Cavalier warned. "I don't need any grief right now, not from you. What was it, gentlemen? Fatigue? Combat Stress Disorder? Just give me one reason why you two went off the handle and turned the Club Sector of Klermine into a war zone? And why you cost me thousands in damages and media blackouts?"

"Boredom," Nightmare said.

I pulled my gun out and plopped it on the table. Griffin's eyes went wide. "I had to field-test this gun."

"Have you named it yet?" Katt asked.

I picked it up, turned it in the light with admiration, and then slipped it into the magnetic lock of the holster. "Hellraiser."

She nodded.

"Can we get back to the point here?" Cavalier said evenly. "I'm not through yelling yet."

"Sorry," I shrugged.

Cavalier re-activated the wall monitor. "Let's see the tally for the month, shall we?" He stroked the keys like a professional. Numbers scrolled along the screen, lit up in either red or black lettering. "Between the funding for Katt and Stitcher's 'little project' and Warlock's reincarnation, not to mention the damages list over the last three months or so, our division is way in the red."

"That's bad, right?"

Cavalier didn't laugh. "I've been paying a lot of credits to cover your collective butts, and my superiors have a lot of questions. Come to think of it, so do I." The room was silent as we waited for him to continue. "Why does a corporation like Nebula buy a couple of older model droids for a local security job, then try and ignore it when they lose an executive, several security personnel and even their security chief, as well as the droids? Get this, they're calling this a slight employee restructuring."

"I don't think the entire corporation is bad," I said. "Conner -- well, before we blew him up, anyway--didn't know all that much, but he suggested it had something to do with the programming of the droids. We can't really get at the top people to ask them what they know, but couldn't we track down the source of the droids, get the instructions and the details that way?"

Cavalier hit a key, changing the data. "I'm tired of all the questions. I want some fucking answers."

"What do we do?" I asked.

Get ready to go off world. The records don't give us the starting points, but a space freighter shipped them here. Katt and Stitcher are going to prep their special project for its first field test, and you're going to outfit the *Hawkeye* with whatever you need. Have Griffin and Katt requisition from storage and fill out the appropriate forms and paperwork. As soon as we get word of the location of this Cerberus person, you're going to fly out to wherever he or she is, and you're going to start getting the damned answers." He scanned his terminal. "I'm tired of being on the defensive. Now we play the game our way."

Nightmare looked at me with a shrug.

I leaned towards him. "We shoot everybody and drink a lot."

"Oh. Okay," Nightmare said as he leaned back.

Cavalier kneaded his eyes with his fists. "One . . . two . . . three . . . you people are going to give me ulcers, you know that? Four . . . five . . ."

Stitcher wet his lips and touched Cavalier on the shoulder. "Sir, a nice cup of lightly warm milk can help you out with that, and –"

"Stitcher?"

"Yeah, Boss?"

"You aren't helping this situation at all."

"Sorry, Boss."

Cavalier shushed him, moving his hands from his eyes to his temples. "This meeting is over. Get ready to move, people. We have work to do." He keyed into the computer and began a series of subroutines.

Griffin came over to where I sat, a puzzled expression on her face. "*Hawkeye?* What is that exactly?"

"When I'm not living it up in a medical room, surrounded by all sorts of people in white, I live on board my ship." I stretched, all my muscles moaning in protest. I still had some resting to do before I would be back to my normal form.

"Ship? As in 'space' ship?"

"Well, I'm no sailor. Would you like to see it?" I rose to my feet.

Nightmare blocked my way, towering over me. He looked down at me and sneered. "You look like Warlock, you talk like Warlock, and you fight like Warlock. As far as I'm concerned, you are Warlock." He paused, his eyes deadly serious. "But if you ever prove me wrong, I will personally rip out your liver and eat it for lunch." He chuckled, a dark, morbid sound, and clapped me on the shoulder before walking away his arm around Katt in a forward manner, the fingers of his hand cupped around a buttock.

"You have such wonderful friends," Griffin said. "Did you boys have fun playing last night."

"We do more destruction before breakfast than most people do all day. You should see me in top form."

"I have," she said.

Everyone's a smart-ass.

* * *

"Here we are." I could feel Griffin's arms tighten around my waist as she got her first glimpse of my ship, my home, my sanctuary. I downshifted and slowed the motorcycle down to a complete stop, taking a deep breath, getting the same rush as I did the first time I saw it, the booty from a raid in the Thurian Asteroids.

"Wow," Griffin whispered. "Oh, wow."

"You've seen space craft before, haven't you?"

"Never one owned by someone I knew."

The *Hawkeye* had been a pirate vessel, designed and refitted for speed and agility rather than battle, based on a Lars-class medium freighter. It perched on the docking pad like a giant raptor, a bird of prey. The last third of the ship was all engines, extended from the original design for a higher maximum speed as well as a stronger rate of acceleration. The added power had proven useful on several occasions. Just past the edge of the engine block, the lowered ramp rested an open maw waiting to swallow us up. "Hold on." I eased the motorcycle under the belly of the ship, and gunned it up the ramp into the bowels of the ship.

I popped the kickstands and let Griffin slip off the motorcycle as I cut the power. I stepped off and looked around. We were in the hold, a wide open space perfect for carrying materials. In the original craft the hold was larger, but I had been forced to sacrifice some space for the engines. I wheeled the cycle to where I kept it most of the time. And made a grand gesture. "Welcome to the *Hawkeye*."

"This is great. I've never been in space before. It must be wonderful."

"A well-educated woman such as yourself? A landlubber?" I grinned. "You've never even been on a shuttle?"

"No," she stared around herself, aware of every detail with almost a child-like air.

"You're going to love this," I said. With a formal wave I motioned her towards the main hallway. "We have four cabins, two on either side here. That one is the captain's quarters," I paused to sniff dramatically, then pointed to the one across the hall, "and Nightmare and Katt share that one when they travel with me. This small room is the bathroom and air shower."

"Can I have the cabin next to yours?" She gave me a playful smile.

"I suppose."

She moved to my cabin and pushed the button to open the door. The portal slid open. "So this is where you live."

"Please, invade my privacy."

"Okay," she stepped inside. The cabin itself was about twelve by twelve by eight, with a single bed built into the wall, a good-sized desk, and a small closet. Above the desk was a display case full of knives, ranging from an ancient Bowie my father had owned to a Ventorian noble's jeweled dirk. It was a good collection. She touched some of the leather-bound books lined on the back of the desk, scanning the titles. "Interesting."

"Does it meet your standards?"

"Not bad." She nodded, looking everything over one more time. "A woman's touch couldn't hurt, you understand, but not bad."

"At the very least let me finish the tour before you decide."

She pursed her lips. "Please continue."

I followed her back out into the hall. "The ship was designed for a small crew, four to ten people at the most and depending upon how friendly they are. Most of the navigation and basic functions of the ship only take two crew members in a pinch." I started towards the front

of the ship. "When the team I was on raided the pirate's base, this ship was one of their main transports. It had magnetic grapples installed on the bottom of the ship for boarding purposes and the addition of some small lasers for attack and defense."

"Why do I get the feeling you made more modifications?"

"And Katt and Nightmare. Between the three of us we gave Cavalier something to yell about."

"He needs an excuse?"

"Easy. Cavalier means well. He yells because it is the best way for him to vent his frustrations. Since I've been working here, he's always backed his people up. He handpicks his people, and he respects and trusts them. The fact that he put you with us means he has a high opinion of your skills." I squeezed her shoulder. "He puts up with our shit, we put up with his."

"You could have warned me."

"Cavalier can't be described. He has to be experienced. After you."

The doors to the bridge hissed open, and we stepped through. The bridge itself was oval-shaped, with the navigation chair at the far end with the pilot controls and the main screens. Next to the station was a sensor globe, the blue sphere about a foot and a half in diameter. It was essentially a three-dimensional radar system. Directly behind it, in the center of the oval was the main weapons control, the entire station built to swivel as needed, even in a complete circle. There were workstations on either side of the gunner's chair, but they were only to maintain internal systems.

"Wow," she said again.

"The gunnery station was Nightmare's idea. He had a rail cannon installed on the top, and tied in all the lasers to this position, including defensive counter-measures. Katt extended the engines and altered them more to her specifications." I pointed to the right side. "I thought

we might put a station there for all your equipment. It'll only take a couple of days to install a terminal."

"What system do you use?"

"All I really have is a navigational and sensor system, your basic 50XST Nav-Com."

"Jesus, I could use an abacus faster and probably come closer nine times out of ten."

She shook her head.

"What do you need?"

She sat down in the chair. "The question is, what do you need? Am I just a consultant or meant to monitor your systems? Or do you want me to be a hacker? What I need to put into your ship really depends on what you need out of me."

I leaned against the gunnery chair and chewed on my lower lip. I didn't want to put her into any danger by making her a hacker, but she had had incredible success in getting the sales records. "I want you to have the best system you can get to hack whatever systems we run across. Try to prepare for everything you can think of, since you'll be our grid-support on these missions."

"Okay, but I'm going to make Cavalier foam at the mouth. I need a Seti-9000 mainframe with three Ram-logic drives and a grid-client access transceiver. A Stealth beta-module and a secondary monitor wouldn't hurt. That'll cover most of the hardware, but I'll need plenty of software."

"Could you repeat everything after 'mouth'?"

She chuckled. "I'll fill out the proper forms, and talk to Katt about some of the options we have. Maybe she'll have some ideas. Give me three days and I'll have your systems humming like a symphony."

"Three days, then we'll head off-planet and find this Cerberus," I said. A shadow passed over her face. "What's wrong?"

"I just never thought I'd be glad to leave this planet. It's like—" She gave a weak laugh, "—like I don't have a home."

"Hey, there's always room for you on my ship."

"Thanks," she stood up and gave me a hug. "I better go. I have a lot of work to do before we leave."

I looked around the bridge as she left. This was my home, and the crew was filling out nicely. Soon, we'd know where Cerberus was, and we'd get the answers we needed. "Hold up, Griffin. I'll give you a ride back."

Chapter Four

*But the Navajos say he won a contest once.
It was to see who could sleep out in a
snowstorm the longest
and coyote waited until chipmunk badger and skunk were
all curled up under the snow
and then he uncovered himself and slept all night
inside
and before morning he got up and went out again
and waited until the others got up before he came
in to take the prize.*

*--Leslie Marmon Silko,
Toe'osh: A Laguna
Coyote Story*

Metaltech Headquarters, Aldion III

That night I dreamed of my father.

We sat in a sweat lodge—I assume it was a sweat lodge since I had never been in one—the hot, humid air clinging to my skin. He sat across from me, his sharp features chiseled by the red glow of the hot rocks in the center of the room. His eyes were closed and he swayed silently as he hummed an old song to himself. Sweat ran down his face and shoulders in large rivulets, and for the first time I realized how much I really looked like him. Same jaw line, same nose. This was what I would look like in a decade or so. If I lived that long.

My eyes burned with perspiration. I wiped my face. I had always been too young for the sweat lodge, and by the time I was the right age, I was far away with the McEdlin's family. I had always wanted to try it.

"Greetings, my son."

Chills prickled down my back as I heard his voice. "Hello, Father."

"You are looking well."

"Thank you, sir."

He smiled. "You don't need to call me sir. That was how you spoke when you were a tiny child. You are a man now. We are equals." In the distance, outside the safety and discomfort of the walls of the tent we were in, I could hear a familiar howl, the wail echoing through my ears. My father cocked his head, as if the cry could be understood. He smiled. "So, you have met Coyote." The smile turned wistful, his eyes lowered. "He cries for the Earth Mother."

"He's a figment of my imagination, a drug-induced hallucination."

"Am I a hallucination?"

"I'm not sure."

"Listen to his words, my son. He is a Great One."

I shook my head, my wet hair flailing about. "Coyote the Trickster? Coyote the Vengeful?" I shook my head. "Many of the stories I know have Coyote lying and stealing to get his way."

"That is but one side of him. Many times he stole and fought to help his children. Coyote stole healing rituals for his people and was even the cause for the death of the So'yoko ogre."

"Those are only stories. Coyote is a cutthroat and a prankster. How do I believe anything he has ever said? Or anything he might say later on?"

"Take care, Warlock. You, too, have been a thief. You have told half-truths to accomplish a given task. And you have killed." My father shrugged. "You are one of his children."

"Excuse me? I did what I did to survive and—"

My father held up his hands. "I do not question what you have done. You have always followed your emotions and behaved like a warrior. Like a child of Coyote. I am proud of the man I see before me."

I was dumbfounded. "Is that why you're here? To tell me that?"

He nodded, taking the ladle from the bowl of water next to him. There was an abrupt sizzling sound from the hot rock. I stared at the glowing lump as my father poured more water on it, sending clouds of steam up to curl about the ceiling and coil around us like tendrils, obscuring the air between us. There was so much I wanted to ask, so much I needed to say, that I found no words to cover it all. My throat clenched and I simply sighed.

The steam cleared.

"Have you been listening, Hairless One?" Canine eyes winked at me from the other side of the hot rock, the irises bright from the scarlet glow.

"You? It figures it would be the Trickster." I leaned back, sweat running down my neck. My face burned with anger. "Was my father ever really here, or was it you the entire time?"

"Of course he was here," Coyote said with a sniff. "I like tricks, but I'm not that sadistic. Your mother sends her regards. She wanted to come and visit too, but I can only allow one visitor at a time. Union rules."

"Right. The spirit world has a Union?"

"Of course." He sat back on his haunches and scratched at a scarred ear. "Decent rules, but you don't want to piss off the boss."

I groaned. "Why are you doing this? I've never been a believer, I've never learned the proper rituals, the proper traditions. Why are you picking on me?"

"I like you. You've got spunk. I never met a man who died and got better."

"So tell me what's really going on. Last time we spoke you told me to 'listen to the cycles.' What cycles? The only cycle I can hear is my motorcycle, and there is nothing divine or special about my bike. I don't get it."

"You hear and do not listen. That is the human way."

"No games! Just tell me what you want from me."

"I want you to understand."

"Understand what?"

Coyote grinned, showing his sharp teeth. "If I told you it wouldn't be a lesson, now would it? Listen for the cycles."

I stared into the hot rock. I could feel the sweat glistening on my skin, the heat on my face, the weight of the moisture-laden air all around me in the tent. I had written Coyote off as a dream, an illusion induced by the memory upgrade from the cloning procedure. This was like no dream I had ever had. This felt real. This had texture and substance. *This has to be a dream. There's no other explanation. This couldn't be real, could it?*

"Nah," Coyote said.

I awoke with a start. I lay there for a long time before I dozed back off. I resolved to go let Stitcher check me out first thing in the morning. Maybe there was a logical answer to all of this, some chemical residue or imbalance in my clone body. Maybe I could explain these dreams away. Somehow, I couldn't convince myself.

But they had to be dreams.

* * *

"Breathe."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Cold metal touched my bare chest, causing me to shudder slightly. I grimaced and tossed Stitcher a mean look. "Hell, Stitcher, can't you at least warm up your equipment first?" I rubbed at the spot he had touched as if it had been frostbitten.

"No," Stitcher said. "Shut the fuck up and breathe."

"Wonderful bedside manner."

"Piss off."

I inhaled again as Stitcher listened. He nodded to himself and put the stethoscope away. "Everything sounds fine. All your systems are humming along at normal levels."

"You sure?"

He pointed. "The bio-scanners don't lie."

I rubbed my face. "Well, that's a relief," I muttered, only half meaning the words.

"So why the surprise check-up?"

I took a deep breath. And let it out. The last thing I needed was Stitcher thinking that I had lost it completely. He had been there when I awoke from the first dream, and he might not be too receptive to the idea that I was able to speak to the spirits of my ancestors and Holy Ones. "Nothing. Just a little trouble sleeping, that's all. I thought there might have been something more to it. That's all."

"You're in perfect health. I can check the cyberware. Maybe there's a neural reverberation."

"Ouch."

Stitcher ignored me and attached a small scanner to the cyberarm. He whistled to himself as the device compiled its data and stopped when the final analysis was compiled. "Your cyberware seems to be fully integrated and running fine. Does it feel okay?" He spoke with his back to me, studying the scanner.

"It feels fine, I guess. I can sense it and when I pick things up, I know it, but it's almost like it's not there at the same time." I flexed the chrome limb, listened to the servos whir.

"You'll get used to it after a while, like it was perfectly natural," Stitcher said.

"How would you know?"

Stitcher paused, then turned to face me. He held his hands up in front of him, turning them back and forth. He wiggled his fingers, flexing the digits at an inhuman rate. He stopped and grinned, turning back to his equipment.

"You have cyberarms?"

"Hands. Everything back from the wrists is flesh and bone. The hands go with my eyes." He tapped the implanted shades with a finger. "I've got the full set."

"How'd you lose your hands?"

"A doctor friend of mine took a strong anesthetic and a laser saw and removed them. Why?"

"You chose cybernetics over flesh?"

Stitcher leaned against the counter and folded his arms over his chest. "Yeah, I wanted the synthetics more than I wanted my own hands. Do you have a problem with that?" The white coat parted just enough for another glance at the sidearm he always wore. "I'm the best field medic in the business."

"I know."

"Oh, really?"

I nodded, still looking at my metal arm. "You have at least seven degrees in medicine, including xeneology and neuron-matrix design. I'm lucky if I can spell neuron-matrix, much less understand what it is. You're smart, you're sharp under pressure and you even have references from three medical universities that are top-notch. I know you've published a few papers in scholarly circles, real groundbreaking stuff. You found new ways to do the job, and you did it better, every time."

"You been researching me?"

"Part of the job."

"So what's your point?"

I sighed. "If I were a young doctor with the potential for being the greatest physician and surgeon in three galaxies, the last place I would be is in a corporation." I unplugged my arm from the scanner. "With that many letters after my name, I'd be living it up on some rich planet where the most I'd have to do all day is remove moles from the rumps of rich women. You should be in a penthouse with a beautiful wife and handsome children."

"If you were me then you wouldn't be spreading your butt all over the skyline."

"That's just rude, Theodore."

Click. Stitcher drew his revolver and pointed the barrel directly at my good eye. He cocked the hammer with his thumb. "Don't ever. Call me. Theodore."

I shrugged. "Okay, Stitcher. Okay. Ease down."

The medic lowered his gun and slid it back into the oiled leather holster. "I can dice you up and sell you for scrap, you know."

"You turning bodylegger, Stitcher? That's not like you."

"Don't tempt me, man. Don't tempt me."

"You still didn't answer my question."

He rubbed the back of his head. "It's not as complicated as all that. Katt's one of the best technicians in this sector. Cavalier hooked up with me and offered me a position on her team for the Project. They needed a medic who was quick on the punch, and I liked the idea behind it. Good people, cutting edge of the field. What else can I say? I signed up."

I smiled. "For a moment I thought you just liked the action." I picked up his riot gun from where it lay near his leather trenchcoat and tested the heft of the weapon. It was a high-grade gun. "You wouldn't be an action-junkie, would you?"

"I'm a professional—"

"Yeah." I pumped a round into the chamber. "A professional adrenaline freak."

Stitcher snatched the gun away, setting the safety and setting it carefully back on his coat. "I'm getting a lecture from you?"

"Not a lecture, just an observation. I know you spent some time in the colonial wars on Optima IV, and you have a rating of three with small firearms. In a profession where you could be rich and famous, you choose to help soldiers and people under fire. I think you get a kick when the bullets are flying and people are bleeding. You like this shit."

He folded his arms across his chest. "You have a problem with that?"

"Nah. Just checking." I shook my head. I wasn't worried about Stitcher in action. His profile showed that he was levelheaded and quick under fire. He just liked to be under fire when he worked. "When do I get to see this 'project' you and Katt are working on?"

He shrugged. "Katt's the security freak. Ask her."

"Nah. She and I haven't had much to say since I blew up at her."

"Well, that's your own damn fault." He shook his head. "What were you going to do? Avoid her for the rest of your life? Hold on." He paged her on her com-mike. After a moment or two, she responded, but it was soft enough I couldn't hear. "Morning. Yeah, I've got that line covered. We'll check the system out first thing after lunch. Say, Warlock wants to see the 'Project.' Is that okay with you?" He paused. "Testing Lab D-3? Cool. I'll send him down. Out."

I was mildly surprised. "She doesn't mind?"

"She's very proud of this project. Hell, so am I, for that matter. I suppose you could say it's her baby, and like any new mother she wants to brag."

"I'll be sure to prepare myself."

Stitcher grunted a sound somewhere between a laugh and an agreement. "You'd better."

* * *

I punched my code into the door, and was met by a cheerful beep as the portals to Testing Lab D-3 slid open. I stepped inside and came up short, faced with something I hadn't expected darkness. The lights were off and the only sound I could hear was the faint echo of my boots on the metal floor and my breathing forced back at me from the metal walls. Under normal circumstances, Katt embraced the chaos of her projects, pausing only to eat or make love to Nightmare. In any case there should be light and noise. I had expected to find her dirty and

tired, her face and hands stained with grease or some other mechanical fluid. *What the hell?*

"Katt?"

Silence.

I stepped forward and brushed up against something solid. I put a hand against it. It felt familiar, something about the texture, the composition of the object that was distinct in my mind. *Wait a second--*

The lights came on at the exact moment I realized just what it was I was standing beside. It was a target dummy, made of canvas skin, metal rods for a skeleton and foam innards. The chamber was filled with a silent chorus of these inanimate beings, all of them bolted solidly to the floor. There was only one reason this many target dummies would be in one place like this.

Target practice.

I dove to the floor, hands over my head. Thunder boomed through the chamber as large shells were fired, punching through the targets above me. The shots were methodical, precisely fired with only a second interval between them, rather than groups or sporadic gunfire. If I hadn't been lying flat against the floor, I would have been impressed. "The room's not clear!" I screamed over the whistle of the shells. "There's someone in here!"

Sparks danced along the metal wall behind me as some of the slugs made it through the targets. I pressed my face into the hard floor, working hard to ignore the loose bits that fell from the targets, sprinkling over me like a soft summer rain. This was different than mere target practice. The dummies were being *shredded*. I was reminded of the Zombies. Could Katt have repaired them. *Nah. I didn't leave enough to patch up.*

The gunfire subsided.

I waited making sure this wasn't a trick or a reload. Then I carefully picked myself up and brushed off my arms and shoulders. There was smoke and dust clouding my vision as I

made my way to the source of the shots. "Cute, Katt. Really cute. I always enjoy being shot at right before breakfast. It sets the tone for the rest of the day."

I coughed and continued forward, trying to peer through the haze. The heaviest of the particles were beginning to settle, and I was getting close to the far side, when I saw him, standing in the unnatural fog like a tower.

At first I thought it was a man. Then I thought it was a humanoid robot of some kind. Then I realized I was right on both counts, and that sent a chill trickling down my back.

It was a cyborg.

He was over seven feet in height, with broad shoulders and a barrel chest. For his great height, his limbs were still remarkably proportionate, and his bald head gleamed under the florescent light. Where the man's nose and mouth were supposed to be, a mask was fastened to the skin of the face, a mask that reminded me of the re-breathers. A thick tube ran from the bottom of the mask down to enter the cyborg's chest, and where his ears should have been were two metal plates with miniature antenna relays. His left eye gleamed like a cybernetic optic, while the right was covered with some sort of external cyberware. He wore a gray tank top and gray scale camouflage pants and military boots, and while I could see his skin, I knew a large amount of it was pseudo-flesh from the sharper angles on his muscles and joints. He had more cybernetics than was naturally possible. He hefted his heavy rifle over one shoulder and scanned the room. Katt stood behind him, arms folded, throwing me an evil grin.

I walked over to her, dusting myself off some more and keeping one eye on the cyborg. She put her hands on her hips. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"What do you think?"

"What do I think?" I asked. I glanced over at the cyborg, and threw a punch at her, connecting with her jaw. She staggered back a step. "What kind of sick—"

I was cut off as my feet were swept out from under me by a low kick from her that connected just under my knee. I hit the floor hard, and for an instant my vision blurred. When it cleared Katt stood over me. She placed one foot on my chest and rubbed her cheek. "Damn! Nice punch. Reincarnation gave you some delusions of grandeur, didn't it?"

"Luring me into a firing range isn't funny."

"I thought it was great."

"What if you killed me?"

"Impossible." She leaned down. "You have a small device in your cybernetic arm that registers you as a non-target to his sensors. I added it while you were unconscious. He can't fire at you. Now, if you still have a problem with all my 'gifts' that I added, I could grab a laser scalpel and some forceps and take it all back. Then you could just fend for your own damn self. How would that be?"

I laid my head back against the floor. "I do appreciate what you've done to help me, it's just been rough adjusting to it all." I looked into her eyes. "I'm sorry for what I said."

She nodded. "Apology accepted." She removed the foot on my chest and, almost in afterthought, she stomped on my diaphragm, just below my ribcage. I coughed weakly as all the air was pumped out of my body. "Now we're even."

"Even, right," I wheezed, rolling over onto my hands and knees.

I looked up at the cyborg as I struggled for a breath. He watched Katt and me with some confusion, his head tilted to one side. Katt watched him with what came close to maternal pride. "This is the T-214 CEFCU project. This is what Stitcher and I have been working on the last few months. The perfect harmony of flesh and machine, all right here in one package. His name is Torgue."

"Torgue," I said, looking at him again.

"Greetings, Warlock," he said in a deep baritone voice. The speech sounded like it was synthesized, or at least enhanced electronically. It had a full resonance that living tissue couldn't make.

"He knows me?"

"By the same transmitter. Each one is tagged specifically to the wearer. Griffin, Stitcher, and Nightmare all have them."

"Did everyone know about Torgue except me?"

She shrugged. "You were too busy adjusting."

"Who was he before he was jacked up?" I gave her a sidelong look.

"Some booster-punk fixer from the Barrens. Nightmare found him at some hole-in-the-wall bar down close to the Edge and killed him. Snapped his neck clean and quick. We brought the body back here and got to work."

"That's real ethical, Katt. Ever hear of murder? Does that even phase you?"

"Don't stand there and preach to me about innocent life. He wasn't innocent. He wasn't clean. He wasn't even close. He and his buddies ravaged the Barrens for the last two years, killing, raping, and stringing out families in a ten-block area. He has a record on file that'll take you days to get through. He was a killer."

"That's not the point."

"That is the point. I made him better."

"He's still a killer."

She nodded. "But he kills who we want, not indiscriminate murder. He's a soldier, not a psychopath."

"If you say so."

She threw her arms up. "What is your problem?"

I rubbed my face in frustration. "If he was a volunteer, that's one thing. But he wasn't. You didn't ask him to join. You didn't give him a choice. You never give anyone a choice. You

get an idea of something you can do or make or create and you go ahead at full throttle, never asking any questions or even pausing to consider if you should even try it. You're a genius, Katt. I have to give you that. You are one of the top technicians in your field, and you're my friend, but sometimes you're wrong. You were wrong."

"Look at his files. He was a waste of everyone's time. He was—" she sighed and stopped. "Let me try this a different angle. 'Mare says you've been seeing spirits. Do you believe in a higher power?"

"I guess so. I'm still not sure what I believe."

"But there has to be something behind it all, right?"

"Yeah. So?"

"What kind of benevolent power could create the wonders of nature and science, organize the cosmos and then waste perfectly good meat on someone like him?"

"That's not for us to decide."

"It is for us to decide. Who better? I took this aberration of nature, this boil on the rump of humanity and turned him into something useful, made him something greater. Can't you see that?"

"Just be careful."

"Why?"

"*Frankenstein* doesn't have a happy ending." I walked around the cyborg. He seemed to be listening to us, but I wondered if he understood what we were talking about.

"I didn't create this life. I enhanced it. There's a big difference."

"Sure—" I said, but my train of thought was blown as my com-mike beeped. I pulled it out of my jacket and thumbed the switch. "Warlock here."

The unit crackled. "This is Cavalier. I have some news on Cerberus, but it's not simple. Can you come up to my office and we'll chat about this? I need you to run a quick errand to

finalize everything, since you're the only person without hundreds of things to do. I was hoping this would be cut and dry, but nothing's ever as easy as I want."

"No shit. Say, I went last time. It's not my turn. Can't you send Nightmare?"

"He's busy on your ship, moving heavy equipment. Stitcher is loading his medical equipment, and Katt and Griffin have their projects. You're up."

"I'm on my way." I switched off the mike. "We'll continue this discussion later."

Katt smirked. "Count on it."

* * *

I heard the thunder of the repulsion jets kick in as the heavy freighter neared the ground. As a kid, I had spent hours watching the freighters come into port, unloading their cargo. It was exhilarating. I could feel the hum of the engines deep in my chest like a familiar song, the melody of the ion chargers, the chorus of the repulsion system as the pilot guided the large, box-shaped craft down onto the docking bay. It took skill to land a freighter. Hell, to land any spacecraft. From where I was, the craft vanished behind a row of storage buildings, but I could still hear it as it made the last corrections and settled into position.

I glanced at my watch. 2:01.

I was early. I sat on my motorcycle, letting the engine cool off as I tugged my gloves off a finger at a time and studied the warehouse across the street. It was quiet and dark, even in the middle of the afternoon. Ordinarily that wouldn't mean much, but it was where I was supposed to meet T'Phar in about ten minutes. The isolated location bothered me. He was a loader at the nearby space docks, and he heard and saw a lot more than most people figured. Cavalier trusted him.

T'Phar had requested that the agent be unarmed, as a sign of good faith. I had my orders. The Hellraiser was in its holster back in my cabin. I did have a Viper under my jacket in

its shoulder rig, along with some extra clips. I didn't plan to use it, but one never knew. And Cavalier and I agreed that T'Phar couldn't be trusted that much.

Very few people could.

I slid off the bike and walked away from the warehouse into a corner bar, one of the lower class establishments where the loaders and mechanics from the space docks could have a relaxing drink and conversation after a long day. Being early afternoon, the bar was quiet. It was clear except for a small group of characters that had set up camp in the back corner, whispering and chuckling. I took a stool where I had a clear view of the main entrance to the warehouse out the front window, past the flickering laser lettering of the sign.

The overweight bartender walked over, cleaning a glass with a corner of his apron. He raised an eyebrow with an unspoken question. "Whiskey. Hardest shot you have." The man nodded and walked away to fix the drink. I looked to my wrist.

2:04.

I looked over at the mirror and found I could see the corner table clearly from where I sat. Four Kirians sat in a huddle, chuckling and drinking. They looked like the typical Kirian loaders. They were each well under five feet tall, with two yellow eyes, bulbous aural membranes back close to the rears of their heads, and thick gray-green skin stretched tightly over faces and bodies covered with horn-like ridges. Just under their nose slit dangled a mass of writhing tentacles surrounding a beak-like mouth. They were a violent, quick-tempered race evolved from a aquatic creature much like the squids I had seen in holos. They breathed through gill-like flaps on the backs of their necks, but did not need water daily like many amphibians. A low purr came from the huddle as the gills fluttered with each of their breaths.

I wasn't worried about them. Kirians had always been known as hard workers, but they were also renowned for keeping to their own business. They drank a thick yellow liquid out of bowls on the table between them.

A shot glass was set before me. I handed the bartender a credit and took a gentle sniff of the drink. It was a strong brand, but I didn't recognize it offhand.

The warehouse was still quiet.

My watch read 2:05.

I tossed my drink down, wincing at the bite as the alcohol hit my stomach. I kept my eyes on the building across the way as warmth flowed through my blood, radiating out pleasantly from my gut to my arms, my legs, and even my fingers and toes. It calmed me down a little.

Something was strange. The request for an unarmed courier, the location of the meet, it all felt wrong. Was it an ambush? A trick? What was going on?

2:07.

The bartender gave me another look, but I declined. One drink was calming. Two was inhibiting. I turned the shot glass over on the bar. I stood up and sauntered over to the door, straightening my jacket, noting the press of gun metal under my arm. It was my ace in the hole. It was possibly the only chance I had.

Maybe I was just paranoid.

I left the bar, ignoring the jingle of the door chime as it closed behind me. I walked casually across the street, leaving my bike in the parking lot of the bar.

2:08.

I walked down past the front entrance, choosing a different path. If it was a trap, I was going to do the unexpected. If it wasn't a trick, than I was just overly cautious, and it was no big deal.

I found a secondary entrance, and stole up to the door. I paused to glance through the window in the door.

Let me just say that in the years of stealth and subterfuge that I have performed for the military and for Metaltech, I have never—I repeat, *never*—peeked through a window in a

situation like this and actually seen anything of importance. It was usually before or after that I caught on to something important. Perhaps it was luck, or perhaps it was incompetence on the part of those inside that made this time different. In either case, I did see something when I peered into the dimly lit warehouse interior.

2:10.

At least three shadowy figures stood around T'Phar, a Kirian dock loader. Each of the mystery men were taking turns beating the dock worker to the ground. Resilient, he kept getting up. I pulled away from the window, reaching into my jacket. My fingers wrapped around the grip of my pistol. The Viper was cold and harsh in my grip. It was familiar.

Remember the cycles.

I stared at the Viper. I hadn't used it since the incident at the Nebula building. With the Hellraiser, I hadn't needed it. The last time I had used this gun, I had been reckless, stubborn, spontaneous, and on the edge. It had gotten me killed. Now, here I was, about to leap into a warehouse where I was outnumbered and outgunned.

Remember the cycles, Coyote's voice chuckled in my head.

I put the gun back in the holster and made sure it was secure. *This is stupid. I need another plan.* My eyes were drawn to the bar, and a tiny idea germinated. I smiled. I needed support, and Nightmare and the others were too far away. By the time they got here T'Phar would be dead, and maybe me on top of that. I needed immediate help, and there was only one place to go.

Back to the bar.

I entered the establishment at a fast pace, heading directly for the Kirians. The chirping of their native language shattered into wary silence as I walked up to the table and leaned down to face them.

"What doo yoo want, hooman?" One of them burred in a broken form of English.

"Augh! It smells hoorrible!"

They chuckled at each other. *Look who's talking*, I thought but held my tongue. I looked at the first speaker directly in the eyes, forcing myself not to cringe at his breath, which was tainted with what smelled like mildew. "It's none of my business, but I saw some ugly looking thugs jumping all over a Kirian in that warehouse over there. I thought he might be a friend of yours."

"Why doo yoo care?"

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm Indian. Pure-bred Navajo. My ancestors were walked all over by close-minded goons for a long time, a lot longer than they've been beating up on you guys. I just figured that you'd care when the Brotherhood sends thugs down to stir up things on the 'port, you'd want to help protect your own. Sorry I bothered you." I turned to walk away.

The leader grabbed my arm. "Brotherhood? Here?" He proceeded to spew what I assumed to be curses—assumed because it sounded to me like he was gargling molasses. He got up, pushed roughly past me and swaggered out the door and into the street, closely followed by his comrades, who joined in his chorus of unintelligible words. I couldn't blame them. I wasn't proud that I had lied, but it wasn't by much. I didn't know who was beating up on T'Phar, but it was possible that they were related to the Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood was an organization that held two firm beliefs. The first was that humans are intended by laws of nature to be the dominant, if not only, race in the galaxy. The second belief was if they were unable to purge the entire galaxy then all other races on planets with humans should be "cleansed." Mainly they were a bunch of people who were too ignorant and too frightened to understand other life forms. These were the people that gave humans a bad name.

Whoever they were, at least I had my diversion.

In true Kirian style, they headed off in a tight quartet—two-by-two formation—across the street, oblivious to the traffic and onlookers. They were direct and strong-headed and

would bring a great deal of attention to the people inside. If they were trying to be subtle, they would flee rather than confront the Kirians. That would keep the amphibians from being shot at while I did my magic.

The side door was locked with a small magnetic lock. I glanced around, made certain I was alone, and pulled my black leather wallet out of my jacket.

Ah, my beautiful black wallet.

I opened it and smiled to myself at the number of electronic picks and security bypasses that lay within the soft folds of cloth. The mag-lock was a simple device in construction; two metal plates, one in the door, one in the wall, were charged with miniature gyro magnets that when activated locked the door more strongly than any conventional bolt, and was good for home use.

Not that it would stop me.

I slipped a small device from the wallet, pressing it firmly on the mag-lock. I pressed the glossy flat side of the unit against the contact point between the lock and the door and pressed the button on the grip with my thumb. The unit hummed and the magnetic seal popped softly. The door opened gently. I put the unit away and took a deep breath. *Time to violate a few civil rights.*

There was a wet scream from the front of the building, and I realized it was a Kirian howl of rage.

I slipped inside and studied the area with my cybereye—it already having switched to match the interior luminescence. The men inside were watching the fuming Kirians storm through the main doors, ignoring their prisoner and me for the moment. T'Phar looked like hell, his skin worn with greenish-hued bruises and gray green blood. From my spot next to the door, I did a quick head count. The three who had been beating my contact were approaching the door. There had been two guards on that side, who were trying to confront the Kirians, and there was a sixth man, who had been posted near the door I had entered, but he was much more

interested in the action, his back to me. He had a rifle in his hands, and was hiding it behind boxes to one side of him. He didn't play innocent very well.

Neither do I, I thought as I pulled out my gun. I noted grimly that if I had barged ahead when I wanted to, I would have been nailed.

Two soft steps forward and I whipped one hand around, cupping my cybernetic hand over his mouth as I slammed the butt of my Viper against his temple. I managed to switch my grip from his mouth to the collar of his jacket in order to catch him as his body suddenly went limp. *Sucks to be you when you wake up*. I lowered the unconscious man to the ground my eyes darting across the other men. No one noticed what I had done.

"Yoo dare too attack a Kirian?" One of the squid-men—the leader—pointed at T'Phar.

"Why don't you just back out of here while you still can, Sushi. You don't know what's going on, and it ain't your business." One of the men held up his hand preventively. "This is a private matter."

The angry rattle of their air flaps—the only response of the Kirians—grew in volume, echoing off of the walls of the warehouse. They were *pissed*.

Four Kirians and me on one side and five thugs on the other. Much better odds.

I stole over to T'Phar, my Viper aimed at the backs of his assailants. He looked bad. His breathing was ragged and wet sounding, like he was breathing mucous. Fluid dribbled from the strangely unmoving tentacles. I felt a sharp pang as I wished Stitcher were here. He'd have some idea of how to help the Kirian. "C-Cavalier? Did he send you?" T'Phar whispered.

I nodded, "Easy." The Kirian reached into his tunic and pulled out an envelope, pressing it into my hand. I stuffed it into my jacket and gripped his shoulder. "We'll get help. Hold on. You'll be okay." I didn't sound convincing. I wasn't convinced. Most of my first aid training was for humans. I knew I had to stop the bleeding.

"Who the fuck are you?" one of the thugs shouted at me.

"Me? Who the fuck are you?" I snarled.

This caught him by surprise. He stepped towards me, reaching into his long duster. "No, I asked you first. Just who the fuck are you?" I could feel him about to go for his gun. I leveled the Viper.

"You're right. You did ask first." I pulled the trigger, and his left knee popped into a mess of blood and cartilage. The thug went down with a scream, clutching at his leg.

Everything went to hell.

At the sound of the gunshot the Kirians, uncertain who was shooting, leaped upon the remaining thugs with shrieks of rage. I ignored them, because at the sudden silence after the shot, I suddenly couldn't hear T'Phar labored breathing. I couldn't hear it because it had stopped.

I put the gun down and made a fist with one hand and covered it with the other. Praying they kept their lungs in the same place as humans. *If they have lungs.* I started pushing down on his chest in rhythm.

One – push, two--push, three – push.

The Kirians made short work of the thugs. They were well known for their brawling skills, regardless of their height. Some world even had Kirian wrestling as a regular sporting event. No humans were allowed in those competitions, due to the danger factor involved. Needless to say, I wasn't worried about the thugs anymore. I focused on T'Phar. "Breathe, damn it. Breathe."

One – push, two--push, three -- push.

Pause. "Come on."

One – push, two--push, three – push.

Pause. "Come on!"

One – push, two – a strong hand pulled me away, breaking the rhythm. I sat back and looked at the body of the man Cavalier had sent me to find. A dock worker who gave a little

information on the side. All I really knew about him was that he was dead. "Too late," the Kirian behind me shook his head. "He's left this plane."

There was a gurgle of agreement from the others.

I stood up and looked at T'Phar. He was just an errand-runner, a messenger. He was innocent in terms of what was going on with the investigation. One of the bodies of the thugs caught my eye. *Who are these guys?*

I rifled through their clothes. There was about two hundred in credits and five gold keycards. I gave a low whistle at the cards. This made everything a lot nastier.

I turned back to the Kirians, and handed one of them the credits. "This is for T'Phar's family." I have never been proud of the violence I've seen, but in many cases I can ignore it. T'Phar was a normal person working hard to feed his family and make a living. He shouldn't have been caught up in this mess. "I'm sorry," I said.

The Kirians gurgled around me.

* * *

Cavalier sat back in his chair, his fingers laced before him as he pursed his lips and stared hard at the gold I.D. cards spread out on the desk. His brows were furrowed in intense concentration. Worst of all, he was quiet. When Cavalier ranted and raved, it was a sign that he was in control, that he knew what needed to be done. The silence was troubling. "Well?" I said, leaning heavily on the desk.

"Well what?"

I gave a small laugh. "Well, what do these mean?"

"What do they mean?" Cavalier raised an eyebrow. "I think you know exactly what these badges mean. Don't insult my intelligence."

"I'm not insulting your intelligence. I just want to know what this does to the mission objectives."

He mused over this question for a moment, his eyes focused on the cards on the table. Then he spread his hands and shrugged. "Nothing. We keep working like this had never happened."

I frowned. "You're not serious."

"And why not?"

"Those goons were agents of Fugiyama-Tech. You remember them? The boys who nearly took out the Metaltech base on Lars II? The same company that is always trying to steal all your best people and designs? The same corporation that bought out the Yakuza families over two decades ago? That Fugiyama-Tech? This changes the rules just a bit."

"I know who the fuck they are, thank you very much." Cavalier shook his head. "This increases the players, that's all. It's not the first time. We roll with this punch and keep going. Simple as that."

"I think it's a bit more complicated for T'Phar and his people."

"That's not fair, Warlock. I'm taking care of the funeral and T'Phar's family will be looked after by an account from our emergency funds."

"And you said you're not made of credits." That earned me a dark look. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I just—"

Cavalier softened a little. "You want to tell me what's eating you, son? Or would you rather go around and annoy the hell out of everyone who is close to you?"

"At least this time I have a choice."

Cavalier waited silently.

"I don't know. It isn't that I've gone soft. I had no problem with the idea of shooting any of those men. I would have done it twice without blinking. But seeing T'Phar on the floor there, his body broken—" I sat back in the chair, staring at nothing but seeing the lifeless Kirian.

"I've always had the luxury in most missions to never have to see innocents caught in the middle. Most of my targets have been military in nature, and the few times there have been innocent lives at stake my teams have always secured them safely. Even Nebula had mostly armed security. I guess in my mind that was easier to justify.

"This is different. This whole mess has gotten very bloody. And so far, a lot of the blood has been innocent. Breck. T'Phar. Even Conner wasn't exactly the enemy. They all died because of the cover-up. That's a lot of innocent blood to me."

"Where are you going with this?"

"I want Griffin off the team."

"I beg your pardon?" his eyes widened in surprise.

"Just think about it for a moment. Everyone else has combat experience."

"No."

"She's just a hacker. She doesn't need to get caught in the line of fire. Put her back with the suits."

"No."

"She can't see this through. She's not up to this. She has no idea what she's getting into here, and I can't watch her the entire time. And she's too green to be on her own."

"I'm sorry. I must have stuttered. No." He rubbed his eyes. "You know why I put you on the team? You have a solid code of ethics—most of the time—and you have a conscience. You care about every mission, every person. Even the small stuff is important to you. It's your strength in the unit. I also understand your concern. But you have to understand my position: you're wrong.

"Griffin is one of the better hackers I've dealt with, and she really is on top of her stuff, if you give her half a chance. I don't want her in a firefight, but you need a Grid-runner. She stays. If you have a problem with that, I don't care." He shrugged. "Now, is there anything else you'd like to discuss?"

"No," I said.

"Excellent. Finalize the flight plans and let me know before you leave."

"Yes, Boss."

"That's the spirit."

* * *

In the time I was gone, the bowels of the *Hawkeye* had changed dramatically. While Katt had described the unit where Torgue usually rested and downloaded new information, I wasn't really prepared for the full effect of seeing the device. The throne itself was metal with wicked interface prongs where his head and the small of his back would be. The chair merged with the machinery of the unit behind it, which had a pair of terminals to analyze the cyborg and interface with Torgue on a base level of programming. The entire thing took up a small wall of the hold.

I had been expecting the rack that held Nightmare and Katt's battle-suits. The suits were specially fitted for each of them and they used them only in intense battle situations. Katt's suit was slightly smaller and not as intense, while Nightmare's was like a condensed juggernaut. They stood in the racks like beasts lying in wait.

I had also been warned of Stitcher's car, but my mental picture wasn't even close. It was a hover ambulance, but he had made a few changes. The long body had additional armor on the sides and roof, and the lift engines had been juiced with a pair of booster pumps and a wicked looking set of hummer pipes. I had heard him refer to it as an urban assault rescue vehicle. He was right.

"Nice, huh?" Stitcher said from near the vehicle. His cyber-shades gleamed in the artificial light.

I nodded. "It's definitely you."

"Yeah," Stitcher ran his hand lovingly along the side of the vehicle. I left them to be together and made my way forward to the bridge. Griffin's station had changed considerably, modified to her specifications and equipment selections. I had no idea what gear she had requisitioned for the ship computer, but she seemed to have most of it together. She was lying on her back, her head and arms wedged under the console surrounded by circuits and crystal processors.

"How's it coming?" I bent down, watching her work.

"Gaack! Fine, this stupid chip needs to be half an inch shorter on one side . . . Come on," she said, her voice resonant from the echo under the console. "Katt and Nightmare are bringing Torgue and the last of their stuff. How did it go?"

"Could've been better."

"That's nice," she sighed. "Screw it. Give me that hammer over there. I'll make the damned thing fit." She blinked. "What could have been better? Didn't the tip pay off?"

"It was fairly simple. For the most part."

"For the most part?" She crossed her arms, her nose wrinkling in the familiar way when she was on to one of my little white lies. I had seen that look before. In a strange way, it was one of her charms. "What happened?"

I took a deep breath and told her.

She listened to me patiently and silently and took all the information in stride. When I was done, she shook her head. "You shouldn't blame yourself, Warlock. You didn't kill him. Cavalier set up the meeting and T'Phar should have known the risks. You did the best you could."

"It wasn't enough."

"Sometimes it isn't."

I looked at her evenly. "This mission is getting bloody, Griffin. Are you sure you want to come along? Maybe you should—"

"Just hold it a minute, Warlock. I'm on the team. You need a hacker and Grid-runner, and I'm good. I'm very good. I can help you get to the heart of this mystery, and I'm going to help find out why my brother was killed. We always thought of and treated you like family, but he's *my* flesh and blood."

"Cavalier called?"

"Just before you got here."

"Figures."

She smiled, wiping a hand across her face. "You can't protect everyone, everywhere, you know."

"I know. I know! I just want to protect my own, that's all."

"I appreciate that. It means a lot to me." She slipped her arms around my neck and gave me a hug. "I promise I'll let you stand between me and any bullets. And lasers. And grenades. I hate grenades."

"I don't do missiles," I warned.

She laughed. "That's typical. Promise to defend me from all the evils in the galaxy and leave a small clause just to get out of your responsibilities. Men, I swear." She picked up a small crystal datagem. "Now get outta here. I still have some work to do," she said. I turned and started to head for my cabin. "Warlock?"

"Yes?" I glanced over my shoulder.

"Thanks for worrying about me."

"No problem. I'm sure I'll do more of it before we're done."

"So am I."

* * *

"What does the Nav database have on Tallion?" I looked at Griffin.

"Tallion," Griffin said. She hit a key and her screen came to life. The image of a planet spun into view on the computer screen and froze as tracks of data rolled by. "Moderate-sized planet, pretty calm in terms of weather and seasonal cycles go. It's mostly an agriculture-based society with three major cities and the capital. The capital is the only spaceport on the entire planet, and that seems to be where most of the action is. It was colonized about eighty years ago and has been growing slowly but steadily ever since."

"That's where Cerberus is located?" Stitcher snorted.

I looked over at him. "That's what T'Phar turned up. All shipments from Cerberus came -- under alias--from Tallion."

"That backwater little place?" He shook his head. "I thought this Cerberus would be some big shot living the good life in a major city somewhere, with connections everywhere. You're telling me that our 'assassin programmer' is some fuckin' farmer? A god-damned Agri-tech?"

I looked at the medic. "Think about it, Stitch. It's the perfect setup."

"How the hell is *that* the 'perfect setup'?"

"Say you're a major player in arms, both illegal and legal, but more the former than the latter. What exactly is the life expectancy of an arms dealer? How many times do the top players get offed by the competition or the law?"

"A lot," Stitcher said.

"Right. So if you have all sorts of contacts available through subspace communications, and enough money to make a name for yourself, why paint a crosshair on your ass? Why make dozens of enemies who would just as soon leave the head of your wife lying in the bed next to you? Why not retire to a world cultivated enough to have a major spaceport and large cities, but without much legal enforcement or suspicion? Cerberus could stay here, out of sight, and never reveal himself to the public. And warehouses full of contraband are a good deal easier to hide on a remote planet. And Tallion fits the bill just right."

Stitcher nodded, thinking over the idea. "That's pretty slick. Keep the machine greased and running and stay out of the media. All the glory but none of the risk. Not bad. Still leaves one little problem for us, though."

"What's that?"

"How the hell do we find this player when we don't know where on the planet they are or even what Cerberus looks like?"

"We have that part covered."

"Have you ever been there?" Griffin asked. "You sound like you know the place."

I nodded. "Back when I joined Metaltech we provided some security for the mayor of Altbridge, the large town there to the east of the capital. It was a quick job, a basic retrieval mission. We eliminated some potential terrorists and had to rescue the mayor's daughter. Anyway, the mayor is a reliable contact and I think we can trust her. If anyone on that planet knows about Cerberus, she will."

"Isn't an arms dealer a little underground for the mayor to know about?"

"You don't know this mayor. She keeps a solid tab on everything that goes on in her town. She knows all the major players."

Stitcher nodded. "Okay. When do we leave?"

"First light. We have some final checks before we take off."

"What's left?" Griffin frowned.

"Nightmare hasn't loaded his weapons yet," I said.

There was a chorus of groans.

Chapter Five

I'm glad you asked that, my dear. The major misconception concerning the history of the human race is this silly idea of "Earth." There is no Earth. Earth is simply the rational and psychological construction many people have created and perpetuated in order to understand where we originate and to give ourselves a remarkable history. There are many popular theories as to the origin of the human race, but none so farfetched as this one. If the race must have a home world then we should consider Garlin V or even Marek, considering the development of these worlds and their respective levels of technology. Believe me, the Earth is a myth. There is no Earth.

--Desmond O'Rourke,
Professor of Sociology
University of Aldion,
Klermine City

Klermine City, Aldion III

"Everybody strap in," I slipped into the pilot's chair and thumbed a key, bringing the console to life. I could hear Nightmare took his position in the gunner's chair. And I knew for a fact that Griffin was at her place, communicating with the Port Authorities and making the final flight plan. While no ship could be held tightly to its entered plans, every ship was required to give the PA's a basic idea of travel intentions. "Griffin, did you load the fake identification relays?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure why."

"It's an old smuggler's trick. Break the codes to give off a fake reading and hide what you're really carrying. The fake relays will let the spaceports and any traffic we hit think that we're a commercial vessel, loaded with air and water processors. The fewer people who know who we really are, the better off we'll be."

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Depends on who catches us. The real trick to it is to make up a story with enough truth to sound convincing, yet not give away what you're really carrying. Besides, if any of the authorities have any questions, I can use my Ranger status to smooth things over. We're not evading the authorities, we're evading everyone." I activated the propulsion systems, sending them into the prep cycle.

"That makes me feel so much better," Griffin said.

"Relax and tell me when we have clearance."

"Who's tense?"

I smiled, but didn't look back. "If you grip that armrest any tighter you're either going to break the chair or your wrist."

"Shut up."

"Just thought I'd mention it." I glanced back as Katt and Stitcher entered the bridge and found seats. Katt had a systems console, while the medic took an observer's chair near the back.

"The back secure?"

Katt nodded. "Everything's locked down. Let's get going."

"This thing flies? In the air?" Stitcher strapped himself in the chair. A fine sweat gleamed on his brow.

"Not you too," I growled. "This ship flies just fine, thank you. I didn't think you were afraid of space travel, Stitch. Why didn't you say anything earlier?"

"You weren't about to launch my ass into orbit, kemo sabe. I've been on all kinds of shuttles and public spacecraft, and I was always happy because I had no idea who the pilot was. It makes me a lot more comfortable to deal with professional attendants and company pilots."

"Why is that?" I set the repulsion jets charging.

"You attract violence," Stitch said with a grin. "I don't want to be running from a port getting shot at because you pissed somebody off."

"We could just leave you on Lurze Colony," Katt said.

Stitcher darkened, but grew silent. I filed that comment for a later date.

"Just how many times *have* you left a spaceport with someone shooting at you?" Griffin asked innocently.

"Never," I said.

"Never?"

"Nope," I activated the seals on all outer hatches. The interior atmospheric generators hummed as they kicked in. "Most of the time they aimed at the ship, not me." I threw a glance at Nightmare, who nodded in agreement. He had been there every time.

"Funny. Real funny," Griffin said. "Okay, Mister Sense-of-Humor. You have clearance from Port."

I keyed in a command, and the repulsion jets popped loudly, pushing the ship off the landing pad, pushing us up into the air a few meters. I could almost feel Griffin and Stitcher tense up behind me. I brought up the landing gear and pushed the throttle on the lift jets, pushing us further up into the air, and when the gear was pulled up and locked safely away, I engaged the main Lichten drive, and we were off, the landscape and city falling behind us.

Flying in the *Hawkeye* has always been one of the few things I truly enjoyed about this job. The feeling of freedom, of power, was always a rush. I think part of it was all the times I looked up to the stars as a child, mesmerized by the beauty, and for a few moments believed in the greatness of the universe. Or maybe it was just the same kind of thrill as free falling from a shuttle. We were challenging the forces of nature and physics and breaking the rules.

"Wow," Griffin breathed. Flying public transports was one thing. Flying in a private ship was quite another.

I sent us roaring over a small inlet sea, then up at a strong angle. As the ship climbed there was some pull, the internal gravity unable to compensate for the relative proximity of the planet. Clouds rushed past the front windows, white and wispy tendrils clinging to the ship. The sky went from a deep rich blue and lightened to an almost white color as we rose. One by

one stars winked into view as the atmosphere thinned and finally, with a breathtaking rush, we were free from the bonds of the atmosphere. There was a soft change as the Lichten drive ebbed out to be replaced by the lulling hum of the ion pulse engines.

Chills hit me as I saw space again. The only way to describe the sensation is if someone has ever been a pilot and guided a ship into it. The vastness involved was staggering. The deep blackness, broken up by bright—much more bright than standing on those hills as a child—stars, and each star potential worlds and places. The concept was staggering. I wasn't the only one awed by the beauty. Griffin left her seat to stand next to me and look at all the stars. Once free of the atmosphere, the generators made the interior as close to planet-side as possible, including inertia fields to give us gravity. Once we left Aldion, we could move about easily. I looked at Griffin's open-mouthed daze. "Are you okay?"

"I'm just trying to get used to this."

"You never get over it, that rush of hitting space."

She glanced at Nightmare and Katt, who were talking about some data at her terminal. "Doesn't seem to faze them much, does it?"

"They have their own moments. They just don't let anyone else see them. They make up for it in their own ways. Considering the way they present themselves, they're actually very private people."

She gave a low whistle, her attention on the stars outside. "What do we do now?"

"We feed our destination into the Nav-computer and let the auto-pilot take over. Sensors will warn us if anything gets too close, and give us enough warning to deal with it. Other than that? We relax and enjoy the trip. It'll take about four days travel time." I smiled and looked out the window. "This is the best part about what I do. We used to talk about the stars? Now we can touch them."

She gave my shoulder a squeeze, then tried to stifle a yawn. "Not to ruin a moment, but I'm going to catch up on some sleep. I was up way too much getting the systems interfaced to the computer."

"You okay?"

"Nothing a day's sleep won't cure."

She gave me a warm smile and drifted away. I was glad she was here. She needed to be here. I needed her to be here. Outside, the stars spiraled as the computer took control and maneuvered us towards Tallion. I stayed in my chair for a while and studied the heavens spread out before me. I stayed there a long time.

* * *

Deep Space

Torgue sat on the metal throne, studying the pieces on the table between us. His face was expressionless; granted, that was because the breather mask obscured most of his face. Cables ran from his interface ports into the throne, storing data and cycling through his internal systems. He reached over and with careful precision—analyzing hundreds of potential counter-moves as he did so—picked up the ebony horse-head and moved it to a different spot on the board. Satisfied, he looked up at me.

I moved a side pawn and went back to cleaning the disemboweled Hellraiser.

Torgue looked back at the chessboard. The cyborg studied the board for a few minutes, taking his time. Any computer could do the most logical move according to percentages. Torgue was trying to use instinct along with the knowledge of probability to make his moves. He rationalized, he pondered, and in the end he slowly made his move, setting the rook down slowly, his fingers dragging along the surface of the piece.

I moved my bishop diagonally up two spaces.

He moved a pawn.

I moved my rook.

"I do not understand."

I rubbed oil along the loose barrel. "What do you mean?"

"You seem to be playing one method of attack, and then you turn around and you initiate another style halfway through the first attack. What is your strategy?"

"It's not that hard. I'm trying to take your king."

Torgue paused. "I have down-loaded fourteen hundred classic attack strategies plus most of the variations for each of them. You are ignoring every major form, and yet you seem very confident in your chances for success. What is the name of your strategy?"

"Go with my gut."

"I do not know that form."

I put down the pieces of the gun. "Sometimes, Torgue, knowing every possible move on the board and all the reasons behind them isn't enough."

"Your moves are random and chaotic. I will win."

"They're not random or chaotic. I just don't have them all decided for the next two hundred moves. I watch what you do, and I react. I make a decision, and watch your reaction. You play like this is a great, ever-changing puzzle. Make the right moves and you'll always win. This is a study in war. There is no right answer. You can plan a few steps ahead, but go too far and you hesitate. Not far enough and you're walking blind. You make a mistake, lose a piece here or there and you go on, you make up for it."

"And that is acceptable?"

"Put this in real life for a moment. In a combat situation, I can't compensate for everything. If I worry about every little detail, some moron's going to get the drop on me while I'm trying to make up my mind. Sometimes, you go with a hunch, your gut feeling, whatever

you want to call it. If you're wrong, you apologize and keep going; if you're right, more the better. Understand?"

"I believe so."

"Then move. It's your turn."

He studied the board and after a moment, made his move. He set the pawn down on the board with more confidence. I nodded, then moved my queen halfway across the board. "Check," I said, and went back to cleaning my gun, careful not to smile or look at the cyborg as I worked.

Torgue stared at the board for a long time.

* * *

"No."

"Griffin—" Katt said.

"Why are you arguing about this? I said no. With the rest of you packing all sorts of nasty little toys, there's no reason for me to carry a gun. End of argument." The hacker went back to her work at Torgue's main terminal. With his grid-point interface, the cyborg had some hacking abilities, and Griffin was taking the time to bring his subroutines in order.

Katt looked at me in frustration. I threw her a silent *I-told-you-so*.

Stitcher strolled past. "What's the big deal? Not like everyone else in the whole damn sector isn't packing *something*."

"Way to go, Stitch. Keep the conversation light-hearted," I said.

"I'm a doctor. I never lie."

"Except when you told that nurse you were a wealthy specialist in body amplification and redesign," I gave him a sly smile.

"It's my dream in life. Back off. Besides, she was going to be a research topic."

"She needed more amplification? She was tucked and plucked so much that if you stuck her with a hypospray she'd burst," Griffin said.

"That's a bad thing?" Stitcher asked. He chuckled and left the hold. He had to step aside as Nightmare walked in carrying a large utility bag. He slammed his large fist into the wall, popping a catch that released a fold out table in the wall. He set the bag down and began fishing through the contents.

I knew what the bag held. I had seen that bag on many occasions. I walked over to Nightmare. Katt pulled Griffin away from the computer and towards the table. "Look, I told you. No guns."

"Just come here."

"What are you looking for?" I looked over Nightmare's shoulder.

"Gun," he said.

"She won't keep it."

He held up an hand cannon. "Too big."

"You're wasting time."

He eyed a Black Bart Special, then glanced at me. I shook my head, and he agreed, putting it back. He continued to rummage through his hand guns like some sort of demonic Santa Claus, looking for the perfect gift for some little girl or boy. Unfortunately L-7 putty explosives and engraved temperature-sensitive mines don't go well under trees.

Griffin resisted Katt's urgings. "Why isn't anyone listening to me? I don't want a gun. I don't want to shoot anyone. The rest of you have enough firepower to level anything in our way."

Nightmare pulled out a Stiletto M3 and set it aside. It was a slender gun designed to fire needle-like darts at rapid speed. One clip of ammo held a good thirty shots, and yet the gun was relatively small in comparison to other weapons. Most mercs and police favored other slug-throwers to a dart pistol, what with the various body armors on the streets, but in terms of

basic safety, a needler was not a bad choice. The Stiletto was lethal against lightly-armored opponents, so while I wanted Griffin out of the main line of fire, she could still defend herself.

He turned to Griffin. With somber precision and a parade twirl, he flipped the Stiletto around and slapped its grip into her hand.

"No." She set the pistol down.

"Pick it up," Nightmare said in a low voice.

She frowned.

"Do you think this is a game? Pick it up."

Griffin stood her ground. "Do I think this is a game? You're the ones running around with the ammo and weapons. I'm trying to do my job."

Nightmare leaned in close to her, his hard face inches from her stubborn eyes. "We are agents of a corporation. At any time we might have to kill or be killed. At any time you might have to kill someone to save one of us. What if you run into the enemy? The agents out there aren't going to say, 'Oh, look, she's unarmed. Don't hurt her.' They'll kill you in a heartbeat and do an autopsy later."

"I—" Griffin started.

"Pick up the god-damned gun!" Nightmare snarled.

Griffin picked up the needler.

Nightmare returned his guns to his satchel and hefted the bag over his shoulder. "If you want some tips on shooting, ask Warlock or me." With that he walked out of the hold. Katt glanced at us and followed him towards their cabin. Katt had a few ways of making Nightmare relax. For the most part I really didn't want to know what they were.

When the door had closed behind them I walked over to where Griffin held the needler cradled in her hands. "This is Nightmare's way of showing concern."

She gave me a dark look.

"He cares enough to give you a gun. He wouldn't let just *anyone* have one of his weapons, after all. It's a gesture of friendship." I patted the Hellraiser. "He's done the same for me before. Weapons are a necessity where he comes from, and he's--oh, never mind." It was impossible to explain Nightmare. He wasn't a personality, he was a force.

She turned the Stiletto over in her hands, feeling the texture of the pistol. "You have some weird fucking friends," she muttered.

"Yeah," I said. "You fit right in." She shook her head and walked back towards the computer terminal. "If you want some lessons, let me know."

"How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Kill someone. I still don't get it."

"When I was getting my Black Ops training I studied under a man named Black Wind. I never knew his real name, just the handle. Some of the other guys and I used to speculate as to his true background over meals when he wasn't around. There were plenty of rumors to fill in the gaps, mind you. Some thought he was an ex-Yakuza agent, while others claimed he was a renegade from a forbidden ninja cult, if you believe that sort of thing. He was the best hand-to-hand fighter I have ever seen, including Katt, who comes real close." I sat down on the floor next to her.

She nodded for me to continue. I picked up the Stiletto and inspected it as I went on. "Black Wind kicked my ass on a constant basis. Three times a day we went through the drills and sparred. If he had wanted to, he could have killed me at any given moment. I never once saw him break a sweat or even get winded."

"You sound like you believed the rumors."

"Hard not to. He was just that good. We all thought he was invincible, with a heart of stone."

"I take it this is going somewhere?"

“One day I was hurting from a particularly nasty sparring session, and Black Wind invited me to his home to eat with his family. I agreed, sensing that this was some sort of honor. I met his wife and children, and had a good supper. First home-cooked meal in my career in the military.

“I learned two things on that trip. The first was that Black Wind was just a man, with the same fears and concerns. He was just better at surviving.”

“And the second?”

“Well, afterwards, he gave me a tour of his gardens and meditation sanctuary, and we discussed philosophy. He told me that in the years he had been with the marines, he had seen many types of soldiers, and what I am about to tell you is exactly what he told me. There are three types of killers in the galaxy. Some men are predators, who kill through instinct and the need to gain “trophies.” They are the serial killers and murderers. These men have no honor and no souls. Some men are mercenaries, and they kill for money. They make up the hit men and soldiers-for-hire. These men have no honor and no souls. Then there are the warriors, who fight for a cause and seek to defend an ideal, a person, a place. These are few and far between. These men have honor and their souls are strong.”

She nodded. “I think I understand.”

“I may not be a warrior, but I’m trying.”

She flashed me a smile. “I get the message, Warlock. I’ll give it a try.”

“Good.”

* * *

It was well into the second day of travel when Katt announced to me that she had some ideas to make the atmospheric engines higher in output and lower the fuel consumption. What this really meant was I had to spend most of the day in the engine with her while she made the

alterations and explained the ideas. I'm not nearly as intelligent as she when it comes to science, but the *Hawkeye* was my ship and I'd be damned if changes were going to be made without me at least understanding the basics about them. I'd like say that this was in case I needed to effect repairs and she wasn't around to help adjust the equipment, but in truth it was simply because she wanted to play with *my* ship. I stole her fair and square, and I wanted in on all the details.

Most ships, especially light freighters and yachts that entered and left the atmosphere frequently had two separate engines, one for in the atmosphere and one for the reaches of space. The ion pulse engines that carried us towards Tallion were a separate system from the Lichten drive, so it was safe to work on one while the other was going.

The Lichten drive was an amazing engine designed by a man in the Nova Corporation, Dieter Lichten. The drive was a simple idea. It worked like ancient jet drives, but the energy came from a chemical reaction to corinide mist under intense light. The released energy gave off very little heat but quite a lot of thrust. What did this mean to transportation and corporate politics? Here was an engine that left little to no heat signature and yet enabled greater speeds than the conventional engines of his day. Katt had helped me install one on the ship when I first acquired her, and it had been a big help on several instances.

Unfortunately the engines were not designed for comfort. One had to crawl and squeeze through a maze of pipes, tubes, conduits and chambers to fix anything. And on top of that it was also quite hot. I found myself deep in the maze, stripped down to a dirty shirt and pants damp from sweat, my head at an awkward angle as I braced myself under the generators. "You want to what?"

"Tighten the concentration of the gasses inside the generators and change the injection rate of the coolant system to match."

"I don't like messing with those gasses. I'm sure Lichten had them all set to those specifications for a reason. Maybe it's just me, but I liked them where they were. There's a certain comfort in not playing with chemical engines."

"Lichten had a good idea, but he went directly into marketing it. No sense of field testing whatsoever."

"You're the boss."

"I'm the professional."

"Right." I watched as she changed the calibrations. She was easily one of the smartest people I knew, and watching her mind churn as she worked was something else. It was like being in the presence of Hawking or Einstein, but on a street-wise scale. Almost all her talent came from experience, reading, and "common sense" and yet she could do more than most lab techs I knew.

"So," she said through clenched teeth as she struggled with a clamp. "Does Griffin know about Alena?"

"She doesn't need to know about that. That's all history."

Katt smiled. "If it's history, why not tell Griffin? I don't see the problem."

"I just . . . I mean . . . we—I don't know."

"That I believe."

"What are you, my mother?"

Katt set her tool down. "If I were your mother I'd have smacked you around a long time ago."

"Knock some sense in me?"

"Nah. I'm not one for miracles." She shook her head. "You have to understand, I like Griffin. Some of the tricks she used on Torgue's programming are good. Damn good, in fact. Some of her encryption codes are top notch. I know she really likes you, and I think under all that stubbornness that you like her. It's not any of my business, but cut out the bullshit and get with the bitch."

I rubbed under my eyes at invisible tears and sniffed. "That was beautiful."

She threw me a glare and returned to the task at hand. "Or don't. Like I said, it's not my business."

I could taste the venom in her words. "I would like one favor."

"Which is?"

"Maybe you could give her some hand-to-hand lessons. She might take to that more than the needler."

"You could teach her just as well as I could. Why me?"

I smirked. "Please Katt, don't go fishing for praise. You and I both know that women have to use a different style than men. You're one of the best martial artists I know, and we both know you're better than I am. On top of that, I'd like her to be taught by someone not as close to her as I am."

"It's just nice to hear you say it."

"That a yes?"

She nodded, grimacing as she pried at a valve. "That's a yes."

"Thanks." I set out to alter the fuel regulators. *That was good, Warlock. Real smooth. It's nice to see that the old charm is still there.*

* * *

I played chess with Torgue the third day.

The cyborg was still uncertain about my tactical theories, and was doing his best to keep up. He even won once or twice. The entire time we played, Stitcher poured over his recent diagnostics, Nightmare field-stripped just about every weapon he owned, and Griffin had her first hand-to-hand lesson from Katt. The ladies had cleared a spot in the hold to practice, while Nightmare and I watched but said nothing.

"Why does she dislike it?"

"Dislike what?" I said, returning to the game.

"Guns. Fighting. Why does Griffin put up such an argument?"

I moved my pawn up two spaces. "She's never been one for direct confrontation. She would get around obstacles or use them to her advantage. She was a talker, not a fighter." I watched her punch, only to have Katt correct her form. "That and I think she has a basic respect for life, human and otherwise. She was the kid in school who befriended the off-world kids, gave them some sense of acceptance."

"You respect her for that," Torgue noted.

"That gets burned out of most people early on these days. Everyone has a gun, corporate wars rage everywhere, it's nice to see that kind of gentle heart these days." I watched the hacker try a punch again. Nightmare glanced at me and shook his head, then went back to work. Whether he shook his head at the punch or my comment was up to debate.

"She is out of place here."

"Is she?" I gave Torgue a curious look.

"The others are all armed —"

"— And dangerous. What's the problem?"

"She is a weak link in the team. A weakness that can be exploited by the right people." He moved his pawn. "Someone could get to her and use her position in the unit to undermine or destroy us."

"Lighten up a bit, big guy. She helped with all that programming in your chrome skull. She's not a scrapper, but I wouldn't underestimate her either. Just because she doesn't get physical, doesn't mean she's not a fighter."

Torgue cocked his head. "Explain."

"She's got a stubborn streak in her. She and her mother got into arguments that made the battlefields of Vichard look like an oasis. Breck and I would go play hover-ball and try to

ignore the two of them rant and rave, throwing things, slamming things around. They always had to butt heads on all the little details."

"Why did they do that?"

"They're family."

"You and Katt argue. Does that make you family?"

"Yeah, I guess it does. All my relatives are dead and buried. These people in this hold on this ship? This is my family. Katt and Nightmare are closer to me than most kin."

"The word dysfunctional comes to mind."

"Damn straight," Stitcher chuckled from off to the side.

"No one will ever piss you off like family. They know all the buttons to push, and it takes a lot more work to care for those close to you."

He mused over this and we continued to play the game silently as Katt began the first lessons. She set the hacker in a basic stance, feet shoulder-length apart and knees bent slightly. "Now for Rule Number One. All men are evil. It's a scientific fact. Their genetic disposition is such that the entire gender is corrupt."

Griffin glanced around the hold. "What about them?"

Katt snorted. "They're well trained. But the potential is still there. Back to the lesson. Do you know where a man's weak spots are?"

"Right between the legs?"

"Obvious. Too obvious. Where else?"

Griffin shrugged.

"Adam's apple," I said. *One of my favorites.*

"Credit pouch," Stitcher hooted.

"Third vertebrae in the back of the neck," Nightmare said.

"What weapon am I using?" Torgue asked.

Katt threw us all a stony glare and walked around the mat. "Don't listen to them. This is the basics. The balls are a good target, and the throat and eyes aren't bad, but always remember the joints. The elbows and knees by their nature are easy to dislocate or even hyper-extend in a pinch. It takes very little force to tear up an elbow or a knee if you hit it right, but you have to hit it just right."

She proceeded to show Griffin some of the moves. I had to admit Katt was a much better teacher than I would have been. She had the precision and the patience. With her, martial arts was just another science to study and command, and she had done just that.

"Hai!"

With a blood-curdling scream she threw Katt to the floor, and stood there gaping in sheer surprise at what she had done. Katt, always one for the quick comeback, lashed out with a kick, sweeping the hacker's legs out from underneath her. Griffin landed hard on her backside, getting up slowly. She'd learn how to fall soon enough. Katt was nothing if not consistent.

I glanced around the hold at my friends. *I just love quality time.*

* * *

Warlock.

"Hmn?" I said and glanced up from the text I was studying on a hand-held pad, and glanced about my cabin. I was alone. It was rather odd, but it sounded like someone, a woman, calling me from far away. If Katt or Griffin needed me, they would have used the internal com system. I shook my head. Perhaps I was hallucinating; perhaps the voice was some trick echo. The *Hawkeye* had never carried this many passengers. It was bound to pick up a few quirks sooner or later.

I rubbed my forehead. "Great, Warlock. Real good. Now you're talking to yourself. Just brilliant. It's only bad if you answer back--"

Warlock.

I paused. The voice was warm, a loving voice but somehow laced with just a hint of sorrow and pain. Gooseflesh rippled across the nape of my neck, and I tossed the pad aside, sitting up. *That's impossible.*

I knew the voice. I wasn't sure how I knew the sound of it, but it was clear to me in an instant. There was no way I could be hearing this. There had to be another explanation, something that gave valid reasons for my strange visions. Maybe it *was* the cloning process, something from my past coming out to haunt me. I wasn't sure which would be worse: to find out I was completely crazy and imagining the entire episodes, or to discover that the myths and the stories were true.

But if it's simply a memory, I sighed, then why do the visions seem so damned real?

Come home, Warlock.

"Oh yeah?" I stood up. "I've had it with the visions and the voices. If you're going to keep this up, then I'll at least give you a reason." I grabbed a bottle of cloomis and stormed out of my cabin, heading for the bridge. It would be hard to hear the voices over the pounding blood of a solid hangover.

Warlock.

I took a swig of the blue liquid, wincing at the sting as it hit my throat. "Fuck you," I told the voice. "Leave me the hell alone." I began to drown out my spirits with the ones in the bottle.

* * *

"Morning," Griffin said.

"Muphlgump."

I have never been a good drunk. I usually know my limits and don't push them, since in my field it tended to be a hazardous habit. A lot of soldiers and mercenaries ended up dead with their reflexes slowed by a drink or two. A sergeant I once served under had a habit of taking a couple of shots before a fire-fight to loosen himself up. The shakes had hit him during an extended campaign. He ended up having a nice honorable ceremony before being "buried at sea" out an airlock.

The next morning, heralded by a chorus of sonic hammers throbbing behind my eyeballs, I was in my bed. I tried to open my eyes, but a gentle hand pressed lightly over them. "Keep your eyes closed. It'll hurt less."

"Griffin," I noted. The voice had indeed stopped.

"Easy. You really did a number on yourself last night."

I nodded, the movement setting off a series of minor aches pulsing in my neck. "That was the idea."

"Want to talk about it?" She moved her hand and I started as the shock of a cold, wet cloth was slipped over my face. I could feel my mind clear a little at the jolt. "You were pretty incoherent when I found you on the bridge."

"Rough night."

"I'll say. Cloomis is a rough way to celebrate."

I lifted the cloth to peek at her. "How does an innocent lass such as yourself know about clumi'dian liquors? I thought they were illegal on Aldion."

"This may be my first space voyage, but I know a few things."

"Really."

"Yes. Surprising, isn't it? I've never had any, but I've heard of the stuff. I even smelled some once. Gah, how could you drink it?"

I lowered the cloth. "I had an episode last night."

Chapter Six

*Here monstrous Cerberus, the ravening beast,
howls through his triple throats like a mad dog
over the spirits sunk in that foul paste.
His eyes are red, his beard is greased with phlegm,
his belly is swollen, and his hands are claws
to rip the wretches and flay and mangle them.*

—Dante Alighieri,
Inferno, Canto VI, lines
15-18

Ugh. (Click of a safety being removed, followed by three small-caliber explosive rounds being fired in quick succession.) *Bad doggie.*

—Nightmare

High Orbit, Tallion

Cerberus.

I stared at the green and brown world that filled the window, noting the tendrils of clouds that shifted in the atmosphere, and the deep blue splotches of the oceans that covered over half of Tallion. In terms of colonization and development, the planet was young, although the spaceport and three main cities were up to date in terms of technology and culture. And somewhere down there was an arms dealer weaving his intricate webs of deception and corruption, and I was going to bring him down.

The space port of Ha'lit was the largest cultural center on Tallion, and as the center of commerce the entire place as run by the Merchant Guild, who had established a Council of five members to serve as the head of government. There was a mayor-elect, who had some power, but it was no secret that the Council had the final say on the elections, giving them almost complete control.

"The dock-master is sending us a flight path and a drop window," Griffin said.

I thumbed my Nav-screen. "Got 'em. Everybody strap in." The HOD (Holographic Ops Display) hummed to life on my view screen, feeding me visual data depicting wind currents, distance to sea level, and my designated flight path and the orbital window were clear and bright. I rarely used the HOD outside of landings, and even then if coming in from space. I transferred juice from the weapons systems to the shields. Nightmare growled. "The weapons will be at full charge in a minute, stop grumbling," I said.

A warning light came on, indicating the Lichten drive was starting to strain. As the ship neared the outer atmosphere, the engine would die out, suffocated by the gases. I instantly shut off the space drive and kicked in the secondary engines.

The alarm stopped.

We hit atmosphere. It was a physical jolt as the shields lit up, crackling as they began to burn. The view screen grew red as the friction grew worse. Soon I was blind, but the HOD kept relaying data, so I was able to stay on course. The entire ship started to shake with the intense atmospheric battering.

"I knew I should have skipped breakfast," Stitcher muttered.

And then, like a wave of water washing up the beach, the shaking ceased, the shields went silent, and the screens cleared.

Ha'lit was visible even at this height, and the lands surrounding the spaceport were flat and brown. I could make out some of the other traffic, as two haulers headed for space and a freighter settled down on another docking pad, and repulsion tugs darted about like insects, guiding traffic and monitoring all movement. I followed the glowing trail on the screen that the Nav-systems had plotted. The HOD indicated the area reserved for the *Hawkeye*. From here I could make out the lights of the docking pad flashing in an irregular beat.

"Hang on," I said, and keyed in the landing cycle. Our descent was slowed by the cushion effect of the repulsion jets roaring to life. The *Hawkeye* pivoted to match the horizon as the landing cycle took over. I kept an eye on a small screen to my left that showed the landing

pad beneath the ship. I made a few minor adjustments, but the computer did most of the work. There was a hum as the landing gear extended, locking into position. The jets gave full thrust as the ship settled gently on the pad.

I set the engines running in the warm-down cycle, and put all the systems on stand-by. "We're down," I announced and got out of my seat. Griffin was busy feeding flight plans and information to the dock-master's computer systems, and Nightmare looked mildly annoyed that he hadn't had to shoot anything. I made my way to the hold, pausing to sling my gun belt over my shoulder, and punched the wall plate. The lock, which would not allow the seal to break while the engines were active, shut off. The ramp hissed as the inner and outer environments equalized and then lowered. My ears popped.

I walked down the ramp and started to check the underside of my ship. White gases spewed outward as the engines cooled, the thick mist spilling around the landing gear and the ramp, and trailing away. All the hoses and plates seemed to be fine, not even touched by the heat from re-entry. The *Hawkeye* hit the final warm-down cycle, sighing like a satisfied wolf about to rest after a successful hunt.

"Everything cool?" Stitcher said from the top of the ramp.

I nodded. "I just like doing the inspection myself. While I trust everybody else, I just feel more comfortable doing it myself." I noticed the others stepping off the ship, stretching their legs and looking at the space dock. Griffin walked out from under the ship and stared upward, back the way we came. "Safe and sound," I told her.

She seemed astounded. "The sky is deeper blue than I remember."

"You remember a sky on a different world."

"Yes," she said, watching clouds stretching across the blue expanse, "I know. But being on the ship makes all the colors . . ."

"Intense?"

Griffin nodded. It would take a few minutes, but she would get adjusted to the changes in a few minutes. I let her have her moment and walked back to the others. "We need to find Cerberus' location. I know the mayor-elect. I'm going to drop in and see what I can find out from her office. Any other ideas?"

Stitcher straightened his coat. "I'm going to check out a few clubs. There may be a fixer who knows the field."

"You can afford to bribe a fixer?" I asked.

"I'm on the team account. We put out billions of credits for your clone and that walking tank in there, I think Cavalier can spare a hundred to donate to the local smugglers and black market merchants, don't you?"

"Sure. I just wonder why your contacts are always in clubs?"

"Class?"

"Or lack thereof?" Katt chided. Stitcher threw her his widest grin. "'Mare and I'll contact Cavalier. He may know something more by now. We'll keep an eye on the ship, make sure everything is secure."

Griffin walked back, her arms folded across her chest. "I'll access the city hall data-banks on the Grid, see what a dataworm or two can find." In Gridspace, a hacker could access any system hooked to the Grid, and with her dataworms, Griffin could search a data bank in a reasonable amount of time.

"Sounds like we have a plan going," I said.

We headed back up the ramp, and I walked over to my bike, releasing it from where I had secured it during the flight. "So," Griffin walked up, an impish gleam in the corner of her eye. "How do you know the mayor elect?"

I had been dreading this discussion for the last couple of days, but I decided to go ahead and tell her everything. "Alena Harcord has been the mayor elect for several years. When I joined the Rangers they sent me down here because a faction of merchants who were trying to

break up the Guild's tariffs and regulations had kidnapped her little girl. I helped rescue her daughter and put a stop to them."

"That's not what Nightmare said."

"Nightmare always has a lot to say when I'm not around." I shrugged. "I stayed for a month or two and helped out."

"Helped out?" Griffin cocked an eyebrow.

"Made sure security was tighter, double-checked to make sure the conspirators were all rooted out --"

"--Had a passionate affair?" Griffin chuckled.

"Nightmare really needs to stay quiet. Yes, we had an affair, but it burned out pretty quick and I moved on to the next assignment. I send her a message every now and then, but I haven't seen her since I left." I shrugged. "I don't even know how she's going to take seeing me again. She was always a bit confrontational. And Misty, her daughter—Jesus, she has to be five now—she probably doesn't even remember me."

Griffin gave me a quick peck on the cheek. "You'll do fine."

"I suppose. I didn't say anything because, well, I don't know, I just wanted to avoid any problems, and I think I'll shut up now," I fumbled with the motorcycle.

"Okay. Good luck. Stay out of trouble," she said.

"You know me," I said, buckling on my gun belt and securing the holster to my leg.

She threw me a look as she headed back towards the bridge. I wasn't quite sure how to take the glance, but I decided not to ask her about it. Chances were I wouldn't appreciate the answer.

* * *

The government center lay to east of the port, and it was only half an hour from the landing platform until I reached the City Plaza, where the governmental agencies and members worked and made policies that tangled up the lives of everyone else on the planet. It had moderate security, but my Ranger badge gave me some accessibility. I showed it to the guards at the Plaza entrance and they waved me through. It was late afternoon, I reached the building with her office and parked my bike outside.

The guards at the door frowned at my sidearm but recognized the badge. They let me pass but not without an armed escort. I couldn't blame them. In fact, I was surprised they were as relaxed as they were. A tall man in a midnight blue uniform walked me to the elevators and then to the offices on the top floor, and then waited until the secretary had called Alena and she cleared me before he went back downstairs.

Alena was still as strong and pretty as ever, sitting behind her desk, hard copy littering its top. Her jaw line was sharp and her cheekbones were high, accenting her ice blue eyes. Straight brown hair cascaded down her shoulders framing her aristocratic face. She was very attractive, but her air of authority, her inner strength, distracted most people. That stubbornness had been part of what drove us apart. I liked women who had their own minds, but she never seemed to need *anyone*. I suspected that this independence had driven off Misty's father, but we had never talked about the subject. She was a good mother, and she loved Misty, but her fiery streak eventually singed some people.

She rose when I walked in. "Hello, Warlock."

"Alena. You're looking well."

She pursed her lips, her eyes narrowing. "For a power-hungry bitch-goddess, you mean."

Ouch.

"Yes, for a power-hungry bitch goddess. Jesus, it's nice to know you can still hold a grudge," I said. "Is everything I've ever said in the heat of the moment going to fly back in my face or can we be adults?"

"I only have ten minutes before my next appointment."

"I need your help."

"So now it's what *you* need."

I folded my arms across my chest and frowned. I wasn't sure what I had expected, but she was more hostile than when I had left so long ago. She held herself in imperial fashion, jaw thrust out as if daring me to continue. I couldn't handle her head-to-head. I had seen her stand firm with a verbal defense like this for weeks at a time, and time was in short supply. The trail leading from Breck's death would grow cold before Alena warmed up. "How's Misty?" I asked.

The granite foundation of her emotional defenses softened just a bit. "She's good, she's really good. She misses you, you know."

"I've missed her."

"I'm sending her to the Mystic Academy on Vilnor next year. She aced the Esper tests just a couple of months ago. Sometimes I look at her and I wonder if I really had something to do with her, like she's been touched somehow." The ice queen froze over again. "You should have visited."

"I wanted to, but why open old wounds?"

"At least you don't open them until you're the one who needs something from me."

"What should I have done? I was miserable and you were enjoying it way too much for my tastes."

"So you left. Maybe you should have stayed gone."

I raised my hands in defeat. "This was a mistake. I'm sorry." I got up and started to head to the door.

"You never could finish a fight." Her voice was low, soft.

I stopped near the door. "You never choose your battles well enough."

Silence filled the office.

"What do you want?" she said finally.

"Cerberus."

She gave a low whistle.

* * *

I studied the maps Alena had pulled out of her files. I would have thought the maps would have been on computer, rather than hard copy, but I noted a concealed stash of hard copy. *Politically covering your ass, eh?* I thought, but kept it to myself. I indicated the spread of farms and homes between and surrounding the three major cities. Ha'lit served as the northern point of a triangle formed by the three cities, and most of the farmers had claims inside the triangle. To the north lay mountains, which formed a wall running from the northwest to the southeast, and on the western side lay a coastline. To the south of this triangle lay a thick jungle, which was relatively undeveloped.

Relatively.

"This is the official map showing all approved construction including past, present, and planned, for the tri-city regions. It doesn't hit the specifics, but you can see where everything is focused. The farmers are localized here and here, and the Urban Development League is expanding through here." I followed the areas where she pointed.

"Okay, so?" I shrugged. "What am I missing?"

"No one is building or living further south than this line bordering these slight hills, right?" She pulled out a transparency of the same map, slipping it over the first so everything lined up. "The Council has several probes in orbit, and over the last year, the scans they took showed something interesting." She tapped the overlaid maps with a fine nail.

"What?"

"We have heat signatures in all the normal regions. Urban areas, developing areas, docking bays, they all match up, right?"

I stared at the map, looking for the inconsistency. In the southern regions, away from civilization and hidden by the vast jungles, was a tiny splotch of red. "Everything except that, that is," I said and pointed. "So what exactly is that?"

"I wish I knew. We sent out scouts at the time to make sure a ship hadn't gone down, but they didn't find anything."

"I take it you think that's Cerberus."

Alena rolled up the maps and sighed. "There have been rumors of a black market arms dealer on the planet, but no one can prove anything. We have transports and freighters in and out all day long. Who knows if one or two might carry a shipment of illegal arms? The dock-master is overloaded as it is."

"And Cerberus?"

"From time to time we have performed searches on the outbound shipments, and sometimes we run across crates with an unidentified and unclaimed logo. A scarlet, howling, three-headed dog."

I nodded. "Cerberus is definitely here. I take it that jungle region is the only place Cerberus could be, than?"

"Everything else is accounted for, and while there could be invisible backers to some of the organizations here, I don't think Cerberus is one of them. Arms dealers would need space to house their goods, and deep in the jungle, away from prying eyes, is as good a place as any." She tucked the maps away and scribbled a note down on a piece of paper. "I'm not so naive that I don't know we have squatters out there, but they stay way the hell away from us. Whoever this is wants to use our spaceport."

I nodded. It made sense, and it was the best lead I had. "Thank you, Alena. I really appreciate your help."

She slid a piece of paper across the desk. "These are the coordinates of the heat signature. If you want to go check it out, feel free. I have appointments to keep. It's been good seeing you. Please feel free to drop me a line."

"That's it? Hello, here's the info and off you go?"

"Were you expecting us to be friends? Chums? I told you what I knew to honor what we once had. There's nothing left binding us. Please don't come back."

I pocketed the note and gave her a two-finger salute. While I hated the idea of leaving things in this fashion, I had to honor her wishes. She had done me one last favor, and the only way to repay it was to leave her alone. I had wanted to see Misty before I left, but it would be quieter and easier on the girl if I just left. Alena wasn't a bad person, but she had never taken emotional pain very well. Her childhood had been rough, and Misty's father had been less than civil as well. When we didn't work out it was another cut on the patchwork of emotional scars. It was best that I just leave.

Alena's desk intercom beeped. "Miss Harcord, your appointment is here."

"Tell her to wait--" Alena was interrupted as her office door swung open and a little blonde bundle of energy charged in, followed by a powerless secretary who was trying her best to maintain control, but failing. "--Outside," Alena finished with a sigh. "I was hoping to avoid this, Warlock," she muttered.

"Unca Warlock!" Misty squealed, throwing her self into my side. I scooped her up-- with a groan--and gave her a hug. "It's you. You're here. I told Mommy you'd be here."

"Hey, kid. How have you been? How'd you know I was here?"

"Good," she grunted as I set her down. "Wanna see the picture I drew?"

"Sure," I said, shrugging helplessly at Alena. The mayor-elect was frowning at me, ice in her eyes. Misty fumbled through her bag and pulled out a piece of paper. "See, there's me, and there's Mommy, and there's Mr. Dog. Mr. Dog told me you'd be coming here."

"Mr. Dog must be really smart."

"Uh-huh. He's really nice." She dove back into the pack. "Wanna see my homework?"

Alena leaned forward. "She has been talking to invisible friends for the last few months. This 'Mr. Dog' is a manifestation of her Esper talents. Her lack of control because she's so young makes her invisible friends show her talents. I've been told it's quite natural for these children, but I'm still getting used to it."

"But *Mr. Dog*?" I whispered teasingly. I really couldn't say much. I spoke to dead relatives and the spirit guide of my people. Who was I to make fun of a little girl's figments of imagination?

"She's five. Shut up."

"Point taken." I walked over to where the girl pulled out a small computer out of the bag and opened it up. "Misty, I can't stay long."

"I know," she chirped. "Mr. Dog said you had lotsa stuff to do."

"Maybe you can show me that park you like so much?" I patted her shoulder. "We could go later on this afternoon."

"Sure, Unca Warlock."

Alena stepped in. "I'm afraid Misty is busy for the rest of the day. Rest of the week, actually." Her arms were folded again, her chin jutting out, taunting me to defy her in front of her own child.

Misty shrugged. I sighed. "Sorry kid."

"It's okay. I got lots to do, Unca Warlock."

I gave her another hug and stood up. Misty kept at the computer, her tiny fingers jabbing keys glazed with the residue of some long-forgotten candy, her face pinched as she

worked on her studies. *Ever the scholar, 'Lena?* A few more years of this and Alena would have a clone of herself. I walked towards the office doors, stepping past Alena, . "You're all heart, 'Lena."

"Leave us alone, Warlock."

I walked out of her office with the lead on Cerberus. Alena still hated me, but that meant that she didn't hate me, which bothered me. The fact that she hadn't kicked me out when I got there meant there was still some good feeling, even if she didn't show it. That she helped me meant even more. I had the secret in my hands, and I felt we would avenge Breck soon. I would have thought I should have felt better as I left the building. I felt sick to my stomach instead.

* * *

"So how did it go?" Griffin swiveled her chair around as I entered the bridge.

"Don't ask."

She made a face. "Sorry. She didn't help at all?"

"Yeah, she helped. And I was told to never come back." I rubbed my eyes wearily, my body emotionally drained. "And I saw Misty. God she looked good. Of all the bad times Alena and I had over the course of the relationship, the one thing I truly miss is that little girl." With a sigh, I told her everything that happened.

"I'm sorry, Warlock."

"It's okay. Say, how are the worms?"

"Hmn?"

"Those data-worms? Did you find anything?"

"I let them go just after you left, and I've been giving them time to work. Does it matter? It sounds like you know where Cerberus is, why do you need my program?"

"While I doubt she would, asking Alena for help is a perfect opportunity for her to give us false information, maybe take out a rival or solve a problem for her. She may be my ex, but she's always been a politician at heart. Before I let Nightmare go play his version of tag anywhere, I want confirmation that Cerberus is really there."

"Paranoia?" The last time she accused me of that, I found a target had been drawn on my back.

"Professionalism."

"I'll check." She slipped the cable from her console and plugged it into her neural interface. She paused, throwing me a sly grin. "You want to hitch a ride, big boy?"

"Excuse me?"

She held up a slender visor and gave it a playful spin. "Before I was implanted, I used this headset to interface with the Grid. If you want to watch, I can link this to my computer and you can tag along and watch me work."

"In the Grid?"

"Yes."

"Is it safe?"

"I work there all the time," she plugged the visor into her console as well.

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Warlock!"

"Okay, okay. Toss me the visor." I sat down and caught the optic in one hand. I tentatively slipped the headpiece over my eyes.

Griffin started running her fingers across the keys of her terminal, then hit a switch and my vision exploded with colors that swirled and eddied and jumbled about, a chaotic amalgam of rainbows and whirlpools. There was a feeling of vertigo, as I seemed to fall into one of the chromatic fissures, falling towards sensory oblivion.

Then it stopped. I was standing on a strange landscape, a neon-lit, digitized version of reality. The buildings around me were perfect replicas of the docking platforms and the spaceport, so real I might have been fooled, except for the lack of shadows. That, and the fact that the sky, rather than being blue with clouds and sun, was nothing more than an expanse of gold lines forming a bright grid against the darkness. I turned in my chair, and found a virtual doppelganger of the *Hawkeye*, perfect to almost every detail. This image represented the ship's computer and its embedded grid-space access. Between the buildings, where roads should have been, large chrome tubes rotated silently. Specks of light darted back and forth in these corridors, and I supposed they were other hackers and data-runners, traversing this neon world in search of information.

"This is fantastic," I whispered, awed by the sights. I had heard about the Grid, but it surpassed anything I had imagined.

"Pretty wild, huh?" a half-eagle, half-lion said.

"Griffin?"

The creature bowed, shifting on its talons. "This is my grid icon. You like?"

"Icon? You call this an icon? I can see the feathers ruffle when you move and your beak open and close when you speak. This is amazing."

"I do okay. I've seen things in this world that will scare the hell out of you. I know this is a false world, generated by Grid servers and accessed by computer, but sometimes I wonder if it's not just another dimension that's always been there, waiting for us to contact it." The griffin shrugged. "You just have to be careful. They have their own rules around here. Let's go collect the data-worms."

"After you," I said.

The griffin walked towards one of the "boom" tube entrances, a silver arch filled with a field of static. Being a hitchhiker on this trip, I had no icon of my own and no control, so I followed powerlessly. I could only go where she went, see what she accessed. She crept up to

the entrance arch, and I marveled again at the detail, the muscles stretching under the mythological beast's skin with every step, the flexing talons, the subtle bob of the head as her weight shifted. She raised a claw and light flashed between her talon and the arch, and the field of static parted like a curtain being drawn back, and Griffin leaped into the corridor, her form melting away until she was a small shimmering star, a comet rocketing through the tube. An instant later, I was swept inside.

The walls spun at a blinding speed as other grid-runners rushed past, will-o-the-wisps spiraling away like drunken insects. With a dizzying rush I—we burst out of the tube. Her icon reassembled outside the corridor, and the veil of static lowered in the arch behind us. The buildings around us were alive with bits of data cycling around inside them. I realized that the main city computer resembled the plaza where Alena worked. It made sense, but it caught me off guard.

A deep voice resonated around me: "Welcome to Ha'lit Central Systems. Feel free to browse the Public Library system. Enjoy the Tri-City tour shuttles. Enter code."

"That's Ha'lit's core A. I. Voice of God, first time you hear it. Not much of a personality, though. He's okay," Griffin said. "Follow me." Griffin walked around the corner of the nearest building, her wings folded back. *Like I have much choice*, I thought as I hovered behind her.

She moved to the back of the building and ran a talon along the base of the wall, the tips of her claw digging into the structure. Then she grabbed at another spot and savagely ripped the section of the wall off. Under the outer shell, the interior of the building was made of a lavender energy, a radiance that seemed to flow and shimmer like water, but glowed with a hellish light. Griffin hummed, dipping her claws into the pure data, she pulled out a pair of writhing red tubes. "There you are," she said, then stuffed the worms into her beak.

"That's a bit much don't you think?" I winced as one of the worms struggled to get free in the corner of her beak, only to be gulped back down.

"Part of the ambiance," she said haughtily. "Look, I have to process the worm program. Deal with it."

"Right. Sorry. Please continue." *Ick.* I watched as the griffin touched the air in front of her and a screen spun to life, bits of data that the worms had gathered scrolling past, jumbled and haphazard in detail.

"Reference, all data on Cerberus and mythology of afterlife, cross with local names and organizations in the Merchant Guild's registry. Special observation for logos that match the guidelines." She paused as the data re-configured to meet her requirements. "That logo Alena mentioned ought to be in here."

"She said it was unregistered."

"Perhaps, but if it's been logged in by the dock-master like you said she said, it'll be here, names and information notwithstanding."

Logos flashed past the screen with amazing speed, subsidiaries of larger corporations and small businesses alike. When it stopped, it was a jarring action, catching me by surprise. There, spinning on the small screen was a silhouette of three howling wolves, their shapes overlapped so they seemed to share a neck and torso. I read the text file that was attached. "Three Dog R&D. Jesus, the registry is right there, with company name and history. Why did Alena say it was unregistered? It's a small research station, set away from everyone else for security and safety. What do they specialize in?" I scanned the text. "Atmospheric generators? They produce atmospheric generators for colonization? It looks clean on the books, all nice and tidy. Why did she lie to me?"

"Politics," Griffin said. "You understand that at least. She probably had to cover her ass."

"But after what we've been through—"

“—She’s washed her hands, Warlock. Cut her ties to you and that way if this is Cerberus and you attack the base, she’s blameless. She doesn’t have to worry about who wins, since she played both sides against the middle.”

“You seem to really understand all this.”

Try working as a corporate underling sometime. You understand how to swim real fast when you’re tossed into the ocean. But this proves it, right? It looks like the lead is genuine.”

“Yeah. The lead looks good.” I watched as Griffin saved the data and there was a rush of adrenaline as the Grid reality was torn to shreds and replaced by darkness. I pulled the visor off and noticed Griffin unhooking herself from the computer. “I need to talk to Nightmare and Katt. We need to go have a chat with Cerberus.”

“One thing I’ve never been sure of,” she rubbed her chin with her finger.

“What?”

“Is Cerberus a man, a woman, or a company?”

“Good question,” Stitcher’s voice piped up from the entryway. “Man, I asked all the right people all the right questions, and most of them told me to go take a walk out an airlock. Cerberus is a touchy subject around here, one of those evils everyone ignores as long as it passes ‘em in the night. What the hell are we dealin’ with here?”

I stood up, handing the visor back to Griffin. “Let’s get Nightmare and Katt. I think it’s time for a team meeting.”

“What’s up?” Stitcher looked from me to Griffin and back again.

“I think Nightmare and I need to pay Three Dog R&D a little visit. Ask a few questions, see the sights, just the usual.” I gave a grim smile.

“Oh, dear,” Griffin said softly.

Chapter Seven

Of all the registered races across the galaxies, humans are by far the most adaptable, most culturally diverse, most violent, and most likely to destroy themselves in a grandiose fashion while trying to make a bigger, nastier weapon. Even the barbaric krakhans are not as potentially dangerous as humans are when it comes to violence within the species.

--Xipogee, Vilhous
ambassador to the
Akiel'ma colonies

As long as I get paid.

--Stitcher

Southern Reaches, Tallion

Stitcher sat casually behind the wheel of his armored ambulance, every now and again throwing a glance back at Nightmare and me as we got prepared. Outside our windows, walls of agriculture rushed past in the night, obscuring any hope of scenery. The others were all back at the ship; Griffin had wanted to come see us off, but it was better this way, easier. We said our good-byes back at the docking platform, and headed south towards the farming communities around Al'Far, the southern point of the tri-city area. That's where Nightmare and I would start our march. "You guys want a drink or something?" the medic called back over the pulsing rhythms of his music.

"No thanks, Stitcher," I said, loading an extra clip with case-less rounds. "What's the ETA?"

"Fuck if I know. All I can see is farms." He shook his head. "Welcome to Backwater Tours, guide to the galaxy's most boring places. On the left, we have a farm. And over on the right we have row after row of--what the hell is that? Corn? Whatever--green leafy things. And coming up around the bend on your left, you'll notice the wondrous sight of the planet's largest pile of shit."

Nightmare and I exchanged glances.

Stitcher wasn't happy playing the chauffeur. He wanted to be there when we hit Cerberus, but Nightmare, Katt and I agreed that it was better that just two of us go. Nightmare and I had done this sort of thing before, and we knew how to work this kind of situation. Stitcher just felt left out. Me? I wanted him ready to pick us up, just in case we needed a medic.

"Where's the gift shop?"

"Piss off."

I chuckled, slipping my spare clips into the back of the gun belt. I belted the Hellraiser to my thigh, cinching the lower belt around my leg. It was becoming second nature, the weight of the weapon in my walk and my stance. It felt good.

The toughest decision on this mission was concerning Nightmare, or more specifically, his favorite toy.

Besides Katt.

The Juggernaut Mark-10 battle-suit was one of the best armor series on the market—which wasn't really true, since the suit was a Mark-5 that Katt had tweaked up and improved to 'Mare's specifications. The armor was black and red, and the wedge-shaped helmet reminded me of a badger's head, with red sensors for eyes. The standard weapon of the Juggernaut was the Widowmaker-1000. It was a huge cannon, designed to match the battle-suit in color and style, which Katt had also toyed with, adding two more barrels to increase the destructive capabilities. It also ate ammo like most people drank coffee, so the suit had extra storage compartments on the back. Metaltech had designed most of them for the Heavy M. E. T. A. L. units. Katt had one as well, designed more towards her body type, so she could double as a soldier if needed.

The difficult decision had been whether or not to use the suit for this situation. On the one hand, stealth was important. We didn't want to announce ourselves until we were ready to meet Cerberus face-to-face, and the Juggernaut could potentially give us away to sentries and

heat detectors. On the other, the need for the firepower and defensive abilities it provided was just as important. One of them had to be sacrificed.

In the end, Katt had an idea for a compromise. She adjusted the mixture of the coolant system in the suit. Long-term it was dangerous, causing a lot of wear and tear on the equipment, but for this mission it would help keep the heat level low enough to fool most sensors. If Nightmare took his time and refrained from intense activity in the suit, we had a good shot at staying unnoticed until we wanted to be seen.

At least the numbers looked good, Katt had said.

Right.

Nightmare sat in the back of the ambulance in his black, neural suit. The suit had silver fiber wiring running along the glossy surface, connecting at several interface discs, and fit snugly on him, almost a second skin. He finished charging up his reserve power plant and was fitting it into the breastplate of the armored shell.

“Almost there. You boys really are tooling up for this shit,” Stitcher said, looking back again.

Nightmare almost smiled.

I pulled on a black shirt and fished through the nylon bag that held all my gear, coming up with my heavy combat vest. It had a variety of pockets along the sides, as well as a sheath for a large military-class knife, and the inner lining was a kevlar mesh that would stop most common slug throwers and give me half a chance against any laser under a medium class. I pulled it on, zipping it up until it was snug against my chest. The com-unit rested in a knapsack that hooked onto the vest, the mike tucked into the neck of the vest and the receiver running into an earplug on the left side. I fastened the pack into place and unzipped the vest pockets to transfer the rest of my equipment over from the nylon bag.

Nightmare opened the battle-suit and clambered inside, pulling it closed. The armor thrummed softly with power as he activated the systems and linked them to his neural suit. He lay on the gurney, waiting.

I fished in the bag, coming up with last minute items. The wire garrote fit in the top right pocket and five throwing spikes went into the left. Electrical tape fit into another pocket. I finished my inventory by pocketing four black grenades in the bottom pockets. When we had been packing the ambulance, Nightmare had loaned me a medium laser rifle to use. I had intended to use the Hellraiser only, but he wanted me to use the rifle and keep the sidearm as a secondary option. The rifle was about three feet long and made of black metal. The handgrip was custom-tooled, a silver skull and crossbones grinning from the rubber and foam surface. It was one of Katt's special toys, modified to her specifications.

The main differences between slug-throwers and lasers were the recoil of the weapon and the rate of fire. Slug-throwers had some kick but the reload rate was nominal, while the laser had no recoil whatsoever, but the charge would lower with each shot. The user could control how intense a beam the rifle would emit, but at full strength the rifle would need several seconds to build the charge back up. I hefted the rifle and pumped the battery, letting the charge build. After five heartbeats, the rifle chirped, letting me know that the charge was at maximum power. While charged, it would chirp every fifteen minutes to remind the owner.

I adjusted the mike clips in the neck of the vest and inserted the receiver in my left ear. "I'm good to go."

"Let's do it," Nightmare grunted.

Stitcher slowed the ambulance, but didn't come to a halt. "Okay boys, we're about as far south as we can go without hitting jungle. Holler when you're ready."

"You'll be the first to hear," I grinned.

Stitcher hit a switch near the wheel and the back opened up. The automated gurney slid out and down, dragging in the dirt and depositing Nightmare in the middle of the road. I

hopped out and rolled to the right as soon as my feet hit ground, coming up on my knees next to a wall of some type of corn-like crop. I studied the area as Nightmare synched the battle-suit to his internal equilibrium. He rose to his full height, his armor alive with power. He gave me a salute with his Widowmaker-1000, which I returned.

I mentally activated the compass in my cybereye, the degrees from polar north scrolling in the corner of my vision as my head moved. I turned slowly, getting a solid reading, then pointed south-southwest, towards the location Alena had given us. Nightmare nodded in agreement, and we quietly slipped into the fields.

Modern agricultural science was an astounding art. The farms of the southern region sat on an area that had once been jungle, until it was cleared and the soil reconfigured for a different crop than what might actually grow in that area. Underground moisture pumps and chemical boosters guaranteed the plants received the exact amounts of what they required to thrive. What this meant for Nightmare and I was the fields extended for miles, running into a wall of foliage that marked the current boundary of the jungle. I went from neat and orderly rows of controlled, organized crop formations to the thick and oppressive tangles that made up the "Outlands," as the locals dubbed it.

In some ways, I liked the raw chaos and power of the jungle more than the order of the farms. It was a purer force. The air was warmer and more humid, giving cause to the thick clusters of undergrowth. Even as I stepped across the line into that primal world, I could see natural beauty. Flowers of exotics hues and scents peeked out of the vines and leaves, and on the northern sides on most of the trees there was a glittering fungus that seemed to catch the light as I moved, casting prismatic bursts across the air.

"You read me, Partner?" I kept my voice low, not putting much air through the words. The com-unit was sensitive enough I didn't have to talk very loud. Nightmare was about five minutes behind me, taking it slow and easy.

"I'm here. How's it look?"

"Rural." I crept forward. "And a bit unfriendly."

"Be a man."

"Fuck, that's easy for you to say. You're walking around in a giant tank. I have to worry about the natives."

"Natives?"

"Snakes, spiders, that sort of thing. Whatever wildlife is the usual on this planet. Hell, I bet you even get to piss in your shorts." I stepped over a fallen log.

"All the comforts of home."

"Prick."

"Asshole."

I smiled to myself and kept the channel clear for a while. It didn't take long to work up a sweat, and I had to focus on keeping my eyes open and my attention on everything around me. While I was concerned about patrols and guards, I really disliked the thought of meeting a hungry native reptile that seemed universal to jungle environments.

"Hang back for a while," I said into the com-unit. "I'm going to have a look around."

"Affirmative."

We had about half a day's hike to the coordinates of the base, but we were taking our time and making certain we were undetected. I wasn't sure what the best tactic would be, having no real knowledge of the facility. I had no intention of rushing into a full-blown firefight, however, and that meant reconnaissance. And reconnaissance was my department.

Everyone needs a hobby.

* * *

When I returned to the agreed-upon location, I found Nightmare under a thick tree. He was nestled back far enough that he was partially hidden by shadows and foliage, even in the

battle-suit. I made a lot of noise as I drew close so he would realize I wasn't an enemy patrol. He lowered his gun when he saw me enter the small clearing, and gave me a mock salute. "See anything interesting?"

"Just an arms-dealer's well-designed complex hidden in the jungle on a backwater planet." I picked up a stick and waved him to a spot of mud on the ground. I started scribbling on the ground, making a map of what I had seen.

"Nothing interesting then."

"The usual," I shrugged.

I drew a big rectangle in the wet soil and a squiggly line against it on one side. "The main compound is several stories high, embedded in the shore of a river that runs along here. The river's pretty damn big, too. A good quarter of a mile in width at the very least. As far as I can tell there is a dock and a couple of boats, so I'm betting that's the main source of moving their goods. I saw a couple of guards, basic ex-military types. I also saw a hover-truck leave the side of the building away from the water, so they must have an entrance there. If so, it'll be on the third or fourth floor of the complex, while the river access is on the bottom floor. The land entrance faces north, so I'm assuming it's the front of the compound." I stabbed the ground for emphasis with the tip of the stick.

"See any defenses at the front?"

I shook my head. "I couldn't get too close, but you can bet there are some. Cerberus deals in arms, I doubt the compound is going to be unprotected. I saw a small craft on the water near the docks, but I'm not sure how many were on it. Also, I found some tracks about a mile away from the compound. Military-issue boots. Pretty worn, too, from the looks of the heel. I found three sets of prints. I don't know how many patrols Cerberus has going at a time, but those tracks were the only signs I found."

"You don't need five revolving patrols out here. That would only attract attention. The smart money is on switching out a single patrol every so often. That's all you really need, unless

you're expecting trouble." He waved to the jungle around us. "This is too far from anywhere to expect trouble."

I tossed the stick aside and picked up my rifle. "Then it's probably a good sign. Okay. Which side do you want? Either way you'll get wet. To get to the front from here you have to cross the river." The suit was atmosphere-controlled and completely sealed, so he wouldn't swim, but he could walk across the river bottom with no problem.

"I'll take the front. It's bound to have heavier defenses. You take the river entrance and I'll meet you on the inside."

"Works for me. You want the com-units shut down?"

"Nah, just keep 'em quiet until we need to coordinate the attack. Think you can handle the river side?"

I threw him a grin. "Definitely. What's the signal for the attack?"

"You'll know, trust me." He stood up and smirked at me. "Just be careful with the rifle. Katt tweaked it, so it has more of a kick to it." There was a rare twinkle in his eye. Whatever Katt had done, he approved of the alteration and that in and of itself gave me a little chill.

"Right. Holler when you're ready to go in," I said.

"You too."

He waded into the underbrush, his armored frame swallowed by the foliage as if it were a leafy, organic fluid. I turned around and headed back towards the river. My cybereye was hard at work, the scrolling marquees on the border of my vision indicating the compass heading, the current standard time, and announcing that the shroud was at full charge.

I leveled the laser rifle in a ready position as I walked.

I tried to attune myself to my surroundings, to hear and feel any sign of life nearby. More specifically, the patrol might still be around somewhere, so I had to be careful. Sweat clung to my skin and dripped from my hair. In the back of my mind I resolved to shower when I got back to the ship.

Minutes passed.

I was haunted by a sudden image of Misty back at her mother's office. I saw the sadness in her eyes and I wondered what I could do to change things for the little girl. She was a sweet kid. While you can't help everyone all the time, I wished I could do something to make her life a little easier. This was one fight I couldn't begin to win, so it was hard to convince myself to even start.

I was so wrapped up in my own thoughts they were almost on top of me by the time I noticed them.

The voices were carried to me before they came into sight, but I knew they were headed right for me. While there was underbrush around and trees close by to hide behind, I needed a few moments to do either and allow leaves to stop moving and branches to stop swaying from my passage. I didn't have those few moments.

I dropped to a crouch and thumbed the switch on my cyberarm. The Shroud field crackled along my body as it came to life.

"What was that?"

"What was what, Rene?"

"I saw something up ahead."

"Where?"

"Right over there."

"There's nothing there. You ate those mushrooms again, right?"

"Fuck you, Lopez! There was some sort of shimmer right over there."

Three men waded onto the path. One of them, a lanky, slick-looking man, was pointing in my direction. *You must be Rene.* They all wore a patchwork version of military-grade armor, but they carried chrome-plated rifles, examples of the best the arms market had to offer. It stood to reason. Since they worked for a black market dealer, the least Cerberus could do was provide top weaponry for personal defense.

Lopez was obviously the swarthy man chuckling beside Rene, but I had no idea about the name of the hawk-nosed man was behind them. He had been silent so far and gave no indications of having much to say any time soon.

"There's nothing here," Lopez chuckled. "You getting' heat stroke again?"

"I don't get paid enough to take your shit," Rene said.

"I don't get paid enough to walk perimeter with a Shroom-head."

The mute mercenary was watching my area fairly close, as was Rene, but they didn't react like they saw anything. *That's right, boys. You're just tired and seeing things. Keep moving. Keep moving. Move along.*

I kept still, fighting the little itches and tingles that always seem to appear when you want to stay still. I could feel every drop of sweat where it clung to my skin or trickled down my face. *Don't move.* I felt my jaw clench as I forced myself to not wipe my face. *Just stay still a little longer.*

"Back off," Rene said.

Lopez snorted. "Let's keep moving. There's nothing out here but bugs and trees."

Rene continued to grumble, but the three men continued their trek, walking from my left ahead of me towards my right side. Thankfully, their path did not cross the spot where I knelt. I held my breath and tried to wait them out. *Just another minute--*

The charge monitor on my laser beeped.

The three men started to turn.

I swung towards the men. My only chance was to try and do a full beam, which would allow me to hit all three men, but not do as much damage if I aimed at one of them. I needed all three off-balance for a few more seconds. As I swung around I pulled the trigger, and a beam of lavender light burst forth lancing into the foliage. I followed through with my spin and swept the beam over all three men. The laser stopped after three seconds when the charge ran out. I started to draw Hellraiser, then stopped. I deactivated the shroud.

The jungle was quiet. Foliage smoldered and smoked from the laser's passage, and two trees had deep, charred grooves in their trunks. I hefted the rifle and studied it for a moment. The charge monitor chirped merrily. Staring at the carnage, I hit my com-mike. "Nightmare?"

"You okay? I saw a flash of light."

"TWEAKED?"

There was a pause. "That was the laser? I guess it worked."

"TWEAKED?"

"Yeah, Katt's modifications looked intense in theory. What's the problem?"

There was a bad taste in my mouth, and the scent of cauterized flesh drifted at me. I glanced at Lopez and Rene. I knew Nightmare and his violent nature, and I knew Katt and her talents with science and technology. Death was no stranger and I my tolerance level for dead bodies was high, but three men cut in half by a modified laser? "Nothing. It worked just fine," I said.

"I figured you'd like it."

"Yeah, thanks."

I shut the com-unit off. Nightmare, God love him, was my best friend. He was also the scariest person I knew. With Katt's help he still retained some of his humanity, but when the adrenaline kicked in and the battle started up, he was dangerous. There was no one I'd rather have at my side in a firefight, mainly because I wanted him firing anywhere else but in my direction.

Shaking my head, I headed for the river.

* * *

The water was cold. I eased into the river, keeping my eye on the patrol boat in the distance. There were two men on the craft, one piloting and one sweeping the search light along

the shore. They were focused on the side away from the compound, so I was going to attack from their blind side. I ducked under the water to have a look around.

There was a fair drop-off just past the waterline, the rocks and mud curving down to eleven or twelve feet. With the digital amplification of my cybereye I found a tangle of thick roots that jutted out of the mud about fifteen feet out, but still a good four feet from the water's surface. From the way the patrol was hugging the bank, this would be the perfect spot for an ambush. It was still upriver from the compound so no one there would notice what was going on. The problem was balance when I struck. I had to have the laser above the water to fire it, and I needed ground to stand that high; besides, treading water with a rifle was next to impossible. Lasers--anything smaller than the types mounted on vehicles--would diffuse and refract under water, doing little more than heating the water nicely and giving it a cheery glow before the power cell ruptures and the refraction system burned out.

I had a couple of minutes before the boat would get close. I shouldered the laser and pushed away from the bank with my legs and swam towards the gnarled roots, letting only my eyes and nose remain above water. No sense broadcasting what I was doing by making ripples in the water.

I settled on the tangle, found stable footing, and slipped the rifle off my shoulder. *Let's move faster, gentlemen. Time's a wasting.*

The craft moved at a slow, steady pace, the hum of the engine drifting across the water. It was a basic flatbed boat with a decent engine and a chair and control panel to steer by. The blue-white circle of the spotlight drifted across trees and foliage on the banks. I wondered if they were actively searching for someone or if this was the usual procedure. These men seemed more professional than the three on perimeter, but that wasn't much of a stretch. I decided this was par for the river patrol.

The boat drew closer. I took several quick breaths and pulled my head under the water, the silent pressure closing around me. I forced my real eye shut and used the cybereye to watch

the underside of the boat as it approached. My vision was as clear as if I were wearing a facemask. I grabbed a root with my left hand to keep me from drifting up towards the surface, and tried to ignore the slight pressure building in my chest.

Come on.

Oblivious to my needs, the boat maintained its pace. The tightness in my chest was spreading and my throat started to burn, but I held on to the roots and forced myself to be patient. I forced the pain down, willing myself to remain calm as the craft reached my area. I had to wait for the blind spot.

Just a little more, I urged silently.

The craft slid through the water, its engines vibrating in my inner ear. I released the root, and stood up. As my head got above the water, reality came back with the presence of sound. Insects, birds, and even the sound of the wind came at me in a rush. I gripped the laser rifle and looked at the men on board the boat. The one operating the light and the main gunner were focused away from me, intent on studying the bank. The driver was casually piloting the craft with one hand, when he glanced over the water and our eyes met. He let go of the controls and dove for his gun. I hastily pulled the trigger, trying to maintain the element of surprise.

Click.

The gun should have fried itself, the light reflected back upon itself. I should have been tagged instantly by the pilot. My wonderful little ambush should have failed completely.

The water in front of me glowed with infernal, lavender light, and a thin beam of light burst from the surface, stroking across the back of the head of the driver. My real hand went numb from the shock as the rifle finally fried. The pilot screamed as his flesh and hair ignited. *Jesus, I thought. Skin just doesn't catch fire.* I dropped the rifle, took a deep breath and dove under the water as his companions turned towards me. I pushed off with my legs, diving under the boat. I could see the rifle silently sink to the muddy bottom. It gave a last spark from under the casing like the last twitch of a corpse. *Tweaked.*

The water around the tangled roots churned and boiled as the men on the craft unloaded where I had been. The water quickly cushioned the slugs, but the sound of the bubbles and the rounds bouncing off the thick roots echoed forebodingly.

I swam towards the side away from the gunfire, pumping with feet and hands, and nearly lost my breath as something fell partially over the side of the boat and into the water. I got a good look into the unseeing eyes of the pilot. His cheeks and ears were badly scarred with burns, and bits of charred skin and hair flaked off into the water. His mouth was agape with pain and fear. A hand reached down, fingers dipping into the water as it attempted to pull the body back on board.

Oh no you don't. I lashed out and grabbed the wrist, pulling myself up out of the water even as I dragged the man down. I yanked my knife free from its sheath on my vest, and as my face broke the surface I thrust the blade upwards. The steel bit into flesh and sank up to the hilt in the man's throat. He tried to speak but no air passed his moving lips. His eyes went wide with shock.

I grabbed on to the side of the boat and pulled myself up. The last man was still cutting loose on the water, his back to me. Next to the dying man rested the sleek automatic gun he had set aside to help his comrade out of the water. The gunner paused to change clips. "How is he?" he yelled over his shoulder, not really looking.

I scooped up the gun, checked the safety, and pointed at the gunner. "They're dead." He turned, fumbling to get the clip in his weapon. With a snarl, he slammed the clip into place. I fired a quick burst that emptied the gun. The man's head jerked backwards as the slugs tore into his upper torso and face. He fell backwards, landing in the water. I paused to see if there was any life. I kicked once in the water to give myself lift and pulled myself up into the boat.

The last gunner lay in the water, a dark lump bobbing in the soft current, clouds of deep purple-red enfolding the corpse. I tossed the empty gun into the water.

I kicked the driver's body off the boat and tugged my knife out of the throat of the last body, wiping the blade off before returning it to its sheath. I patted him down, but there wasn't anything out of the ordinary. Spare clips, knife, com-unit, security ID badge. There was nothing surprising. I took his knife and his badge, then rolled his body into the river.

Sailors have always consigned dead crew to the sea. The Confederate Navy ejects them into space. It was poetic somehow. That and the bodies would distract anything that was attracted to the blood in the water.

I pressed the throttle lever up and steered the craft on a gentle curve, bringing it back on a course for the compound. The throttle was a "dead-man switch;" it cut the engines when released. While holding on to the throttle at half-speed—roughly the same speed they had been going while on patrol—I slipped the knife under the lever so the console braced it. The engine maintained a steady hum.

The boat rounded a bend in the river, and I could see the dock thrusting out into the water ahead. With one hand I kept the craft on course, and with my other I drew Hellraiser. The magnetic holster echoed with a dull clank as the gun came free.

I hit the com-mike. "Mare? I'm almost at the dock. Hit it when you're ready."

No response.

I piloted as close as possible to the dock. The mental clock started up in my head as I judged the distance and speed I was going. *One.* I stepped back from the console as far as possible without letting go of the control. It was going to be close. *Two.* The dock was approaching fast. I did a quick check but didn't see any guards. *Three.*

I lunged forward and leaped, backpedaling to stop myself from careening into the river as I landed on the dock. The craft stayed on the last course, humming as it went down river. I crept along the dock until I reached a wall of crates waiting for distribution.

Everything was quiet. I wondered what Nightmare was doing.

The force of the explosion shuddered through the ground, rattling the docks and causing the crates to shift in their formation slightly. The compound was built into the rock lying along the river, the top of which was several stories up. Over the crest of earth, between jutting trees, I could see orange-red light fading away.

Ah. There he is.

Alarms sounded from within the rock and mud, and red lights started spinning. Under their red glow, I could see that the docks were clear. I moved over towards the entrance, pulling out the badge with my free hand.

I held the security I.D. to the sensor on the side of the thick portal, and the doors hissed as the magnetic seal broke and they started to open. I dropped to a crouch, thrusting the gun through the widening gap between the doors. I found a small warehouse on the other side, piles of crates stacked neatly in rows. The aisles were shadowy, lit only by a few lights at intersections. I rolled through the doorway coming up with my back to a crate a crate. I listened.

The alarms were still blaring. The doors slid shut and sealed. I gripped the Hellraiser and paused for a few seconds more. Most of the people, if they were properly trained, were making for Nightmare's position. *God help them.*

I stood up and glanced around the corner. Nothing. I crept down the walkway, searching the walls for the door that would lead deeper into the compound, or even an elevator. I searched about for several minutes, expecting to run into a lifter or guard at every turn, but the entire storeroom was empty. There were only crates of weapons and ammunition, guns and explosives. It was a room of death. I finally found an elevator and a stairwell at the far end of the room.

I thumbed the com-mike. "How's it going?"

I could hear the sound of the Widowmaker spitting round after round. "Not bad. Top floor will be secure in another few minutes."

"Okay. Don't take the elevator to the bottom level."

"Why?"

"I'm leaving a surprise. Bottom floor is secure."

"Right."

I fished the wire garrote and tape out of my vest and stood in front of the elevator. It took a couple of minutes, but I used two of my grenades and taped them to one side and ran the garrote through the pins and taped it to the other side, making a crude booby trap. It wasn't a trip-laser, but it would work. Once I was done with the trap I put the tape back in my pocket, picked up my gun and headed up the stairs.

The next level was a metallic corridor running left and right for a good twenty feet before they each turned south. The alarm lights were spaced out along the hallway, spinning in their painful hypnotic pattern. I went right, leading with my left shoulder and keeping my back to the wall. I slowed at the corner, peeking around to check what was down the hall.

The corridor ran further down, the left side lined with windows. "'Mare, second floor is research and development."

"Can you handle it?"

"It's quiet. I haven't run into any security yet."

"I have." His voice was drowned out by gunfire.

"How much?"

Over the com I heard an explosion. "All of it, apparently." There was a touch of excitement in his voice. He was on his own little rush.

"Enjoy yourself." I cut the com-link. Nightmare didn't sound in trouble, so I'd leave him to his art. I moved steadily down the corridor. The research lab was empty and silent, the computers and machines shut down. Not even the technicians were present. I circled the lab and found myself back at the stairs, having found no resistance and nothing of interest.

I made my way to the next floor.

The third floor reminded me more of an office building, the walls looked like wood paneling, the floor carpeted. There was even a slight hint of flowers in the air, or perfume. It was enough of a change that it took me by surprise for a moment. Even the alarm was dampened on this floor, the tone softer and more refined. "Nightmare? Where are you? I'm on third."

"Top floor is secure." He paused. "Real secure. I'm coming to your level in the elevator."

I could hear it start to move even as he spoke, the machinery humming inside the bowels of the wall. I glanced both ways, but there was still no sign of anyone. "I'm to the right of the elevator doors. Try not to shoot me."

"Is it clear?"

"So far." The elevator stopped and I watched as he lumbered out. His suit was pockmarked with new dents and carbon scores, and there were smears along his legs and torso I didn't want to know about. He smelled of hydraulic fluid, the plasma-like substance in the joints and pumps that gave him a complete range of movement. *He must have taken a hit in a hose somewhere.* "How's the suit?"

"Down to ninety-one percent. Nothing serious."

I nodded and led the way.

The level was similar to the other in that it consisted of a main room, surrounded by a corridor. I opened the door and glanced around, running into the first person I had seen inside the compound. He looked to be some sort of tech, perhaps a hacker. He was a lean man, with dark weasel-like eyes and dark mop of hair on his small round head. His jaw dropped as I leveled the Hellraiser at his face. "Don't move." He shook his head vigorously.

"Kill him." Nightmare said.

"N-no, don't!" the hacker threw up his arms. "I'll do anything you say!"

I sniffed. "Anything?"

"Just don't kill me!"

I pulled the gun away, but kept it primed. "Maybe we can work something out, right? You don't have to die, not if you cooperate. Why don't you get on your computer, access the Grid-address, and lower all the ice." Nightmare snorted and positioned himself to watch the hallway.

"But that'll leave us defenseless on the grid!" I shoved Hellraiser back in his face. "I mean, that's not a problem. I just wanted you to know," he gave a nervous laugh.

"Please," I said.

He cleared his throat. "Of c-course. Give me just a minute." He sat in his chair and jacked into the system, plugging the interface into a socket behind his right ear. I swiveled a monitor around like Griffin had done for me, so I could be certain he wasn't trying anything shady. On the screen, I could see the red and black fog of lethal virus drop one by one, until the grid image of the compound was clean. The hacker jacked out. "There. No defenses."

You're on, Griffin.

I pulled out my badge. "I'm a ranger. Go down the stairs--the stairs, mind you, not the elevator. There is a small boat down there. Take it and leave. Get as far from here as possible, and we'll forget you were ever even here."

"T-thanks." He tripped over his own feet as he hurried for the door.

Nightmare reached out with an arm and grabbed him by the front of his shirt, lifting the frail hacker off his feet. "Where's Cerberus?"

He pointed, his long fingers trembling. "Down the hall--her office is down there. She almost never leaves it." He looked sick to his stomach, dangling from Nightmare's armored fingers. The big man glanced at me and dropped the hacker, who scurried off down the hall. We had rattled him pretty bad. He must have assumed no one would ever assault the base. He had thought he was safe.

"Cerberus is a woman," I said. I hadn't known a gender or even race before. It made things interesting to know she was a woman.

"That just makes Cerberus dangerous."

I made my way down the corridor, Nightmare directly behind me. The office he mentioned was the only other area on the floor. The double doors were ornate, made of thick wood, *real* wood, and the handles were polished brass. It was not a display of vulgar wealth, but was more the portal of someone with class. There were fancier doors, and more secure doors, but this was the office of someone with sharp personal tastes. I was impressed.

It splintered rather well under the huge armored boot. Nightmare kicked at it once, the frame shattering and the doors falling inward to land heavily on the carpet. "Knock-knock," he said.

"There they are now, Jarvis," a woman's voice said with a thick accent.

"Indeed, ma'am."

Nightmare and I entered through the ruined doorway, guns first. There were only two people were inside the office. The first I noticed was a tall, thin suit with reading glasses on his hooked nose and a data-pad in his hand. I assumed he was Jarvis because the second individual was obviously Cerberus.

She must have been exotic and beautiful in her youth, for she was still attractive even though she was obviously over fifty. Wrinkles spread from the corners of her green eyes and the signs of age dotted her arms. Her brown hair tinged with silver was cut in a conservative style, and she wore a business outfit, with all the buttons and ruffles. She folded her arms on the desk and smiled, completely unfazed by our presence. She looked over Nightmare's suit and my gun with an appreciative eye, like a tiger licking its maw before a kill. "Where did these wonderful boys come from, Jarvis? And why aren't they on the payroll?"

"I don't know, ma'am."

"You couldn't afford us," I said, checking the room.

"Don't presume to know what I can and cannot afford, dear boy. My abilities and finances are quite formidable. I can even repair all the wonderful things you've blown up and

replace the men you killed." She clucked her tongue. "I simply need a better class of security force. Perhaps I could interest the two of you in a career change?"

Nightmare stared down the Widowmaker at her. "No."

"See?" She laughed merrily. "These are the kind of men I want: loyal to a fault, smart, and they never back down. After seeing these two men dismantle my crew and my home—my home!--I have to assume you hired the guards from some sort of retail outlet, Jarvis."

"I'm sorry, Cerberus," Jarvis lowered his head. "I was misinformed as to the caliber of manpower we were getting."

She gave him a sidelong look and a wry smile. "Yes you were. We shall discuss that later. But for right now, let's move to the issue at hand. Why have you gentlemen come to my little sanctum?"

Her disarming manner was starting to piss me off.

"This is about some droids you sold a while back. Two of them, in fact. I have it on excellent authority that they were programmed here, by your people, before they were sent off. These droids killed an innocent man. I want to know what their programming was, in specific detail."

She sat back, her eyes narrow. "It's quite possible those droids came from here. It's very possible. I've sold a large number of droids, and had, until my home was defiled, a fair number of programmers. Now they're either dead or fled, but it is quite possible that these droids you mentioned came from my stores. What of it? Do you desire a refund on faulty merchandise? All sales are final." Jarvis showed her something on his pad. "Do you have the contract agreement?"

"Those droids killed a decent man. They killed my brother!" I tightened my grip on the gun, my finger starting to bite into the trigger.

"What classification?"

I stopped and tilted my head. "Zombie. Why?"

"Zombie, was it? Jarvis, let me see the schematic for that model—ah, yes. Here we are. That class is meant to be a guardian and has a lethal setting. If it killed someone you knew, I'm sorry, but it sounds like the droid did its job. I can't give refunds for contracts that live up to the specified contract."

Even in his battle-suit I could feel Nightmare tense.

I cocked my head at Nightmare but kept my sights on Cerberus. "Don't do it," I spoke out of the side of my mouth. "Don't you dare do it. We need her alive."

He pulled the trigger. I winced at the sound of the gun going off, and Cerberus closed her eyes as Jarvis—standing expectantly over her shoulder with his fancy data-pad—burst like a melon. What was left of the assistant hit the floor like a burlap sack. The wall and window behind Cerberus was covered in gore, and her hair and face were dusted with bloody mist. From her gaping mouth and hardening eyes, she was somewhere between shock and rage.

I ground my teeth. "That was real constructive, Nightmare."

"I didn't shoot *her* yet."

"Do you feel better now?" I snarled.

"I'm halfway there."

Cerberus pulled out a handkerchief and wiped at her face. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to get good assistants? It took me three years to break Jarvis in and get him adjusted to this lifestyle." She dabbed at her clothes with the cloth. He was the brightest accountant I have ever met. He had a mind like a computer."

"His CPU is all over your blouse," Nightmare said.

"Quite. What exactly are you searching for?"

"You sold a pair of Zombies to the Nebula Corporation's complex on Aldion. All I want is the information on that transaction. Contracts, funds exchanged, everything."

She looked around her with a helpless shrug. "Fine. Take it. Take it all. It's all on the computer system. Since you've been so kind as to kill all my people and destroy my entire career

in one bold strike, please feel free to raid my files and take anything you wish." She picked up a mug of something, glanced at the flecks of blood on the rim and set it down. "Until today I was a top of the line dealer. Who are you people? What gives you the right to ruin everything I've accomplished here?"

"We're investigating a murder. One of your Zombies was the tool."

Nightmare tilted his head. "Everything is in your database?"

Cerberus shook her head. "You don't program Zombies for assassination. Their logic circuits don't work along those lines. They only attack things that violate certain perimeters within their programs. Your friend crossed a line somehow that the droid acknowledged as an illegal action and terminated the problem."

"Why did he have to die? What did he do that made him a target? He was a number cruncher. He sat in an office and analyzed data from a number of projects. He was no threat."

"Not just sales receipts, I mean," said Nightmare. "Everything."

"Perhaps this man found something he should have left alone." Cerberus chewed on her lower lip. "Those Zombies can be attached to a computer system to react if the central processors are somehow breached. It fits within their watchdog logic circuits."

"Everything?" Nightmare asked.

"What?" Cerberus looked at him. "What are you babbling about?"

"Everything you know or have done is on the computer, yes?"

"That's what I said," the arms merchant sighed.

Nightmare pulled the trigger without hesitation and the sound of the Widowmaker slammed into my senses. I was stunned. Nightmare paused, eyeing the aftermath of his shot. Then he lowered his gun, turned on his booted heel, and walked out of the room.

I was speechless.

"Griffin, this is Nightmare," he spoke into the com-mike.

"I'm a little busy, guys. I accessed their system once you dropped the security virus shield, but her entire career must be on the computer. There's a lot of data in here, and I'm trying to leave anything irrelevant behind."

"You have total access?"

"Not a problem."

"Keep at it," Nightmare said. "Get it all."

I holstered my gun. Suddenly I felt tired. "We could have learned more, you know. You didn't have to kill her. Computers don't have human perspective and intuition. There was more she could have told us, more that I wanted to ask."

"She had to die."

I threw my arms up in the air. "Are you absolutely certain? You didn't give her much time to talk."

Nightmare pointed back at the bloody office. "She programmed those Zombies. Maybe to someone else's orders, maybe on her own. In either case, she was involved with Breck's death and with your own." He hefted the hand cannon. "Do you think Griffin wanted to keep her alive? Cerberus made her own choices, and this is where those choices led. She was born to be a spot on that wall."

"Why is that?"

"She killed you."

I suddenly realized that his anger was at the death of a friend, a brother in arms. We had always been a good team, and a man like Nightmare had few friends. This was vengeance, and it was important to him. It was almost touching in a sick sort of way. "I understand what you mean, but let's face it. I got better."

He chuckled. "You killed some men on the way in, why get all weak-kneed over killing Cerberus?"

I glanced back at the office. What had I been expecting? *Not a middle-aged woman playing at black-market sales like she was an antique dealer, that's for sure.* "I just thought it would end here, you know? We'd challenge the evil arms dealer, uncover a motive and tie up the entire thing. It would make everything neat and tidy. Somehow it seems that this is going to get nasty and tangled before we understand the entire mess."

"You don't know that. Give Griffin a chance."

I shook my head. "I don't doubt her abilities, I just have this feeling in my gut. Something strange is going on here, and we've just opened the lid to take a peek inside."

"Don't overreact. We may find that Breck stumbled onto her illegal deal with Nebula and that's why the Zombie activated. That would be a straightforward answer and explain everything."

"Except Breck wasn't in accounting, he was a project manager. He had no reason to be in any files that would mention Cerberus. Our only connection came from the droid, after the fact."

He paused. "I didn't kill your ideas."

"No, you killed our lead."

"Let's see what Griffin finds before we get too morose. You never know, we might just get lucky." Nightmare headed for the elevators.

"I'm lucky, but I'm not that lucky."

* * *

It took the rest of the day and a good portion of the night to make it back to where Stitcher waited for us. We might have been able to make better time, but we were already weary and we didn't have the pressing timetable we had when trying to get to the compound. While it was only hours of walking, by the time we reached the ambulance my legs felt leaden, as if days

had passed. Stitcher popped the back doors, letting Nightmare and I climb aboard. As soon as 'Mare was on the gurney and I was seated, Stitcher took off.

I pulled the vest off and let it slump to the floor. I sank into the seat, resting my head on the back of the cushion. I closed my eyes. I could hear Stitcher saying something, and there was the sound of Nightmare emerging from his suit, much like a chick breaking out of its shell.

And then I was somewhere else, but I wasn't.

I was still in the back of the assault ambulance, but everything was shadowed. Nightmare, Stitcher, the vehicle itself, all of it was made of shadow. Everything except everything outside the windows and me. I seemed normal, and through the windows an eerie purple glow radiated. No landmarks passed by, just a constant light on the other side of the glass. Something else was here, standing amidst the shadows, a splash of life in the darkness. I sighed. I was already tired. I didn't have the strength to deal with this.

"Nice job back there." The voice was all too familiar. "You're the real deal, huh? You don't talk too tough but damn if you don't get the job done."

"Coyote," I said.

"In the fur." My patron saint of sarcasm gave a canine curtsy. "You're looking well. You didn't blow up or get shot or anything this time. That's good."

I looked at him evenly. "Is it your goal to make my life miserable?"

"I have plenty of goals. Making you miserable is just a perk."

"At least you enjoy your job."

Coyote lay down on the floor of the ambulance, never taking his intelligent eyes away from me. He yawned, his toothy mouth stretching wide. "Excuse me. I've been on the move quite a bit recently. It feels good to stretch out."

"Hard to be a spirit guide these days," I said sympathetically.

"More than you will ever know, Warlock. More than you will ever know."

I rubbed my face with my hands, wondering if that would help my vision return. When I looked up, the world was still a blur of shadows. “You usually have reasons for coming around. What is it that you want this time? Do you have some mysterious, obscure command to give me?”

Coyote cocked his head to one side, a mischievous gleam in his eyes. “You stand at the end of the first leg of your journey, and before you is a fork in the road. You have two paths before you. One is very dark, and the other is very bright. One of them will bring you to the truth. Which one is the correct choice is not clear. Perhaps both will lead to the truth, or perhaps neither of them will.” He paused. “Is that cryptic enough?”

I hung my head. “Shut up.”

Coyote faded away, and color and texture filled the empty shadows as I came back to the real world. The *Hawkeye* was in front of us, its gangway lowered to accept the vehicle. We were home. I hoped Griffin had had time to examine the collected data. I wanted answers, and I didn't think the trail ended with Cerberus, as much as I would have liked it to do so. *If it does end here, I wouldn't be at a crossroads, now would I?*

Chapter Eight

I hold that it is much more secure to be feared than to be loved, if one of them must be given up. The reason for my answer is that one must say of men that they are ungrateful, mutable, pretenders and dissemblers, prone to avoid danger, thirsty for gain. Men hesitate less to injure a man who makes himself loved than to injure one who makes himself feared, for their love is held by a chain of obligation, which, because of men's wickedness, is broken on every occasion for the sake of selfish profit; but their fear is secured by a dread of punishment which never fails you.

--Niccolo Machiavelli,
Ancient advisor to
tyrants, from his essay,
The Prince

That has to be the wisest, most logical and thought-provoking passage I have ever seen to come from a cruel, wicked, evil, lying, back-stabbing, sadistic mind. And the mind has to be that twisted, since it rested in the skull of a man. If I saw this jerk today, I'd probably shoot his knees out just to see if the theory fucking worked.

--Katt

Ha'tit, Tallion

I lay on my bunk for hours trying to fall asleep when we got back. A thin layer of sweat formed on my forehead. It always happened after an intense situation. Prolonged combat got the juices flowing, and it took a while for the adrenaline to subside in my blood. I finally gave in to the insomnia and sat up, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. Stitcher had offered a chemical cocktail chaser to put the evening away, but I had to let my system cycle down on its own. The bed was uncomfortably warm, and the floor had a surprising chill under my feet. I contemplated lying on the floor to cool off, then shrugged off the idea. I'd never get back up, and if anyone came in on me, it would be awkward explaining myself.

I stepped out into the hall, trying to be quiet about it. I didn't have to worry very much.

The only sounds audible were coming from Nightmare and Katt's quarters, and they were making enough noise to leave nothing to the imagination. *I guess Nightmare still has some energy left.*

The others were probably asleep, their cabins quiet. I went into the hold, trying to walk off this energy, and found it quiet as well. The only area with any light was Torgue's throne and system monitors. I moved over to look at the cyborg. His eyes were closed, as if he were asleep. *Do you sleep? I mean, really sleep like we do?* Then I wondered about dreaming. The human mind needed a certain amount of dreaming to remain sane. Did Torgue have dreams? Was there enough meat left to allow him to dream? Katt called Torgue a symbiosis, a perfect balance of man and machine. There wasn't much free thought coming from him, however, and I wondered how much of the being was still human.

His eyes opened, and met mine. He didn't say anything.

"Who were you?" I asked.

He gave me a puzzled look, tilting his head as if the slanted perspective would help him understand. "I am Torgue, CEFCU unit A001."

When all else fails fall back on your basic routines. "Yeah, that's who you are right now. Who were you before the cybernetics? You know, before you ran into Nightmare and Katt and Stitcher, and they gutted you and grafted the hardware.. You used to be a person. You used to wake up every morning and have breakfast and go to work and come home, and the whole package. Who were you? Did you have family? A wife?"

Torgue shook his head. "I don't understand."

I lowered my head in defeat. "Never mind. They wiped your memory anyway, and I doubt they'd leave any traces. You can return to the interface." He watched me for another minute and closed his eyes, interfacing with his chair once again.

There was a shuffle behind me. I turned to see what it was, and found Griffin. Her hair was a tangle of curls, and her face was etched in shadows from fatigue. She had still been at the

computer going over the files she had boosted from Cerberus' databanks when I had tried to sleep. That had been several hours ago. She was obviously just now going to bed. "What are you doing up?" she yawned.

I folded my arms across my chest. "I asked you if you were going to get some sleep a couple of hours ago, and you said you would 'in a moment.' I believe those were the exact words you used, weren't they?"

She shrugged.

"I think that was exactly what you said. Let's get you to bed." I put my hands on her shoulders and turned her towards her cabin. She followed my guidance, but leaned back as she walked, resting her head on my chest. It was pleasant, having her weight in my arms.

She gave a weak laugh that reverberated in her chest and didn't quite make it out. "So what's your excuse?"

"For what?"

"Being up this late. Stitcher told you to rest too, you know."

"Oh no you don't. Don't think you can turn this all around on me like that and get out of trouble. That might work on everyone else, but I've lived with you for a time. I know all your little tricks, and they're not going to work."

She looked up at me with an impish grin. "But being cute gives me the edge."

"I think you've outgrown the word 'cute,' don't you?" Her eyes grew soft. I gave her a push to hide my sudden unease. "And whatever your edge, I can see it coming fifty clicks away, so don't even try."

"I might have a few tricks you don't know." There was a playful tone in her voice.

"I'm sure you do." I hit the switch and opened the door to her cabin. I walked her into the room, using my knees to keep her legs moving. "And you can tell me all about them later, after you get some sleep." I maneuvered her to her bed and lowered her gently down. "I'm very proud of you." I pulled the covers over her to keep her warm. She snuggled into the cushion

and sighed pleasantly.

“So why do you always pull away from me?” her voice was soft, fatigue slowly claiming her. “Every time we get close, you throw up another wall. Is it me? Did I screw up?”

“No. It’s nothing you’ve done. I’ve had a lot on my mind since I woke up as a clone, and I’ve spent most of it adjusting and thinking things out.” Her eyes slowly closed. “I’m sorry I’ve been distant.”

She murmured softly, her chin bobbing as sleep drew closer.

I sat down on the floor beside her bed. “Part of it is the clone thing. Am I a freak of science or just an example of modern technology? Hell, whichever side you choose, I don’t know what other people will say if they find out. Do I have the same rights as any other individual in the Confederation? Will people make clones a slave population, or will they use this process to try and live forever?” I stared at my hand, at the lines, the swirls and curves. “I guess it sounds stupid. Nightmare thinks I’m Warlock and that’s all that needs to be said, that I should let it go ahead and accept it. Katt doesn’t see anything wrong with it either, but the science is what matters to her. But it’s important to know these things.”

She said something too soft for me to hear.

“What?” I leaned in close.

She tilted her head up and sniffed. “Why?”

“Sometimes I look in the mirror and I wonder at the person staring back at me. It looks like Warlock, but it’s not quite right.” I stopped, looking for the right words. “Remember how you drew that flower that summer before I left for the marines?”

She nodded, curling into a ball under the covers. “Wild dragonrose.”

“That’s the one. It was the prettiest sketch you ever drew—a work of art. You loved the attention it got you—hell, even your mother liked it. Breck wanted it for his albums, and you kept it tucked away for yourself. For the holidays you tried to draw it again and again to go with your cards. I remember you sitting in the middle of your room, this pad in your lap, surrounded by

crumpled balls of paper as you tried and tried, and it just never pleased you.”

Griffin laughed. “Damned if I ever got it to look that same way again. It was always lacking something. And I never could figure out what was different with each try. It just wasn’t right. Like it lost the magic or something.”

I nodded. “That’s what I see in the mirror. It’s Warlock, but it’s not quite right.” I felt her fingers slip into my hair and she rubbed my neck.

“Is that why you back off?”

“Yes—no. Maybe. I’m still not sure, to be honest.”

“When Greyson Lightfoot left, he was an immature young man who strode into everything with his balls and a bluff, and thought about it afterwards. The same guy who fought for my ‘honor’ when the boys at school made fun of me and my red hair. The same guy who, along with my dear brother, frightened my dates so bad that one of them almost pissed in his pants before we left for the dance. Remember Paul Eberstein?”

I lay back on the floor, chuckling hard. “It was good to know the limits of his bladder control.”

She smacked me lightly. “I really liked him, you know.”

“He was a geek.”

“He was not. He was smart and he made me laugh.”

“Made me laugh too.” That got me smacked again.

Her warm eyes looked into my face. “So what do you think I see when I look at you?”

“An older, wiser Greyson with years of combat experience, a dignified sense of duty, and a well-formed code of honor?”

She sniffed. “No, I see the same Greyson, a little older, but still following his balls and a bluff to get in and out of bad situations. The marines gave you bigger balls and a better bluff is all. That’s how I know you’re the real thing. Even now, with all your bravado and impulsiveness, you can’t hide your compassion. You’ve always tried and it never worked.” She

shook her head, tossing red curls back and forth wildly. "So torture yourself in the morning, okay?"

"Sounds like a plan," I said. "You get some sleep. We'll go over your files first thing tomorrow."

Griffin almost said something more, then nodded, and the momentum carried her head down to the pillow. Her breathing deepened and she settled even further into the blankets. I rose and stealthily crept out of her room and back into the hall. *Time to try the sleep thing again myself.*

I crossed the corridor to my room and lay down on the bed, my arms above my head. I tried to force my system to calm down for a second time in one night, and let myself fall asleep.

It didn't work the second time either.

An hour and a half later I was sitting at my desk, going over hard copies of the project reports for the assignments Breck had been working on before he died. I was hoping that something would jump out at me, something that someone might kill to cover up. Most of it was pretty dry.

Breck spent most of his time grouping data into fields for analysis and research. Nebula was large enough to fund its own security force and some minor deals with weapons, but most of its interests lay in deep space formations. He had data on various types of stars as reference material, but he also had catalog files for nebulas, asteroid clusters, comets, and black holes, as well as several other incidents that cannot be confirmed, such as wormholes and time rifts. Most of the latter two were dismissed as idle ramblings of drunken spacers, since there was little more than their word to go on in terms of hard data. There wasn't much more on black holes. Locations of some black holes had been verified, but the gravitational forces destroyed all probes sent in to investigate. In terms of comets, asteroids, and nebulas, the company had a great deal of information.

They gathered this information for two basic reasons: First, scientists used the raw data

to theorize the characteristics of the galaxy, and how these objects effected physics on a galactic scale. This was the side they showed more to the public and the other centers of learning.

Second, the corporation also used the information to mine precious minerals sometimes found in these celestial bodies. Asteroid mines were not uncommon, and I knew for a fact that Nebula had even begun harvesting crystals in at least one of its namesakes. There was even talk of possibly mining a comet, but the level of technology was still too advanced to make it worth the money to even try.

It didn't leave me with much to go on. Money was a potential motive, but a rival company or individual would have attacked the source, not a figure as high up the company ladder as Breck. There wasn't much else to go on from his files.

What did that leave?

I briefly toyed with the idea of an unknown woman being involved, perhaps a prostitute or some other shady figure, but that wasn't like Breck. He didn't play in the shadows. Besides, he had been with a young lady at the time of his death, and from what Griffin had said the young lady's parents had approved of Breck. *What was her name? Oh, yes. Landra.* While Landra might have had a jilted lover who wanted revenge on the man who had stolen her heart away, the droid thing was a bit too complex for that scenario, considering the off-world connections needed to pull it off.

The droid had been placed at work and had been bought by Nebula, so it was likely he had come across something while at work that had set the Zombie off. Something in these reports was important enough that someone killed to protect it, but damned if I had any idea what it was. Everything seemed plain and ordinary to me.

I toyed with the thought of getting on Griffin's computer, but decided against it. The system was her baby, and I'd let her show me the files herself.

The only thing left for me to work on was the hard copies of Breck's personal files, and I had avoided it for too long as it was. Griffin had perused them already and hadn't found

anything worth investigating. I had let them be simply because they were Breck's personal files, and it was almost a violation to go through them, even with him dead.

It didn't take long to understand why Griffin hadn't found anything in the files. Most of them were directed to Landra, and were somewhere between cute and romantic. Those were the hardest to read. There were also a few messages to his mother, mostly about the family. There was nothing about any of his current projects or anything work-related in the files.

The hard copies fell from my fingers onto the desk. The personal message files only proved that either Breck was an innocent man, or if he was into something sinister, he was able to keep it secret from his family, his lover, and his job. It was possible that a man might be able to keep a private life that secret, but there was nothing to substantiate any illegal actions in his credit accounts.

Breck was clean.

It was useless to look at the files any longer. It wouldn't bring Breck back, and it just proved we were on the right track, because it was the only track. My eyes hurt, my head hurt, my legs hurt. I rose from the chair and staggered over to my bed.

I was asleep before I hit the blankets.

* * *

Six hours of sleep, a shower and some food improved my attitude a hundred fold. By the time I walked on the bridge, I was almost in a good mood. Cerberus had to have had more data. The trail would keep going and Griffin would find it. I knew it, as though willing it to be simple would make it so.

For once I was close.

Griffin turned and gave me a wave as I entered the bridge. "I've got something to show you." She swiveled her body back to the computer and pulled off several more sheets from the

burner.

“What?”

“I’ve cross referenced all the files we’ve collected from Nebula, Metaltech, and Cerberus, and I found some interesting facts.” She handed me several transparent pages. “Cerberus put the guard droids in Nebula, but an outside agency completed the transaction. Nebula wasn’t satisfied with their own security force, so they let this agency set up the home security.”

“Only on Aldion III? That doesn’t make sense.”

“No, not just in Klermine. According to these contracts, the deal was for all major complexes, all seven planets. On every planet, at every complex, this agency sent two droids. One was on active guard duty while the other was a reserve.”

“So what was the name of the agency?”

“I have no idea,” she shrugged. “That’s the odd thing. The only thing we have from the files is a contact address and the name of the representative in charge of this project from their end. I guess Cerberus only asked as much as she needed to know. The man who signed the contracts and paid the bills was this guy—” she pointed to a name on one of the sheets in my hand. “--Vince Rhodes. No title, no company logo, just his name and address. He has the resources of a major player, though. I have the figures he put on the table for the deal, and it wasn’t cheap.”

I gave a low whistle.

“Lots a zeros there, huh?” she said.

“With finances like this, he could have financed Torgue. Do you really think he’s just an external security advisor? I don’t think so. Jesus, who the hell is this guy?”

“I don’t know, but I know where he made the arrangements from,” Griffin said. “The credit transfers and programming instructions were beamed from someplace called Crater City. If he’s going to move that much cash that quickly, he has to have some sort of base there, where ever *there is*.”

"You've never heard of Crater City?" I set the transparent pages down. "It's a big city on the edge of the Carson-Knight asteroid field, embedded in the largest asteroid in the area. Lots of miners and traders meet there, but it's funded by corporate backing from the companies needing a plant far away from everybody. It has this giant dome covering the entire city, but the inside is like any place you've been to, on any other planet you could name. The odd thing is, Nebula doesn't have anyone out there. It's mostly Confederate-allied companies."

"Strange, considering all the data Nebula collects on rocks in space."

I leaned against the console. "Those rocks are union-owned. Nebula couldn't do any geological studies or corporate mining on their own. It doesn't surprise me too much that they steer clear. What bothers me is how they found this guy Vince if he operates way out there. Doesn't make much sense."

"What do we do know?"

"We follow the lead and ask Vinnie what the fuck he thought he was doing. I don't suppose the original coding for the droids was in the files?"

She hit a key. "It was just one line. 'Protect and secure all relevant data to Blackjack-1.' It doesn't get any more specific than that." She paused to run her tongue thoughtfully along her teeth. "It's possible the specs for Blackjack-1 were hard-wired into the memory chips, but that still doesn't tell us much of anything."

"It's a start. Nightmare and Katt probably need to give Cavalier a buzz and give him all the details. I'm sure he'll ask us to investigate, but he likes his protocol." I started a mental inventory of what needed to be done to get in the air as soon as possible.

"I wonder what the towns will do now that Cerberus is dead."

"How do you mean?"

"I noticed in the list of customers as I went through the database that Cerberus supplied the local police with everything they needed short of actual bodies in the uniforms. Weapons, ammo, transportation, the works. If they needed anything, she was brought in as the primary

supplier. The local government was her biggest client.”

My face flushed. *If that's true--* “She lied. Damn it all, that’s the last time I believe anything she says.”

“Who?”

“Alena. She told me that she knew some rumors and had some suspicions about Cerberus, making the whole thing very sinister, but all along Cerberus was on the payroll. Damn it!” I slammed my fist into the wall. “I hate politics, I hate politicians, and I hate all the bullshit that they throw around to cloud the issue. She knows it, too. She knows I always hated the word games and half-truths”

Griffin chewed on her lower lip. “Why would she completely lie?”

“It makes sense if you think about it. Why would an arms dealer work out here, in this backwater hole of the galaxy? Why the secret compound in the jungle? This would be the perfect place if this small-time planet were also the location of her largest customer. She conducts outside business through contacts and her Grid access, and does most of her business here in person.”

“She made a living selling most of her weapons to the three cities here? You keep saying how behind this planet is, and how it is still under-colonized. Could she make a living just selling to the people here?”

“It wouldn’t be that hard. She probably offered discounts and virtually no shipment costs. They save money and time to arm their military and security interests, and she gets the monopoly on weapons for the planet. This may still be decades behind other territories, but they’re growing quickly. Growth means capital, and capital means money for a crafty merchant to absorb.”

“So why not just say this at the beginning? Why didn’t Alena just tell you?”

“The black market is still the black market. Maybe she thought I’d disapprove. Maybe she thought I’d arrest her. Hell, maybe it was something else altogether. The problem with

politics is you can never tell who is lying and who is greedy. Tell you what, I'm going to go ask her exactly why she lied to me. How about that?" I stormed off to my cabin.

I focused on what I needed to take with me. "I thought you agreed to stay away from them." Griffin had followed me.

"And she told me about rumors and docking logs." I belted Hellraiser on and grabbed my jacket. "Something is up, and I'm going to take my questions up with her personally." I scooped up my badge and keys, and straightened the collar of my shirt.

"Maybe you should calm down first," she said.

"Look, I'm not going to kill her, I just want her to come clean. I promise."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I'll even leave Nightmare here, okay?"

She accepted that. "So what do I do?"

"Is there anything else left in the files?"

"Yes. There's one file left that my encryption program hasn't cracked. I'll get it, but it may take some time."

"Okay. Tell the others about all this. We'll contact Cavalier and get his advice, and head out tonight, wherever we decide to go next." I stopped myself from leaving. Griffin had broken into a remote system with her computer, hacked through hundreds of files, taken what was relative to us and cross-referenced it with our earlier data. She had worked as hard as Nightmare and I had, if not harder. "Nice job, by the way."

"On what?"

"Everything."

She was at a loss for words for a moment, and decided on "Thanks."

I made for the hold and my bike. Stitcher and Torgue were playing chess, Nightmare was patching the surface damage to his battle-suit, and Katt was only visible from the neck up as she worked under the floor panels of the hold to get at the engines. I didn't ask what she was

doing, mainly because she might have told me, and after the laser rifle incident it was better to remain ignorant.

Then again, it's still my ship.

She caught my gaze with a strong glare and motioned for me to approach. I almost stormed out, having built up enough steam to dash over to the mayor-elect's home and throw a fit, but I decided to give the tech a moment of my time. "Where do you think you're going?" she asked, wiping her forehead and leaving a black smear behind. It did nothing to diminish her sex appeal. "We have a ship to work on. These engines need tuning and the coolant system needs to be completely flushed before take-off."

"You need a hand at that?" I was amazed.

"Yeah. Hop on in and let's get to it."

"I have an errand to run," I said with a wave. "I'll help when I get back."

She set her wrench down gently and leaned against a support. "The engine needs work now." Her voice had a slight edge to it, the way it did when she spoke to any man she didn't know personally. Moreover, her knowing you in no way guaranteed that she would warm up to you. She loved Nightmare. She respected Stitcher. She made Torgue. I knew she cared about me, in as much as I was the best friend of her lover, but that wouldn't shield me from her wrath.

"That means," Nightmare said, never pulling his eyes from the battle-suit, "that she needs to talk. You need to make the time."

"No pressure."

"Most men don't need me to ask twice to have a little talk," she said, her lips twitching in a mock pout.

"Most men don't know you that well," I said.

The pout turned into an evil sneer. "I would hate to ask twice."

"I'd probably hate that too," I said. There was no sense arguing with Katt when she was in one of her moods. I knew where Alena worked and lived. Our discussion could wait. I

rubbed my jaw and gave in to Katt's subtle persuasion, lowering myself into the hole in the floor to look at the repairs she was working on. The coolant pipes ran along the perimeter of the engines, stretching into the drives next to where Katt stood. "Coolant system looks just fine."

"Strangest thing, that."

I sat down on the floor and pressed my back to the wall. Katt took a position opposite me and tossed me a rapi fruit. "Thanks. What exactly do you need to talk about?" I took a bite of the fruit, the citrus pulp and moist skin melting in my mouth. Juice trickled down my throat, leaving a sticky, sweet trail at the back of my mouth. "Everyone seems to need a piece of my time. I just found out Alena knew about Cerberus the entire time and didn't tell me about it. She lied through her teeth when I asked about the situation, so I'm going to go down there and straighten it out."

"No you're not."

"I'm not?"

She shook her head. "You're going to stay here and leave it alone."

"I suppose you'll tell me why I'm going to just leave it alone?"

"Stop and think about it."

I took another bite and wished I had a drink of water to clear my throat. Rapi was a delicious fruit, but intense in flavor. When I spoke, I nearly choked on the taste. "She was always a cast-iron bitch and she'll never change?"

"Typical response from a man. She's a single mother with no help from her family who is trying to make a living in a political arena. She has to keep all sides relatively happy at work as the mayor and also make sure she's doing a good job at home as a mother. And she pulls it off. She's self-reliant and successful, and that scares most men, including you."

It always comes to this with her, doesn't it? I pointed at her with my free hand. "Don't turn this into an 'all men are evil' campaign. I'm not pissed because she's successful. I'm not pissed because she's a good mother. I'm pissed because she lied to me."

"Why shouldn't she? Were you here to visit an old friend? Did you come to share fond memories and stay in touch? You came to her as a representative of the Metaltech Corporation as well as the Rangers, and she acted as the Mayor-elect. The fact that you shared a bed with her for a while is irrelevant." She chuckled. "Alena understands the difference between business and personal, and you have the boundaries a little blurred. You always did."

"She should have told me."

"Why? What if you and 'Mare hadn't succeeded? She couldn't leave her butt hanging in the wind, and she was obviously close enough to Cerberus to be in real danger."

"You think like her, so I take it you agree with her as well. I should just let the whole thing drop?" I rested my head on the structure behind me. *Sometimes I grow extremely tired of all the games people play.*

She spread her hands and leaned forward. "I didn't say that. I understand her, yes, but do I agree with her? No. I'm just not certain you have any justification in running over to her place and tearing into her for doing her job and keeping her priorities straight. Besides, what would it do to the little girl?"

"Yeah," I said, my voice sounding weary to my own ears. Thinking about Misty made all the rage and tension drain from my body. "Everything has to be complicated all the time, doesn't it?"

"Go figure."

I decided to leave Alena be. There were other things to worry about, and as reluctant as I would be to tell her, Katt was right. Forcing the issue with Alena wouldn't accomplish anything. Katt even forgave her to a certain extent. Perhaps I'd forget what she had done eventually.

But not quite yet.

"I'll go set the Nav-computer with the flight plan for Crater City."

"Good idea."

I raised myself up back into the hold and dusted myself off. I found Torgue watching

me. His mechanical eyes were starting to look at things with more interest, both at things but more importantly at people. Perhaps the programs Griffin had been designing were taking effect, and the cyborg was learning. Torgue turned back to the chess match, moved his rook and sat back. "Checkmate."

Stitcher shook his head and reset the board. "Got to find another game," he muttered.

I unbelted Hellraiser and was starting to head for my cabin. We'd take off soon and head for Crater City to have a talk to Rhodes and find out just what the hell was going on. *It's about time for some fucking answers.*

"I've got it."

Griffin sounded excited as she entered the hold. She had a transparent hard copy flopping back and forth in her upraised hand. She brought it down on her other hand with a loud slap, punctuating her excitement. "My encryption-breaker finally got through with the last file."

"Is it important?" Katt asked as she vaulted up from the crawlspace.

Griffin shrugged. "It's a file dedicated to potential future projects, as far as I can tell. There's only one project in the file, though, and it's a bit misleading." She looked over the read-out.

"What do you mean?" I took a position behind the hacker and looked at the hard copy over her shoulder.

"The file is titled 'The Great Weapon,' and all I can find are a series of numbers making up the rest of the file. I double-checked my program, but it decrypted the entire file, so the numbers are exactly what Cerberus had in the file. There may have been more, but all that's left is this series of numbers. They just don't make much sense to me." She passed the copy to Katt:

139925	545454	999999
565657	222222	999999
121903	878772	999999
343536	699912	999999
891121	120000	999999

I had gotten a good look at them, and as Nightmare and Stitcher gathered closer, the

technician and I exchanged a knowing look. I knew the series of numbers, or to be more precise, what the numbers represented. So did Katt.

They were interstellar coordinates.

More to the point, they were the raw mathematics found in the foundation for the programs used by most Nav-computers in service. Part of spacecraft navigation training included the ability to work out the mathematical equations without the help of the computer. I could do it, if forced to, but I always hated those kinds of problems. The series of numbers indicated position of the nearest star, orbit paths and trajectories of the destination--assuming it was a planet. That didn't mean I could tell the type of math involved. I took the hard copy to the bridge and typed in the series into the Nav-processor. The others followed, quietly waiting to see what the computer said.

It didn't take long.

I read the read-out as a hard copy scrolled out of the computer shell. "It's an area deep in Confederate space."

"Is it some sort of 'Fed laboratory? Or maybe a weapons depot?" Katt asked.

I sat back against the console, rubbing at my eyes with the palms of my hands. "This doesn't make sense. These coordinates, according to the computer, are restricted deep in a quarantined sector. Not even 'Feds can get in there, much less anyone else."

"Why would they quarantine a sector?" Griffin looked up from the transparency.

"A region of space that poses a threat for travelers. Usually it suggests strange gravitational fields, areas of high radiation and the like. Once its restricted, no one goes inside, until probes left behind prove the area is safe for space-faring again. If this 'Weapon' is in a Q-sector, then Cerberus would never have gotten her hands on it, and neither would the 'Feds. What could this have to do with Breck?"

Nightmare and Katt shrugged in unison. Stitcher rubbed the back of his head. Torgue watched everyone. After a few moments of silence, it was Griffin who reacted. She sat down at

her station and began typing furiously. "I'm cross-referencing the coordinates from Cerberus with the files Breck was working on before he died."

Stitcher cocked an eyebrow. "That guy studied clouds in space. What connection would he have with a weapon?"

I shrugged. "It's worth a shot."

Torgue cocked his head. "What if the weapon was in a cloud in space?"

Stitcher and I shared a look, a long glance of discomfort at just how much the cyborg was starting to catch on. Torgue was definitely much less an "it" and much more a "him." I was more worried about the cyborg blowing his mind-wipe and remembering his past life. If that happened he might slip into some sort of split personality and then no one could predict what he might do. I figured cyberpsychosis would set in at that point, and anyone in the general area would be toast. Stitcher and Katt had supposedly taken care of that possibility, but I was still concerned.

We went back to watching as the hacker tore into the data files, comparing the two sets of data. The flurry of keystrokes slowed and then stopped. Griffin sat back and sighed, her body sagging under the exhaustion and the relief.

"We'd better call Cavalier," Nightmare said.

* * *

I gave the disk-like holographic projector a solid blow and tried the switch again. The floor device could be looped into the grid transmitter for projecting images across space almost instantly. From what I understood, this was just an illusion of physics and dynamics, but I had no idea who the whole thing worked--when it worked. "Sorry, folks. It's been a while since I used this thing. Usually I just do grid mail." I stood up and gave it a kick.

"I can fix it," Katt started to join me.

I gave her a look. "Tweak it later. It just needs to warm up."

The projector had started to hum after the kick, violently belched a column of red and green light up into the air, causing dust motes in the air above it to glow eerily in the dim light of the hold. I backed away from the machine as a life-sized image of a man began to form in the pillar of energy. The column of radiance coagulated around the form, giving the figure the illusion of substance.

Cavalier stood before us, his arms held behind his back in a thoughtful manner. "Okay, people. What's the word?"

Katt started to explain. "We have a possible connection between Cerberus, Breck and the Nebula Corporation. It's not an obvious lead, but data from a space probe in a Q-sector ended up at Nebula. Perhaps it was transferred to the wrong location or accidentally jumbled in with other data. It could even have been hidden there for safety. Whatever the case, he analyzed the data. We think that's what killed him."

"On what grounds?"

"Simple," Griffin said. "We talked it out. The droids were assigned to Nebula corporate sites just about everywhere on the advice of this Vince Rhodes character, who happens to be working from Crater City. Warlock says that has mostly Confederation-based companies, so there's a good chance that Rhodes is a 'Fed.'"

"Go on," he said.

"To top it off, Cerberus has a copy of the coordinates in her files under the heading 'Great Weapon.' We don't know what it is exactly, but the one thing that ties all this information together are these coordinates."

"Options?" Cavalier asked.

"We can try and track down Rhodes or we can try and investigate these coordinates," I said.

"Negative. I think it's best for you to return to HQ and we'll regroup later." He rubbed

at his chin with his thumb. "There is a lot we still don't understand, and I'd feel better if you return to base. We can put our heads together and figure all this out."

"Why?" Katt frowned. Nightmare threw me a look.

"There is a lot of data to digest, and if the Confederation is trying to cover something up, we should proceed cautiously. I'd rather not pit the *Hawkeye* against the Confederate Armada, if it's all the same to you."

Nightmare almost smiled.

"Why the sudden change, Big Guy?" Stitcher piped up.

Cavalier's face darkened. He stared at all of us evenly. "Listen to me. I made Heavy M.E.T.A.L. and I'm in charge of the unit. You work for me, remember? Get your butts home. That's an order. I do that every now and again, give orders. Just like Ribik V, I expect you to follow them to the letter. Am I understood or do I have to get ugly."

"Already there, man," Stitcher muttered.

"We're on our way," I said.

Cavalier nodded and the holo-projector winked off.

"That was weird," Griffin said quietly.

"Ribik V," I said. "I remember you guys talking about that place."

"What's Ribik V?" Stitcher asked.

Katt chewed on her bottom lip. "It's a small moon. Cavalier and 'Mare and I were there on a scouting mission when the backing we had got pulled. We had to fight our way out, hijack transportation and disappear for a short time."

"What does it mean?"

"It means someone above Cavalier is applying pressure," I said. "Since I started on this investigation, people have been trying to cover up this mess. Every time we got somewhere it seemed that the trail led higher up the food chain. Now it's extended over Cavalier." I shook my head. "This is big."

"So the real question is what to do now," Griffin said.

"I'll put in the flight plans like we're headed for Aldion. That'll buy us some time to make a decision and act on it."

We quietly split to get some rest and leave each of us to our own thoughts. There were some serious decisions to make, especially if the corruption and strings connecting all these reactions to Breck's discovery led as far up the political chain of command as I feared. Everyone had to decide what we wanted to do, and whether asking the question was worth the danger the answer would provide.

* * *

"PST."

I raised my head from my pillow and glanced around my cabin. The room was shrouded in darkness, and nothing moved anywhere. I took a deep breath and snuggled back under my sheets to ward off the slight chill in the air. My body and mind were still tired from the day, and I needed my rest.

"Psst."

I propped myself up on my elbows. Nothing. Silence. My cabin was still, and I was alone. *If I'm alone, then who keeps hissing?*

"That would be me."

I looked and Coyote sat at the foot of my bed, his mouth open just enough to look like a grin. I pulled the blanket closer around my head. "Figures. Look, I don't know what you want, and I don't know why you're here, so why don't you just leave me alone and let me get some sleep?"

"Nah. This is much more fun," Coyote chuckled. "You're doing well. You have met every challenge and every obstacle and succeeded, but you are at a critical point in the tale."

"What are you babbling about?"

The weight at my feet lifted as Coyote hopped off my bed, his claws clacking loudly on the floor. "This is the point, don't you see? In every journey there is a point where either Coyote becomes the trickster or the Coyote gets tricked. You stand at that very point, and whatever you decide will decide the outcome of the path you have chosen." Coyote laughed. "You can't change the nature of the journey, and therefore you must make your choice and accept the consequences of that choice."

"As if there wasn't enough pressure already."

"Choose wisely, my son."

I sat up in the bed. "I'm tired of your games, Coyote."

"Give me a little more pout when you say that, runt." The coyote huffed, and I realized it was his version of a snicker. "What do you call someone who thinks everything through before making a decision?"

"What?"

"A philosopher."

I pulled my pillow over my face, my breath warming the cushion around my mouth and nose. *I want to wake up*, I commanded myself. *Wake up, Warlock*. Maybe if I pulled on it hard enough I would suffocate myself and at least find peace.

"Not really. That'd put you in my world, pup."

"Let me go back to sleep, or tell me what you want. Either way is fine, but just stop this bullshit. Please?"

"I want to find her." Coyote hopped up at the foot of my bed and lay his head down.

"Her? Her who?"

"*Her*. Don't be dense. I know you've heard her. I've heard her, too. She's been gone a while, you know. I haven't seen her since the great chaos and the Time of Forgetting. Maybe that's it. Maybe I forgot along with everyone else. Terrible shame, that. You'd think that a spirit

would have a better memory than that." He chewed absently at the top of one paw.

"I don't know what to do, Coyote," I said.

"Me neither. Ain't it a bitch?"

"Yeah."

In the darkness of the cabin with only the hall light shirring from around the door's edges, there was a subtle change. I could feel color fill my vision, like water filling a basin. I rubbed my eyes, trying to ignore the ache under my temples. "Coyote?"

Silence. He was gone.

"Asshole," I muttered. What had he been babbling about? Very little of what he said made any sense, and yet, sometimes it seemed to make a great deal of sense at the same time.

We had two choices. We could check out either Crater City with this Rhodes character or the Q-sector with whatever it held. Crater City was certainly easier to deal with, since the Q-sector would be guarded with a perimeter of sensor satellites and probably at least a small Confederate patrol. Crater City was open territory. Thinking about the choices made my head hurt. Then I heard another familiar voice.

Come home, Warlock.

I hung my head, weary from the voices and spirits darting in and out of my skull. It was going to be a long night.

* * *

The omens of my long night held true. I was startled out of a restless sleep by the horrid noise of the warning klaxons echoing down the hall and throbbing through the walls of my cabin. I leaped out of bed before I was fully awake, stubbing my toes into my desk chair as I raced out of the room and towards the bridge, forgetting to pull on a shirt as I moved. Nightmare was close behind me as I entered the bridge and found my seat. He activated the defense systems

while I checked the scanners. When I saw what had set off the alarms, a cold lump formed in my gut, sending chills along my spine and down my arms and legs. I kicked the engines up to full burst. *Maybe we can dance our way out of this yet.*

"Fuck me," Nightmare said in an uncustomary burst of emotion.

Griffin and Stitcher staggered in, grasping at the walls as the ship gyrated, the artificial gravity working hard to compensate. "What the hell—" the medic started to say when Katt pushed past him to reach Nightmare's side at the weapons chair.

"Hang on, folks," I said, twisting the ship onto an evasive course. The hull moaned under the movement, as if the ship was weary of space travel. The sound was familiar to me, almost comfortable. The ship would hold together. I grinned to myself. Griffin found her chair, slipping on the safety belt and giving me a confused, worried look. The medic buckled himself in as well, muttering all the while. I wasn't trying to hide anything from or ignore either of them, but I didn't have time to deal with their fears, much less my own.

I was busy trying to get us past a Confederate frigate.

The Confederate lines of ships, from the smallest frigates to the carriers to the really huge battle cruisers, were magnificent to look at, even in the midst of battle. The frigate was mostly engines and guns in a wedge-shaped chassis, bow to stern shining in the starlight that reflected off of the chrome-like hull. It was large enough to house almost a hundred men and had enough firepower to hold its own during prolonged combat.

Now, it was possible the ship was on a routine patrol in this sector, and just happened to be near our flight path. After all, according to the official paperwork, we were headed for Aldion, so no one should know we were headed this direction. Did they know? Did we tip our hand?

"I'm really tired of all the fucking coincidences," I said to myself.

"Pardon?" Griffin asked.

I shook my head. "Nothing." So, let's say you're trying to cover something up,

something really big. Some corporate agents start poking their noses into this business, albeit in a roundabout way, making you very nervous. Now let's say you put the pressure on the agent's boss by pulling a few strings and calling in some favors. Well, the agents file a flight path for home, which means victory right? Maybe not. Do you trust the flight plan? The smart military maneuver is to station a medium class ship along the way between Tallion and this Q-sector—just in case.

Sometimes I hate it when the bad guys grow a brain.

A wave of laser fire flew past the windows where we had been moments ago. The open communication circuit kicked in with a wonderful service message from some officer on the frigate: "Attention rogue craft, that salvo was a warning shot. Power down your vehicle and prepare to be boarded or you will be destroyed."

"Is it me," Stitcher said, "or do they always call it a warning shot when they miss?"

The entire ship jerked to a stop and I was shoved into my console. The others fared fairly well, having belted into their seats. I pushed myself back with a curse. The frigate had a tractor field generator, and we had been snagged like a trout in a net. The field neutralized all energy fields, rendering engines and lasers useless. They still worked, but the energy transfer was stopped. Katt had compared the idea to breaking the synapse chain in a human being. *Great, the 'Feds are giving my ship a stroke.*

Nightmare chuckled as his hands flew across his controls.

"What are you doing?" I said as I looked back.

"Before the field snagged us I got a charge in the main cannon." The main weapon on the ship was a rail cannon, which built an electromagnetic charge that sent the ammunition spinning at subsonic speeds until it was released down the muzzle. There was no energy spent by the systems when the shot was released, so the tractor field had no effect whatsoever. Nightmare didn't need a lot of juice once the shot was charged, due mostly to inertia, but he didn't have all day to make his shot count. "Gimme a minute to aim manually," he said, focused

on his work.

The servos around us groaned under the weight as the cannon swiveled under his guidance. He paused, made one minor adjustment, then pulled the triggers on his turret grips. There was a muffled *thoomp!* as the cannon released its payload. I glanced at the medium scanner. The glittering sphere shot towards the frigate, dancing up the lavender light of the tractor field, and spewing what looked to be stardust as it went.

The pellet hit the frigate on its chrome belly, causing large parts to float away from the initial blow. Fire started to burst from the hole in the hull, but the vacuum of space quickly snuffed it out. More importantly, the tractor field was gone, and with a violent burst of speed we were on our way again. "Nice shooting, Nightmare!" I grinned, using the momentum to our advantage, angling away from the frigate in a new course heading. Another wave of laser fire surged past.

"We're getting close to their maximum range on those pulse cannons," Katt announced.

"That's good, right?" Griffin looked around, desperate for some good news.

"Yeah," Stitcher said. "In theory a laser will keep going until it hits something or it uses up its charge. I've used all sorts of different types in the field, but they won't do shit to armored hulls. You have to have something that gives more juice, but it fades a lot quicker in open space."

"Been on the run before, Stitch?" I winked at his reflection in the HUD before me.

"Fuck you, man."

I glanced down at the medium scanners, keeping one eye on the surface scan of the frigate. Specifically the speed and range from us interested me. "You guys want the good news or the bad news?" I muttered.

Nightmare growled.

"We're at the outer range of their cannons, but they can match us in terms of speed now that they've got their engines going. We can't get away, but they can't catch up, and in the meantime we have to keep changing heading to evade their cannons." I changed the heading

and watched the dance of the pulse blasts fade in the distance ahead of us. "This is going to be a hell of a run."

"Can we get help from the Rangers? Or Cavalier?" Griffin sounded on the path to hysteria.

"I've been locked out of the system. I haven't looked, but they probably retired my badge already. It's hard to say without absolute proof, but I think the Rangers have turned their back on the whole thing. If I'm right, then the Confederates must be piping some intense pressure down the lines to be able to have an effect within the Rangers. Not that it's impossible, mind you. It just bothers me to think about it."

Katt nodded. "From that holo-conference we had, I'd say the boys back home have disavowed us, too. Don't get me wrong, Cavalier would help if he could, but he may have his own problems to deal with right now."

"So we're all alone? Just the six of us against the Confederate Militia?"

"I'm afraid so," Katt said, bracing as I altered our course slightly.

"Ohmygodohmygodohmygod—" the hacker's voice was full of fear.

"Breathe, Griffin," I cooed softly. "We'll get through this. Hell, we've been through tougher situations than this, and we come through every time." It was a lie, but maybe she'd buy it temporarily.

"When?" Stitcher hissed. "I didn't sign on for this. I signed on for a little bit of action and to work on Torgue." The ship rocked from a grazing shot. "This is way past a little bit of action, guys. And if you end up on the wrong end of a Confederate posse several times a week then I want out of this dumbfuck outfit."

"You wanted to get more involved," I reminded him.

"I take it back."

"What can I do to help?" Griffin asked. Her voice was stronger, more resolute. *That's a girl. Chin up. If we work together we'll get out of this yet. If we panic then we're dead.*

Unfortunately, I didn't have anything off hand for her to do. I was too busy at the controls. There wasn't a strong place for hackers in real-time combat, planet-side or otherwise. Computers could tell you what to shoot at, and what was shooting at you, but the legerdemain involved with hackers was rarely potent in ship-to-ship combat.

"I don't know. What can you do?"

She covered her mouth with one hand, looking at her console. "Maybe I—" she said then paused. "Maybe I have an idea."

I would have responded but I was getting the maneuvering jets to get the ship to roll to the right. Stars wheeled past my vision and then the heavens righted themselves. I hoped she had a good idea, or that Nightmare actually got a shot under the frigate's shields, because the tucking and rolling was getting more difficult to do.

Nightmare fired another shot from the cannon. "Try not to move the ship," he murmured. "It makes it hard to aim."

"Where's your sense of a challenge?" I retorted.

"Mine's on Aldion, and I'd like to go pick it up," Stitcher said. "Now."

Katt shifted from Nightmare's side to Griffin's station. "You got something?" the tech leaned over and studied the monitors. "What are you doing?"

"Routing my station through Torgue's Grid array. I'm using the defense we installed in his system and sending a signal directly into the frigate's computers." She shrugged. "Their ship is relatively fast, but not as maneuverable as ours, so it should be pretty basic to get the link in place." She stroked a series of keys.

"Griffin, I hate to tell you this, but those are military computers with military ICE backing up their systems. What do you think you can do?"

"Piss them off, if I'm lucky."

"You'll never get in," Katt warned.

There was a chime from her computer. "I'm already there," the hacker said. "Maybe

when their ship is on red alert their computers don't pay much attention to the Grid access points."

Katt was stunned. "Does that happen on our system too?"

"No. Not only no, but hell no." Griffin smiled. "Our defenses get mean when we're on alert, pretty much shuts out all outside traffic. That's why I'm using Torque's array."

"Good," Katt laughed.

I altered the course and clenched my teeth as the ship bucked from a grazing shot. "If anyone has any suggestions I'd like to hear them," I said.

"Give me a few more seconds," Griffin said, her eyes in the virtual reality of the Grid. She shook her mane of red curls. "The weapons subroutines are getting overworked, and so are power systems. Everything is lit up with activity." She whistled. "I don't have to piss them off. They're well beyond that. They have all sorts of code being accessed here. The computers don't have time to deal with little old me."

"Anything you can do?"

"Maybe." She started hitting keys. "There. I'm working on it."

The *Hawkeye* dodged another volley of lasers, and then another. It was easy to stay on the move, but it was about half skill and half luck that kept us alive. I kept waiting as I guided the ship on its erratic course for a full blast to slam into us. I didn't know if we could take it. I didn't want to find out.

"Griffin," I said. "Gimme what you've got, babe."

"I put a virus in the only system not being overworked at this point."

Katt studied the sensor scopes. "Nothing's happening. No, wait. They're losing speed. Keep dancing, Warlock, they haven't stopped shooting, but the engines are powering down. I thought you said the engines were also heavily used, Griffin."

"They were. I put the virus in the life support control programs."

"They have to reroute power," Katt mused. "So rather than take the guns or the shields

they use their engines. Stupid fucks, aren't they?"

"What do you mean?" Stitcher was bracing himself with both hands.

"If they used cannon power, they could stay with us and shoot at us after they took care of the problem. Instead, they'll keep shooting at us until they can get everything under control. This way, we're going to be out of range by the time engines are back at full strength. Nice job, Griffin."

She gave a mock salute. "Just trying to help."

"You scare me when you put your mind to it," I said.

"I haven't begun to scare you," she chuckled.

"Promises, Promises." I evaded another cascade of energy bolts and checked the scanner. The distance between the frigate and the *Hawkeye* was slowly increasing. We neared the outer range of the cannons, reached it, and flew past it. We met this boundary with silence. Just because the lasers were useless this far out, we were still in danger. After one final round of laser fire that came close enough to cast an eerie glow off the surface of the hull, the guns stopped firing. The ship was saving its energy for more useful tasks. Once they diverted laser energy to their engines, the frigate matched speed with us again, but the damage was done. We couldn't pull away, and they couldn't hit us. We were at a stalemate for the time being. I made sure the power levels to the main drives were stable, and put the ship on auto-Nav.

I waited to see if there were any other surprises. There weren't. This fact did not stop Nightmare from taking a few pot shots at the large craft. I rose from my chair—the leather-like cushion sticking to my bare back—and headed back to my cabin. On my way I gave Griffin's shoulder a squeeze. "Ask, and ye shall receive," the hacker patted my hand.

"I'll remember that."

In my cabin I found a shirt and my worn boots, pulling them on quickly. I couldn't stay away from the helm for very long. We had a momentary breather, but it wasn't a solution. *Story of my life*, I mused and glanced at my reflection in my mirror. My reflection looked weary, with

dark shadows under his eyes and a slight layer of sharp stubble running along his jaw. *I wish I had time for a shower.*

Chapter Nine

*... when you look long into an abyss,
the abyss also looks into you.*

--Friedrich Nietzsche

Deep Space

The klaxons sounded again. This time the alarms were announcing our passage into the Q-sector, and I was already at my position at the helm. The boundary was established by a series of drones that circled the region, and overrode and communications arrays that passed through their sensor field. "YOU HAVE ENTERED A RESTRICTED SECTOR. THE CONFEDERATE COUNCIL HAS SEGREGATED THIS AREA FOR YOUR OWN PROTECTION. TURN BACK OR RISK DANGER TO YOU AND YOUR CRAFT," boomed over the internal com. There was a chorus of *oofs* and *aa/s* from behind me. It was hard to be frightened by whatever lay ahead when we knew what lay behind.

"Katt, keep an eye on the radiation levels, and keep the scanners on full active. I'd like some idea of what's out here before we hit it."

"You think it's radioactive?"

"I haven't a clue what it is," I said. "If Cerberus was drooling to have it, I'm pretty sure it'll be nasty."

"Nasty enough to kill for," Griffin said quietly.

"Can you crack the programs in those perimeter drones?" I looked back at her.

"I had Katt scan them when we got close," she said with a frown. "They don't have enough in them to do much more than what you heard. Their sensors detect a craft nearby and they play the message. When the area is clear they go into a waiting cycle."

"Your tax dollars at work."

"Nightmare, what're you doing?" Stitcher asked.

Nightmare had activated the power cells for the lasers – the back up weapons to the rail cannon – and a scope was lowering from the ceiling. He flipped the scope's arms out and took a hold of their grips. Greenish-blue light played demonically over his rough face as the weapons came on-line. His chair and the scope rotated until he was facing the rear of the ship. "Target practice."

I returned my attention to the sensor display on my right. Everything looked good, but I could only make out the first two-fifths of the sector. Whatever this sector was concealing, would be close to the center. I smiled. Three drones vanished on my scanner as Nightmare picked them off with his medium-grade lasers. "Nice," I said.

Nightmare grunted.

"Oh, shit. Shit!" I glanced back at Stitcher, who was standing beside Katt. She was silent, her hand over her mouth, and her eyes wide. "We gotta go," the medic said. "We need to leave!"

"What is it?"

"Get us out of here!" the medic hissed, sweat beading on his forehead.

"Stitcher, calm down –"

Griffin cut me off. "There's another Confederate ship at the border behind us. The computer's labeling it a Destroyer-class. It's moving to take a position at the border close to the frigate."

"Is that what's freaking you out?" I glared at the medic. "A second ship?"

"No. I'm scared of that." He pointed out the window.

I had read up on them, and I had heard stories, but I had never seen one before. Part of me was fascinated, while my common sense was in complete agreement with Stitcher. Against the abyssal star-scape around us, clouds swirled in a spiral pattern, rich with blues and greens streaking through the mists. The gasses were normally invisible in space, but the gravitational whirlpool made them intense to the naked eye. In the controls, I could feel the ship react as the

first gravitational currents brushed the hull. I adjusted the course, then peered at the “eye” of the strange storm before me, awestruck at the phenomenon before me.

“Holy mother of God,” Griffin said.

“Jesus,” Katt said.

“Still want to give me shit, Chuckles?” Stitcher muttered.

“No,” I managed.

Nightmare gave one of his typical grunts, but it was more than a little forced. I couldn’t see their expressions, but I could feel their fear radiating throughout the bridge. I couldn’t blame them either. I was scared.

Before us extended the raw power of the first black hole I had ever seen.

* * *

“Nobody panic,” Katt said. “We’re safe for the moment.”

She was right. The controls were affected by the black hole’s gravitational pull, but it wasn’t overpowering the ship by any means. I had expected to be drawn in instantly to the center of the hole, but the pull was about as intense as an orbit around a planet or large moon. I could fly in these conditions, but I had no desire to test the limits of my skills or the *Hawkeye*. There was something else out there, hard to make out from our position. I ignored it for the moment.

“Safe?” Stitcher sputtered. “This is what you call safe?”

“You scared, Stitch?” the tech asked.

“Check my shorts, bitch.”

“Yeah,” Katt said, her eyes drawn with horrified delight to the phenomenon. She rested an arm on Nightmare’s shoulder. “Me too.”

Griffin held on to her console with both hands. I put us in a holding pattern, letting the *Hawkeye* bob on the invisible currents. "Can we target an escape vector away from the Militia and the black hole?" I glanced around. "Let's just get the hell out. We can discuss the rest of this once we're clear." There were still questions unanswered, but this was neither the time nor the place. Someone had killed to keep this place a secret.

"We have a problem."

Really? What gave it away? I kept the thought to myself and turned to Nightmare.

"What now?"

"Sensors registering at least five more ships. Two look like 'Feds. Two look like Fugitech, and I have no idea what the last one is."

I hit a key and cycled through the images of the nearby ships. The computer identified each craft and gave me a brief run-down of what was obvious to a surface scan. The cruisers from the Death Syndicate were sleek and black, almost like blades cutting through the void of space. The last ship was new to me as well, but Stitcher glanced at it over Katt's shoulder at her station and recognized it. "Vilhouis? What the hell are they doing out here?"

"Are you sure?"

"I've taken the classes. I know what I'm talking about. See how it looks like a crystal snowflake? The Vilhouis are energy beings. They don't travel or do things the same way we do. The books don't have much to say on their body-type, since their bodies are based on force-of-will." He rubbed his chin. "I remember they used crystal ships to travel about, merging with the collective 'crew'. Weird shit."

"Why are they here?"

"They need some laughs?" he shrugged.

"So give me some choices, people. We can't go back, and we can't go forward." Katt punched a chart up, and it blinked onto a sub-screen of one of my monitors. I glanced over it.

"Give me an escape route."

"There isn't one," Katt said. "The tail end of the Abhiri Wastes extend through here, walling us in from one side. Those asteroids aren't like the ones you can dodge at Crater City. These are small and mean. It'd be like flying through a molecular filament. Those rock fragments would shred us in seconds. They're far enough away to be relatively unaffected by the black hole, but the only way out would put us between the hole and the asteroids, here," the screen highlighted a region of space, "where the fragments on the edge are being pulled into the vortex. The gravity is turning the rocks into projectiles."

"Stone rain. Lovely. Give me the good news, Katt."

"That was the good news." She highlighted another area of space. "The other end of the sector has a nebula that's feeding the clouds around the black hole, and from what the sensors are telling me there are pockets of intense radiation. The ship isn't rigged for that kind of drain. We'd be fried to a crisp in there."

"That leaves the black hole and the ships behind us. You're not helping here."

"What do you want? I'm a miracle-worker, not a god," Katt snapped back. "Why don't you ask one of your ghosts?"

"Spirits, fuck you very much, and they don't seem to do requests." Nightmare hopped out of his chair, walked over, and jerked me out of my chair, shoving me towards the door.

"Sure, you want a minute alone, 'Mare? Let's chat." Once the door had shut behind us and we were alone in the hall, he let go of my collar. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" I shoved him away. "I have enough to deal with right now—"

"You gotta get us out of here."

It was simple, blunt, and completely lacking the usual edge of violent aggression his words tended to contain. The man could make every syllable a threat. "You okay, chief?" I tried to get a look at his eyes.

"Get us out of here. Please." There was something new in his voice, something I had never heard before. Fear. Nightmare was afraid. The universe had finally hit him with

something he couldn't kill or ignore, and it had completely destroyed his paradigm of reality. I could sympathize, but later, after we were all safe.

"I'm trying. I really am. We may have to fight it out, but I'll give it everything I have. Okay?"

He nodded, his shoulders relaxing a hair. I led the way back to the bridge, and sat down. "Like I was saying, any ideas?"

Silence.

"I'm getting a beacon signal from a planetoid near the hole," Griffin said finally. "At first I thought it was a warning beacon, but it looks like the types you used when landing at the spaceports. What do you think?"

"What planetoid?"

"You can't see it from this angle, what with the gases around the black hole," Katt frowned. "She's right. There is a planetoid in all that mess, about five clicks from the horizon of the hole." She sighed at my puzzled look. "Take a look at the edge of the hole—right there. Do you see how the darkness has a sharp definition? That edge is the horizon. We can fly up to the absolute face of the hole, but as long as you don't cross that boundary, you can escape with normal drives. If you do cross it, you're fucked."

"How can the planetoid exist that close to the horizon? Wouldn't the black hole destroy it at that range?"

"You would think so, but I'm also seeing some pretty weird fluxes in the energy fields, from gravitational to radiation, across the board. Something's going on down there, but I can't tell you much from here."

"Um, guys?"

"Yeah, Stitch?" I turned.

"Those frigate captains must have grown some balls." He was looking at one of Katt's sensors. "They're taking their time about it, but they're coming in." On the long-range sensors,

the ships began to crawl forward, testing their limits to try and reach us. The Vilhous spacecraft maintained its position.

Nightmare's eyes widened. "What do we do?"

I clenched the throttle grip with my right hand. It was down to the wire, and the choice was mine. If we died, the fault would be mine. If we angled right, and used the "terrain" to our advantage, there was a chance we could out-fight the larger ships, or at least slip past them with manageable damage to the ship. With a little luck, and a lot of—

Come home, Warlock.

"You gotta be shitting me," I whispered.

Come home.

With a grimace I gunned the throttle to maximum and guided the nose of the ship towards the guidance beacon on the planetoid. The sudden thrust pulled on my intestines as we slipped into the stronger currents of the black hole's gravity storm and plunged towards the planetoid Griffin had discovered. The choice was made.

The size of the black hole was astounding. The point we had just left had made the black hole seem like a powerful force. I could tell now as we flew closer that the black hole was immense as well. "Jesus," I said. "I thought it would be small."

"It is small," Katt said, "compared to a star."

"I hate all of you," Stitcher muttered, his knuckles pale as he gripped the sides of his chair. "I really, really do."

The guidance beacon was flashing on the Nav-screen, clearly on the opposite side of the planetoid from the black hole. That was a plus, since the planet itself would shield us from the strange fluxes that Katt had noticed earlier. The "planetoid" itself was large, not large enough to be a planet, but easily the size of a moderate C-class moon. When we had first seen the black hole from a distance, the moon had been against a background of multi-colored gasses and besides, the hole was much more eye-catching.

"Could it be the remains of a moon from a planet that the hole ate?" I asked.

"Doesn't work like that," Griffin said. "The—"

"Later," I cut her off in mid-lecture. The controls were getting sluggish. "Contact the Control and tell them we're coming in." The tech moved over to help Griffin. "If there's anyone left on that hunk of rock."

After a moment, Griffin began typing. "Everything was left on automatic. I can access the front doors, though."

"Do it." We were getting close. I could see a metallic mountain—no, more hill-sized—sitting on the barren rock of the moon. It was a large, truncated cone, with the beacon close to the top, pulsing in rhythm to the beeping signal it emitted. As we drew closer, the black hole slipping behind the moon's surface, the doors at the top began to part, belching dry, dusty air into the sudden vacuum. It had been awhile since the doors had last opened.

No one said a word.

I put us on maneuvering jets and repulse engines to guide the craft into the maw of the landing bay, impressed at the size of this dock. It was big enough to have supported a large freighter's passing, much less the *Hawkeye*. Once inside, the doors had silently closed behind us, and the controls loosened up as the atmospheric buffers within the dock activated.

A large, wide corridor was the only exit from the chamber. It was big enough for any traffic able to fit through the exterior doors, so I spun the *Hawkeye* around and gave a little thrust, easing down the passage.

"What is this place?" Griffin murmured.

"Access corridor," I murmured, studying the sensor feed on my left. "Someone made this exit available so you could reach the side closest to the black hole, but have protection from those strange fields we saw." I flipped a switch and kicked the main lights on. "This runs under the ground all the way around to the other side. It'll take about fifteen minutes to run the whole length of the tube. That'll put us directly at the zenith point under the black hole."

"What's at the other end?"

"Answers," I said.

* * *

At the other end was a large hanger. I set the Hawkeye down facing back the way we came, and left the systems on automatic rather than letting them cycle down, just as a precaution. If there was any trouble, we could take off almost instantly.

Katt double-checked the atmosphere outside the ship. There was oxygen present, but at extremely low levels. Katt and Nightmare started to prep their battle-suits, but I was going to need something myself. I opened a utilities closet and pulled out a rebreather suit. It was designed for short space walks or hostile atmospheres, but not combat. There didn't seem to be anyone on this station, so I wasn't concerned. Much.

"Where's mine?" Griffin rubbed her arms.

"Maybe you should stay here."

"You're going to need me in there to kick start their core computers. I can't do that from here by remote, and if you want answers, that's where they'll be." I thought about it, searching for a reasonable argument. I couldn't come up with one. I grabbed a second rebreather suit and handed it over. "How does this thing work?"

"Slip it on and I'll show you."

"What about me?" Stitcher

"What about you?"

"I'm not staying here by myself." I glanced over, and Katt was getting Torgue ready to move. The medic shrugged. "I need to be there. Besides, I actually have some zero-gee training."

"There's gravity out there, Stitch."

“Shut up and give me a suit.”

I did so. Griffin had pulled the suit on over her clothes, and had zipped it up. I folded the seal over the zipper, then helped her pull on the hood and faceplate. I connected the tubes from the back of the hood to the pack on her back. “This will recycle your air for up to two hours,” I said. “Just don’t break the seals, and if you get cold, I can adjust the dials. This won’t keep you alive very long in deep space, but it’ll do fine here.”

She nodded, flexing her hands in their gloves.

I stepped into my own suit and within minutes everyone was ready to step outside. I sealed the interior doors, and within moments the hold became an airlock, adjusting for the outside conditions. The gangway lowered silently, the hum of hydraulics muffled by the low-level atmosphere.

Griffin’s hand found mine. I gave it a squeeze and glanced at Nightmare. He hefted a laser rifle on his shoulder. His grin was wicked, illuminated in the faceplate of his battle-suit. “The place is probably deserted,” I said as Stitcher plucked up his shotgun.

Nightmare primed the laser rifle. “Let’s find out.”

* * *

The first room away from the hanger was a storeroom of worker droids, horrible monsters in the lights from our packs. There were acres and acres available for storing goods here. We found construction materials in the back, sheets of metal and braces. Katt theorized that someone might have used the droids to build the complex, but that didn’t tell us much about the mindset of the people who had built the place, or why it was a secret. The next door was locked, but I had a sonic key. I noted to myself that the type of electronic key was a much older model. My key worked, since the principles were the same, but not as cleanly.

Nightmare took a position as the door opened and did the standard military sweep with his weapon. Nothing moved beyond the portal. Torgue backed him up. "Sensors clear," the cyborg announced. We halted our forward move when the ground shook, a tremor running through the rock below. "I am registering several tiny fault lines around the structure's foundation."

"Are they dangerous to us?" Katt looked at the cyborg.

We entered another huge chamber. This appeared to be a main control room. A gridded catwalk extended from the door to a platform with a row of consoles underneath three large screens. There was a set of stairs on either end of the platform, the left set leading to the main floor below, and the right set extending upward into the metallic ceiling. We stopped at the main set of consoles. Katt caressed the plates and keys with a loving hand, even through the gauntlet of her battle-suit. "It looks like everything is controlled through here," she said. "What do you think, Griffin?"

"Yes," Griffin studied a screen. "The automatic subroutines are kept revolving through these systems. Whatever wasn't necessary was taken off-line. We put the main power back on, and we might get better lights, better air, everything."

"Can you ladies get the systems on-line?"

"Not a problem," Katt said. Griffin nodded in agreement. They took up positions at the consoles and started comparing notes.

"Torgue," I clapped the cyborg on the arm.

He turned his cybereyes on me. "Yes, Warlock?"

"Keep an eye on the girls while we do some exploring, okay?"

"Yes, Warlock." He turned and stood behind them, scanning the area for any threats. I waved Nightmare and Stitcher over to where I stood.

"Stitch, take those stairs up to the next level, and 'Mare and I will take those stairs down. I don't want a deep exploration, just an idea about what's going on. The suits have com-units, so let's keep in touch."

"Why is it I'm going upstairs by myself? Why am I going up there in the first place?"

I jerked my thumb at a small sign near the stairs that read: *Med-labs 1 and Main Observatory*. "Because you know your way around Med-labs much better than Nightmare and I, and you can learn more there than any of us could." Leave Katt and Griffin to the technical stuff, and leave the medical shit for the medic. He needed to earn some of his pay this trip, anyhow.

"Oh."

"Keep your eyes open. There's a lot of motion somewhere in the complex for an establishment that has been off-line for a long period of time." The grillwork floor rumbled under the boots of my suit.

"You okay, Warlock?" Sticher cocked his head.

I shrugged him off. "Yeah. Let's get moving. Sticher, give us regular updates every five minutes or so." The medic nodded and walked towards the far staircase.

I turned to see Nightmare crossing his arms. "Give."

"What?"

"What's bothering you?" he asked quietly.

"Just a funny feeling, that's all. Let's have a look downstairs." He almost persisted, but gave up at the end and followed me down the spiral staircase towards the shadowed floor below. I couldn't tell him how I felt someone was watching us, waiting for us, here at the complex. Mostly because I was going on the advice of spirits no one else could see, but also because I didn't sense any threats from this watcher.

Come to me, Warlock

"Shut up," I mumbled.

"Pardon?" Nightmare raised an eyebrow.

Good going, Warlock, I admonished myself. Real bright. Let them know just how crazy you really are. "Nothing," I said. I hoped he would leave it alone, and he did. We continued downstairs, my friend leveling his laser at the darkness, waiting—probably hoping—for something to come at him.

Nothing did.

When we stepped onto the floor, I paused to stare at the source of the vibrations. Beyond a large window, extending from the floor to just above seven feet, were generators. A huge gear with razor-sharp teeth spun at almost invisible speeds, causing various pumps around the main shaft to undulate in rhythm and steam was vented every few seconds into the room above the machines. A large amount of energy was being channeled from this room, more than was being used by the complex itself. Perhaps it had to do with the strange energy fields Katt had noticed.

While I was enraptured by the technology, Nightmare had done a sweep of the room.

"We're alone."

"I wasn't worried."

The com-unit crackled. "Stitcher here. I did a quick inventory of the Med-lab. It's nothing fancy, but better than a field hospital. Actually, this is a pretty decent Med-lab."

"Really?"

"Yeah," he said. "If we were talking about one-hundred and fifty years ago. They have a lot of stuff up here, but most of the medications have long-since deteriorated. Even the equipment is several steps back from the cutting edge. Hell, in Med-school I was taught over half of this shit was labeled as antiques. No one uses these devices any more. They're too redundant. I have stuff on the ship that can accomplish the same tasks with better accuracy."

"Is anything up there using power?"

"Nope. I'm searching with the suit's lanterns. Why?"

"I have a lot of juice coming out of a generator system down here, and I don't know where it's going."

"I'm heading back down," Stitcher sighed.

"What about the Observatory?"

"There is a huge window up here, giving a great view of the black hole. If you think I'm going any closer to it, you can kiss my ass."

Nightmare rolled his eyes. "Pussy."

I stifled a chuckle. "Easy, guys. Easy. Stitch, come on down. Nightmare and I will check this stuff out a little more and meet you upstairs in five." I shut the com-unit off and leaned towards Nightmare. "I seem to remember you being scared of the black hole yourself, fairly recently."

"Fucker."

"Just give Stitcher a break."

He turned away, the battle-suit thumping on the metal floor. "I was concerned. Stitcher is scared. Big difference."

"Of course," I said. I wasn't listening anymore, at least not to him. I was listening to his boots as he stepped. I stomped a couple of more times, listening to the impacts. "This floor is hollow."

"Floors can be hollow?"

"It's like someone put up a frame and these metal plates over a cavern or something. Maybe it's the water storage or something."

"It's not important."

"Probably right. Let's see what the girls have found." I looked around. If the entire floor was the same as where we stood, then the cavern under our feet had to be huge. Why have a control center built over a cavern? For that matter, why build an outpost/observatory this close to a black hole, and then kill to keep everybody away from it? "I hope that have

something." I looked up at the grillwork ceiling, which was in turn the very platform they stood upon.

"Yep," Nightmare said.

The com-unit crackled in my ear. It was Katt. "You boys might want to get up here. Griffin has managed to access some sort of journal that belonged to the chief scientist of this place. It's taking her a few minutes. I'm in agreement with Stitcher. When this place was built, it must have been the top of the line. Now it hurts just trying to use it."

"Want to know how old this computer is?" Griffin asked over the link. "There's no Grid access, no holo-projectors, and no neural interface ports. I might be able to get it to add two plus two, but you'll have to give me a few moments."

"Aw," I chided. "Life's tough, huh?"

"Fuck you," the hacker said. I almost see the pout in her voice. "I had to go into the base code to bypass the password. Ugh, it gave me the shivers. Binary."

"Anything interesting in the journal?"

"There are about a year's worth of entries. Katt had the idea to cross-check some keywords and see if it narrowed our search. It'll be done by the time you boys get back up here."

She was right. The computer had compiled a handful of entries dealing with her search perimeters. The journals themselves had a visual and audio recording, so Griffin pumped them through the main screen. An image of an older man with expressive, bushy eyebrows and a slight hunch to his posture from time and age appeared before us.

Using his own words, Dr. Vincent Sinjin told us his story.

* * *

I have begun this journal in the hopes that anyone who finds this will understand the great folly and devastation that has resulted from my good intentions. If indeed there is a hell despite all of my scientific claims to the otherwise, then there is a good chance that I will be there when you finally hear these words. Perhaps I will be in good company. They say the same of Albert Einstein. I never meant—I never thought—

My apologies. I will start from the beginning.

This is the journal of Victor Sinjin, Ph.D., Chief Scientist of the Whiplash Project. I have been investing time and thought into this concept for many years. This is the fruit of my labors and it has spoiled in my hands. Most of my work was done here, where you now stand. You are now inside the walls of the Sinjin Observatory, one of the finest establishments for the study of planetary bodies. It was built by my grandfather and came into my hands upon the death of my father ten years ago. Built in the cold wastes of Antarctica, it has hosted all the prominent masters of physics and many of mine own peers.

I have taken up this recording as a warning to others who might duplicate my work. I stand as an observer to the greatest marvel of the universe, and it is all my fault.

I destroyed it all.

The project was simple. The furthest level in solar energy technology was still a passive science. You stand there with a panel and a rechargeable battery and wait for light to come to you. You catch and store the light's energy and keep it for consumption later. The process takes a while, is subject to the environment, and the number of panels needed to power a city is not cost effective.

Victor Sinjin Sr. had the idea to force the energy released in the fusion and fission reactions in the core of a star. Specifically our sun, Sol. You hit a star with a modified Mark V laser, set to an unusually high harmonic. Throw in some star-stone lenses to take the pressure and the heat, and you have a concentrated microwave beam with the focus of a laser, that

doesn't degrade as it travels through space. (In truth, it will degrade and fizzle out after about five light years, but for this experiment, it's not important.)

A picture took up the monitor, filled with a complicated series of equations I couldn't understand. After a moment, Sinjin came back.

We first shot a similar beam, but used a light Mark I with the same modifications, and used a small fission reactor. The beam caused the reactor to over-compensate and speed up the complicated processes within it. The excess energy was sent back along the wave beam, riding the parent back to the source. In this experiment the laser exploded, due to the unexpected speed of the results.

But it worked.

The full version was built here at the observatory. I, along with my closest peers, took up the concept and made it reality. There was almost no resistance. In this age of colonization and space travel, barely a fourth of the human population remains here on Earth. We sent up a series of satellites in a variety of orbits to aid our efforts, and we built the laser. The base was designed to swivel, to compensate for the planet's rotation and the orbit around the sun. It took two years and almost all my resources, but we did it. The main laser was designed with a wide ring of panels, so when the energy rode the beam back, it would be dispersed into a bank of collectors and sent to various stations. We intended to fire the beam for ten minutes to prove our theory, and then we could design a system to share the power across the globe.

My dream was to bring unlimited power to all races, allowing them to gain access to the natural reactors their planets orbited. I wanted no race of people to want for warmth, heat, or light. I had had all the right reasons for what I did. I don't understand why it all went so wrong.

Bea Wallace, a physicist on the project and devout Christian, decided God got pissed.

I couldn't and still can't argue.

The day of the first shot came, and we had the attention of the entire world. We had spent a week charging the laser, and in a blaze of glory and pride, we fired the laser, sending the lavender stream of energy into the heavens. I was so proud.

Until the sun collapsed.

I have no explanation. The beam struck the heart of the star and caused some sort of imbalance, a type of reaction that none of the experts I had researched could have predicted. Now, looking back on the affair, I was vain to think I understood the instincts and characteristics of the sun. Maybe it should have gone nova. Instead, it collapsed into a black hole.

There was footage involved, presumably from a satellite. Before our eyes the beam Sinjin had mentioned hit the star, and the light from it dimmed. It seemed to coalesce into a sphere of red matter, crisscrossed by yellow scars. Then it shrank in pulses, expanding slightly before it contracted further, reminding me of a heart growing smaller with each beat. As it seemed to lose mass, it grew darker. Soon, it was a solid black sphere. Sinjin returned.

I had destroyed in ten minutes what God took seven days to build.

There was an emergency evacuation of the planet. Those that had access to off-planet transportation used it. Those that had none tried to find shelter. The major governments were shuffled to corresponding colonies. I, however, remained along with my staff. The only craft we have are shuttles we bought from the military, but they don't have the power to break Earth's gravity. Besides, the Observatory had been designed much like modern lunar structures, in order to protect us from the cold, so we made certain all the seals were in place and waited to see what would happen.

The next few months saw great changes in the environment (Dr. Chen keeps putting that in the "no shit" category). The lost children of humanity who could not afford the high cost of space travel or simply did not matter, i.e. the homeless, the institutionalized and the imprisoned, were lost in the first few days. No one had the time to think of them, until

afterward, when the atmosphere of the planet shrugged off. The Earth changed orbit, shifting towards the black hole, and it slowly stopped spinning.

Jesus, what have I done?

The planet is being pulled slowly towards the black hole. I cannot shut the beam off. All the circuits are fried, and the Whiplash Effect has caused a power loop, where energy coming back from the black hole is feeding the beam, which is pulling energy from the hole, which—

--Which means we're doomed.

* * *

"Earth," Griffin said in a hushed tone. "Jesus."

If the recording was correct, and I didn't have any reasons to doubt it, then we were standing on what remained of the human homeworld. Gone were the lakes and the trees I had heard about, gone were the deep blue skies and the murky green oceans, teeming with life. The fertile lands my ancestors had revered were ruined. All that remained was a large chunk of rock bobbing on the edge of a gravity pool. I never could blame other races for being wary of humans. Look at what we do to each other.

Look at what we did to our own world.

"Where did all those scientists go?" Stitcher asked. "There aren't any bodies upstairs, and we haven't seen any corpses." Everyone glanced around, as if a body might suddenly pop out of the works. Griffin shivered. "If they had cryogenic units they would have been in the Med-lab," the medic said. "It was clean."

"Someone had to build that access tunnel," I mused. "Sure, those worker droids built it, but who ran them? It had to be the scientists. If they had shuttles like he claims, when the atmosphere dissipated they could have taken off. There weren't any shuttles in the hanger."

"If they escaped, where did they go?" Stitcher rubbed his chin. "We would have heard about this before now. Everyone has always said that Earth was a myth."

Nightmare shook his head. "This was covered up by Confederates, right? They would have made damn sure the scientists had nothing to say, if they ever did escape from this place. Guess they never wanted anyone to know how bad we fucked up."

"It's more than that," I said. "Cerberus call this the 'Great Weapon.' Maybe others had the same idea."

"That's just great. I can see it now. Pay up or we vaporize your planet by turning your sun into a black hole." Stitcher sighed. "I just love people."

"That's not that big a worry. I understand the basic need to cover it up, but the people on the planet might notice someone spending a couple of years building a laser big enough to do the job, don't you think?"

"But the technological potential is there to reproduce this effect," Katt said. "That's what they were probably frightened of letting out."

"Could this really be Earth?" Griffin asked. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Torgue," Katt turned to the cyborg. "Can you download the journals into your temporary memory?"

"Of course."

"I thought the computer had no neural interfaces," I said.

"I want him to use his CPU to hook up to the computer, not his neural jacks." Katt and Griffin helped Torgue plug into the computer, stretching a thin cable from the console to the metal antenna array that had replaced the cyborg's left ear. He closed his eyes as he began the silent communication with the computer.

In effect, Torgue had two brains. Katt and Stitcher had tried to explain the entire process to me, but I only understood the basics. Torgue had his human brain, with much of the regions humans never used converted into storage. He also had a CPU in his system to

coordinate the interface of his flesh and his cybernetics. In some ways, he could concentrate on two things at once. Rather than use the normal neural interfaces, such as the one Griffin had implanted in her head, they would do a direct feed to his "computer brain."

One of the scanners showed the ships getting closer to the planetoid and the docking cone. The Vilhous craft, with its crystalline arms, was glowing a bright lavender in the darkness. "It makes sense," I said.

"Really? I don't understand," Nightmare grunted.

"Think about it for a second. Earth is nearly destroyed by an experiment, an experiment you don't want anyone else to duplicate. Let's say a race of aliens sees all this and realize that we can't be trusted with this information. We being mankind in general, that is. They might entrust one group of humans to police the others, help cover up this blunder and keep everything moving smoothly."

"Like the Confederacy?" Stitcher said.

"Exactly. They get involved to make sure we don't destroy the rest of the universe, and they make sure the Confederacy keeps its authority. They seal off the sector under the guise of some radiation field or other bullshit story, and keep everyone at a distance, including themselves. They get some of their agents to plant failsafe options in various corporations that deal with astrological surveying, and sit back and wait to clean up any messes they find."

"Shit," Nightmare said.

"What?"

"If the entire Confederacy is behind all this I have a lot of people to kill."

"Down, boy," I patted his shoulder. "So let's walk it through. Breck accidentally tags the data for the black hole, activating the Zombie at Nebula, which was put there by Vince Rhodes with the help of Cerberus. He died so no one would find the black hole or more importantly, the generator that created it. Cerberus called this place the Great Weapon. That's

the exact mentality that the people who started this cover up were concerned about. It's hard to blame their paranoia."

Katt unhooked Torgue from the computer. "He's downloaded the journals. Torgue, query: did the professor go into any details about the project itself? Did he give any frequencies or blueprints for the device?"

"The only mention discusses how he erased the data," the cyborg answered.

"There is a huge area of blank memory in the computer," Griffin said. "That's probably where that info was." She folded her arms across her chest. "If this is Earth, the size is all wrong. And what about the planets further away? Wasn't the Earth one of the closer planets in the system?"

"Punch up the local map on the screen," I said. She complied, and we all looked at the navigational chart. "What do you see in this region of space besides the black hole? There is a lot more clutter out this way than in most places."

"Asteroids and a nebula," Katt said, a smile creeping across her mouth, as she began to understand.

"So?" Stitcher shrugged.

"Depending on the make and size of the other planets in the galaxy, the solid planets could easily have broken up into those asteroids. Their orbits degraded and eventually there wasn't enough power to keep them together. Any gas planets would have dissolved into component clouds. Over time they spread out into more known space, but they were given new names." Kat was smiling now.

"Oh, yeah? What about Earth? Why didn't it crumble completely?"

"The Generator here and the resulting power feedback loop its in probably protects the planet to a certain extent. It's physically smaller from erosion, but the fields I noticed on the way in keep what's left from disintegrating into powder."

"Now we know. Can we go?" Stitcher looked around uneasily.

"That's the problem. Our friends outside won't just let us go," I said. "We know too much. Torgue, is there anything in the files on how we can escape from here?"

"No," Torgue said.

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Damn. Okay, people let's think of something."

I went over to the guardrail near the stairwell and looked down at the floor below. Could we shut off the generators? There was no telling what that would do. I felt a rumble that was more in my gut, building all around us. I clenched the rail with both hands. The world trembled for a moment, and was silent.

What was the answer? For that matter, where were those voices pulling me along? I glanced around. *Coyote?*

There was a horrible shriek above me. I watched as a sizable piece of the rafters underneath the Med-lab separated from the ceiling and began to drop, falling into a dive like a snake uncoiling itself. *The tremor must have loosened it,* I thought. There was a moment of macabre fascination as I watched it lunge for me. I grabbed the railing and hurdled over it. I used my momentum to jump from the platform to the stairwell. I grabbed onto the braces of the stairs and flinched as the debris rushed past me. The tangle of beams struck the platform at the junction where the grillwork met the staircase, punching through the metal with ease. For an instant, the staircase stood by itself, with me on the outside.

Then it started to groan.

Then it shifted.

Then it fell.

Nightmare got as close as he could, trying to grab hold of the stairwell with his battle-suit. I could see his eyes as the stairwell twisted and bent in half. He watched as I fell, his eyes full of anger and concern. He was never very good with frustration. I glanced down, and

noticed a hole in the metal panels below, yawning wide underneath me. The debris had punched through the floor as well. I couldn't tell what lay below the floor.

My position on the stairwell put me directly over the hole as the structure crumpled. The staircase bent back on itself and slammed into the ground. The impact wrenched my fingers from their handholds, and I was pitched backwards, past the generator room into what lay beyond. The darkness silently engulfed me, the hole of light pulling away from me as I fell.

I was right. The floor is hollow.

Chapter 10

*So the other witches said
"Okay you win; you take the prize,
but what you said just now—
it isn't so funny
It doesn't sound so good.
We are doing okay without it
we can get along without that kind of thing.
Take it back.
Call that story back."*

*But the witch just shook its head
at the others in their stinking animal skins, fur
and feathers.
It's already turned loose.
It's already coming.
It can't be called back.*

*—Leslie Marmon Silko
Long Time Ago*

Sinjin Observatory

I came to in darkness. The ground underneath me was irregular, like rock, as opposed to the smooth texture of tile or the metal floor I had fallen through. I pushed myself to a sitting position and fumbled with my suit. The faceplate had built-in lights, but I hadn't needed them above in the main control room. I found the switch and pressed it. There was a popping noise, and nothing happened. I took a tentative breath. The air from the suit's recycler tasted the same. So I had taken some damage from the fall, but the overall integrity seemed fine.

I thumbed the com-mike. "Nightmare? Griffin?"

Nothing.

"Katt?"

I didn't even get static.

I checked my arms and legs. Nothing broken. My side was sore, but I had broken ribs before, and mine might have been bruised but they were intact. I was healthy, and my suit had survived. I just had to find a way back to my friends.

As my eyes got used to the darkness, I started to notice shapes within the darkness. I was on the threshold of seeing but not crossing over. I thought some light might have been coming from the hole the debris had made, but I couldn't see a hole above me. For that matter, I didn't notice the debris within arm's reach. Yet I could see somewhat, so there must have been light from somewhere, no matter how diffuse.

I wanted to find the light source. I rose, keeping one hand on the wall beside me. I took a step. Everything was fine. I took another –

–And nearly broke my foot as I cleverly found the debris. I stopped and clutched at my boot, cursing the curled girders and the amount of grief they had caused me in a handful of minutes. The rafters and I must have slid down an incline away from the hole. It might have been surmountable, if I had any gear. But I didn't. Moreover, I had no idea which wall to start with, so it didn't matter.

"Fuck. If you can hear this, I'm going to walk around while you guys think up some amazing way to get me out of here."

No response.

"Fine, don't respond. I have the access codes to the Hawkeye. You can't leave without me." I was trying to keep my sense of humor. It wasn't working.

Beyond the debris I found the walls of rock narrowed to a small corridor. The light seemed to be slightly stronger from that direction. I felt my way towards the mouth of the passage, and glanced around. If this led to the surface, I was a dead man. The suit I was wearing wouldn't last long enough in deep space conditions for me to make it to safety. But I also wasn't going to survive long just waiting to be rescued. I had to move.

I crept into the passage.

The rock tunnel narrowed more, making the way more difficult before it finally opened again. When it did finally broaden, I noticed the light was a little stronger here. What was the source of the radiance? Radiation, perhaps? Phosphorescent fungus? The glow grew in intensity as I walked forward. The tunnel became a passage. The passage became a corridor. The corridor became a cavern.

“Where the fuck is my rad-counter?” I muttered. “It would be my luck to evade death only to have my balls cooked in their own juices.”

Cold pain tightened in my gut. A hundred thousand possibilities flashed through my mind as to what it could have been. Nothing could have ever prepared me for what I found when the cavern expanded into a giant chamber.

The walls were covered with a fine layer of thick green foliage, tiny bursts of flowering color spattered here and there along the leaves and vines that clung to the rock. The floor had a similar carpet of green, and the ceiling wore a similar hue. In the back of the cave a tiny brook trickled from a crack in the stone and fed a small pond, crystalline ripples vibrating across its surface. A soft mist clung to the pond and the surrounding foliage, fingers creeping around the large rocks that sat at the edge of the water. I might have seen a couple of white butterflies flutter past, but I wasn't sure. In fact, I was even willing to bet that the pond probably had several colorful fish. The light seemed to come from everywhere, without a specific source. It was impossible for this pocket of life to exist in the stone body on the edge of the black hole, and yet I was standing in it.

None of this scared me as much as the woman sitting on a stone beside the pond.

She was Native American, and looked very old. Her leathery brown skin had deep folds around her eyes and mouth and neck, her brown eyes twinkling out from her half-closed lids. Her gray and white hair was braided back and extended almost to the back of her knees and she wore brown robes with various beads attached to the fringes. Her gnarled hands gripped a polished wood cane.

She took a breath and opened her mouth. I expected her to utter the wisdom of the ages in a language I couldn't hope to understand.

"Coyote was right. You are very slow."

Her voice reminded me of warm tea and wood smoke. It was very familiar. "You're the one who's been calling me. I've heard you in my dreams. Hell, I've heard you when I'm awake. You sound just like my mother."

"Of course."

"Are you my mother?"

"In a sense."

I was tired of the way I never quite understood everything anyone said. "Sense? In a sense?" I threw my hands in the air. "I haven't had a decent night's sleep in weeks. Every time I close my eyes I hear you or Coyote telling me what to do or where to go, but you don't really tell me a damn thing."

"He said you were a whiner. He was right again." She clucked her tongue and then pointed to a bare rock next to her. "Sit down."

"I don't—"

"Sit down. Don't make me raise my voice."

I sighed, tired of fighting. I walked over to the rock and sat down. "What else did Coyote say?"

"He said you have a habit of not seeing the trap and then killing the wolf who fell in before you." She chuckled, tapping the rock with her cane. "And he said that you would come to me. I have been waiting for a long time."

"Why me? Why wait for me?"

She shrugged. "No one else would have made it. Only a son of Coyote could have made the journey, and you are one of the last of his children. Maybe *the* last. I do not know."

"One more thing."

"Yes?"

"Who are you?"

She smiled. "You know who I am."

"Not really."

"Yes you do."

"I remember dad telling me stories about my mother. You remind me of her, but you're not her. You might be one of the spirits he told me about. I remember he liked the Coyote tales, but I vaguely remember a story about the Earth-mother. All life sprung from her bosom, and all life returned to it." The old woman was grinning, her teeth yellow with age. "Are you trying to say you're her? You're the Earth-mother?"

"No, you're trying to say that," she said. "I'm enjoying this glade."

"That's what I'm talking about. You and Coyote are always dancing around the issues. I want a straight answer for once. And this glade thing? It's a nice trick, but there's not enough air here for the plant life to grow. There's not enough for you to really be here. You must be a spirit, right?"

"Why must I confirm what you already know?"

"It would make me feel better."

"So you are here solely for your own comfort?"

"No, but it would help. Would you please stop answering my questions with questions?"

I hate that."

"Life is questions," she said and rapped me once with her cane.

I put my head in my hands. "That clears it right up."

"Very good."

"That was sarcasm. I didn't mean it."

She frowned. "Then why did you say it?"

This was going nowhere. "Why did I have to come out here to this place to find you. I'm starting to understand why Breck died, but why did you want me out here? Can you leave with my friends and I? Can we take you to a new home? There has to be someplace suitable."

"I will stay here," she said with a faint smile. "The cycle must begin again, as it always has before, and will do so again. I cannot change it, and neither can you. I do not want you to change it. You must accept it." She patted my arm. "You are the key. I could not leave until Coyote found me. Now that you are here, I can begin my journey."

I picked up a smooth stone and spun it in my fingers. "See, you slipped back into babbling. What are you talking about? How can you make a journey and still stay here?"

"Easy, kid," a familiar voice huffed. Coyote trotted past and sat beside the old woman. "You did good, kid. I was worried once or twice but you really pulled through on this one." He looked up to the Earth-mother. "I told you he asked too many questions."

"He is young. It is his right."

"Whatever."

"Kid, there's not a whole lot of time left. I'll answer three questions, and then we all have to get going. Sound fair?" The old woman scratched Coyote behind the ears with her long crooked fingers.

"No," I said.

"Such a shame. Fire away."

I considered all my questions, and tried to narrow them down in my mind. I also had to consider that they might not know the answers. "How did the Earth--or the Earth-mother-- get lost in the first place, anyway? I understand about the black hole and the cover-up, but an entire race lost their heritage."

"Oooh. That's a good one. You don't start out small, do you kid?"

"You only gave me three shots at this. You made the rules, don't bitch about my questions."

“Fair enough,” Coyote said. “About the time Sinjin tried to become a god and fucked it all up, the rest of humanity was slipping into a bad time. Periodically the human race tries to hard, things get too complicated and everything collapses so you can start again. That’s one of the things your kind does best. You rebuild. Too much colonization, too many people trying to reach the stars, it all added up to government being stretched far too thin to maintain any sort of control. Humanity entered another Dark Age that spread across worlds. On individual planets, mock governmental structures sprouted here and there, but they couldn’t hold up. They didn’t have the vision or the organization to maintain order.

“Most of the other races left you alone, trying to distance themselves from the chaos. The only organizations able to keep control over people were the corporations. They rose up and took power, replacing governments. They developed their own military and representatives, and syndicates became the new worlds. The strongest syndicate was the Confederacy, which took over many of the human worlds, and was responsible for the cover-up that kept Earth hidden for so long. The Confederacy grew to such proportions that it became an interplanetary government without intending to do so. Corporations made alliances with each other and began interacting with other races to maintain control of human worlds and stabilize individual economies, but much of the internal espionage continued unabated.

“History is always dictated by the official organization in charge, so the masses were easily convinced that the Earth was more myth and symbol than actual fact, and the Earth-mother was all but forgotten. Most of your people ended in the Amer cluster and tried to keep the old ways sacred. In other sectors, humans chose to forget their heritage and accepted the history that was presented to them. Those who knew kept silent and watched the universe continue on its path.

“Actually, it’s the sort of thing I can really appreciate. Think about it. You have been involved in uncovering the greatest trick in the universe.”

A little chaos and some skilled businessmen had made the Earth disappear. A mistake had caused the death of my friend, and led me here. I had felt drawn here the entire time. There had to be a reason. "If you knew all this and I had to come here, why not ask? Why did my friend have to die? Why did I have to go through all this shit?"

"Would you have come if I just asked? Hell, no. You would have upped the dosage on your drugs. That's two."

My thoughts spun around in my head. What do you ask someone whom your ancestors considered gods? There was so much I needed to know, to understand, in order to accept what I had seen. Finally, after a few moments of contemplation, I settled upon: "What does it all mean?"

The old woman rose to her feet and smoothed her dress. "It is time to go." Coyote turned and followed her, dogging her footsteps. "You must go now."

"Now wait just a minute. You didn't answer my last question."

The Earth-mother favored me with a matronly smile. "It has already begun, Warlock. Follow the edge of the pond and you will find a small tunnel that leads up to the warehouse above. You and your friends must leave. Time is short."

"Wait—"

She laughed softly to herself. "As for that last question, Warlock, the answer isn't easy, and you won't like it, but after I tell you, you have to leave here. You can't be here for my journey. It is something I must do alone."

"Fine."

"There are things in this universe that you were not meant to know."

She turned and walked away, vanishing into a thick mist that was pouring off the surface of the pond. Her answer didn't help me at all. I resisted the urge to follow her and gave Coyote a small salute. "I guess that's that."

"See you around, kid."

"Must you?"

Coyote chuckled, then turned and followed the Earth-mother into the mists. "I'm not making any journeys. You'll be hearing from me."

"Is that a threat or a promise?"

No answer.

The mist was turning into a thick fog, and I was quickly losing my way. I followed the edge of the pond until I found the tunnel she had indicated, and began climbing my way up the sloped passage. I heard Coyote's gruff voice one last time as I scrambled up the rocky hill, but I didn't take the time to respond.

"Listen to the cycles, kid."

* * *

My com-unit returned to life by the time I was at the top of the tunnel, the sound bursting in my ears suddenly and almost making me lose my grip. "—I don't care how long we have, we're not leaving him!" It was Griffin's voice, and she sounded panicked. "We have to go down there and get him. He might be alive."

"I don't want to leave him either, but we're running out of options," Katt said.

It's good to be loved. "Easy, ladies," I said. "I'm okay. Meet me back at the ship. I should be there myself in two minutes."

"Thank god," Griffin said. "Where are you?"

"You wouldn't believe me. Just meet me back on the ship. We're evacuating the observatory." I cut the channel and crawled through the hole at the top. One of the tremors had torn open a seam of two metal panels. I pulled myself through and got my bearings, then sprinted for the hanger.

I reached the hanger doorway about three seconds ahead of the others, with Nightmare in the lead and Torgue bringing up the rear. We were all on the run. While I had announced our departure over the com-link, my statements had never had such an effect. *Which means something else has happened.* "What happened while I was out, guys? You all look completely panicked. Or is it just me?"

"The fields are collapsing," Katt said. "The generators are shutting down. They'll be completely off-line in exactly—" she checked a chronometer, "--sixteen minutes."

"That doesn't give us a lot of time," I said.

"We don't know what's going to happen when they go," Stitcher huffed.

"Any theories, Katt?" We rounded the doorway and headed for the ship. Stitcher and Nightmare hustled up the gangway.

"Yeah, none of them good."

"Oh." I took the ramp in three strides and sprinted for the bridge. I didn't want her to go into the theories. I didn't want to hear it. I nearly leaped into my chair and keyed in the ignition sequence. Griffin found her seat as did Stitcher, but Nightmare, Torgue, and Katt here still in the hold.

"Everybody on," Nightmare shouted over the com-link.

"Hang on," I said as I hit the repulsor jets and the ship rose into the air. I spun the craft around and aimed it back into the tube, kicking the engines as high as I dared in the close walls of the tunnel. There was the sound of something heavy falling back in the hold. The only things not secured were the cyborg, the technician and the psychopath. I wondered which one had made the sound. "I told you to hang on."

"Fifteen minutes," Katt announced. I set a small chronometer beside my thruster control to match her countdown. The numbers silently ticked away. "Do you mind, Warlock? Nightmare and I are still getting out of our suits."

"Fucker," Nightmare said, his voice low and even.

"I'll take it easy when we're out of here," I said, "and back on Aldion." I was more worried about the warnings of the Earth-mother. The generator failure had to be connected to her demand that we leave, but I had no concept of what would happen when the machines shut down and the fields collapsed.

Torgue cut in on the link. "That lift-off was not proper procedure, Warlock."

Stitcher guffawed from where he was strapped in. "The cyborg's telling you how to fly! Maybe you need a refresher."

"Maybe you should walk."

"It was just a thought," Stitcher said.

"Griffin," I tilted my head towards her but kept my eyes forward. "Make sure the doors are open."

"Already done," she said. "Trust me, I'm ready to go."

"Yeah," Stitcher said.

"I'm working on it." I glanced at the counter. 14:21.

14:20

Torgue entered the bridge and stood beside Stitcher, watching everything going on. If he understood the true danger, he didn't show it. In some ways I wished I could be like him. He probably didn't have needles prickling up his spine in anticipation of the unknown. I urged the throttle up a little more, working hard to keep the ship from bouncing off the sides of the tube. I noticed Griffin tighten her straps out of the corner of my eye.

The *Hawkeye* bucked as the port side got too close to the tube, the ship touching the wall briefly, but enough to send up a shower of sparks across my window. I readjusted the controls but didn't let up on the engines. I had to find a way to shave off some time.

13:39.

Katt came onto the bridge, her hands pressing against the wall for support. She made her way to her station. "Nice one. I suppose I'll have to fix that too. Try not to shake us apart before we get to the docking cone."

"Maybe you should sit down and let him fly," Griffin said flatly.

"Ooh," Stitcher said in warning tones.

"Ooh?" Torgue gave the medic a puzzled look, his repetition of the sound devoid of the playful inflection Stitcher had used.

Katt stared at her, somewhere between shock and anger. Both emotions gave way to a dry chuckle. "I always knew we could get you to grow a spine. I'm so proud." The hacker made a gesture I couldn't recognize, but I guessed the basic meaning. "That's the spirit," Katt said. She sat down and started studying the read-outs.

10:53.

10:52.

The time was passing too fast. When we had been here earlier, waiting to find answers to our questions, the trip along the access tunnel had taken forever. Every second counted, and the end seemed to be getting farther and farther away. I nudged the thrusters up another notch. The seams of the tube segments rushed past at a dangerous rhythm, as the ship threatened to crash at any second.

Nightmare strode in. He slid into his chair and activated the targeting scope. I threw him a smile and an apologetic shrug for the bad take-off.

"Fucker," he muttered.

8:08.

8:07.

Goodbye, Warlock, the Earth-mother's voice echoed in my head, buzzed just under my temples and caused my sinuses to ring.

I shook my head to clear it. Now wasn't the time.

"Warlock, something's happening to the black hole," Katt said. She sounded tense.

"There's too much rock over this access corridor for me to get a clear reading, but when the field levels dropped past a certain point, the black hole reacted."

"What does it mean?"

"I wish I knew."

"I'm glad I don't," Griffin said, and there was a chorus of weak laughter in support.

6:00.

5:59.

There was a lot of silence on the bridge. The team watched, waited, and maybe prayed as I fought for every extra second I might glean to get us away from the black hole. The team had always had sarcasm to take the edge off. It was sometimes harsh and often playful and was how we survived. It was one way to pull back from the violence that we always faced and sometimes caused. It was a safety catch.

No one said a word for a long time.

3:44.

3:43.

3:42.

"We're not going to make it, are we?" Griffin asked.

"Just hang on," I said.

"That's not a yes or a no. We're going to die, and there's not a damn thing we can do about it!" Her frustration had pushed her into hysteria.

"Hey," I said.

"We're dead. That's it," the hacker started to sob.

"Hey!" I shouted.

"What?"

"I've been dead before, remember? Give me a chance."

She wiped the tears off her cheeks, but stayed silent. No one else had anything to add.

2:10.

2:09.

The problem was, she was probably right. I had no real options here. We might make open space, but would we get very far before everything fell apart? I had no idea, and it was eating me up inside. Something very big was about to happen, and I was caught up as an observer. Maybe with a little luck it would be painless.

1:01.

1:00.

I wished I had more time. I had been given a second chance with the clone that most people never had, and I had used it all up hunting down a murderer and uncovering a conspiracy. While it had led to the secret of Earth, was it worth losing everything I held dear? I had gambled with my second chance and lost.

0:48.

0:47.

I wished I could have told Breck's parents why he had died. Someone needed to carry the story on, and let others know exactly what we as a race had done. The few who knew would never let the information out into the open. Not if they could help it.

0:33.

0:32.

I wished I could explain to the people around me how important they were to me. Nightmare was my brother, Katt was my sister, and Stitcher was my annoying little cousin who never went home.

And Griffin?

0:24.

0:23.

I wished I had been able to let Griffin in a little more than I had. I wished I had given her the trust she deserved and that had been deep inside me the entire time, restrained by my own doubts and conscience.

0:18.

0:17.

I wished I had kissed her.

0:10.

The docking cone came into view. I eased back on the throttle slightly, my hand reaching for the maneuvering jets.

0:09.

I cut the main jets, letting the momentum carry us forward. "Torgue, see if you like this," I said.

0:08.

I hit the front jets, which kicked the ship into a slow spin, nose rotating upwards, giving me a clear view of the ceiling.

0:07.

I waited for the moment, my hand poised on the throttle. *Come on*, I tried to will the entrance closer. We had no time to waste.

0:06.

Suddenly there were faint stars before my eyes, and the open vacuum of space extended into the distance. I slammed the throttle control into full, and I was pressed into my seat by the force as the ship reacted.

0:05.

We were out of the cone, and starting away from the planetoid and the observatory. Lasers flashed before me. We weren't alone.

0:04.

The frigates were close, and positioned to catch us in the crossfire. It was a standard ambush. I tried an evasive maneuver—

0:03.

--but that took us closer to the planetoid. I veered the ship back around to make a run for it. Perhaps we could get the Fugiyama boys to get aggressive on the Confederate ships. It was risky, but I had no time to think up anything else.

0:02.

I aimed for a hole between the ships and clenched my teeth, ready to go for it.

0:01.

From somewhere outside my vision the Vilhouis craft left the area faster than a human craft could ever hope to travel. I wondered what exactly the race of energy beings knew that we didn't.

0:00

I was blinded by intense light, so bright that I could see it with my lids clenched shut. The light swept over the ship scant seconds before the impact struck.

Aftershock

"That which does not kill you becomes your lunch."
--Ancient Krakhan phrase

Deep Space

"I can't be dead," Stitcher moaned. "I hurt too much to be dead."

I pulled myself out from under the console, shoving my broken chair out of the way. The bridge was a mess. Wiring and electronics lay everywhere around me, the navigational systems disemboweled savagely across the floor. The gunner's chair was tilted to one side, the scope spun around at an odd angle. I couldn't see anyone in the darkness. What light was available came from the flickering of the screens that were off-line. "Sound off, people," I said. My voice sounded deep in my own ears.

"Ouch," the medic said.

"Yeah," Griffin called out weakly from her station.

"What a mess," Katt said from somewhere.

"I am functional," Torgue announced, a giant shadow against the gloom of the bridge.

"Fucker," Nightmare grunted softly.

I forced myself up to a sitting position, and leaned back against the ruined console. "At least life support is still on. Anyone seriously hurt?" No one said anything. "Okay. Anyone know what happened?"

Katt stood up and stretched. "The black hole went nova."

"I thought stars went nova, not black holes."

"The black hole was once a star. I suppose when the containment fields went down the energy fluxed the other way."

"So why aren't we dead?"

Katt shrugged. "I'd bet that we were in the planetoid's shadow, and it soaked up enough energy that we were able to survive the wave. This isn't my field, though, and there could be other explanations."

"How bad is the ship?" Nightmare asked, rolling to a sitting position. "Weapons systems are gone."

"Navigation is out," I said.

"Computers are up but we lost some memory," Griffin said. "I might be able to salvage it, but not without landing for a while."

"Can you try and get the sensors up and running? I want to see what's out there." Griffin nodded, and started to straighten her workstation. Katt stumbled over to help. "Stitch, you might want to get your gear back together in the hold. I know I need some first aid."

"You and me both, brother," he said.

"Are you okay?" Griffin looked over at me.

"Bumps and bruises," I chuckled. "Nothing serious."

It took the women a few minutes of scavenging and almost an hour of technical work to get the systems back up to fifty percent. Once the sensor array had built up a charge, Katt used most of the system's resources and took a scan of the area. It wasn't a full-range, but it gave us a good idea what was out there. The *Hawkeye* was the only object in this region of space. The Q-sector was clean. The black hole was gone.

I couldn't hear the Earth-mother's voice any more.

It took some work, but I finally made Griffin go to the hold, once the systems were at least functional. She had a nasty gash along her hairline that was dark with dried blood. She had waved it off while working, but I wanted Sticher to take a look at it.

"It's uglier than it hurts," she said, lying back on the examination table. "It can wait until later."

"Nope," I put a hand on her shoulder. "Take it easy. We're doing fine. Right, 'Mare?"

Nightmare walked by with a junk crate full of replacement boards and extra wiring over one shoulder, intently looking over Katt's worktable for something specific. "Yeah," he said vaguely.

"How can you say that?" Griffin huffed. "The ship is practically ruined."

"You should have seen it before I got it. Besides, we're alone out here, a fair distance from anything dangerous that we might drift into, and the life support is stable. We have supplies to last us for weeks, and we're alive. Jesus, we survived an exploding star and you're worried about the paint job." She laughed at that. I liked her laugh. "Besides, we're doing better than average. Isn't that right, 'Mare?"

"Yeah." He walked past, victorious in his hunt for a hand-torch. "Usually we're scraping his ass together after he blows himself up."

I gave him a nasty look. "You had to go there, didn't you?"

"You led the way, punk."

He left the hold. Stitcher handed me a small cloth and a bottle of cleanser. "Clean up that cut and I'll throw down some stitches in a minute." He shuffled over to his lab equipment, some of which had been tossed about in the impact. As he walked, every step was punctuated by a small "Ow" as he exaggerated his pain.

I wet the cloth and dabbed at the crusty scab. Dark bits fell from the wound. She inhaled sharply. "Sorry," I said with a wince of sympathetic pain.

"It's okay," she said, patting my hand. I continued to dab. She closed her eyes. "So how the hell did we get here? My dad catches you trying to boost our car and the next thing I know I have this cute adopted brother. Now here we are at the ass-end of the universe in a crippled ship after a black hole went inside-out and blew up, and we know a secret that we can't tell anyone because no one will buy it and our proof was vaporized."

"You've got a good handle on the situation."

"I know you're a professional at all this, but just how would you classify this mess we're in?"

I looked in her green eyes, and gave her a soft kiss on her warm lips. "About par, my dear. About par."

Epilogue: Confederate Paperwork

Encrypted Report
Begin
Transmit Code: Delta
Re: Q-Sector 385
To: Confederate Militia High Council
From: Vince Rhodes

Dear Sirs:

This report is to confirm the rumors concerning Q-sector 385. What we have been hearing is indeed true. I have personally checked the sensor probes that survived the incident, and the images they received are included in this data-packet. The black hole in Q-sector 385 is gone, as are the *Dallas*, *Enterprise*, and *Galilee*. It is impossible to tell at this point exactly what transpired on the observatory, but the generators were taken off-line and the black hole created by the project was destroyed, taking with it the ships mentioned above and all hands present.

The question I am investigating is what happened exactly, and I have come to a single conclusion: the black hole went nova.

My people have theorized that the fields *made* the original star shift into a black hole. When the fields dissipated, the black hole shift back into a star, but the energy was so unstable that the star exploded. Dr. Reeves calls this the "pendulum effect of energy transmutation," which in this case swung from one extreme to the other. The planetoid, the observatory, and the sector are cleansed.

The Great Weapon is gone, and with it the methods for its creation. Our pact with the Vilhous still stands, but now there is nothing to cover up, as the nova consumed all evidence to our deception. We may breathe easier, ladies and gentlemen. The agents from Metaltech, who might have presented a problem, are also gone. In one blast of fire and radiation, our troubles have been wiped away.

Sincerely,

Vince Rhodes
Shadow Ops Coordinator.
Crater City
Password: xxxxxxxxxxx
Clearance: Top
File Number: 38754-778

Footage Included.

Q-sector 385 Footage

Holographic transmission opens:

The image is taken up by the polar relationship between the hungry mouth of the black hole and the solid form of the planetoid. At the end opposite from the black hole the docking cone is almost visible, a faint glint in the dark maelstrom. The combined forces start to close in on the docking cone, ready for something to come through.

The colors in the swirling gasses around the black hole start to fade, and the black hole itself seems to shrink in size, slowly, but with a pulsing rhythm as the black mass tightens upon itself. The ships silently maintain their positions.

Something comes out of the docking cone. It is too far away to make out from the sensor's eye, but one frigate opens fire on it, red lasers slicing through the vacuum. The other ships move to get better angles. With unnerving precision, the Vilhous craft rotates its position and then bursts into motion, rushing past the sensor faster than any human craft could travel.

An explosion of energy—on the scale of a star going critical—erupts from the black holes, shredding gas clouds in its wake. The frigates and gunships slowly spin, trying to achieve escape vectors, but they have no chance. The waves of light and radiation sweep over them. As the waves hit, there is a moment of silence, almost a gasp, and then the destructive power kicks in and the ships crumple like aluminum tubes, even as their component parts are knocked loose and set boiling, carried away by the wave of energy. Each ship is touched in turn, and none are left standing. The flare of energy obscures the planetoid from view, and then the wave reaches the sensor, and with a pulse of intense light—

—the sensor-feed goes dead.

End holographic transmission.

Epilogue:
Vilhouis Paperwork
(Translated from the Vilhouis Data banks)

Data Prism 1011001-1001-111-1
Sector 0-1101
Monitor M'cklech'tor reporting.

The black hole is gone, wiped from our reality by the innate human curiosity that makes them so dangerous. The threat that they might try to repeat the experiment is no longer a danger, however, as all data on the subject was lost when the black hole reversed polarity and went nova. Our pact with the human government to hide this project from other humans is now concluded. It is my opinion that the Vilhouis may now return to their original roles as watchers as our progenitors were in past ages. We can finally leave the physical races to their own devices.

The region itself is clean. The nebula on the negative z-axis border has been burned back several noombars and the asteroid fields on the positive x-axis are less defined, their border asteroids having been pulverized by the shock wave. Radiation has reduced by a factor of ten and will soon be at acceptable levels. As to the planetoid that was once Earth, it has vanished. It is possible the close proximity to the black hole caused the planetoid to vaporize instantly, but there are other theories.

The scar in the fabric of space and times has healed. It is possible, due to the lack of debris from the planetoid, that the entire satellite was consumed by a flux in the space-time distortion an instant before the shock wave was released. The only question is where or when it went from here. I studied the logs of my predecessors and progenitors, those who monitored the region of space since it was a far-reaching nebula, and attached to this prism is a link to one of the prisms of my sires.

I would note that any correlation between these two events is speculation and to be determined by one of the Great Ones. I merely note that these two incidents take place in the same region and the similarities they share are too close for coincidence. Undoubtedly it would be wise to keep the humans ignorant of these events until we understand them ourselves

I leave it to you.

Monitor M'cklech'tor
Sector 0-1101

Prism link included

<Prism Link>

Data Prism 0000110-1111-001-1
Sector 0-1101
Monitor Xech'mich Reporting.

I have watched the majesty and beauty of the nebula encompassing the entire sector as the gasses have coagulated into roughly nine shapes, embryonic states of the planets they may yet become. I have seen the power of the galactic cycles as the bodies have taken spherical shapes, forged by the raw power of gravitation. Moreover, I have seen deep into the heart of the nebula where fusion and fission chain reactions have drawn energy into a new star. This has been an honor and a pleasure, and I look forward to my successors as they examine what forms of life, from cellular and beyond, will take shape.

I am troubled by one even, which I cannot explain, so I note the incident for future Vilhouis in the hopes that they will discover what it means.

Earlier there was a strange disturbance in the space-time harmonics and a strange planetoid burst into the sector, taking up an orbit around the third planet, becoming its only satellite. Already there have been ramifications on the planet, as the presence of a moon has caused gravitational stress on the surface. All I can ascertain is the surface has been cleansed by the effect that brought it here, the surface smooth thanks to the friction of the time-space rift.

As this is the most excitement I have seen since I have taken this post, this event raises more questions than I have the ability to answer:

Where did this planetoid come from? Why did it come here? More importantly, how will this effect the future of the body it now orbits? Will life now grow on a planet that would have remained barren? Or will it kill any life that the planet might have been processing? These are questions my heirs will face.

I must be content to wonder.

Monitor Xech'mich
Sector 0-1101